



# Relationship Research Institute

*Strengthening Relationships Through Research*

December 2010 Newsletter



## Welcome!

The *Relationship Research Institute* is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to strengthening relationships and empowering families through innovative research.



The *Bringing Baby Home Program* aims to improve the quality of life for babies and children by strengthening their family relationships during the transition to parenthood.



## About the RRI

The *Relationship Research Institute* (RRI) conducts research and sponsors programs that support couples, families, and interpersonal relationships. Dr. John Gottman—psychologist, Senior Scientist at the RRI, Emeritus Professor at the University of Washington, and relationship guru—created this non-profit research institute to ensure that there would always be a place dedicated to sponsoring research on relationships that is of the highest scientific rigor. The RRI also sponsors empirically-based programs designed to strengthen relationships, such as the Bringing Baby Home Program—an educational workshop that teaches couples the skills needed to successfully overcome challenges associated with becoming parents.

The RRI is committed to conducting cutting-edge research that provides a foundation for clinical practice and public policy that can be used and implemented in the Puget Sound and beyond to help families improve and maintain quality relationships, and foster optimal health and development of children and all family members. We appreciate and welcome support from individuals and organizations that have the ability to help us meet these goals. If you have any questions about the RRI or would like to support the work that we do, please contact us at 206-832-0300 or check out our website: [www.rrinstitute.org](http://www.rrinstitute.org).

## The Bringing Baby Home Program



The *Bringing Baby Home* (BBH) Program combines scientific research and service delivery in order to improve the quality of life for babies and children by strengthening their families and parental relationships. BBH offers new and expecting parents a weekend workshop designed to teach parents how to strengthen their relationships and support infant development during the transition to

parenthood. Findings from a randomized clinical trial conducted by the Relationship Research Institute indicate that couples who participate in the workshop have higher quality relationships, less hostility, and lower baby blues compared to couples who did not attend the workshop. Our aim is to promote social change by making BBH available as part of the standard birth preparation program offered to expectant couples in hospitals throughout the nation. If we are successful, millions of babies and young families will experience a healthier, happier transition to parenthood that is characterized by emotionally sensitive parenting and positive family relationships. Check out the BBH website for more information: [www.bbhonline.org](http://www.bbhonline.org)

## Relationship Meltdown after a Baby is Born is a National Problem

For many couples, the arrival of a new baby begins a cascade of relationship meltdown that can lead toward the breakup of the family. In our study of first-time parents, we discovered that two-thirds of new parents experience a serious drop in their relationship's happiness after the baby arrives. Couples also experience a high rate of perinatal mood disorders, and their ability to be effective parents can become seriously compromised. All of these events have serious consequences for the emotional and cognitive development of babies. That's why we've developed and tested the *Bringing Baby Home Program*.

## Did You Know?



In our Bringing Baby Home study, Dr. Gottman and colleagues found that the best predictor of marital adjustment after a new baby arrives is the quality of the friendship before the baby arrives.



# Relationships and Holiday Stress



Many people experience the "blues" during the winter months and the holiday season. The shorter days, decreased light, and changing weather may bring about a type of depression known as Seasonal Affective Disorder. Additionally, many people experience the "holiday blues" during this time of

year. The holiday blues may strike due to increased social demands and other holiday-related stressors, such as less sleep and interruptions in diet and exercise routines.

These feelings often take a toll on close relationships. At the same time, close relationships with friends and family members can help remedy the blues and provide support and companionship during tough times. What can you do to nurture close relationships and thrive during the holiday season?

Research done by Dr. Gottman and *the Relationship Research Institute* has helped us learn about the "Masters" and "Disasters" of relationships. Relationship Masters are couples who have happy, healthy, satisfying relationships that last a lifetime. These couples love and admire each other and find ways to effectively manage conflict. In contrast, the Disasters of relationships are couples who are not happy with their relationships and experience high levels of conflict that they find hard to overcome. Disasters are more likely to end their relationships or divorce... Those who decide to stick with their partners are often miserable and unsatisfied. The Masters and Disasters of relationships have taught us a lot about the types of interaction patterns that can be observed between couples that contribute to the quality and stability of relationships. The box on the right contains some common behaviors that we've observed in the Disasters (i.e., things that you want to try to avoid in your relationship) and the Masters (i.e., things that you want to encourage in your relationship). By trying to act like one of the relationship Masters, you can pave the way for healthier, longer, more satisfying partnerships and relationships in your life!

