

Strength At Home Couples Program

The Strength at Home Couples program is designed to enhance intimate relationships and prevent relationship conflict/aggression among service members and their partners. Strength at Home is tailored to military populations and thus emphasizes the unique stressors associated with deployment and warzone exposure. The intervention is intended to help participants develop effective conflict resolution skills, increase intimacy and closeness in their relationships, and improve communication with one another. The group follows a closed-group format involving weekly 2-hour sessions. Each session contains brief instructional material, group activities to discuss, learn, and practice new behaviors, and flexible time to solve ongoing problems, explore change efforts, and build group cohesion.

Session 1: Introduction and Welcoming

This session introduces couples to the structure, expectations, and philosophy of the group. After initial introductions, the group leaders give participants insight into the rationale and goals for the group, explain the importance of practice assignments, and answer questions about the group. The main clinical tasks are to begin establishing a working alliance with each couple, to validate and address participants' concerns and reservations about counseling, and to model and encourage healthy group interactions. In addition, group leaders teach participants the skill of paraphrasing, which is the foundation of active listening. Group leaders will refer to this skill and encourage participants to use it throughout the program.

Session 2: Trauma and Relationships I

Group members explore their beliefs about healthy and unhealthy relationships and review assignments designed to enhance intimacy and solidify mutual treatment goals. The session then shifts to discussing psychoeducational material that focuses on understanding forms of partner abuse and the impact of trauma on couples' relationship functioning. The main clinical tasks of the session are to enhance motivation, educate group members about symptoms of PTSD, and help members gain insight into the effects of trauma and specific PTSD symptoms on their own relationship.

Session 3: Trauma and Relationships II

This session begins with a discussion of the practice assignment focusing on understanding how trauma has affected the couples' relationship. The group discussion then shifts to several themes related to trauma that can affect relationships, including trust, power and control, self- and other-esteem, and intimacy. Group material facilitates further contemplation of behavior change and treatment goals, building upon psychoeducational material from Session 2.

Session 4: Conflict Management I: Assertiveness

This session focuses on conflict management and expressing anger assertively, with some material focused on how conflict management styles were learned in the military and elsewhere. The clinical goals of this session are to continue to facilitate an understanding of the impact of trauma on relationships (and conflict management styles in particular), and to help group members identify positive (i.e., assertive) versus potentially harmful (i.e., aggressive, passive) communication styles during conflict.

Session 5: Conflict Management II: Time Outs

Group members review the self-monitoring assignment designed to assess group members' assertive, passive, and aggressive responses to conflict situations. The group discussion then focuses on developing strategies to deescalate conflict situations. Couples are asked to generate and put into practice a detailed "Time Out Plan" to use during potential conflict situations. The development of these plans is an important crisis management tool that helps ensure safety for the couple, and provides a skill that helps to lay the groundwork for future work on communication.

Session 6: Communication Skills I: Active Listening

This session begins with a discussion of the Time Outs and self-monitoring practice assignments. The focus then shifts to discussing aspects of good and bad communication. Active listening skills are emphasized in this session because they are the foundation of good communication and are critical for de-escalating conflict and enhancing intimacy. Listening skills are particularly important when significant trauma symptoms are present in one or both members of the couple, because information processing abilities are often compromised by emotional arousal.

Session 7: Communication Skills II: Assertive Messages

After reviewing group members' communication self-monitoring forms, group discussion focuses on how to give an assertive message. Next, group members are introduced to a scripted role play depicting both assertive messages and active listening. They then practice these skills in session. The continued focus on enhanced communication skills is intended to reduce the negative impact that deployments and trauma may have on communication, and to further the development of intimacy, improve relationship problem solving, and facilitate the sharing of trauma-related material.

Session 8: Communication Skills III: Expressing Feelings

Group members review their communication self-monitoring forms and the assertive messages and active listening practice assignment. Group material then focuses on how trauma-related avoidance can lead to difficulties expressing emotions in relationships. Strategies for expressing feelings are provided, and couples are given an opportunity to practice these expression skills during the session. Emotional expression skills are important for enhancing intimacy and understanding among couples.

Session 9: Communication Skills IV: Common Communication Traps

After discussing the communication and feelings expression self-monitoring assignments, group material focuses on five communication traps that undermine assertive communication. These traps are particularly important for those experiencing deployments and trauma. Strategies to avoid these common communication traps and to cope productively when they arise are introduced and discussed.

Session 10: Reviewing Treatment Gains and Planning for Future

After discussing the emotional expression practice assignment, group members explore gains made in the group. They identify goals and strategies for future change along with barriers to change and strategies to overcome these barriers. Much of the session is spent discussing thoughts and feelings about the group ending, exploring plans for future change, and saying goodbye. The primary clinical tasks of the session are to help group members develop a realistic appraisal of changes made and to help group members identify areas needing continued attention and strategies for continuing this work after the group ends.