

'How to avoid marrying a jerk'

ACA member packages dating plan for singles and singles again

By Angela Kennedy
Counseling Today, July 2005

John Van Epp first began helping singles and couples as a pastoral counselor, providing guidance and creating educational programs for those in his church who were dealing with relationship issues or divorce. The number of people struggling to find a healthy relationship seemed to be escalating, and at one point he was counseling almost 75 percent of the congregation.

"I found so many couples coming to get premarital counseling but already completely set on the marriage and marriage date," he said. "There was not a lot of openness toward working on issues that may have already been present in the relationship." He realized during this time that the need existed for a program targeted at singles before they became serious in their dating relationships. "Because once serious," he said, "they overlook and minimize the problems that later infect and plague their marriage."

Van Epp felt strongly that there was a need to help this population further, so he decided to pursue his counseling degree and eventually a doctorate. In 1986, he made the switch from the pastorate to a full-time counseling practice in Ohio. Although he was now working in a clinical setting, he continued to see many clients who were frustrated with broken marriages or dysfunctional relationships.

"Once I got into the counseling practice," he said, "the same issues kept presenting themselves in those who came in for couples counseling, as well as the individuals who had left the relationship. They almost always could see problem areas but overlooked them and minimized them."

To better help his clients find and maintain meaningful relationships, Van Epp created a seminar presentation that blended humor, psychology and commonsense strategies for determining whether a courtship has the potential to turn into a healthy, long-term relationship. "I developed a program, basically, that would help people have the tools to know what to look for in a relationship and prospective partner before they become so involved and infected with the 'love-is-blind syndrome,'" he said.

The seminar, "How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk: The Way to Follow Your Heart Without Losing Your Mind," was a hit and eventually evolved into a video program with a workbook, curriculum and instructor certification. With amusing lesson titles such as "You can't marry Jethro without getting the Clampetts" and "Putting the horse before the cart," the program's popularity grew quickly. Van Epp's seminar has been taught in 45 states, seven countries, more than 250 military bases and thousands of churches, singles organizations, educational settings and agencies. A book is currently under review for possible publication as well.

"It's very concise and focused because it's centered on a plan and builds around a model - the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM)," Van Epp said. "Because this is based around the RAM, it's very user-friendly and easy to remember and apply. It informs the person on the major

areas that predict what a person will be like in a marriage and the bonding forces that must be kept in balance as a relationship grows."

The five-hour video program presents Van Epp's live seminar that comprehensively and comically describes the five dynamics that create attachment and the five crucial areas to explore in a premarital relationship. A 42-page video series discussion workbook is available to assist viewers with the outlined lessons. In addition, numerous reflective questions help to personalize the material. The end of the workbook has questions that couples should answer during the premarital period of the relationship. An instructor certification packet is also available for those interested in leading discussion groups with the video series/workbooks or those who want to be certified to actually teach the program, now referred to by its more politically correct title, the "Premarital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge Program" or PICK. The certification packet includes a display board of the Relationship Attachment Model, a PowerPoint presentation of the program, a manual and a seven-hour DVD home instruction course.

"The program is about a lot more than avoiding a certain type of person," Van Epp said. "It's how to pace your relationship and know what exactly to look for in a healthy commitment." The course focuses on what he calls the underdeveloped education of the mind and the overdeveloped attachment of the heart. "Too many people simply do not know what to look for when dating, and too many people simply do not know how to keep a dating relationship in balance," he said. "It was these two needs which led me to develop a program to follow in the premarital relationship and decisionmaking process."

Van Epp concedes that tons of self-help books for singles are already on the market but contends that none of them really provide a road map or plan for effectively choosing a partner.

Head knowledge

"The program addresses two main parts - the head and the heart," Van Epp said. "There are certain areas that a person needs to get to know about another person. That's the 'head knowledge.' Even if you get to know all the right stuff about someone else, if your heart has become so involved, so attached and so overwhelmed with a person, it will not even pay attention to who you are getting know." The most common mistake in new relationships, he said, is assuming that how a person acts now is how he or she will act over the course of a long-term commitment.

"They draw the conclusion that the way the person is treating them the first months of the relationship is how they will be treated throughout the course of a long-term relationship, especially into marriage," he said. "It's one of the main problem areas that I see singles buy in to. The reality is there are some very subtle but powerful predictors as to what a person will be like in a marriage."

To address the head knowledge, he said, it is important to explore five areas - or FACES - when forming a relationship.

Family dynamics and background

The way a person interacts with family members is a subtle predictor of how he or she may act in a relationship, Van Epp said. The roles and dynamics learned from the family tend to present themselves later on in the commitment, he said.

"A good example is a man who has major conflicts with his mother," Van Epp pointed out. "He may be wonderful in a dating relationship because he is not viewing the woman as a prospective wife or mother. He is viewing her as his girlfriend or soul mate. Yet, once married, those roles will kick in and become lenses that he looks at the woman through." At that point, he said, the man may have a major shift in behavior. For example, while he once was very conscientious in the dating period, he may become detached and uninvolved in the marriage.

"It becomes very important that singles - before they are heavily involved in a relationship - learn what to look for so that when they get into a relationship, they aren't fooled or overwhelmed by all the positives that might be happening," he said. "They can look at the areas, like family background, that might be predictors of something very negative."

Unfortunately, he said, this idea goes against popular dating practices, where the courtship takes place first, followed by a commitment. Only then do suitors tend to "meet the parents."