## From Our Families

"Knowledge is power, and the educators (from the BBH Program) did a really good job of teaching us the skills we need to have a healthy relationship, especially with the stresses of a new baby coming soon!"

-Father-to-be; Seattle, Washington

"I felt that the (Bringing Baby Home) Program was very worthwhile and very, very helpful. Our son is 17 months and I definitely wish we had done it before he was born instead of waiting until later. I think it will be extraordinarily helpful, and I wish we had done it sooner!"

-Mother of 17 month old; Seattle, Washington

# The Masters & Disasters of Relationships

What do the Relationship <i>Disasters</i> do? -The Problems	What do the Relationship <i>Masters</i> do? -The Remedies
<p><b>Criticism</b> Criticism occurs when you complain about something and suggest that the problem is a character defect in your partner.</p> <p><i>"The dishes are never done when I get home, and you are always just sitting there on the couch. You are so lazy! Why can't you just do the dishes when they need to be done?!"</i></p>	<p><b>Complain without blaming</b> Rather than criticizing, state the problem in a neutral way and let your partner know how it makes you feel.</p> <p><i>"I see that the dishes are not done yet. It upsets me to come home and find that they are not done, which means that I can't make dinner. What can we do to get them done on time?"</i></p>
<p><b>Defensiveness</b> Defensiveness is a common response to criticism. It occurs when one person tries to defend their actions and deny responsibility for the problem.</p> <p><i>"I didn't do the dishes because you didn't ask me to. I can't read your mind!"</i></p>	<p><b>Accept some responsibility</b> Let your partner know how you have contributed to the problem.</p> <p><i>"I guess I forgot to do the dishes when I got home and then got caught up with reading this article. I'm sorry."</i></p>
<p><b>Contempt</b> Contempt occurs when you try to hurt your partner's feelings or insult them. It can take the form of name calling and sarcasm.</p> <p><i>"Maybe I should ask the magic dishwashing fairy to do your chores for you; then maybe I can actually count on them to be done!"</i></p>	<p><b>Create a culture of appreciation</b> Express genuine fondness and admiration for your partner and let them know that you are thankful for them.</p> <p><i>"I really appreciate your willingness to talk with me about this and create a plan that will help us get the chores done. I love you."</i></p>
<p><b>Stonewalling</b> Stonewalling usually occurs when someone gets really upset and doesn't want to interact any more, so they just sit there like a stone wall and ignore their partner.</p> <p><i>Withdrawn from the interaction and not responding to anyone, saying nothing.</i></p>	<p><b>Take a short break</b> If you are feeling overwhelmed and like you might say something hurtful, then take some time to calm down and self soothe.</p> <p><i>"I really need to take a moment before we talk. I'm feeling really overwhelmed, so I'm going to go out for a quick walk. We can talk when I get back."</i></p>

The Relationship Research Institute has provided help, support, and resources to approximately 2,000 couples in recent years!

In addition, the Bringing Baby Home Program has taught over 750 educators how to help couples navigate the transition to parenthood and welcome new babies into an emotionally sensitive, caring environment.

Please help us to continue making positive impacts on the lives of couples, children, and families in the Pacific Northwest and beyond by supporting our research and programming today!



## Stories of Success



When Adam and Kelsey\* first contacted the RRI, they were not very happy with their relationship. Adam said that Kelsey wanted the relationship to change, but he felt that

there was a negative stigma attached to going to counseling, and he just didn't feel very motivated to make an effort. This couple, parents of two small children, decided to participate in the Creating Healthy Relationships Program in an effort to strengthen their relationship. It was a big commitment, and they weren't sure if it would make a difference in their relationship, but Kelsey was firm in convincing Adam to attend the weekly workshop with her. Adam decided to attend for the sake of the research.

