

PREP® Facts

The Current Reality:

- > ***Adults and children are at increased risk for mental and physical problems due to marital distress and divorce*** (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1997; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Coie et al. 1993; Coyne, Kahn, & Gotlib, 1987; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1993).
- > ***Mismanaged conflict and negative interaction in marriage predict both marital distress and negative effects for children*** (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993; Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 1997; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Grych & Fincham, 1990; and Stanley & Fincham, 2002).
- > ***Marital problems are associated with decreased work productivity, especially for men*** (e.g., Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley, & Kessler, 1996).
- > ***Married men and women in all age groups are less likely to be limited in activity (a general health index) due to illness than single, separated, divorced, or widowed individuals*** (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997).
- > ***Children living with a single parent or adult report a higher prevalence of activity limitation and higher rates of disability. They are also more likely to be in fair or poor health and more likely to have been hospitalized*** (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997).
- > ***Younger people in the U.S. who are marrying for the first time face roughly a 40-50% chance of divorcing in their lifetime under current trends*** (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992, p. 5).
- > ***The conflict that precedes and surrounds divorce causes great mental, physical, and economic damage to parents and children alike--and these effects are actually stronger than the effects of divorce, per se.***
- > ***Due to a lack of confidence in marriage, more couples are choosing premarital cohabitation than ever before, which research shows is more associated, not less, with risk for marital problems and divorce*** (e.g., DeMaris & Rao, 1992, Brown & Booth, 1996; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, in press).
- > ***The “triple threat” of marital conflict, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births has led to a generation of U.S. children at great risk for poverty, health problems, alienation, and antisocial behavior.***

Creating a Better Reality: Marriage Education

While marital therapy programs seem to be effective in reducing marital distress (Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Jameson, 1994; Hahlweg & Markman, 1988), the data on the long-term outcome indicate that in many cases therapy is undertaken too late to repair the damage of years of destructive conflict (e.g., Jacobson, Schmaling, & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1987; Snyder, Wills, & Grady-Fletcher, 1991). A viable alternative to treating the problems of divorce and marital distress is to provide *preventive* interventions while the couple is still happy or at least in the early stages of distress. This is the aim of PREP--to modify or enhance the dimensions of the couples' relationships that have been found through theory and empirical research to be linked to marital health (e.g., communication, conflict management, expectations clarity, commitment, etc.; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995; Stanley, 2001).

- > ***Current research suggests that the prevention of marital distress is possible, especially the prevention or lowering of negative interaction and conflict.***
- > ***A preventive approach attempts to address the societal problems of marital distress and divorce by teaching people to make wise relationship choices earlier on, and by teaching couples how to have healthier marriages—especially, how to minimize destructive patterns of conflict.***

Best Practices in Marriage Education: The PREP[®] Approach:

Over the past 30 years, marital researchers have discovered that marital success is not a matter of luck nor is marital failure a mystery. Using a growing knowledge base, *the best practices in marriage education are scientifically based, regularly refined based on ongoing scientific findings and field experience, and have demonstrated beneficial effects in accordance with scientific standards for dissemination.*

The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP[®]) is a research-based approach to teaching couples (premarital or marital) how to communicate effectively, work as a team to solve problems, manage conflicts without damaging closeness, and preserve and enhance commitment and friendship. The PREP Approach is based on over 25 years of research in the field of marital health and success, with much of the specific research conducted at the University of Denver and funded by the National Institute of Mental Health. PREP is *empirically informed*, meaning that, to the extent possible, the strategies of PREP are based on the growing body of research on marital and family health. PREP is also *empirically tested*. PREP has been studied intensively, including long-term outcome studies by six different research teams in four different countries. Further, the program is *regularly refined* based on the latest research.

PREP: Empirically Informed

A variety of studies show that certain premarital (or early marital) variables can differentiate between couples who will do well and those who will not do well with 80% up to 94% accuracy (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, under review; Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996; Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Kelly & Conley, 1987; and Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). While marital failure cannot easily be predicted for a given couple, various studies of this type have illuminated key risk factors for marital success and failure. The factors that predict marital failure range from relatively *static dimensions* such as history of parental divorce, differences in religion, and personality styles to more *dynamic dimensions* such as communication and conflict management patterns (Stanley, 2001). In knowing what puts couples at risk, there is hope for helping couples beat the odds.

