

■ Review article

The effects of premarital relationship enrichment programs on marriage strength: A narrative review article

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Abstract

Background and Purpose: Strengthening marriage relationship includes a body of programs focusing on boosting the couples' common understanding, honesty, trust, empathy and coordination. Premarital consultation along with the couples' relationship enrichment can result in their improved relationship. The current study aims to analyze the studies conducted on consultation programs for marriage relationship enrichment and marriage strength.

Methods: The current study is a narrative review performed using key words related to advanced search in database like Pubmed, Google Scholar, Web of Sciences, Magiran, Iran Medex and SID in the past 20 years. After recovering 57 papers, 10 Persian ones along with 25 English papers directly related to this issue and cited by famous authors many times have been given in the paper's results.

Results: The findings show that premarital consultation through promoting life skills, familiarity with spouse selection criteria and paving the ground for accepting gender role in marriage can be considered as one of the critical components of strengthening marriage.

Conclusion: Premarital consultation helps human beings to improve their relationship by knowing themselves and their would-be partner, clarifying their expectations from each other, promoting problem solving and getting aware of compatible and incompatible characteristics before marriage. By considering the population policy of Iran and in order to meeting favorite relationship between newly wedding couples, it's suggested to provide suitable premarital counseling packages according to Iranian socio-cultural context.

Keywords: Marriage, Premarital consultation, Marriage strength

Introduction

Family is a social system consisting of a group of people living with one another via marriage, reproduction and children rearing and plays a vital role for the individuals' growth, progress and socialization (1). In this respect, it can be stated that marriage is one of the most complicated human relationships on which family foundation is based and has been analyzed as an absolutely general phenomenon in the social life of all communities (2). Marriage is to enter a new stage of life

encompassing a very important part of individual and social life of each person. Besides, marriage is the factor behind family genesis, reproduction and survival of human generation and if it is done according to the required conditions and sufficient knowledge, it can have significant effects on the health of the people and society. In a successful marriage, diseases and be increase (2,3). How to start and how to form couples' relationship can influence them and their children positively or

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negatively. Thus it seems imperative for creating successful marriage it's necessary to make the youth more prepared and knowledgeable since in addition to facilities, prosperous marriage requires certain skills and capabilities (4).

In the psychologists' mind, a person is ready to marry when she/he possess sufficient social maturity, motivation and information (5, 6). Premarital consultation is an interventional procedure for the couples on the verge of marriage with the goal to train the necessary skills and in order to improve their relationship (7). This program contains preventive aspect and its goal is a successful marriage and also boosting the couples to maintain and keep their function in the maximum level (8, 9). Benefitting from premarital consultation services makes the man and woman start their shared life with more awareness and equipped with enough knowledge in their relationship and their would-be spouse and also the significance and goals of marriage (7).

The first premarital consultation was done in 1924 by Ernest Groves for the families living in Boston University (8). In Iran, the premarital training plan was ratified in 1991. In this way authorities of marriage registry offices were obliged to announce marriage bond of the ones on the verge of marriage only if the parties presented health certificate based on the examinations and passing training course (10). The objective to implement this plan is to promote the couples' awareness about the importance and necessity behind the relevant issues of pregnancy health, prevention of the maladies especially venereal diseases, genetic ones and familiarity with health-treatment services providing units (11).

Premarital consultation can happen widely through the knowledge about marriage goals, the women's and man's psychological knowing, being aware of correct marriage criteria and having the necessary conditions to uptake marriage and sex education (12). Since premarital consultation is one of the suitable ways to maintain and protect families and

its preventive aspects are more important than its treatment aspects, thus the researcher's goal to do this review study has been to categorize the findings of the papers dealing with analyzing the effect of marriage strength enrichment consultation programs, so that via this path and recognizing the significance of premarital consultation service in family basis strength and successful marriage, it is possible to help society premarital consultation service.

