When Partners Become Parents: Strategies and Factors for Keeping Love Alive

Presented to:

The Faculty of Adler Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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February 2014
Abstract

Many programs for expecting couples are focused on the baby and parenting. There are fewer programs that are specifically designed for maintaining relationship quality through the transition to parenthood. In general, there is less public awareness of how the romantic relationship is affected by becoming parents and how the relationship between mothers and fathers impacts the psychological wellbeing of their child. This paper brings awareness to the impact the parental relationship has on children and society as a whole. It suggests governmental support for new parents and the promotion of relationship enhancement programs by hospitals and birthing centers as a form of preventative care. Based on the literature reviewed this paper also puts forth a seven session lesson plan which incorporates experiential psycho-education addressing common obstacles couples encounter as they become parents. Such obstacles include declines in intimacy, renegotiation about the division of household, paid, and child labor, and individual and couple reorientation in perception of existing relationships. It also integrates strategies for overcoming these obstacles for example by increasing resiliency to stress and improving relationship skills such as communication and conflict resolution. This paper encourages helping professions to utilize the supplemental material and modify the lesson plan to meet the needs of their clients.
I would like to thank Ruth Buelow and Richard Close, for their guidance and encouragement throughout this thesis process.

To the faculty of Adler Graduate School for providing me a strong Adlerian foundation and giving me courage to be imperfect.

I would also like to thank Claire Stuckey for her incredible supervision, support and encouragement. Her faith in me facilitated my growth into a confident Adlerian therapist.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my fiancé, Brian, for his endless support throughout my journey toward a lifelong career in which I am truly passionate. Without you I would not have had the courage to take the leap of faith and begin something new. Nor would I have had the strength to continue on through the extremely long days of work, school, and internships day after day and year after year for nearly three years. Sharing our life together going forward has given me the motivation I need to turn my dream for myself and our family into a reality.
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When Partners Become Parents: Strategies and Factors for Keeping Love Alive

Building stronger marriages is a worthwhile goal since healthy marriages not only benefit individuals and their children but also society as a whole (England, 2001). This literature reviewed demonstrates the importance of the marital relationship on the psychological well-being of children, common obstacles for maintaining a vibrant romantic relationship and strategies to preserve relationship quality following the birth of a child.

A range of child emotional and behavioral problems have been associated with marital conflict between parents (Katz & Gottman, 1993). These problems include internal disorders, such as insecure attachment impairments, and external disorders such as social difficulties. Jaycox and Repetti (1993) reported that children from homes characterized by marital conflict were described by their teachers as displaying more behavioral problems at school than children from homes not characterized by conflict. Children from families with marital conflict also perceived themselves as less competent. Forehand, Long, Brody, and Fauber (1986) found that children of parents who reported low levels of marital satisfaction were less sociable in school than children whose parents endorsed greater marital satisfaction. Even when controlling for earlier child behavioral problems, marital distress was found to be associated with a range of child problems such as depression, conduct disorder, and academic underachievement (Petch, Halford, Creedy, & Gamble, 2012).

Conversely, some evidence has shown that children from intact marriages demonstrate superior academic achievement, self-concept, and social competencies (Amato, 2001). Couple relationship satisfaction also predicts the extent of observed co-parenting, which is the collaborative interaction between the couple and the infant (Gordon & Feldman, 2008). Co-parenting predicts later paternal positive engagement with the infant, which in turn predicts
future female relationship satisfaction (Petch et al., 2012). In short, the better the relationship is between the parents, the more likely the child is to develop into a well-adjusted social contributor to society.

The way in which mothers and fathers can maintain a satisfactory relationship is not just a matter of the individual or couple but also a matter of social resources or constraints. Social resources and constraints such as social networks, cultural beliefs, and the ability to reallocate time, are intimately tied to social status. Although social status plays a vital role in the well-being of a family, this literature review is limited to relationship resources, time allocation, paternal involvement and practice dealing with stress. It also presents researched based, experiential approaches for enhancing the relationship between new parents and provides a lesson plan to be used by the author as a psycho-educational program for couples in the midst of the transition to parenthood.

**Part I: Factors Affecting the Loving Bond**

**Relationship Resources**

*Communication.* Countless studies have underscored communication as the hallmark of successful family relationships. For example, Robinson and Blanton (1993) investigated the strengths of long-lasting marriages and identified communication as a key factor in such marital relationships. Most studies reveal that a lack of communication between spouses lead to poor marital satisfaction. For instance, Gottman (1994) indicated that poor communication skills precede the onset of marital problems. Therefore many people who research marital communication are dedicated to understanding how communication skills affect the relationship (Askari, Nohd Noah, Hassan, & Baba, 2012; Gottman & Schwartz Gottman, 2007; Mattson, Frame, & Johnson, 2011; Rehman, Janssen, NewHouse, Heiman, Fallis, & Rafaeli, 2011;
Roberts, 2000). Fewer studies have explored how the relationship may affect communication skills.

Prior research has demonstrated that dyadic communication patterns predict later marital satisfaction across different relationship stages and discriminate between distressed and nondistressed couples (Gottman & Clifford, 2000). Dysfunctional communication strategies are thought to exacerbate conflict and hamper problem resolution, which in turn fosters greater distress and erodes satisfaction over time (Bradbury & Karney, 1993).

**Conflict resolution.** The way couples communicate during conflict discussions has been found to be a reliable predictor of marital satisfaction (Rehman, Newhouse, Heiman, Fallis, and Rafaeli, 2011). The majority of divorce cases are due to the unresolved marital conflicts among couples (Askari et al., 2012). Askari et al. (2012) found that communication and conflict resolutions skills training can improve marital satisfaction. Evidence that these relationship skills can be learned provides hope for conflicted couples that with a certain amount of effort, the relationship can indeed, improve. It also provides a good opportunity for marriage and family therapists to promote the development of relationship resources between distressed couples.

**Skills training.** There is a strong correlation between divorce and poor communication and conflict resolution skills (Askari, Nohd Noah, Hassan, & Baba, 2012). Askari published a study in 2012 that looked at the effect of communication and conflict resolution skills training and marital satisfaction of Iranian couples. The research design used pre- and post-test questionnaires with 108 participants randomly assigned to a control group or experimental group. The participants in the experimental group received training in communication and conflict resolution skills from the PREPARE/ENRICH program. Those in the control group did not. The results indicated that participants who received the communication and conflict
resolution skills training had significantly higher mean scores on the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Questionnaire than those who were in the control group (Askari et al., 2012). Those in the experimental group showed more significant gains from the pre-test to the post-test. Askari’s study emphasizes communication skills training and how it can be used to increase marital satisfaction but does not explore individuals’ unique communication styles prior to the training.