There are many topics that could be included in a marriage education program. PREP takes advantage of the growing knowledge base of key risk factors in order to narrow the scope of focus. How couples communicate, handle their differences, manage conflict, express and clarify expectations, and understand and act on commitment make the most attractive targets for marriage education for two key reasons. First, these factors are highly predictive of divorce, or precursors of divorce. Second, these factors seem the most amenable to change. PREP is primarily focused on the dynamic dimensions identified in research as crucial to marital success (Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999).

Thus, the core content of PREP includes two key content areas with the goal of lowering risks and raising protection:

Lowering Risk

- *Interaction Danger Signs*
- *Communication Theory*
- *Key Issues and Conflict Management*
- *Problem Solving*
- *Expectation Clarification*
- *Forgiveness—making it happen*

Raising Protection

- *Commitment, Priorities, & Sacrifice*
- *Preserving Friendship*
- *Keeping Fun Alive*
- *Sensuality and Sexuality*
- *Spiritual & Religious Intimacy*
- *Core Belief Exploration*

PREP: Empirically Tested

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

While there is more research to be done, a series of long-term studies have evaluated the effects of PREP

compared to several different types of control groups including no intervention (NI), and traditional premarital counseling (TPC), and indicate great promise for helping couples. The findings indicate that:

- > ***PREP couples have lower rates of premarital break-up and post marital divorce.***

In a large-scale study in Denver, PREP couples as compared to control couples had 1/3 the likelihood of breaking up, up through 5 years following the program (combining premarital and post-marital break up). In a recent study in Germany, 3% of the PREP couples had divorced at a 5 year follow up while 16% of couples who received traditional PMC (or no PMC) had divorced. However, other studies do not show this same level of difference in break-up rates.
- > ***PREP couples have shown a greater likelihood of maintaining relationship satisfaction for a few years following training, in one major long term study.***
- > ***PREP couples have lower levels of negative communication and higher levels of positive communication immediately following the program, and maintain these advantages up to 5 years later.*** (Based on studies in the U.S., Germany, and Australia)
- > ***PREP couples, in one study, have reported lower levels of physical aggression in the years after taking the program.***
- > ***PREP couples enjoy taking the program because of the “hands on” skill oriented nature of the material—with PREP couples reporting greater program satisfaction than couples taking other programs offered to couples.***
- > ***Higher risk couples receiving an Australian variation of PREP were happier up to four years following the course than high risk couples receiving an alternate, biblio-therapy program. In this study, low risk couples did as well or even better with the alternative program, though in studies at the University of Denver, to date, low and higher risk couples derived similar benefits from PREP.***
- > ***Premarital couples taking PREP given by clergy or lay leaders in their religious organization (as well as when given by university staff) communicate more positively and less negatively following training compared to couples taking more typical premarital training in their religious organizations.***

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

PREP: Regularly Updated

One of PREP's greatest commitments to those interested in helping couples is to regularly update their strategies and materials based on ongoing research being conducted by various social scientists around the U. S. and the world. As research reveals more about relationships and marriage, PREP incorporates the latest most useful (and robust) findings into their program. While some of the values underlying strong and healthy marriages and families are timeless (e.g., respect, commitment, forgiveness), there is always more to learn about what couples who do well think and do vs. what couples at risk do that keeps them there if they do not make changes. PREP strives to always provide state-of-the-art strategies within their program. Further, ongoing research is directed at illuminating (over the coming decade) issues such as which kinds of couples benefit the most and which the least from programs like PREP. For example, some studies suggest equal benefits for high vs. low risk couples, others show no difference, and some suggest that lower risk couples may derive less benefit. Eventually, it may be possible to determine the ideal pairing of couple types or risk levels with interventions tailored for the needs of those couples, but clear knowledge on these kinds of complex patterns will take years of careful research.

