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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**USING MARRIAGE EDUCATION TO STRENGTHEN MILITARY
FAMILIES:
LESSONS FROM THE ACTIVE MILITARY LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM**

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Introduction

In the story of King David and Bathsheba found in II Samuel 11, Uriah was called back from the front lines of war so that David could hide the fact that he had impregnated Uriah's wife. Although unaware of this, Uriah refused to go home and be with his wife. Instead, he chooses to sleep at the entrance of the palace. Verses 10 and 11 read,

When David was told, "Uriah did not go home," he asked him, "Haven't you just come from a distance? Why didn't you go home?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!"

Many American soldiers, much like Uriah, do not really ever come home. Guilt and stress from war and other service related experiences prevent them from fully reengaging in the relationships they had prior to separation or deployment.

Background and Purpose

Factors that contribute to divorce vary. However, research shows that individuals whose occupations expose them to danger and trauma have a higher risk of divorce and the military are no exception (Miles, 2005). Army officials reported about 5,600 divorces among active-duty forces in fiscal year 2001, just over 7,000 in 2002, fewer than 7,500 in 2003 (Miles). The war in Iraq started on March 19, 2003; there were 10,477 divorces reported in 2004. This same pattern was observed among Army officers who had 1,900 divorces in fiscal year 2003, but more than 3,300 in 2004. At least one army chaplain believes that “the stress of multiple deployments and an increased operational tempo throughout the Army played their part in the 2004 increase” (Miles). Unfortunately, spikes in divorce filings in county court records by military personnel can often be linked to soldiers’ returns from long deployments (WKRN, 2007).

According to Hull (n.d.), almost 700,000, or 50%, of the country’s armed forces are married and many of these couples will face difficulties that are exclusive to military life, such as deployment and combat stress. During time of conflict, it is not unusual for couples to have to also cope with redeployments. Long and frequent deployments are associated with loss of emotional support, disconnected relationships, increased caretaking and household responsibilities, all of which create stress beyond the departure itself (Kelley, 1994). Military spouses may also experience loneliness, depression, anxiety, anger, and physical illness (Blount, Curry, & Lubin, 1992; Bey & Lange, 1974; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). The distress of the separation during times of deployment can be even greater for those couples whose relationships are characterized by poor communication (Blount et al.).

Some research has found lower rates of divorce and better adjustment to separation among military couples who felt good about their marriage prior to deployment (Schumm,

Silliman, & Bell, 2000; Rosen, & Durand, 1995). Such findings suggest that it is imperative to attempt to strengthen marriages among couples in the armed forces.

The military is beginning to recognize this need and is beginning to offer some programs designed to help military couples strengthen their relationships. According to Miles, among those programs being offered by the Army are the Building Strong and Ready Families program, which focuses on improving communication skills and the P.I.C.K. a Partner Program (Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge) program, which aims to assist single soldier make good mate selection choices. The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program is being offered by the Marine Corp. This program has multiple components, but it focuses heavily on effective communication. The Navy offers a similar program called Marriage Enrichment Retreat. The Air Force does not have a specific servicewide marital support program at this time, although there are various programs offered through individual bases.

Because of the sheer number of couples in the military, the fact that military life is accompanied by strains that increase the likelihood of divorce, and the relatively few programs specifically designed to improve the quality of military relationships that have been tested to date, more program evaluation in this area is warranted.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the Active Military Life Skills (AMLS) program at improving the quality of military couple relationships. The AMLS program is designed to improve the ability of military couples to address the stressors of daily life through better communication skills, conflict resolution skills, management of emotional triggers, and awareness of financial responsibilities.

Methodology

Recruitment and Study Design

A self-selected sample of 25 active duty United States Air Force (USAF) couples stationed at a base in Europe were recruited through radio spots and brochures advertising a workshop retreat for couples. In addition, information on the workshop was distributed through vital United States Air Force (USAF) community networks, including the “Key Spouse” and First Sergeant. Each squadron in the USAF has at least one Key Spouse who is responsible for maintaining contact with, and providing information to, the other spouses in the unit. Each squadron also has a First Sergeant that is responsible for disseminating information to its members.

