



HEALTHY FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

**A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH
LITERATURE TO CONTRIBUTE
TO THE CAMPAIGN FOR ACTION
ON FAMILY VIOLENCE**

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1. PURPOSE AND FOCUS OF REVIEW

This paper was prepared to summarise the findings from a literature review of the research on couple and family relationships to contribute to the Campaign for Action on Family Violence.

The aims of the Campaign for Action on Family Violence are to increase awareness of family violence in New Zealand, to promote a greater propensity to act on family violence and to create a social climate that supports change. The Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families vision is that ‘all families and whānau have healthy, respectful, stable relationships, free from violence’.

Our research goal was to identify principles of healthy couple and family relationships to provide the Campaign team with the information to create a strengths-based set of messages that offer an alternative to violent relationships. We undertook a literature review to find evidence for those attitudes and behaviours that promote respectful, cooperative and harmonious rather than violent and highly conflicted family relationships. We focused therefore on those family relationships where violence and intense conflict most often occur: by male partners against female partners, between intimate partners and between parents and children.

The method and focus of the search are described in Appendix 1.

1.1 DEFINING ‘FAMILY’

The definitions of family are based variously on legal relationships, biological connectedness, household composition, and on groups of fictive kin that are defined as family by a person or group of people, which may include people who are not biologically related.

For the purpose of identifying principles of healthy family relationships in this context we are assuming a mix of biological and household factors and have chosen to focus on relationships between living together intimate partners, between parents, and between parents and dependent children.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

1. *Family strengths*. Results from a number of surveys on key family strengths can be broadly classified into two domains: attributes and behaviours.

Attributes

- Togetherness
- Acceptance
- Commitment
- Resilience

Behaviours:

- Affection
- Support
- Communication
- Sharing activities
- Appreciation
- Conflict management

2. *Family rituals* and shared activities enhance family identity and cohesion.
3. *Realistic expectations* about normal child development reduce tension and lower the risk of children being physically punished.
4. *Relationship competence* is a developmental issue, influenced by family of origin, and starts with 'personal security' and 'other centredness' (empathy).
5. *Stress from a number of sources* undermines couple and family relationship satisfaction. Learning stress-reducing strategies is very important to family cohesion and relationship stability.

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6. *Virtues and Values*. Demonstrations of commitment, sacrifice, loyalty, respect and willingness to forgive are key elements that protect the adult relationship.
7. *Cognitions*. The match between pre-existing lay theories and current relationship experience, and realistic expectations about relationship stages and challenges both contribute toward relationship satisfaction.

8. *Behaviours* that are particularly harmful to close relationships are:
- 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' (identified as the four strategies predictive of relationship break-up)-
 - criticism
 - defensiveness
 - disdain
 - withdrawal
 - Harsh start-ups (irritable or hostile openings and greetings)
 - Threats to leave
 - Frequent regulation attempts to change a partner
 - Alcohol and substance abuse.

COUPLE AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

9. *The Importance of emotion and sentiment.* Sentiment accounts more than behaviours for relationship satisfaction and family feeling, and applies to both adults and children.
10. *Building credit.* The best way to maintain sentiment is to build 'credit' in the relationship by demonstrating affection, respect, support and assistance, and communicating on a ratio of at least 5 positive signals to 1 negative signal.
11. *Cognitions.* Sympathetic interpretations of negative behaviour have a strong influence on relationship satisfaction and on reducing physical punishment of children.
12. *Alcohol and substance abuse* are very strongly implicated in violent behaviour. Limiting alcohol and drug taking has a positive impact on couple and family relationships.

3. KEY FINDINGS: RESEARCH ON COUPLES

The following section outlines the key findings from the literature review of recent research on couple relationships, covering the following areas:

- Model of couple relationships
- Relationship competence
- Emotions and sentiment
- Cognitive variables
- Attitudes
- Behaviours
- Communication and conflict management
- Virtues and values

Each section and sub-section summarises key findings and concludes with *Implications for improving relationships* that might be included in, or contribute to a relationship education programme. The implications are categorised into two types: *Self-help* (directly communicated to couples) or *Relationship Education* (offered as part of a relationship education programme) and are presented in shaded boxes.