Materials and Methods

The current research is a narrative review conducted using key words related to advanced search in database like Pubmed, Google Scholar, Web of Sciences, Magiran, Iran Medex and SID in the past 20 years. After recovering 57 papers, 10 Persian ones along with 25 English papers directly related to this issue and cited by famous authors many times have been given in the paper's results. The ethical considerations have been pursued by loyalty to literature translation, lack of committing plagiarism in the literature and the spiritual ownership right in exploiting the obtained information.

Results

Based on the findings, the significance of premarital consultation programs on strengthening couples' relationship can be summarized in three main axes depicted in diagram 1.

1) Life Skills Promotion: Life skills refer to a collection of mental and social capabilities increasing the individual's compatibility and positive behavior. These skills make people take on their social role related responsibilities and free from any harm to themselves and others, encounter life problems and make their own choices and have appealing behaviors throughout their lives (13). Training life skills as the important and key element in individuals' life has been set forth worldwide.

Various studies have indicated that the capabilities an individual acquires in these trainings

enable him/her to value life opportunities and get prepared to cope with probable dangers (14-18). Also training life skill raises mental and social capabilities and helps the person to face life situations effectively and to adaptively function with other humans, society, culture and the environment and provide their mental health. In addition, this process can enhance the ability to manage life, to recognize emotions, feelings and needs of their own and of the other ones and increase marital satisfaction and compatibility (14-16). Reviewing the existing studies implies that training some of these life skills in the couple counseling sessions can assist them to maintain and promote their life quality.

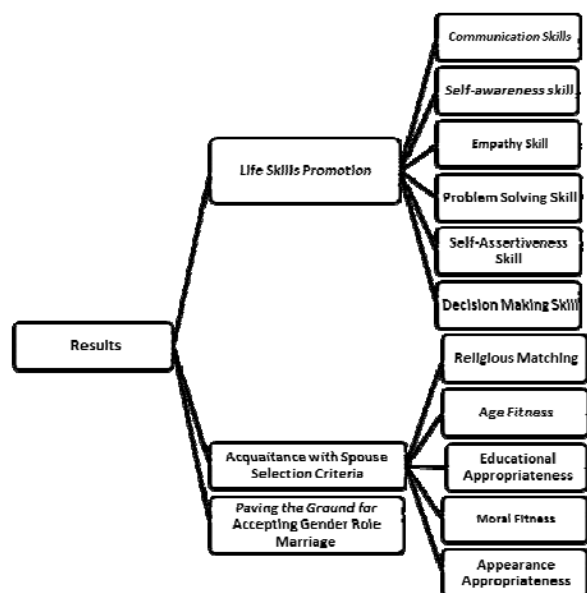


Diagram 1. Main findings towards the effects of premarital relationship enrichment programs on marriage strength.

1-1) Communication Skills: Communication skills are of the types that when the spouses learn, they can improve their relationships (4). Training Communication skill aims to help the couples to form and boost their marital health and stability and relationships (17). It's suggested that the best solution to raise marital contentment in couples is to use social norms, satisfaction with the relationships and flexibility in their desires (18). The skillful relational process between a couple

leads to the most satisfactory and effective outcome between them. The spouses who participate in couple training programs mentioned their positive effects as : better understanding of their own and that of their spouse, feeling more valuable, settling disputes better and faster, enjoying each other's company more, new ways to express closeness and the relational potential and ultimately marriage satisfaction increase (1, 3, 4). Also it's reported that marriage satisfaction increases as communication skills are promoted. In this way marital satisfaction level increases in men more than women (19).

1-2) Self-awareness skill: Self-awareness includes identifying all psychological, social, emotional and physical dimensions of the individuals. The more one gets to know themselves, the more probable it is to develop independence and self-confidence and paves the ground for better growth (20, 21). In fact, a person's self-awareness helps acquire skills such as decision making, recognize emotions and master behaviors through better knowing their needs and characteristics and enables the one to be more realistic when tackling their strong and weak points and face nuisances in life more effectively (22). On the other hand, the first step to select spouse is the person's information about himself/herself. The answer to the question as (who should I marry to?) that people wonder depends on recognizing self. Also self-awareness plays the key role in life determining decision makings and the person's compatibility and controlling emotions and has a significant impact on stress coping styles. Through the knowledge people have about each other, they can understand others better and accurately predict others' behaviors. Thus self-awareness causes the self-conscious person to experience fewer problems in order to have more effective role in their interpersonal relationships with others to strengthen marital relationships (21, 23).