The AMLS retreat was held over a weekend (Saturday and Sunday). The United States Air Force in Europe provided funding for much of the workshop, including two nights in a hotel and 5 meals for the couples, although participants were responsible for the cost of travel, incidentals and childcare. A total of 25 active duty Air Force personnel and their spouses/partners attended the AMLS workshop retreat.

This study utilized a pretest, posttest, 2-month follow-up design and all participants signed informed consent authorizations prior to completing self-report survey instruments. Posttest responses reflected how participants “thought” their relationship would be changed or impacted in the coming weeks, while follow-up responses reflected how participants perceived their relationship actually had changed two months after the workshop. In other words, at posttest, participants had not yet put any new knowledge or skills into play, but their responses reflected what they anticipated or hoped their relationship would look like in the future. At follow-up, participants had now had time to incorporate the skills and information from the

workshop into their military lifestyle, so responses at that time reflected what was actually happening.

The workshop facilitator, who was the author of the program, provided instructions to participants as a group on completing the instrument and used sample questions to be sure participants understood the answer keys. In addition to ensuring confidentiality of responses, spouses/partners sat apart from each other while completing the surveys to increase the honesty of responses.

All 50 participants completed pretest and posttest surveys. Follow-up data was collected from 37 participants (18 couples plus one individual) two months after the workshop. Collecting data at this stage was complicated by deployment and other issues related to military life styles. Even so, 74% of the original sample completed follow-up surveys.

Description of the Sample

The original sample ($n = 50$) was 50% male ($n=25$) and 50% female ($n = 25$). Forty-seven, or 94%, of the participants were “married”, 2 were “separated or divorced” and 1 was “dating”. These military couples had been in their current relationships from 1 to 25 years, with the average being 7.40 years ($SD = 5.44$). The average number of children living with this sample of military couples was 1.20 ($SD = 1.23$), with a range of 0-4. This was the first marriage for 76.0% ($n = 38$) of the original sample.

The follow up sample ($n = 37$) was 49% male ($n=18$) and 51% female ($n = 19$). Thirty-five, or 95%, of the participants were “married”, 1 was “separated or divorced” and 1 was “dating”. On average, these couples had been in their current relationships for 8.27 years ($SD = 6.07$), with a range of 1 to 25 years. Participants reported having from 0-4 children living with

them, with an average of 1.22 (SD = 1.25). This was the first marriage for 26 (70.3%) of participants in the follow-up sample.

The ethnicity, age, education, and income distributions of both samples are displayed in Table 1. The original sample was predominately Caucasian (74%), with 68% reporting at least some college or technical training and an additional 12% reporting at least a four year college degree or higher. The original sample was relatively young, with 58% between the ages of 20 and 30. Half (50%) indicated their household incomes fell between \$20,000 and \$30,000 annually; no participants reported incomes below \$10,000.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Sample

Variable	Original (N = 50)		Follow-up (N = 37)	
	%	n	%	n
Ethnicity				
African-American	12.0	6	13.5	5
Asian-American	4.0	2	5.4	2
Caucasian/White	74.0	37	70.3	26
Hispanic/Latino	4.0	2	5.4	2
Mixed	6.0	3	5.4	2
Age				
20-25 years	34.0	17	21.6	8
26-30 years	24.0	12	24.3	9
31-35 years	14.0	7	16.2	6
36-40 years	22.0	11	29.7	11
41+ years	6.0	6	8.1	3
Education Level				
Junior High	4.0	2	2.7	1
High School/GED	16.0	8	21.6	8
Some college/technical	68.0	34	64.9	24
Four year college	10.0	5	8.1	3
Graduate/professional	2.0	1	2.7	1
Income				
10,000-19,999	8.0	4	8.3	3
20,000-29,999	26.0	13	27.8	10
30,000-39,999	24.0	12	22.2	8
40,000-49,999	8.0	4	8.2	3
50,000-74,999	16.0	8	13.9	5

75,000-99,999	14.0	7	16.7	6
100,000+	2.0	1	2.8	1

Program Objectives and Outcome Measures

The research team chose to evaluate the program’s actual impact on the participants’ marital relationship rather than the participants’ acquisition of specific program content. If the overall goal of marriage education is to reduce marital distress and divorce, then variables that are dynamic and causal in the development of marital distress must be evaluated to determine the impact of the program. For example, the team did not want to just measure the acquisition of communication or conflict resolution knowledge and/or skills taught in the workshop, but rather they wanted to measure whether participants believed their ability to communicate and resolve conflict had improved. Based on the literature, the team chose to evaluate the following six outcome objectives. The program would be considered effective if it demonstrated:

1. Increased overall marital satisfaction
2. Increased hope for the success of the current relationship
3. Increased positive communication
4. Increased ability to resolve conflict
5. Decreased negative interaction
6. Increased commitment to the current relationship

The six program objectives and the rationale for choosing them are outlined in the paragraphs that follow.