3.1. MODEL OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

The satisfaction and durability of couple relationships are the outcome of a number of interacting factors. Halford (2001) proposes a model which demonstrates the complexity and range of factors that are involved in relationship outcomes:

- the individual characteristics of each partner,
- the context e.g., physical, social, economic, geographical, cultural, religious etc,
- life events,
- each partner's thoughts and feelings,
- the couple's adaptive processes and behavioural interactions.

This highlights the importance of assessing the current challenges in any relationship by gathering information on each of these factors before deciding which interventions might be applied to improve the quality of the relationship.

Implications for improving relationships – Applying the model of couple relationships
Relationship Education:

- Providing information about the range of factors that produce relationship outcomes to help couples identify the contribution of each factor to the state of their relationship

3.2 RELATIONSHIP COMPETENCE

As one of the factors in the model of contributors to outcomes for couple relationships is the individual characteristics of each partner, 'relationship competence' has been identified as a construct worthy of investigation. Carroll, Badger, & Yang (2006) describe relationship competence as a developmental individual issue, made up of two key dimensions, influenced by family of origin: 'personal security' and 'other centredness' (empathy).

Other writers have identified self-regulation, self soothing and self insight as important sources of relationship adaptation (Halford, 2001; Richards et al, 2003; Lange et al, 2000).

Implications for improving relationships – Relationship competence

Self-help:

- Self reflection- through writing/talking about individual and family history
- Identifying family legacies – which to adopt and which to reject

Relationship education:

- Learning self regulation and self-calming strategies for both adults and children
- Promoting empathy exercises: stepping into another's shoes and seeing self through another's eyes

3.3. EMOTIONS AND SENTIMENT

While behaviours are most often the focus of assessing the state of a relationship there is increasing evidence that the link between behaviours and relationship satisfaction is weak. According to Weiss and Heyman (1997) 'daily marital events appear only in a limited sense to be the basis of marital satisfaction. Attempts to isolate classes of events that account for satisfaction variance have shown that 'feeling-based' or positive affectional events may be more salient contributors'.

This finding has led to the creation of the 'sentiment override' hypothesis' to account for the puzzling phenomenon of the disjunction between negative behaviours and positive satisfaction with the state of the relationship. There is evidence that positive illusions and perception of partner's regard have a stronger effect than the partner's behaviour on relationship satisfaction.

The sentiment over-ride phenomenon may account, in part, for the willingness of some women to stay in relationship with a partner whose behaviour is abusive or violent because of the perception that 'deep down he really loves me', or 'we do love each other – we are meant to be together'. It may also account for the lack of improvement in relationship satisfaction for couples in therapy where the emphasis is primarily on behaviour change, communication skills and 'homework' (Gottman, 1998).

3.3.1. BUILDING 'CREDIT' IN THE RELATIONSHIP

How positive sentiment is sustained over time, however, is affected by behaviours. There is considerable evidence for keeping relationships 'in credit' as a key way to strengthen positive affect and to reduce relationship distress and breakdown.

While there is controversy over the impact of the precisely prescribed ratio of 5 positive to 1 negative signals on the durability of intimate relationships proposed by Gottman, (Gottman et al, 1998; Gottman, 1999) all researchers agree that the substantial weighting of positive over negative signals is important (Lebow, 2001). In this context 'signals' means a range of forms of communication and expression – verbal, non-verbal, physical and practical.

Halford (2001) identified four main classes of behaviour most strongly related to relationship credit: affection, respect, support and assistance and shared quality time.