**Intimacy.** Relationships with high levels of emotional intimacy have been found to promote psychological well-being and are an important factor in relationship adjustment (Boden, Fischer, & Niehuis, 2010). According to Erikson (1963), the development of intimacy is a necessary component for the success of a marriage. He argued that the ability to hold on to and carry out intimate relationships is essential for becoming a functional adult. Furthermore failures to develop this psychosocial competence will likely result in cold or unsatisfying relationships later in life. Among a sample of 147 couples involved in marital therapy, Doss, Simpson, and Christensen (2004) found that the lack of emotional intimacy was one of the highest-rated reasons for seeking therapy. The association between intimacy and marital adjustment is so well established that some clinical models in psychotherapy focus specifically on increasing intimacy in relationships (Johnson 2004).

Emotional intimacy has been defined in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this paper, we will use the definition put forth by Reis and Shaver (1988) in which emotional intimacy was described as an interpersonal transactional process with two pivotal features: self-disclosure and partner responsiveness.

Results from several studies have supported the importance of self-disclosure for the health of an intimate relationship. Olson and Olson (2000) found that 96% of happy couples indicated comfort in sharing their feelings with their spouse. On the other hand, 72% of unhappy
couples reported that their partner did not know how they felt. Self-disclosing behavior among couples is positively related to marital satisfaction (Lippert & Prager, 2001). Moreover, emotional skillfulness and the ability to express emotions are also positively related to marital adjustment (Cordova, Gee, & Warren, 2005). In contrast, emotional withdrawal contributed to unsatisfying relationships (Roberts, 2000).

With evidence supporting the notion that relationship resources such as communication and conflict resolution skills can be taught to adults in relationships, researchers question whether intimacy can also be acquired later in life. In light of Erikson’s developmental theory, Boden et al., (2009) carried out a study to explore the idea that emotional intimacy is a skill that can be developed and potentially modified. They explain that little is known about whether emotional intimacy experienced and developed during early adulthood predicts marital adjustment at a later time. The study incorporated longitudinal data from a sample of 144 recent graduates at five data points over a period of 25 years. Results revealed that intimacy skills acquired in the formative years of late adolescence and further developed throughout young adulthood have an apparent long-reaching effect on marital adjustment 25 years later. In other words Boden et al. posits that intimacy is something that can be learned and developed.

The acquisition of intimacy skills could be very important to future marital success. Considering the importance of a child’s experience of intimacy in their formative years on their future marital adjustment, modeling healthy emotional intimacy becomes even more important for new parents.

**Transition to Parenthood**

The transition to parenthood is one of the most common and most studied developmental transitions (Schumacher & Meleis, 1994). The early years of parenthood are probably the most
complicated in a parent’s life in which most modifications have to be made (Keizer & Schenk, 2012). Research has indicated that parent and nonparent couple’s demonstrate a similar average decline in relationship satisfaction across the first decade of marriage. New parent couples display a sudden and marked decline in marital satisfaction after the birth of their first child. The sudden decline is likely due to the challenging demands of infant care, division of household tasks, and new roles that accompany parenthood. Relationship satisfaction starts to rise again once the child reaches the age of seven. Once the child goes off to primary school and becomes more independent and requires less intensive care, household labor on behalf of the child diminishes (Keizer & Schenk, 2012).

First-time parents are faced with multiple changes in their lives as both as individuals as well as in their life as a couple. Thus, making a healthy transition to parenthood entails accomplishing mastery of the new roles, maintaining a satisfactory relationship with a partner, and forming a satisfactory relationship with the child. In the transition to parenthood, men and women must find a way to resolve internal and interpersonal dilemmas, with child care being the central reason for reorganization. Couples vary greatly in the extent to which they cope effectively with these challenges (Gottman & Schwartz Gottman, 2007).

**Spousal Time and Intimacy**

Research suggests spousal time plays a significant role in facilitating communication, fostering emotional intimacy, and sharing valued activities between spouses – practices that are all important sources of marital happiness (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). Many couples are unprepared for the subsequent decline in spousal time and intimacy that follows the birth of their first child (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). In their study on intimacy between married couples following the birth
of a baby, Gottman and Schwartz (2007) found that libido for new moms tends to plummet following the birth of the baby and throughout the time she is nursing.

Faced with this lack of physical intimacy from their partners, men may withdraw from both their women and their babies. But during this transition time, it’s crucial for husbands and wives to find time to talk, stay attuned to one another, and to reach out to one another. Sexual intimacy arises from emotional intimacy. And emotional intimacy comes from partners making the effort to find each other through the maze of duties to perform. (p. 26)

In other words, it is vital to the overall health of the relationship and the family for mothers and fathers to prioritize spending time with each other to maintain emotional intimacy even if physical intimacy has waned.

Results from a study by Dew and Wilcox (2011) on marital satisfaction among new mothers indicated the decline in marital satisfaction was due to a reduction in quality time spent with their husbands. “Spousal time helps couples be emotionally closer…Spousal time has emerged as one of the strongest predictors of women’s happiness in marriage” (p. 2). Having minor children at home emerged as the strongest negative predictor of spousal time (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). Accordingly, as women transition to motherhood, they are likely to experience a decline in spousal time and, as a consequence, a decline in marital satisfaction (Dew & Wilcox, 2011).

Changes in parental norms may also contribute to declines in spousal time. Mothers and fathers expect to spend more time parenting now than parents expected in the past (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). Parents want to spend as much time with their children as possible, which often
means giving them the majority of their free time. On the other hand, paternal involvement with children has been shown to increase marital satisfaction.

**Paternal Involvement**

With an increase in demand on their time, numerous parents question whether they are spending the right amount of time with their children. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center survey of 2,511 adults, 33% of parents with children under the age of 18 say they do spend enough time with their children. Furthermore, fathers are more likely to feel this way than mothers. Some 36% of mothers say they are not spending enough time with their children versus 46% of fathers.

An analysis of time use data indicates that fathers devote significantly less time than mothers to child care (an average of seven hours per week for fathers, compared with 14 hours per week for mothers)… (Pew Research Center, 2013). According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, married mothers employed full time were more likely to do household activities and provide childcare on an average day than were married fathers (U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). In their research on how prenatal expectations compared with reported postpartum division of childcare and play, Biehld and Mickelson (2012) found that mothers experienced unmet expectations with fathers doing less than mothers expected; however, fathers’ expectations were exceeded with mothers doing more than fathers expected.

Levy-Shiff (1994) concluded that the most consistent and powerful predicting variable for spousal satisfaction was found to be paternal involvement with the baby. In her study on the transition to parenthood, she found that a higher level of paternal involvement, especially in caregiving was associated with less of a decline in marital satisfaction. She concluded that paternal
involvement may increase the father’s empathy and understanding of the mother’s difficulties coping with the baby and his tolerance of having less of a wife as well as reduce his feelings of being an outsider. The less men were involved with their infants, and the more their wives were involved with the infants, the greater the men’s decline in marital satisfaction (Levy-Shiff, 1994).

