

Should we have a National Strategy to Bolster the State of Matrimony - And/Or Happy Lasting Partnerships ?

For CSLP-ICP – Conference on Happiness and Public Policy.

Introduction:

The research is clear. The quality and stability of couple and family relationships are hands down the most powerful predictors of individual health and resilience, and life satisfaction. At best, our closest relationships give us a sense of security – a safety net that is essential for wellbeing and are a potent source of joy and meaning in themselves. These relationships are also the basic building blocks of any functional society. Part of good government is then to find ways to promote healthy, stable adult partnerships and healthy stable families. The governments of other developed nations, Britain, Australia, the USA for example certainly think believe this and are acting on this belief.

Maybe this idea sounds like a cliché? After all, what is a healthy marriage – a healthy family? Do we really know HOW to promote happy, strong, supportive family relationships? Isn't this the field of Hallmark Cards and cheap romance novels?

At the beginning of the 21st century, I can tell you that social scientists now know exactly how vital strong couple bonds/families are and we know what matters in family relationships – the factors that define those relationships and the incredible power of the neural duet between family members. We are finally cracking the code of love and bonding and understanding how family members impact each other's nervous systems, brain activation, coping strategies and ability to shape their environment.

Most important of all, we now know an enormous amount about how these relationships go wrong and how to put them right. We know how to foster positive, secure, lasting couple relationships and strong, functional families. The question is, what do we, as Canadians do with this new understanding?

First of all, we need to be clear that we are talking about something very powerful here. We are mammals, born to bond with others.

In the last 15 years, scientists have finally started studying the simple things of everyday life – intimate conversations, facial expressions, how we connect with others, how empathy is triggered, trust is

learned and what exactly a “hurt” feeling is. This new science is telling us clearly that for adults, strong stable attachment relationships are the most powerful predictor of mental and physical health and that for children, specific kinds of stable loving bonds with others are truly essential. In fact, for infants, a steady diet of responsive attuned interactions is essential for certain parts of the brain to grow and develop at all!

Let me just give you a taste of this new science:

- > Emotionally isolated individuals are 3 times more likely to suffer heart attacks and strokes. This is a “stunning effect” (Hawkley 2006). One of the best predictors of recovery from heart attack is the quality of your closest relationship, it is as important here as the severity of the attack.
- > Lack of emotional connection is more lethal than smoking, being overweight, or lack of exercise (House et al., 1988).
- > In terms of mental health, you are 3 times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety disorders if you are not in a loving relationship (Whisman, 2006). And in spite of their affluence, North American nations are suffering from an “epidemic” (Twenge, 2000) of anxiety and depression. In 2007, 30 million prescriptions for antidepressants were written in Canada. This kind of prescription rose 64% between the years 1996 and 2000.

The message here is that emotional isolation and negative relationships are DANGEROUS for each one of us and for society as a whole. Human beings are built to live in socially monogamous partnerships and develop and grow within close family bonds. This is a key if not the key factor in our “design specifications”. We are wired for connection.

On the positive, side- loving bonds create resilience and well-being even in the face of stress. Securely attached survivors of 9/11 were healthy 18 months later, while less connected survivors suffered from significant depression and post traumatic stress disorders (Fraley, 2006).

For just this reason, the US military, who used to say “if you needed a wife, the army would have issued you one”, is now recognizing that military marriages and families are important and must be supported if you want resilient fighting men. As a result they have asked professionals such as myself to design programs for post-deployment military couples. In Canada, new Operational Stress Injury clinics just set up across the country are including couple interventions in their treatment plans.

A snapshot of this new science can be seen in one study by my colleague, Jim Coan. A woman lies in an MRI machine and is told that when an X appears in front of her face there is a 30% chance she will feel an electric shock on her feet. When she is alone in the machine and she sees the X, her brain lights up like a Christmas tree- it goes into alarm and if you ask her if the shock hurts, she tells you indeed it does. If a stranger holds her hand, her brain lights up a little less and she feels that pain of the shock a little less. When her husband, who in this case she is securely bonded and happy with, holds her hand, her brain does not light up in the same way and she tells you that the shock is merely uncomfortable. This evidence, that contact comfort with a loved one changes the way the brain encodes threat and responds to it, is directly proportional to how happy the woman's relationship is with her husband.

