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# A Multi-Method Initial Effectiveness Pilot Study of an Electronic Relationship Education Program with Couple Coaching for the National Guard

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## Abstract

This study documents the effectiveness of the electronic Prevention and Relationship Education Program (ePREP) with couple coaching in a cohort of currently serving National Guard service members and their significant others from a Midwest state during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing a multi-methods design, pre to post-test findings indicated that couples improved in communication skills and worry for both men and women, and that women had improved depression and alcohol use behaviors. Qualitative findings indicate concurrence with the quantitative findings as overall satisfaction with the online program.

## Introduction

Since the unveiling of the 82 recommendations made by the Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, the Department of Defense (2021) has started to focus more on the primary prevention of harm than in previous years. This change in focus resulted from issues that continued to abound in the military despite numerous efforts to curb incidence rates. Problematic behavior—such as suicide and sexual assault—persists within military populations, including the National Guard (e.g., Defense Suicide Prevention Office, 2023; Department of Defense, 2024). By shifting to a public health primary violence prevention model that focuses on preventing harm before it occurs, the Department has considered prevention efforts (i.e., programs, policies, and practices) that demonstrate effectiveness in reducing harm in the future. In this article we address one such effort, the evaluation of the electronic Prevention and Relationship Education Program (ePREP) with couple coaching, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a cohort of National Guard members and their committed partners in a Midwest state.

## Unique Needs of National Guard Couples

Within the current context, the operational tempo of the National Guard continues to be high. Since the end of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, states and the federal government have called upon the National Guard for several other missions, including tours to the Middle East, operations in support of COVID-19, missions to

support natural disaster relief, and missions in response to civil unrest. These missions help the National Guard fulfill its mission of serving both community and country (Griffith, 2022). Given the continued demands placed upon the National Guard, service members and their families have seen unprecedented negative outcomes ranging from increases in mental health rates, substance use, comorbidity, relationship distress, and suicidality, among others (Kennedy, 2023).

According to multiple sources, service members belonging to the Reserve Component (RC; both the National Guard and Reserves) may be at increased risk for psychological distress when compared to their Active Duty (AD) counterparts (Cohen et al., 2015; Gorman et al., 2011). For all components (RC and AD) service members who either attempted suicide or died by suicide, the most common stressor identified was a failed relationship within the past year (Defense Suicide Prevention Office, 2023). Further research finds that, in National Guard populations, intimate relationships can buffer suicidality when service members have a mental health condition post deployment (Blow et al., 2019).

Researchers partially attribute this high level of distress experience by the RC to a lack of support found within the communities in which RC service members live. For example, Tanielian et al. (2014) found that only about 13% of mental health providers in civilian communities across the U.S. have the military cultural competency and evidence-based training to serve military-connected families effectively. This lack in military cultural competency and evidence-based practice dramatically decreases the further respondents live from a Veterans Affairs facility or AD installation. With the continued high operational tempo of the National Guard and its effects upon member wellbeing, members of the National Guard and their families can benefit from on-going and increased support to deal with their unique needs and additional stressors. This study reports on the initial efficacy of an only relationship education program.

## Relationship Education as Primary Prevention

Relationship education (RE) programs are one mechanism of impacting relationship health and individual mental health. Recent analyses of RE find that programs can be effective but that effectiveness varies based on many fac-

tors (e.g., duration, dosing, and participant acceptability; Markman et al., 2022). A long-standing critique of RE programs is that they lack diversity in both creators and participants, though the past decade has brought more diversity to program participants including military couples with demonstrated effectiveness across multiple domains of wellness (Markman et al., 2022).

A few different RE programs have been empirically tested within military populations. The most well-researched program, Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), has been studied multiple times within AD military couples over the past two decades. Studies find that PREP implemented with military couples can be useful in increasing relationship satisfaction, marital quality, communication skills, confidence in longevity of the couple relationship, anger management skills, and positive bonding, while reducing divorce or relationship dissolution (Allen et al., 2017).