**Gender Role Differences**

Much of the literature has supported the notion that the decline in marital satisfaction for new mothers is slightly more than that of new fathers (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Milkie, 2011; Van Steenbergen, Kluwer, & Karney, 2011). On the whole, wives find their marriage to be more satisfactory than do their husbands; however, the decline in their marital adjustment with the transition to parenthood is more substantial than that of their husbands (Levy-Shiff, 1994). The radical reallocation of time mothers experience upon the arrival of a newborn influences feelings about their marriage. Dew and Wilcox (2011) found that new mothers’ marital satisfaction declines could be attributed to an increase in perceptions of unfairness in housework and reductions in wives’ quality time spent with their husbands. Other research indicates that relationship satisfaction for both members in a couple changes in tandem after they become parents and that women and men react similarly when becoming a parent (Keizer & Schenk, 2012).

**Reallocation of Time**

**Household labor.** In their study on couple relationship transition to parenthood, Moller, Hwang, and Wickberg (2008) found that even if men and women experience household labor in a similar way (personal level of distaste), the division of labor at home plays a stronger part in women’s marital satisfaction than it does in men’s marital satisfaction. The performance of the
bulk of the domestic chores is often experienced as physically and emotionally draining and may lead to negative feelings on the part of new mothers toward their husbands (Levy-Shiff, 1994).

Women who have been socialized to expect more equality in the household division of labor experienced increases in housework and child care and declines in paid work outside the home as stressful, unfair, and an affront to their professional identity. This in turn was likely to lead to lower marital satisfaction. Research has suggested that wives are happier when they share housework and child care with their husbands (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). Women who are in the best positions in terms of education level and career (i.e. middle and upper-class professionals) before the birth of the child, are better off when it comes to making or maintaining a fair division of labor (Milkie, Social and Cultural Resources for and Constraints on New Mothers' Marriages, 2011).

Keizer and Schenk (2012) found that men who entered fatherhood became less satisfied with their relationship when their spouses increased the hours they spent on housework. Researchers call for further investigation on this cross-over effect but hypothesize that the more time and energy mothers devote to taking care of the child and the household, the less time they have to spend as a couple. As previously stated, studies have shown that spousal time predicts marital satisfaction (Glorieux, Minnen, & Tienoven, 2011).

**Paid labor.** According to a 2013 Pew Research Center survey of 2,511 adults, both mothers and fathers indicated that they wish they could be at home raising their children rather than at work. Though dads are much more apt than moms to report they want to work full time.

When asked what is best for children, only 16% of the respondents said the ideal situation for a young child is to have a mother who works full time, 43% said mothers working part time
is ideal and one-third believe it’s best for young children if their mothers do not work at all outside of the home. (Pew Research Center, 2013).

About 60% of two-parent households with children under the age of 18 have two working parents (Pew Research Center, 2013). On average, mothers spend more time on child care and household chores while fathers among those households spend more time than mothers in paid work. Nevertheless, mothers and fathers have nearly an equivalent workload when their paid work is combined with the work done at home (Pew Research Center, 2013).

When paid work, child care and housework are combined, parents in single-earner households have much less of an equal division of labor than parents in dual-income households. In dual-income households, fathers contribute 58 hours on average of total work time a week, versus 59 hours a week for mothers. In households where fathers are the sole financial contributor, his total workload exceeds that of his partner by roughly 11 hours (57 vs. 46 hours per week). In households where the mother is the sole financial contributor, her total workload exceeds that of her partner by about 25 hours (58 vs. 33 hours per week) (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Division of labor becomes a key point of negotiation as couples attempt to balance work and family (Zhao, Settles, & Sheng, 2011). For instance, "who does what" and "how much" are often questions that challenge couples in their attempts to fairly divide total labor. Although each individual within a couple may have different perceptions about what is fair and unfair, studies have demonstrated that couples' perception of what is fair is a critical factor in predicting family satisfaction and marital success, both for men and women (Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Burley, 1995). Furthermore, achieving a sense of shared parenting led to success and happiness, even though wives tended to be more involved in parenting.
Work flexibility. When it comes to what fathers and mothers value most about paid labor, working fathers value having a high-paying job while working mothers are more concerned with having a flexible schedule (Pew Research Center, 2013). Hughes and Galinsky (1994) found that having limited control over one’s work hours was related to increased marital tension and decreased marital support for spouses with children, but was unrelated to marital tension and support for spouses without children.

In their study on workplace flexibility and mothers’ satisfaction with their husbands’ contribution to household labor, Alger and Crowley (2012) found that mothers with more control over work-related schedule and predictability and those that had the ability to secure employment again after an extended break had higher levels of satisfaction with their husbands’ participation in household labor. Their results also indicate that husbands who utilize their employer’s flexible policy for new fathers increase their partners’ satisfaction with their contributions. Therefore, work flexibility becomes increasingly important for the health of a couple’s relationship after a child is born.

Governmental Support for Families

Despite the negative impact that limited spousal time has on children, U.S. government support for working parents remains limited. Milkie (2011) poses the rhetorical question, How can one’s time and that of their partner be divided in a way that is fair, effective, and pleasant for the child, partner, self, and community? Mothers and fathers certainly struggle with this a great deal. Some of the practical and psychological struggles could be relieved by policies and practices that reflect the fact that equitable, flexible, and supported parenting is a social good that is likely to enhance the stability of marriages.
and, in turn, increase the likelihood of children being raised in happy two-parent families.

(p. 21)

Here Milkie points out the difficulty parents find in organizing time and recommends that society recognize the critical role new policies can play in supporting parents and the development of their children.

According to data compiled by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), among 38 western nations, the U.S. is the only one that does not mandate any paid leave for new mothers (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012). In contrast, Estonia provides new mothers two years of paid leave, with Hungary and Lithuania providing one-and-a-half years of fully-paid time off (Livingston, 2013). Among the 38 countries, the medium amount of fully-paid time off for new mothers to care for their newborn babies is about five to six months. Meanwhile, America’s Family and Medical Leave Act, falls in line with countries like Papua New Guinea and Swaziland, which also don’t pay for maternity leave.

In terms of protected leave, in which parents can take time off to care for their baby without worrying about losing their job, the U.S. offers 12 weeks to new mothers. On the other hand, Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, France and Finland offer three years or more of protection for leave related to motherhood. The median amount of protected leave for new mothers among the 38 countries is about 13 months (Livingston, 2013).

Paternal involvement with a new baby is also valued more in other western nations. Norway, Iceland, Slovenia, Sweden and Germany all offer eight weeks or more of protected paternity leave, and also mandate that a portion of this time off be paid.
Stress-Resilience

All couples experience stressful life events. Giving attention to how couples adapt to stress is essential for understanding marital adjustment. When the context of marriage contains a number of stressful life events such as financial difficulties or work related stress, marriages often suffer a phenomenon referred to as stress spillover (Neff & Broady, 2011). Stress spillover occurs when being overloaded or discouraged in one role undermines one’s ability or motivation to meet obligations in another role, thus contributing to withdrawal and irritation in interaction, and lesser performance in and satisfaction with the other role (Bolder, Delongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1981). Crossover occurs when one person’s experiences affect the partner’s emotions and satisfaction within a relationship (Westman, 2001).

A common theme emerging from the stress and marriage literature is that stressful contexts adversely impact marital quality. Daily diary studies demonstrate that on days when spouses experience increased stress at work, their partners describe them as more irritable and angry in the home (Neff & Broady 2011). On the other hand, Neff and Broady (2011) argue that under the right conditions, stress could help to strengthen marital health drawn from Meichenbaum’s (1989) stress inoculation theory.