Implementing PREP

Since 1989, PREP has been actively training mental health professionals and clergy world wide in their

approach. The material can be presented to groups in an educational format, can be used in counseling by mental health professionals, or can be taught to couples through freestanding educational materials. PREP is modular in design and PREP Instructors are free to vary the length and number of modules taught in order to balance the goals of effective education with real world time pressures for couples. In the educational formats, PREP has been taught in weekend workshops, six weekly sessions two hours in length, and one day workshops.

PREP has developed numerous free-standing materials for couples including the Fighting for Your Marriage book, audio tapes, and video tapes—and most recently, self-directed video-tape instruction for couples. The book A Lasting Promise covers the entire PREP content as well, integrated with Christian theology and teaching on marriage. For more information on training or materials, call or write PREP.

Short Biographies

Howard J. Markman, Ph.D. is a professor of psychology and Director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver. A noted expert on marriage, he specializes in research on the prediction and prevention of marital distress. Dr. Markman has published extensively in professional journals, and regularly appears as an expert on marriage in the media. He has co-authored the books *We Can Work It Out* and *Fighting for Your Marriage*, as well as co-produced the *Fighting for Your Marriage* video and audio tapes.

Scott M. Stanley, Ph.D. is Co-Director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies and an adjunct professor of psychology at the University of Denver. He has authored numerous research articles on relationships and is an expert on marital commitment. Along with the co-authors, Dr. Stanley has co-authored the book *Fighting for Your Marriage* and developed video and audio-tapes by the same title. He is also the co-author of *A Lasting Promise* and author of *The Heart of Commitment*. Additionally, he regularly contributes to print and broadcast media as an expert on marriage.

Natalie H. Jenkins, is vice president of PREP, Inc., and as such, has taken the lead in the development and growth of this influential business over the past decade. She has extensive experience in the dissemination of program materials to providers and users of educational services, and oversees product development, training, and marketing for PREP. Ms. Jenkins is co-author of the book, *You Paid How Much for That: How to Win At Money Without Losing at Love* and the *Fighting for Your Marriage Workbooks*.

Susan L. Blumberg, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice in Denver, Colorado, working with children, families and couples. She does not work directly for PREP, Inc. but she continues to be actively involved in training others in PREP. She leads PREP workshops for couples and works with families and businesses interested in improving communication skills. Dr. Blumberg has co-authored the best selling book, videos, and audios titled *Fighting for Your Marriage*.

PREP has been fortunate to work with many other talented and dedicated people, including research associates and colleagues, and a range of experts in various areas with books adapted for transition to parenthood, empty nest, and couples from different backgrounds such as Jewish, Christian, African American, and so on.

Background Information

PREP, Incorporated

PREP has formed vehicles (e.g., PREP, Inc., and PREP Educational Products, Inc.) for the dissemination of training and resources based on PREP and empirical marital research.

PREP, Inc.	
P.O. Box 102530	800-366-0166
Denver, Colorado 80250-2530	www.PREPinc.com

The Center for Marital and Family Studies: University of Denver

The Center for Marital and Family Studies is a research center in the psychology department at the University of Denver. The center is devoted to research on various dimensions of marital and family functioning, especially the prediction and prevention of marital distress and divorce. You can reach the research center by

calling 303-871-3829 or by writing:

Center for Marital and Family Studies
University of Denver
2155 S. Race Street
Denver, Colorado 80208

Brief Publication List

[Full citations for most references cited in this document can found on our website (www.PREPinC.com) in the marriage research and policy section, in the document entitled "Other Useful References."]

Key Books On PREP or that Utilize Some of the Core PREP Content:

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- Arp, D., Arp, C., Stanley, S., Markman, H., & Blumberg, S. (2002). Empty Nesting. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, Inc.

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- Schilling, E. A., Baucom, D. H., Burnett, C. K., Allen, E. S., & Ragland, L. (2002). Altering the course of marriage: The effect of premarital communication skills acquisition on couples' risk of becoming maritally distressed. Journal of Family Psychology.
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