Objective I: Increase Marital Satisfaction.

Marital satisfaction is one of the most studied concepts in the marriage education field. An early study by Lewis and Spanier (1979) offered one of the early and frequently-cited

theoretical framework for explaining marital satisfaction. Their study provides evidence that satisfaction is an important component of marital quality. Over the past three decades there has been a proliferation of research on marital happiness and stability (see Glenn, 1990; Fowers and Olson, 1989, Hicks & Platt, 1970; Spanier & Lewis, 1980, for a review of this research). Interest in marital satisfaction has received empirical justification that demonstrates that marital satisfaction is the most prominent contributor to global satisfaction (Olson, McCubbin, Larsen, Muxen & Wilson, 1983, Weingarten, 1985, Fowers and Olson, 1989). In more recent studies Karney and Bradbury (1997) found that initial levels of marital satisfaction predict marital dissolution indirectly. Edward Owsley Marshall (2001) found that marital satisfaction was a strong predictor of the cognitive component of subjective well-being. Therefore, a successful marital education program should increase the marital partners' overall satisfaction with their relationship.

Life Innovations' ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (Fowers & Olsen, 1989) has well established norms and has been utilized in a number of studies establishing its reliability and validity. The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale asks respondents to rate their level of agreement, using a 5-point scale ("strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") on 35 items, such as "I am happy with most of my partner's personality characteristics or personal habits" and "I am happy with our communication and feel my partner does understand me". This scale also consists of several subscales, including a communication, a conflict resolution.

Two additional questions measured this objective. Participants rated their level of happiness, on a 10-point scale ("very unhappy" to "perfectly happy") in their present relationship and, at posttest and follow-up, participants indicated how true on a 7-point scale ("less true" to

“more true”) the statement “I will spend more time having fun and being friends with my partner” was for them.

Objective II: Increase Hope for Success of Present Relationship.

Westerop (2002) identifies the ability to desire, imagine, and be committed to a future as a marital dyad (i.e. hope) as an asset of healthy marriages. Generally, couples do best if they have a clear sense of a future together (Amato & Deboer, 2001; Waite & Joyner, 2001). Scott Stanley (2002) proposes that there are two components to commitment: personal dedication and constraint. One of the four components of personal dedication is a desire for a future together. Westerop found that hope in the future of the relationship could be nurtured. A measure of the success of a marriage education program then should be its ability to increase hope for the future success of the relationship.

To assess this objective, participants indicated on a 10-point scale (“unlikely” to “most definitely”) how strongly they believed that they (he/she and partner) would be together in 10 years. Additionally, at posttest and follow-up, respondents indicated how true on a 7-point scale (“less true” to “more true”) the statement “I feel more confident we will stay together in the years to come” was for them.

Objective III: Increase Positive Communication.

The use of communication skills that lead to positive interaction is a compelling indicator of a satisfying relationship (Canary & Cupach, 1988). Communication that is positive in nature and leads to increased understanding contributes to more rewarding interaction, greater likelihood of conflict resolution, and higher levels of intimacy and satisfaction with one's partner

and the overall relationship. An individual's ability to understand their partner's experience and perspective is critical for relationship contentment and stability (Le & Agnew, 2001; Schwebel, Dunn, Moss, & Renner, 1992). The concept of sharing daily trivia is an essential emotional aspect of the relationship and provides a foundation for relationship maintenance (Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). Conversely, communication problems, defined as expression of negative intentions as opposed to skill, has been found to be associated with lack of marital satisfaction among distressed couples (Burleson & Denton, 1997).

The ENRICH Communication subscale was the outcome measure chosen for this objective. Participants rated their level of agreement using a 5-point scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) on nine items about different aspects of communication with their partner. Example items included “I can usually believe everything my partner tells me” and “My partner is a very good listener”.

