

Marriage Education: An Important Investment in Cultural Change

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The Origin of Marriage Education

What we now call the “Marriage Education Movement” was brought into public awareness by a pioneering MFT who recognized in 1989 that no matter how large a caseload she and every other Marriage and Family Therapist in the country might be willing to take on, our country’s rampant divorce rate had created a tsunami of social breakdown. Even more discouraging to Diane Sollee—who had worked at the national level at AAMFT for ten years—was her recognition that what had been viewed as an encouraging increase in skilled therapists had not yet dented the prevailing 50% divorce rate. This discouraging convergence of factors was counterbalanced by a handful of like-minded colleagues who saw the futility of trying to pull drowning couples from the river and were determined to find ways of going upstream to keep couples from falling in, as well as others who were investigating the determinants of marital outcomes.

Crisis created opportunity, and out of this Diane Sollee created the term “Marriage Education”—by which couples learn and practice skills that foster marital success—and founded two organizations—The Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples Education

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(CMFCE) and Smart Marriages®—through which she provides a comprehensive Marriage Education clearinghouse and annually brings together the best and the brightest in the field of Marriage Education.² These impressive outgrowths of one MFT’s vision, passion and determination can be seen as a measure of what one (extraordinary and determined) person can do, and can also be viewed as a natural progression of MFT’s systems orientation applied to the process of cultural change.

It is nothing less than cultural change that Marriage Education seeks to accomplish—to create full public awareness that “marriage is basically a skills-based relationship”, that these skills can be learned, and to have the learning of them become part of everyone’s development as a human being. Even with the enormity of this challenge, the unacceptable level of breakdown of American family life calls for us to take action.

America’s world-record divorce rate is correlated with numerous indicators of social breakdown: For couples—divorce is correlated with decreased mental and physical health, shorter life, lower income and increased risk of poverty, lower productivity at work, increased Domestic Violence, more crime and more violent crime, higher rates of suicide, and damaged relationships with their children—among other undesirable outcomes. For the children of divorce, the impact is even more detrimental, long-lasting and well-documented.³ These socially disastrous outcomes have created a growing sense of crisis and a realization that something must be done. [See exhibit: *Why Marriage Matters in America*]

² 2008 Smart Marriages Conference will be held in San Francisco, CA: July 2-5, 2008 (along with additional Pre- and Post-conference Institutes, and 70 hours CE). Conference schedule and registration information at: www.smartmarriages.com

³ A Report from Family Scholars, “*Why Marriage Matters, 2nd Edition: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences*”. New York: Institute for American Values, 2005; The Healthy Marriage Initiative, *Benefits of a Healthy Marriage*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families. www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/benefits/index.html

The personal cost of divorce—emotional costs, financial costs, and the costs of family turmoil—can be unbearable. Sad to say for many who think they are skirting the divorce problem by not marrying, the breakup rate for cohabiting couples is even greater.⁴ And, our society’s rampant relationship breakdown rate is not only costly to the individuals involved but also to State and Federal governments, and to the taxpayer. For divorce alone, the overall cost of social services that must be provided due to marital failure is estimated at \$30,000 per divorce.⁵ Thus, with California’s current divorces numbering approximately 150,000 annually, these marital failures draw *\$4.5 Billion each year* from government funds—all going to divorce clean-up and “adjustment”, not divorce prevention. It certainly seems that we can think of better ways to invest some of this \$4.5 Billion annually.

Not surprisingly, these data have prompted the Federal government, through the Administration for Children and Families, to look for solutions and to invest in what has been called the Healthy Marriage Initiative: As Dr. Wade Horn, Assistant Secretary for Children and Families states it:

⁴ Estimates for the increased break-up rate for cohabiting couples over married couples range from 10-50% greater likelihood. Our most authoritative resource is the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, *The State of Our Unions—The Social Health of Marriage in America* (2004) (www.marriage.rutgers.edu), where Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe report: “A substantial body of evidence indicates that those who live together before marriage are more likely to break up after marriage. This evidence is controversial, however, because it is difficult to distinguish the “selection effect” from the “experience of cohabitation effect.” ... What can be said for certain is that no evidence has yet been found that those who cohabit before marriage have stronger marriages than those who do not.” For a full review of the research on cohabitation see: Pamela J. Smock, “Cohabitation in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000); and David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage—A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research*, 2nd Edition (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002).

⁵ The social costs of divorce include direct and indirect costs associated with increased child support enforcement, Medicaid, TANF funds, food stamps, public housing, correctional facilities, unwed childbearing, drug problems, delinquency, criminality, and other social problems associated with divorce. David Schramm (2003). “What Could Divorce Be Costing Your State?”. Logan UT: Utah State University.