Another program, Essential Life Skills for Military Families, helps couples learn relationship skills and build financial preparedness (Carroll et al., 2013). In interviews, couples who attended this program reported that they learned more about each other, received instruction in dealing with conflict, and learned about healthy communication. Additionally, the Marriage Checkup was tailored for military couples and underwent pilot study testing. Results indicate that couples' relationship satisfaction and intimacy improved when compared to pre-intervention assessment (Cordova et al., 2017). A larger study on Our Relationship and ePREP, both online programs, included 90 military couples and found that, compared to civilians, military couples were less likely to complete the program and that relationship satisfaction, conflict, emotional support, and breakup potential all significantly improved post-treatment and that these gains were maintained at follow-up, though intimate partner violence and individual functioning did not improve (Georgia Salivar et al., 2020). In Australia, Couple CARE in Uniform, a military adaptation of the Couple CARE program, helped to improve relationship satisfaction and communication in couples, though the active control group in the pilot randomized control trial had similar outcomes (Bakhurst et al., 2017). Although both groups improved, couples reported greater satisfaction with the Couple CARE in Uniform than the control.

Though studies have been conducted on military couples across multiple RE programs, only one of these studies has included NG or RC populations (see Carroll et al., 2013). It is important to include these reserve service members in studies given some of the unique challenges they face in their daily lives.

## Overview of ePREP

Braithwaite and Fincham (2009) adapted the PREP curriculum for use online in an attempt to reach premarital college age couples. The intent of ePREP was to help couples establish safety, effective communication, and problem-solving within their relationships. The final version con-

sisted of six modules lasting approximately one hour each. In addition to the core four modules of safety, three keys to success, decide don't slide, and doing your part, these authors added in XYZ statements, the Problem-Solving Model, and Commitment. Over time, these same authors started to explore a hybrid version of ePREP which included couple coaching. In couple coaching, participants complete an online module on their own then meet with a coach to review the content and practice the skills. In a recent large-scale RCT of this hybrid model with people two times below the poverty level, Roddy and colleagues (2020) found that gains from completing this program were similar to, if not greater than the improvements realized in the traditional in-person delivery.

Building on these findings was a key component of the current study because ePREP has not been evaluated within the military or RC. Given findings that ePREP with and without coaching improves relationship and psychological health, it was expected that, with minor editing of the coaching script to align with military language we would uncover these same findings in a cohort of NG service members.

## Couple Coaching

Couple coaching is the process of a couple meeting with a third party who is trained in coaching to review and practice content and skills learned through self-study or other means. Unlike traditional therapy, coaching is more direct and does not require the coach to have a mental health license. The intent of coaching is to enhance the effects attributed to the curriculum content. A recent meta-analysis of family coaching suggests that family coaching improves behavioral outcomes, improves the long-term gains from the intervention, and helps diminish stigma associated with receiving care (Rotheram-Borus et al., 2018). When couple coaching was included in the ePREP curriculum, gains from the intervention appeared to be greater than those of the intervention alone (Roddy et al., 2020).

## Hypotheses and Research Questions

The following research questions guided this research study.

1. Is ePREP + Coaching effective in strengthening RC couple relationships in a sample of National Guard couples?

H1. ePREP + coaching, will lead to positive increases in relationship satisfaction for both service members and their partners in the area of communication, relationship satisfaction, sexual intimacy, and decrease break-up potential;

2. Is ePREP + Coaching effective in decreasing psychological problems in a sample of National Guard couples?

H2. ePREP + coaching, will lead to improved psychological health for both service members and their part-

ners in the areas of depression, post-traumatic stress, alcohol use, and suicidality.

3. What is the feasibility of conducting online relationship education for National Guard connected couples?
  - a. What motivated RC members to enroll in and complete the program?
  - b. What were participants' experiences of a computer-based relationship education program?
  - c. What barriers did participants face when engaging in online relationship education?
4. How did participants view the curriculum?
  - a. Was the curriculum acceptable for military couple participants?
  - b. Did the curriculum meet their needs?
5. What were participants' views on couple coaching?

## Method

### Research Design

Employing a multi-methods design, the team evaluated how completing ePREP with coaching improves relationship and psychological health, in a cohort of National Guard members and their committed partners (i.e., married, engaged, or cohabitating). We also evaluated participants' experiences of the program to determine fit and overall satisfaction with the model. Multi-methods design is well suited for an initial efficacy trial because it provides a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study by both describing and explaining. Such designs collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data, then merge findings to uncover areas of convergence and divergence which would remain unknown if only one method were used (Creswell, 2015).

