

# Chapter 8

## Looking Ahead

### Chapter Highlights

- The educator helps couples identify likely life changes and plan how to manage those changes.
- The educator reviews with couples early warning signs of relationship deterioration, and how to respond constructively to get their relationship back on track.
- The educator reviews with couples what they will do to sustain their relationship together.

The final unit of Couple CARE for Parents is focused on maintaining relationship satisfaction long term. The unit begins with a review of the content and self-change plan of the previous unit on caring and sexuality. The new content in this unit addresses three areas. First, couples identify changes likely to occur in their lives over the next year or two, discuss the possible positive and negative relationship effects of those life changes, and develop a plan to enhance the positive effects of life changes. Second, the couple is encouraged to consider what might be the early warning signs of relationship problems, and what they could do to prevent the development of serious relationship problems. Third, the couple is encouraged to maintain an ongoing focus on their relationship by developing rituals to celebrate their relationship, and developing strategies for continuing to practice their most important relationship enhancing habits.

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## Reviewing the Intimacy and Sexual Self-Change Plan

Even couples with good sex lives find the active discussion that Unit 5 encourages can be helpful. The following review is of a husband who had set a self-change goal of talking to his wife about their sex life together since the baby arrived. It illustrates how a husband learned more about his wife's sexual interests, and how they had been influenced by becoming a parent.

Educator: "What stands out in your mind, Gerard as the most important part of last week's unit?"

Gerard: "I had been avoiding talking about sex with Susie. She just does not seem keen since the baby, and I was ... was not wanting to pressure her. My worry is that the few times we had sex she just went along to please me, she really didn't seem into it. It surprised me that she said having sex a bit more would be good."

Educator: "Susie, what is your take on this?"

Suzie: "I enjoy sex, or at least I really did before the baby. In the first few months I was so tired. Frankly sex was the last thing I thought about. Gerard is right in that I did sort of just go along when we first started having sex. But now I .. I would like a bit more, you know... (giggles)."

Educator: "A bit hard to talk about with me here?"

Suzie: "It is, but there is something else too .. I feel less sexy you know? My tummy is floppy, my boobs are different. I told Gerard I felt funny about whether or not I still interested him. I've been thinking more about sex, missing the closeness."

Educator: "So having a baby has changed your appearance some, and you feel unsure if Gerard still finds you sexy? But you would like sex more often?"

Suzie: "It sounds like a kid on her second date, right? Does he still like me? But yeah I have an appetite, but I do avoid looking in the mirror."

Gerard: "When we spoke this week, I just said 'Do I find you sexy? Hell yeah', (Laughs) I've only be holding back cause I thought you weren't interested."

Educator: "Right, so talking made you both realize that Suzie was keen to have sex, at least some of the time, but she was worried you were less interested in her. And you were holding back because you worried she was not interested. And what effect do you think knowing that might have?"

Gerard: "I know what effect it had on Thursday morning." (laughs).

Educator: "Right" (smiles). "Suzie: what, if anything, would you like to say to Gerard about the effects of having the discussion together about sex?"

Suzie: "Our sex life has been good. I think me approaching Gerard sometimes, like Thursday, sometimes will be good for both of us. Next week I just might look for a chance to initiate, if Gerard behaves himself. I quite liked surprising him."

Of course not every self-change plan goes exactly as intended. Aaron's self-change plan outcome described below illustrates how there is usually some useful learning to be had even when plans go slightly awry.

- Educator: “Aaron, how did the self-change plan go?”
- Aaron: “Not quite as planned. I had this idea of like a really romantic evening. The baby was settled, I had cooked a nice meal – a curry, some wine, candles on the dinner table, soft music. I even bought some scented massage oil. I had thought it all out.”
- Educator: “Sounding good so far. Melissa?”
- Melissa: “Almost all of the planning was really good. The curry was hot, I mean really hot.”
- Educator: “So what happened?”
- Aaron: “Melissa was a sport, she tried to eat it. I like my curries hot, but man it even stopped me. She has this easily upset gut and felt pretty dreadful. Long story short, didn’t need the massage oil. She and I slept badly, then the baby woke early, and we both felt ragged.”
- Educator: “So Aaron you went to a lot of trouble, by the sound of it. What was good about what you did?”
- Aaron: “Not much really. Melissa has a cold, probably from missing out on sleep.”
- Educator: (gentle laughter) “He really tried so hard didn’t he Melissa?”
- Melissa: (Laughing) “Yeah he did. My smooth lover had it all beautifully planned, and now I am coughing and sneezing so bad he’s on the couch trying to get some sleep.”
- Educator: “So Melissa what did you like about Aaron’s plan?”
- Melissa: “It was the effort, that was the good thing. When we first met he was so romantic, but we’ve got busy and somehow...” (dabbing her eye with a tissue). “I miss being... like... romanced.”
- Aaron: “Babe, you know I love you. Maybe I’ll try again, but no curry.”
- Educator: “So, Aaron it seems that even though the evening was not as you planned, it meant a lot to Melissa that you went to the effort and tried a romantic evening.”