Just as a vaccine exposes individuals to a weakened form of a harmful disease to promote the creation of antibodies for fighting stronger forms of the disease, exposure to moderately stressful events should serve to mobilize an individual’s coping resources. However, in order to benefit from the inoculation experience, individuals not only must be exposed to moderate stress but also must possess adequate resources for successfully surmounting that stress. (p. 1051)
Results from Neff and Broady’s 2011 study on stress resilience in early marriage, support Meichenbaum’s inoculation theory and indicate that individuals’ mental health was more resilient to negative life events if the individuals had formerly experienced some lifetime adversity than if they had no history of adversity.

Neff and Broady (2011) proposed the key to developing stress resilience in marriage is practice. Their studies explored whether experiences with moderate stressors early in the marriage may serve to make the relationship more resilient to future stress. For instance, in Study 1, 61 newlywed couples provided data about their stressful life events and relationship resources (i.e. observed problem-solving behaviors) and marital satisfaction at several points over a 2.5 year period. Study 2 examined stress resilience following the transition to parenthood in a separate sample of 50 newlywed couples (Neff & Broady, 2011).

As predicted, wives who displayed more effective problem solving behaviors and who had more experiences with stress early in the marriage exhibited fewer future stress spillover effects than did wives who displayed effective problem-solving behaviors but who had less practice using those behaviors under stressful conditions (Neff & Broady, 2011). Contrary to predictions, significant results were found for wives but not for husbands in Study 1.

The results of Study 2 coincide with those of Study 1. It was found that spouses who underwent manageable stress early on in their marriage with strong initial relationship resources (i.e. observed support behaviors) experienced a smoother transition to parenthood than did spouses who had strong initial resources but less prior experience dealing with stress (Neff & Broady, 2011). Collectively, results show that entering marriage with better relationship resources such as communication and conflict resolution skills, may not be adequate to protect marital satisfaction from the detrimental effects of stress; instead, couples may also need practice
in using their relationship resources to withstand moderate stressful events. These results provide the first empirical evidence of stress resilience in a marital context.

Empirical evidence of stress inoculation effects is increasing. One longitudinal study of newlywed couples found that experiencing stress early in the marriage predicted declines in satisfaction over time for couples exhibiting poor problem solving behaviors (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). Moreover, experiencing early stress predicted more satisfying relationships for couples exhibiting more effective problem-solving behaviors. This study highlights the importance of developing or strengthening relationship resources (communication and conflict resolution skills) for the sake of the relationship.

In summary, stress can enhance the durability of a marriage under certain conditions. Experience with small, surmountable stressors early in the relationship may help spouses develop resilience to larger future stressors such as having a child.

Part II. Experiential Therapeutic Approaches to Maintaining Relationship Quality

Experiential Therapy

Experiential therapy is an umbrella term that can incorporate a number of therapeutic methods such as wilderness therapy, adventure therapy, equine therapy, psychodrama, sweat sessions and art therapy to name a few. Experiential therapy usually involves recreating an experience in a setting that allows the unconscious mind to more fully emerge so that the integration between conscious and unconscious begins to occur. Often a couple will participate in a procedure which employs the body, mind, and soul. The physical self must work in harmony with the intellectual and emotional self to provide a holistic experience (Mason, 1987). The experience is often discussed in a debriefing and metaphorically applied to the world view of the client (Hildreth, 2012).
Experiential approaches to family therapy can be traced back to Virginia Satir (1983) and Carl Whitaker (1988), who emphasized subjective experience and unexpressed feelings (including the subconscious), authentic communication, spontaneity, and creativity (Mason, 1987). Sue Johnson also includes experiential aspects in her emotionally focused therapy for couples (Piercy, Sprenkle, & Wetchler, 1996).

**Experiential Therapy Verses Traditional Therapy**

Two articles in the literature reviewed directly addressed the outcome of experiential couples’ therapy in comparison with traditional couples’ therapy. The two studies surfaced opposing results (Hickmon, Protinsky, & Singh, 1997; Colmant, Eason, Winterowd, Jacobs, & Cashel, 2005).

The study conducted by Hickmon, Protinsky and Singh (1997) compared the effectiveness of enhancing intimacy between couples using two different types of marriage enrichment programs, an Adventure Therapy program and an ACME (Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment) program. The participants consisted of married couples from three Church of Christ Congregations in Arkansas, a conservative group that places principal importance on the family (Hickmon et al. 1997). The instrument used to assess the quality and quantity of intimacy in the marriage was the Waring Intimacy Questionnaire (WIQ). It is a 90-item, self-report, true-false questionnaire. The sample was randomly assigned to one of three groups, ACME, Adventure, or control. The participants in all three groups completed the assessments in both the first hour of treatment and the last hour of treatment (Hickmon et al., 1997).

After the treatment the ACME and the Adventure therapy groups both showed statistically significant increases in total intimacy scores. However the effect sizes calculated on
the WIQ showed a relatively strong effect on the ACME group and a relatively moderate effect for the Adventure group. In other words, the study showed that traditional couple therapy (without an experiential component) had a more measurable positive effect on intimacy than did the adventure or experiential therapy.

On the contrary, experiential therapy demonstrated to be more effective than traditional therapy in the study conducted by Colmant et al. (2005) on the effects of sweat therapy on group dynamics. Colmant et al.’s study consisted of a relatively small sample-size of 24 undergraduates who enrolled in a health promotion class at a large southwestern university. The age-range was 18-45 with a mean age of 22.5 years. Participants were separated by sex (12 women and 12 men), and randomly assigned to one of two groups. One of the groups received counseling in a sauna (the sweat group), the other group received counseling in a standard office setting (the non-sweat group). All groups met weekly for eight weeks. The Critical Incidents Questionnaire was used to measure the effect of the group therapy session from each member’s perspective.

Results showed that both the male and female participants of the sweat groups perceived a higher degree of usefulness of the group therapy session than did the male and female participants of the non-sweat groups (Colmant et al., 2005). In addition, the ratings the sweat groups gave to their global cohesiveness and trust were almost twice as high as the ratings given by the non-sweat groups. Essentially, the study showed that experiential therapy had more positive effects on participants than did traditional therapy.

Thus, no conclusive argument can be formed regarding the effect of experiential therapy in comparison to traditional therapy when restricted to the data provided by the two studies. The
results are limited to the variables specific to each study and cannot alone be generalized to represent the effects of experiential therapy in comparison to traditional therapy.

**Improved communication.** Improved communication was emphasized throughout the literature related to experiential therapy. Leveton (2005) makes note of how psychodrama can lead to more effective communication especially when working with couples in perpetual conflict. She uses a technique developed by Virginia Satir called *family sculpture*. This particular technique asks one partner to position the other in the way that he or she views the presenting problem. The sculpture created assists in providing an alternative way for each person to view the issue and assists in prompting further discussion about emotions that otherwise may never have surfaced.

