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The Five Love Languages Program: An Exploratory Investigation Points to Improvements in Relationship Functioning

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The authors describe an exploratory investigation of a relationship education program based on the Five Love Languages (5 LL) (Chapman, 2007), implemented by Extension educators in seven rural counties. Relationship assessments measured participant changes related to the quality of the primary relationship, belief in the future of the relationship, and partner empathy. Confidence in using the 5 LLs was also assessed. Two groups were compared, a “no booster” group that participated in didactic and final sessions and a “booster” group that received a book, tips, and reminders to practice the 5 LLs. Focus groups revealed how participants benefited. The results showed significant gains in knowledge of and confidence in using the 5 LLs. All participants significantly improved on partner empathy and the “booster” group showed significantly more improvement than the “no booster” group. The value to the family life education mission of Cooperative Extension is discussed, and recommendations for future research are given.

Keywords: relationship and marriage education, RME, couples and relationship education, CRE, partner empathy, perspective-taking, relational maintenance, love languages, Five Love Languages, 5 LLs, family life education

Introduction

Rationale

The growing field of Relationship and Marriage Education (RME) or Couples and Relationship Education (CRE) is defined broadly by Markman and Rhoades (2012) as

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Efforts or programs that provide education, skills, and principles to help individuals (a person not in a relationship or a person without his or her partner) and couples (both partners participating) increase their chances of having healthy and stable relationships. (p. 170)

Extension educators with expertise in couple relationships responded to the rapid expansion of funding for research-based RME programs with the formation of a working group known as NERMEN or the National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Network (www.nermen.org). NERMEN provides research-based resources and promotes national, state, and community level outreach partnerships to advance the knowledge and practice of RME. The NERMEN model grounds RME teaching in research and best practices and gives educators guidance for selecting and developing educational resources (Futris & Adler-Baeder, 2013).

Although some Extension researchers have noted the presence of a number of empirically validated curricula for RME (Goddard, Marshall, Olson, & Dennis, 2012), others have argued that many couple education programs are only loosely connected to research and have not been empirically validated (Adler-Baeder, Higginbotham, & Lamke, 2004). The challenge has been to find evidence-based RME programs that can be used in Extension.

RME programs are typically delivered in multiple sessions (9-20 hours of instructional time). These moderate-dosage programs have been shown to produce significantly larger positive effect sizes than shorter programs (Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, & Albright 2008; Hawkins, Stanley, Blanchard, & Albright, 2012).

However, moderate-dosage RME programs (9-20 hours) are often not practical for Extension community-based audiences. The norm is to deliver short low-dosage programs, as multi-session programs are difficult to support without external funding, and attendance is hard to sustain over time in RME programs at the community level. Therefore, systematic evaluation of low-dosage relationship education programs would enhance NERMEN objectives.

The program evaluated in this study, the Five Love Languages (5 LL) program, is a low-dosage community program based on Gary Chapman's (2007) book of the same name. The program brings adults and their primary partners together to learn about the 5 LLs and take a self-directed assessment to determine their own love language. Couples are then encouraged to share their love language with each other and develop a plan for expressing love based on their partner's love language (LL) rather than on their own.

In the book associated with this program, Chapman teaches that partners can have more satisfying relationships if they choose to fill each other's love "tanks" by "speaking" their partner's LL. He describes the LLs – words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, gifts,

and physical touch – which reflect behaviors that are seen as expressions of love and appreciation by one’s partner. He believes that partners tend to show love to their partner using their own preferred LL, but states that those in the happiest relationships make a conscious choice to express their love according to the partner’s preferred LL (Chapman, 2007).

While a Google search on Chapman’s 5 LL model returned 117,000 links, indicating that it has reached broad audiences, little research has been conducted on the program, although some have attempted to connect Chapman’s LLs to established research (Egbert & Polk, 2006; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). There is one doctoral dissertation that studied a 5 LL program conducted with individuals living in military housing (Veale, 2006). The research concluded that participants in the 5 LL program overwhelmingly felt that their love languages were accurately portrayed by Chapman’s Love Language Survey and that they understood how to communicate better with their spouses after learning their partner’s LL. However, there was insufficient evidence to conclude that partners modified their behavior to accommodate their spouse’s LL (Veale, 2006).

Since 2010, the Families and Health unit of an Extension Service in a rural state has been delivering the 5 LL program. Extension faculty developed materials to standardize the delivery of the program, including a PowerPoint presentation, several handouts, and an evaluation form. A discussion guide for group leaders and a participant handout, “Connecting with Others Using the Five Love Languages,” are available online (Kaczor, Peck, & Riffe, 2012). The program has been implemented in 17 counties, with more than 1,700 participants. Versions of 5 LL have been created for parents of teens and parents of children. The faculty who developed the program have received national recognition from professional organizations, and other states have expressed interest in implementing the program.

In the state where this study was conducted, the program is two hours in length and begins with dinner for participants. The Extension educator uses a PowerPoint presentation based on the *Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman to explain the principles behind the 5 LLs. Participants have the opportunity to discover their own LL by completing a short questionnaire. After participants discover their own LL, an Extension educator leads a discussion of activities associated with each of the languages and how relationships can be strengthened when individuals speak the LL of their partner. Each participant or couple is given *The Five Love Languages, How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* as a reference at the end of the program and a list of possible activities for each of the 5 LLs. The publisher of *The Five Love Languages, How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, Moody Press, granted permission to use Dr. Chapman’s concepts in this exploratory project.

Purpose

This mixed-method exploratory study of the effectiveness of the 5 LL program posed four evaluation questions:

1. Did participants increase in overall confidence in their knowledge of and ability to use the five love languages?
2. Did participants experience changes in relationship constructs, including relationship quality, partner empathy, and confidence in the future of the relationship?
3. How did participants describe the benefits of the program?
4. Were there differences in the outcomes of the “booster” group, who received a book and reminders to practice the 5 LLs during the five weeks following the instructional training, and the “no booster” group, who did not receive supplements?

Methods

Design

A mixed research design was used that included both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The evaluators determined that a mixed design was the best approach to studying the effectiveness of the 5 LL program. Quantitative data from the relationship assessments can be used to measure changes in participant perceptions about their relationship over the course of the program, while qualitative data from open-ended responses on surveys and discussions in focus groups can be used to examine ideas, beliefs, and human behaviors associated with using the skills taught in the program.

A purposeful sample was used because Extension agents were limited to studying the 5 LL program with the community groups that they work rather than with randomly selected groups. The quasi-experimental design compared two groups: a “booster” group and a “no booster” group.

An application for exemption of consent for the Five Love Language research protocol was submitted to the university’s research compliance unit and was approved.

Procedures

Extension county faculty recruited program participants in seven counties through newspaper releases, flyers, and electronic mailing lists of past Extension program participants. Participants were alerted to the research component of these 5 LL programs, as required by the Institutional Review Board. Recruitment was difficult and slow because of competing programs and

reluctance to attend relationship programs. In all, 38 participants signed up for the programs, including 18 couples.

To determine with which group a county program would be associated, the names of four counties were randomly drawn from a container and became the “booster” groups while the remaining three counties became “no booster” groups. Participants in the “booster” group listened to a didactic lesson, took home a book entitled *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate* (Chapman, 2007), and received weekly tips and reminders via email or text to practice the languages during the subsequent five weeks. The “no booster” groups listened to the same didactic lesson and were encouraged to use the skills in their daily lives but did not take home a book and received no reminders or tips to practice the skills. Both groups were brought back together for a final culminating event around the sixth week.

An Extension educator administered presurveys at all of the first sessions before the didactic program began. Surveys were precoded to reflect the county and participant’s assigned identification number. Names associated with codes were never shared with those who entered or analyzed data and codes were eliminated from the analysis after they were matched with the postsurveys. The postsurveys were administered at the beginning of the final event before the focus groups were conducted. There were 38 matched sets.

All participants who attended the final event were part of the focus groups, which were held during the final session and were conducted by the same Extension educator who taught the initial training session.

Quantitative Measures

Learning assessment. The Confidence in Using the 5 Love Languages Scale (CU5LL) was a scale developed by the research team to measure participant learning from the program. A reliability analysis resulted in a Cronbach’s alpha of .69. The scale contained four statements about participants’ confidence that they had learned to identify and use the 5 LLs. The statements were:

1. I feel confident that I know my love language.
2. I feel confident that I know my partner’s love language.
3. I feel confident that I can communicate using my partner’s love language.
4. I feel confident that we can work through conflicts using our knowledge of the 5 LLs.

Response options for each statement were 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*.

Relationship assessments. Three relationship constructs were selected for inclusion in the study: relationship quality, partner empathy, and confidence in the strength and stability of the primary relationship. After reviewing scales to measure these constructs, the following were selected because they were concise, easy to understand scales that were appropriate for use in a rural community setting. Each of these scales was included in a paper survey administered before the 5 LL didactic session began and then again at the event six weeks later:

Relationship quality. Norton's Quality Marriage Index (QMI; 1983) is a six-item unidimensional index focusing exclusively on subjective evaluations of marital quality instead of other variables (Norton, 1983). A meta-analysis of 1,031 studies comparing the reliability of seven of the most commonly used measures of relationship satisfaction found the QMI to have excellent reliability with an average of .944 on Cronbach's alpha scores across studies (Graham, Diebels, & Barnow, 2011). The QMI also shows high internal consistency and convergent validity (Karney, Bradbury, Fincham, & Sullivan, 1994).

Partner empathy. The Perspective Taking scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples (IRIC; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010) was adapted from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index and validated with three independent samples (Davis, 1983). It demonstrated good discriminant, convergent, concurrent, and incremental validity, as well as adequate internal consistency. Cronbach's alphas for dyadic perspective taking and dyadic empathic concern were .84 and .74, respectively, in individuals involved in heterosexual relationships (Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010). Partner empathy, or perspective taking, refers to the ability to accurately understand the other's point of view without experiencing their emotions (Davis, 1983; Péloquin & Lafontaine, 2010). The Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples asks participants to indicate whether each of the statements does or does not describe them. Examples of statements on the scale include "I try to look at my partner's side of a disagreement before I make a decision" and "When I'm upset at my partner, I usually try to put myself in his/her shoes for a while." The responses on the scale are from 0 to 4 with 0 indicating that it does not describe the respondent well and 4 indicating that it describes the respondent very well.

Confidence in the strength and stability of the relationship. The Confidence Scale (CS; Stanley, Hoyer, & Trathen, 1994) measures a couple's confidence that they can effectively manage their relationship and stay together. We used the 5-item Future Relationship Confidence Scale (FRCS) which was modified from the original CS (Whitton, Olmos-Gallo, Stanley, Prado, Kline, St. Peters, & Markman, 2007) and can be accessed at <http://www.floridamarriageprep.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Confidence-Scale-Key-Florida-Marriage-Prep.pdf>. The modified scale was found to be reliable prior to this study (Cronbach alphas were .70 and .75 at pre- and postassessment, respectively). Items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly Disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*, with higher scores indicating more confidence in the relationship.

Qualitative Measure

Focus groups. Seven focus groups (one in each county) were conducted six weeks after the initial training session. They were moderated by the Extension educator who conducted the initial training session. The dialogue was audio-recorded. A prescribed focus group protocol was used which included the following questions written by the evaluation team, based on what they wanted to know about the program:

1. What was the easiest love language to practice? Why do you feel this way?
2. What was the hardest love language to practice? Why do you feel this way?
3. What changed in your relationship as a result of attending this class?
4. How did you personally change as a result of attending this class?
5. How will you continue to use the 5 LL information?
6. Would you recommend this program for other couples? Why or why not?
7. During what stage in a relationship do you think this program would be helpful to couples?
8. What other thoughts do you have about the program?

Participant Characteristics

Demographics. The questionnaire contained five demographic questions, including gender, description of the primary relationship, age, race, and salary level. In all, there was a total of 38 participants, 19 men and 19 women. Of these 19 couples, 13 were married, while 6 couples were in other types of committed relationships. All attended the 5 LL program with their partners. There were 22 individuals (11 couples) in the “no booster” group and 16 individuals (8 couples) in the “booster” group. Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of all participants who completed the pre- and postsurveys. Numbers for each demographic based on whether individuals were in the “booster” or the “no booster” groups are also shown.

Table 1. Five Love Languages Program Participant Demographics

Demographic		Whole Group	“Booster” Group	“No Booster” Group
Sex of Participants	Female	19	11	8
	Male	19	11	8
Age	Less than 30	8	6	2
	31-40	9	5	4
	41-50	7	4	3
	51-60	8	5	3
	61 and older	6	2	4
Primary Relationship	Marriage	26	14	12
	Committed but not married	11	7	4
	Other	1	1	0
Race and Ethnicity	African American	1	1	0
	White/Caucasian	35	19	16
	Hispanic	2	2	0
Income	Less than \$20,000	5	2	3
	\$20,000-\$39,000	7	5	2
	\$40,000-\$59,000	6	3	3
	\$60,000-\$79,000	12	10	2
	\$80,000-\$99,000	2	0	2
	More than \$100,000	6	2	4

Results

Evaluation Question One: Did Participants Increase in Overall Confidence in Their Knowledge of and Ability to Use the Five Love Languages?

The first evaluation question, "Did participants increase in overall confidence in their knowledge of and ability to use the five love languages?" was answered through an analysis of the Confidence in Using the 5 Love Languages Scale (CU5LL). A paired sample *t*-test was conducted on the mean pre- and posttest scores of the CU5LL. There was a significant difference between the pre- and posttest scores on the CU5LL scale as shown in Table 2. An a priori alpha level of .05 was used to represent statistical significance for this test and all statistical tests in this paper.

Table 2. Results of *t*-Test and Descriptive Statistics for the Confidence in Using the 5 Love Languages Scale (CU5LL) Pre- and Posttest Responses for All Participants

	Test						95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Pre			Post					
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
CU5LL	13.9474	.63666	38	17.5789	2.04849	38	-5.04155, -2.22160	5.219*	37

Note: * $p < .05$

Evaluation Question Two: Did Participants Experience Changes in Relationship Constructs, Including Relationship Quality, Partner Empathy, and Confidence in the Future of the Relationship?

The second evaluation question, “Did participants experience changes in relationship constructs, including relationship quality, partner empathy, and confidence in the future of the relationship?” was answered by an analysis of three validated assessments commonly used to measure relationship constructs.

Relationship quality. On pretest, the mean score of all participants on the Quality Marriage Index (QMI) was 31.00, above the cutoff score of 29 or less that is the criterion for relationship distress (Woods, Priest, & Denton, 2013). On the posttest, the mean score was 31.47. These aggregate scores indicate that couples in this study were non-distressed at both the beginning and end of the program. A paired-sample *t*-test was conducted with the pre- and posttest scores on the QMI. There was no significant difference between the pre- and posttest scores for all participants on the QMI as shown in Table 3.

Partner empathy. A paired sample *t*-test was conducted with the mean pre- and posttest scores on the Perspective Taking scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples (IRIC). As seen in Table 3, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre- and posttest mean scores on the IRIC. This result indicates that participants increased in their empathy for their partner and their ability to take the perspective of their partner.

Confidence in the strength and stability of the relationship. A paired sample *t*-test was conducted on the mean pre- and posttest scores for the Future Relationship Confidence Scale (FRCS) for all participants. There was no statistically significant difference in the pre- and posttest scores on the FRCS as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of *t*-Tests for the Pre- and Posttest Scores on Relationship Constructs for All 5 Love Languages Program Participants

	Pre			Test			Post			95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
QMI	31.0000	3.52597	38	31.4737	3.21093	38	31.4737	3.21093	38	-.28301, .09353	-1.020	37
IRIC	28.6842	4.97075	38	30.1579	4.07050	38	30.1579	4.07050	38	.66804, -12010	-2.206*	37
FRCS	22.1842	2.80786	38	22.2105	2.50575	38	22.2105	2.50575	38	-.91583, .86320	.060	37

Note: QMI = Quality Marriage Index, IRIC = Perspective Taking Scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples, FRCS = Future Relationship Confidence Scale. * $p < .05$

Evaluation Question Three: How Did Participants Describe the Benefits of the Program?

The third question, “How did participants describe the benefits of the program?” was answered using a qualitative approach. Focus group discussions, held in the last session of the 5 LL program around week six, were audio-taped and transcribed. Qualitative data were analyzed by “fracturing” the data and reassembling them in new ways (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The 5 LL evaluation team met for an all-day session where members read through the text of the long answers on the questionnaire and the focus group discussions and developed themes related to benefits and/or gains of the program, even if the question did not specifically ask about benefits or gains. Team members came to a consensus on which themes about benefits or gains should be included and documented in the analysis. A list of benefits or gains from the program with representative quotations is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Focus Group Themes about Program Benefits and Gains and Related Quotes

Benefit/Gain	Related Quote
Awareness of one’s own love language	Mine is the gift of service. It has made me more aware of doing things for people. I was like oh, that’s why I do all this stuff and it dawned on me on why I do those things, and I hadn’t thought about it before.
Awareness of one’s partner’s preferences and viewpoints	I guess I try to see stuff from her side -- see what she wants to do. See how she enjoys spending time with me, it’s not watching me work in the garage, it’s something else. I didn’t know his would be quality time. That was totally unexpected. Even if it’s something as simple as after she’s (child) in bed and he wanted to watch TV or a movie, and I would blow him off, I didn’t realize that was a big deal, but it was. He was just wanting me to sit next to him and hang out, and I guess I started thinking about that a little more.

Benefit/Gain (continued)	Related Quote (continued)
Realization of the tendency to practice one's own love language, rather than the love language of their partner.	No, I think I realized that I was trying to practice my love language on him when it wasn't his to begin with. Cause his is acts of service and gifts and mine is quality time, so I was always focusing on quality time. What has been the most difficult part of this is being able to concentrate on my husband's love language. It is different than mine, so how do I show him I love him the way that makes him feel loved rather than the way I want him to?
Realization that practicing one's partner's love language takes effort.	I think for me, I tried to make myself have a more conscious effort of not just practicing my normal patterns and trying to think outside the box and do something different.
Understanding of how to apply the 5 LLs to relationships other than one's primary relationship.	I think I have already started applying it to other relationships, friendships and interactions with family and just being aware of it in relationships other than (husband).

Evaluation Question Four: Were there Differences in the Outcomes of the “Booster” Group and the “No Booster” Group?

The fourth evaluation question, “Were there differences in the outcomes of the “booster” group, who received a book and reminders to practice the 5 LLs during the five weeks following the instructional training and the “no booster” group, who did not receive supplements?” was answered by comparing the difference between the pre- and posttest means of the two groups. The difference in means on the CU5LL scale was computed for the pre- and posttest and then the difference score was compared for the two groups using an independent-samples *t*-test. There was no significant difference between the “no booster” and the “booster” group on the CU5LL scale as seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of *t*-Tests for Differences in Pre- and Posttest Scores on Relationship Constructs Between the No Booster and Booster Groups

	No Booster			Test			Booster			95% CI for Mean Difference	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>			
CU5LL	4.5455	5.17988	22	2.3750	2.21736	16	-0.64403,			1.570	36	
QMI	-0.2727	2.65799	22	-0.5000	1.67332	16	-1.30404,			.301	36	
FRCS	-4.5455	5.17988	22	-2.3750	2.21736	16	-4.97393,			.125	36	
IRIC	-2.3636	4.37031	22	.7500	2.74469	16	-5.63176,			-2.508*	36	

Note: QMI = Quality Marriage Index, IRIC = Perspective Taking Scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples, FRC = Future Relationship Confidence Scale. **p* < .05

Similarly, a difference score was computed for each of the three relationship constructs, and *t*-tests were run for each construct. A significant difference was found on the differences in means for the Perspective Taking scale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index for Couples (IRIC) as seen in Table 5. No significant differences were found between the two groups on the Quality Marriage Index (QMI) and the Future Relationship Confidence Scale (FRCS).

No substantive differences in the discussion of the two focus groups were found based on “no-booster” and “booster” group status. However, the depth of the discussion was very different. The “no booster” group members answered questions in short, matter-of-fact ways. Most of the answers were limited to “yes” or “no” or one or two short statements. The “booster” group’s discussion, on the other hand, was full of elaboration and detail about their experiences using the 5 LLs during the preceding weeks.

Discussion

The evaluation team designed the evaluation protocol to answer five questions. In this section, the results of the evaluation will be discussed in relation to each question.

Did Participants Increase in Overall Confidence in Their Knowledge of and Ability to Use the Five Love Languages?

An unpublished dissertation by Veale (2006) found that participants who identified their love language within the context of the 5 LL program were able to accurately describe their love language and their partner’s love language. Based on an analysis of the CU5LL scale in this study, we can say that participants were significantly more confident that they knew their own love language and the love language of their partner after participating in the program and in their ability to use the love languages within their relationships.

Based on the qualitative data from the focus group, we know that this confidence was based on purposively determining to use the LL of their partner, rather than their own LL.

Did Participants Experience Changes in Relationship Constructs, Including Relationship Quality, Partner Empathy, and Confidence in the Future of the Relationship?

As a result of the analysis of the three relationship constructs using standardized, validated assessments, only one construct showed significant results. Specifically, the study did not find any evidence that participants improved on measures of relationship quality or confidence in the future of the relationship. This may be because participants started the program with high scores on those measures.

However, this study did find that participants improved in partner empathy or perspective taking. Building on a study that showed males and females in high-adjustment relationships perceive their spouses as better at perspective taking than those in low-adjustment relationships (Long, 1993) and another study that individuals with higher empathy towards their partners reported higher relationship satisfaction than individuals with lower empathy towards their partner (Perrone-McGovern et al., 2014), this study confirmed that couples in quality relationships can gain perspective taking skills within a short relationship education program.

Perspective taking is a construct that is discussed in psychology and business literature but is mainly related to relationships within or between groups of people and focuses on efforts to reduce racial and other biases in order to reduce conflicts and promote social justice (Cohen, 2010; Shih, Wang, Bucher, & Stotzer, 2009; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011). The authors did not find much evidence that relationship education programs evaluated partner empathy or perspective taking. This study highlights the need to measure this construct, and perhaps more intentionally, incorporate perspective taking content into existing programs. As an example, an assessment of one program that intentionally targeted perspective taking with couples involved in romantic relationships showed that participants demonstrate increased partner empathy as well as empathy with others in general (Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto, & Kalso, 1999).

How Did Participants Describe the Benefits of the Program?

An analysis of the discussion for both the booster and the no-booster groups revealed that participants in both groups benefited from the 5 LL program in much the same way. Both groups gained an understanding of the 5 LLs and confidence in using them. However, the participants in the booster group (who received tips during the weeks between the first and final sessions) seemed more enthusiastic as they described their experience, as well as more aware of their partner's LL and the hard work it takes to change one's mindset from thinking about how you want to receive love to how your partner wants to receive love.

Were There Differences in the Outcomes of the “Booster” Group, Who Received a Book and Reminders to Practice the 5 LLs During the Five Weeks Following the Instructional Training and the “No Booster” Group, Who Did Not Receive Supplements?

Citing an article by Silliman, Stanley, Coffin, Markman, and Jordan (2001), Ooms and Wilson (2004, pp. 446) stated that “participation in a relationship skills program should not be viewed as a one-time inoculation that will have effects over a lifetime, but rather as an inoculation that requires boosters.”

Sixteen participants in the 5 LL program received boosters in the form of reminders and tips on using the 5 LLs during the intermittent period between receiving the didactic lesson and the culminating meeting five weeks later. There were significant differences between the “booster” and the “no booster groups” on partner empathy.

There were also differences in the qualitative data retrieved from focus group discussions related to the adoption of and enthusiasm for using one’s partners love language. The booster groups were more verbally expressive about their experience in the program. The “no booster groups” talked about relationship skills not covered specifically in the program, as if they were speaking more in general terms rather than based on their experience with the love languages. The tips on how to practice the LLs helped participants do the work related to learning their partner’s LL, leading to improved partner empathy.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations within the design of this study need to be understood when interpreting the results. First, the sample of program participants was a convenience sample of people who attended 5 LL programs in the counties where the Extension educators work. The outcomes/benefits that are reported are limited to that group. Definitive answers to the evaluation questions cannot be given at this time. The findings also may not generalize to a cross-section of people in intimate relationships who would not volunteer to be involved in similar programs.

Second, the short-term effects that were seen in this study are based on self-reported measures. Self-reported measures are not as reliable as observational measures for relationship education (Blanchard, Hawkins, Baldwin, & Fawcett, 2009; Fawcett, Hawkins, Blanchard, & Carroll, 2010; Norton, 1983).

Third, the sample was small because couples were encouraged (although not required) to attend the sessions together and many experienced conflicting schedules and other family constraints.

In an article that discussed the current status and future directions of relationship education research, Markman and Rhoades (2012) stated that “a key issue in the relationship education field involves motivating people who are not currently experiencing problems to seek services or to take advantage of services.” A study that utilizes a large, random sample, as well as some observational methods, should be conducted to verify the results of this study.

Conclusions and Implications

In this exploratory study, participants in the 5 Love Languages (5 LL) program gained an understanding of their own LL and the LL of their partner and gained confidence in using the love language of their partner. These two findings confirm earlier research that 5 LL program participants felt that their love language was accurately portrayed by the Chapman's Love Language Survey and that they understood how to communicate better with their partner after learning their love LL (Veale, 2006). However, there was insufficient evidence in Veale's research to conclude that partners modified their behavior to accommodate their spouse's love language.

This study provides some evidence that all participants in these 5 LL programs improved in partner empathy and that individuals in the "booster" group showed significant improvement as compared to individuals in the "no-booster" group. The latter result may suggest that, for certain populations, educators should add tips and reminders to the didactic component of the 5 LL program.

Overall, the results of this study show that 5 LL program participants gained knowledge of the love languages, understanding of how their partners want to receive love, and skills in expressing love. Participants in the program said that a benefit of the program was that they learned to meet their partner's needs by utilizing their partner's love language. This behavior helped them communicate better with their partner and improve the time they spend together. Most participants in the program said that their primary relationship had been made stronger.

Due to the limitations of this study, further research on the 5 LL program is needed. Future studies of the 5 LL program should look at different variables, including gender, time in the relationship, married couples vs. those in a committed relationship, and the number of times participants practice relationship skills. A comparison study of participants in moderate and high-dosage programs would also help researchers understand the differences between these types of approaches.

Extension faculty are usually not trained therapists. Their main role is to bring research-based educational programs to citizens in the communities they serve. Therefore, evidence-based, low-dosage Relationship and Marriage Education (RME) programs would be an important component in the toolbox of Extension family life educators. Small, incremental change in the lives of people and organizations is a hallmark of Extension programming.

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