

Since we have written so many articles on PREP and relationship/marriage education in recent years, much of what follows will be long quotes taken from the references noted. We've worked hard to describe things well in so many other resources that we will take advantage of those writings to give you a solid overview of PREP. The references are provided so that you may read in more detail or you may cite what we have written here.

History and Background

Excerpted from:

Stanley, S.M., Blumberg, S.L., & Markman, H.J. (1999). Helping Couples Fight for Their Marriages: The PREP Approach. In R. Berger & M. Hannah, (Eds.), *Handbook of preventive approaches in couple therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

The specific roots of this work go back to the mid 1970s when many researchers were studying marital distress. At Indiana University, Howard Markman and Clifford Notarius teamed up with John Gottman to investigate the specific causes of marital distress. Along with other researchers around the United States (e.g., Birchler, Weiss, and Vincent, 1975), the group at Indiana was particularly interested in how distressed couples communicated compared to better functioning, happier couples. This team studied actual couple interaction through the use of trained observers. In brief, such research highlighted the fact that distressed couples were particularly deficient in their ability to communicate well.

While at Indiana University, Markman began a key longitudinal study to test the hypothesis that the communication variables that had discriminated between distressed and non-distressed couples in earlier research would predict the development of marital distress and divorce (Markman, 1981). Markman found that the quality of communication before marriage, and before distress had developed, was one of the best predictors of future marital distress. It was from this beginning that Markman founded a preventive program for couples based on empirical research. Over the years, Markman has been joined in the research, development, and refinement of this work by others, notably Frank Floyd, Scott Stanley, and Susan Blumberg (e.g., Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Jamison, 1984). Studies have continued on the effectiveness of PREP over the past 20 years (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). The most up-to-date version of the program is embodied in a variety of materials for couples (e.g., Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, Markman, & Blumberg, 1994).

From its inception PREP departed from earlier efforts in this area which were based on armchair speculation and untested assumptions, and which had failed to document any actual long-term preventive effects. Instead, PREP emphasized the necessity of an empirical foundation to describe the nature of the problem, evaluate etiological factors, and demonstrate the short- and long-term effectiveness of intervention strategies. To accomplish these objectives, we began a program of longitudinal research

to evaluate the possibilities for preventing marital discord and divorce, as well as to identify the predictors of divorce and marital distress.

Over the years, we and others have conducted the outcome research on PREP with premarital and remarital populations. The focus on these populations is in keeping with the preventive philosophy underlying this program. However, we have every reason to believe that PREP works very well with married couples as well as premarital couples. Our research with younger married couples in the Army thus far, has been extremely encouraging. For purposes of prevention, couples would be exposed to PREP or programs like it premaritally or early maritally, so that good patterns of communication can be established prior to the onset of distress. We see no reason why this material cannot be used effectively for premarital and marital couples, including couples who have some levels of distress. PREP is being used around the world with married couples at various stages with very good reports of both effect and program satisfaction coming back to us. However, our intensive research efforts have remained on the primary prevention level.

Rationale

PREP is based on interpretations of the available empirical, theoretical, and practical knowledge about what makes for a well-functioning, happy marriage. While we find the program to be well received by couples who have been together for some time, and who may be distressed, our roots are in prevention. The program and techniques can be delivered as an up-to-date BMT (Behavioral Marital Therapy; e.g., Baucom & Epstein, 1990) style marital intervention, though we remain excited about the possibilities of preventing serious marital breakdown in the first place.

The rationale for a divorce prevention program is a desire to combat the high level of distress found in many relationships, and the accompanying high divorce rate in our society. Not only is it estimated that nearly half of all marriages will end in divorce (e.g., Raley & Bumpass, 2003), but there are countless other couples who remain in stable but distressed relationships, living in varying degrees of stress and misery over long periods of time. In fact, Mace and Mace (1980) suggested that among marriages that *do not* end in divorce, less than 50% percent are truly happy marriages. This high distress and divorce rate leads to an increasing amount of "personal distress, disruption, and dislocation of lives, vulnerability to physical and mental disorders, and growing strain on social institutions" (Markman, Floyd, & Dickson-Markman, 1982; Markman, Fortofoer, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996; Waite & Gallagher, 2001). Divorce has become a social problem which has not been dealt with adequately. Standard approaches to marital distress provide interventions after problems develop, when negative effects on spouses and children may already be in evidence (Bloom, 1985). PREP provides an alternative approach, where the goal is to teach competencies associated with successful adjustment before problems develop.

