Welcome to ProSAAM

ProSAAM is an approach to marital enhancement that builds upon key strengths in African American religious traditions as well as empirically based relationship skills training to provide a unique combination that is culturally sensitive, flexible, and easily implemented.

Research has shown that religiosity and involvement in church activities are good predictors of relationship well-being among African American couples. Prayer is an established and central component of African American spiritual traditions. These observations combine to suggest that relationship enhancement in African American communities may be served best by programs that have a religious component, particularly one that recognizes the importance of prayer.

In creating ProSAAM, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement (PREP) curriculum was modified so it could be implemented in three half-day meetings. We wanted to create a program that would appeal to a wide range of couples, many of whom must balance work, family, and other responsibilities. Background information about marriage and material for skills training were drawn, with the authors’ permission, from “Fighting for Your Marriage” and “From this Day Forward,” two excellent sources of skills-based instruction on empirically based methods for improving relationships. Because experiences with racism can be emotionally disruptive to African American couples, we added material and activities acknowledging that institutional and implicit racism can negatively affect African Americans’ marriages. This also provided a context in which to introduce the importance of listening rather than problem solving as a means of providing support for many of the problems that couples confront on a daily basis. In recognition of the cultural importance of prayer, and because prayer is a largely untapped means of relationship enhancement, we introduced into the program a strong focus on prayer for one’s partner.

The materials that have been developed to date should be viewed as preliminary. We anticipate further refinements and updated versions of the material in the future. The current version focuses on couples. Many of the couples who participate in ProSAAM espouse Christian beliefs and view prayer as a natural part of their own spirituality. We expect the program to be highly adaptable, with future versions suited to a variety of spiritual and religious traditions. Finally, our experience thus far shows the program to be well received in predominantly African American congregations.
Sources Contributing to the Fabric of ProSAAM

Many sources contributed to the fabric of ProSAAM. However, the program can be regarded as a product of several “threads” that each contributed to the program’s overall “fabric.”

Researchers at the Center for Family Research at the University of Georgia have been studying African American family life in the rural South since the early 1990s. This work has focused particularly on understanding the ways in which family, school, and community contextual processes promote health and positive development for all family members. As part of this research, we formed important partnerships with members of rural African American communities in Georgia. Community liaisons, who are respected residents of the counties in which our work is conducted, have collaborated in the conceptualization and implementation of our studies. In return, we have gained an insider’s perspective and understanding of community-level influences, patterns, and resources. This close contact with the community has proven to help us to recognize the central importance of the African American church. The African American church provides an important institutional structure in rural areas, small towns, and urban centers, acting as an organizing framework for social integration in many areas. We have documented the strong positive influence that church involvement has on many aspects of family life.

Research, Availability, and Current Efficacy Trial

The skills taught in ProSAAM have demonstrated effectiveness in preventing marital difficulties (1,2,3,4). In addition, the PREP program on which the current version of ProSAAM is based has been disseminated on a national level and the materials it includes are readily available.

Currently we are conducting a trial involving 500 African American couples randomly assigned to one of three conditions: ProSAAM with prayer; ProSAAM without prayer; and a control condition in which couples are given a book about marital skills, 12 Hours to a Great Marriage. Results should be available in 2009.
What is it designed to do? What is in the kit?

ProSAAM is designed to build on the religious foundations of African American marriages, a traditional source of strength. It also includes training in skills such as good communication, support, problem solving, and enjoyment of time together, all of which are needed to strengthen African Americans’ marriages in today’s hectic, stressful, marriage-unfriendly environment.

The ProSAAM Kit contains a leader’s guide that provides instructions for leading each session, sample prayers, skill-building tips, handouts and worksheets, and materials for the Speaker-Listener Technique. The kit also includes three pre-recorded DVDs that address important facts about marriage, causes of marital problems, skills that can address those problems, and directions about ways to maximize the positive impact of prayer on marital relationships. ProSAAM is designed to be flexible. Future variations will include a stand-alone prayer module that can be combined with a wide range of current marital enhancement approaches. This will allow many existing programs to increase their appeal to religious groups, capture the power of prayer as a means of enriching married life, and provide a culturally sensitive approach to marital training for communities in which entirely secular programs may be less effective.