Objective IV: Improve Conflict Resolution Skills

The inability to manage anger and constructively resolve the conflict that produces the anger is a leading risk factor for marital distress. (Clemens, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Gottman, 1993; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998; Markman & Halweg, 1993). Couples experience distress when their attempts to manage conflict are ineffective (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994). Gottman (1993) and other researchers (Jones & Gallois, 1989) have concluded that how conflict is handled in a relationship is a more important determinant of marital distress than the amount of conflict. Therefore, successful marriage education programs should increase the couple’s ability to manage conflict in ways that are not damaging to the relationship.

The ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale was the outcome measure chosen for this objective. Participants rated their level of agreement using a 5-point scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) on 10 conflict resolution items. Example items included “My partner and I have very similar ideas about the best way to solve our disagreements” and “My partner usually takes our disagreements very seriously”.

Objective V: Decrease Negative Interaction

Numerous studies suggest that the quality of the interaction between partners is predictive of marital distress or divorce (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Markman & Hahlweg, 1993.) Couples with more negative interactions than positive experience higher levels of marital distress and are more likely to divorce. Krause and Shaw (2002) define negative interaction as “unpleasant social encounters characterized by rejection, criticism, competition, the violation of privacy and the lack of reciprocity.

Mathews and associates (1996) conclude, “The weight of the evidence, then suggests that the quality of marital interactions, whether warm and supportive or hostile and negative, relates to risk for marital distress and even dissolution of the relationship” (p.643). More recently, negative interaction was linked to male’s divorce potential and female’s decrease in positive connection to their spouse (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Successful marriage education programs should improve the couples’ ratio of negative to positive interaction.

A negative interaction scale used in a major study of marriage education with military families called Building Strong and Ready Families (BSRF) was selected to assess this objective (Science Applications International Corporation, & PREP, Inc., 2004). Participants rated how

often they and their partner experienced various forms of negative interaction on a scale of 1 to 3, with 1 = almost never or never, 2 = once in a while, and 3 = frequently.

Example items included “Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past hurts” and “My partner shouts or yells at me”. In addition, at posttest and follow-up, participants rated how true on a 7-point scale (“less true” to “more true”) the statement “I have the tools to talk without fighting about issues that come up” was for them.

Objective VI: Increase Commitment to Present Relationship.

Although there is some disparity among researchers as to the precise definition and nature of commitment, it is widely accepted as essential and directly related to marital satisfaction and survival (Montgomery, 1981; Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986; Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Stanley noted in the findings of a survey of 2,300 divorced residents in Oklahoma revealed that 85% believed “lack of commitment” was the major reason for divorce (2002).

A recognized commitment inventory was chosen as a measure for this objective (Stanley & Markman, 1992). This scale has high internal consistency with a variety of populations (Adams & Jones, 1997; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Pramann, 1986). Because of concern that questions worded negatively might be misunderstood, some questions were reworded into positive statements with permission from the author.

Participants were also asked to respond to a single question, on a 10-point scale (“not at all committed” to “absolutely committed”) about how committed they were to staying in their present relationship. Furthermore, at posttest and follow-up, participants rated how true on a 7-point scale (“less true” to “more true”) the statements “I will invest more time in our

relationship” and “I have new ideas for how to show my commitment to my partner” were for them.

Summary of Program Objectives and Measures

The six program objectives and the scales and/or questions chosen to measure them are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2
Outcome Objectives and Measures of AMLS**

Objective	Measure(s)
Increase marital satisfaction	ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale Happiness with present relationship question Spend more time bring friends with spouse/partner question
Increase hope for success of present relationship	Believe still be together in 10 years question Confidence in future relationship question
Increase positive communication	ENRICH Communication Subscale
Improve conflict resolution skills	ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale
Decrease negative interaction	BSRF Negative Interaction Scale Have tools to talk without fighting question
Increase commitment to present relationship	Commitment to present relationship question Time investment in relationship question New ideas to show commitment question