### Study Procedures

Convenience sampling methods were used to recruit couples with at least one member currently serving within the National Guard. The research team recruited couples via internal listserv emails for a Midwest State National Guard, word of mouth, and social media posts prior to the training. Commanders, First Sergeants, Readiness Non-Commissioned Officers, Chaplains, and Religious Affairs Specialists were also asked to spread the word to their respective units during drill periods. Internal to the National Guard, this study published a Memorandum of Instruction (MOI) describing the program. The MOI was received and reviewed by unit full-time staff and outlined pay and incentives for participants who sought to participate in the training. 120 people enrolled in the study but most ( $n = 96$ ) did not meet the criteria for inclusion. Although the convenience sample limits the findings of the study, it is an appropriate method to reach difficult populations and in the conduct of initial efficacy trials (Rudestam & Newton, 2015).

**Table 1: Sample**

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

Gender		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
Male	11	42.30%
Female	13	50.00%
Race		
White	23	96
Black	1	4
Level of education		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
HS Diploma	1	3.80%
Some College	7	26.90%
Technical Certification/	1	3.80%
Associates		
Batchelor	11	42.30%
Graduate	4	15.40%
Annual income		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
\$25-50K	3	11.50%
\$50-75K	7	26.90%
\$75-100K	10	38.50%
>\$100K	4	15.40%
How many years partnered <sup>1</sup>		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
0	1	3.80%
2	2	7.70%
4	2	7.70%
6	2	7.70%
8	2	7.70%
11	2	7.70%
13	3	11.50%
17	1	3.80%
25	1	3.80%
26	1	3.80%
How many times deployed CONUS		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
0	9	34.60%
1	2	7.70%
2	1	3.80%
3	1	3.80%
How many times deployed OCONUS		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
0	4	15.40%
1	9	34.60%
2	2	7.70%
5	1	3.80%
Age		
	<u>n</u>	<u>%</u>
20-30	5	21%
31-40	12	58%
41-50	5	21%

Employing a pre/post design, the quantitative component of this study involved data collection before and after couples completed ePREP with couple coaching, while the qualitative component collected focus group data following the completion of the training. Data were collected using online data collection software that meets the Department of Defense Information Assurance guidelines (i.e., Qualtrics and HIPPA compliant Zoom). Recruiting efforts directed service members to click a link which routed them to the ePREP website where they were instructed to review the informed consent and take the pre-assessment if they wished to participate. Participants were then contacted by the coach and instructed to begin the training. Upon completion, participants were invited to complete a post-assessment survey and participate in one of two focus groups, which took place 30-90 days post training. Couples were given gift cards totaling \$75 as incentives after each assessment and focus group.

Participant engagement in the training was monitored via an online dashboard which allowed the team to view the content completed, when, and the number of times the modules were reviewed prior to the coaching sessions. Data across time points and couple data were linked via a unique identifier that each person provided at the beginning of the survey. When the identifiers did not align, the research team consulted participant email addresses to create alignment. In accordance with Department of the Army and Institutional Review Board requirements, all data was anonymized before storage on a secure cloud drive until analysis.

To ensure coaching sessions were completed according to the manual, the research team and PREP developers conducted a coach training session with selected individuals. This online three-day session focused on the tenets of the PREP curriculum with additional content on effective consulting skills for the coaches. In total, 15 coaches completed the training. When coaches started to work with couples, the research team with three members and PREP developers with two members reviewed coaching sessions each week with the coaches. These sessions lasted approximately one hour providing feedback to the coaches and ensuring that they completed each section of the manual for the module they were on. Those reviewed indicated a high degree of fidelity for the coaching sessions with each coach completing each of the required tasks for the coaching sessions.

## Measures

### *Relationship Measures*

Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby et al., 1995): A 14-item measure that assesses overall relationship health, with higher scores indicating better adjustment ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

Locke-Wallace Relationship Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959): Evaluates relationship satisfaction across 15 items. Higher scores indicate greater relationship stability ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

Couple Satisfaction Index-4 (CSI-4; Funk & Rogge, 2007): A brief 4-item scale measuring relationship satisfaction ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Marital Instability Index (Edwards et al., 1987): A 3-item measure assessing the likelihood of marital dissolution ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR; Schaefer & Olson, 1981): An 18-item scale measuring relationship intimacy and satisfaction ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

Relationship Knowledge (Barton et al., 2021): This six-item scale assesses participants' awareness of items that cause stress in the relationship ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

nFORM Subscales *Communication Skills, Conflict, and Trust* (Mathematica Policy Research, 2020) Subscales assessing communication habits, conflict levels, and trust within relationships. Higher scores reflect better skills and intimacy ( $\alpha = .79, .61, \text{ and } .96$  respectively).