Experiencing a highly stressful situation may also bring up unconscious feelings. Mason (1987) makes reference to a particular comment from one of the participants in her study on wilderness therapy highlighting ways in which dormant deeper emotions were evoked and verbalized while rock climbing when one partner said to the other partner, “No way, you can’t belay me! I don’t trust you, and I won’t marry you” (p.94). In this case trust was the dormant issue which may never have emerged or may have emerged too late unless the couple was put in such a physically stressful situation. The couple decided to delay their plans for marriage until they could work through trust issues and eventually rescheduled the event.

Distancing can be particularly beneficial for couples that are unwilling to discuss specific issues central to their overall wellbeing. Rober (2009) notes that making drawings, “about their relationship offer partners a special kind of lens through which they can observe themselves in their relationship from a distance” (p. 177). The parallels between the drawings and real life create the metaphor that is then used throughout therapy as an easier way to discuss sensitive
topics. It allows for a context where blame is avoided, and more room for reflection is created (Rober, 2009).

**Strengthening Marriages through Experiential Therapy**

In their meta-analysis on changes in relationship satisfaction across the transition to parenthood, Mitnick, Heyman, and Smith Slep (2009) found that attending prenatal classes assuages decreases in satisfaction. Mitnick et al. (2009) posit that their results could reflect either a positive direct benefit of the prenatal classes or particular types of couples who choose to attend such classes. Couples who attend prenatal classes together might naturally be inclined toward cooperative parenting, which is related to greater relationship satisfaction.

Experiential therapy can distinctively foster intimacy. In a study on marital satisfaction following the birth of a first child by Dew and Wilcox in 2011, it was found that the most crucial aspect of marital satisfaction was the amount of spousal time the couples spend together. Accordingly, the more spousal time, the more intimate the relationship becomes and the more satisfaction that the marriage provides. An experiential therapy session in itself provides clients with high quality spousal time. Whether or not the couple continues to make time for themselves as a couple is beyond the control of the type of therapy provided. However, relationship enhancement programs with a foundation of experiential therapy would be a good option for couples to ensure they are getting the time they need together to increase the intimacy and satisfaction they get from being married.

In accordance with inoculation theory, experiential therapy is an excellent method to provide resources for stress resilience, including moderate and manageable amounts of stress (Meichenbaum, 1989). One example of such a situation is of the couple that participated in the experiential therapy technique of rock climbing. The physical and emotional stress the couple
underwent forced them to discuss dormant interpersonal issues that otherwise never would have surfaced. As stated previously, the couple put their marriage on hold to work through the issues before resuming the wedding planning. Other forms of experiential therapy such as heated couples therapy, couples yoga, and emotionally focused couples therapy can also apply a moderate amount of stress on a couple as a vaccine for future stress. According to inoculation theory, this stressful situation will act as a type of vaccine for later and perhaps more intense feelings of stress, which in turn will fortify the health of the marriage.

**Specific Experiential Therapy Techniques**

**Psychodrama.** Leveton (2005) posits that using psychodramatic techniques at the beginning of couples work can present a break in an expected pattern of blame by asking for active, creative participation. “In couples therapy, the therapist often finds it difficult to shift to a more productive process. Experiential techniques can break the destructive pattern and introduce new, more effective ways of communicating” (Leveton, 2005, p. 55). It lays the foundation for more productive work going forward.

Leveton (2005) suggests using versions of the family sculpture technique originally introduced by Virginia Satir. As the couple begins to work, the sculpture becomes a tangible version of the couple’s problem. Consistent with the Adlerian philosophy of movement, therapists can begin to understand the relationship dynamic by observing the physical level of directivity. Leveton cites Grinder (1983) and suggest that when emotional states are linked to bodily sensations awareness is improved.

Psychodrama can be particularly effective for couples transitioning into parenthood by providing an avenue for exploring new definitions of themselves as individuals and as a couple. Using the family sculpture technique with new parents can provide a new perspective for
resolving internal and interpersonal dilemmas that may come up as a result of the new family
dynamic.

**Sweat therapy.** Around the world and throughout history, sweating procedures have
been used by people to gain greater physical, mental and spiritual health (Colmant et al., 2005).
For example there is the Finnish sauna, the Russian bania, the Jeweish shvitz, the Islamic
hammam, and the Native American sweat lodge ceremony. In recent years Bikram yoga, which
combines group sweating with yoga, has increased in popularity across the U.S for its therapeutic
properties.

Colmant and Merta (2000) completed the first inquiry into the use of multicultural means
of combining group sweating with group counseling (as cited by Colmant et al., 2005). Four
boys living in a group home with disruptive behavior disorder participated in 12 sweat therapy
sessions using a sauna. Of the four boys, three showed measured improvements of self-esteem
and treatment progress in the group home throughout the sweat therapy treatment period. The
boys reported that the sweating process helped them relax and relieve stress and left them with a
feeling of accomplishment. To improve the research a subsequent study (Colmant et al., 2005)
was carried out with a control group. The sweat group participants rated sessions as more
beneficial and interacted with stronger group cohesion than non-sweat participants. Group
members identified experiencing the heat as yielding beneficial effects, specifically in relation to
stress relief, and feelings of accomplishment. The results indicate that group sweating appears to
accelerate and intensify group counseling processes.

Seeing as sweat therapy or therapy in a heated room was found to enhance global
cohesiveness, it would seem to be an excellent technique to use with couples, especially those
going through the most difficult transition they may ever experience in their relationship.
Perhaps a stronger feeling of cohesiveness is an underlying aspect of intimacy. That being the case, providing couples therapy in some form of a sweat session or sauna would increase cohesiveness and thereby increase intimacy.

**Adventure therapy.** In a 1993 article by Gillis and Gass, they review several studies which have shown specific benefits of using adventure therapy practices for the enrichment of couple relationships. One of which was an adventure program which focused on family issues related to one member’s disability conducted by Roland and Hoyt (1984). After a weekend of adventure activities followed by weekly meetings to help integrate positive changes made while participating in debriefing activities, the authors reported, “subtle yet meaningful changes” (p. 24) in families who participated (as cited by Gillis & Gass, 1993).

Gass (1992) offers a seven-point rationale for how adventure therapy works (as cited by Gillis & Gass, 1993).

1. It is an action-oriented therapy.
2. An unfamiliar environment (wilderness) is involved.
3. The positive use of stress (eustress) is used to provide a healthy climate of change.
4. The use of activities provides leaders with observable assessment information as participants project their functional and dysfunctional behaviors into the activity.
5. The use of a small-group (couple) format with activities perceived as risky or stressful can create conflict that allows for opportunities to balance individual and group (couple) needs.
6. The approach focuses on solutions and successful behavior instead of dysfunctional patterns that lead to failure.
7. The role of the therapist becomes active as activities are designed to target specific client behaviors.

Clapp and Rudolph (1990) created the “Family Challenge” program, a multifamily short-term model designed for assessment, enrichment, and intervention where families met five times over a three week period. The authors reported that participants showed significant gains in problem-solving abilities, general functioning skills, and reframing abilities (as cited in Gillis & Gass, 1993).