Implications for improving relationships – Building credit

Self Help:

- Daily expressions of affection, tenderness and appreciation
- Demonstrations of respect for the person
- Giving support and practical assistance
- Creating shared quality time

3.4. COGNITIVE VARIABLES

While emotional/affective dimensions have a considerable impact on relationship satisfaction, cognitive factors also have a significant part to play. The key cognitive factors identified from the review are: the match between pre-existing lay theories and the current relationship experience, the application of attribution theory and the value of realistic expectations.

3.4.1. THE MATCH BETWEEN PRE-EXISTING LAY THEORIES AND CURRENT RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE

There is substantial evidence that people's pre-existing lay relationship theories have a major influence on their satisfaction with their relationship. 'How do you know when you're in a good or bad relationship?We do so by comparing what we perceive we have in the relationship with pre-existing explanations, ideals, standards and beliefs concerning what constitutes a good or bad relationship' (Fletcher, 2002, p 40). To illustrate, partners who both place a value on role-bound relationships will perceive their relationship as satisfying, as long as each adopts the prescribed gender-based role. If one partner has a pre-existing lay theory that successful relationships depend on role sharing, and the other associates relationship success with traditional separate roles, the satisfaction and stability of the relationship is likely to be lower.

Implications for improving relationships – Lay relationship theories

Self Help:

- Identifying the ideal relationship style or model for each partner
- Exploring family-of-origin and other influences on relationship models

3.4.2. APPLICATION OF ATTRIBUTION THEORY

How partners interpret each other's behaviour has a strong influence on relationship satisfaction. An important contribution to positive emotion in close relationships is the practice of sympathetic interpretations of negative behaviour.

The interpretations are based on causal attributions: the kinds of causes or motivations that are ascribed to the behaviour. There is substantial evidence that attributing negative behaviour to external causes, and attributing positive behaviour to the internal features of the partner both contribute to relationship satisfaction.

At a more detailed level, people are more satisfied in their close relationships when they attribute a *negative behaviour* to causes that are:

- specific – to this incident
- external – responding to external demands
- unstable – not part of a pattern

and attribute a *positive behaviour* to causes that are:

- global – demonstrating a quality or virtue
- internal – expressing a personal principle or emotion
- stable – illustrating a pattern

(Fletcher, 2002).

The Power of Attributions

Example:

*Negative behaviour from partner: **She's late home and hasn't called...***

Attribution:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>Specific</i> | 'She was trying to finish a report' |
| <i>External</i> | 'Her boss needed this urgently' |
| <i>Unstable</i> | 'This can happen when there's a tight deadline' |

Attribution

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| <i>Global</i> | 'She's a hopeless time manager' |
| <i>Internal</i> | 'She's too scared to tell her boss where to get off' |
| <i>Stable</i> | 'Work always comes first and I always come last' |

Example:

*Positive behaviour from partner: **He makes a special anniversary meal***

Attribution

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| <i>Global</i> | 'He can still surprise me' |
| <i>Internal</i> | 'He thought of this himself' |
| <i>Stable</i> | 'He's a basically kind person and he loves me' |

Attribution

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| <i>Specific</i> | 'He just wants to go fishing next weekend' |
| <i>External</i> | 'Just trying to look good in front of the family' |
| <i>Unstable</i> | 'Don't expect this to last' |

3.4.3 REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Realistic expectations about the difficulties and challenges of relationships also contribute to relationship satisfaction. (Noller, Beach & Osgarby, 1997; Overall, Fletcher & Simpson, 2006). Stressed couples are more likely to believe that any form of disagreement is destructive and that change by partners is not possible (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

Implications for improving relationships – Interpretations and expectations

Relationship education:

- Educating about sympathetic interpretations of negative behaviours, e.g., she's stressed because family gatherings are very important to her.
- Educating about usual relationship challenges, e.g., impact of new baby, loss of job etc
- Educating about 'normal' conflict

3.5 ATTITUDES

Lack of respect (contempt) is particularly harmful to close relationships and the presence of respect, including respect for differences, is a very important feature of relationship quality and satisfaction (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006). 'Respect' in this context is not respect for authority but for the autonomy and individuality of another person.

