

Adventures in Marriage: An Intensive Weekend Marriage Enrichment Program for Military Couples

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Abstract

Military couples face unique stressors because of the responsibilities and expectations of their work (Mancini et al., 2020). High levels of trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder after deployment can lead to negative marital outcomes including communication, parenting alliance and positive bonding (Allen et al., 2010). Consequently, marriage initiatives have been developed to help improve the well-being of soldiers. This presentation will describe the *Adventures in Marriage* (AIM) program, an adaptation of the PAIRS program (Turner & Gordan, 1995), that has been implemented as an intensive weekend retreat with military couples. Preliminary evaluation results will be shared that examined the immediate and long-term achievement toward program outcomes of the AIM weekend program among a sample of married heterosexual military couples. Findings from retrospective pre/post tests and follow-up suggest that most couples in the sample reported significant improvement in communication skills, conflict resolution, perspective taking, and emotional management. Data provided preliminary support of the AIM curriculum as an intensive weekend marriage education program for use in married heterosexual military couples.

Introduction

Adventures in Marriage (AIM) is an empirically-informed, skills-based marriage education program, co-authored by Richard Albertson (Live the Life) and Lori H. Gordan, the author of PAIRS (Turner & Gordan, 1995). The overall intended impact of AIM is a reduction of the divorce rate and increase in the marriage rate. Intended outcomes include a) decreased intent to divorce, b) increased communication/conflict resolution skills, c) improved perspective taking abilities, and d) increased emotional management.

Each AIM unit contains research-based content with interactive skill-building exercises, as summarized below:

- **Unit 1: Meet the Need:** Introduction to the Program, Design Your Own Paradise, CARESS Assessment, Relationship Road Map, Level and Congruent exercise.
- **Unit 2: Bonding 101:** Daily Temperature Reading, Natural Cycle of Relationships, Heart to Heart
- **Unit 3: Searching for “Us”:** Anatomy of Conflict, Personality Assessment, Stress Styles, The Power of Us

- **Unit 4: High Brain vs. Low Brain:** Dirty Fighting, Relational Brain, “Stuff It” Role Play, Taking Out the Trash

The aim of the present study was to conduct a preliminary evaluation of the achievement toward program outcomes of the AIM program implemented as an intensive weekend retreat among a sample of married heterosexual military couples. **The primary hypothesis** of this study is that an AIM intensive weekend marriage enrichment program targeting military couples will improve participants’ communication skills, conflict resolution, perspective taking, and emotional management as reported on the AIM Program Outcomes (APO) scale.

Specific research questions addressed in the present study include:

- 1) Is there a significant difference between pre- and post-test APO scores among military couples who completed the AIM curriculum?
- 2) Is there a significant difference between post-test APO scores and 6-12 month follow-up among military couples who completed the AIM curriculum?
- 3) Is there a significant difference between men’s and women’s post-test and 6-12 month follow-up APO scores after completing the AIM curriculum?

Method

Sample

Participants were recruited to the AIM weekend through military bases in Texas, Florida, and New Mexico between 2018 and 2019. The retreats were held at hotels near the military bases. The sample included 515 married heterosexual couples (N=1030) in which one of the spouses was active-duty military. Participants received 8 hours of the AIM curriculum throughout the weekend. All couples who completed the retreat were asked to complete an anonymous retrospective pre-post measure to evaluate program outcomes prior to completing the workshop versus after.

Measures

Program outcomes were assessed with a retrospective pre-post AIM Program Outcomes (APO) scale that included 12-items, each of which addressed a targeted outcome for the AIM curriculum, including self-report of divorce intent, communication/conflict resolution, perspective taking, and emotional management. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency for men ($\alpha=.94$) and women ($\alpha=.94$). Couples who consented to provide an email were sent an anonymous follow-up questionnaire 6-12 months after completing the weekend, yielding a total of 365 responses (35%).

Analyses

Primary analysis included a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the average APO scores among men and women at pre-test, post-test, and follow-up.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations of study variables are summarized in Table 1. Results demonstrated a statistically significant difference in APO scores over time for men $F(1.68,1)=79.09, p=.00$ and women $F(1.79,1)=123.43, p=.00$ (Table 2). Partial eta squared revealed a moderate effect size for men ($\eta^2=.56$) and women ($\eta^2=.55$). Post-hoc analyses with a Bonferroni adjustment suggest APO scores for all participants were significantly higher from

pre- to post-test and follow-up. Participants scores decreased from post-test to follow-up but remained significantly higher than pre-test at follow-up (Figure 1). Significant gender differences were discovered in the pre-test and follow-up scores through an independent samples t-test. Women reported significantly lower scores on the APO at both the pre-test and follow-up compared to the men in the sample. There were no detected differences among racial/ethnic groups. Results revealed that participants had the greatest effects immediately following the program. Although the participants reported lower APO scores at follow-up, there were still significantly higher improvements at follow-up compared to the pre-test.

Discussion

Overall, this study provided preliminary findings in support of the AIM curriculum for use in married heterosexual military couples. Because this was a preliminary evaluation, it consisted of a non-experimental study design. Nonetheless, it provided initial evidence of the effectiveness of the AIM curriculum as an intensive weekend marital education program with military couples. Results can inform marital education researchers and practitioners of the utility of using this format with military couples. Since military couples serve a critical function for the safety of Americans, this study provides support for the provision of marital education services to these military couples.

References

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Tables and Figures

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics and correlations of study variables*

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	1	2	3
<i>Men</i>				
1. APO Pre-test	43.41(11.91)	--	.57*	.29*
2. APO Post-test	58.56(6.80)		--	.33*
3. APO Follow-up	57.73(8.89)			--
<i>Women</i>				
1. APO Pre-test	41.30(13.02)	--	.51*	.43*
2. APO Post-test	59.07(7.09)		--	.53*
3. APO Follow-up	54.80(13.92)			--

Note: * $p \leq .001$; APO = AIM Program Outcomes measure

Table 2 *Repeated measures ANOVA results*

	SS	df	Mean Square	F	<i>p</i>	η^2
<i>Men</i>						
Between Groups	394697.19	1	394697.19	3828.93	.00	.98
Within Groups	6472.67	1.68	3856.89	79.09	.00	.56
Error	5074	106.61	47.59			
<i>Women</i>						
Between Groups	584784.74	1	584784.74	3064.04	.00	.97
Within Groups	13357.49	1.79	7341.11	123.43	.00	.55
Error	10930.51	183.77	59.48			

Figure 1 *Estimated marginal means of APO for men and women*

