



(W28) AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO WORKING WITH COUPLES: RELATIONSHIP MATTERS WHEN MS MOVES IN

In 2006 the National Multiple Sclerosis Society was awarded a five-year, 2.6 million dollar demonstration grant to develop and implement a project as part of the Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy Marriage Initiative. General marriage education courses help couples deal with more common relationship challenges, however when chronic illness and disability are present in one partner, an additional set of challenges enter the equation – this is why we developed Relationship Matters: A Program for Couples Living with MS. The Relationship Matters program provides customized relationship education designed to meet the unique needs of participating couples.

The primary objectives of the project include: improved communication, increased skills to cope with the effects of MS on the relationship, learning conflict resolution skills, and increased marital satisfaction. The secondary objectives are to: collect and analyze marriage satisfaction data, create an effective marriage education approach that helps couples more effectively deal with challenges, provide a model for marriage education to community-based organizations who serve people with chronic illness and disability, and use information to enhance advocacy related to issues like domestic violence, the need for respite care, and others.

Couples choose the educational format that best suits their lifestyle and approach to learning, whether it is in-person, online, on the phone, or all three. The program offers trainings topics such as financial planning, employment, keeping the fun in your relationship, communication and conflict resolution, intimacy, and parenting. Each couple receives individual attention from an MS Navigator to help with planning identified learning goals and to act as a guide to all of the resources that are available to assist people with MS.

The Relationship Matters program is now in its second year of funding. Our goal is to serve at least 2750 couples at the end of the demonstration period.

Kimberly Koch
Lara Rezzarday, MPA
National MS Society
700 Broadway Suite 810
Denver, CO 80203
United States