We expect to receive ongoing feedback from those who use ProSAAM. Incorporating this feedback will enable us to strengthen the program as couples in various congregations take part in it and share their experiences and suggestions.

Who profits from the sale of ProSAAM kits?

After production, dissemination, and royalty costs are subtracted, all profits from the sale of ProSAAM materials will be reinvested to enhance the program’s efficacy and to further its dissemination in the African American community.

Where can I purchase a ProSAAM kit?

PREP materials are available at http://www.prepinc.com/

Soon ProSAAM materials will also be available on the PREP website!
Contributors to ProSAAM

Drs. Lily D. McNair and Velma McBride Murry have been involved in ongoing efforts to strengthen African American families. Their research during the past 10 years has underscored the potential for brief, targeted interventions to strengthen African American families. In addition, they recognized the importance of religious institutions in supporting positive developmental outcomes. Drs. Frank Fincham and Steven Beach studied the importance of forgiveness in marriage. They noticed a connection between religious foundations and the possibility that prayer could facilitate forgiveness. As they examined prayer in terms of its potential to foster or enhance various positive outcomes in marriage, the relevance of prayer in strengthening marital bonds became increasingly clear. This team came together to conceptualize ProSAAM as a culturally sensitive, church-friendly method for strengthening families.

We discussed with Dr. Scott Stanley the use of prayer in training programs designed to strengthen marital skills. He became an enthusiastic supporter of ProSAAM and has been instrumental in helping to shape it into a combination of prayer-based intervention and skill-based programming. Similarly, we have benefited from input and support from the Rev. Dr. Kenneth R. Board of Pilgrim Baptist Church in Rockford, Illinois, who strongly advocated ProSAAM’s availability to the general public nationwide, and whose prayers have helped inspire the ProSAAM effort. Dr. Myron Downs was also an early supporter of the ProSAAM concept and helped shape the initial version of the program. More recently, we have received enthusiastic and invaluable support and guidance from the Rev. Dr. Jerry Alexander of Springfield Baptist Church and Elder Terris Thomas of Timothy Baptist Church, both in Athens, Georgia. Their input has informed ongoing revisions of the program and will contribute to future dissemination efforts. Currently, ProSAAM is being tested in an efficacy trial funded by the John Templeton Foundation and led by Dr. Tera R. Hurt with a team of intervention leaders and assessment specialists.

How does prayer respond to limitations of current skill-based marital programs?

Two criticisms of skills-based approaches have appeared in the literature, which the addition of prayer to marriage enhancement programs might remedy. First, a number of authors have noted a potential problem with emotional–state dependence of skills training as a potential limitation of skills-based marital therapy and marital enhancement (5, 6). Wile (7) stated this in colloquial terms when he noted the impossibility of using certain behavioral skills when a spouse is angry and wants revenge. If skills are not used when most needed, however, their effect on the relationship will be limited. The use of regular intercessory prayer deals with this problem by introducing a behavior to which spouses are likely to
How does prayer respond to limitations of current skill-based marital programs? (continued from page 4)

Resort during times of strong emotion that can help them transition into a state of mind in which relationships skills seem more attractive than destructive behavior.

Second, several authors have noted the need for marriage enhancement programs to provide spouses with a way to increase self-regulation and self-soothing in the aftermath of conflict. For example, John Gottman (6) suggested that spouses’ abilities to soothe themselves is crucial to successful conflict management. This may be particularly important for problems that arise due to personality differences between the partners, which are unlikely to have clear solutions. Halford et al. (8) echoed this theme, adding a self-regulation component to skills training. Intercessory prayer can provide couples with a means of regulating their emotions in ways that prevent escalation of conflict. An added advantage of intercessory prayer in response to conflict is its ties to an existing community culture and the ongoing support the community can provide. Intercessory prayer does not rely entirely on an individual’s or a couple’s resources. This is a great structural advantage because this aspect of the marital program becomes most important when stressed individuals and conflicted couples are likely to be least resourceful.

What is the place of ProSAAM in broader debate between science and religion?

We are particularly grateful to the John Templeton foundation for their encouragement of a strong dialogue between science and religion. This Foundation supports activities that bring scientific and religious perspectives into productive dialogue. We recommend their web page for ideas and direction.


