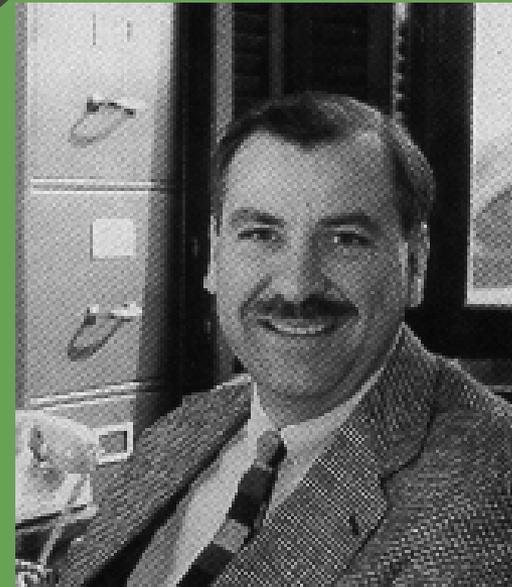




National Stepfamily  
Resource Center

# COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS IN STEPFAMILIES



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# THE COUPLE

They are in love.

Unfortunately, the divorce rate for second marriages is higher (approximately 55%) than for first marriages (approximately 45%)

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.



# IMPORTANT AREAS TO CONSIDER

1. Communication
2. Co-Parenting
3. Lack of empathy for the Other's Perspective
4. Effect of Having Had Previous Mates
5. Unrealistic Expectations & Complexity of the Stepfamily



# COMMUNICATION

Neurobiology has clearly established that couples always are communicating, even without verbal engagement.

Important to address misinterpretations and vague communication.

This can be a genuine challenge for the new couple.

Time should be set aside to talk.



# 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.

Expectations must be clarified.



# LACK OF EMPATHY FOR THE OTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

It is difficult to see a situation from a perspective that is unique from their own.

one often feels that they already “know,” to some extent, what the experience of a father (for example) is.

the fact that the stepparent experience is uniquely distinct from the tradition role, is disorienting.



# EFFECT OF HAVING HAD PREVIOUS MATES

Often the lack of an emotional divorce from the previous mate (or mates) causes each member of a couple to project inaccurate intentions onto the new mate.

In addition, the previous mate is a living, breathing person who may rightly have a significant influence on the new stepfamily.



# UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS & COMPLEXITY OF THE STEPFAMILY

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.



# PSYCHO-EDUCATION

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 they will be naïve to the conflict that can result in a surprising level of intensity.

The step-couple benefit from stability.



# SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH ON COUPLES

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 (1994).

Gottman has found that various factors are connected with couples becoming more resilient and successful.



# REPAIRS

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 “turning toward” the other, even when you disagree.



# CONTEMPT

Another common concern involves speaking to the other with contempt.

Contempt occurs when you act “as if” you are “better” than the other.

Anyone wishing to help a couple will be on the lookout for this pattern of communication.



# ACCEPTING FEMALE INFLUENCE

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.



# SLOW START-UP

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.



# QUESTIONS YOU CAN POSE

Do the members of this couple respect the other as either parent or stepparent?

Can the members of this couple see the situation from the “eyes of the other?”

Do they know enough about what is “normal” in stepfamilies?

Can they see that the stepfamily is a system, and that all actions are intertwined?



# IN CONCLUSION

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.