“Our emphasis is on healthy marriages—not marriage for the sake of marriage, not marriage at any cost—but healthy marriages that provide a strong and stable environment for raising children. It is about helping couples who choose marriage for themselves gain access to the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain healthy marriages.”⁶

In support of the Healthy Marriage Initiative, the Federal government significantly increased its funding for this work in 2006 by reappropriating⁷ \$150 million each year over the next five years for Healthy Marriages and Promoting Responsible Fatherhood grants, which now fund 225 of the nation’s most promising “demonstration” projects. While these monies represent what seems like a wonderful new level of support for this work, upon closer scrutiny, we can see that what it really represents is a cautious first step the government is taking to assess the potential value of Marriage Education to strengthen marriages and families.

As California Goes...

California’s leadership in No-Fault divorce is often blamed for the unraveling of American families, but in actuality, No-Fault is more a symptom of pervasive marital breakdown than a cause. If the prevailing societal belief is that marital success is a function of “getting lucky in love” and finding your soul mate, then it makes sense for there to be “no fault” if you make an unfortunate selection. More fundamentally, the reality is that most couples do not know how to create and sustain a strong and successful

⁶ www.acf.hhs.gov Healthy Marriage Initiative.

⁷ The 2006 Healthy Marriage reappropriation came from reassigning a small percentage of TANF funds previously directed toward wedlock incentives that had been shown to be ineffective.

marriage, and the intolerability of having a failed marital relationship at the core of their lives pushes many to look for an escape through divorce. Our task thus becomes that of helping people incorporate into their relationship what we have learned over the last thirty years of research about relationships. John Gottman's research in his "Love Lab" at the University of Washington, with which most MFTs and Marriage Educators are familiar, has opened a window onto marital outcomes that were hidden from our parents and grandparents and from every preceding generation in human history. His seven predictors of divorce and six predictors of marital success mean that couples are no longer doomed to fumble in the dark about how to make their marriage succeed, and these data have been of tremendous value to the work all of us do with couples, whether in the classroom or in the therapy office.⁸

Concurrent with these and other new data, the Marriage Education field now recognizes three important streams: 1) teaching relationship skills to couples; 2) raising cultural awareness about the benefits of a healthy marriage for couples, their children and for society; 3) conveying normative roadmaps about what couples can realistically expect inside marriage and on their lifetime journey as a couple.

Ample evidence shows that Marriage Education classes are successful in helping couples learn the skills associated with marital success:

- In a meta-analysis of 20 different marriage programs across 85 studies involving 3,886 couples, researchers translated the various findings into common expressions of program effectiveness and found an average positive effect size of 0.44. This effect size means that the average

⁸ John Gottman, Ph.D. *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail... and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York: Simon and Schuster (Fireside), 1994. John M. Gottman, Ph.D. and Nan Silver: *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1999.

couple participating in any one of the programs studied improved their behavior and relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any program.⁹

- A meta-analysis of 16 studies on one Marriage Education program observed meaningful program effects with regard to gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The average couple, after taking the training was able to outperform 83% of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.¹⁰
- A longitudinal study evaluating another Marriage Education program found that, compared with couples without the training, participating couples maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training; they also demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction, and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.¹¹
- In a meta-analysis of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education, researchers found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—“to reduce strife, improve communication, increase

⁹ P. Giblin et al., “Enrichment Outcome Research: A Meta-Analysis of Premarital, Marital, and Family Interventions.” *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, Vol. 11 (1985), pp. 257-271.

¹⁰ Mark H. Butler and Karen S. Wampler, “A Meta-Analytic Update on Research on the Couple Communication Program,” *American Journal of Family Therapy*, Vol. 27 (1999), p. 223.