Implications for improving relationships – Respect for differences

Relationship education:

- Learning to view and describe differences in neutral terms e.g., I like clothes, he likes car/I like order – he is more easy going/I like to take time to make decisions – she's more spontaneous.

3.6 BEHAVIOURS

Key findings on behavioural factors influencing relationship stability and satisfaction have been categorised into three main areas: use of substances, sharing tasks and giving and receiving emotional support.

3.6.1 LIMITING SUBSTANCES

Alcohol and substance abuse are very strongly implicated in violent behaviour.

In a study by Fals-Stewart (2003) a group of men with a history of violence were referred to a drug and alcohol treatment programme. On the days they drank alcohol they were eleven times more likely to hit their partners than on the days they did not drink.

A similar result emerged from a study of young couples who were eight times more likely to hit each other on days they drank alcohol, than on days they did not drink (Relationship Services, 2006).

Stopping alcohol and substance abuse is a key factor in reducing aggression and violence, and limiting alcohol and drug taking has a positive impact on couple and family relationships.

Implications for improving relationships – Limiting substances

Relationship education:

- Applying ALAC guidelines for alcohol limits
- 'If you've got children, No drinking after midnight.'

3.6.2 SHARING TASKS

There is evidence that sharing household roles and tasks does contribute to relationship satisfaction of women, but equity may be more important than equality in relationship satisfaction. Perceived equivalence of effort and of sacrifice may be more important than strictly equal effort in every domain of the household and relationship.

Implications for improving relationships – Sharing tasks

Self Help:

- Agreeing on what constitutes fair sharing of family and household tasks
- Identifying and acknowledging what each partner is sacrificing for the relationship

3.6.3 GIVING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

More important than sharing tasks, men's 'emotion work', contributes the most to relationship satisfaction for women (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). 'Emotion work' relates to the expression of emotional attention, support and interest.

Implications for improving relationships – Emotional support

Self Help:

- Showing an interest in each other's daily experiences.
- Reflecting the feelings not the solutions

3.7 COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

A considerable body of research on intimate relationships has focussed on observations and analysis of partner interactions

Couples often cite 'the arguments' as the major problem in their relationship and attribute the conflict to poor communication. They are usually unclear about the specific aspects of the communication that are problematic. The research shows that there are particular styles and forms of communication that create distance and distress, and some forms and styles that increase goodwill and intimacy.

There is also evidence that the frequency as well as the style of communication has an impact on the state of the relationship and on the chance of misunderstanding. In the early stage of relationships, couples talk more, assume less and are more accurate in their interpretations of each other's feelings and thoughts. The longer the relationship, the more confident, but less accurate, partners are in their interpretations of each other's feelings and thoughts (Fletcher & Thomas, 1996).

Partners in healthy relationships are likely to:

- be more accurate in their understanding of each other's intentions and affect,
- feel more confident in expressing their feelings and attitudes to one another,
- deal with negative affect from the partner without reciprocating it,
- reciprocate positive affect (Noller, Beach & Osgarby,(1997).

When tension rises, early intervention is necessary to reduce the chance of emotional flooding, especially for males. Emotional flooding is a physiological process of raised heart rate, adrenalin release and muscle tension that occurs in states of high arousal and which reduces the chance of conflict resolution. From their research on conflict in close relationships Faulkner, Davey & Davey (2005) found that:

- while the demand-withdrawal pattern is not helpful to marital satisfaction, neither is avoiding conflict. (The demand withdrawal pattern occurs when one partner raises concerns or expresses anger and, if the other partner responds by retreating or withdrawing, the complaining partner pursues at an increasingly insistent level.)
- there is evidence of biological differences in responses to heightened autonomic arousal, with women having higher tolerance and men finding it highly aversive,
- lower satisfaction reported by either partner was related to poor conflict management skills.

While there is evidence that active listening is neither regularly practised in intimate partner relationships, nor a predictor of relationship satisfaction, there is evidence that learning communication skills that include active listening, helps in slowing the escalation of conflicts.