This passage illustrates a very important theme that occurs in many couples’ experience of doing Couple CARE for Parents. When people experience their partner genuinely making an effort to be loving, to be romantic, to be considerate, to listen more effectively, it makes them feel loved, it draws the two partners closer together. Imperfect effort is a world away from no effort at all.

## Managing Change

All couples will experience a range of changes during a lifetime together. Many of these changes require the couple to adapt their relationship to changed life circumstances. All the couples doing Couple CARE for Parents have just become parents, which is in itself a huge change. Further changes are likely as their child grows, perhaps as another baby comes along, parents change their paid work and child care arrangements, and so it goes.

Helping couples to manage the relationship effects of life change involves three steps. First, couples reflect on the common changes in couples’ lives, and the possible relationship effects of those changes. Second, the couple identifies life changes

**Table 8.1** Likely changes in our life together

Change	In 2 years?	In 10 years?
A partner returning to paid work after a break		
A partner changing to work more paid hours		
A partner changing to a different job		
More responsibility at work		
Change home within same city/area		
Change home to a new city/area		
A partner finishing a course or other training		
A partner starting a course or other training		
Birth of another child		
A relative needing special care		
Major purchase (e.g., home or business)		
A major change in social activities		
A major change in sporting activities		
A major change in artistic activities		
Other:		
Other:		

that are likely to occur for them in the next year or two, and the relationship effects of those changes. Finally, the couple is asked to develop a plan to maximize the positive gains, and reduce the negative effects, of those anticipated life changes.

The educator should introduce this activity at the end of Unit 5, saying something like the following “*In the last unit of Couple CARE for Parents you will be identifying one or two major life changes you might experience in the next year or two, the positive and negative effects of those changes and how you can plan to manage the effects these changes might have on your relationship. There are some good examples of common life changes for new parents listed in Table 8.1 and Table 8.2 is an illustration of how a couple might work through the three steps.*”

### **Clinical Connection**

What have been the most important changes in your life situation in the last 5 years? What positive and negative impacts have those changes had on your closest relationship? How might your experiences be used constructively in sessions you run with couples?

*“In the Table 8.2 example, Zi Huang and partner John are discussing Zi Huang’s return to part-time work after giving birth to their first child. You see how the couple first identifies the direct effects of the change. For example, the new job means more money and more hours committed to work, and having to work different times of day. Then the couple listed the possible impact of these changes on them, which included less time together, and a rebalancing of work and family commitments.*

**Table 8.2** Example of planning for change  
**Change:** *Zi Huang is returning to work half time next month*

1. Direct effects of change	2. Possible effects on our relationship	3. Our plan to deal with relationship effects
1. <i>Zi Huang will have less time to attend to cleaning and cooking</i>	1. <i>If Zi Huang kept doing all her current chores plus work she might feel resentful. John may find it hard to get used to doing more of the chores</i>	1. <i>We need to develop new routines for getting chores done. We need to agree on who does what. We need to talk this one through</i>
2. <i>We'll have more money</i>	2. <i>We'll be able to save or spend money differently</i>	2. <i>We could spend our money in lots of ways (e.g., save for a mortgage, get a cleaner to help with chores). We need to agree on our priorities and agree on a budget. Organize for cleaners to come in each week</i>
3. <i>Zi Huang will probably be more tired than now, she may need time to adjust to the demands of her new job</i>	3. <i>Zi Huang might feel the need for support from John</i>	3. <i>John will take care to have regular couple time to talk to Zi Huang</i>
4. <i>We will both be busier</i>	4. <i>Having less time to talk may result in us being more stressed with each other</i>	4. <i>Both of us to remember that this is a time of change and may be stressful at first. We need to have a regular date to have fun</i>
5. <i>We both are unsure how the baby will adjust to day care</i>	5. <i>If we are stressed about how little Nan is finding day care, we might be irritable with each other</i>	5. <i>We should visit the day care place again. Maybe have Nan do a few half days to get her used to the place, and see how we manage</i>

**Table 8.3** Planning for change handout

<b>Planning for change</b>		
Change (1): .....		
1. Direct effects of change	2. Possible effects on our relationship	3. Our plan to deal with relationship effects

Finally, the couple listed a plan to deal with the relationship effects of the change. Does the activity make sense?" (Table 8.3).

