

Tips for Success In Relationship and Marriage Education Sessions

1. If you do a group activity at the beginning, use the term “warm-up activity” rather than “ice breaker activity”, which is less friendly.
2. When working with a group of unmarried individuals, be conscious of the wording that you use as you have people move into various groupings. Do not use the phrase “pair up”, but rather say move into a small group of 2 people, or turn to the person sitting next to you. Don’t say “match up” or any language that would look as if you are arranging couples.
3. Do not use terms such as “break up” or “divide up” into small groups. It spreads a spirit of disunity and relationship trouble.
4. Thoroughly read the materials ahead of time. Look up any unfamiliar words and make sure you can explain them as needed.
5. Trust God, the group process, and the wisdom and experience of participants to support you as facilitator(s).
6. While being realistic about marital challenges, speak positively about marriage and confidently about the participants’ ability to have lasting marriages.
7. Draw on your own personal experience and share it, but with wisdom and moderation.
8. These are marriage education sessions, not group therapy sessions, so please resist acting like a therapist with participants, even if you are a trained professional.
9. Refer participants to counseling agencies or religious leaders as needed.
10. Don’t think or act as if you have all the answers (because you don’t!).
11. Wherever possible, have the participants spend the needed time to complete a worksheet or part of an activity on their own before engaging in group discussion. This individual work will enhance learning.
12. Allow for more than one answer to each question if it is an open-ended question. Each participant will have their own point of view.
13. Use inclusive “peer” language. Avoid being paternalistic. Speak to the youth as you would speak to adults in a formal situation. It’s important not to treat them as children, but also important not to be pals with them if you do not already have this type of relationship.
14. Incorporate “energizers” to keep the physical body and the brain alert.
15. Don’t use technical or religious jargon that may confuse your listeners, and invite them to let you know if they don’t understand something you say. Examples could be “consultation” or “the virtues” or “spiritual principles.” Don’t assume that they know what you are talking about when you refer to religious institutions by their initials or to people’s names that only some may be familiar with.

16. Remember that people in the group could be of any faith background or dating/courting anyone of any faith background, so don't assume they are of one particular faith.
17. Carefully review music, stories, skits, and so on and evaluate them for the messages they convey. Ensure they are timed appropriately to support maximum learning in activities.
18. Lighten up at times and have a sense of humor.

Accompanying and Learning in Action

Accompany: To go along or in company with or join in action; can be either planned or spontaneous; requires flexibility.

“Learning in action is becoming the outstanding feature of the emerging mode of operation.”

(Universal House of Justice, 1-17-03)

“The more we do, the more we learn.” (International Teaching Centre, 9-30-07)

“This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word ‘accompany’ appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá’í community. It signals the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith. Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010)

Relationship and marriage education is most effective when it is consistent over time and a facilitator is skilled in accompanying the participant in their learning and skill building. It has not traditionally had any aspect of service connected to it. When participants feel fear, discomfort, and unfamiliarity, this can interfere with their ability to learn and serve. The solution appears to be accompaniment paired with an attitude of “learning in action”.

Encouragement can be defined as offering sincere, uplifting acknowledgment of the character strengths, effective actions, or good intentions of others and oneself; inspiring or assisting others and oneself to start, continue, or stop doing something; or fostering personal growth and development. Encouragement is one of the most commonly found words in the Bahá’í Writings and letters from administrative institutions. It is a vital component of creating a culture of “learning in action.”

Your first experience with accompaniment and learning in action arises as you help the participants to learn the content of the course and apply it to their lives. You will invite them to try out new words and actions, reflect on the effect they had on others, share their experiences with the group members, and either try again to build skills or attempt new directions. This effort requires patience, love, encouragement, not having all the answers, learning from mistakes, and finding solutions together.

It is a privilege for you serving as a facilitator to accompany others to help them increase their comfort level with the subject matter, skill practice, and service, and feel the joy of success. However, participants can also be in this role as they help their fellow group members. Elements that may contribute to success are:

- Encouragement
- Prayer
- Identifying talents and abilities
- Providing or preparing venues
- Inviting people to participate; offering service
- Providing supplies
- Being physically present
- Recruiting additional support people
- Reflection and goal setting
- Assisting with difficulties

It is wise when considering accompaniment to reflect on the quality of helpfulness. Moderation is required. Your role is empowering others to act, not doing the actions for them. A question you may consider trying is “How can I help you to be successful?” rather than saying, “Here’s how I think you can be successful.” Remember that everyone will act in different ways, and it will not be helpful if you impose your will and design on the process.