Markman, Floyd, Stanley and Lewis (1986) present the rationale for the placement of the intervention at the premarital stage. They suggest that the family life cycle can be thought of as a developmental track, with appropriate tasks and stressors to

be dealt with at each stage or time of transition. The transition to marriage stage has its own set of specific developmental tasks, including development of constructive communication and conflict resolution skills, development of realistic and compatible attitudes and expectations about marriage and relationships, and development of behavioral and communication patterns that satisfy the basic emotional and psychological needs of each partner. This particular set of tasks makes the premarital stage an appropriate context for the skills and strategies presented by PREP.

This awareness of the life cycle tasks, combined with the knowledge that dysfunctional interaction patterns which lead to dissatisfaction can be recognized in premarital couples (Markman, 1981) support the placement of our program at the premarital and early marital stage. In addition, research showing that dysfunctional patterns are difficult to modify (e.g., Raush, Barry, Hertel, and Swain, 1974) clearly points to the need to intervene before dysfunctional patterns appear.

While there is empirical evidence that early signs of future marital distress are potentially identifiable in premarital interaction (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Markman, 1981), the primary method of intervention with marital distress is to treat relationship problems after they have become severe enough for the couple to seek therapy, usually after there have already been negative effects on spouses and children. Even for those who seek help, research suggests that most couples in therapy usually become less distressed but not necessarily happy (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988).

The rationale for divorce prevention is similar to other forms of prevention in that efforts are directed toward teaching the competencies associated with successful adjustment before problems develop. Ideally, we intervene during the "planning marriage" period or first year of marriage because, during such transitions, motivation to learn new skills is relatively high and destructive interaction patterns have not yet solidified. However, if the goal is "prevention," the main task is to identify and help couples at risk before serious problems develop. Like the architects who built the San Francisco skyscrapers to survive earthquakes, we attempt to provide couples with foundations to build a successful marriage that is able to withstand and prepare for the ground swells of marriage.

Research and Theory Underlying PREP

Safety Theory

The dominant construct underlying our work with PREP has always been safety. It has become increasingly clear over the years that safety is one of the most powerful ways to summarize what makes for healthy, happy, and stable marriages (e.g., Stanley, 2003; Stanley, 2004). The following excerpts highlight the importance of safety as an organizing theme for what we do (and what you are likely trying to do for your couples!). We have changed some of the terms we use over the recent years, but the dominant themes and their importance remain the same.

We have discussed safety along several major themes that are relevant for all relationships:

- 1) **Emotional Safety** (or safety in day-to-day connection and interaction): being able to talk openly and well, being supportive, being able to talk without fighting, etc.
- 2) **Personal Safety**: freedom from fear of physical or emotional harm and intimidation
- 3) **Commitment Safety**: security of a clear future and mutual investment

What follows are quotes from our recent papers, provided to give more detail to these thoughts.

From: Stanley, S.M., Markman, H.J., & Whitton, S. (2002). Communication, Conflict, and Commitment: Insights On The Foundations of Relationship Success from a National Survey. *Family Process*, 41(4), 659-675.

Dynamics related to communication, conflict, and commitment may be central in large part because of the ways in which each contributes to a sense of safety—or lack thereof—in intimate relationships. In this view, safety can be divided into two broad categories: safety in interaction and safety in commitment or relationship security (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999).

From: Stanley, S. M. (2003, November). Assessing Couple and Marital Relationships: Beyond Form and Toward a Deeper Knowledge of Function. Paper presented at Healthy Marriage Interventions and Evaluation symposium of the Measurement Issues in Family Demography Conference, Washington D.C.

We believe that sound marriages have three essential types of safety (Stanley, Markman, Whitton, 2002). First, there is the safety of the day-to-day interaction of the relationship, including emotional safety and a sense of positive connection in the absence of chronic fear of criticism, negativity, or danger. This type of safety can be divided further to include safety from physical or psychological injury such as would be inflicted through domestic violence. Second, there is the safety that comes from having a clear commitment to the future that provides an overall sense of security and a reason to believe that it is worth putting effort and investment into the relationship. . . .