Results

For questions asked only at posttest and follow-up, means and SD or frequency distributions and percentages are reported. To assess whether the differences between pretest,

posttest, and follow up responses (e.g., change in scores) were significant, repeated measures ANOVA tests were conducted. When statistical significance was detected ($p < .05$), protected t -tests were conducted using paired sample t -tests and a significance level of .017 (.05/3) to address the issue of possible inflated Type I errors (Cronk, 2006). These tests also revealed the times where significant changes occurred (e.g., pretest to posttest, posttest to follow-up, pretest to follow up) and whether those changes were in the desired direction. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated where statistically significant positive changes ($p < .017$ in the desired direction) were detected using the following formula (Cronk, 2006):

$$d = \frac{\overline{D}}{S_D}$$

Effect sizes were interpreted according to Cohen's (1992) typology: .2 was considered small, .5 medium, and .8 or higher large.

Analysis of Study Objectives

Objective I: Increase Marital Satisfaction.

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores on the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale at the three time points was significant ($F(2,42) = 73.258$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected t -tests revealed that scores changed significantly from:

- pretest ($m = 109.60$, $sd = 16.51$) to posttest ($m = 145.15$, $sd = 19.85$) and
- pretest ($m = 109.60$, $sd = 16.51$) to follow-up ($m = 141.59$, $sd = 19.33$).

Results of ANOVA analysis comparing the participants' scores on how happy they were in their present relationships at the pre, post, and follow-up was also significant ($F(2,72) = 23.533$, $p < .001$). Follow-up protected t -tests revealed that scores changed significantly from:

- pretest ($m = 6.81$, $sd = 1.82$) to posttest ($m = 8.73$, $sd = 0.84$) and
- pretest ($m = 6.81$, $sd = 1.82$) to follow-up ($m = 8.57$, $sd = 1.52$).

When asked if they would spend more time having fun and being friends with their partner, the mean response at posttest was 6.56 ($sd = 0.79$) and 6.38 ($sd = 0.79$) at follow-up.

In addition to indicating that they would likely spend more time with their partners, analysis of the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale and the happiness in present relationship question both indicated statistically significant positive change immediately after the workshop and that the change was maintained over a two month period. These findings suggest that the AMLS program was successful in increasing participants' marital satisfaction.

Objective II: Increase Hope for Success of Present Relationship

At pretest, when asked how strongly they believed they and their partner would still be together in 10 years, the mean response was 8.44 ($sd = 2.68$) compared to 9.16 ($sd = 1.69$) at posttest and 9.27 ($sd = 1.17$) 2 months later. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA examining participants' scores at these three times was not significant ($F(2,70) = 1.671$, $p > .05$). On the second measure for this objective – which asked if participants felt more confident that he/she and partner would stay together in the future (on scale of 1 to 7) - the mean response was 6.42 ($sd = 0.86$) at posttest and 6.32 ($sd = 0.92$) at follow-up.

Although the first measure did not achieve statistical significance, both posttest (9.16) and follow-up (9.27) mean scores were higher than pretest (8.44). With such a high pretest mean, the bar was set high for achieving significance. Furthermore, participants appeared to be more confident in the future of their relationship. Based on these findings, it is believed Objective 2 was largely achieved.

Objective III: Increase Positive Communication.

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores on the ENRICH Communication subscale at the three points was significant ($F(2,68) = 94.331, p < .001$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed statistically significant change in scores from:

- pretest ($m = 32.71, sd = 5.51$) to posttest ($m = 43.16, sd = 4.78$),
- posttest ($m = 43.16, sd = 4.78$) to follow-up ($m = 40.54, sd = 6.47$), and
- pretest ($m = 32.71, sd = 5.51$) to follow-up ($m = 40.54, sd = 6.47$).

Analysis of data from the ENRICH communication subscale indicates that participants increased their positive communication skills and maintained those skills over the follow-up period, suggesting that Objective 3 was achieved

Objective IV: Increase Conflict Resolution.

Results of ANOVA analysis comparing participants' scores on the ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale at the three time points was significant ($F(2,68) = 75.579, p < .001$). Follow-up protected *t*-tests revealed statistically significant change in scores from:

- pretest ($m = 31.04, sd = 5.20$) to posttest ($m = 39.83, sd = 5.28$) and
- pretest ($m = 31.04, sd = 5.20$) to follow-up ($m = 38.30, sd = 5.42$).