### *Psychological Health Measures*

Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9; Spitzer et al., 1999): A 9-item depression measure, commonly used to assess depression severity. Higher scores indicate higher levels of depression ( $\alpha = .90$ ).

Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT; Bush et al., 1998): A 10-item assessment evaluating problematic alcohol use. Higher scores suggest greater alcohol-related problems ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Penn State Worry Questionnaire (PSWQ; Meyer et al., 1990): A 16-item measure assessing general worry and anxiety levels ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-5 (PCL-5; Blevins et al., 2015): A 20-item measure for PTSD symptoms, commonly used in both research and clinical settings ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R; Osman et al., 2001): A brief 4-item scale measuring suicide risk ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

## Results

### **Is ePREP + Coaching effective in strengthening RC couple relationships in a sample of National Guard couples?**

In partial support of the first hypothesis, a paired samples t-test for both men and women in the sample indicated significant improvements in communication skills as assessed using the nFORM subscale for communication with women's gains,  $t(12) = -8.6, p < .001, d = -2.23$ , CI  $[-3.46, -1.29]$  being much greater than their male counterparts,  $t(10) = -4.96, p < .001, d = -1.4$ , CI  $[-2.36, -.60]$ , both with large effect sizes. Other variables including dyadic adjustment, couple agreement, relationship satisfaction, break up potential, sexual intimacy, knowledge of items that cause stress, communication conflict, and trust were not significant in the analysis, which is consistent with other short-term evaluations of RE programs.



**Table 2**  
Pre-post differences in relationship and psychological health domains

	Men						Women					
	Mean (pre/post)	N	Delta	t	Cohen's d <sup>a</sup>	P <sup>1</sup>	Mean (pre/post)	N	Delta	t	Cohen's d <sup>a</sup>	P <sup>1</sup>
RDAS	57/57	11	0	0	0	.50	59.92/58.62	13	-1.31	1.2	0.31	.128
Locke-Wallace	35.64/36.36	11	0.72	-1.08	-0.30	.153	38.08/38.15	13	0.08	-0.12	-0.03	.459
CSI-4	17/18.45	11	1.45	-1.52	-0.42	.080	19.31/18.62	13	-0.69	1.03	0.27	.162
Marital Instability Index	8/8.27	11	0.27	-0.9	-0.25	.196	7.62/7.77	13	0.15	-0.41	-0.11	.344
PAIR	19.36/17.72	11	-1.6	1.78	0.5	.052	19.08/20	13	0.92	-1.12	-0.29	.143
Relationship Knowledge	23.27/24.09	11	0.82	-0.92	-0.3	.190	23.08/23.62	13	0.54	-1.17	-0.30	.133
Communication Skill	17.55/20.91	11	3.36	-4.96	-1.4	<.001	18.77/22.46	13	3.69	-8.6	-2.23	<.001
Communication Conflict	15.73/14.82	11	-0.9	1.36	0.4	.101	14.38/14.39	13	0	0	0	.50
Trust and Intimacy	15.36/15.36	11	0	0	0	.50	17.31/16.92	13	-0.39	0.92	0.24	.187
PHQ-9	11.73/10.64	11	-1.09	1.06	0.3	.157	16/13.15	13	-2.85	1.95	-0.51	.038
AUDIT	13.36/13.45	11	-.091	-.14	-.04	.444	11.69/9.85	13	-1.85	2	-0.51	.036
PSWQ	41.82/33.27	11	-8.55	2.4	0.67	.019	54.69/44.54	13	-10.15	5.26	1.37	<.001
PCL-5	24.27/25	11	0.72	-1.3	-0.35	.117	32.23/30.92	13	-1.31	0.34	0.09	.369
SBQ-r	6/5.27	11	-0.72	0.81	0.23	.218	4.92/5	13	0.08	-0.19	-0.05	.425

<sup>1</sup> All p values are one-tailed

## Is ePREP + Coaching effective in decreasing psychological problems in a sample of National Guard couples?

In partial support of the second hypothesis, t-tests indicated significant improvements in anxiety for both men and women, and improvements in depression and alcohol use behaviors for women. For women, depression levels dropped an average of 2.85 points on the PHQ-9  $t(12) = 1.95$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -0.51$ , CI [-0.54, 1.11]; their level of alcohol use dropped an average of 1.85 points on the AUDIT  $t(12) = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = -.51$ , CI [-3.20, -1.15], and their level of worry dropped an average of 10.15 points on the PSWQ  $t(12) = 5.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.37$ , CI [5.95, 14.36], all with large effect sizes. For men, their scores dropped an average of 8.54 points on the PSWQ  $t(10) = 2.396$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $d = 0.667$ , CI [0.04, 1.38], indicating a large effect size. For a comprehensive list of quantitative findings see Table 2.