Both Adam and Kelly were very intimidated by the group nature of the workshops. At first, they were scared to reveal their struggles and expose their vulnerabilities with other couples in the group. After the first session, though, they were relieved to know that other couples struggled with the same issues that they faced! So they found the courage to share their ideas and experiences; each week, they discussed with the group what they learned about each other and their relationship from the workshop and shared successful strategies with the group. They also appreciated hearing other couples' stories about what they had learned from the program.

A year later, things look very different in their relationship! They both report that their relationship has changed for the better. Kelsey recognizes when she is angry and flooded and knows how to tell Adam when she needs to take a break. Adam will "back off" now when he recognizes his behavior is upsetting Kelsey. They used to say regrettable things when they were angry, which would make things worse, but now they are willing to stop before conflict escalates and accept responsibility for the problem. Adam says that, since completing the program, it is much easier to recognize when he needs to apologize and see how his behavior impacts his relationship with Kelsey. Both feel that they communicate much better, recognize old patterns that caused problems and try to avoid them, and have a more meaningful relationship.

When we last saw Kelsey and Adam, it was a year after they finished the program. The benefits of attending the program were clear; it was a pleasure to watch them interact as a strong and healthy family. They said that their parenting approach is the same as far as structure and discipline, but they are able to calm themselves when they "get worked up" by daily parenting struggles and they are better at soothing themselves and their children in times of stress. The Creating Healthy Relationships Program has made their family life better, their relationship richer, and has given them a new path to follow toward a brighter future.

\*names and images have been changed to protect the privacy of our families.

## Creating Healthy Relationships Program

Research shows that up to one-third of couples experience conflict in their relationships that escalates and gets out of control. Such conflict can have a negative impact on all family members, including children. We are currently testing a psycho-educational workshop for low-income couples with children who experience hostility, distress, and conflict in their relationships. The workshop—called the Creating Healthy Relationships Program—was developed based on 35+ years of research on family relationships. The goals of the workshop are to provide couples with better conflict management skills, improve communication, strengthen the parenting alliance, increase intimacy, and improve overall relationship satisfaction. The purpose of this project is to provide empirical evidence that shows the workshop to be effective in assisting at-risk couples who experience significant distress in their relationships. We hope that such evidence will enhance our ability to offer the program to more families in the future by encourage public policy-makers to provide funding and support for program implementation across the U.S.



Preliminary findings from this project show that the program was successful in bolstering couples' relationships! Couples who completed the workshop reported being more satisfied with their relationships. They were also more likely to use an array of healthy relationship skills after attending. For example, couples who participated in the Creating Healthy Relationships Program experienced more "shared meaning" within their relationships. This means that partners were more likely to honor each others' dreams and life goals. Couples also had stronger friendships and knew more about one another's inner worlds. They were more passionate and romantic, and reported better sex lives! Finally, couples experienced less conflict. Participation in our program helped couples learn how to avoid relationship "gridlock" by compromising and accepting influence from one another. Couples also reported fewer instances of the "four horseman of the apocalypse"—criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling—relationship behaviors that our research has shown to contribute to divorce and relationship break up. Couples began incorporating the "remedies" to these maladaptive behaviors into their interactions instead. Check out the information in this newsletter for tips on how you can use these relationship skills with your loved ones.

## Introducing Dr. John Gottman



John M. Gottman, Ph.D. is a Senior Scientist at the *Relationship Research Institute*. He is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle and is one of the leading research scientists in the world on marriage, relationships, and parenting.

Dr. Gottman is the author of over 130 journal articles and has authored, coauthored or edited over 30 books, including "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail," "The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child," (Simon and Schuster), "What Predicts Divorce?" (L. Erlbaum Assoc.), "The Marriage Clinic" (W.W. Norton); "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work," and "The Mathematics of Marriage, Dynamic Non-linear Models," (MIT Press).