1-3) Empathy Skill: Empathy is an essential element for successful interpersonal performances. In fact, empathy is the ability to experience other

one's emotions and allows the person to harmonize him or herself to what others think of him/her, to communicate with their surroundings and to avoid harming other ones (24, 25). It's showed that increased empathy helps to lower couple's behavioral disorders and improve their interpersonal relationships (26).

1-4) Problem Solving Skill: Problem solving is of the basic life skills and of the effective tools to cope with many difficulties and as a result, to maintain and enhance the person's personal coherence (27). Problem solving refers to cognitive-behavioral-innovative process by which the person determines compatible effective coping strategies for daily nuisances (28). On the one hand, problem solving skill depends on the individuals' cognitive-behavioral capability so that the more accurate the individuals' emotional reaction to the problems, the more their problem solving gets due to more knowledge about the problem and the better their interpretation of the situation and the less their being influenced by stress (27). Problem solving skill helps the couple to analyze problem solving solutions and achieve more cooperation and empathy so that their agreement goes up. In other words, problem solving skill assists the couple to collectively solve their problems rather than having dispute, criticism and reproach. That in its turn, it is one of the most significant factors in raising the couple's agreement and intimacy (29, 30).

1-5) Self-Assertiveness Skill: Self-assertiveness is of the most critical and fundamental social skills being significant in establishing, keeping and promoting interpersonal relationships. Self-assertion means to express beliefs, emotions and thoughts so that it hinders disrespecting and violating others' rights (21, 28). Literally, self-assertion is one of the life skills to raise self-esteem, express thoughts and emotions logically, decrease anxiety, enhance relational and social skills and also observe others' rights and at the same time, adjudicate their rights and finally, increase contentment and happiness in life (30).

One of the most fruitful methods for self-assertion is using verbal message consisting of three parts as non-judgmental description of the behavior requiring change, venting emotions of the person simultaneously with self-assertion and clarifying objective or tangible effect of the other party's behavior on the person while asserting.

1-6) Decision Making Skill: In decision making skill, people learn how to decide logically and correctly, to assert and set forth their ideas and give decisive response to others' demands. In premarital counseling process, the couple is helped to identify the possible solutions, to evaluate the results multidimensionality and finally, to select the best and the most optimal solution when facing life special conditions for sensible decision making (31, 32).

2) Acquaintance with Spouse Selection Criteria: Marriage is considered as the first and the most critical family life cycle and the most important factor to create healthy society and viewed as very significant phenomenon. Among this, the issue as spouse selection as the primary cornerstone of family formation is highly important and in fact, all emotions, reproduction process, future generation fostering, needs supply responsibility and future challenges of our life depend on it (33, 34). In addition to increasing the couple compatibility probability, familiarity with the criteria for selecting the would-be spouse during counseling sessions can highly prevent from choosing spouse by accident and its due challenges. In this respect, the existing studies point out some of the cases of optimal matching for the couples on the verge of marriage as the effective ones in successful marriage:

2-1) Religious Matching: There is a positive meaningful relationship between religion and marital satisfaction (35). It seems that this sort of conformity between a couple and mechanisms such as not being disloyal in marriage, spouse support increase, sharing original religious values and participating in religious activities at home may raise happy marriage (36). It's revealed that a

significant relationship exists between religious attitude and its subscales and marriage satisfaction (37). Islam also considers religious similarity as the prerequisite for permanent marriage happening and forbids Muslims from marriage bond with non-Muslims. Also Islam views a pious man peer for a pious woman and a Muslim man as the match for Muslim woman.