Emotional signals from those we depend on are the hidden regulators of our emotions – our physiological realities. They turn on oxytocin, the cuddle hormone that creates calm and well-being. Swiss pharmaceutical companies have actually made oxytocin into a nasal spray. In fact, they offered this to me for my research. My reply was that we now know how to shape the interactions that trigger oxytocin naturally, so we do not need their spray. Our closest relationships define how we perceive our world, especially the safety of that world, and so how we engage with this world.

Most of the research above is about couple relationships. In terms of family life, the research is also clear. Happier, securely bonded couples are better parents. They are less depressed and more responsive and empathic and offer more consistent discipline and support to their children, and their children do better on almost every indicator of health, wellbeing and achievement.

Now let's get a little more specific. In 2010, what is the state of Canadian marriage and family life?

In Canada, 38% of couples divorce (rates are higher in Quebec, as high as the US, 47-48%). These rates, of course, do not capture break-up among cohabiting couples. And they do not capture the negative impact of those couples who stay together in spite of significant and ongoing distress. The average age of divorce is early 40's, a key time when children are learning to be adults. Key researchers estimate (Amato et al 2007) that children who live with two married biological parents are now in a minority and that only one third of NA marriages are both happy and intact after 16 years (Glenn, 1998).

In Canada, 30% of children experience dissolution of their parent's marriage by age 15. Often divorce means that the children lose their father (25% of non-custodial fathers only visit their children

irregularly). Divorce also increases the risk of depression and poverty for a large proportion of women and their children. On average, single parents who are poor have an income that is 40% below the poverty line. This is “dire poverty” (Ambert, 2009, York University report on Divorce). In Canada 35% of all female lone-parent families live in poverty.

Children of divorced parents have more problems at school, lower academic achievement, and more issues with delinquency and crime. An American study found that whereas 10% of children from intact homes receive some form of mental health treatment, at least 25% of children from divorced homes receive such treatment. Girls with divorced parents are at particularly high risk for developing depressive symptoms during adolescence.

Family fragmentation is EXPENSIVE! Overall, across American society the estimate for social services burden is \$30,000 per divorce. A British think tank (Breakdown Britain report) recently estimated the cost of relationship breakdown to the public purse at \$20 billion per annum – and a White Paper on Mental Health noted that prevention in this area made ultimate sense – even in bad economic times. The costs to society of family fragmentation are clear in terms of health costs for parents and children, welfare costs, justice system costs and loss of productivity on the part of affected adults and older children.

If the family cannot provide a safety net, then society has to take up the slack and deal with the problems that the loss of this net creates. If the family is dysfunctional, society ends up paying the bill.

But, as I stated before, the problem here is not just about divorce. Many couples are just generally and chronically distressed and in conflict and we now know the disastrous effects of parental conflict on children. Few family problems predict poor adjustment in kids as clearly as angry exchanges between spouses do. Between 40-50% of children exposed to marital violence evidence extreme behavior problems, and this is exacerbated when family stress is high (Cummings & David, 2010). In fact, kids who witness domestic violence are as traumatized and have as many developmental problems as kids who have been actually physically abused by their parents (Kitzmann, 2003).

The main message of the last 20 years of research on families is that overt hostility between parents predicts child behavior problems. Hostile critical exchanges between unhappy parents and between them and their children predicts relapse into every known mental health problem – including schizophrenia. (As an aside point - Hostile exchanges between partners also routinely undermine the impact of individual treatment for everything from depression to alcoholism. If you want your

individualized treatments for depression to last, you had better know how to involve a client's partner. Without the support and involvement of a partner, the client will relapse and the clients or the Federal Governments tax dollars will be wasted.)

The Take Home Message here? - Scientific evidence is overwhelming. Children need an environment that offers stability, affection and a felt sense of emotional security to grow, learn to regulate their own emotions, move into the world with confidence and shape a healthy society. We also need to listen to our citizens who tell us clearly in survey research that a stable loving relationship is their number one life-goal – ahead of career or financial achievement.

In light of the above, it is clear that we need a national awareness and policy framework to promote the positive close relationships that citizens of all ages can depend on for health and happiness.

So where are we then in terms of being able to address these issues?