Dr. Gottman has conducted seminars, lectures, and workshops throughout the world for his academic colleagues in the field of psychology and family relations. He has also appeared on numerous radio and television programs such as 20/20, Dateline NBC, Good Morning America, Eye to Eye, NPR's Fresh Air, BBC and Discovery Channel documentaries, among others.



## Year End Giving



You can help the *Relationship Research Institute* in our efforts to ensure a future where all couples, children, and families can thrive. Help support our research and research-based programs so that we can help couples and families everywhere!

Every donation helps the *Relationship Research Institute* continue this much needed research and helps our programs grow. As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, we rely solely on grants, community partners, sponsorship, and individual donations. *Your gift to The Relationship Research Institute is tax deductible to the full extent of the law. Please visit [www.rrinstitute.org](http://www.rrinstitute.org) for more information or to make a donation. Thank you for sustaining this essential work through your contribution.*

## Volunteer with us!

Our research would not be possible without the dedication and efforts of our volunteers and interns. Our diverse team includes undergraduate students seeking to gain research experience, Masters-level students interested in growing their clinical and research skills, doctoral students and early career professionals seeking development opportunities, and community members of all sorts who have a passion for helping families strengthen their relationships. For more information about volunteer opportunities please contact us at 206-832-0300, [info@rrinstitute.com](mailto:info@rrinstitute.com), or check out our website: [www.rrinstitute.org](http://www.rrinstitute.org)

## With Our Thanks



Thanks to your generous support, we are able to provide families with relationship skills,

support with the transition to parenthood, and improve the lives of children in the Pacific Northwest and throughout our country.

We are very grateful for your gift this year, and wish you and your family a warm and wonderful holiday season!



## Couples Decision-Making Study

The Relationship Research Institute recently conducted a study to learn about how couples who are receiving public assistance communicate and make decisions about things related to, for example, finances, household chores, and parenting. Our goal was to understand how these couples interact and make decisions so that we could assess the need to improve the programs and services that are offered to low-income families in the U.S. Couples who participated in this project were asked to engage in a variety of tasks together; for instance, they were asked to pretend that their family won the lottery and decide how the money would be spent, and tell us how they like to get chores done. Couples were also asked to engage in a series of interactions, such as trying to resolve an issue in their relationship, and building a paper tower out of arts and crafts supplies. While they were doing these things, our research assistants videotaped them so that we could later observe the way these couples interact and make decisions.

When our staff members later watched those interactions, we found that couples showed a pattern of emotional and behavioral reciprocity. In other words, when one member of the couple acted a certain way, the other partner was highly likely to act in that same way! This was true for positive behaviors, like displays of physical affection and attempts to include the other person, as well as negative behaviors, like anger and dominance. So, when one partner laughed or asked her partner for his opinion, he was more likely to do those same things throughout the interaction. Findings from this study also showed that couples were more satisfied with their interactions when they contained more positive and less negative behaviors. These results point to the importance of helping couples learn how to interact and work together in positive ways.



When we looked at the way couples made decisions together, we found that individuals had the tendency to compromise and include partners' preferences in the decision making process. For example, almost all couples in the study moved away from their individual preferences and toward their partners' choices when trying to decide how to spend the pretend lottery winnings. In other words, they compromised! When we asked couples how they liked to complete household chores, like picking up the kids from school and grocery shopping, they reported being more satisfied when working together to get the chores done. This suggests that low-income individuals may be happier when working collaboratively with their partners. Thus, we need to encourage policymakers to provide low-income couples with opportunities to work together.

## Plan to Join Us!

The *Relationship Research Institute* sponsors educational programs for couples and families, as well as educators and health care workers. Please plan to join us for the following events in Seattle, Washington in 2011! Check out our website for more details: [www.rrinstitute.org](http://www.rrinstitute.org)

- **March 26-28:** Bringing Baby Home Certification Training
- **June 11:** Workshop on the Transition to Parenthood: Latest Research on Intimate Relationships and Parenting
- **June 12:** Certified BBH Gottman Educator Breakfast
- **July 30:** Workshop on Treating Couples During the Recovery Process

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