Interaction (Emotional) Safety. *There is a tremendous amount of evidence that relationships that are characterized by chronic negative interaction can be damaging to adults and the children living with them. Negative interaction includes patterns such as escalation, criticism, invalidation, withdrawal, demand-withdraw, contempt, and so forth.*

- *Negative patterns of interaction strongly differentiate happy couples from*

unhappy couples (e.g., Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Johnson, et al., 2002; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002).

- *Negative patterns of interaction are one of the best discriminators of which couples will go on to experience chronic distress, break up, or divorce (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, Malamuth, 1995; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).*
- *Negative patterns of interaction are associated with a variety of negative outcomes for children, including mental health risks, decrements in school performance, and various forms of acting out behavior (e.g., Cummings & Davies, 1994; Emery, 1982; Grych & Fincham, 1990).*
- *Negative patterns of interaction are associated with negative mental health outcomes for adults, such as depression and anxiety (e.g., Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997; Halford & Bouma, 1997).*

There is therefore compelling evidence that chronic, negative interaction and poorly managed conflict places adults and children at risk. A healthier marriage would be characterized by lower levels of such negativity. An unhealthy marriage would be marked by higher, chronic levels. As will be discussed later in this paper, reductions or prevention of such patterns would be one kind of evidence that interventions were being effective in promoting healthier marriages and family relationships.

Beyond negative interaction being a hallmark of an absence of interaction safety, positive dimensions such as supportiveness and friendship would go a long way toward fostering a day-to-day sense of being safe and well connected in a marriage (see discussion of these and other dimensions below).

This aspect of safety is crucial to how couples will do in life. There are various ways that it is reflected in the content of PREP. There is much information and strategies for dealing more constructively with conflict and negativity throughout the curriculum. Importantly, the themes of friendship, fun, and core beliefs provide important contexts for you to stress the positive bond between partners, and what the happiest couples tend to do to preserve it. For example, friendship is based in it being safe to be open and share, and also in the tendency to support one another rather than be critical, when aware of struggles. Doubtless, it is a kind of deep emotional safety and connection that is the deepest goal two people have when they marry. We want to help them preserve and enhance their ability to achieve that goal.

Personal Safety. *The obvious may not need to be stated, but domestic violence puts adults—and especially women and children—at greatly increased*

risk for mental health problems, health problems, and death (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Healthy marriages, and interventions designed to foster them, could be expected to help prevent domestic violence in ongoing or future relationships, reduce the likelihood for ongoing violence in relationships where there have been incidents, and reduce the number of such relationships people remain in, especially those relationships characterized by the most serious and dangerous forms of domestic violence.

Note that domestic violence and aggression can include physical threats and harm as well as psychological abuse and intimidation. Continuing with the quote from Stanley (2003):

***Commitment Safety.** Marriage can be fundamentally construed as a long-term investment, and in many ways, functions like one (Stanley, 1998; Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999). It is the expectation of longevity that makes the day-to-day investment and sacrifice that characterizes good marriages rational. In contrast, having no clear sense of a future favors relationships with increased pressure for performance in the present, with score-keeping being the logical outgrowth (Murstein & MacDonald, 1983; Stanley et al., 1999). While data directly addressing the effects of long versus shorter term views are thin, and causality is no doubt in both directions, the existing evidence suggests that couples do best when they have a longer time horizon for their relationships (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Simply put, couples do best when they have a clear sense of us with a future: couple identity with a long-term view (Stanley & Markman, 1992). This does not mean that it makes sense for all couples to have a future. Some relationships are destructive and would be better ended than continued. I believe that the average couple with reasonable potential in marriage will do best if they are able to maintain the protective benefits that come from commitment.*

Hence, the argument we make is that core elements of safety are universal to healthy marriage and family relationships, and these same core elements will provide the best foundation for raising children. However, not all relationships are safe, and not all would be wise to continue.

Therefore, there is *not* a blind assumption here that the relationship someone is currently in is one that will be best for her or him, or the children involved, in to the future. There are growing efforts within government to support initiatives designed to promote healthy marriages. In a healthy marriage, when all three of these components—safety in interaction, personal safety and safety in commitment—are in place and operating well, family members (both adults, and children) will feel safe at home [1]. Adults and children will derive the maximum benefits from marriage under these circumstances. Safety along these dimensions may be as close as one could conceive as representing universal themes of family relationship success.

