Overview

Effective couple communication is essential for a healthy family. Qualitative research findings from Malawi indicate that lack of open communication, particularly around issues of sexuality, is a key reason men and women look outside the home for other partners, increasing their risk of contracting HIV and passing it to their partner.

To strengthen couples’ communication skills, BRIDGE II, in collaboration with local faith-based organizations from different religions and sects, developed *A Happy Married Life: A Couple Counseling Guide*. The guide was used at the community level by faith-based counselors trained by BRIDGE II. The overall objectives of the counseling sessions were to:

- Support people planning to get married by helping them choose a partner who is right for them;
- Improve couple communication and strengthen intimacy between married couples;
- Assure married partners and those entering marriage that obeying the commands of God/Allah is one way to help prevent HIV from entering the home;
- Help men and women think through and take responsibility for acting on what they need to do to have a happy family life.

The guide also helped couples resolve conflict in their marriage and enabled faith-based counselors to assist couples in addressing issues previously regarded as taboo or difficult to bring into the open. The guide accomplished this through the use of several different participatory methods, allowing couples to express themselves. The methods included group discussion, brainstorming, role-play, small group work, drama, and storytelling.


Voices from the Field

The decision to attend faith-based marriage counseling was life-changing for Christopher and Ndaziona Kachingwe from Ng’ombo, Machinga. With encouragement from the marriage counselors, Christopher and Ndaziona went for HIV testing and learned that they were both HIV-positive.

“There were a lot of taboos and difficulties in talking about sexual issues before we attended the faith-based marriage counseling sessions. But after the counseling, we felt more comfortable talking about these things, and we were encouraged to go for HIV testing.” said Ndaziona.

*A Happy Married Life: A Couple Counseling Guide* was used by couple counselors to conduct group counseling sessions in churches and mosques in Malawi.

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Community Engagement

The development of the guide was a collaborative effort between BRIDGE II and several Faith Based Organizations (FBO) in Malawi. Representatives from the FBOs provided substantial input on foundational concepts of the guide, identified the topics the guide should include, and contributed key content for each section, including relevant quotes from the Bible and Quran. The guide was also pretested on couples from participating FBOs who identified issues that impacted the usability of the resource and provided feedback on how to resolve these issues. Following the finalization of the guide, a review meeting with leaders from prominent FBOs was held in order to gain their buy-in and promote their use of the Happy Married Life guide.

Achievements

Participating faith-based institutions and couples counselors have reported that the guide was well accepted by both Christian and Muslim communities. Participating couples testified that the counseling sessions helped them find solutions to marital problems and improved their overall communication. Many couples acknowledged that counseling has made them more open to discussing difficult but important issues, such as sex and money, and has increased their knowledge about HIV and AIDS.

• 490 couples (980 people) from 10 Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) were trained in using the Happy Married Life guide to provide counseling services.

• More than 50,000 people participated in couple counseling sessions.

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