



# Fact Sheet

## Social Service Providers Have Families Too: Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education as Personal and Professional Development

**By: James Marshall, Ph.D., LMFT, Associate Professor of Family Life, University of Arkansas**

### Is Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education for Me?

The answer is “Yes.” There are two reasons why safety-net service providers should be interested in healthy marriage and relationship education. First, these skills can help them to strengthen their own interpersonal relationships. Second, by strengthening their personal relationships they can improve their work performance and their ability to serve their clients.

Safety-net service providers are busy people who are passionate about their work and the people they serve. They spend their days educating and helping others. They make every effort to strengthen the lives of the children and families with whom they work. But sometimes providers forget to take sufficient time to nurture their own families and relationships. They may also not realize the influence that the quality of their personal relationships has on their work performance and ability to serve their clients. Safety-net service providers can use healthy marriage and relationship skills to improve their own relationships, work performance, and ability to serve their clients.

### Preventing burnout: Taking time for self-renewal

Safety-net service providers work in emotionally charged, high-stress occupations. This can lead to burnout. However, daily tending to physical and mental health can prevent burnout, increase productivity and the ability to handle challenges, and help strengthen personal relationships. Providers should make sure to

take time every day for renewal, giving themselves a new opportunity to recharge instead of hitting the wall.

### Maintaining a sustainable work-life balance

Service providers need to consciously separate their work from their personal lives. Although this can be very difficult to do, it is important to protect couple and family relationships from the demands and stresses of work. It is okay to leave work at work and to focus on home when you are at home.



One way to do this is to create a transition routine on the way to and from work. For example, you can use your commute time to and from the office to mentally and emotionally make the transition. If you are on your way to work, you might say, “I am putting on my work hat now. That is where my focus will be.” If you are on your way home you might say, “I am leaving work behind. I am looking forward to the joy of being with my family and the people I love.” For those who wear a uniform, name badge, or other form of ID to work the process can be even simpler. You can tell yourself,

“When I put these things on in the morning, I’m ready for work. When I take them off in the evening I’m ready for home and family.”

The following are additional skills providers can learn and use to keep personal relationships healthy while working in a highly emotional occupation.

Learn more about healthy marriage and relationship education through the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. The Resource Center has a virtual library with more than 500 free materials, including tip sheets, research to practice briefs, brochures, and more at [www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org](http://www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org).

## Seven Key Skills

### Skill 1: Do some self-care

**Appreciation** is the foundation of happiness. While most of us are programmed to want something more than we have, happiness is more likely when we enjoy what we already have. We can increase our happiness by appreciating our past, present, and future. This can be done by remembering a person who is an important part of our life story, reflecting upon some things we have enjoyed today, or thinking of things we hope for and are excited about.

Our lives are positive when we use our talents often. But many of us obsess about our weaknesses. We plan self-improvement projects that often fail. We become discouraged because of our failings. Rather than trying to overcome all our weaknesses, we can design our lives to use our strengths regularly. We can manage our weaknesses while **focusing on our strengths**.

Using our talents to serve is an important way to build well-being. As service providers, you have already dedicated a part of your lives to making the world a better place. There are many ways to serve! Consider ways to serve that also include your family or other loved ones. Whether you are good at offering a helping hand, a listening ear, teaching others, or organizing things, your life can be better when you **dedicate some time to service**.

### Skill 2: Get to know your partner well

**Learning** about your partner is a never-ending process. No matter whether you have been with someone for two weeks or 20 years, people grow and change so there is always more to learn about them. Knowing your partner well is vital for a strong friendship and a lasting relationship. Become well versed in your partner’s likes, dislikes, personality quirks, hopes, and dreams. You can do this by planning a time each day where you talk for 10 to 15 minutes without other interruptions.

**Listening** helps us understand our partner’s experience. Sometimes, when our partner shares something with us we are eager to respond, but in unhelpful ways. We may want to give advice, talk about our own feelings and experiences, or minimize their pain. Listening in order to understand takes time and patience, but it strengthens relationships. To better understand your partner, practice acknowledging your partner’s feelings. Acknowledge that his or her pain, suffering, joy, happiness, or excitement is real for him or her. Invite him or her to say more about it. People feel loved and valued when others care enough to explore their hopes, dreams, and feelings with them.

### Skill 3: Nurture your relationship

**Intentionally engaging in positive interactions** helps nurture your relationship. Everyone can find ways to be more positive. This can be especially challenging when your day is spent with families in crises. Instead of talking about things that bother you, talk about the things you enjoy. For example, instead of complaining about a messy kitchen, express appreciation for a lovely meal. Instead of complaining about socks left on the floor, pick them up and be grateful for the opportunity to serve. To increase positivity in your relationship: show interest, be affectionate, show you care, be appreciative, show your concern, be empathic, be accepting, joke around, and share your joy with your partner.