These findings suggest that participants in the AMLS workshop increased their ability to manage conflict in their relationships to a statistically significant degree and were maintaining that skill at the time of follow-up.

Objective V: Decrease Negative Interaction.

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores on the BSRF Negative Interaction Scale at the three time points was significant ($F(2,70) = 49.315, p < .001$).

Follow-up protected t -tests revealed that scores changed significantly from:

- pretest ($m = 19.46, sd = 4.69$) to posttest ($m = 13.04, sd = 2.60$),
- posttest ($m = 13.04, sd = 2.60$) to follow-up ($m = 15.08, sd = 4.12$), and
- pretest ($m = 19.46, sd = 4.69$) to follow-up ($m = 15.08, sd = 4.12$).

When asked if they had the tools to talk without fighting (on scale of 1 to 7), the mean response at posttest was 6.60 ($sd = 0.64$) and at follow-up was 6.08 ($sd = 0.83$).

Statistically significant positive change was achieved at all three possible time points, although not in the desired direction from posttest to follow-up. However, follow-up scores (15.08) were still substantially lower than at pretest (19.46) and achieved significance, clearly indicating improved interactions with their partners. Furthermore, at both posttest and follow-up, participants agreed that they had tools to talk with their partners without fighting. Taken together, there is support that program objective V was achieved.

Objective VI: Increase Commitment to Present Relationship.

Results of ANOVA analysis comparing the participants' scores at all time points was significant ($F(2,70) = 7.353, p = .001$). Follow-up protected t -tests revealed scores changed significantly from pretest ($m = 69.48, sd = 10.31$) to posttest ($m = 74.73, sd = 9.96$).

For this objective, participants were also asked to rate how committed they were to staying in their present relationship. A one-way repeated measures ANOVA comparing the participants' scores at pretest, posttest, and follow-up was significant ($F(2,72) = 7.381, p = .001$). Follow-up protected t -tests revealed statistically significant change in scores from:

- pretest ($m = 8.46$, $sd = 2.00$) to posttest ($m = 9.30$, $sd = 1.36$) and
- posttest ($m = 9.30$, $sd = 1.36$) to follow-up ($m = 9.14$, $sd = 1.23$).

When asked if they would invest more time in their relationship (on a scale from 1 to 7), the mean score at posttest was 6.56 ($sd = 0.84$) and 6.35 ($sd = 0.95$) 2 months later. When asked if they had new ideas to show commitment, the posttest and follow-up mean scores were 6.54 ($sd = 0.68$) and 6.32 ($sd = 0.91$) respectively.

Participants scores on the commitment scale increased significantly from pretest to posttest, and although not significant, the follow-up mean score (74.16) was quite similar to that at posttest (74.73), indicating that the change was still being maintained. There was significant positive change from pretest to posttest on how committed participants were to their present relationship. There was also significant change from posttest to follow-up, but this change was not in the desired direction. However, the follow-up mean score (9.30) was higher than the pretest score (8.46) indicating a higher level of commitment at follow-up. Furthermore, study participants, at both posttest and follow-up, agreed they would invest more time in their relationship and that they had new ideas to show commitment to their partners. These findings indicate that program object VI was sufficiently achieved.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Participants were asked several questions at posttest and follow-up about the future of their relationships and skills that had been acquired in the AMLS workshop. Table 3 shows that scores were high at both posttest and follow-up (highest possible score was 7), although follow-up scores did tend to drop slightly. However, this is not surprising considering that participants had just completed the workshop and may have had inflated expectations of how the knowledge

they had just acquired would transfer into their daily, routine (military) lifestyles. The follow-up scores remaining so high actually seem more impressive than the high posttest scores.

Table 3
Mean Scores of Posttest and Follow-up Questions

Question	Posttest		Follow-up	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Spend more time being friends w/partner	6.56	0.79	6.38	0.79
Confidence in future of relationship	6.42	0.86	6.32	0.92
Have tools to talk without fighting	6.60	0.64	6.08	0.83
Time investment in relationship	6.56	0.84	6.35	0.95
New ideas to show commitment	6.54	0.68	6.32	0.91

On the seven outcome measures in Table 4 on which ANOVA analysis indicated that change was significant ($p < .05$), subsequent paired sample t-tests were conducted.

