

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: *Linking Research to Relationship and Marriage Education*

Ted G. Futris, University of Georgia
Francesca Adler-Baeder, Auburn University

NERMEM Overview

- **Choose** – Making intentional relationship choices
- **Care for Self** – Maintaining physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual wellness
- **Know** – Maintaining knowledge of your partner’s world
- **Care** – Using nurturing, caring and affectionate behaviors
- **Share** – Developing and maintaining a couple identity
- **Manage** – Dealing with differences in healthy ways
- **Connect** – Engaging in a positive social network of support

Introduction

During the past two decades, research on couple and marital relationships has significantly informed our understanding of what makes relationships “work” (i.e., relationships that are satisfying and stable) (e.g. Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2010). While couples can interact in a variety of ways and consider themselves in healthy relationships, there emerges from research overarching patterns of interactions that seem to be fundamental to forging healthy relationships over the long term. As couples seek to share their lives with each other, understanding these recommended practices can help them build and maintain healthy and satisfying relationships. Research on the patterns of thinking and behaviors associated with healthy couple relationships and marriages exists to guide the development of empirically informed program content (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). A team of researchers and practitioners – the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (www.nermen.org) – built on this early work to summarize the extant literature on predictors of marital quality, and methodically reviewed and organized this information to develop a framework or model for ensuring an empirical basis to community-based relationship and marriage education (RME) programs. The purpose of this publication is to share that research and those recommended core relationship practices with practitioners who offer RME.

Research-Based RME

The model presented here is “research-based;” that is, the components are derived from existing research on couples and serves to inform best practices for RME implementation. This work differs from efforts to develop “evidence-based” RME programs that involve implementing and assessing the impact of specific RME programs



and curricula. Definitions of “evidence-based” programs and criteria for utilizing this term have been established by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (see Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2009). A growing body of literature has emerged that focuses on the evaluation of RME programs for youth and adults and assessment of outcomes and evidence of efficacy:

- Youth-focused relationship education has been shown to help adolescents better understand the differences between healthy versus unhealthy relationships, develop positive attitudes about relationships and marriage, and acquire the skills needed to maintain safe and healthy dating relationships (Antle et al., 2011; Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004; Kerpelman et al., 2009). In turn, youth participating in these programs report maintaining more positive relationships with others, including dating partners (Gardner & Boellard, 2007). These positive program effects have been found across diverse groups of youth and sustained for one year (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Kerpelman et al., 2010).
- Research evaluating relationship education for unmarried adults has also demonstrated positive changes in the attitudes and practices of engaged couples (Barton, Futris, & Bradley, 2012; Carroll & Doherty, 2003) and relationship quality improvements over-time (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). These programs have been demonstrated to help unmarried military soldiers (Van Epp, et al., 2008), parents (Adler-Baeder, Calligas et al., 2013) and low-resource individuals and couples (Antle, Sar et al., 2013; Wilde & Doherty, 2013).
- Married couples who participate in RME also show significant improvements in how they interact with each other (Blanchard et al., 2009) and in their reports of overall marital quality (Hawkins et al., 2008). Research has also documented some positive effects of RME on re-married couples in stepfamilies (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009; Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012).

It is important to understand that the focus, content, and delivery of the RME programs evaluated, as well as the methods and study design vary. Still, there is general consensus that benefits and positive outcomes are experienced in the short-term, on average, by youth and adult RME participants. More recently, the focus of research evaluating these programs is shifting towards better understanding the differing trajectories of change over a longer period of time as studies increasingly include samples that are more diverse than in previous years (Hawkins et al., 2010). Scholars are calling for future



Why Healthy Relationships Matter to Parenting and Child Well-Being

The research is clear: healthy relationships, and resulting family stability, promote the physical, social, and emotional well-being of adults and children (Adler-Baeder, Shirer & Bradford, 2007):

- *Healthy relationships, healthy adults.* On average, those in healthy relationships are healthier and live longer. They have comparatively lower stress levels, exhibit better health habits and practices, are more stable emotionally, and have lower incidence of mental health issues. Individuals in healthy, stable relationships also tend to be more financially stable.
- *Healthy couples, healthy children.* On average, children growing up in a home in which there is a healthy, stable couple relationship have fewer emotional and behavioral problems, perform better in school, and are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviors (e.g., early/risky sexual activity, criminal activity, abuse of drugs and alcohol).
- *Linking couple relationships, parenting and child outcomes.* Importantly, the quality of the couple relationship influences parenting practices, regardless of family structure. Thus, when couples (or unmarried co-parents) maintain positive relationships with each other, they tend to engage with their children in more positive ways, which in turn positively impacts child outcomes.

