

Program spotlight

Break Through: Remedies for Rocky Relationships

Centacare Melbourne

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Throughout her twenty-six years as a practising Psychologist, Rosalie Pattenden has been concerned that many couples consider ending their relationships because they do not have the skills or knowledge to work through the difficulties and differences that inevitably arise in any relationship. If and when they do present for counselling, many couples are unsure whether to leave or stay in the relationship. They may find themselves entrenched in conflict, feel a sense of helplessness, and an inability to arrest their progression towards dissolution. In Rosalie's experience, even after they have separated and/or divorced, many couples wish they had done something more to keep the marriage together.

The need for the Break Through program

There are many programs for individuals and couples forming relationships and preparing for marriage, as well as programs dealing with post-separation adjustment and moving on after divorce. For couples who have been married or living together for whom difficulties are arising or are (becoming) entrenched, there are few options available outside formal couples counselling. Furthermore, for many people, particularly men, there is still a stigma attached to seeking professional assistance for marital or relationship difficulties, and counselling, a 'talking cure', is not for everyone.

The Break Through program

The Break Through program offers couples an opportunity to seek a form of professional relationship help that is a step removed from counselling. The program is conducted in venues that are not readily identified as places where one would go to seek professional relationship assistance, such as conference centres or community halls. It is conducted over the course of one day, and is attended by groups of no more than 14 couples. The group size and setting offers some protection for those reluctant to divulge too much of themselves, but there are also opportunities throughout the day for sharing to the extent that participants feel comfortable raising more complex issues with the facilitators. Even spouses who were initially wary of having to reveal something of themselves take the opportunity to discuss more intimate concerns, including family violence, with the facilitators during breaks or when couples are engaged in 'couple work' rather than interacting with the group as a whole. The program can also act as a 'warm transition' to other counselling services; couples who attend the group course may feel more inclined to approach the agency for further counselling or other services at a later date.

The program is based on the solution-focused 'Divorce Busting™' program, devised by Michelle Weiner-Davis in the US. After undertaking training in the US, Rosalie proceeded to adapt the program for Australian couples, changing some of the language and tailoring it for provision in a community setting.

While the program is grounded in the 'Divorce Busting' program, it includes material from other theories and approaches, such as attachment theory and emotion-focused therapy. The Australian program also incorporates additional skills training, in particular communication skills that are demonstrated to, and then practiced by, the couples, and information drawn from research. Presenting the research basis for the program material engages participants, especially the men. For example, relevant gender differences for which there is solid research evidence are discussed, concentrating on how such findings are played out in the interactions between men and women on a number of levels. Although the program comprises several discrete topic areas, the various parts build on each other progressively, leading to a discussion focusing on the concept of "not wrong, just different" that integrates the topics and activities covered throughout the day. The program always ends on a positive note, with an activity in which each participant names at least one skill or piece of information about themselves or their spouse/partner they learned during the day that will help them move forward. Couples find it helpful to have reframed their relationship from "what's been wrong" to "what can we do about it".

The program moves between sessions in which there is information-giving (e.g. "from the research we know...") to activities (e.g. mapping their own and their spouse's behaviour in a difficult situation) and incorporates opportunities for the couples to explore more difficult issues with one-on-one assistance from one of the facilitators. Key components of the program involve exploding several relationship myths, and raising participants' awareness of the triggers for each other's behaviour. The contribution of the participant's and his/her spouse's behaviours, interpretations and

attributions to the patterns of conflict they experience are also covered (see box). The program is constructed in such a way that the facilitators function as an independent voice for participants, articulating some of the issues they have been trying to communicate. This also shifts the focus away from the person to the specific behaviour, and reveals some of what lies behind how a spouse might act in a certain situation.

The aim in having spouses learn how they contribute to their partner's reactions is to encourage them to begin to take responsibility for their own behaviour, and through the course of the day they learn new ways to interact so that the old patterns are not repeated. The emphasis on raising awareness through research-based information and discussion of its implications for how couples interact helps the spouses to better understand each other, and how the patterns of conflict and other negative behaviours in which they are currently entrenched have evolved. The solution-focused orientation means that couples leave the program equipped with at least one strategy that they feel confident they can and will apply effectively to their relationship. Potentially even more valuable, though, is the sense of hope that couples are left with. Feedback is replete with quotes such as "before we came we were feeling hopeless, now we feel there's hope" and "it was so helpful to see that other people are struggling in the same way we are, so now we feel we can say 'well all couples do this, so what can we do about our situation?'"

The price of the program was set so that cost did not become an additional barrier for those who were already a little uneasy about attending. Advertising is largely through local newspapers, and it is expected that referrals into the program will gradually increase over time as the program becomes more widely known, and the flow of information through the newer networks created by the Family Relationship Centres gathers momentum. Program flyers emphasise the characteristics that appeal to men in particular – it requires little ongoing commitment of time (one day only), food is provided, it is conducted by 'relationship specialists' and is knowledge based and skills focused.