During the phone or video-conference debrief the educator’s aim is to assist couples have realistic and helpful plans for managing future change together effectively. The dialog below provides an example of how an educator helped Michael and Carol. Educator: “What change did you identify as possibly occurring in the next year or two?”

- Michael: “We chose to explore the effects of us swapping role. I am planning a year as a full time Dad. Carol stopped work a few years back, but next year she will go out and be the bread winner.”
- Educator: “Full time parenting, that does sound exciting. Michael, what did you list as the positive effects of that change?”
- Michael: “The reduction in pressure, I am a bit over my job to be honest. Having fun with Dan.”
- Educator: “Wonderful, wonderful. And what did you list as challenges in this change?”
- Michael: “None at all. No work stress, wondering what else I might do with my spare time in the couple of days he is in day care. Golf maybe?”
- Educator: “So it feels like it’s all upside, with no possible challenges?”
- Michael: “None that I can think of.”
- Educator: “Carol, what did you list as the positive and negative effects of this change?”
- Carol: “Well I love the idea of Mike having more time with Danny, that’s a positive effect, but I am not sure about day care for a couple of days - I think I see day care as a negative effect. Also, I have been out of the work force for a while and I never earned as much as Mike. I worry we will be short of money, so I listed possible money concerns as a negative effect. Also, looking after a child does take a lot of time. I am not sure Mike quite gets yet how much time it will take him so I listed another possible negative effect that Mike might find parenting stressful, overwhelming.”
- Educator: “So Carol you listed three challenges, and you both listed Mike’s opportunity to be with Dan as a positive. You want to realize your longtime dream of sharing parenthood. But it sounds like, for Carol at least, you need to be confident you have enough money to get by, you need to feel Mike understands what he is getting into – the demands of parenthood, and finally, you need to decide if you will use day care?” (Mike and Carol nod.) “Mike, what was it like to hear Carol list these three concerns about this change?”
- Mike: “Actually, I had been sort of thinking about the money one myself too – and the cost of day care, will we manage? But, I really want to spend more time with Dan – he’s growing up so fast.”
- Educator: “Uh huh... It’s important for you to have a chance to spend more time with Dan, and Carol agrees this is important. You both also agree that your change might lead to money worries. What did you write down as possible effects of this change on your relationship?”
- Carol: “I wrote that we would be closer because we would both understand and can talk about the day to day of parenting – Mike would learn more of what it is like and that shared conversation would be really great. I also, thought, though that the money worries might make us tense with each other- maybe we would argue more about what to spend money on – like day care?”
- Educator: “Yes, those are to important possible relationship outcomes. Mike what did you have down?”
- Mike: (pause)...“Nothing actually...I couldn’t think of any relationship effects at the time. What Carol says is good though – I agree those things could happen to us.”

The above discussion illustrates how a brief coaching intervention, in this case prompting the couple to talk through positive and negatives about a future change led the couple to openly talking through the challenges in their plan for Michael to spend more time being a father, both in terms of the direct effects of the change and the effects on their relationship. In reviewing this process with Michael and Carol, Michael commented that he had avoided talking about money and the cost of day care for Daniel because he was concerned that considering these issues might prevent the arrangement of him leaving work from happening. The planning activity with the coaching from the educator led the couple to discuss these concerns further resulting in one of the options to manage the effects being for Michael to consider a change of job and a move to part-time work.

### **Practice Tip**

When reviewing attempts to manage change, prompt the person to examine both positive and negative potential effects of the anticipated change. Someone conducting a thorough review of the likely effect of changes helps that person to develop better management plans.

In reviewing management of change it is important to recognize that flexibility is often needed. Couples with a new baby often find their plans have to be modified. For example, Maggie and Brian had a 6-month-old son, Sean. The couple had discussed adjusting to parenting a baby together. The educator reviewed the discussion with the couple as follows.

Educator: “What’s the issue you two were discussing?”

Maggie: “How hard it is to be parents in your late 30s. When I was expecting Amelia I planned to take a week or two maternity leave and then back to work. I love my work. But I had a 30 hour labor, and in the end needed a cesarean.”

