

# APPG for Strengthening Couple Relationships

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. My name is Mark Molden and I am the Chief Executive of Marriage Care, one of the founding members of the Relationships Alliance.

I've had the privilege of leading 2 charities over recent years that have been at the forefront of delivering couple relationship education for adults, and a particular form of that called marriage preparation. I am passionate about its impact and its potential within the ecology of relationship support services. It is a preventative intervention that needs to be taken seriously not only because of the direct positive impact it can have on the quality and stability of the couple relationship but also as a catalyst for changing couples' attitudes towards working through problems rather than separating and towards accessing support in the future – increasing the chances of early intervention, before relationship difficulties become entrenched and in crisis.

Marriage Care is the largest faith-based provider of relationship support services in the UK and we provide marriage and relationship information, education and counselling to thousands of people each year through our network of centres and professionally trained and accredited volunteers - and we've been doing so for nearly 70 years.

When my wife Tess and I decided to get married it coincided with the release of the film - Captain Corelli's Mandolin – an adaptation of the novel by the same name, set on the Greek island of Cephalonia. The main characters are Antonio Corelli, an Italian army captain, and Pelagia, the daughter of the local physician, Dr Iannis. Corelli and Pelagia's slow-developing love is the central focus of the novel and the film provided the tear-jerking soundtrack that accompanied my wife as she walked down the isle on our wedding day. It was all very romantic.

However, in the midst of the film Dr Iannis pricks the romantic bubble with words that point to a more enduring love. He said this:

*"Love is a temporary madness; it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides. And when it subsides, you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your roots have so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Because this is what love is. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion, it is not the desire to mate every second minute of the day...That is just being "in love", which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident."*

Many of us have the fortune to find safe, intimate relationships in adulthood that have the potential for healthy growth but there is also an 'art' (and a science) to achieving that growth. Good fortune may have brought my wife and I together but that didn't automatically endow us with the skills to successfully navigate and bring together our expectations, our families of origin and in our case the forming of a stepfamily.

We think nothing of investing in our skills and personal development when it comes to the workplace - adult learning and education is recognised as having many

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benefits<sup>1</sup> - but why, when it comes to relationships (which matter more) do we fall into the trap of assuming no adult education and lifelong learning is required?

*Primary interventions* like marriage preparation - promoting relational capability through education, skills, training and information have now taken their rightful place alongside interventions at key stress points in people's lives and more commonly known *specialist interventions* like counselling that seek to protect people at times of identified relationship distress.

Kelly and David attended one of our marriage preparation days last year. They are fairly typical of the couples coming to Marriage Care for their marriage preparation. They were in their early 30s, had been living together for a number of years, Kelly was a Catholic and they had chosen to marry in their local Catholic Church. But when the priest asked them to attend our Preparing Together day course as part of their wedding preparations they weren't very enamoured with the idea! Kelly said 'We didn't know much about it and to be honest...we thought it would be a boring day and we wouldn't get much out of it but...now I think that if we hadn't have done it and found a way of talking about things I don't know what [that] might have done [to our relationship]'.

Research tells us that people have high expectations of their relationships, yet rarely do they think through the implications of making a life-long commitment or discuss their expectations with their partner...most people do not receive any preparation for their couple relationship, yet many say they would find this helpful.

88% of couples who attend our marriage preparation courses find them useful despite the fact that only 25% want to attend from the start - but significantly 100% say that every engaged couple would benefit from attending!

The best interventions are delivered following a blueprint or a manual which is research-based and there are three things in particular that you will find in the blueprint of most evidence-based programmes like our Preparing Together course<sup>2</sup>:

The first is **raising awareness**. Making couples more aware of the kinds of patterns that will harm their relationship if not kept in some check or dealt with.

Duncan and Alexandra got married in the summer of 2013 and attended our 'Preparing together' day course. Like many of our couples, Alex and Duncan came from different backgrounds. Alex is Polish and Duncan is a Geordie and Duncan said to us:

*"The thing I remember most was the realisation that Alex had - that tone of voice was really important. That really came home to us because with Alex being Polish, she can sound a bit harsh because of her accent because she doesn't have a nice Geordie accent. So she might say something that is just matter of fact but to me it sounds stroppy or aggressive. They brought it up - about tone of voice - and*

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<sup>1</sup> NIACE (The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) says that 'Those who participate in learning are likely to be healthier, happier and better paid than those who do not'.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from Three Key Educational Strategies for Prevention (Source: Prep [www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com)) Diane Sollee, Director

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*although we had talked about it before when [our course facilitators talked] about it, [the penny finally dropped for] Alex..”*

In our Preparing Together course we encourage couples to share what we call ‘pinches’, (the little irritants or niggles) in order to avoid the ‘crunch’ (the crisis point) which happens when hurts and disappointments lead to a buildup of resentment, anger and disconnection. Raising awareness also that all couples have differences and all relationships go through difficult times as they change and grow.

Secondly, **fostering change in attitudes and belief**: teaching people about ways of thinking and acting that are associated with greater levels of commitment and giving them strategies to overcome dysfunctional thinking – such as putting a partner down.

We provide couples with strategies for changing the negative behaviours, which are usually learned behaviours from their family history. And we know that changing behaviour can lead to a change in thoughts and feelings and this is something many of our couples comment on in their feedback forms.

And finally **skills training and the use of structure**: teaching couples positive skills for directly countering negative patterns and agreeing ground rules for handling issues a certain way.

We introduce our couples to the Speaker-Listener technique developed by Markman and Stanley - focusing on the skill of active listening so that each hears and understands the problem from the others perspective before they begin to find ways to manage or solve it.

We focus on face to face delivery through trained volunteer facilitators but there is also very valuable work being done by many other organisations such as One Plus One and Relate on engaging with people online and by PACE, in their ground-breaking work delivering relationship preparation courses within the LGBT community.

FOCCUS is another relationship preparation intervention we offer in Marriage Care - it stands for Facilitating Open, Couple Communication, Understanding and Study - and is a questionnaire and report that if used with a trained facilitator helps couples enhance the quality of their relationship by discussing important topics including communication, problem-solving, parenting, intimacy, finances and so on. It was highlighted by a Department for Education funded evaluation for delivering statistically significant positive change in relationship quality and for providing a staggering benefit to the public purse of £11.50 for every pound invested.

Telegraph columnist, Robert Colville said this of his FOCCUS sessions:

*“The occasion was one of the most terrifying – yet ultimately reassuring – of my life. Before getting married, my girlfriend suggested we took a compatibility test. The idea was to make sure, before we spent a sum equivalent to the GDP of Paraguay on hiring a marquee, that “till death us do part” would be a blessing, rather than a sentence....When I mentioned to friends that we were doing the test, most of them were amused or even alarmed. I, too, was doubtful that a few yes/no questions could*

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*map the recesses of our souls. But I came away a convert. It turned out it wasn't so much an exam as a lesson, teaching us to recognise our differences in personality and temperament, and to make sure we came up with ways of resolving disputes without lasting damage. It was a reminder, in short, that happily ever after takes some work. I've no idea whether we'll make it – though I certainly hope so. But at least we can say we're trying our best. And we've even got a certificate to prove it.”*

Robert Colville recognised the ‘art’ that Dr Iannis referred to; the value of marriage preparation, of couple relationship education for adults.

I hope that with the existing and emerging evidence of its effectiveness and the influence of this group, relationship education will be recognised for the significant contribution it can make in the pursuit of a society in which adults can build and sustain strong, fulfilling, healthy couple relationships.

Thank you