Can Skills Training Prevent Relationship Problems in At-Risk Couples? Four-Year Effects of a Behavioral Relationship Education Program

W. Kim Halford1, Matthew R. Sanders2, & Brett C. Behrens2

1.1 Aim

This study was aimed at establishing whether Self-PRER (Self-regulatory Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) improves couples’ communication and helps them sustain high relationship satisfaction.

2.1 Hypotheses

It was hypothesized that in comparison with high-risk couples in the control condition, high-risk couples receiving Self-PREP would show:

1. improvements in communication;
2. higher sustained relationship satisfaction; and
3. fewer relationship separation.

It was further hypothesized that, relative to low-risk couples in the control condition, low-risk couples receiving Self-PREP would:

4. benefit little from Self-PREP in terms of communication;
5. sustained relationship satisfaction;
6. or sustained stability.

3.1 Results

Hypothesis 1 was only partially supported. Contrary to prediction, both self-PREP and control high-risk couples improved communication from preintervention to postintervention, with no significant difference between conditions.

Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 was partially supported. Contrary to predictions, Self-PREP produced some short-term improvements in verbal communication relative to the control condition in low-risk couples, but the control couples subsequently improved their communication and were similar to the Self-PREP high-risk couples at the 1 year follow-up.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 were supported.

4.1 Findings

The results of the current study replicate previous findings that skills-based relationship education enhances couple communication and prevents erosion of relationship satisfaction. To date, there is no evidence for long-term benefits of relationship education approaches other than skill-based programs. Given that this is the third study to report positive long-term effects of skills-based relationship education, this is the relationship education intervention of choice for couples entering committed relationships.

5.1 Summary and Implications

Eighty-three couples were stratified into groups at high and low risk factors for relationship distress and randomized to either the Self-PREP or a control condition. As predicted, there were differential effects of Self-Prep on high-risk and low-risk couples. Because of low statistical power, results must be interpreted cautiously. High-risk couples seemed to benefit from skills-based relationship education, but low-risk couples did not.

The possibility of deleterious effects of relationship education for some couples sounds an important warning that more research is necessary on the effects of relationship education among low- and high-risk couples. In the longer term, this has important social policy implications; relationship education offered selectively to couples at high-risk for relationship problems may produce the best effects in reducing relationship distress.

1. School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia
2. School of Psychology, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia