

## Couple Relationships in Stepfamilies (NSRC Module)

The couple in a stepfamily enter into a phase of commitment with one great advantage, they are in love. This love often feels like enough of a boost to propel the stepfamily forward, but often, other skills and attitudes are necessary for the successful development of a stepfamily.

Unfortunately, the divorce rate for second marriages is higher (approximately 55%) than for first marriages (approximately 45%). Co-habiting couples fare no better in staying together, and may, in fact, split up at even a higher rate. By examining some of the primary reasons for the difficulties presented to stepfamilies, it is hoped that those studying this module will be able to forge successful relationships in stepfamilies, or assist those attempting to do so.

Utilizing the research of experts, this module will highlight those areas that have been found to profoundly affect the success of people who are forming the couple in a stepfamily. The first area of concern is communication. Neurobiology has clearly established that couples always are communicating, even without verbal engagement. Therefore, it is truly important to address communication due to the great difficulties that result from misinterpretations and vague communication. While the expertise at honest and clear communication may seem an obvious goal, such efforts can be a genuine challenge for the new couple.

The second area of frequent problems revolves around co-parenting. This is a significant area of concern, and may be the single greatest reason for marital difficulties in step-couples. This area is given a separate module as part of this series.

Third is the lack of empathy that couples often have for the other's perspective. It is difficult to see a situation from a perspective that is unique from their own. Speculation as to why empathy may be peculiarly less practiced in stepfamilies suggests that since family life is similar to stepfamily life, one often feels that they already "know" to some extent what the experience of a father is, so the fact that the stepparent experience is uniquely distinct from the tradition role, is disorienting.

The fourth area involves recognizing the effect of having had previous mates (possibly from each member of the couple). Often the lack of an emotional divorce from the previous mate (or mates) causes each member of a couple to project unnecessarily and often inaccurate intentions onto the new mate. In other words, when one is more angry than the situation seems to merit (a determination that one might come to well after the fight) it can be understood as related to some past experience that left, metaphorically, a bruise.

In addition, the previous mate is a living, breathing person who may rightly have a significant influence on the new stepfamily. This influence may be largely positive, but certainly, that is not always the case.

Unrealistic expectations and the sheer complexity of the stepfamily, are the two final areas of common conflict to be addressed in this module. It is of critical importance that both members of the step-couple be aware of their expectations for themselves, and their partner. This is an active intervention that demands the differences in expectations are both recognized

and explicitly addressed. People need to be honest what they expect from the other in a stepfamily. A father may simply believe that his new mate, the “stepmother” in this system will naturally do certain tasks and feel a certain way. Until the discussion that clarifies that these expectations are inaccurate each member of the couple will feel a nagging frustration.

Due to the somewhat predictable difficulties a knowledge base about what to be prepared for, is of critical importance. Regular discussions (with an awareness of common “hotspots”) decrease the likelihood that the will be naïve to the conflict that can result in a surprising level of intensity. The step-couple benefit from stability. Since usually at least one member of the couple has experienced a dissolution of a meaningful relationship, there is an increased sensitivity elevated conflict.

While an awareness of “step” issues is of central importance for couples, it is also necessary for couples to be aware of the research of John Gottman (Citation). Gottman has found that various factors are connected with couples becoming more resilient. Due to some of the expected stressors involved for many in simply forming a stepfamily, the suggestions based on Dr. Gottman’s research are well worth utilizing.

In keeping with the earlier theme of communication, couples who make “repairs” when involved in a heated discussion have a much better chance of keeping the relationship strong. Repairs are defined by Gottman as (quotation and page from earlier citation).

Another common concern involves speaking to the other with contempt. Contempt occurs when you act “as if” you are “better” than the other. For example, the husband who says, “If you had just done it right the first time you wouldn’t be complaining about how long it takes.” Or the wife who says, “I’m not surprised you don’t understand why your sister is angry, you don’t get emotions.” Anyone wishing to help a couple will be on the lookout for this pattern of communication.

Another important factor is that relationships benefit when the man (this research has largely been done with heterosexual couples) is willing to be influenced, to some extent, by his female mate. And finally, Gottman highlights the critical importance of having to ability to have a “slow start-up.” This is best illustrated when a member of a couple introduces a heavy topic with respect to timing. Rather than springing something important on one’s mate, the person utilizing a slow start-up, let’s the person know that “we need to talk, at some point, about why I got a little angry before.” By learning to not “sandbag” one’s partner, difficult conversations are less heated and often include less defensiveness.

Remember that the couple, in a stepfamily, are often in love; they want it to work. They are often, however, confused by an intensity of emotion that often is related to child-rearing. The steps discussed in this module will help couples maneuver these times with greater success.