¹¹ H.J. Markman et al., “Prevention of Marital Distress: A Longitudinal Investigation,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. Vol. 56 (1988), pp. 210-217, and “Preventing Marital Distress Through Communication and Conflict Management Training: A Four and Five Year Follow-up,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 62 (1993), pp 1-8.

parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.” They concluded, “This research demonstrates that marriage programs are effective and makes the case that marriages can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship work.”¹²

Concurrent with these encouraging developments, many MFTs and other professionals within California have become involved in various aspects of Marriage Education work. One such MFT, Dr. Carolyn Rich Curtis, founder of the Healthy Marriage Project—Greater Sacramento Region, joined in 2005 with Dennis Stoica, founder of the Orange County Marriage Resource Center, to replicate the successes these two nationally-recognized coalitions had achieved by creating a statewide organization called the California Healthy Marriages Coalition (CHMC). CHMC was the first statewide Healthy Marriage coalition in the country, and as such, presents a promising model for creating widespread awareness of and access to Marriage Education programs.¹³

CHMC’s mission is to increase such access to Marriage Education programs for couples and individuals through development of a statewide interlinking network of Healthy Marriage coalitions that cuts across four dimensions of diversity: Geography; Ethnicity/Cultural groups; Agency type (faith-based and community-based organizations);

¹² “Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works”, Patrick F. Fagan, Robert W. Patterson & Robert E. Rector. The Heritage Foundation: *Backgrounder #1606*, 2002. www.heritage.org

¹³ “What you’re doing (in California) is very exciting and it isn’t happening in any other state... but I’m sure that they will want to once they hear about it.” Bill Coffin, Special Assistant for Marriage Education at the Administration for Children and Families, spoken at a CHMC statewide coalition meeting, Pepperdine University, June 6, 2005.

and the Ages and Stages of Marriage. To foster the success of these Healthy Marriage coalitions, CHMC has incorporated into its approach eight key best practices.¹⁴

So promising is “the California Model”, as it has been called, that CHMC received in 2006 the largest Healthy Marriage grant ever awarded by the Administration for Children and Families—\$2.4 Million/year for five years, through a Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant, designed to implement innovative and promising approaches to public awareness campaigns about Healthy Marriages and increase access statewide to Marriage Education programs. This important grant acknowledges California’s leadership in Healthy Marriage work, which is further recognized by the numerous other Administration for Children and Families grants awarded to nonprofit organizations throughout the state, resulting in a total of \$11.6 Million per year over the next five years—the largest number of awards and the largest amount of funding awarded to any state in the union. California is ready for lift-off!

Through its Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant, CHMC will execute seven allowable activities, as specified by the Administration for Children and Families:

- 1) Public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and the skills needed to increase marital stability and health;
- 2) Education in high schools on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting;

¹⁴ **CHMC’s 3X10 Saturation Model** : Features of a Complete Community Healthy Marriage Initiative/Best Practices: 1) Visionary Leadership; 2) Community Marriage Resource Center Website; 3) Strong and effective Community Marriage Education Agreement (CMEA); 4) Range of Marriage Education/Relationship Skills curricula; 5) Local Marriage Education/Relationship Skills Leadership Training; 6) Consciousness-Raising Public Relations; 7) TA—Coalitions receive Technical Assistance from CHMC and give it to their member organizations; 8) Outcome Evaluation on the impact of Marriage Education programs; 9) Sustainable Organizational Infrastructure; 10) Sustainable Revenue Sources

- 3) Marriage education, marriage skills, and relationship skills programs for non-married pregnant women and non-married expectant fathers;
- 4) Premarital education and marriage skills training for engaged couples and for couples or persons interested in marriage;
- 5) Marriage enhancement and marriage skills training programs for married couples;
- 6) Divorce reduction programs that teach relationship skills to troubled couples;
- 7) Marriage mentoring programs, which use married couples as role models and mentors in at-risk communities.

The implementation of CHMC's Healthy Marriage Demonstration Grant during Year 1 (2006-2007) will include two kinds of consciousness-raising campaigns. The first is the "10,000 Signs Project" in which 1000 signs were distributed in each of 10 major cities in California during National Marriage Week in February, each with brief Healthy Marriages messages. While these signs gave just the briefest of hints about how to create a Healthy Marriage, they served to spark curiosity, and this campaign will be expanded next year. The second campaign will be internet-based, consisting of two or three Ultramercial® advertising campaigns each year on the nature of Healthy Marriage that will link viewers to Marriage Education classes through their local Community Marriage Resource Center website. Because of the unusually high "click-through rate" for Ultramercial ads, each campaign is predicted to yield 40,000 Californians wanting more information about Marriage Education classes—which will take us into altogether new levels of demand. To measure the impact of these consciousness-raising campaigns in

California, CHMC is conducting a series of before-and-after polls throughout the state, which in and of itself should create a consciousness-raising effect.

The delivery of Marriage Education and Relationship Skills programs will be accomplished primarily through relationships with approximately 30 Partnering Organizations, consisting of Healthy Marriages coalitions throughout the state that span the four dimensions of diversity. Each of these Partnering Organizations will execute projects that implement the allowable activities specified by the Administration for Children and Families, with a focus on the delivery of nationally-recognized, researched-supported and culturally-appropriate Marriage Education/Relationship Skills courses that span the Ages/Stages of relationships.

