

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Air Force

## Using Marriage Education to Strengthen Military Families: Evaluation of the Active Military Life Skills Program

Kotrla, K., & Dyer, P. (2008). Using marriage education to strengthen military families: Evaluation of the active military life skills program. *Social Work and Christianity*, 35(3), 287-311.

**SUMMARY:** Exposure to trauma may increase risk for divorce, potentially putting military couples at greater risk. Relationship variables (e.g., satisfaction, hope, commitment, communication) were compared before and after a marriage retreat and two months later among Active Duty Air Force members and their spouses. Relationship factors, including overall satisfaction, generally improved, suggesting marital education and skills training may be beneficial for military couples.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Couples reported that happiness with the relationship and conflict resolution abilities increased from pre-retreat to post-retreat and again from post-retreat to follow-up.
- Participants reported increased marital satisfaction and positive communication and decreased negative interactions from pre-retreat to post-retreat; although these changed in the undesired directions from post-retreat to follow-up, follow-up levels remained better than pre-retreat.
- Commitment to the relationship increased significantly from pre- to post-retreat.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide military couples with workshops that include relationship education and skill-building
- Offer childcare during relationship programs for military couples
- Tailor military marital programs for post-deployment to couples' unique needs (e.g., rebuilding communication, discussing difficult or traumatic events, increasing positive interactions)

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the development of marital programs with on-going follow-up or booster sessions to continue to renew positive expectations and practice skills
- Encourage education for professionals working with military couples about the impacts of stress and trauma on relationships and marriages
- Continue to support military programs that address marriage concerns and increase resilience

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## METHODS

- U.S. Air Force members and their spouses were recruited via radio, brochures, and spouse and family military groups at a European base to attend a weekend marriage retreat.
- Service members and spouses completed surveys of relationship variables (e.g., satisfaction, hope, communication, commitment) before and after the retreat and at a two-month follow-up.
- The retreat aimed to teach skills and foster communication to improve overall marriage quality.
- Couples' relationship quality was compared before and after the retreat and two months later.

## PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 23 Active Duty Air Force members and their spouses (n = 46, 50% male).
- Couples identified as White (76%), Black (11%), Latino (4%), Asian-American (2%), and Multiracial (7%) and were primarily between the ages of 20-40 years old (94%).
- Average relationship length was 7.78 years (SD = 5.47), and it was 78% of participants' first marriage.

## LIMITATIONS

- Couples who agreed to participate may have differed from those who did not, including on levels of marital satisfaction and other relationship variables.
- The majority of couples rated relationship commitment high before the retreat, so results may not generalize to military couples with lower levels of commitment.
- Whether couples were living apart or together was not measured and may have impacted results.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine the effectiveness of relationship education and skill-building retreats with military couples experiencing higher levels of marital problems and distress
- Explore additional variables potentially related to the well-being of military couples' relationships, including number and length of deployments or mental health status
- Investigate whether teaching self-care skills for Service members and spouses in marriage programs enhances improvements in relationship outcomes

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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