Look for more information in each chapter about how the NERMEM principles promote positive parenting practices.

evaluation studies that consider multiple contextual factors that may influence program effectiveness and impact, and increased efforts to move towards evidence-based models of best practice for diverse populations (e.g., Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008; Markman & Rhoades, 2012).

The chapters that follow explicate the research-based core relationship principles and skills considered essential and applicable to individuals in various relationship forms and at various development stages. As well, recognizing the diversity in how couples from various socio-economic, racial, and ethnic groups interact within relationships and marriages, each chapter offers *cultural considerations* to help practitioners be mindful of the application of each concept with diverse audiences (for more information on working with low-resource and culturally diverse audiences, see Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). In addition, youth development research should be considered in efforts to offer developmentally appropriate relationship skills to youth. As such, each chapter also features recommendations for applying the concepts reviewed when *working with youth* (for more information on youth-focused relationship education, see Kerpelman, 2007).

Theoretical Grounding of RME

The model presented here is also grounded, both explicitly and implicitly, within various theoretical frameworks and perspectives. In addition to research, the understanding and application of theory to RME (and all family life) programming is critical to program design and implementation (Adler-Baeder et al., 2004; Higginbotham, Henderson, & Adler-Baeder, 2007). It is important for practitioners to recognize and frame their assumptions about

- 1) relationship development and maintenance (e.g., “Why do couples adopt and engage in practices that help versus hurt relationship quality and stability?”),
- 2) the effect of the content and skills taught in programs (e.g., influences on self; the effect on the partner; influences on parenting),
- 3) which strategies for teaching RME will stimulate positive impact (e.g., knowledge-based versus skills-practice approach),
- 4) who to engage (e.g., youth, single adults, engaged or married couples),
- 5) when to engage them (e.g., pre- and/or post-marital, transition to parenthood, post-divorce), and
- 6) how to engage the target audience (e.g., working with couples together, males and females separate, couples and children).



Cultural Considerations

Look for information shared by Dr. Linda Skogrand (Utah State University) in each chapter about things to consider when applying the NERMEM principles with socially, culturally and economically diverse audiences.



Working with Youth

Look for information shared by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman (Auburn University) in each chapter about how to apply the NERMEM principles when working with youth.

Although not intended to be a comprehensive and complete review of theory, below are a few examples of common theoretical perspectives that ground research on relationships and marriages (e.g., Fine & Fincham, 2013; Sassler, 2010; Olson, Fine, & Lloyd, 2005) and that informed the development of the model:

- *Ecological and systems theories.* Although distinct theories, both ecological (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and systems (e.g., Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993) theories focus on the interaction between multiple levels of influence. From an ecological systems approach, intimate partner relationship attitudes and behaviors are shaped by socio-cultural (e.g., expectations about relationships and marriage), community (e.g., resources to support healthy relationships and marriages), and familial norms and practices (e.g., models of healthy relationships and marriages). A systems approach to understanding couple relationships focuses more on the interaction between “sub-system” relationships embedded within the family (e.g., couple, parent-child, sibling, in-laws, etc.) and how those relationships influence the development and maintenance of healthy couple relationships. Through RME, couples can develop a better awareness of these influences, process how these influences have shaped their current relationship, and explore ways to negotiate and manage the impact of these influences on their relationship as well as the impact of their relationship on others.
- *Spillover theories.* More specifically, spillover theories (e.g., Saxbe, Rodriguez & Margolin, 2013), derived from a broader systems view, emphasize how experiences (both positive and negative) in one domain (e.g., work) or relationship (e.g., couple) affect experiences in another domain (e.g., home) or relationship (e.g., parent-child). RME can help couples understand these influences and develop skills to manage negative spillover from one domain to another. Conversely, when improvements are made in one area, it can be expected that other areas may benefit as well.
- *Life course theories.* A life course approach (e.g., Bengtson & Allen, 1993) to RME programming implies the value placed on linking past experiences (e.g., parental divorce, sexual onset, intimate partner violence) and relationships (e.g., prior marital and parenting experiences) to

understanding how and why individuals transition into new relationships and the continuity and change that occurs in these relationships. RME can offer individuals opportunities to identify and understand these influences and explore ways to make conscious and informed decisions as they develop new relationships and move forward in current relationships.