Risk and Prediction Research

Numerous factors have been shown to increase the risk of marital dissolution. Factors shown to increase risk include, but are not limited to, wives' employment and income (Greenstein, 1990), neuroticism (Kelly & Conley, 1987), premarital cohabitation (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Thomson & Colella, 1992), difficulties in the areas of leisure activities and sexual relations (Fowers et al., 1996), physiological arousal prior to problem-solving discussions (Levenson & Gottman, 1985), parental divorce (Glenn & Kramer, 1987), previous divorce of husbands (Aguirre & Parr, 1982; Bumpass et al., 1991), communication positivity/negativity (Markman, 1981), communication withdrawal and invalidation (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993), defensiveness and withdrawal (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989), higher ratios of hostility to warmth (Matthews et al., 1996), dissatisfaction with partners' personality and habits (Fowers et al., 1996), difficulties in communication and problem solving (Fowers et al., 1996) religious dissimilarity (Maneker & Rankin, 1993), maintaining separate finances (Kurdek, 1993), knowing the partner a short time before marriage (Kurdek, 1993), marrying young (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Bumpass et al., 1991; Martin & Bumpass, 1989), one partner being less conscientious than the other (Kurdek, 1993), problems relating to friends and family (Kurdek, 1991; Fowers et al., 1996), low or differing levels of education (Bumpass et al., 1991) and having dissimilar attitudes (Kurdek, 1993; Larsen & Olson, 1989).

The variables of greatest interest are those that are both dynamic in nature and causal in the development of marital distress and divorce (Stanley, 1997; Stanley, 2001). Related to this, many studies of the prediction of marital distress or divorce have pointed to the quality of the interaction between the partners as highly predictive of future outcomes (e.g., Clements, et al., 2004; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Markman, 1981; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Matthews et al., 1996). Studies such as these and their cross-sectional counterparts (e.g., Birchler, Clopton, & Adams, 1984; Margolin & Wampold, 1981) included procedures in which couples' interactions were observed and coded by trained observers to discriminate among couples on current or future level of distress or divorce. To be quite simplistic, many studies such as those mentioned above showed that couples who were either currently doing poorly or likely to do more poorly in the future interacted more negatively and less positively than other couples. The hallmarks of couples headed for trouble included negative reciprocity, poor affect management, and withdrawal during problem conversations. As Matthews and colleagues (1996) summarized, "The weight of the evidence, then, suggests that the quality of marital interactions, whether warm and supportive or hostile and negative, relates to risk for marital distress and even dissolution of the relationship" (p. 643). In this way, the interaction between two partners appears to be dynamic, changeable, and causal in the development of marital distress and divorce. Prediction studies are so valuable precisely for the hope of illuminating such targets for prevention or intervention. They are less valuable for providing the ability to predict the course in life for any specific couple.

Many of the dynamic variables were important in the prediction of both marital stability and marital satisfaction. In each of the comparisons, groups of couples could be reliably discriminated by various dynamic (changeable) relationship variables. Such findings are consistent with findings using growth curve analyses. Most notably, the work of Karney and Bradbury (1997) demonstrates that behavioral data (from objective coding) is more associated with the slope of these curves than such static dimensions as neuroticism (which is more associated with intercept). Hence, the dynamic factors are particularly telling of the course of marital quality over time. Many other studies are pointing the way to the importance of key dynamic processes and risk over time in marriage (e.g., Gottman, 1993; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Matthews et al., 1996).

Importantly, it is not only the presence of high negatives that is related to marital failure but the absence of a strong positive bond as well. In fact, research shows that negative interaction is most corrosive of marriages when there is also an absence of an ability to talk supportively at other times; and the ability to be supportive (and positively connected) mitigates the impact of negative interaction on marriages (Carels & Baucom, 1999; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Saitzyk, Floyd, & Kroll, 1997).

Here we have categorized the various risks of marital failure into dynamic and static dimensions. PREP focuses on the dynamic dimensions, not because the static are not important, but because the dynamic are more plausibly changeable.