Brian: “Poor Maggie was wiped out; she got a post-operative infection, and had to go back into hospital. Amelia still doesn’t sleep through the night.”

Educator: “It sounds like a much tougher journey than you anticipated.”

Brian: “Oh yeah. So we’re wondering how to get back in control.”

Educator: “What options did you come up with?”

Maggie: “Well Brian reckons we should ask the hospital if they ever take babies back.” (Laughs.) “Look we would never give little Milly back, but some days it feels like we’re drowning.”

Educator: “Having a young baby can be truly exhausting. I remember when my kids were really young, and our son had been sick. My wife and I had got no sleep for a couple of nights. I stumbled into the bathroom in the middle of the night and my wife was showering with a tracksuit on. The poor woman was so tired she had no idea what she was doing. About that time we asked her Mum to help us out for a few weeks. I am wondering what you have thought about?”

**Practice in Focus**

As educators gather more experience working with couples, you can share the wisdom you have gained about how different couples manage the challenges of parenthood. At the same time it is important to recognize a key component of giving good suggestions: timing. The educator has first to listen to the views of each partner, understand what the couple has already considered, and only then should a suggestion be offered.

Maggie and Brian were initially somewhat stuck with generating other options. But they recognized that they were not coping, and something needed to change. Maggie was working half-time, and was reluctant to cut back work any further. Eventually they resolved that Brian would ask his work to let him take some half-time leave, so he could give Maggie more time off from parenting. The best option for any couple varies according to their circumstances, but those who plan ahead tend to manage stressful life changes more effectively than those couples who do not plan. At the same time it is important for the educator to draw out the need for couples to modify their plans when the unexpected comes along.

**Preventing Couple Relationship Problems**

Sometimes couple relationships go wrong. The focus in Couple CARE for Parents is working with currently satisfied couples to help them sustain high relationship satisfaction. However, problems might develop in the future. It is important to assist the partners to think about early warning signs that a relationship is developing problems, and to do things early to prevent problems.

There are a couple of issues related to discussing potential future problems. First, many couples have unrealistically optimistic views of their future relationship satisfaction, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. One study found that over 90 % of recently married couples report that there is zero or close to zero probability that they will ever separate from their spouse (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996). Yet, we know that upwards of half of all marrying couples do divorce. The rates of breakup are even higher in cohabiting couples.

Clearly many couples have unrealistic illusions that there are guaranteed positive relationship outcomes. Often this romantic unreality is conveyed by comments like, “she is my soul mate, we will always love each other,” and, “from the moment we met I knew he was the one.” Couples with such positive illusions are sometimes resistant to considering the possibility that their relationship might encounter difficulties in the future. Due to this potential resistance to considering future relationship problems, the topic of how to manage emerging problems is not explicitly dealt with in Couple CARE for Parents until toward the end of the program. This is



intended to allow the major focus of the program to be on relationship enrichment during this major life transition, and leave addressing the potentially sensitive issue of preventing couple problems to when hopefully, the relationship between the educator and each couple is strong.

There are a few points worth making about the nature of couple relationship problems, and the risk of separation. The educator can summarize these briefly saying something like the following:

*“About 40% of married couples and about 60% of cohabiting couples separate. Doing Couple CARE for Parents is a really important step you have taken to strengthen your relationship, which reduces your risk of developing relationship problems. Another thing you can do is understand what leads to separations, how you can detect early warning signs of a deteriorating relationship, and what to do about it.”*

*“About half of all separations result from serious relationship problems. Violence, severe chronic arguments that get nasty, mental health problems like depression or alcohol abuse, and affairs. In Couple CARE for Parents we emphasize the idea of self-change, of each person taking responsibility for strengthening the relationship. But there are some behaviors that a partner might do that are unacceptable to you, but which you have little influence over. For example, when men are severely violent toward their female partner it seems to have little or nothing to do with her behavior. Rather, those men often have persistent long-established patterns of violence toward others. A woman who finds herself the victim of such violence might have few options within the relationship to alter the man’s behavior. Similarly, if your partner has a severe drinking or gambling problem, that could wreck things for both of you. If you have tried to get someone to change a real problem like that, and they refuse... Well, that is what divorce is for. Getting out of a bad relationship is a good idea.”*