At its most basic level, ProSAAM is based on the conviction that enhanced spirituality will promote social relationships, individual mental health, and individual physical health outcomes. We predict that efficacy data from ProSAAM will support Sir John Templeton’s prediction that “if governments encourage people to become more spiritual there will be a reduction in healthcare.” Leaders in scientific and religious communities should find more opportunities for open discussion and exchange rather than confrontation. ProSAAM is a living, growing testament to a “science and religion” rather “science versus religion” orientation.
How do couples, individuals, and communities benefit?

Couples will learn how to handle and prevent relationship problems, as well as how to support and care for each other in ways that improve their relationships. They also will discuss issues that are important to them as African Americans.

Strong, stable marriages provide a safe harbor from life stress. Conversely, serious dissatisfaction in romantic relationships and marriages predicts increased risk for future depressive episodes even with history of depression controlled (9). Physical conflict between partners predicts an increase over time in depressive symptoms, even with prior symptom levels controlled (10). Cano and O'Leary (11) found that partner infidelity predicted a six-fold increase in risk for clinical depression, even with family and individual history of depression controlled. Spousal conflict has also been linked with greater use of anti-anxiety medication among both husbands and wives (12). Severity and chronicity of marital conflict is associated with increases in problem drinking even with prior alcohol problems controlled (13) and distress in intimate relationships is associated with relapse after treatment for substance abuse. Patients whose partners are highly negative and critical are more likely to relapse and relapse more severely during the year following treatment for alcoholism than are patients whose spouses avoid negative behaviors. A marital approach to the treatment of alcoholism yields relationship benefits that exceed those associated with individual treatments (14); a similar pattern of treatment results has emerged for depression (15). A strong marriage apparently enhances personal functioning across a range of domains and is a potential resource in the treatment of mental health problems. Conversely, a discordant relationship may worsen the problems. So, by strengthening marriage, individuals also strengthen and enrich their own lives.

Strong marriages bring health and wealth to the community by helping adults to stay well physically, psychologically, and spiritually while also giving children stable homes in which they can grow and develop. By giving married couples a chance to improve their relationships, ProSAAM can help communities grow stronger. By taking part in ProSAAM, individuals can also help lead the country in a new effort to strengthen marriage within a religious framework. Strong marriages are important because they influence mental, emotional, and physical health outcomes, both for spouses and for their children. Nevertheless, satisfying, stable marital relationships are elusive for many Americans. Given their connections to individual mental, emotional, and physical health and to children’s adjustment, disparities in marital outcomes are likely to result in broader disparities in health and well-being (16). By disseminating powerful, culturally sensitive relationship enhancement programs in African American communities, we can begin to address the inequity that currently characterizes so many aspects of our society.
What makes ProSAAM unique?

The purpose of ProSAAM is to test whether or not the educational program works. We will do this by comparing three groups of couples – a control group, a skill-based intervention group, and an intercessory prayer plus skill-based intervention group. The control group will receive a book. By comparison, couples enrolled in the skill-based intervention groups will be exposed to the traditional PREP curriculum. Couples selected to participate in the intercessory prayer plus skill-based intervention group will also be exposed to the skill-based curriculum and be asked to pray for their partners. The program is structured this way to allow us to find out if adding components increases the ability of the ProSAAM program to increase effectiveness.

ProSAAM is an exciting and unique research initiative for several reasons. First, the PREP curriculum shortened from a 15 weeks program to a course that meets on three mornings, in hopes of appealing to couples who often times must balance work and family. Second, by including material and activities that recognize how institutional and implicit racism affects and works against the success of African American marriages, the curriculum has been adapted to an African American audience. Third, we recognize that prayer is part of the cultural tradition of many diverse groups and is widely understood to be an important avenue for spiritual growth and development. Therefore, by providing skill-based training and encouraging prayer for one’s partner, we believe that praying for the well being of one’s partner can engender feelings of closeness to the partner at the same time that it anchors one’s relationship in a religious framework. In this respect, regularly praying for one’s partner strengthens marital relationships and increases individual resilience. Lastly, in collaboration with prayer providers in Rockford, Illinois, we will determine if couples’ marital relationships improve when others pray for them by name only.
Cited References


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