This guidance from the Universal House of Justice may provide helpful principles to consider: “As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause. In this way will the impulse to over instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be averted. Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning. The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.” (Dec. 28, 2010)

It is wise to consider one additional factor in the accompaniment process. The degree to which the participants will be successful is also linked to the example of the facilitator. If you are actively applying the concepts to your life, serving, reflecting, learning, and sharing your experiences with the participants, it will empower the participants to do the same. Your example is priceless.

Studying Quotations from the Bahá'í Writings

You will facilitate the study of quotations in a variety of ways and find what is most comfortable for you and most effective for a particular group.

Before the Sessions

It may help before you will be facilitating to read through the quotations ahead of time and do the following:

1. Circle any words that either you are unfamiliar with or that you think the group might be confused about. Note in the margin any definitions of them that may be helpful in guiding the group. You will first ask the group what they think it means, but you will be prepared to guide as needed.
2. Abstract concepts and unfamiliar words can also be clarified with concrete examples. You may find it difficult during the session to think of these quickly, so making a note of them ahead of time can be helpful. Asking the group to think of concrete examples helps to ground the quotations in the reality of the participants' lives. Again, you will ask them to come up with the examples and only provide them yourself if the group is stuck.
3. Underline phrases that you think will benefit from discussion, and note in the margin any question that you think will be pertinent. You may need to note discussion opportunities throughout the exercises as well as the quotations.

During the Sessions

The following practices may be helpful to further understanding:

1. Ask two participants to read the quotation all the way through, so the group hears the words twice.
2. Ask whether there are any unfamiliar words. Raise questions about any that the group does not identify if you think it would be helpful. Do concrete examples as needed.
3. Ask open questions to accomplish basic understanding, such as "How did this quotation touch your heart?" or "What do you see as important concepts in this quotation?" Ask specific questions about key phrases to ensure that the group understands them.
4. Ask the participants how they can apply the content of the quotation to their lives and to being of service to others.

Additional Skill Building

One of the skills that develops over time is that of turning to the Writings as a source of guidance. As you ask questions, it becomes clear that the answers are often directly from the quotation. This helps the participants to focus on the original source. To assist this process, you may at times locate one of the quotations in a book and show the participants the book and how to find the quotation in it.

Enhancing Learning and Service Capacities with the Arts

The process for you serving as a facilitator of enhancing the learning of your participants is usually linked to your ability to connect with all of the senses and various ways that people learn best. Of course, you will need to know your participants and begin to gain an understanding of their learning styles. Some people need visual cues to fully appreciate the content. Some like to have a tactile/touch experience. Some will simply prefer to be involved in an intellectual discussion. What helps one person to understand, remember, and apply the content of a section will not necessarily work for another person. So, flexibility and creativity are your watchwords.

If you are someone who has struggled to incorporate the arts into learning activities or who has a view of “the arts” as being only crafts (which you may not be good at doing), it is time to broaden your perspective. The intent of including “the arts” is to enhance the participants’ service capabilities and their spiritual development. You may need to assist your participants in accepting the arts as part of their experience. It is also important that your attitude about including them be positive and encouraging.

You may find that the simplest and most effective means of including the arts is music. There are many musical pieces that include the Bahá’í Writings. Other inspirational music by various artists may also be effective, and participants may wish to bring recordings of their own uplifting music. You can play music to open or close a session or as background music for an activity. Often people can also use instruments or their voices to create music. Remember “...music, sung or played, is spiritual food for soul and heart.” (Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, pp. 118-119) And this one, “...although music is a material affair, yet its tremendous effect is spiritual, and its greatest attachment is to the realm of the spirit. If a person desires to deliver a discourse, it will prove more effectual after musical melodies.” (Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in “Extracts from the Baha’i Writings on Music”, *Compilation of Compilations*, Volume 2, p. 77)

Another simple technique to have people be creative is to provide colored markers, pens, pencils, or highlighters and encourage people to mark key passages in their handout or books or illustrate concepts with quick drawings that help them remember a quotation. Color creates beauty and can be a visual memory cue.

