

# Working on it

## Keeping marriages intact is hard work — and an evolving industry

By Lisa Marshall, Camera Staff Writer  
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Just utter the words "marriage counseling" and you'll likely conjure images of a distraught couple seated in a quiet office, perhaps crying and shouting as they air their most intimate complaints about each other.

Tony and Melissa Giordano opted for a different approach.

On a recent weekend at Boulder's St. Julien Hotel and Spa, the Denver couple sat barefoot on the floor of a conference room, taking turns rubbing each other's feet, as a reflexology expert taught them and four other couples how to relieve each other's stress. Across the hall, five other couples made their way through six generous samples during a wine tasting class, as a few other couples learned about bike maintenance in the room next door.

What do wine, reflexology, and cycling have to do with a healthy marriage?

Everything, says Marcie Pregulman, president of Love Your Relationship, a new marriage education weekend workshop that combines research-based lectures with planned romantic activities.

"Positive connections are so important," says Pregulman. "Without them, there is no buffer there, no reserve in the bank. The idea here is to build up that reserve so that if you do have a fight, it is not going to wreck the relationship."

Co-founded and presented by University of Denver psychology professor Howard Markman, a pioneer in the field of couples research, Love Your Relationship is just the latest evolution in a marriage education industry that has exploded in the past decade. Rather than waiting until a marriage is crumbling and intervening with psychotherapy, marriage education classes aim to educate couples on what to expect and how to navigate conflict long before the D word comes into consideration. Workshops are typically taught to groups, and attendees range from newlyweds hoping to start out right to people like the Giordanos who have reached a critical impasse.

The industry got a boost this month when Congress approved a plan to invest \$100 million per year over the next five years into marriage education, primarily for low-income couples, in hopes of lowering the nation's divorce rate. Private marriage counselors, somewhat skeptical of the growing field, say group education alone is no match for the serious problems some couples face. But those at the forefront of the marriage education field are lauding the attention.

"Divorce is one of the biggest public health issues we face," says Diane Sollee, founder and director of SmartMarriages.com, a Washington D.C.-based clearinghouse for marriage education programs. "Having a solid marriage predicts longevity in children and adults. It is a bigger health indicator than smoking."

A decade ago, after "suffering an epiphany," about her chosen career, Sollee left her job as an associate executive director of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and got involved in marriage education, which she believes can reach more people. "It took 13 years to get trained and licensed and I am going to sit with one couple at a time? That's very cost inefficient," she says.

In 1996, she held the first SmartMarriages conference, bringing marriage education providers from across the country together. It drew about 400 people. This year, there were 2,000, from small, faith-based groups offering inexpensive classes to national franchises offering weekend retreats for thousands of dollars.

Statistics confirm that, in general, marriage is good and divorce is bad when it comes to society.

According to the report "Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences," divorce reduces the likelihood that children will graduate from college and doubles the odds that adult children will end up divorced. Married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than single men. Married people have longer life expectancies. Married mothers have lower rates of depression and domestic violence. And divorce is the number one cause of personal bankruptcy.

"They say it takes a village to raise a child but it takes a lot of strong stable marriages to create a village," says Sollee. She believes that while divorce was the "in thing" in the '70s and '80s, things are changing. "Marriage is the new status symbol."

Nonetheless, 43 percent of first marriages and 60 to 65 percent of second marriages still end in divorce. Colorado is 20 percent higher than the national average, and Boulder has one of the highest rates in the state, Markman says.

"Most people get married and divorced in the United States without seeking any kind of marriage counseling whatsoever," says Markman, who argues that most marriage counselors are better trained at treating individuals than couples. "Even when they do go to marriage counseling, they don't receive the best services available."

Looking back over more than two decades of scientifically researching couples who made it, or didn't, Markman points to one fundamental conclusion: "It wasn't how much you loved each other or how similar or different you were in your personalities that made a difference, it was how the differences were handled when conflicts occur."

In 1991, Markman founded PREP Inc., a marriage education program so successful it has been adopted by the U.S. military. "Love Your Relationship", which hosted its premier retreat last weekend, expands on the PREP concept. It not only teaches couples how to deal with conflict better (taking time-outs, taking turns being the "speaker" or the "listener," and setting aside family meetings for serious talks and date nights for fun), but also how re-discover why they got together in the first place. Couples stayed in the hotel last Saturday night and were challenged to a "fun fest" — to go out on the town and have as much fun as possible. They came back Sunday morning with stories of poetry in the bathtub, scenic drives, and romantic interludes back at the room.

"Just to be able to get away as a couple is, at times, as important as doing the work," says David Gebel, 48, who attended the retreat with his wife of 26 years.

Sollee says marriage education also enlightens couples about what to expect. For instance, they are taught that the highest number of divorces occur during the first two years of marriage (when life is full of compromises) and years 14 to 16 (when the kids become teenagers). Just knowing those tough times are par for the course might keep some couples from fleeing, she says.

Jay Lindsay, a licensed clinical psychologist in Boulder who has specialized in marriage therapy for 30 years, says he believes marriage education can be helpful for some. But in some cases, there are deep emotional wounds that have to be worked through, and private, professional counseling is necessary. He says much of the claims that private couples counseling is ineffective are based on old research: "Marital therapy has come a long way in the past two decades."

Chris Knight, 36, and Sandra Gnat, 36, drove 14 hours from their home in Chicago and paid \$935 to attend the Love Your Relationship workshop, and they're not even married yet. "We've seen our friends go through it — get married, have kids, get divorced — and it's really scary," says Gnat, who plans to marry Knight this fall. "We just wanted to start out right."

Tony, 44, and Melissa, 46, Giordano walked into the workshop Saturday with the possibility of divorce lurking. With three boys from their previous marriages and an 11-month old son together, plus high-stress jobs, they found themselves with little time for fun.

"Date night used to drive me crazy," says Tony. "All we did was get into an argument."

The two went home Sunday night, more hopeful than they had been in a long time.

"This teaches you some techniques so you can do it on your own," Tony said.

For more information on Love Your Relationship, log on to [www.loveyourrelationship.com](http://www.loveyourrelationship.com). Prices range from \$935 to \$1,600 for retreats.

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