*“However, half of divorces happen in couples that do not have high conflict, or obvious severe problems. It seems more like the relationship has lost its spark. When asked about why they divorced, these people say things like, “We just sort of grew apart. We stopped communicating. The magic had faded”. Now wanting a good relationship seems pretty reasonable. But divorcing someone because the relationship is a little jaded is a bit like finding your car is low on petrol and abandoning it at the side of the road. The car needs fuel, not to be abandoned.”*

The Unit 6 handout included as Table 8.4 asks partners to identify early warning signs of relationship deterioration and how they might deal with these. The debrief-

### **Practice Tip**

It is important to help couples distinguish between intolerable behaviors and potentially acceptable behaviors. Intolerable behaviors include things no one should have to experience, like violence or heavy drug or alcohol use. At the same time, no partner is ever like to do everything exactly as one might want and acceptance of the spouse’s shortcoming is needed for sustaining a relationship. Some examples of behaviors that can be annoying, but potentially are acceptable, are not always pulling their weight with certain chores, not expressing themselves clearly, and not expressing affection quite as you might like.

**Table 8.4** Early warning signs handout

Early warning sign	What I might do
Example: My partner and I are arguing a bit more than usual. This goes on for months	1. Revisit the program materials, refresh our conflict management skills 2. Look into relationship therapy

talking about a difficult issue on more than one occasion; (c) finding you tend to do the same things over and over, and that the fun is not really there; (d) the frequency of expressing love or caring has dropped away; (e) you have an argument and bad feelings persist; (f) you or your partner drop away from doing your fair share of the parenting or household chores; or (g) your interest or enjoyment of sex had declined.

### Clinical Connection

This list of warning signs might look familiar to the couples, as it summarizes failing to do some of the key things promoted in Couple CARE for Parents. What other warning signs might be useful to draw to couples' attention?

There are three issues that are useful to highlight after discussing early warning signs of a deteriorating relationship. First, problems often develop over a period of time. Second, addressing problems is most effective when it is done early in the development of the problem. Paying attention to the relationship and working to keep it strong is a vital investment in having a good life together. Third, talk with your partner about any issues that worry you and try to find things you personally can change to make things better. If the relationship does not improve from your own efforts, go for help and go early. Couple therapy is very effective when couples go with smaller problems that have recently developed. A couple tune-up is a very good investment. Couple therapy when there are long-standing and severe problems is worth a try, but it is less effective than going early.

It is important to conclude the review of prevention of relationship problems on a positive note. I often make the transition to a final review of the Couple CARE for Parents program with the following along the following lines:

*“We have focused on potential problems because we know problems can occur. If problems develop and you cannot resolve them yourself, then seeking help early gives you a good shot to turn things around. By being attentive to your relationship, using the skills you have learned through Couple CARE for Parents, you can reduce the chance that such problems will occur. So let’s turn to maintaining a relationship focus and continuing to apply what we have covered in Couple CARE for Parents.”*

## **Relationship Maintenance**

An introduction to the importance of relationship maintenance might go something like the following: *“Sustaining a relationship through the ups and downs of a long life together is not always easy. Nobody is kind, attentive, supportive and effective at communication all the time. What makes a real difference is putting in some effort from time to time. Perfect relationships do not exist. But truly wonderful relationships do. You have been working to make your relationship as good as you can, and the final activity or Couple CARE for Parents asked you to consider how you can sustain your relationship across the years.”*

### ***Celebrating the Couple Relationship***

Most couples develop rituals in which they celebrate their relationship together. Some couples have regular rituals such as a cup of tea together on a weekend morning, or a drink together early in the evening. There also might be less frequent rituals like a romantic dinner for their wedding anniversary, or a celebration of each other’s birthdays.

The idea of relationship rituals can be introduced by describing the idea in similar terms to those in the preceding paragraph. During the telephone or video-conference the educator can ask questions such as *“How do you currently celebrate your relationship? What did you list as the two new things you could each do in the future to celebrate your relationship?”* to explore when, where and how the couple currently celebrate their relationship, and what they plan to do in the future to keep celebrating their relationship. If the couple struggles to come up with ideas for celebrating their relationship the educator could ask them what they see other couples, family or friends doing. Or, if the couple is really struggling, the educator can offer the ideas listed in Table 8.5 and send it to the couple after the session.