Canada, as far as I know, is the only, I repeat, the only developed nation that has no National Initiative/Strategy/Institute of any kind to promote healthy couples and families. In fact, the only associations that have the words “National” and “Family” in their titles here in the nation's capital are one research organization (IMFC) and two anti-gay marriage organizations! This is bizarre.

In contrast, in some US states, your marriage license now costs you less if you enroll for a basic marriage education course, and there are easily accessible programs for low income couples to learn relationship and parenting skills. This makes good economic sense, in terms of the costs to individuals and to society. This makes good economic sense in terms of avoiding “expensive” and tragic problems such as child and partner abuse. We have not even begun to grapple with these issues.

This is even more ironic when you consider that we now have a growing science of love and bonding. *We have the tools to make a difference* and Canada has great resources and expertise in this area. The work at my Institute and at the University of Ottawa are an example of this expertise. Using an approach called EFT, we obtain the best outcome results in the field of couple therapy and our results are stable; there is no evidence of relapse even with “at risk for divorce” couples such as the martially distressed couples of chronically ill children at CHEO or with couples who have deep emotional injuries to deal with, such as affairs. In our research we show 70-75% recovery rate from relationship distress, and significant increases in positive factors such as trust and intimacy, as well as decreases in depression

and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. We have designed a very successful post-deployment couple program for the US Army Chaplains office to help to address family breakdown, soldier PTSD and suicide and we are in the process of creating an educational program for heart attack patients and their spouses that we hope one day will be routinely offered in Canadian hospitals. Canada also has a body of skilled professionals, psychologists and marital and family therapists - mental health professionals who are extensively trained in fostering healthy partnerships and families.

If we had a national policy making body to focus and co-ordinate our efforts, I believe that we could promote stable families at very little cost. Following the lead of sister nations such as Australia and Britain such a body could:

>Develop a clearinghouse for research and policy proposals for Canada as a whole. Issues such as tax benefits can be considered here, as well as key topics such as parental leave. Most industrial democracies offer an average of 10 months paid leave. Scandinavians offer 18 months. This makes sense in light of the fact that attention and affection levels offered by parents impact health resilience and happiness in a child decades later.

>Create relationship education programs in schools and for adults. For adults, such programs can be delivered over the web with consultation by phone. For 2.5 million dollars, the Australians have created a DVD and a Guidebook that couples can use in a self-directed manner (Halford – Couple Care). Pre-marital programs, relationship check-ups and referral information and advice on key family transitions such as parenthood and empty nest can be offered.

>Develop subsidized easily accessible counseling programs. The UK institution Relate is a good example of this. Relate offers a free service on the web for teens affected by parents relationship problems. One of the aims here is to reduce rising teenage suicide rates.

> Shape the systematic national training of professionals in efficient treatment interventions. Such programs are a growing part of a system of integrated medicine – most treatments (whether they are for cancer, depression or addiction) work better when partners and families are involved and supportive.

> Set up systematic national research projects for at risk families. The Minnesota Family Investment Program is a good example of this kind of project. It targeted poor families and has been shown to have cut divorce rates substantially, reduced domestic violence and improved school performance for kids.

Conclusion

Long term bonds between partners are not just strictly private relationships between two individuals. The quality of these relationships affects us all and shapes the nature of our society. As a British government report (Fractured Families) notes, “Committed relationships are essential for the community and the country.”

The institution of marriage is changing. Less folks getting married and there is a marked rise in lone parent families; yet we aspire to marriage – to long-term bonds and we count on them for our health and happiness. It is important to remember that we no longer live in small villages supported by the people we grew up with. Surveys tell us that, in general, we live more and more isolated lives. Social capital (Putnam, 2000) has plummeted in NA. We depend on our families more than ever and our families are more fragile than ever! As David Cameron, the British Prime Minister has suggested, we need to create more “family friendly” societies.

An Australian colleague (Susanne Abuse) associated with Relationships Australia said to me just last week, “But Canada must have a national relationships organization?” I told her “NO”. She replied, “How very strange!”

Canada MUST have a national relationship organization – a national strategy – a coherent policy. Couple and family relationships are just too important to leave to chance. Strong bonded relationships are really the only way to make any country “strong and free” and its citizens truly productive and “happy”.

Thank you for your attention.

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