RELATIVELY STATIC FACTORS THAT ARE HARD TO CHANGE ONCE MARRIED:

- Having a personality tendency to react strongly or defensively to problems and disappointments
- Having divorced parents
- Living together prior to marriage
- Being previously divorced, yourself or your partner
- Having children from a previous marriage
- Having different religious backgrounds
- Marrying at a very young age (for example, at the age of 18 or 19; the average currently is about 25 or 26 years of age for first marriages)
- Knowing each other only for a short time before marriage
- Experiencing financial hardship
- Having major mental health problems

DYNAMIC FACTORS THAT COUPLES CAN CHANGE TO IMPROVE THEIR ODDS:

- Negative styles of talking and fighting with each other, like arguments that rapidly become negative, put downs, and the silent treatment
- Difficulty communicating well, especially when you disagree
- Trouble handling disagreements as a team
- Unrealistic beliefs about marriage
- Lower levels of supportiveness between partners
- Having different attitudes about important matters
- A low level of commitment to one another, reflected in such things as not protecting your relationship from others you are attracted to, or failing to view your marriage as a long term investment

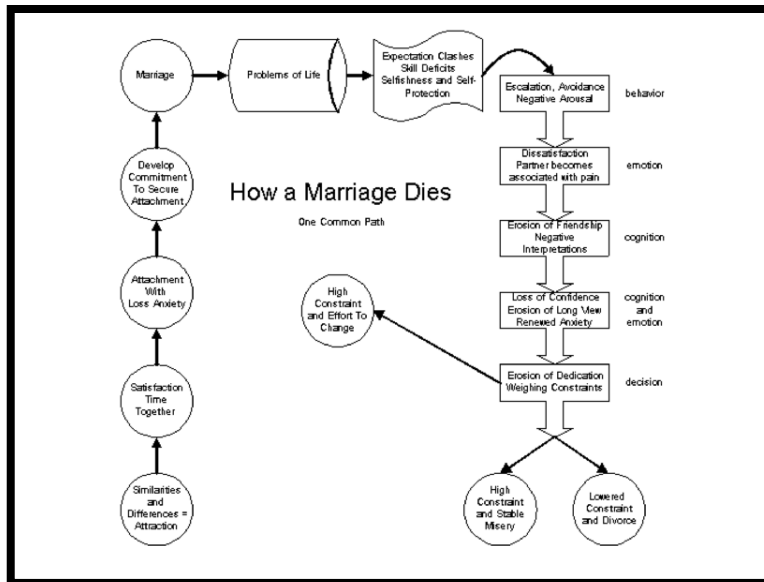


Figure 1

Theory of Marital Failure

Excerpted from:

Stanley, S.M., Blumberg, S.L., & Markman, H.J. (1999). *Helping Couples Fight for Their Marriages: The PREP Approach*. In R. Berger & M. Hannah, (Eds.), *Handbook of preventive approaches in couple therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

While there is not a singular pathway to marital distress or divorce, figure 1 portrays a comprehensive model that reflects a common path to marital failure based on findings from many different studies on marriage and relationships (from Stanley, 1997). In this model, two people initially become attracted to one another out of the mix of similarities, differences, and proximity. As time is spent together that is satisfying, a sense of attachment grows between the two partners. Along with this bond comes a sense of anxiety over the potential loss of the loved one. In this context, commitment develops, in large measure to remove this anxiety by the promise of a future together (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999). For many couples, this commitment culminates in marriage.

Prior to the wedding day, most first time married couples have had few tests of their ability to handle conflict. They simply have not encountered many significant issues or disagreements during courtship. That is partly why satisfaction tends to be very high at this stage (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Yet, there's clear evidence that how couples communicate and handle conflict foretells an important story about their future, and is more important than their premarital level of satisfaction (Markman, 1981; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Over time, this committed couple must increasingly deal with the problems of life, *together*. This explains why so many couples can start out so committed and so happy only to find their attachment being eroded by the constant dripping of unresolved and upsetting conflicts.

What they argue about and how they argue is a function of both expectations and their abilities to communicate and negotiate effectively--most of which is based on previous experiences in life with family of origin, past relationships, and the cultural context. Certain patterns of mismanaged conflict which are destructive for relationships will be repeatedly expressed in many couples (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Notarius & Markman, 1993). Out of this mix, a very important change occurs over time in the relationship: ***the presence of the partner becomes increasingly associated with pain and frustration, not pleasure or support.*** For most couples, this violates a basic assumption about what being together is about--having a most intimate and supportive friend for life.

Negative interpretations about the partner can become commonplace as a “me versus you” environment takes hold. These negative interpretations lead each to consistently interpret the actions of the other as more negative than is warranted (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Confidence erodes and the sense of attachment that led to commitment in the first place becomes more fragile. In fact, we have observed that many couples will begin regularly threatening the future of the relationship, as commitment becomes a pawn to be sacrificed in the heat of tormenting conflicts (Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999).