Based on the results of these studies, it seems that adventure therapy offers promise for couples transitioning into parenthood by enhancing trust, communication, and problem solving between couples. Depending on the type of adventure, it could even provide mild amounts of stress under which the couples would have the opportunity to practice their relationship skills thereby enhancing the durability of the marriage.

**Emotionally focused treatment.** Johnson and Greenberg (1985), conducted a study to measure the effectiveness of emotionally focused treatment (experiential therapy), verses cognitive-behavioral interventions, such as teaching problem-solving skills, for resolving marital conflict. Forty-five couples were randomly assigned to one of three groups, a wait-list control group, a group which would receive experiential treatments, and a group which would receive cognitive behavioral intervention. After attending eight sessions from six equivalently experienced therapists, both treatment groups showed significant gains over the untreated group on measures of marital adjustment, intimacy levels, goal attainment, and target complaint reductions. Additionally, the effects of the experiential treatment were superior to those of the cognitive-behavioral treatment on intimacy, target level of complaint, and marital adjustment. Moreover, the assessment at the two-month follow-up revealed marital adjustment scores for the
emotionally focused group were considerably higher than those in the problem-solving group (Johnson & Greenberg, 1985).

Emotionally focused couples therapy would be particularly effective for new parents by providing specified spousal time within which their main focus can be on the quality of their relationship. As previously reported, spousal time plays a significant role in facilitating communication and fostering emotional intimacy.

**Relational drawings.** Rober (2009) suggests using relational drawings in couples therapy to open space for new dialogue. He reports “drawings about their relationship offer partners a special kind of lens through which they can observe themselves in their relationship from a distance” (Rober, 2009, p. 117). Rober notes that the approach is deeply-rooted in comprehensive therapeutic experience, as well as in dialogue between the couple. It is not the imagery that is the central focus, it is the dialogical exchange about the drawings.

Relational drawings would be an excellent way for new parents to distance themselves from a particular problem they may be having with the transition. The distance would provide each individual a new perspective of the problem thereby allowing new ideas for resolving it to surface.

**Paint on the same paper.** Sadie E. Dreikurs in her book *Cows Can Be Purple: My Life and Art Therapy* (1986), describes her exercise entitled *Paint on the Same Paper*, as a potent experience. She iterates the way that partners work in this exercise is an extension of their own functioning in life situations, which is congruent to family constellations. She admits that she uses this exercise not only as a way to determine how sensitive participants are with what is going on in their partner but also as a way to see how they choose what they want to hear. Dreikurs explains that following the exercise she will follow-up by asking what each partner
heard in the directions. She reports that almost every time each person has heard something different and it shows up in how they proceed in the exercise. Paint on the Same Paper is an excellent illustration of how two people can perceive something in completely different ways.

Paint on the Same Paper would be an exceptional experiential therapy technique for couples transitioning to parenthood by providing insight as to how two people can perceive one thing in completely different ways. The exercise can then be referenced when a conflict is a result of a misunderstanding or a different understanding.

**Summary**

From the literature reviewed a conclusion can be drawn that the more relationship resources on effective communication (Gottman & Clifford, 2000) and conflict resolution skills (Askari, Nohd Noah, Hassan, & Baba, 2012) couples have available to remain resilient through the turbulence in life, the more satisfaction they can experience from marriage and the more prepared they will be for dealing with the additional stress that a newborn brings to the relationship.

Numerous studies suggest that training in communication and conflict resolution has a positive effect on marital satisfaction (Askari, Nohd Noah, Hassan, & Baba, 2012; Gottman & Clifford, 2000). Neff and Broady (2011) cite a longitudinal study that suggests the initial capacity for effective problem solving may be an important resource for developing stress resilience. These findings support the idea that one possible mechanism underlying the development of resilience includes the confidence to successfully deal with conflicts and difficulties. Another avenue for developing resilience to stress includes theories of inoculation put forth by Meichenbaum (1985). As previously stated, inoculation theory suggests that
experiencing small amounts of stress early on in a relationship can act as a vaccine for future stress making the relationship stronger and healthier and able to handle even more stress.  

One of the variables for how couples cope includes the division of labor. The perceived inequality of household labor dampens marital satisfaction. This, however, can be avoided if husbands make more of an effort to do their fair share of housework and child care so that the division of labor is equitable. Another variable related to how couples cope with the new child is related to work flexibility. Mothers with more control over work-related schedule and predictability and those that have the ability to secure employment again after an extended break have higher levels of satisfaction with their husbands. Additionally if husbands take advantage of their employer’s flexible policy for new fathers increase their partners’ satisfaction with their contributions. Levy-Shiff (1994) maintain that the most consistent and powerful predicting variable for spousal satisfaction is paternal involvement with the baby. 

As spouses become parents, they may lose spousal time (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). Allocating specific spousal time has been shown to increase intimacy. In fact, the way in which couples reallocate their time after baby arrives plays a crucial role in overall marital happiness, especially for wives (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). The sudden decline in marital happiness after the birth of a child is likely due to the challenging demands of infant care and household tasks that accompany parenthood. Couples vary greatly in the extent to which they cope effectively with these challenges (Dew & Wilcox, 2011).

Birth of a child need not necessarily lead to a decline in marital satisfaction…new mothers can maintain their satisfaction with marriage if they and their husbands set aside time for their marriage and if wives resist the ethic of intensive motherhood…Husbands need to make more of an effort to spend time with their wives after children arrive and to
do their fair share of housework and child care so that the division of labor is equitable.

In other words, the arrival of an infant may not spell trouble for wives if they and their husbands can take the time to keep working on their relationship. It also helps to have a husband who realizes that the arrival of a baby means that he also must devote considerably more of his own time and emotional energy to hearth and home (p. 11).

Research has shown that new parents can maintain their satisfaction with marriage following the birth of a child if they set aside time for their marriage, resist the ethic of intensive parenting, and ensure the equity of household labor and childcare roles and responsibilities.

Literature indicates that experiential therapy is a distinctive platform for enhancing communication and intimacy between individuals in a romantic relationship (Mason, 1987; Rober, 2009; Colmant, Eason, Winterowd, Jacobs, & Cashel, 2005; Dreikurs, 1986).

Experiential techniques can assist couples in strengthening their relationship resources thereby enhancing marital satisfaction (Leveton, 2005; Gillis & Gass, 1993).

It is inconclusive whether experiential couple’s therapy is more effective than traditional couple’s therapy. However, experiential therapy can uniquely enhance couple communication skills. The sculpture technique developed by Virginia Satir provides an alternative way for each person to view the issue and assists in prompting further discussion about emotions that otherwise may not have surfaced. Psychodrama can be used in a similar fashion to assist partners is viewing a certain situation from a different perspective (Leveton, 2005).

