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CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program

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Name of Model

The *Creating Lasting Family Connections*[®] Marriage Enhancement Program (CLFCMEP)

Introduction

The *Creating Lasting Family Connections*[®] Marriage Enhancement Program (CLFCMEP) is a manualized program for couples in which one or both partners have been physically and/or emotionally distanced because of relational difficulties or separation due to military service, mental health, or substance use disorder treatment, incarceration, out-of-town work assignments, or other challenging circumstances.

Relying largely on cognitive change and relational skills training, the goal of CLFCMEP is to build and/or strengthen a couple's relationship skills by providing structured opportunities for participants to develop greater self-awareness and an increased capacity for communication, conflict resolution, emotional awareness, emotional expression, commitment, and trust.

Two certified trainers implement the module-based program with a group of 4 to 15 couples through one of the following implementation options: (1) an 8- to 10-session format (with 2-h sessions), (2) a 2- to 3-day weekend retreat format, or (3) an 18- to 20-session format (with 2-h sessions), which includes all modules. A 3- to 5-day CLFCMEP Certification Training is required for access to implementation materials.

CLFCMEP includes three instructional, interactive, and stand-alone training modules in the following three skill areas:

- *The Marriage Enhancement module* consists of 12 marriage-focused, facilitator-guided exercises designed to strengthen marriage through the learning of open, nondefensive communication skills. Partners develop a shared vision, review family of origin experiences, recognize the difference between thoughts and feelings and how they are separate but related, recognize both positive and negative traits in each partner, understand partner needs and how to practice active listening

and echoing, provide emotional validation and compassion, and learn to use effective strategies for conflict resolution (Strader 2012).

- *The Getting Real module* is designed to enhance marital relationships through clear and honest communication, and the setting of boundaries through guided role plays that involve saying “No” with warmth and firmness coupled with deep sensitivity and compassion (Strader et al. 1998).
- *The Developing Positive Parental Influences module* is intended for couples interested in positively influencing their children or other family members. Participants are expected to develop a greater awareness of facts and feelings about drug use and dependence; to examine childhood and family experiences involving alcohol/drugs; to review effective approaches to prevention; and to develop a practical understanding of intervention, referral procedures, and treatment and recovery options. This module also examines attitudes toward alcohol and drug issues, the dynamics of chemical dependence, and its impact on marriages and families (Strader and Noe 1998).

Case management is a critical component of CLFCMEP, and program implementers are strongly encouraged to understand how to assess a wide variety of needs of participants and link them to additional support services in the community.

The CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program is one of three programs comprising the *Creating Lasting Family Connections® (CLFC) Curriculum Series*. The Series also includes the *Original CLFC Program* and the *CLFC Fatherhood Program: Family Reintegration*. The *CLFC Curriculum Series* addresses the intergenerational and chronic nature of addiction and the family’s role in both recovery and prevention. The *CLFC Series* represents the intersection of treatment and prevention services for families (Strader et al. 2013). Each of the three CLFC programs is separately listed on SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Prominent Associated Figures

Drawing on earlier works with Dr. Tim Noe and Warrenetta Crawford Mann, the *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program* was developed in the early 2000s by Ted N. Strader, M.S., a Certified Chemical Dependency Counselor, a Certified Prevention Specialist and Executive Director of the Council on Prevention and Education: Substances, Inc. Teresa Strader, L.C.S.W, Brooke Arnold and Christopher Kokoski assisted with the development of support materials. The CLFCMEP curriculum has been recognized on the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP). In 2013, the John C. Maxwell Leadership Team named Mr. Strader one of the top 10 leaders in the USA serving youth and families.

Theoretical Framework

The *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program* integrates an eclectic combination of personal, couple, family, and community strengthening theoretical frameworks. These frameworks are translated into a structured series of sequential, developmental, and experiential activities for participating couples. CLFCMEP incorporates Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb 1975) by providing an interactive program with a strategic mix of role plays, games, brainstorming, guided imagery, reflective exercises, demonstrations, and group discussions. Participants are invited to be open-minded in order to involve themselves in practicing or “experiencing” the ideas, concepts, and skills shared in the sessions and to engage in reflective thought and group discussion (Johnson 1997; Rogers 1951).

Drawing on the couple and family therapy work of Virginia Satir, Harville Hendrix, and John Bradshaw, the program invites couples to review relational dynamics from early childhood experiences with a specific focus on the effects of a family history of addiction or substance use

disorders provided in the Developing Positive Parental Influences module (Bradshaw 1990; Hendrix 1988; Satir 1983).

Risk and Resiliency Theory (Hawkins et al. 1992) serves as an underpinning of the program. Specific exercises build resiliency across the domains of self and family. Building from strengths, the program focuses on both intra- and interpersonal skill development including verbal and nonverbal communication (with an emphasis on listening and validation); how to say no (refusal skills); and relationship management practices to help prevent negative outcomes and mitigate known risk factors. Further, CLFCMEP combines Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1977) and Therapeutic Alliance (Bordin 1979) through the positive rapport established between staff and participants and through staff modeling of appropriate relationship behaviors. Developing respected interpersonal connections is key in promoting growth in both personal and family behavioral dynamics. For example, in the group “educational sessions,” two program staff served in roles often perceived more as facilitators of information and role models of new possibilities rather than as “therapists.” A range of non-judgmental, inclusive, and positive facilitation skills (Strader and Stuecker 2012) result in a Therapeutic Alliance between the CLFCMEP trained facilitators and participants. This alliance can be carried into private case management sessions that, when needed, can lead to deeper personal work or other necessary referrals for more specific therapeutic interventions.