These programs include:

- For youth—The Dibble Fund’s Connections and Love U2;
- For non-married pregnant women and non-married fathers—Love’s Cradle;
- Premarital education—FOCCUS, PREPARE/ENRICH, as well as Marriage Mentoring when used in conjunction with one or more Marriage Education skill-building curricula;
- Marriage enhancement—Relationship Enhancement (RE), Mastering the Magic of Love (MML), Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS), 10 Great Dates, Active Relationships, World Class Marriage, Bringing Baby Home;
- Divorce-reduction—The Third Option, RE/MML;
- Marriage Mentoring Programs, organized in association with Community Marriage Agreements among local faith-based organizations whereby they

agree to take an active role in providing Marriage Education to members of their congregations.

Diane Sollee observes, “That while large numbers of married couples are served through these Marriage Education classes, the skills taught are applicable to all persons, whether single, married, cohabiting, gay/lesbian, and regardless of religious or ethnic background.”¹⁵ Recognizing that as you educate the individual, you change the village, CHMC looks for the ripple effect from these classes to be tremendous.

Through the consciousness-raising campaigns and increased access to Marriage Education classes fostered over the next five years, the California Healthy Marriages Coalition has set the goal of reducing California’s divorce rate by 15%—a goal seen as both possible and important. At \$30,000 per divorce, a 15% reduction in the statewide divorce rate would lessen the social service burden by an estimated \$675,000,000 each year. Added to this tremendous benefit will be the inestimable positive impact on the lives of couples and families who become or remain healthy, happy, productive and stable as a result.

A few other features of this statewide roll-out are important to note: 1) As required of all organizations receiving Federal funding, CHMC requires that all Marriage Education programs provided through these funds be secular, skill-based curricula; 2) CHMC will collect outcome data—utilizing three standard inventories—on the impact of these courses on couples’ lives so that over time, a fuller understanding will emerge about which curricula work best for which couples at what point in their lives; 3) Because “follow-up” is traditionally a weakness of educational interventions, all Partnering Organizations will be required to identify and implement plans for reinforcing skills

¹⁵ Personal communication with Diane Sollee: January 21, 2007.

learned in Marriage Education classes; 4) Because none of us wants to encourage anyone to stay in an abusive relationship, all Partnering Organizations are required to develop a Domestic Violence protocol corresponding to Federal guidelines and implement this protocol throughout their coalition.

Contextualizing the Present

As we conclude Phase I of the Marriage Movement, there are many accomplishments. We have research indicating which behaviors predict marital success and which predict failure; outcome research showing that participation in Marriage Education classes is correlated with positive marital outcomes; we have a nationwide clearinghouse and annual conference for Marriage Education practitioners; grassroots organizations—both faith-based and community-based—that are working to support couples, have coalesced into Healthy Marriage coalitions and have developed their capacity to offer Marriage Education programs in their community; larger organizations such as CHMC are providing expertise that fosters the success of local Healthy Marriage coalitions; the Federal government recognizes the importance of this work and has allocated a meaningful amount of funding for it.

As we begin Phase II, our challenge is to penetrate the culture. A relatively small percentage of people know what Marriage Education is and the vast majority of couples has never taken even one Marriage Education course. We don't know enough about the best methods for reinforcing skills learned and for helping couples integrate these skills into their daily lives. We do not yet know how many Marriage Education classes the average person should take for their "Relationship IQ" to reach sufficiency. Only a

handful of charitable foundations currently identify “Healthy Marriage” or “Marriage Education” as endeavors they support, and so the connection needs to be drawn between how the causes that foundations care about are impacted by marital outcomes. Our media present many more models of bad relationships than of skilled ones. Our schools do not systematically include relationships curricula. Most medical professionals do not talk with their patients about the correlation between overall health and relationship health. Funding for Healthy Marriages within California—the nation’s “richest” state in terms of funds available for this purpose, currently amounts to just 30 cents per resident per year, while there remain large amounts of untapped State and Federal monies that are likely better spent in preventive rather than in “downstream” reparative efforts. Meanwhile, our fellow human beings blithely continue to fall in love, get married or not, have kids and skid into a high probability of divorce/relationship breakup, and experience numerous damaging consequences on their own lives, on the lives of their children and for our overall society. There are a lot of important items on our To Do List. Bottom line: We still have a long way to go, but our vision for a new world is clear.

