

A Healthy Marriage Is Good For Your Health

OBJECTIVES:

1. Examine the health benefits of a healthy marriage.
2. Describe the characteristics of a healthy marriage.
3. Identify one issue that if improved will move participant closer to a healthy marriage.

HANDOUTS:

1. *Rate Your Knowledge About Healthy Marriage*
2. *Steps Toward a Healthy Marriage*
3. *Take Home Message for This Session*

ITEMS NEEDED FOR THIS EDUCATIONAL SESSION:

- Handout materials for participant workbooks
- Scrapbooking materials
- Flipchart and markers
- Pens and pencils
- Rocks or other materials for *Steps Toward a Healthy Marriage* activity

GETTING STARTED

At our last session, we talked about the importance of using your money wisely and saving money for your child's future. Does anyone have any reactions or experiences or thoughts they would like to share?

Let's now turn to today's lesson that is about what steps to take to have a happy marriage.

In today's session, we are going to discuss the benefits of healthy marriage for children, adults and families. Most of us will marry at some time in our lives; many of us will do it more than once. Marriage is an important part of our communities and society. There is even a government initiative to promote marriage.

An important point to keep in mind as we talk about the benefits of marriage is that these benefits can only be realized if you have a healthy marriage. Basically, a healthy marriage is one where the partners have a low-conflict relationship. All the benefits of marriage are cancelled out if a couple experiences high levels of conflict and domestic abuse is present.

According to the Administration for Children and Families (2005), there are at least two characteristics that all healthy marriages have in common:

- First, they are mutually enriching, and
- Second, both spouses have a deep respect for each other. It is a mutually satisfying relationship that is beneficial to the husband, wife, and children (if present).

So with these ideas in mind, let's look at the benefits of a healthy marriage.

ACTIVITY:

Rate Your Knowledge About The Benefits of a Healthy Marriage

Before I share with you the benefits of a healthy marriage, I'd like you to take a quiz. Don't worry—we won't be collecting the quiz. It is only meant to see how much you already know.

ACTIVITY:

Mini-Lecture on the Benefits of a Healthy Marriage

We will go over the quiz after we share with you some information about the health benefits of marriage. In an earlier session, we talked about the negative effects of stress on ourselves and our relationships. A healthy marriage is good for our stress levels as well.

Researchers at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota examined studies on the relationship of marriage to physical health. Here is what they learned:

- Married women are 20 percent less likely than single women to die from heart disease, suicide, and cirrhosis of the liver.
- Married men have even more benefits. They are two to three times less likely to die of these causes than single men.
- Married people are less likely to be victims of domestic violence, sexual assault, and other violent crimes.

The benefits of marriage also extend to married people's mental and emotional health. The happiness of married people is much greater than that of unmarried people. And this is true across the lifespan.

While these benefits are clear, it is not as clear **why** married people live healthier lives. Many experts believe that people benefit from living together, having greater financial stability, and having social support. But the most likely reason has to do with stress management.

We know that too much unmanaged stress is bad for our health. Researchers believe that married couples work better together as a team to handle stress.

For example, they may share the tasks of running a household, earning money, and raising children. With two people, you have two times as many resources. On the other hand, a single parent has to handle these demands on his or her own.

Here is how marriage helps reduce stress:

- There is more money in a married household. People pool their incomes and are able to build up more resources over their lifetime. Financial stability has been shown to improve people's health.
- There is a larger social network. Married people bring together two groups of friends and families, creating a larger support network to rely upon. This could mean lower rates of depression.
- Married people tend to improve their health behaviors. For some reason, people make better choices once they are married. This could be due to feeling responsible for another person or because the other person reminds you to take care of yourself.

There is one negative aspect of being married for health. Married people, especially men, weigh more and have higher rates of obesity than single people. People who never marry have the lowest incidence of obesity.

Unfortunately, unmarried couples who live together and love each other don't seem to enjoy these same benefits. Experts think this is because married people have made a legal vow to stay together for life. Often this vow is taken in front of family, friends, and community. Both the couples and those around them are more likely to support this pledge. Unmarried couples do not receive this same kind of support and may develop weaker support networks.

But what did the Mayo Clinic find regarding unhealthy marriages? Unhealthy marriages have negative consequences. For example, people in unhealthy marriages have more severe depression, which can be a great source of stress.

Another study found that when couples show hostility and negativity towards each other, there was a greater decline in their immune system. This decline can cause a number of problems—wounds will heal slower and there will be a greater susceptibility to infections.