2-2) Age Fitness: Appropriate age for marriage differs in various geographic and climatic conditions. The acceptable age difference between spouses is 2-5 years (6). It's suggested that increased contentment is seen in the couples with less age difference and the maximum satisfaction has been stated by those having less than 5 years age difference with their spouses. High age difference results in creating various physical, emotional and social gaps for each of them and limiting the individuals' emotional intimacy and cooperation with each other and decreasing their marriage satisfaction (38). Besides, it has been reiterated that in the couples with high age difference, there is lowered marriage contentment so that despite being old, men marry to young women and adopt patriarchal relations in their marriage (39).

2-3) Educational Appropriateness: The studies have implied that there is a direct relationship between marriage satisfaction and the couple's educational similarity. In this relationship, it has been shown that despite boys, girls are more willing to select husband with higher education (40).

2-4) Moral Fitness: In a research with the goal to determine spouse selection criteria from medical sciences university students' perspective it's indicated that the students in both genders consider moral aspect as the key for spouse selection (41).

2-5) Appearance Appropriateness: Many factors play role in marriage success and satisfaction like partners' personality trait, mutual understanding, thinking maturity, mental balance, economic factors, sexual contentment and love and interest as the most important factors generating a pleasing and

happy life (42). In this respect, it's implied that boys have taken biologic criteria including: physical health, appearance and attraction of the considered person as significant while girls have viewed psychological and social criteria involving social behaviors, decision making power, education, religious and cultural congruence important in selecting spouse (34).

3) Paving the Ground for Accepting Gender Role Marriage: Gender role is a set of social norms based on which a gender behaves in society (41). Accordingly, premarital health counseling plan can be one of the important services in this period since it helps to get fully knowledgeable about significant health issues in fertility and establish their sexual relationships accurately. The researchers assume that premarital teachings for the youth in all communities can have remarkable impact on reproductive and sexual health behaviors and their management and training seems a must. It seems premarital counseling helps to recognize personal risk factors and personal flexibility aspects and the couple gets ready for marriage .So that the couples who have received premarital training are less probable to get separated (12). Moreover, it has been suggested that the couple sexual training affects creating a more contented and stable life (43).

In a healthy marriage, the existence of a favorable sexual relationship causes the partners' contentment and has a great role in family circle success and stability (44-46). The studies have demonstrated that lack of correct information, poor inter couple skills and expectations and unrealistic function in marriage relationship between the couple play a remarkable role in generating sexual problems (47). Despite all sexual tendencies being natural and involuntary, sexual attitude and behaviors can be learned, as knowledge goes up, the individual will be able to move towards healthier sexual relationships. As the couples get more knowledge in sexual matters and modify their unrealistic

expectations, empowering programs in marriage increases marriage life happiness and satisfaction

(48-50). A summary of the related papers and their results have been given in table 1.

Table 1. A summary of some studies conducted towards premarital relationship enrichment programs on marriage strength

