

The Couple LINKS Course

PROGRAM: Couple LINKS (Lasting Intimacy through Nurturing Knowledge and Skills). The website is www.lovethinks.com The contact person is the developer of the program, John Van Epp, PhD. He may be contacted at john@lovethinks.com if anyone has any questions.

TARGET POPULATION: The target population of the Couple LINKS program is all committed or married couples. This program is beneficial for both distressed or non-distressed couples because it provides deep relationship understanding along with relational skills and virtues for strengthening a relationship, repairing areas of brokenness, and rebuilding and sustaining the bonds and feelings of closeness that originally brought them together. Participants of this program can be at any stage of their marriage (newlywed, establishing couples, later in life couples, empty nesters, etc.) as well as from any ethnic or religious background. There are community versions: adult and military; in addition, there is a faith-based version.

CONTENT:

The LINKS program is unique when compared to other couple Relationship Education (RE) courses. Most RE programs are informed by behaviorist and social learning theories and focus on skills training as an early intervention to adjust later marital trajectories. Although many programs are beginning to incorporate other theoretical perspectives, such as transformative processes and marital virtues, these other perspectives do not make up the core of the curricula.

The LINKS program, on the other hand, centers on bonding behaviors using a conceptual model known as the Relationship Attachment Model[®] (RAM), described in more detail later. On the surface, it appears much like other programs — it consists of five units of instruction, discussion, and a workbook and includes elements of skill learning — but has a wider theoretical base and focuses on specific aspects of couples' relationships.

The RAM model. The RAM model defines the sense of love that a couple shares as a relationship bond, which is made of five dynamic bonds: know, trust, rely, commit, and touch. These dynamic bonds represent the ways in which couples can become closer, and increasing these bonds increases the overall relationship bond. Decreases in the bonds can cause imbalances in the relationship, and the LINKS course is designed to help teach couples to be aware of and to fix these imbalances. In the LINKS program (for couples), RAM is framed in terms of balancing and adjusting the relationship to keep it healthy and happy.

After being introduced to the RAM model in general, the participants in LINKS learn about its five dynamic bonds in detail. The first element—to know—is considered the most basic of the dynamic bonds. Participants are taught that knowing your partner is achieved through talk, togetherness, and time. They also learn communication skills and strategies. The second element—trust—is built from day-to-day interactions with that partner, which generates a sense of consistency and expectation. Participants learn to maintain positive mental images of one's

partner and how to rebuild trust where needed. Reliance—third aspect of the RAM—is the willingness and ability of the partners to meet each other’s needs and partners are taught to recognize and meet each other’s needs. The fourth element— commitment—is defined as a priority of support to one’s partner, a belief of belonging to one’s partner reflected by carrying a partner’s presence, even when the partner is not around. Participants learn about resiliency models and how to use life change and difficulties to increase commitment. Physical and sexual intimacy are covered under the fifth dynamic bond—touch. Intimacy is defined as being emotional and relational, in addition to being physical, and as a tool to renew relationships. Participants learn to understand and deal with differing sexual needs and drives in a relationship.¹

In summary, the LINKS course provides couples with ways to revitalize and also sustain the closeness of their relationship with the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) by having regular couple meetings (called Huddles). The RAM provides a simple picture that characterizes five complex interactions of the ways couples *know*, *trust* in, *rely* on, are committed to (*commit*), and show affection and experience sexual intimacy (*touch*), and the boundaries needed in the same relational areas to protect from harm. However, packaged within this model are the skills and virtues needed for communication, conflict resolution, forgiveness and rebuilding trust, satisfying personal needs, constructing a marriage story, and growing sexually. Weekly or bi-weekly huddles are the primary take-away so that all that is learned in the LINKS course is regularly reviewed and applied in these frequent check-ins where couples have the RAM tool to identify areas of their relationship that need adjustment and then they set goals to bring those areas up to full strength (e.g., their communication, attitudes of respect and appreciation, the ways they meet each other's needs in their togetherness, roles and mutual division of responsibilities, their commitment to support each other, and their affectionate, romantic and sexual closeness).

FORMAT: The program has several versions and is formatted in either five or ten lesson workbooks. The classroom time is 12+ hours, with the ability to expand the course to 24 hours with supplements. When facilitating the course, instructors have flexibility how to format the delivery: the sessions can be spread out over multiple days, a weekend retreat, or abbreviated to be facilitated over the course of one day.

PROVIDERS/TRAINING: Anyone can become certified to teach the program, providers do not need to be mental health professionals. The requirement is to attend an in-person or live, virtual training which includes the instructor's certification packet and access to the password-protected instructor section of the Love Thinks website that houses additional resources for instructors. The instructor's certification course is a two-day training.

BACKGROUND: Couple LINKS is both research-informed and evidence-based. Research has been collected and published that validates the effectiveness of the Couple LINKS course on improving

¹ J. Scott Crapo, Kay Bradford & Brian J. Higginbotham. Preliminary Evaluation of the Couple LINKS Program (2019). *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2019.1567175>

both the quality and stability of relationships within marriage. In addition, qualitative and quantitative data conducted on the RAM has been collected, analyzed, and published. Statistical evidence has been found for the five factors of the RAM. As a result, construct validity has been established, showing that these bonding constructs are crucial areas of relationships. For the past twenty years, over 35,000 certified instructors have taught Couple LINKS to military couples in all branches, to community couples with state and federal grants, and to couples within faith-based settings.

The Couple LINKS course approaches relationship education in a conceptual framework rather than a topical list. Therefore, the Couple LINKS course, as with other Love Thinks courses, utilizes the RAM within its course outline, allowing for complementary Love Thinks course offerings, or a packaging of several Love Thinks courses into one longer and more comprehensive course (e.g., a fatherhood course with a first section on healthy romantic relationship formation and partner-selection from PICK², a second section on ways to maintain, repair, and sustain a couples' relationship the LINKS course, and then a third major section on a gameplan for actively and intentionally running their parenting relationship from Home Run Dads³).

² PICK (Premarital Interpersonal Choices & Knowledge) course is a Love Thinks research-informed and evidence based course that has been taught to over a million participants in youth, adult, and military settings.

³ Home Run Dads is a Love Thinks research-informed and evidence-based course that provides fathers with a RAM-based gameplan of intentionally and actively running their relationship with their children.