Key elements of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (Beck 1993) are incorporated into group exercises. Participants are invited to participate in a process of individualized coaching and personal reflection in order to self-correct unhelpful thinking and behaviors. CLFCMEP integrates this system of established theories, which are expressed in the program design, exercises, activities, and implementation protocols. Each of these theories relates to the central belief described in *Building Healthy Individuals, Families and Communities* that “deep healthy connections build strong protective shields to prevent harm and to provide both nurturing and healing support”

(Strader et al. 2000, p. 17). The book refers to this concept as “connect-immunity.”

Populations in Focus

The *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program* is designed for married or committed couples in which one or both partners have been physically and/or emotionally distanced because of relational difficulties or separation due to military service, mental health, or substance use disorder treatment, incarceration, out-of-town work assignments, or other challenging circumstances.

Strategies and Techniques Used in Model

The *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program* incorporates a rich variety of strategies and techniques to appeal to the full range of adult learning styles, cultural differences, personalities, and preferences. Learning strategies and techniques include brief lectures, role plays, guided imagery, reflections, discussions, brainstorming, and facilitator demonstrations. CLFCMEP facilitators are trained and certified to implement the program. CLFCMEP provides facilitators of differing gender, age, race, and experience to relate to the largest number of participants. CLFCMEP facilitators role model the skills of the *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program* and provide information within a relational and nonjudgmental context. Facilitators listen and validate participant thoughts and feelings, provide clear and sensitive feedback, and express their own emotions as a means to manage group participation and interaction throughout the program sessions. The concept of “influence versus control” is threaded throughout the entire *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program*. Facilitators both role model and manage the program under the belief that participants learn best when they can voluntarily choose their own preferred level of participation (i.e., active discussion, interactive practice, quiet listening, etc.) for each activity in each program session. Throughout the *CLFC Marriage*

Enhancement Program, facilitators incorporate motivational interviewing and trauma-informed care techniques into interactions with participants (Strader and Stuecker 2012). Culturally sensitive case management and ongoing support supplements the program content. Facilitators refer participants to appropriate service providers, as needed.

Research About the Model

The *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program* was implemented through a “Healthy Marriage Initiative” grant from the Administration for Children and Families from 2006 to 2011. Participants were 250 married individuals (with at least one partner who was recently released from either prison or substance abuse treatment, or both) who voluntarily participated in the intervention group ($n = 230$) or a program typically offered to those being released from prison ($n = 20$). The individuals were predominately African-American (57%) or Caucasian (40%). 45% lived with their spouse, 83% had children, and about two-thirds reported living with their children and being independently housed. Most had a high school diploma or GED and 54% were employed.

Questionnaires were completed at each of three waves that included items about nine relationship skills. Analyses examined whether there were changes over time among participants in the intervention group. A convenience sample of comparable husbands being released from prison allowed for an examination of this change for male intervention participants compared to male comparison participants who were receiving *treatment as usual* aftercare services. Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used in nearly all analyses to examine whether there was differential change in relationship skills between 115 husbands in intervention group and 20 husbands in comparison group.

Relationship skills remained relatively constant for the comparison group, but improved for the intervention group. Specifically, the targeted skills showed a large increase between pre- and posttest for the intervention group and the level of

relationship skills increased slightly between posttest and follow-up. Pattern of changes in relationship skills was nearly identical for husbands and wives (Shamblen et al. 2013).

Case Example

At first, Isabell and her spouse Derek (fictitious names are used to protect true identities) were hesitant to participate in the *CLFC Marriage Enhancement Program*. Derek had a history of past arrests and brief incarceration, and both reported that they were in substance abuse recovery. In the Screening and Program Placement Survey meeting, the couple indicated they had all but given up on their marriage. They agreed that there was probably nothing they could learn that would help them communicate. However, they decided to try something anyway because they had heard about the “Marriage Class” (CLFCMEP) from some friends who were also in recovery.

In an early exercise where Derek and Isabell listed their goals for their marriage, both were pleasantly surprised to see how much their personal hopes for their relationship aligned. Isabel noted with excitement that one of Derek’s goals was that their daughter would have two loving parents while growing up. Next, the couple made some connections between the hurt and pain they felt growing up in their own families and, in Derek’s case, the frustrations he was feeling in this relationship. This provided Derek and Isabell with deeper insight into themselves, their relationship and how their earlier family life was affecting their expectations, interactions, and responses to each other. As the program progressed, they learned and practiced the skills of active listening and validating each other’s thoughts and feelings with compassion. When they realized that Isabell was trying to “re-parent” Derek by being controlling, they made a powerful, positive shift by working together to uncover and nurture Derek’s past hurts and address some of his unmet needs. This realization gave both Derek and Isabell greater insight and compassion into the ongoing challenges in their relationship. Derek said, “Wow! I think we’re learning how to

fight fair.” Near the end of CLFCMEP, they both committed to taking several small actions every day or every week as an expression of love for each other to help rejuvenate the romantic feelings they had experienced in the early stages of their relationship. Ten weeks later they reported that their relationship went from feeling very distant to closer than ever now that Isabell was less controlling and more understanding of Derek’s needs. Isabell stated that Derek was now showing more sensitivity to her emotional needs too. At a 6-month follow-up session, they both reported that they are now able to listen to each other and respect how each other are feeling – something they reported that they could not do before the program. Isabell thanked the CLFCMEP facilitators most of all for showing her that her feelings are real and deserve her and her husband’s attention and nurturance. She also stated that her participation in the sessions changed her outlook on herself-worth. Derek said he felt hopeful and excited because he thought it was important that their young daughter could now have two loving parents for years to come.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Creating Lasting Family Connections® \(CLFC\) Program](#)
- ▶ [Creating Lasting Family Connections® Fatherhood Program: Family Reintegration \(CLFCFP\)](#)

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