Table 4
Means, Standard Deviations, and ANOVA for Effects of AMLS on Eight Outcome Measures

Outcome Measure	Pretest		Posttest		Follow-up		df	ANOVA
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale	109.50	18.337	146.64	19.35	140.68	20.618	2,42	73.258***
Happiness with present relationship	6.81	1.823	8.73	0.838	8.57	1.519	2,72	23.533***
Believe still be together in 10 years	8.92	2.465	9.50	1.108	9.25	1.180	2,70	1.671
ENRICH Communication Subscale	32.34	5.407	43.49	4.032	40.74	6.577	2,68	94.331***
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale	30.51	5.238	39.83	4.294	38.26	5.527	2,68	75.579***
BSRF Negative Interaction Scale	19.22	4.770	12.72	2.092	15.08	4.115	2,70	49.315***
Commitment Scale	71.58	7.268	76.39	5.803	74.64	8.493	2,70	7.353**
Commitment to present relationship	8.89	1.410	9.68	0.530	9.14	1.228	2,72	7.31***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

Table 5 reveals that of the 16 time points for which the AMLS program produced significant results ($p < .017$), 13 of these were in the desired direction. Participants' scores on the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale, the ENRICH Conflict Resolution subscale, the BSRF Negative Interaction Scale and the happiness with present relationship question clearly improved from pretest to both posttest and follow-up. These findings alone offer solid evidence that the AMLS program was effective with this group of participants.

Table 5
Summary of paired *t*-test results

Outcome Measure	Significant time frame	Desired direction?
ENRICH Overall Marital Satisfaction Scale	Pretest-posttest***	yes
	pretest-follow up***	yes
Happiness with present relationship	pretest-posttest***	yes
	pretest-follow up***	yes
ENRICH Communication Subscale	pretest-posttest***	yes
	posttest-follow up**	no
	pretest-follow up***	yes
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale	pretest-posttest***	yes
	pretest-follow up***	yes
BSRF Negative Interaction Scale	pretest-posttest***	yes
	posttest-follow up***	no
	pretest-follow up***	yes
Commitment Scale	pretest-posttest***	yes
Commitment to present relationship	pretest-posttest***	yes
	posttest-follow up***	no

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

Significance was achieved in an unanticipated direction on 3 occasions, including from posttest to follow-up on the commitment to present relationship question. However, the posttest mean (9.14) was still higher than that of the pretest (8.89), so participants actually reported a higher level of commitment 2 months after the workshop than at pretest.

The other two unanticipated significant findings occurred from posttest to follow-up with the ENRICH Communication subscale and the BSRF Negative Interaction Scale. However, on both of these measures, significant positive change was detected at both pretest to posttest and pretest to follow-up. In other words, participants did actually improve overall in communication and negative interaction skills, but their scores did not reflect this from posttest to follow-up. For both of these measures, it is possible that participants were simply overly optimistic in their posttest response ratings.

Effect Sizes

Finally, to further assess the magnitude of the changes that occurred, effect sizes were calculated at all points for which statistically significant positive improvements were detected. These findings are seen in Table 6.

Table 6
Effect Sizes for Significant Positive Score Changes

Outcome Measure/Change Point	Cohen's <i>d</i>
ENRICH Overall Marital Satisfaction Scale/pre-post	2.11
ENRICH Overall Marital Satisfaction Scale/pre-follow up	1.99
ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Subscale/pre-post	1.89
ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Subscale/pre-follow up	1.96
Happiness with present relationship question/pre-post	1.14
Happiness with present relationship question/pre-follow up	.75
ENRICH Communication Subscale/pre-post	2.00
ENRICH Communication Subscale/pre-follow up	1.59
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale/pre-post	1.58
ENRICH Conflict Resolution Subscale/pre-follow up	1.55
BSRF Negative Interaction Scale/pre-post	1.53
BSRF Negative Interaction Scale/pre-follow up	1.03
Commitment Scale/pre-post	.61
Commitment to present relationship question/pre-post	.56

An effect size of .2 was considered weak, with a finding of .5 considered moderate and .8 or larger interpreted as strong (Cohen, 1992). All 14 effect sizes were at least moderate, with 11 meeting the criteria of strong. These findings speak to the magnitude of the impact that the AMLS program had with the military couples who attended this marriage/relationship retreat.