Markman et al (2004) investigated the effectiveness of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), in which skills of active listening, expressive speaking and how to separate problem discussion and problem-solving interactions, were taught. They found evidence of significant improvements in communication and conflict management up to four years after the intervention. After three years, there was greater use of communication skills, greater positive affect, more problem-solving skill, and more supportive validation. There was also less withdrawal, less denial, less dominance, less negative affect, less conflict, less negative communication and significantly less physical violence than in the control group.

In problem solving discussions the use of first person plural ('we') and first person singular pronouns ('I') produced more problem solutions and greater relationship satisfaction than the use of second person pronouns ('you') (Simmons et al, 2005).

Implications for improving relationships – Communication and conflict management

Self Help

Principles

- Make time for regular conversations as a couple, starting with appreciations,
- Self regulate negative feelings- express with restraint,
- Accept or make allowances for the other's negative feelings,
- Engage early with rising tension rather than withdrawing,
- 'Talk it out- don't act it out'.

Behaviours to practise

- Assertive communication – being direct with respect,
- Check assumptions and consult,
 'I think...What do you think?'
- Practise negotiation model: 'I'd like.....What would you like?'
- When a difference arises show understanding of the other's viewpoint,
- Set the goal for agreements, not acquiescence,
- Allow for differences in decision making styles and the time it takes to decide.

Behaviours to avoid

- The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (criticism, defensiveness, contempt and withdrawal) are the strongest predictors of relationship breakdown,
- Withdrawal is the most destructive of the damaging strategies,
- Dismissive put-downs are signs of contempt and are also destructive,
- 'Harsh start-ups' increase the chance of escalating conflict e.g., 'Where have you been?' 'What a mess.' 'What's wrong with you?'
- Threats to leave in the heat of an argument undermine resilience, commitment and security,
- Frequent regulation attempts to change a partner tend to backfire and people become even unhappier in the relationship.

3.8 VIRTUES AND VALUES

In their analysis of recent emerging trends in research on marriage, Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007) observe a move away from the study of conflict, which has dominated the research, towards an investigation into transformative processes such as spontaneous remission of distress and self transformation. An example is the common experience of couples recovering over time from conflict and grievances without applying any deliberate healing communication processes or seeking outside intervention.

Trends in recent research have also focused inquiry into the significance of values and virtues in sustaining healthy relationships.

Fincham et al (2007) identify the following constructs: *commitment*, *forgiveness* and *sacrifice* that have emerged from a number of studies as sustaining features of close relationships. These are described as types of transformation of motivation, helping 'couples accommodate to external challenges or potentially problematic partner behaviours'.

3.8.1 COMMITMENT

In the context of close relationships, various researchers and commentators have found it useful to distinguish between

- commitment to the person ('dedication'),
- commitment to the relationship,
- commitment to the institution and
- constraint commitment; internal moral pressure or external limitations resulting from options or costs (Fincham, Stanley and Beach, 2007).

From a New Zealand investigation into Relationship Commitment, Pryor and Roberts (2005) identified five key dimensions:

- Keeping promises and honouring obligations,
- Relational future – (presuming permanence),
- Unconditional involvement – ('through thick and thin'),
- Putting work into the relationship,
- Individual qualities e.g., trust, loyalty, honesty, respect, faithfulness, availability, courtesy, openness and tolerance.

3.8.2 SACRIFICE

There is a growing body of evidence for viewing sacrifice as making a positive contribution to intimate relationships, including for the person making the sacrifice. 'The very same behaviour that could represent a cost is reappraised with an emphasis on us and our future, turning it into a source of satisfaction rather than a cost.' (Whitton et al., 2002).

From a review of the literature, Bradbury (2003) concluded that setting aside one's own interests and concerns to attend to those of the partner may be a more influential source of relationship satisfaction than the use of problem-solving strategies.