Strong relationships require day-to-day commitment. **Commitment** is really a choice. We choose to do what is necessary to make our relationship strong or we fail to make that choice. We can demonstrate commitment by putting our relationship first, making couple time a priority, building traditions, and setting limits on intrusions into our relationships.

There are several ways to envision a healthy future together. You can **talk and plan together** about what your future as a couple will look like. You can assure your partner that you want to spend the rest of your life with him or her. You can set new and exciting goals each year for your future together.

### Skill 4: Show affection and respect

Nurturing requires patient study and intelligent effort. Different people need different kinds of emotional nutrition in order to feel that they are loved. When we first begin a relationship with someone, we are often filled with warmth, love, and enthusiasm. Nearly every expression of love seems absolutely perfect. But those feelings of romance only last so long. Within two years, most couples have “returned to earth.” Then it may seem like irritation is more common than closeness. To show love effectively, we must study our partners’ preferences. We must be willing to love them in the way they most prefer to be loved.

**Positivity** nurtures relationships. Strong relationships will die without the light of positivity.

Research on strong relationships shows that they typically have five positives for each negative. That means that a partner will express love, appreciation, and affection an average of five times for each correction or complaint he or she offers. Practice having a ratio of five positives to one negative in your interactions with your partner.

### Skill 5: Develop and maintain friendship

In long-term relationships feelings of romance may come and go, but friendship is enduring. **Friendship** is the foundation of any successful long-term relationship. Friends have a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other’s company. You can focus on your friendship by engaging in common interests and activities together and by being supportive of one another.

Couples who focus on joint interests and dreams begin to build a sense of couple identity. They think about what defines their relationship. They begin to think less about themselves and more about their relationship. They develop a sense of “**oneness**,” which can be fostered by sharing goals, engaging in a common purpose, and protecting the relationship from negative influences.

Spending **meaningful time together** draws couples closer. It’s easy for the demands of our busy lives to interfere with our time together as a couple. But we can establish couple routines and rituals to draw us closer together. For example, we may establish the routine of sharing family meals or kissing our partners hello. This reminds our partners that they are valued and appreciated, and can allow for greater intimacy, trust, and connection in our relationships. We might also make it a point to celebrate couple rituals such as anniversaries, major accomplishments, and national or religious holidays together.

Find out more about the seven key skills in the **Strong Relationships: Strengthening Individual and Family Well-Being** free online course at <https://training.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org>.

### Skill 6: Deal with differences in healthy ways

Not all relationship differences can (or need to be) resolved. Conflict arising from individual differences, cultures, backgrounds, and stressors is a normal part of a couple’s relationship. Some differences may reflect solvable problems—those that can be addressed in some mutually agreed upon way. Other issues may be perpetual problems—those that will likely always be present in the

relationship. With perpetual problems, conflict may not be easily resolved, but it can be managed. We can also choose to think of some **differences as blessings** (such as one partner really enjoys cooking and the other does not or one partner is an excellent financial manager and the other does not like balancing the checkbook).

When differences arise in a relationship, there are several unhelpful strategies that many couples employ in an effort to resolve their problems. These include criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. These types of responses to relationship difficulties are counterproductive. We are primed to defend ourselves rather than understand each other. However, it is possible to learn a better way.

There are several things couples can do to **effectively manage conflict** in a loving relationship—things that will help us overcome our automatic and unhelpful responses. We can use soft start-ups, learn to soothe ourselves and our partners, accept influence, maintain a positive environment, compromise, not sweat the small stuff, and forgive.

### Skill 7: Engage in positive social networks

Engaging in a **positive social network outside of the relationship** is an essential element for a strong couple union. Couples who experience greater social support have higher quality and more stable relationships. These sources of support might include extended family and friends, counselors, teachers at a child’s school, religious institutions, and other community resources. Building meaningful and supportive connections with friends who are a positive influence, and have similar values and beliefs, can enable couples to avoid social isolation, reduce stress, and experience positive

interactions with others. Social support often improves economic, physical, and emotional well-being. Just as couples benefit from the support they receive from others, they also benefit from the support they provide to others. Be supportive of others in your circle of friends and family. Talk often with your circle about how you can pool resources to be stronger together—from transportation, babysitting, and house repairs to taking turns laughing with, caring for, or helping out someone who is sick or just had a baby.



## Conclusion

Safety-net service providers give of themselves everyday as they work to assist families struggling to overcome barriers. The key to managing the emotional toll that social work can take on an individual is to maintain a healthy work-life balance and to be grounded in healthy personal relationships.

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