- *Social exchange theories.* To understand why individuals choose to remain in or exit relationships, social exchange theories (e.g., Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) suggest that individuals weigh the rewards (e.g., connectedness, quality time) and costs (e.g., re-occurring disagreements, unmet needs) experienced in a relationship and consider alternative possibilities (e.g., prospect of finding someone else; ability to have needs met by others). RME can support couples in developing skills that, when practiced, would lead to more satisfying exchanges within their relationship.
- *Social learning theories.* From a social learning perspective (e.g., Bandura, 1977), models of healthy versus unhealthy relationships serve as a source for learning what to expect and how to think, feel, and act in intimate partner relationships. Although



relationship attitudes and behaviors are learned during childhood from one's family of origin and experiences shared in intimate partner relationships, knowledge acquired through RME can reinforce healthy practices or facilitate change in practices that do not support healthy stable relationships by providing new models. This theory also assumes an intergenerational influence in that children of RME participants may benefit from observing healthier couple dynamics between parents.

- *Attribution theory.* Based on this socio-psychological perspective, attribution theory (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1990) contends that individuals make affective and cognitive assessments of their partner's behavior that influence how they react in future interactions with their partner. Attributions often reflect one's judgment of whether the behavior is stable versus unstable (e.g., "He forgot our anniversary because he doesn't care" versus "he has been under a lot of pressure at work lately."), an internal or external quality (e.g., "She yelled because she is an angry person" versus "there was a loud of noise in the room and she had to raise her voice."), and within their partner's control (e.g., "The car accident happened because you were texting" versus "the other driver ran a red light."). RME can help couples tune in to their attitudes and attributions and learn skills to reframe and process (individually and together) disagreements and challenges that arise within relationships in order to foster positivity.
- *Feminist theory.* A feminist perspective (e.g., Fox & Murry, 2000) encourages the understanding of how gender attitudes and practices are developed through socialization and interpersonal experiences and how these attitudes may influence couple dynamics in positive or negative ways. The perspective calls attention to the importance of valuing and supporting roles and experiences in couple relationships that make each individual feel valued and empowered. Thus, RME can facilitate feelings of safety and respect in intimate partner relationships and help couples develop skills to negotiate clear and equitable roles and expectations that support and fulfill each partner's needs in the relationship.



In summary, no one theory can adequately explain the complexity of couple relationships. Instead, these theories collectively offer insight into understanding the interaction between cognitive, affective, and behavioral influences on couple relationship experiences and outcomes. Elements of each of these are evident in the model presented here. We encourage practitioners to be aware of the applicability of various theoretical perspectives that can inform RME programming content and implementation design.



The authors who contributed to the development of the model featured in this publication are all members of the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network working group. This team of experts has experience in developing RME resources (e.g., curricula, newsletters, fact sheets), empirically documenting the impact of RME programs, publishing in peer reviewed journals on the research and practice associated with RME, and presenting on research and best practices for RME to state and national audiences. They are each experienced collaborators on RME projects in their states and have developed strong partnerships with local, state, and national organizations. To learn more, visit www.nermen.org/workgroup.php.

Cooperative Extension and RME

Stimulated by federal initiatives and earmarked funding focused on supporting “healthy marriages” since 2001, there has been an increased focus on providing relationship and marriage education on a larger scale through community-based efforts. The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a nationwide educational network that consists of experts that provide research-based information from land-grant universities to youth, adults, and professionals to promote individual, family, and community health. The CES offers various low- to no-cost educational resources and programs focused on supporting positive youth and family development and has historically addressed marital and relationship quality (Goddard & Olsen, 2004).

During the last decade, the efforts of CES to support healthy couple relationships have resulted in a plethora of curricula and educational resources and publications (e.g., fact sheets, newsletters, online videos) in this program area. Formalized in 2004, the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (NERMEN), evolved from a working group organized in the CES in response to the emerging marriage movement (in 1997). Through continued dialogue with federal administration about the needs of the marriage initiative and ways that the CES could respond, NERMEN evolved and established a vision for a nation-wide outreach through Extension specialists and educators in partnership

with agencies and organizations at the national, state, and community levels. With a vision to support individuals and couples preparing for, developing and enriching healthy couple relationships, and a mission to provide research-based resources and promote partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice in RME, this collaborative of Extension faculty from across the country (researchers at the state level and program developers and educators at the state and local levels), have been involved in promoting these CES resources as well as creating new resources and guides to facilitate best practices in offering RME (see Futris, 2007). For more information about the various resources available from the CES, visit www.nermen.org.