The use of metaphor is an aspect of virtually all experiential therapy techniques. Metaphor can be particularly useful for couples to distance themselves from emotionally intense topics and work through them in a much more peaceful and composed manner. Art therapy is an excellent way to allow the client to create metaphors that truly resonate with them. Rober (2009)
notes that making drawings allow couples another lens through which to view themselves and their relationship. Mason (1987) remarks in her study on wilderness family therapy, “when medical residents could talk about the nonverbal experience in metaphorical language, they could have a more objective view of how they were living their lives” (p. 94). Leveton (2005) believes experimental techniques are particularly effective in improving communication because it breaks the couples’ expectations of therapy and asks for active, creative participation.

America must recognize how the government’s lack of support for new parents negatively impacts our children. When children grow up in homes of marital distress due to both parents being overworked in one of multiple life roles, children are more likely to suffer from a range of child problems such as depression, conduct disorder, and academic underachievement (Petch, Halford, Creedy, & Gamble, 2012). Given that children raised in homes with healthy marriages tend to have superior academic achievement, self-concept, and social competencies (Amato, 2001); it is possible that children raised in homes with intact marriages will be more likely to contribute to society than children raised in homes of marital distress who in turn may be more likely drain social resources. Therefore, lawmakers should create policies to allow mothers and fathers the time necessary to devote to parenting and to the health of their relationship with each other for the sake of America’s children and the future of our country. The discrepancy between paid and protected leave for mothers and fathers in America in comparison to other western counties is a horrendous disservice to our families and will only have negative ramifications for our society going forward.

Considering the significant impact the quality of the relationship between mothers and fathers has on the psychological wellbeing of children, psycho-educational programs for couples transitioning into parenthood should be promoted by hospitals and birthing centers and be fully
covered as preventative care by insurance companies. Working with perinatal couples to enhance their relationship skills and prepare them for the transition to parenthood could potentially prevent some children’s suffering of depression, conduct disorder and academic underachievement and instead promote healthier contributors to society.

Given the preceding argument, the author has developed a seven session program for couples in the midst of a transition to parenthood. The program is entitled *Loving Each Other When Having Another* and is an experiential approach to teaching strategies for maintaining relationship quality through the transition to parenthood and increasing satisfaction after having a baby. The lesson plan that follows is intended for use only by the author but could also be modified or used as inspiration by other helping professionals.
References


Dreikurs, S. E. (1986). *Cows can be purple: My life and art therapy*. Chicago, IL: Adler School of Professional Psychology.


Part III: Experiential Psycho-education Lesson Plan for Parents Transitioning into Parenthood

**Loving Each Other When Having Another**

**Program Objectives**

1. Understand how your relationship quality affects the well-being and development of your child.

2. Gain insight on the dynamics of your relationship based on individual family background and personal principles that guide your thoughts and behavior.

3. Utilize your personal and couple insight to agree on a parenting style.

4. Develop a personalized approach for managing common challenges that come with the transition to parenthood.

5. Create a path towards your family dreams with the enhancement of communication and conflict resolution skills.

6. Learn to create space for emotional and physical intimacy with the arrival of a child who desires your undue attention.
### Session Lesson Plans

**Session 1 of 7**  
**Session Date: TBD**  
**Session Length: 2 Hours**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Activity or Method</th>
<th>Instructor/Students Will</th>
<th>Required Materials</th>
<th>Instructor Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 5 Min. | Experience with babies                    | Create comfort for learning                   | Ice Breaker        | Instructor will ask each participant how many years of experience they have with babies. Add all years together to get a total for the class. Explain the importance of being willing to both learn and teach in the classroom and in life. | Whiteboard  
Dry-erase marker  
Calculator                   | Prepare Dates and Times  
Secure participation from co-therapists as necessary. |
| 15 Min.| Course overview                           | Provide awareness of class structure.         | Read aloud         | Instructor will read course overview aloud and answer questions from students regarding objectives, materials, or other questions related to structure and logistics of course.  
Instructor will pass out confidentiality agreement for signature. | Course Overview  
Confidentiality Agreement                  |                                           |
| 20 Min.| Quality of the relationship and the wellbeing of children. | Psycho-education                             | Lecture Discussion | Instructor will raise questions to the class about their thoughts and expectations.  
Instructor will lecture on how the parental relationship quality affects  
Handout on how newborns affect couple relationships |                                           | Review research on how the parental relationship quality affects the wellbeing and development children. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Materials</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Min.</td>
<td>Top Priority</td>
<td>Gain Self and Couple Understanding</td>
<td>Top Card Grid designed and compiled by Lynn Lott, M.A. M.F.T.</td>
<td>Instructor will carry-out assessment on the class as a whole.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Instructor will give a brief overview of each priority.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Students will share what they learned about themselves and each other.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor will ask the class what they could do to help their partner in a stressful situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Treats (Tea/Coffee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Min.</td>
<td>Social Style</td>
<td>Learn to flex to each other.</td>
<td>Brief Social Style Assessment</td>
<td>Students will assess their own social style based on questions from instructor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor will explain the need to flex to partner in certain circumstances and how to do such.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Hand-out on social style traits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Min.</td>
<td>Birth Order</td>
<td>Understand how birth order affects the dynamic of the relationship.</td>
<td>Genogram</td>
<td>Volunteer to share his/her family constellation with the class while instructor maps the genogram.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Handout on birth order traits.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Go over birth order characteristics.

Students to draw their own genogram.

Discuss how birth order characteristics affect the dynamic of the relationship.