The facilitators

A pair of relationship specialists, always comprising one male and one female, facilitates the program. One of the key activities during the program is a discussion with the husbands (with the wives as observers) of relationships from a woman's point of view led by the female facilitator. A complementary discussion of men's perspectives on relationships with the wives led by the male facilitator, while the husbands observe, also occurs. Throughout this activity, as they do throughout the entire program, the facilitators regularly check with each other as to whether issues have been covered adequately, thus modelling some important aspects of communication.

Being a facilitator of one of these programs is not for everybody. It requires high levels of competence and experience as both a counsellor and an educator. Since the couples attending the program often come along with the accumulated frustrations associated with a history of not getting along as a couple, experience and expertise in dealing with emotional couples who may be in high conflict, or shut down, is extremely important. In addition, managing a group of as many as 28 individuals engaged in a highly-personal process for several hours requires well-developed group facilitation skills. Conducting this particular type of group also requires a willingness to share one's own life experiences without embarrassment, providing a connection with the couples that they find very valuable.

At present, those who are interested in becoming facilitators of this program attend the program as a participant with their spouse or partner. It is important that they attend without any prior reading or preparation, so that they can appreciate the full effect of the program on them as a member of a couple, although it is unlikely that a couple would facilitate a group together. They may also attend a program as an observer. Rosalie and her co-facilitator, Ray, are then available as a resource and for debriefing.

Topics discussed in the Break Through program:

- Common misperceptions about relationships
- Defining love
- Where couples get stuck
- Solution oriented goal setting
- Tips for men and tips for women
- It only takes one to tango
- Identifying and changing old patterns
- Communication skills
- Ten rules for fair fighting
- Knowledge of spouse
- Constructive and destructive behaviour.

The outcomes

As noted above, feedback from participants has been routinely positive. Benefits also accrue to the agency hosting the program. The program seems to attract couples purely on face value. In regional areas where low attendance might be expected for a range of reasons – distance, small communities where there is a risk of participating in a group with one's neighbours, heightened stigma of seeking professional help – the program has been fully booked. Participating in the program can be an 'icebreaker' in the sense of being a positive first contact with the agency. Rosalie encourages observation of the program by agency staff, from the Receptionist through to the Chief Executive

Officer, because a) in meeting them personally, clients can put faces to names, furthering the connection with the agency, and b) frontline staff are one of the best ways to promote the program both to clients and to other professionals.

Until recently, measurement of achievement of the program aims was via a standard rating of client satisfaction. In the first step towards a more comprehensive evaluation of the program outcomes for couples, clients now complete a measure of their current feelings about the marriage before and after attending the program. The administration load is minimal at this point, so there is little extra burden on the agency in supporting the data collection. In time, Rosalie hopes to be able to contact clients several months after attending the program in order to ascertain a) whether the couple stayed together, and b) their satisfaction with the marriage at that time. Analysis of the changes in satisfaction (if any) before and after the program (and eventually at a later date) is straightforward, and will provide further concrete, quantitative evidence of the immediate benefits to couples, as will knowing how many couples eventually either separate or choose to remain married.

Keys to success

Having run the Break Through program for Centacare for a year or so, Rosalie has identified three factors that contribute to the success of the program for its participants. These are:

1. The venue

Finding a location that is not typically associated with relationship services such as a function room at a local hall, a conference or community centre, or a school, helps to alleviate a concern that some potential participants might have about being seen entering an establishment recognised as a provider of professional family or relationship services.

2. Using a team of skilled facilitators who work well together

It is critical that both facilitators are highly-skilled relationship counsellors and relationship educators, and that they get along well. Working with a group means that they are constantly modelling good relationship skills – communication, the use of humour, the exchange of ideas – in ways that demonstrate the value and validity of different ideas and opinions.

3. Facilitators' genuine sharing of their own experiences

In sharing their own life experience, whether in regard to their own marriages or those of family members, the facilitators convey to couples that relationship difficulties are common – that even relationship experts have had their relationship ups and downs. The sharing of life and relationship experiences of the two facilitators opens up a lot of common ground. Their experiences reverberate for the participating couples and foster an environment in which couples can feel safe in revealing aspects of themselves.

Conclusion

In a society in which there is widespread reluctance to seek professional help for relationship difficulties, Break Through provides an innovative alternative to formal counselling. Whether a couple is just beginning to experience difficulties in their relationship, there is a well-established pattern of conflict; or when one or both partners have begun to disengage from the relationship, the Break Through program provides a range of skills and information that can help couples reframe their relationship and find a more positive outlook on its future. Client satisfaction with the program is clear. While the long-term impact on the couple relationship is as yet untested, plans are in place to simply but effectively gauge whether and how attendance at the program is associated with relationship outcomes in the longer term. Along with the sound theoretical and practical foundation, the evaluation strategy that is being developed will provide a solid foundation for the ongoing provision of the Break Through program.

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