The NERMEN

With both the demand and the need for broader offerings of relationship and marriage education, a large number of programs have been developed, presenting somewhat of a dilemma for practitioners who are interested in providing effective programming that is research-informed. In an effort to guide RME efforts to either select or develop RME programming, a working group from the NERMEN made up of Extension state-level faculty developed the *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model* (NERMEN) that is featured in this publication.

Over the course of several years, members of the working group conducted extensive literature searches on predictors of marital and relationship quality and participated in several working conferences in which the information was reviewed and thematically organized. Efforts were made to conceptually distinguish key patterns of thinking and behaviors associated with healthy, stable couple relationships that can be taught in an educational setting. As illustrated in Figure 1, the model consists of seven core principles or concepts. Working group members then developed papers on each of these seven core healthy relationship principles that summarize the research basis. Efforts have been made to present the information clearly and succinctly in order to appeal to a practitioner reading audience. A peer-review process was utilized and the final papers are presented here as individual NERMEN chapters for use as a resource and reference for research-based RME work.

The core components of the model are *strengths-based*, with the understanding that all individuals and couples exhibit unique strengths, capabilities, and potential to form and maintain healthy relationships. Consistent with sound family life education principles (Duncan & Goddard, 2011), this model reinforces the importance of identifying, acknowledging, and working with the

The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model



strengths of individuals and couples as a starting point in program services. The principles and skills presented in this model are intended to build upon the individual learner's personal resources and motivation for change, and empower him/her to take responsibility in the care and quality of the couple relationship. The core components of the model are also *process-oriented*, meaning that the development and maintenance of healthy couple relationships is a life long journey. The practices that support healthy couple functioning are dynamic, not static, and evolve as the relationship adapts to the changing needs of the individual partners, couple, and growing family over time. As well, consistent with the guiding principles of the NERMEN working group, the model reinforces a "do no harm" approach and emphasizes that safety in relationships is a priority.

Implications for Programming

This research-based, theoretically grounded model was developed as a guide to help educators make informed decisions about content in RME. Here are a few applications of the model:

- *Selecting appropriate teaching curricula.* There are a wide range of curricula available that vary in content (and cost). And, while a growing number of these curricula have been evaluated and shown to have a positive impact on participants, few have been designated as "evidence-based." At a minimum, family life educators are encouraged to use resources that are research-based. This model can be used to assess the content covered in the curriculum to determine if the essential principles and skills needed to foster healthy relationships are addressed.
- *Developing educational resources.* In order to meet the specific relationship needs of diverse audiences, educators often find themselves creating new and/or supplemental resources that they can share with clients. This model can help inform the focus of those materials and offer direction in communicating developmentally and culturally appropriate messages.

Implications for Practice

Look for more information in each chapter about how the NERMEN principles can be applied in educational settings.



- *Designing and implementing programs.* In a comprehensive framework for RME developed by Alan Hawkins and his associates (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004), seven dimensions are described: content, intensity, methods, timing, setting, target, and delivery. Through this model we seek to address core content and provide recommendations for different target audiences (i.e., working with diverse audiences and youth). Suggestions are offered on the other elements in recent work (Futris, 2007); however, research to guide RME best practices for intensity, methods, timing, setting, and delivery is still on the horizon (Markman & Rhoades, 2012).

Conclusion

Addressing healthy relationships and marriages is consistent with any organizational mission that includes the promotion of child, youth, adult, and/or family well-being. There is strong evidence that points to the centrality of healthy relationships to adult health, family stability, parenting practices, and positive child outcomes. More so, research has demonstrated clear attributes and behaviors associated with healthy and stable couple relationships. In short, we have an empirical knowledge base for core elements of RME program content. The *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model* was developed to share this knowledge in a clear and practical way. While future empirical work will likely reveal additional information and RME content elements that may be critical for specific populations of RME participants, we encourage readers and practitioners to utilize the seven core concepts presented in this publication as a whole – and as the necessary foundation for research-based RME practice.



How to Cite: Futris, T.G., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2013). *National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Linking Research to Relationship and Marriage Education*. In T.G. Futris & F. Adler-Baeder (Eds), *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Core Teaching Concepts for Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Programming*. (Publication No. HDF5-E-157). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Available at www.nermen.org/NERMEM.php.

www.nermen.org

©2013 University of Georgia

HDFS-E-157