3.8.3 FORGIVENESS

Breaches of expectations and relational standards are a regular feature of most people's experience in close relationships. According to Fincham et al (2007) 'the potency of negative events necessitates repair processes that are fundamentally transformative'. The emerging data suggests that forgiveness has considerable power to enable that process of repair and provides important new opportunities for intervention and prevention.

Implications for improving relationships – Virtues and values

Self help:

- demonstrations of loyalty (including sexual fidelity) and keeping promises
- avoiding threats to leave
- making time to be together
- articulating a sense of commitment to the relationship – 'What are our goals for the future?' 'What are we trying to create?'

Relationship Education:

- providing some guidance on distinguishing between small but meaningful demonstrations of sacrifice and self-defeating submission
- providing some guidance on distinguishing between those behaviours which might be forgiven and those behaviours which should never be forgiven.

4. KEY FINDINGS: RESEARCH ON FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The following section outlines the key findings from the literature review of recent research on couple relationships, covering the following areas:

- Family wellbeing and family strengths
- The importance of emotion and sentiment for children in the family
- Application of attribution theory to interpretations of children's behaviour
- Family life cycle, life course transitions, relationship stages and impacts
- Context and stress

Each section and sub-section summarises key findings and concludes with *Implications for improving relationships* that might be included in, or contribute to a relationship education programme. The implications are categorised into two types: Self-help (directly communicated to couples) or *Relationship Education* (offered as part of a relationship education programme) and are presented in shaded boxes.

4.1. FAMILY WELLBEING AND FAMILY STRENGTHS

Family strengths, family practices and family wellbeing are constructs that can be applied to attitude and behaviour changes to contribute to positive family relationships.

Surveys on people's views on key family strengths have been undertaken in a number of western countries (e.g., Stinnet & DeFrain, 1985; Billingsley et al, 2005; Greeff, 2000). The strengths identified can be broadly classified into two domains: attributes and behaviours.

Attributes

- Togetherness
- Acceptance
- Commitment
- Resilience

Behaviours:

- Affection
- Support
- Communication
- Sharing activities
- Appreciation
- Conflict management

According to results of the New Zealand Youth Connectedness Project survey, family identity (sense of belonging) and cohesion (closeness) are some of the strongest predictors of wellbeing outcomes for children (Pryor, 2007).

Implications for improving relationships – family strengths and wellbeing

Self help:

- Family rituals and shared activities, family meals at the table
- Regular expressions of positive warmth and affection

Relationship Education:

- Communication skills – talking so others will listen and listening so others will talk
Guidelines on tension raising and tension reducing behaviours, and on conflict resolution

4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTION AND SENTIMENT FOR CHILDREN IN THE FAMILY

Children's response to the concept of family is more strongly linked to emotions than to structure or to family membership. In a study of adolescents, for example 80% of the young people used affective terms, e.g., 'love', 'care', 'support' to describe a family (Anyan & Pryor, 2002).

Implications for improving relationships: the role of affect for children in the family

Self help:

- Daily expressions of affection, tenderness and appreciation

4.3 APPLICATION OF ATTRIBUTION THEORY TO INTERPRETATIONS OF CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Attribution Theory has implications not only for reducing tension between partners, but also in reducing the likelihood of physical punishment of children who are more likely to be hit if the parent interprets their behaviour as a sign of 'naughtiness' or defiance, rather than as a sign of natural curiosity, adventurousness, upset or tiredness.

Implications for improving relationships – sympathetic interpretations

Relationship Education:

- Education on normal child development
- The child is tired – not naughty/The child is just being curious – not defiant.

4.4 FAMILY LIFE CYCLE, LIFE COURSE TRANSITIONS, RELATIONSHIP STAGES AND IMPACTS

While family life cycle normative models have been criticised on many grounds (Crothers & McCormack, 2007), role theory and models of relationship stages have some utility in promoting realistic expectations for couples.

One model, (Boon, 1994) for example, describes three stages:

- romantic love stage,
- evaluative stage,
- accommodation stage.