Author	Title	Study type & Sample size	Intervention	Results
Abbasi et al.(2011)	The effects of life skills training on marital satisfaction of married women: a case study in dogonbadan, iran	Semi empirical, pretest and posttest in 50 married women	The individuals have been trained various life skills such as communication, child rearing and family pathology and familiarity with women-man psychology skills for 4 days and 6 h daily. The participants filled in the questionnaire once before training and once a year following training	Training life skills has been effective on marriage enhancement and resulted in women life promotion. The total mean scores of pre-test and post-test has been meaningful.
Mehrabzadeh et al.(2010)	The effectiveness of life skills training on increase of marital adjustment in 20-40 year-old married women	Empirical intervention (pretest and posttest with control group) in 50 women	Training life skills twice a week during ten sessions based on life skills training workbook. After the training program getting over, both groups have been taken posttest	By training life skills, there is a meaningful difference between the experimental groups subjects and control in terms of marital compatibility.
Yilmaz & Kalkan (2010)	The effects of a premarital relationship enrichment program on relationship satisfaction	Pretest and posttest intervention in 20 persons	2 h intervention sessions have been held for 7 weeks for intervention group. After 7 weeks, both groups have filled in the questionnaire again	There is a meaningful difference in the intervention group's posttest score relative to the control group in relational satisfaction and marriage contentment.
Stelzer (2010)	Marriage education with Hispanic couples: Evaluation of communication workshop	Pretest and posttest intervention in 275 couples	Workshops on creating relationship for 8-16 h.	Participating in relational workshop has had positive effect on marital satisfaction increase, boosting positive relationship and increasing capability to settle disputes, commitment to the present relationship and reducing negative interaction
Hosseinian et al.(2012)	The effectiveness of relational skills education on married women's intimacy	Semi empirical of pretest – posttest type in 30 persons	The empirical group has been trained for eight 90 minutes sessions about relational skills based on Miller's theory	Educating relational skills has been effective in boosted marital intimacy in dimensions as emotional, intellectual, social, relational, religious, psychological and sexual intimacy
Khodayari fard et al .(2011)	The effectiveness of problem solving training on marital intimacy	Empirical of pretest and posttest groups with control group in 16 couples (32 husbands and wives)	Problem solving skills have been educated in six sessions and with 1 week interval. Then posttest has been conducted	Educating problem solving skill boosted general intimacy .There is meaningful difference between mean general intimacy of the experimental and control groups
Jaafari (2010)	Analyzing the effectiveness of premarital relational skills on boosting premarital marriage satisfaction	Empirical with two groups of intervention and control in 40 couples	8 sessions of communication skills training. Three months after training, the questionnaire has been filled in by both groups	There is a meaningful difference in total score of marriage satisfaction in the experimented men compared with the control group, but the women marriage satisfaction means difference isn't meaningful in the intervention and control groups
Fathi Moghaddam et al.(2010)	A comparison of the effectiveness of communication skills training for marital conflicts and quality of life in female students of Islamic Azad university, science and research branch.	Empirical of pretest and posttest type with control group in 32 persons	Two hours sessions where half of the time has been assigned to skills education and the other half to practicing the trained skills. Practice at home has also been considered. The taught skills included the common problems in family, the communication barriers, message sending and receiving skills, effective listening and speaking, conflict settlement, self-awareness skills. The posttest has been completed after the education sessions getting over	.Educating relational skills lowers marital conflicts and has positive impact on life quality.

Discussion

Training behavioral skills in marriage helps the individuals to convey their messages more lucidly and effectively; besides, the couples learn how to settle disputes more efficiently than those lacking such skills and they can continue their marriage and solve their marriage conflicts appropriately (4,14). It seems that training life skills using efficient methods like listening, speaking, giving effective non-verbal responses and learning problem solving improves their contentment and relationship quality (47). Some studies conducted in this field suggest that training life skills can have positive effects on family relationships and make emotions such as humanitarianism and charitable behaviors of the participants grow (51).

Since verbal communication is exclusively for humans and individual transfer their attitudes to each other in the form of speech, it seems that training marriage preparedness with the couple communication beliefs changes can reduce irrational communication beliefs (22, 43). Proper communication can raise interpersonal bonds, provide the possibility for more accurate decision, direct the partner's beliefs in reaching further empathy and justify changes and variations. Thus training communication skills is of the most important methods playing role in marriage relationship firmness and survival and in contrast, the most common issue set forth by dissatisfied couples is failure in communication. In this regard, the study performed among Iranian students implies that the highest demand for reproductive health training from the participants' perspective is the requirement of training the suitable behavior with the would-be spouse (52). So that in training programs, it seems this group of individuals has to be included appropriately from school to university level.