## Did ePREP with Coaching meet Couples' needs?

To illustrate the effectiveness of the curriculum teaching ePREP skills to military connected couples, the post-survey included a series of seven items which are shown to assess if couples acquired relationship knowledge. High scores in these seven items post-test indicate retention of material at the follow-up. These items include constructive communication, investment, teamwork, relationship knowledge, commitment, communication, and conflict management (Allen et al., 2017).

The analysis indicated that participants acquired knowledge in each of the assessed items. Of these gains, participants reported that the intervention had the greatest effects in their ability to invest time in their relationship ( $n = 25$ ,  $\mu = 4.6$ ,  $\sigma = 0.707$ ) and their confidence in their ability to effectively communicate ( $n = 24$ ,  $\mu = 4.54$ ,  $\sigma = 0.658$ ). Items assessing their ability to manage conflict ( $n = 25$ ,  $\mu = 4.48$ ,  $\sigma = 0.586$ ) and overall healthy relationship knowledge ( $n = 25$ ,  $\mu = 4.48$ ,  $\sigma = 0.707$ ) demonstrated the second largest reported gains. These variables did not reach significance in their related variables within the nFORM, pre to post, however, relationship conflict was trending in a lower direction for men ( $\Delta = -0.909$ ,  $t = 1.363$ ,  $d = -0.379$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Despite the variance within each item, scores remained high with the lowest score for each item being a 3, neither agree nor disagree and a grand mean of 4.45. These results support that ePREP with couple coaching is an effective way to teach the content, and that it meets the needs for military connected couples. For a full report of satisfaction scales see Table 3.

## Qualitative Findings

To answer the remaining three research questions the team conducted a thematic analysis of the two focus groups (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Thematic analysis includes the collection and transcription of data (focus groups) including notes taken during the interviews, reading the transcripts to orient oneself to the data and taking notes, re-reading the transcripts independently looking for themes,

**Table 3***Because of this training...*

	<u>n</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Mode</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>neither agree nor disagree (n/%)</u>	<u>somewhat agree (n/%)</u>	<u>strongly agree (n/%)</u>
I have confidence that my partner and I can talk about things constructively	24	4.54	5	0.658	2/7.7%	7/26.9%	15/57.7%
I will invest more time in our relationship	25	4.6	5	0.707	1/3.8%	7/26.9%	17/65.4%
I think my partner and I will work more as a team	25	4.44	5	0.768	4/15.4%	6/23.1%	15/57.7%
Increase my knowledge about what a healthy relationship and marriage looks like	25	4.48	5	0.707	4/15.4%	5/19.2%	16/61.5%
Increased my understanding of the nature and importance of commitment	25	4.2	4	0.866	7/26.9%	6/23.1%	12/46.2%
Improved my communication skill with my partner	25	4.44	5	0.712	3/11.5%	8/30.8%	14/53.8%
Increased my confidence in managing conflict and escalation with my partner/spouse	25	4.48	5	0.586	1/3.8%	11/42.3%	13/3.8%

re-reading again across transcripts to codify codes. The team discussed findings along each step of the process to ensure accuracy of the analysis. Findings indicate several areas for practitioners to be mindful of when offering online relationship education and couple coaching.

#### ***What is the feasibility of conducting online relationship education for National Guard connected couples?***

**What motivated RC members to enroll in and complete the program?** When asked about why couples attended the program fifteen people shared that their relationship was struggling or that they had recently undergone a significant life event such as the birth of a child. Several couples shared that their relationship was “on the rocks”, “going through a rough patch”, and “that it hit at the right time”. Other couples shared that major life experiences they faced included “the birth of a child a year ago and we needed to refocus on our relationship”, “he was

deploying”, or “it was right before the [our] wedding”. In all these cases couples were pleased to have the ability to attend a relationship education program at the time of the offering because it met a need in their relationship. Other motivating factors for couples enrollment included incentives, and one partner signing up before discussing with their partner which may account for a high dropout rate.