**What I will do next time:**

*Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from His Writings* edited by Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher
<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 min.</td>
<td>Parenting Style and the Transition to Parenthood.</td>
<td>Learn personal and partner parenting style.</td>
<td>Quiz</td>
<td>Students will take parenting style quiz.</td>
<td>Parenting Style Quiz by Active Parenting Publishers. (Appendix A)</td>
<td>Review research on parenting styles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 min.</td>
<td>Inheriting a Parenting Style</td>
<td>Make a conscious decision on whether to keep personal parenting style or change it.</td>
<td>Psychodrama</td>
<td>The instructor and a pair of volunteers will rewrite a negative ER and imbed it through psychodrama.</td>
<td>Review Psychodrama Activity Sheet</td>
<td>Review Psychodrama Activity Sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discuss considerations for new family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 min.</td>
<td>Partner Expectations</td>
<td>Align expectations for the arrival of Baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Psychoeducation</td>
<td>Instructor to lecture about the importance of aligning expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who Does What Worksheet</td>
<td>Students to fill out Who Does What Worksheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Review <em>And Baby Makes Three</em> by John Gottman &amp; Julie Schwartz, pp.18-22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What I will do next time:
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<th>Required Materials</th>
<th>Instructor Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 Min.</td>
<td>Paint on the Same Paper</td>
<td>Learn partner’s sensitivity to what goes on in each other and learn about the self in the process.</td>
<td>Art therapy: Paint on the same paper.</td>
<td>Instructor will give instructions. Students will follow instructions. Discussion</td>
<td>One small sheet of paper for each person. One large sheet of paper for each couple. Paint Tape</td>
<td>Review Instructions Sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Selective Listening</td>
<td>Notice differences in perception.</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Instructor to ask participants to recall the instructions of the previous exercise.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Review Instructions Sheet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What I will do next time:
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Min.</td>
<td>Stress and Conflict</td>
<td>Normalize the stress that comes with a newborn. Identify risky relationship behavior and remedies.</td>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>Instructor will share studies confirming parenthood is stressful. Instructor to explain the “four horsemen of the apocalypse.”</td>
<td>Review And Baby Makes Three by John Gottman and Julia Schwartz, pp. 18-25. Review 4horseman PDF by Bob &amp; Marlene Neufeld and Mary Ann Carmichael, 2005; based on Why Marriages Success or Fail by John Gottman.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Min.</td>
<td>Non Violent Communication</td>
<td>Review homework on practicing non-violent communication.</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Instructor will ask the class how the homework went.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Min.</td>
<td>Resolving a Conflict</td>
<td>Learn 10 Steps for Resolving a Conflict</td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Instructor will facilitate the class through the 10 step method of resolving a conflict.</td>
<td>Worksheet on 10 Steps to Resolving a Conflict from PREPARE/ENRICH Couple’s Workbook.</td>
<td>Review Worksheet 10 Steps to Resolving a Conflict from PREPARE/ENRICH workbook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Min.</td>
<td>Taking a Time Out</td>
<td>Create couple rules for taking a time out.</td>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>Instructor to share recommended rules for taking a time out. Couples to decide on their own rules.</td>
<td>How To Take A Time Out handout from PREPARE/ENRICH couples’ workbook.</td>
<td>Review How To Take A Time Out handout from PREPARE/ENRICH couples’ workbook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Activity Description</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Instructor Activities</td>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Review And Baby Makes Three by John Gottman and Julia Schwartz, pp. 125-143</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsolvable problems and perpetual issues.</td>
<td>Couples to identify unsolvable problems and perpetual issues.</td>
<td>Instructor to share research on unsolvable problems between couples.</td>
<td>Quiz on Perpetual Issues</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecture Quiz</td>
<td>Lecture Quiz</td>
<td>Instructor to share research on unsolvable problems between couples.</td>
<td>Quiz on Perpetual Issues</td>
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<td>Quiz on Perpetual Issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quiz on Perpetual Issues</td>
<td>Students to take couple quiz on unsolvable problems.</td>
<td>Students to take couple quiz on unsolvable problems.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 Min.</td>
<td>Getting out of gridlock.</td>
<td>Art Therapy: Relational Drawings</td>
<td>Instructor to provide instructions for metaphorical drawing. Students to draw.</td>
<td>One sheet of paper for each student. One pencil for each student.</td>
<td>Review Relational Drawings in Couple’s Therapy by Peter Rober</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Art Therapy: Relational Drawings</td>
<td>Draw</td>
<td>Instructor to provide instructions for metaphorical drawing. Students to draw.</td>
<td>One sheet of paper for each student. One pencil for each student.</td>
<td>Review Relational Drawings in Couple’s Therapy by Peter Rober</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Draw</td>
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<td>Homework</td>
<td>Choose a topic for next session.</td>
<td>Couple will come up with a hot topic for next session. Do not discuss before session.</td>
<td></td>
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What I will do next time:
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 Min.</td>
<td>Hot Topic</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Recorded Couple Discussion</td>
<td>Couples will record their discussion of a hot topic in a private room.</td>
<td>Video Camera for Each Couple Private room for each couple to discuss hot topic.</td>
<td>Ensure technology works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Hot Topic</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Debrief on Discussion with Class</td>
<td>Instructor will facilitate a discussion on how it went for each couple to discuss their hot topic.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 Min.</td>
<td>Wilderness Therapy OR Yoga</td>
<td>Practice meditation</td>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>Students will take a walk alone in nature for 60 minutes OR practice yoga for 60 minutes.</td>
<td>Nature OR Yoga Instructor</td>
<td>Secure location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>Rehydrate</td>
<td>Drink water.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>15 Min.</td>
<td>Hot Topic</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Recorded Couple Discussion</td>
<td>Couples will record their discussion of a hot topic in a private room.</td>
<td>Video Camera for Each Couple Private room for each couple to discuss hot topic.</td>
<td>Ensure technology works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Hot Topic</td>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Notice difference in discussion after meditation.</td>
<td>Debrief on Discussion with Class</td>
<td>Instructor will facilitate a discussion on how it went for each couple to discuss their hot topic.</td>
<td>None</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 Min.</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Understand and reconcile differences</td>
<td>Card game: Barnga</td>
<td>Students will break up into two groups. Read the instructions for the game in their group. Play game. Instructors will facilitate discussion.</td>
<td>Two decks of cards.</td>
<td>Review rules of game. Print out rules of game for both groups. Prepare cards for two games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Min.</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Create a Culture</td>
<td>Psychoeducation Worksheet</td>
<td>Instructor will facilitate a discussion on the importance of family culture. Couples will discuss questions on the worksheet. Instructor will facilitate a debriefing from the worksheet.</td>
<td>Create a Culture Worksheet</td>
<td>Review And Baby Makes Three by John Gottman and Julia Schwartz, 2007, pp. 211-239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Min.</td>
<td>Family Mission</td>
<td>Create a Family Mission</td>
<td>Psychoeducation Worksheet</td>
<td>Instructor will facilitate a discussion on family values. Couples to fill out the Family Mission Worksheet</td>
<td>Family Mission Worksheet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Min.</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Min.</td>
<td>Love Languages</td>
<td>Identify personal and partner’s love language and begin learning their language.</td>
<td>Psychoeducation Quiz</td>
<td>Instructor lecture about love languages. Students to take love language quiz. Instructor to facilitate a discussion.</td>
<td>Love Language Quiz</td>
<td>Review Speak Your Mate’s Love Language by Gary Chapman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Min.</td>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>Learn best practices.</td>
<td>Psychoeducation</td>
<td>Instructor to facilitate a discussion about the ten secrets of couples who’s sex life is going well.</td>
<td>List of 10 Secrets of Couples Who’s Sex Life is Going Well.</td>
<td>Review <em>And Baby Makes Three</em> by John Gottman and Julia Schwartz, pp. 157-181</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>Improve Intimacy</td>
<td>Couple Communication</td>
<td>Couples to “Have the conversation they need to have.”</td>
<td>Worksheet “Have the Conversation You Need To Have.”</td>
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<td>120 Min.</td>
<td>Family Mission</td>
<td>Practice relationship skills under moderate stress.</td>
<td>Using the skills acquired through the previous sessions, couples will be asked to build a path to their family dream and lead their horse through the path and to their mission.</td>
<td>Instructor will facilitate equine therapy sessions with an equine professional. Students will participate in activity. Following the activity, instructor and students will process together.</td>
<td>Horses and Pasture Objects for students to use to build pathway.</td>
<td>Review <em>Clean Language Revealing Metaphors and Opening Minds</em> by Wendy Sullivan and Judy Rees. Review “Create Your Path to Your Family Mission” worksheet.</td>
</tr>
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What I will do next time:
References for Lesson Plan


Dreikurs, S. E. (1986). *Cows can be purple: My life and art therapy*. Chicago, IL: Adler School of Professional Psychology.