According to the results, it can be stated that those marriages are prosperous in which spouse election criteria have been followed correctly and the partners possess the necessary conditions for

selection (53). Spouse selection criteria are perceptions about the features claimed from an imaginary mistress or potential spouse and many of such perceptions are explicitly associated with emotions. Sufficient information about one's roles and tasks in marriage helps to start a successful marriage. The couple's knowledge about what brings about marriage communication strength or destruction helps them to be prosperous in marriage (54). Psychologists have stated that in choosing the would-be spouse, there are different ideas about spouse selection criteria (40, 41, 55) including the following ones. It is vivid that increasing on the verge of marriage couples' knowledge about common ideas on spouse selection can extremely influence choosing the future spouse appropriately and strengthen family base and its survival.

-Accidentalness Idea: Based on this theory, no law exists on spouse selection. Selecting partner like other critical life decisions happens accidentally out of a limited body of individuals generally similar to oneself (54).

-Peer Spouse Idea: According to this idea, spouse selection expected accidentally occurs among the couples being identical physically or psychologically. In reality, people tend to choose those as their spouse who are similar to them. The studies have revealed that similarity, for example, in education means similarity in attitudes, values and beliefs of those who are identical in education, intelligence and religion and have special tendency to create stable relationships in particular marriage(40, 56).

-Complementing Idea: To the base of this theory, every person can select a spouse able to compensate their needs and complement each other's weaknesses. The supporters of this theory believe that this is not similarity and consistency rather it is the dissimilarity and inconsistency especially the complementary traits that make individuals marry the other one and maybe for this, extrovert and introvert, domineering and

dominance-oriented, dependent and caring people are attracted to each other in order to meet their complementary demands (33, 41, 56).

Although, a happy marriage is partially related to sexual relationship, this relationship may be one of the most critical factors in happiness or lack of happiness. Since if this relationship isn't satisfactory, it may lead to feeling deprivation and frustration, exposing mental health to danger and following it, the family circle breakdown (46). The main problem the present society is facing is lack of sufficient knowledge, lack of correct and fundamental perception of sexual matters, feeling shy to talk about sexual matters, incorrect attitudes and beliefs about this issue among families and especially the newly-weds that is one of the effective causes in emerging sexual disorders whose consequence is many families getting ruined (44, 46).

In line with this, there are some studies indicating the requirement of training contraceptive methods and healthy marriage relationships during marriage contract as one of the important needs of Iranian youth fertility health. It is obvious that sexual education is a long term process through which the individuals acquire the necessary information and knowledge about sexual matters and form their attitudes, beliefs and values. In order to achieve this goal, it is worth to highlight sexual matters' sociocultural structure and regarding the cultural, social and religious values governing the society, a presentable definition of sexual training has to be presented at various levels. In executing these teachings, considering the individuals position and dignity and the sensitivity of sexual counseling subject by taking the influential obstacles and incentives in presenting reproductive and sexual training and counseling services into account, it is important to execute regular and codified teachings (57).

Conclusion

The general conclusion is that premarital counseling and training can happen broadly from

knowledge about marriage goals, women and man psychological recognition, knowledge about correct marriage criteria to having the required conditions to get into marriage so that the sexual training happens and helps the couple to get fully aware of critical fertility health issues and to establish their sexual relationships correctly. Also this process helps the couple for marriage preparedness by identifying personal risk factors and personal flexibility aspects to create a happier and more stable life. By promoting sexual skills, improving life skills and raising couple's preparedness, premarital counseling can be considered as one of the remarkable components for prosperous marriage. Premarital counseling decreases function disorders and marital problems and also by having enough information and knowledge about themselves and their would-be spouse, it makes the woman and man step into this dynamic and flourishing period more peacefully. Thus it is recommended that given the country governing policies on the importance of population in national authority and taking the current countrywide population dynamism, development and being young as an opportunity and privilege, and in order to offset the population growth rate and fertility rate and families stability and strength and finally , maintain and continue the services provided for the couples on the verge of marriage, we pay particular attention to premarital counseling programs to design native made training and counseling packages based on future field studies consistent with Iranian couples and according to the country governing culture, beliefs and codes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Author's contributions

M. Kardan was involved in search and has written the first draft, Z. Shahhosseini and Z.

Hamzehgardeshi revising the content, and approving the final manuscript as well.

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