Research on relationship stages has shown that transitions to, and through parenthood have a substantial impact on relationship satisfaction. Couple relationship satisfaction tends to decline after the birth of the first child, rises when children attend primary school, declines when children are adolescent and rises again when children leave home (Bradbury, 2003).

According to Ahlborg & Strandmark (2006), factors affecting quality of intimate relationships six months after delivery for first-time parents are:

- coping by adjustment to parental role – mutual support as new parents,
- couple's intimacy, togetherness and love – placing priority on the couple relationship – the most important predictor of stability and satisfaction,
- coping by communication – verbal and non-verbal confirmation,
- coping by seeking social support.

Implications for improving relationships – family life stages

Relationship Education:

- Information on what to expect for couples and new parents,
- Information on availability of relationship counselling and communication courses, e.g., Relationship Services, Catholic Social Services, Prepare-Enrich, Imago Groups,
- Information on how to keep adult relationships alive and well with babies and pre-schoolers at home.

4.5 CONTEXT AND STRESS

Neighbourhoods, community, work, life events and the ability of the couple to manage stress (particularly chronic stress) are all critical factors in relationship satisfaction and durability. Two overworked and work-stressed adults, even in family friendly work settings, have little time and energy left to focus on their relationship.

Many researchers suggest that variables from outside a couple's relationship can and do have powerful effects on relationship satisfaction levels and relationship stability. Indeed, many argue that interventions designed to support couple relationships should target contextual variables such as poverty and health. Amato et al (2003) found that increased economic resources were associated with increased relationship quality. A review of literature that has examined changes in relationship satisfaction scores in otherwise stable relationships suggest that contextual interventions, such as the provision of child care, higher wages, affordable housing, improved access to health care and safer neighbourhoods, could contribute positively to relationship satisfaction and stability (Bradbury & Karney, 2004).

Implications for improving relationships- reducing stress and seeking help

Self help

- 'What's one thing you can do today to make your partner's life easier?'
- 'Date nights' for couples help reduce the chance of relationship decline from neglect.

Relationship Education:

- Information on what adults can do to make family life priorities, relieve stress and to support one another to reduce stress,
- Information on help-seeking strategies, e.g., negotiating in work place, knowing what economic support is available from government.

5. TRANSLATION OF KEY FINDINGS: SUGGESTED MESSAGES FOR PUBLIC AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION PURPOSES

COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

- Plan together – (commitment)
- Stay faithful – (maintain trust and protect the relationship)
- Share the load – (equity or equality)
- Limit the drinking and the drugs – (inhibits aggression and violence)
- Expect some conflict (realistic expectations)
- No put downs, blame, threats or walkouts (lowers the risk of break-up)
- Talk it out – don't act it out – (heal the grievances)

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- ACCENTUATE the positive – (attention, acceptance, approval and affection)
- Make allowances – (sympathetic interpretations)
- Make sacrifices – (putting partner, children and family in front)
- Savour the sentiment – (the power of affect)
- Eat together
- Play together
- Make rituals
- Lower the stress – reduce the load

APPENDIX 1: METHOD

The literature search focused on two main domains of recent international research, most of which had been published since 2000, on intimate partner/marital satisfaction and relationship stability and durability, and on family wellbeing and family strengths.

The findings and conclusions from each of the two domains were analysed to identify any distinct principles, and also woven together to identify any common principles that might contribute to the development of a family relationship education programme.

The emphasis was on selecting principles that might be directly applied to attitude and behaviour change, particularly by those family members with the greatest power to change family patterns and dynamics, namely the adults. We were also aware of the need to identify principles that could translate into messages that are easily implemented.

The search covered the following topics:

- family strengths and family wellbeing
- relationship stages, transitions and impacts
- relationship styles and durability
- relationship features, qualities and satisfaction
- individual relationship competence
- individual cognitions
- the role of emotion
- context
- communication and conflict management
- values and virtues

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