

Healthy Relationship Curriculum during Economic Recession

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The cataclysmic effect of our nation's on-going economic recession has revealed weaknesses in the banking industry, vulnerabilities of the stock market, and has been characterized by large-scale government bailouts. The unemployment rate rose to over 10% at the height of the recession and well into the teens in many communities across the country. On the home front, the social effects of unemployment are inexorably connected to the economic ripples of the recession. Unemployment means more and more skilled citizens out of work. This leads to an increase in divorce rates, homelessness, foreclosures, physical and mental illness and a steady increase in the crime rate.¹ It is no great secret that rates of Sexual Violence often intensify alongside rising percentages of unemployment and poverty. According to Paula Rilinger of the Kansas City News, "...the Metropolitan Organization to Counter Sexual Assault (MOCSA), has seen an increase in sexual violence and increased brutality in the attacks, resulting in rising demand for services ranging from hospital advocacy for rape victims to treatment of child sexual abuse".²

In most instances of sexual violence, the victim and perpetrator already know and trust each other. The recession has given perpetrators greater access to potential victims. For example, as the rates of foreclosures increase, extended families tend to move in with each other. People who do not know each other very well may become roommates in order to decrease housing costs. Parents are working longer hours and children are left unsupervised for longer periods of time. This provides an opportunity for sibling abuse, which was already common.³

Sexual violence has become so predictable in light of economic hardship, that it is increasingly imperative that it be addressed within the framework of primary prevention. This approach requires the creation of environments that promote respect, equality, civility, healthy sexuality, and healthy relationships.

The mission of Northland Family Help Center is to provide safe haven, advocacy, counseling and education to promote and restore healthy relationships. Thus, as we approach primary prevention of sexual violence during a recession, we have begun to develop a new way to promote and restore healthy relationships. We have begun to update our healthy relationships training with a variety of new and cutting edge material. We would like to highlight a book that is being considered and explored as we evolve our approaches. It is our hope that this book review will spur conversation amongst primary prevention educators. It presents a framework to healthy relationships that may not work for everyone. However, as prevention educators we increase our effectiveness by embracing a greater variety of methods that will ultimately appeal to a greater number of people.

¹ Economic News. (2010). Retrieved from Internet on May 7, 2010 from recession.org.

² Rinlinger, P. (2010). Recession is fueling rise in sexual assaults, abuse of children. Retrieved from Internet on May 9, 2010 from <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/05/02/1918797/recession-is-fueling-rise-in-sexual.html>.

³ Rinlinger, P. (2010). Recession is fueling rise in sexual assaults, abuse of children. Retrieved from Internet on May 9, 2010 from <http://www.kansascity.com/2010/05/02/1918797/recession-is-fueling-rise-in-sexual.html>.



After studying 650 couples and tracking their relationships for fourteen years, Dr. John Gottman developed his thesis on healthy relationships for his book: The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work⁴. The ideas that fuel his research are considered both valid and reliable. Although the book is both Marriage Centric and Heterocentric, the ideas illustrate a very different definition of a healthy relationship. This framework can be translated and used in any relationship: familial, friendship, marriage and partnership. The following is a brief and simplified description of each principle.

Principle One: Enhance the Love Map

In a healthy relationship members have a certain “attention to details.” For example, when a relationship is healthy, both members of that relationship tend to pay attention to each other in the most mundane ways. They know little things about each other like: favorite TV show, childhood pet name, what is happening at work, hopes and dreams, favorite socks and so forth... In other words, in a healthy relationship, the little details matter.

Principle Two: Nurture Your Fondness and Admiration

Fondness and admiration can be fragile unless they are nurtured with consciousness. One of the traits of a healthy relationship is the constant awareness of the importance of friendship. Both parties must be willing to remind themselves, as they grapple with each others flaws, the things that they like about each other. This might sound like such an obvious point, however many people in relationships have forgotten that they like and care for each other. This makes things like sexual and domestic violence more possible.

Principle Three: Turn Towards Each Other Instead of Away

The best way to describe this is through the use of a personal story. My husband loves animals and birds. I like them too, but not in the same way. Often, my husband will stand at the window and point out all the birds that visit our bird feeder. He will say, “Sweet, come and see this beautiful robin.” I go and talk about the bird a little, even though it is not something I would notice on my own. This is turning toward each other. This principle illustrates the periodical way people bid for attention, affection, humor and support. In these small instances, reading a paper together, chit-chatting about the weather, leaving little notes or voicemails of encouragement after a bad day. These little moments create the bases of an emotional connection.

Principle Four: Let Your Partner Influence You

This principle tends to be gendered. Dr. Gottman found that women are able to let the other member of their relationship influence them. Men, on the other hand, tend to think that they have the best tool box for problem solving. Hence, men are less likely to listen to the other member of their relationship, particularly if the other member is a woman. Relationships that are based off of a framework of equality or a more feminist model tend to be healthier. This is obvious in the field of sexual and domestic violence. This principle can be enhanced by the power/control and equality wheels.

Principle Five: Solve your Solvable Problems

There are basically two different types of problems within relationships, problems that can be solved and problems that cannot be solved. It is important to be able to analyze the problem and determine if it is perpetual or solvable. There are ways to deal with the perpetual problems in a manner that does not destroy the relationship and there are ways to solve the solvable problems. The important point is

⁴ Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: New York. Three Rivers Press.



that there are some issues that are not going to go away, and the key to a healthy relationship is learning how to cope with those issues.

Principle Six: Overcome Gridlock

Gridlock can stem from those perpetual problems. For example, one member wants to attend church together, while the other is an atheist. One is a homebody, and one is a social butterfly. One wants to have children, the other does not. When there is gridlock, “trying to view those differences like a kind of psychological trick knee that can be coped with may seem impossible, but it can be done” (Gottman, p. 217).

Principle Seven: Create Shared Meaning

The creation of shared meaning in a healthy relationship is the creation of new traditions. Here, members tend to create routines that enrich their lives such as, holidays, birthday traditions, keeping a scrapbook, yearly vacations, and hosting gatherings. This can also be used for more daily mundane behaviors, the weekend trip to the farmers market the way a couple cuddles before bed, and how each member is treated when they are sick.

The Seven Principles look very different from the traditional collection of healthy relationship skill sets (i.e.: communication, conflict resolution, anger management....etc). The book also offers some helpful exercises to assess personal relationships that can be offered to students. There is a large section illustrating when a relationship is no longer worth the investment. This is an important point to teach in Primary Prevention of Sexual Violence.

To conclude, high levels of sexual victimization paired with cultural acceptance of sexual violence, creates an environment where healthy relationships are already threatened. Coupled with larger societal issues, like economic recession, sexual victimization becomes more and more prevalent as families become more economically stressed. The role of the primary prevention educator is to understand the role greater societal systems have on individual relationships and to employ new and creative curriculums to assist in the promotion of healthy relationships. We believe that new paradigms are necessary for our trainings. After using Dr. Gottmans book as a framework for our healthy relationships trainings with over 200 college students, we have received positive feedback that the principles were both insightful and relationship shifting. Again, the book is Marriage Centric thus Heterocentric, but we do believe that the core message is good and worth the time to investigate.