### ***Maintaining Use of Relationship Skills***

After each unit of Couple CARE for Parents each partner is asked to reflect on what ideas they most liked from that unit, and to identify how they might apply the ideas they liked. The last exercise of the Couple CARE for Parents program is an attempt to draw together the learning from across the program, and help partners to identify what relationship skills they believe are most important for them to sustain. Table 8.6 lists the key relationship skills covered in the Couple CARE for Parents program. The educator can ask each person to rate the extent to which they feel they understand and could demonstrate that skill if asked. If a partner cannot remember a skill,

**Table 8.5** Couple relationship celebration rituals

Together assemble and look through photographs of important relationship events (e.g., holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, family gatherings)
Make a photo album about your child's life to date
A weekend at home together when you don't see anyone else, and do fun things together that are different to what you usually do
An in-home date (e.g., picnic in the back yard) where you make a special effort to do something that will be fun for your partner
Cook a special meal for your partner
Have a glass of wine or cup of tea together and catching up on the day's happenings
Plan fun time together, such as a holiday or special outing
Work on a fun project together (e.g., build something for your child)
Plan a special meal to celebrate a birthday or anniversary
Get out the diary and booking in a special couple activity
Get together with family to celebrate your relationship
Send a card to your partner telling them how you feel about them
Do a community service activity together

or misunderstands the skills then the educator can review the skill with the couple on the phone during the debriefing.

The educator should then ask each participant to identify three skills from Couple CARE for Parents that they want to keep doing. Some couples find it useful to specify a date and plan to review with their partner how they are maintaining key skills they recorded as useful to them. Most couples seem to prefer less structure, but still find the checklist useful to prompt their memory of what to include in their maintenance planning.

The educator might also ask some of the following questions: "*What is the most important thing you have learnt from doing Couple CARE for Parents? What is one thing you want to continue to do to enhance your couple relationship?*" A core message for participants is that the Couple CARE for Parents is just one more step in their relationship together. What matters is that the partners each take responsibility for nurturing and sustaining their relationship. For example, if the couple has a disagreement, this can cue one or both partners to review how they manage differences, and to develop a self-change plan to help them manage conflict more effectively. Similarly, if either partner is feeling the need to express more caring, or be more supportive of their partner, then they can develop a self-change plan to address that identified relationship need.

We usually conclude the final session by asking the couple "*Are there any other questions or comments either of you have about what we have covered across the whole program?*" Finally, we suggest that the handouts provided are a useful resource of the couple, particularly the checklist summarizing the skills covered in the program. We encourage the couple to refer back to this list from time to time to generate ideas on how they can continue to enhance their relationship.

**Table 8.6** Key skills covered in couple care for parents

Skills	Do I know?	Important?	My pick(s)
<b>Parenting</b>			
Shared and realistic expectations about infant care			
Realistic shared expectations of parenting			
Identify and address support needs			
<b>Communication</b>			
Describe specifics			
Express positives			
Assert negatives clearly and politely			
Self-disclose feelings			
Pay attention			
Show you are listening			
Summarize content			
Paraphrase feelings			
Ask questions			
Hear your partner out			
Give feedback constructively			
<b>Stress management</b>			
Describe specifics			
Express preferences			
<b>Conflict resolution</b>			
Describe specifics			
<b>Caring and sex</b>			
Prompt self-reflection and partner feedback on expressions of caring			
Express preferences			
Challenge unhelpful self-talk about sexuality			
Balance responsibility for initiating			
<b>Looking ahead</b>			
Plan for change			
Monitor for early warning signs, discuss any issues			
Respond to early warning signs of problems			
Celebrate the relationship			

## Some Final Comments

The couple has now completed their final session. Hopefully at this point each partner has a broad understanding of the diverse influences on their relationship, and a shared vision of the sort of relationship they want together. This knowledge, combined with the capacity to work effectively on their relationship with self-change, empowers each partner to nurture their relationship. When a couple completes

relationship education neither they nor we can know the long-term fate of their relationship. Relationship education is only one influence on their relationship future. The couple may face severe future stresses that undermine their relationship. If that is the case, then hopefully our program better prepares them to recognize early the warning signs of problems, and that they take steps to improve the relationship. Couples often find that the effort each extends to succor their relationship, and their collective ability to support each other, enriches their individual and shared fates.

As professionals we, the authors, have seen the support and joy partners feel when their relationship goes well, and also have seen and felt the suffering of clients and friends when relationships come to painful ends. When our time as professionals with a couple comes to an end, we hope that this couple will experience the joy of truly loving, and being loved by, their partner. The work you do as a health professional, and as a couple relationship educator, is an important contribution toward helping more couples achieve lasting, loving relationships. Thank you for the service you provide to couples. We hope the ideas in this book will assist you in this important work.