Ultimately, the marriage becomes a shell of its former state, with the view each partner holds of the other radically changing, as in the classic reversal of figure and ground (Gottman, 1993). In this case, the initial view becomes harder and harder to reinstate. At this point, the keys to the stability of the marriage lie less in commitment as *dedication* and more in commitment as *constraint* (Stanley & Markman, 1992). In other words, decisions to stay or leave now have more to do with the costs of leaving than the desire to stay. As constraints keeping marriages together weaken in our society, couples who get to this point are increasingly likely to divorce, whereas in the past many stayed together in stable, miserable marriages. Of course some couples rebound from this place of high constraint and low dedication to re-develop dedication, love, and positivity in their marriages.

This model of marital failure suggests a number of targets for intervention. These include certain patterns of communication, conflict management, dysfunctional beliefs, and understandings and motivations regarding commitment. The good news is that couples are not predestined to this path of destruction. There are things they can learn and act on to stay off the path of failure and on the path of friendship, support, and intimacy. But many of these skills and attitudes are anything but natural for most couples.

Outcome Research

Added to the prediction research, various studies strongly suggest that couples can, indeed, learn skills, complete exercises, and enhance ways of thinking that increase their odds of success. In Markman, Stanley and colleagues' research on premarital education, the positive effects of preventive interventions have been tracked for at least five years after the training. They are now conducting what may be the most in-depth study of premarital education ever conducted, funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. Markman, Stanley, and their team hope to learn much more about risk factors for couples and the degree to which it is possible to reduce marital distress and prevent divorce by training couples prior to marriage.

While there is more research to be done, a series of long-term studies have evaluated the effects of PREP compared to several different types of control groups, including no intervention (NI), and traditional premarital counseling (TPC), and indicate great promise for helping couples. The findings indicate that:

- In two key studies (but not all studies), PREP couples have lower rates of premarital break-up and post marital divorce.
- In a large-scale study in Denver, PREP couples as compared to control couples had 1/3 the likelihood of breaking up through the proceeding 5 years of the program (combining premarital and post-marital break up). In a recent study in Germany, 3% of the PREP couples had divorced at a 5 year follow up while 16% of couples who received traditional PMC (or no PMC) had divorced. However, other studies do not show this same level of difference in break-up rates.
- PREP couples have shown a greater likelihood of maintaining relationship satisfaction for a few years following training in one major long term study.
- PREP couples have lower levels of negative communication and higher levels of positive communication immediately following the program, and maintain these advantages up to 5 years later. (Based on studies in the U.S., Germany, and Australia)
- PREP couples, in one study, have reported lower levels of physical aggression in the years after taking the program.
- PREP couples enjoy taking the program because of the “hands on” skill oriented nature of the material—with PREP couples reporting greater program satisfaction than couples taking other programs offered to couples.
- Higher risk couples receiving an Australian variation of PREP were happier up to four years following the course than high risk couples receiving an alternate, biblio-therapy program. In this study, low risk couples did as well or even better with the alternative program, though in studies at the University of Denver, to date, low and higher risk couples derived similar benefits from PREP.
- In two studies of the use of PREP with young married couples in the U. S. Army, couples taking PREP showed gains in communication quality, conflict management, and confidence, as well as gains in the ability to talk well

together about Army-related issues, gains in a sense of connection with other Army couples, and better awareness of other resources that might be of use. Reductions in depressive symptoms were also reported among those who had some struggles with depression. All of the major gains reported were virtually the same among minority and non-minority couples, and also the same among those with higher and lower incomes.

- Premarital couples taking PREP given by clergy or lay leaders in their religious organization (as well as when given by university staff) communicate more positively and less negatively following training compared to couples taking more typical premarital training in their religious organizations. These gains in communication, compared to the tradition offerings, can be observed up to 5 years after training.

It is important to note that the beneficial effects of a program like PREP appear to be clear as long as 4 or 5 years after the training. Beyond that, the effects probably weaken over time, and therefore it is important for couples to periodically review the content. Institutions that provide relationship education to couples and families are in particularly good positions to offer ongoing support for marital health.

Various reviews of studies of marriage and premarital education in general provide evidence that such approaches are effective. It is also no doubt true that we will learn how to be more effective in the years to come.

General reviews of effectiveness:

Carroll, J. S., & Doherty, W. J. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118.