**What were participants’ experiences of a computer-based relationship education program?** Several couples shared their appreciation for a flexible relationship delivery method. Couples shared that they had busy lives and in many cases had to complete the modules separately then attend the coaching together. They shared things such as “we watched it at different times”, that things were “accommodating” and the need to have something “built around our schedule”. These findings indicate the need for flexible delivery for busy couples, most of whom had kids who needed to be shuttled around or where one member

was in the process of deploying and had an inconsistent schedule. Couples also cited the ease of use with the system, their ability to pause and come back, as well as increased feelings of safety of completing the program at home as opposed to in person.

**What barriers did participants face when engaging in online relationship education?** As stated earlier, busy couples struggled to complete the curriculum together. Participants lamented “just trying to find the time when you have four kids”, “his schedule is always changing”, and challenges of taking time away when they had a toddler stood out as areas that challenged couples’ ability to complete the modules. Even during the review of coaching sessions, the research team frequently noted young kids interrupting their parents in the middle of a session and several situations where one parent needed to leave the session to tend to one of their kids for a short period. Other challenges include not having a dedicated meeting platform, and a lack of printed material to reference during and after the program.

**How did participants view the curriculum?** Couples were very impressed with the curriculum for several reasons. Some couples shared that, before they started, they were “skeptical at first” about an online relationship education program, that it provided safety and flexibility that met the demands of their lives, and that despite originally participating for the incentives, they discovered that the curriculum was actually very helpful and beneficial. Looking back on their time completing the curriculum and coaching, several couples mentioned that it was “the right thing at the right time” and that because the military provided it, “it was accessible,” sharing that they would likely not seek out the curriculum otherwise.

**What were participants’ views on couple coaching?** When asked about couples’ experiences with the coaching, couples were overwhelmingly positive. Reasons couples cited coaching as a positive included “getting the reinforcement [from the online modules]”, “just nice... it hit home that we were doing it the right way” and “that we still use the techniques we learned [three weeks later]”. These findings support how couple coaching can reinforce learning and help couples improve in their relationship skills in a manner not possible solely with on online curriculum. Couples suggested improvements in longer coaching sessions and coaching sessions that go beyond the duration of the curriculum.

## Discussion

### Interplay of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Improvements in communication and psychological health may be explained by multiple contextual factors such as lower pre-test scores than the average couple, relationship discord, and significant life events. Couples cited that the program was “the right thing at the right time” suggesting a felt need based on their current situation. As noted by Stanley (2005) initial lower scores for studies on PREP typically lead to larger gains resulting from the intervention, but these initial gains may be shorter lived than

healthier functioning couples (Blanchard et al., 2009). Researchers have noticed a cyclical relationship between relationship satisfaction, which may suffer during significant events, and psychological health in the areas of anxiety, depression, negative self-concept, somatization, and hostility whereas, an improvement in relationship satisfaction is positively correlated with improvements in the other psychological domains (Uludagli & Pekcetin, 2021). Other factors that may have affected the observed improvements include the addition of a couple coach, and the investment or dedication couples placed in the training.

### Implications for Future Adaptation

The current trend for the Department of Defense regarding prevention shifts from “good idea ferry’s” to require the Services (i.e., Army, Air Force, Navy, etc.) to use evidence-based practices, start to establish evidence base for current programs, or discontinue the program (Department of Defense, 2022). In alignment with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s, *Select, Adapt, and Evaluate* paradigm (2019), the off the shelf use of evidence-based programs require a review to ensure alignment with organizational beliefs, attitudes, and values. Through this project, the team carefully considered how the intervention aligned with the organizational structure (i.e., falling within the purview of the Chaplains Office), the alignment of values between the organization and the curriculum, and other factors that may derail the successful implementation and delivery of the intervention. Further adaptations should consider these elements as well, and, where possible, work with program developers to ensure adaptations align with the intent of the program and the unique needs of the participants.

### Limitations

The major limitation of this study is a small sample size and lack of control group. Given the unknown interest in the program during COVID, the research team accepted these limitations. Future studies should focus on larger samples and samples that include greater diversity such as the inclusion of LGBTQ+ and those with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Future studies should also consider how their delivery method affects the learning, use, and retention of the content, and how elements such as safety and coach selection affect participant engagement. Consideration of these elements ensures that the program will meet the needs of participants and that it remains relevant and acceptable.

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