We can and must penetrate public consciousness and increase awareness of the benefits of Healthy Marriages and make Marriage Education a normal and expected part of the culture. Given what we now know about how to help couples become well-informed “masters of marriage” we cannot continue to sit back and wait for couples to walk into our office, their faces filled with pain, at the 11th hour of their marriage. I believe that those of us professionals now living today have the great fortune of living at a time in human history when many factors have come together that give us the opportunity to make a significant contribution to the lives of our fellow human beings by equipping them with the

skills for marital success. I consider this a rare privilege, and an important responsibility.

When subsequent generations look back over the history of civilization, I am quite confident that the 21st century will be hailed as the time when humanity started to figure out how to succeed at marital relationships—and that the benefits of this unprecedented competency will be viewed as a significant milestone in human civilization.

Avenues for Involvement

In a movement virtually created by one MFT and carried forth during Phase I by many other MFTs, in California and around the country, Phase II calls for an even deeper level of involvement. What we're engaged in isn't just teaching Marriage Education classes, although that is certainly a central focus of the work and no small task. At a deeper level, what we're affecting is cultural change, an exciting process, and one that requires all hands on deck. MFTs are vital to this endeavor because of their training, knowledge, connections and status as opinion leaders in our culture. The types of contributions MFTs can make are varied—both in and out of the office—and this list contains but a few:

- Help couples in your practice realize that relationship skills, like any other skill such as golf and tennis, are cumulative, and that taking Marriage Education classes should be seen as an important ongoing investment in their success as a couple
- Teach Marriage Education classes—through your church or community center, in high schools and universities, mental health centers, clinics, for courts, on

military bases—classes that will be all the more in demand once CHMC

launches the broad-scale Ultramercial campaigns

- Found and/or take leadership roles in existing community Healthy Marriage coalitions and become involved with the California Healthy Marriages Coalition¹⁶
- Educate the public about Healthy Marriages and the correlation between Marriage Education and marital success—through articles in newspapers, magazines, e-zines, radio and TV newscasts and talk shows, writing entertaining and educational scripts for TV and feature films; writing quality books
- Help the media steer clear of “fluff” pieces and recognize the importance of publications and programming built upon solid data
- Infuse other professionals with passion about Healthy Marriage work—at conferences, in professional journals and other publications
- Conduct outcome research on Marriage Education programs; supervise the research of graduate students investigating these programs; refine instruments that measure relationship dynamics
- Lobby in Sacramento about the importance of funding for Healthy Marriage programs as a preventive measure for family stability
- Write grant applications for Federal/State and foundation funding to empower Healthy Marriage work through community coalitions; help affluent friends

¹⁶ To view the list of, and become involved with, CHMC and the existing Healthy Marriage Coalitions in California, visit www.CaMarriage.com

recognize the satisfaction and social benefits that can arise from their
contributing to Healthy Marriage work

- Work with county TANF offices to have 1% of TANF monies reappropriated for Healthy Marriage work—which has already been accomplished on a statewide basis in five other states
- Train and supervise Mentor Couples working in churches
- Consult with Healthy Marriage coalitions on Domestic Violence issues
- Steer couples in your practice to quality books and resources on how to achieve marital success, and classes available in your community through your Healthy Marriage Coalition's website
- Develop specialized Marriage Education curricula and resource materials that build upon and expand existing programs
- Become a Marriage advocate in your practice¹⁷ and in your community
- Think creatively about reaching Wal-Mart, Costco and other mass retailers with low-cost, quality resources that help couples, especially those that help integrate relationship skills into their everyday lives
- Attend the Smart Marriages Conference annually, to stay abreast of all facets of this work, become trained to teach nationally-known skill-based curricula, pick up CE credits, and experience what many consider the most energizing professional conference all year
- Join the Smart Marriages listserv to have access to breaking research, activities and programs in the field (www.smartmarriages.com)

¹⁷ See www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com for resources and to become part of the National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists.

- Walk the talk in your own relationship—to increase your professional credibility and to experience all the pleasures and benefits this brings to your own life

I can't know how you will fit in, but I do know that there is space for everyone. We are rowing a very large boat and we need everyone who is willing to take an oar and contribute at their very highest professional level. Social change is sorely needed; we simply cannot sit by the waysides and watch our fellow human litter the landscape of our society with broken relationships and broken families, then scramble to help them pick up the pieces of their lives after this has happened. We need to invest in creating social change. The epidemic of marital failure needs the application of knowledge, of skills, of vision, of passion, of dedication. It needs all of us working together to invest in cultural change.

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