



Marital First Responders

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What do you say when your sister tells you that she is feeling neglected and unloved by her husband? How do you respond when your best friend discloses that he's contemplating divorce? The father/daughter team of Bill and Elizabeth Doherty developed Marital First Responders to equip people for exactly these types of scenarios.

Bill Doherty describes the program as an "ultimate primary prevention" measure helping couples to avoid marital breakdown.

His research shows that individuals experiencing relationship issues often turn to friends and family first, yet these confidants can feel ill-equipped to help. The program empowers "first responders" to help prevent marital issues from progressing. It is unique in that it trains people to aid others within their existing social network.

Bill Doherty is a marriage therapist, author, researcher, and professor at the University of Minnesota. Elizabeth is a licensed marriage and family therapist. They leveraged their expertise to create the program about a year ago, and the first course was offered in late February, 2014.

How it works

Bill Doherty says the program addresses the "common mistakes that people make when being confidants or supporters."¹

Two acronyms capture the seven skills that participants develop throughout the course. They learn to LEAP: to listen, empathize, affirm and offer perspective. Advanced skills are taught using the acronym CAR: challenge, advise, and suggest resources. Confidants learn to discern when they should listen, give guidance or direct friends and family to professional help.

Although new, Doherty notes that Marital First Responders is continually growing. The one-day, six hour course has been offered to as many as 90 participants in one setting. Much of the training has occurred around the Minneapolis-Saint Paul region of Minnesota, but a

shorter two-hour video course is also available. The online video sessions offer all the basics without the practice that on-site participants receive.

The model taught to participants is designed to be easily replicated. Doherty notes that marriage therapists, educators, coaches and faith leaders who have taken the one-day course can participate in further training to qualify as course facilitators in their own communities.

Being a better friend

Bill Doherty stresses that “one of the hardest things for people to get is that the Marital First Responders and the training is about doing a better job with people already in your life who confide in you. It’s not about approaching strangers. It’s not about being a counselor. It’s about being a better friend.”²

He aims to bring more community support to American couples in distress, emphasizing the role personal relationships play in strengthening a marriage.³ Doherty notes that community support is often directed to new couples rather than those who have been together for some time. He suggests this is counterintuitive, joking that “newly engaged couples, as we know, have no problems.”⁴

Joking aside, he suggests experienced couples are often less likely to seek out marital counseling, preferring to rely on friends and family members instead. That’s why Marital First Responders is so well suited to helping couples in long-term relationships and marriages.

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The future of Marital First Responders

Measuring the impact of the program is important to the Doherty’s, who are currently following up with participants in Oklahoma. They anticipate an observable increase in confidence, knowledge and skill level among course participants. Many people who have taken the training have already reported a positive impact on their friendships.

Bill and Elizabeth Doherty envision “a culture with more relational knowledge, wisdom and skill.”⁵ Marital First Responders is a great tool for using the power of existing personal networks to create healthier, happier and more stable relationships.

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¹ Personal communication with Dr. William Doherty, November 20th, 2014.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.