Fagan, P. F., Patterson, R. W., & Rector, R. E. (2002). *Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works*. Backgrounder #1606, The Heritage Foundation. Washington D. C.: The Heritage Foundation.

Giblin, P., Sprenkle, D.H., & Sheehan, R. (1985). Enrichment outcome research: A meta-analysis of premarital, marital, and family interventions. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 11(3), 257-271.

Halford, K. W., Markman, H. J., Kline, G. & Stanley, S. M. (2003) Best practice in couple relationship education. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 29, 385-406.

Hahlweg, K. & Markman, H. (1988). The effectiveness of behavioral marital therapy: Empirical status of behavioral techniques in preventing and alleviating marital distress. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 56, 440-447.

Silliman, B., Stanley, S.M., Coffin, W., Markman, H.J., & Jordan, P.L. (2001). Preventive interventions for couples. In H. Liddle, D. Santisteban, R. Levant, and J. Bray (Eds.), *Family psychology: Science-based interventions* (pp. 123-146). Washington, D.C.: APA Publications.

Research suggesting similar effectiveness of marriage and premarital education for lower income and minority participants (this subject requires much more testing with many more couples from varying backgrounds and experiences):

Stanley, S. M., Allen, E. S., Markman, H. J., Saiz, C. C., Bloomstrom, G., Thomas, R., Schumm, W. R., & Baily, A. E. (2005). Dissemination and evaluation of marriage education in the Army. *Family Process, 44*, 187–201.

Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (In Press). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random, household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*.

Survey Research

Most preparation models are likely to be well received by couples as long as the models are well conceived, theoretically plausible, and thoughtfully presented. But some material will be perceived by the couples as more relevant than other material. In an important, large sample survey recently conducted in the Catholic Church, couples were asked many questions about their premarital preparation experiences. When asked what content areas were most helpful, the top three rankings went to the three “C’s” of *communication* (73.5% rated as helpful), *commitment* (70.4% rated as helpful), and *conflict resolution* (67.2% rated as helpful, Center for Marriage and Family, 1995). Rated significantly lower were topics such as personality issues, finances, sex and intimacy, and career issues (see Silliman & Schumm, 1989, for similar findings). While it is doubtful that most of the premarital programs experienced by these couples were skills-based, it is very clear that these couples who were now well into their marriages recognized the central need for these foci in premarital training. Skills-based models almost always focus on communication. More specifically, PREP (and Christian PREP) focuses on all three of these “C’s” as domains for cognitive and behavioral change. (From Stanley, 1997).

The findings from the Family Stability Project mentioned above are entirely consistent with those noted above. Couples seem to perceive learning about communication, conflict, and commitment as highly relevant in their desire to form and keep long lasting, happy marriages. These are the core themes of PREP.

Commitment Research

As a result of experiences with the longitudinal study begun in 1980, Stanley began exploring commitment as a major research focus (Stanley, 1986). Since 1984, Stanley has been developing various measures of commitment related dimensions to aid

in better understanding what helps healthy and satisfied couples stay that way. Historically, there has been little research on commitment, especially given the obvious importance of the construct in marriage. However, there is an increasingly substantial body of theory and research related to commitment. The current versions of PREP as well as Christian PREP take advantage of this body of knowledge to help couples develop and strengthen their levels of mutual dedication to one another. This knowledge adds some cognitive oriented strategies to PREP that couples can employ in building strong marriages (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Lobitz, & Dickson, 1999; Stanley, 2005).

Research on cohabitation and risks for couples has been particularly fruitful in generating theory about how couples form relates to their risks in marriage. For an overview, see this article on our website:

Stanley, S. M., Kline, G. H., & Markman, H. J. (2005, February). *The inertia hypothesis: Sliding vs. deciding in the development of risk for couples in marriage*. Paper presented at the Cohabitation: Advancing Research and Theory Conference, Bowling Green, OH.

Research on sacrifice in marriage is closely related to research on commitment, and in fact, grew out of the field of research on commitment. A variety of studies show that couples who excel are those who where the partners feel good about giving to one another in ways that mean putting aside personal interest for the good of the partner and the relationship. That does not mean martyrdom nor does it mean one giving to the other at great personal cost without the other giving in return. Rather, in the best, healthiest marriages, the partners freely give to one another in life. Various studies are consistent with this view. If you wish to read more about this area, you can write to us for a copy of the chapter by Whitton, Stanley, and Markman, noted below.

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