Limitations

Although the findings were strong, several limitations must also be noted, including those related to the sample. While participants did have to make some arrangements to attend this retreat, including transportation and childcare, the military covered the cost of the hotel and meals, which may have been appealing incentives for some couples. The sample size was rather small and the sample was self-selected. The active military personnel were members of only one branch of the United States Armed Forces – e.g., the Air Force. The sample was also predominantly Caucasian and fairly educated (80% had at least some college or technical training).

Furthermore, although data were gathered at three different time points, it was only collected from the experimental group. No comparison or control group was utilized. In light of these factors, the findings from this study are not generalizable beyond the sample itself and it would be prudent to study the AMLS program with a wider sampling of military couples and in the remaining military divisions.

Finally, as indicated by pretest commitment measure scores, the military couples who attended the AMLS retreat were already committed to their relationships. Generally speaking, those who attended did not have “troubled” marriages that attendance at this workshop help to

“save”. On the other hand, the fact that the AMLS program demonstrated such strong outcomes among already solid relationships can also be interpreted as an indicator of its power.

Implications for Practice

Social work practice with military populations, including dealing with soldiers returning from war, is certainly not new. Social work practice in this arena has been extensive and includes parent support groups, linking those who remain at home with needed resources, address issues mental health issues of soldiers in combat and providing training to others on recognizing symptoms of post-traumatic stress (DeAngelis, 2003). It is believed that social workers in the military can be key players in helping couples build, strengthen, and maintain vital and healthy relationships.

Social workers in the military need to advocate for continued and/or expanded access of soldiers and their spouses/partners to relationship workshops and retreats. This is particularly true in the Air Force, where no uniform marriage education program currently exists. Social workers, knowledgeable in group processes and in counseling, should also become trained to facilitate such workshops. Recognizing that many issues that couples face need to be addresses *prior* to separation, social workers should advocate for policies that make workshops available as a part of part of pre-deployment training. Finally, social workers in the military must recognize that many couples are not taking advantage of the programs the military currently offers (WRKN, 2007), so it becomes necessary to assess the barriers to attendance and become creative in making the workshops more appealing to soldiers and their spouses/partners.

For community practitioners who wish to reach out to the military community, offering workshops on enhancing relationships with invitations to the military community are certainly

feasible. Perhaps partnering with a military social worker and or chaplain for such an endeavor would help to ensure that the most convenient and effective times for soldiers and their spouses/partners are offered. Furthermore, these partnerships would seem vital for both recruiting participants and in disseminating information about workshops through key military networks.

Finally, unique opportunities exist for churches to support military couples whose relationships face challenges that many people cannot imagine. Certainly, churches in military communities could host these marriage or relationship workshops for military couples. But more creative opportunities exist. Imagine if a social worker were to seek out mentor couples in churches, perhaps targeting those of whom at least one partner is a veteran, to serve as encouragers and role models for younger military couples. There may be circumstances and realities of life that only those who have been in the military can truly understand and having a couple who have not only “been there, done that”, but endured and survived, could be so valuable. Of course, there would need to be clear screening processes established and undoubtedly and plethora of “bureaucratic red tape” to get through, but the possibilities to provide support, encouragement, and hope for the younger military couples seem enormous.

As social workers of faith, we need not only to recognize that programs such as AMLS have the potential of becoming significant tools for the health and survival of military marriages, but to help implement them when possible. As social workers of faith, we can minister to those jarred by the sudden absence of a spouse, but through helping couples to strengthen their relationships prior to times of separation, we can offer hope for a joyful reunion.

Summary

Results of data collected from 25 Air Force personnel and their spouses/partners and 37 of this same group at 2 month later indicate that the Active Military Life Skills program had a strong impact on relationships among military personnel and their spouses/partners. Study findings indicated that after participating in the Active Military Life Skills workshop, program participants reported greater happiness in their relationship, increased confidence in the future of their relationship, and improved communication and conflict resolution skills. In addition, participants reported having new skills and ideas for improving their relationship, a greater willingness to invest more time in it, as well as high levels of satisfaction with the workshop itself. Taken together, these results offer compelling evidence that the AMLS program is a promising mechanism for improving the quality of military couple relationships, thus enhancing their long-term viability.

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