Discuss these questions:

- What do we mean by the term "healthy marriage"?
- What one idea did you find most surprising about the benefits of a healthy marriage for health?
- How is an unhealthy marriage bad for your health?
- How did you do on your quiz?

ACTIVITY: Mini-Lecture on What Makes for a Healthy Marriage

Find six rocks and other items to show Gottman's five to one rule. Label one rock "**hurtful word or action**" and other rocks "**positive word or action.**"

When we decide to get married, we all want a happy marriage that will last. We know that both individuals and society benefit when people get married and have a healthy marriage. But what makes for a healthy marriage? Many of the things we have been discussing and practicing help contribute to a marriage being healthy. Let's review these things now.

Most people believe that the key ingredient for marriage is compatibility. That means a man and woman are alike in many ways and do not disagree about many things. This is important for a healthy marriage but it is not the only thing.

John Gottman has studied married couples for many years and has learned some important things about healthy marriages.

- A marriage lasts when couples are able to manage the disagreements and conflict that are a part of every relationship.
- [Use rocks here to show what it takes to undo one negative comment or action.] A marriage must have at least five positive moments for every negative moment between the couple. In other words, acts of kindness need to outweigh criticism and other negative behavior by a ratio of five to one.
- But it is not a matter of just being nice. Instead, it is learning to calm oneself, to listen and respond non-defensively, and to stick together even when the going gets rough.
- Happy marriages are based on friendship—a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other’s company. Friendship also means that you take the time to really know each other.
- Friendship offers protection against bad feelings toward your spouse when you’re in conflict.
- In the strongest marriages, husband and wife share a deep sense of meaning by supporting each other’s hopes and dreams, and by building a sense of purpose into their lives together.

So, a healthy marriage involves more than marrying the “right person.” It also involves taking the time to create positive moments, learning to manage conflict, learning to talk to each other, and staying committed during the tough times.

ACTIVITY: **Problem Solving: Steps Toward a Healthy Marriage**

So far, today we have learned about the importance of a healthy marriage for our health. Also, we spent a little time looking at what makes a marriage healthy. Sometimes people have problems that need to be addressed before getting married.

Take a few minutes now to think about one problem you have. Choose a problem that you need to manage or improve in order to be more ready for a lasting, healthy relationship. Write the problem down on the handout, **Steps Towards a Healthy Marriage**.

Next, write down two steps you can take to begin working through this problem. Think about what strategies you have learned in these classes that you could use. Make sure you can complete these steps before the next session.

ACTIVITY: **Scrapbook and Homework**

Participants will create a page for their workbook that will display activities they can do with their children for no or very little money. This activity is to have participants explore more low-cost ways to spend their parenting time with their children. It will also give them an opportunity to look at ways to save money.

Examples: Go to the park, go to a museum, or find a free kids matinee.

Give participant the take-home message for this session and have them write down their action steps on the take-home message. Remind them to place the take-home message in the magnetic frame.

CLOSING:

We learned a great deal about the effects of a healthy marriage on our health. We also saw that an unhealthy marriage hurts our health. One step towards a healthy marriage is to increase the positive interactions in your relationships and decrease the negative interactions. Hopefully, you will be two steps closer to a healthy marriage by the next session.

REFERENCE:

Mayo Clinic. (2006). **Healthy marriage: Why love is good for you.** Retrieved from URL: www.mayoclinic.com/print/healthy-marriage/MH00108/METHOD



Rate Your Knowledge About Healthy Marriage

1. True False:

A healthy marriage has more benefits for women than men.

2. True False:

People who are in healthy marriages tend to be happier and have lower stress levels.

3. True False:

Married people tend to help each other make healthier choices.

4. True False:

Unmarried people who love each other and live together enjoy the same health benefits as married people.

5. True False:

Married people tend to weigh more and suffer from obesity more than people who have never gotten married.

Taking Steps Towards A Healthy Marriage

Take a few minutes now to think about one problem you have that would interfere with you having a healthy marriage. Choose a problem that if you can solve it or at least improve it, you will be more ready for a lasting relationship.

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Next, write down two steps you can take before the next session to begin solving this problem.

1......

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2......

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Take Home Message for This Session

Directions: Think of one step you will take before the next session and write it down in the space provided. In addition, write down the time, date, and location of the next session.

**Step by step, I am
moving towards
a healthy marriage.**

My Action Steps:

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The Next Session:

.....
DATE
.....
TIME
.....
LOCATION

