



TWOgether Pittsburgh: Educating couples to help keep them together

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Jackson Brown, Jr., author of the bestselling *Life's Little Instruction Book* also created his "21 Suggestions for Success."

Topping the list of suggestions is: Marry the right person. This one decision will determine 90 percent of your happiness or misery.

It is staggering that Brown places so much emphasis on this one decision. But when one considers how much misery and heartache dysfunctional relationships and divorce cause to not only the couple, but also their children, extended family and society at large, Brown seems spot-on in his advice.

So how does one marry the right person? Well ... one means of assistance is through education and programs such as TWOgether Pittsburgh.

TWOgether Pittsburgh grew out of a coalition that formed in 2002 that included Family Guidance, Inc., as the lead agency, the Center for Urban Biblical Ministry, the National Fatherhood Initiative, the Women's Center and Shelter of Greater Pittsburgh, Smith Brothers Advertising, and a team of evaluators led by Dr. Stanley Denton.

In 2004, this coalition received a federal grant enabling the group to form The Marriage Works, which was the forerunner of TWOgether Pittsburgh. TWOgether Pittsburgh is a five-year, federally funded project and a recipient of \$8.35 million grant administered through the government's Healthy Marriage Initiative.

Dr. Terry Mann is the project's director and says that despite what the alarming divorce rate and the explosion of couples choosing to live together may indicate, marriage is essentially hard-wired into humans. "No matter what people may say or do, people want to be in a relationship. People want marriage. We're not designed to be alone," Mann said.

Statistics reveal just how strong the desire to be in a relationship is. According to a 2002 U.S.

Census Bureau report, nearly 9 out of 10 Americans will marry sometime during their life. Sadly, too many of those marriages end in divorce. However, the divorce rate is not as bleak as is often reported. The statistic that 50 percent of marriages end in divorce is a fallacy. More in-depth study shows that the divorce rate is somewhere between 25 and 35 percent – still too high but better than what is believed.

The statistics one seldom hears is how good marriage is for individuals, families and society. TWOgether Pittsburgh has compiled some astonishing statistics that illustrate this fact. Forty percent of married people said they are very happy with their life in general, compared to just under a quarter of those who are single or cohabiting. Married people are one-third as likely to commit suicide as widowed or divorced people. Married men and women report less depression, less anxiety and lower levels of other types of psychological distress than do those who are single, divorced or widowed.

Marriage also has positive effects on the bottom-line. On the verge of retirement, the typical married couple had accumulated about \$410,000 (or \$205,000 per person), compared to about \$167,000 for the never-married, just under \$154,000 for the divorced, about \$151,000 for the widowed, and just under \$96,000 for the separated.

TWOgether Pittsburgh's mission is to prepare individuals for marriage and to strengthen existing marriages. "We are not a matchmaking service, and we don't provide marriage counseling," Mann said. "What we do is marriage and relationship education."

The project seeks to accomplish this mission by offering programs that help to educate individuals before they make the trip down the aisle and for those who are already married by offering an array of programs such as Marriage Preparation, Marriage Enrichment, Marriage Mentoring, Marriage Sustainers, and they even offer a program that emphasizes Healthy Relationships for Teens.

The Marriage Preparation program helps singles interested in someday getting married and couples planning to marry to develop skills that contribute directly to healthy, fulfilling marital relationships. The "How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk" program equips singles with the information, education and skills necessary to make informed relationship decisions. "One of the areas we focus on is pacing in a relationship," said Jennifer Westgren, director of the Marriage Preparation Program. "The program explores how people can become attached to another yet still protect themselves in the process." Through self-assessment and observing another's other relationships with co-workers, family and friends, one can often make better decisions when entering into a relationship. "I had one woman tell me after attending some of the sessions that, 'I really have to wonder if I'm the jerk,'" Westgren said. The program is conducted in a workshop environment. "Everyone has a great time," Westgren said.

The Marriage Enrichment Program addresses relationships that are pretty good but could be better. There are two different components – one for couples only and one for parents. For parents there are even programs that address fatherhood and step-parenting.

"TWOgether Pittsburgh gives parents a chance to take time to work on their marriage, which is the foundation of the family. And family is the foundation of our society," said Ken MacLeod, director, Parenting TWOgether Program.

Marriage Mentoring is the relationship building aspect of TWOgether Pittsburgh. Couples who have been married seven years or more and have experienced a healthy marriage are paired with couples who are newly married or want to delve into issues related to one of the transition phases of the marriage relationship.

Couples meet on a regular schedule for six months in a relaxed atmosphere as they develop a friendship and share their marriage experiences. A curriculum entitled Marriage Mentoring: Twelve Conversations for Building Strong Marriages provides the framework for these conversations. Topics discussed include thankfulness, showing appreciation, in-law relationships, recreation, finances, communication, problem solving, balancing roles, children, intimacy, celebrations and planning for the future.

Marriage Sustainers is a program specifically designed to assist those couples who may be experiencing the normal stresses of marriage, but are having difficulty working through the stress. While participating in Marriage Sustainers, couples learn and practice the skills that increase the likelihood of a happier and healthier marital relationship.

Marriage Sustainers participants Paulette and Monroe Banks said this of the program: "It's helped me to realize that all the time the blame is not on who you think it's on, and helped me to take ownership for my part of it."

All of the programs take place at various locations throughout the area and most last six to eight weeks. Several of the programs have an Intensive option, which takes place over a weekend.

TWOgether Pittsburgh takes regular assessments of the program. "All the feedback shows that TWOgether Pittsburgh is making a difference," Mann said. Divorce rates are dropping; however, Western Pennsylvania's isn't declining. "Indicators attribute it to economic reasons. The lack of economic growth in this area puts stress on a marriage," Mann said.

"Since the project is federally funded, it must adhere to three guidelines," Mann explained. "The first is we cannot use funds for worship. The second is that we cannot proselytize, and finally we must see to it that the program is open to everyone."

So if you're thinking of tying the knot, have tied it or have gotten your marriage into a nasty tangle, TWOgether Pittsburgh can help you to realize the relationship that you've always imagined.

For more information, visit TWOgether Pittsburgh's website at www.twogetherpgh.org, call 1-888-WED-4EVR or e-mail them at information@TWOgetherPGH.org. All information is confidential.