

UCLA creates new institute to strengthen relationships

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A new UCLA institute will be offering seminars on how intimate relationships work and what couples can do to keep their relationships healthy and strong.

Created and administered by UCLA faculty, the Relationship Institute at UCLA (www.relationshipinstitute.ucla.edu) will present research-based findings in an engaging and accessible format, using case studies, self-examinations, videotaped examples and interactive exercises.

"Research on relationships has evolved now to the point where key principles about intimate bonds can be identified, and I think it would be very unfortunate if this knowledge was left on the shelves in academic libraries," said Thomas Bradbury, co-director of the institute and a professor in the UCLA department of psychology.

Psychologists have long offered therapeutic interventions for couples but are now responding to a growing public demand for basic education about relationships of all kinds.

Benjamin Karney, co-director of the institute and an associate professor of psychology, said that "at all stages of adulthood now, couples are open to learning more about the challenges they are likely to face and how they can best meet these challenges."

The institute's first seminar, called "Building Your Best Marriage," will address how couples can establish and maintain strong relationships. The one-day program will be organized around a few key factors known to affect how relationships develop over time, including the role of communication, how people can disagree constructively, better and worse ways to support your partner, and how stress can divide partners or draw them closer together.

"The aim of these seminars is to answer questions that get beyond the conventional wisdom," Karney said. "For example, we all know that communication is important in relationships, but what does good communication accomplish? Decades of research

contain insights on questions like this that can give couples the perspective to keep their relationship healthy and strong."

"Building Your Best Marriage" will be offered four times at UCLA in 2008, on weekend days, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The dates are April 20, May 11, June 8 and Aug. 23. Each seminar is limited to a maximum of 60 couples, and both members of a couple are encouraged to attend. The cost for the six-hour program is \$200 per couple.

Bradbury and Karney are quick to emphasize that the seminars aim to educate couples rather than provide therapy.

"Our focus is on strengthening relationships that are already going pretty well — not necessarily perfect, but with a reasonably good foundation," Bradbury said. "Couples who are struggling need individual attention uniquely tailored to them."

The seminars offered at the Relationship Institute are based in part on decades of research conducted by the institute's directors. Since 1985, Bradbury has studied hundreds of couples to determine why some newlyweds go on to have great relationships while others struggle. All this research has involved videotaping couples discussing problems with each other in his laboratory at UCLA.

"Having watched these conversations, we are starting to identify the turning points where conversations run the risk of becoming unpleasant," Bradbury said. "Healthy couples anticipate and avoid these traps, but it seems like something that all couples could learn."

Much of Karney's research addresses the surprising role that stress plays in the quality of the communication that partners display with one another.

"The same couples that are able to resolve conflict well when their lives are relatively calm often are not able to resolve conflict as well when their lives get more stressful," Karney said. "How well couples resolve their differences is not simply a product of their communication skills — it is also a reflection of stresses and strains outside the relationship. We are learning that couples need to not only choose their battles but to time their battles too."

Although hundreds of research studies have been published about intimate relationships in recent years, Karney and Bradbury were struck by how few efforts had been made to distill and convey the key findings from this research directly to couples and families. Their forthcoming book, "Intimate Relationships," which will be published by W.W. Norton, covers similar ground.

"I love teaching this material," Bradbury said. "When you tell people about research studies that ring true for them, that is wonderful. We want people to say, 'I never thought about it that way.'"

"We will provide people with information, tools and principles that they can put into practice in ways that we think are likely to improve their relationships," Karney said.

People can learn more about the institute and register for a seminar at www.relationshipinstitute.ucla.edu.

UCLA is California's largest university, with an enrollment of nearly 37,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The UCLA College of Letters and Science and the university's 11 professional schools feature renowned faculty and offer more than 300 degree programs and majors. UCLA is a national and international leader in the breadth and quality of its academic, research, health care, cultural, continuing education and athletic programs. Four alumni and five faculty have been awarded the Nobel Prize.

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