Another excellent visual cue that adds beauty and reminds participants about inner or character transformation (and not judging someone by outside appearance!) is a geode. These rock formations are plain and uninteresting on the outside but have beautiful color and crystals on the inside. You could also create a box with something beautiful on the inside.

This guidance from Ruhi Book 7 may also help you in approaching the arts:

“...[Y]ou can make a **significant contribution to the capabilities of service** of those who take part in a study circle by encouraging them to develop their capacity for artistic expression, be it through music, poetry, painting, drama or any of the various types of crafts. To this end, we will urge you to include artistic endeavors in the activity of every study circle. You should not think of this as entertainment or as an extracurricular activity – for which there is ample room in the Institute’s program – but as **an essential element enhancing the spiritual development of the participants.**” (Book 7, p. 111; bolding added)

“By being a promoter of arts and crafts at the grassroots...you will be **opening up creative channels through which can flow inspiration and the force of attraction to beauty.**” (Book 7, pp. 130-131; bolding added)

“Artistic expression includes a vast area of human endeavor referred to as crafts. Here, scores of materials – leather, wool, cotton, silk, stone, clay, glass, metal, wood, wax, straw, dried flowers, and so on, and so on – are transformed in myriad ways by the skillful hands of the craftsmen into objects, both practical and not, taming the inherent qualities of the materials to create beauty.... **...To develop the ability to work with one’s hands is not a secondary educational objective. It is an imperative in the overall training of an individual.**” (Book 7, p. 130; bolding added)

We have left and right brains that provide balance in our lives. Often one side of the brain is dominant, however. If you are more “left-brained,” you tend to approach life logically and in a linear, straightforward fashion, often relying on numbers to quantify matters. If you are more “right-brained,” you tend to be more creative and flexible in your approach. Creative arts tend to draw on the right side of the brain and assist people with emotional expression.

When you are facilitating, you will need to be sensitive to those who are not used to being creative or who have limited capacity in this area. Putting someone like this in the position of doing an activity that requires a high degree of creative capacity can set them up to feel like a failure, guilty from an inability to perform, or persecuted. On the other hand, if you over-simplify an activity, the person could feel as if they are being treated like a child. You may simply have to do a bit more hands-on demonstration, provide more encouragement, and share more examples. For instance, when the group is doing a collage, you may have to take a magazine, find a few pictures that fit the focus theme of the project, and explain to the group why you chose them. Then the creatively challenged members are more likely to be successful.

The arts are an outlet for the expression of feelings, and they can help participants with processing life experiences emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. The arts have the power to transform thoughts, feelings, outlooks, spirits, and actions.

“The arts” is actually a very broad term, so there are many opportunities to connect with them. People often have a tendency to say things like, “I’m not good at _____,” or “I don’t know how to do _____.” The lists below of art possibilities/capacity builders are not complete, but they likely contain some that you have not yet considered. You can experiment with whatever benefits your participants’ development. Remember that incorporating the arts into your process is sometimes “doing” the art and sometimes participating by “observing,” such as visiting an art museum or watching a performance.

Examples of Arts and Crafts Activities

Performing Arts

- Attending events
- Making/Listening to music
- Acting
- Directing
- Producing
- Dancing
- Singing

Visual Arts

- Movies, videos, and slide presentations
- Architecture
- Photography
- Animation and computer graphics
- Painting - multiple media
- Drawing
- Gardening

Crafts

- Weaving
- Pottery
- Sculpture
- Clothing design
- Embroidery
- Knitting and crocheting
- Sewing
- Ceramics
- Jewelry-making
- Furniture-making
- Leatherwork
- Basket-weaving
- Glassblowing
- Candle-making
- Print-making
- Puppet-making
- Toy-making
- Calligraphy
- Hair design
- Tattoos
- Flower arranging

Reading and Writing Arts

- Dramatic reading
- Story writing
- Storytelling
- Scriptwriting
- Book writing
- Poetry writing
- Journal writing

Social Arts

- Conversation
- Introductions and remembering names
- Hospitality
- Welcoming
- Serving
- Creating ceremonies
- Cooking and food preparation