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Teaching Marriage Skills

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I am a psychologist in private practice whose marriage therapy treatment strategy includes a heavy dose of skills training. I write books for marriage therapists and for couples. I have been invited by many state therapist associations to give continuing education workshops on conflict resolution and marriage communication skills.

In addition, based on my book *The Power of Two*, I have written a workbook plus a curriculum for couples' marriage skills workshops. Lastly, I work for Torque Interactive Media, which offers Internet-based games and workshops where couples (and psychotherapists) can upgrade their collaborative dialogue and conflict resolution skills.

In the 60% of my time (3 days a week) that I devote to clinical work, primarily with couples, my skills-oriented treatment strategy rests on the assumption that if people knew better, they would do better. Backward-looking family-of-origin work strengthens people's understanding of where they learned their mistaken interaction patterns. However, for improvement in these patterns, most clients need explicit skill building. The three-part combination of teaching skills, exploring the family-of-origin sources of mistaken habits, and guiding couples to resolution of issues that have divided them has enabled my clinical practice to flourish free of managed care.

I focus most of the remaining 40% of my work hours on disseminating information about marriage skills to the general public and to marriage therapists. I have been particularly interested in developing online marriage skills-training materials that (a) teach couples the communication, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills that can enable them to enjoy a harmonious marriage and (b) boost psychotherapist effectiveness on conducting marriage treatment. Psychologists especially need training materials like these because of the dearth of marital and family therapy training offered in most psychology graduate schools.

My own interest in these areas began early on in my clinical training with the realization that psychotherapy is the art of helping people to resolve their conflicts, so psychotherapists need to be experts in conflict resolution. When the psychology literature did not offer this expertise, I turned to the literature on business negotiation.

I love teaching communication and conflict resolution skills because the results are so immediate and so gratifyingly obvious. I love when couples enter a session surrounded by clouds of tension and leave laughing together. I love hearing older couples in marriage workshops tell younger ones, "You are so fortunate. If we had learned these skills when we first married, we would have been spared years of needless tensions."

Insurance companies are often reluctant to pay for problems that are labeled *marriage dysfunction*. Diagnosing the problem as depressive and anxious reactions—which almost inevitably result when there have been marriage problems—and listing marriage therapy as the treatment modality is one solution. Alternatively, psychologists can choose not to accept insurance and instead charge clients directly for treatment. I use the latter option.

The main downside of offering marriage skills workshops is the significant marketing effort necessary to get a referral flow established. Also, workshops generally need to be scheduled during non-work hours. That generally limits workshops to weekday evenings or weekends, which can intrude on the psychotherapist's own leisure and family time. However, offering workshops one or two nights a week, one weekend a month, or every other month (or a combination of these) can substantially boost earnings. Many workshop participants decide that they want to continue their learning after their initial exposure to marriage skills training and may request further sessions with the workshop leader.

Most marriage education courses, including Power of Two Workshops, focus on skill development rather than on the content of couples' contentious issues. They also generally use a group format. Marriage workshops therefore tend to be a most appropriate, and least expensive, option for couples who mainly need a skills upgrade rather than help settling urgent conflicts or exploring deeply rooted problems.

Workshops and therapy can be used together, but they are not mutually exclusive. Marriage therapists may encourage their clients to attend a workshop to accelerate their treatment. Workshop leaders may likewise refer couples for therapy during or after completion of the course. It can be helpful to orient new clients initially to both options. That way, the therapist and couple can decide together if and when each option is appropriate.

With regard to related business opportunities, psychotherapists who are able to teach collaborative communication and conflict resolution skills can market to divorce lawyers, who tend to be a virtually untapped referral source. These attorneys can refer couples who prefer to fix rather than abandon their marriage and also postdivorce couples who need to be able to coparent more cooperatively.

Leading workshops actually can yield higher per-hour income than marriage therapy. One of the clinicians in our practice recently reported that teaching a workshop with five couples—her preferred workshop size—yields more than double what she earns per psychotherapy hour.

As I mentioned earlier, marketing is vital for building a marriage workshops program. Marketing can be targeted to engaged couples seeking premarital education, established couples seeking marriage enhancement, couples in therapy, as well as to specific high divorce-risk groups such as empty nesters and parents of special needs children. Marketing strategies can include posting flyers at obstetrics and gynecology practices, hairdressers, gyms, and wedding dress stores and using Internet or radio ads.

To conduct skills-oriented premarital or marriage therapy, one must first become expert in emotional regulation, cooperative communication, and conflict resolution skills. In addition to books, psychotherapists can download the free articles from my website (<http://www.TherapyHelp.com>) and learn from free online games (e.g., <http://www.po2.com>, <http://www.poweroftwo.org>).

To teach workshops, psychotherapists can design their own course materials. It is preferable, however, to start with one of the many excellent existing curricula rather than to reinvent the wheel. The Smart Marriages website (<http://www.SmartMarriages.com>) offers an overview of the full field of marriage education, including listings of existing marriage education curricula. The Power of Two Marriage Skills Workshops program may also have opportunities for psychotherapists who want to teach Internet-based courses.

The bottom line: A good marriage enhances life's blessings—longer life, more happiness, health, wealth, and enjoyment. Communication and conflict resolution skills play a huge part in sustaining successful marriages. Psychologists have much to learn, and potentially much they can earn, in this important area.