Attitudes and actions of the conscience

Someone can have charm or "mad game," as the kids would say, but then turn into Al Bundy once the newness of the relationship has worn off. "These are the skills of winning a person," Van Epp said. "They are extremely focused on the other person in the beginning. With that intense connection, one cannot see how the person will actually be like in a long-term relationship, but over a few months you can detect the patterns of their relationship conscience through subtle patterns in their behavior."

Compatibility

Compatibility is what attracts one person to another person and can be influenced by personality characteristics, values or lifestyle.

Examples of other relationships

Van Epp suggests looking at a person's past intimate relationships for clues. "Find out their history from friends or family," he said. "If we listen more carefully and we ask about some key areas in terms of the past relationships, you can start to see patterns in the subtle areas. Patterns become very important - patterns from their family, other relationships - patterns that help to reveal or expose the way their relationship conscience works." Van Epp cautioned, however, that many times people automatically take the side of their partner and assign blame to "the ex" for whatever issues arose in the former relationship.

Skills

This is the area often addressed in counseling sessions - communication skills, conflict resolution skills, keeping a balance between assertiveness and understanding, etc. "The key is their relationship conscience will determine when they use or don't use their skills later on in a relationship," Van Epp said. "They may be very skilled but choose to not use those skills with

you, or they will use those skills against you. Understanding a person's relationship conscience and their relationship skills is vital."

Van Epp exemplified this point with some classic stereotypes. "There are jobs where the person may have great relationship skills but a very poor conscience, like the idea of a used car salesman or politician," he said. "It's common knowledge that there is a difference, but many times when a person is forming a relationship they overlook that and assume that the skills are the conscience. And that can be very misleading and very painful to face later on down the road."

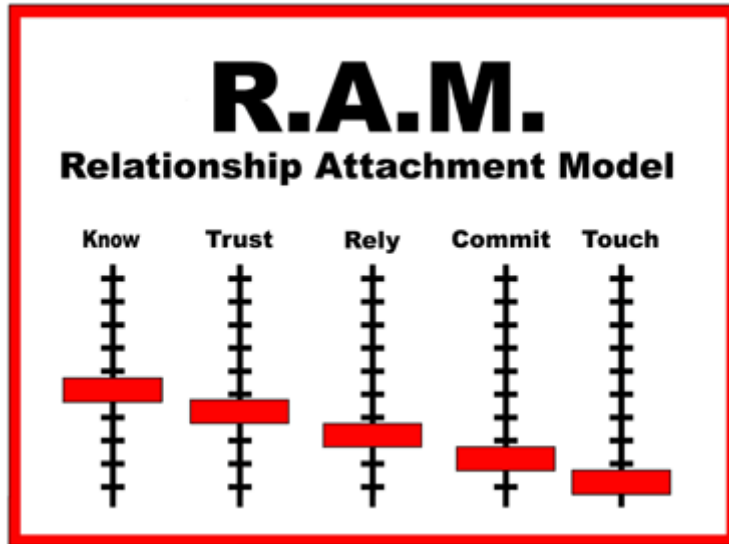
In today's impatient society that embraces instant gratification, accelerated attachment appears to be a precursor to failed relationships. "Singles have to know what to look for and slow down their attachment so they can see clearly from the beginning," Van Epp said.

Heart knowledge

"Heart knowledge" uses the RAM model, which examines bonding processes and how to properly pace a growing relationship. The model, which borrows from other areas of research, illustrates the components of attachment and closeness. Five key bonding components are present in almost every type of relationship. Healthy relationships keep all the components in balance. In contrast, when any one component is extremely high or low, the relationship becomes unsafe. The model offers both clients and counselors an easy way to measure the areas and see how they relate to each other. The bonding components are:

- **Getting to know someone. The process of getting to know someone and having him or her get to know you can form a very strong bond, Van Epp said.**
- **Trust. "The trust that we feel pulls from what attachment theory has found in terms of mental representation," he said. "As you are getting to know someone, you are forming a picture or representation of him or her in your mind. The more positive the representation, the stronger the trust is toward that person."**
- **Reliance. Depending on a person for your needs. "What is found in social exchange theory - whereas I go about meeting a person's needs and they go about meeting my needs - (is that) the better our needs are met, the stronger the dependence and reliance is on each other and, therefore, the stronger the bond."**
- **Commitment. The degree to which two people belong to one another. "It's a kind of healthy ownership in a relationship," Van Epp said. "In terms of a strong bond in a relationship, the more I feel that this person really belongs to me and I belong to them, the stronger the commitment."**
- **Sexual chemistry and touch. "Even in friendships there may be sexual chemistry, but we set boundaries," he said. "This is certainly a very bonding force in romantic relationships."**

"If you think of all these areas, they are very bonding, but they also relate to each other," Van Epp said. His theory is that if the components are kept in a safe zone, where one level does not greatly exceed a previous level, then the relationship is positive. For example, don't let your sexual involvement greatly exceed your commitment; don't become more committed than the level of reliance you have formed; don't try to meet each other's needs beyond the level of trust; don't trust a person you don't know well.



"Married couples also need to keep those five areas of the RAM vital and vibrant in their relationship," Van Epp said. "Couples, over time, can feel like they don't know each other anymore. Their trust picture of each other can begin to be infected with small, negative attitudes. They may stop meeting each other's needs, causing the reliance to drop." Teaching this model to married couples and showing them how to evaluate their relationship can help keep each bonding component strong, he said. Van Epp often uses the RAM chart in his practice to conduct assessments of couples seeking marriage counseling. Having the couple rate each of the five components in their marriage is helpful in setting the agenda, he said. "It's become a very utilitarian model," he said, "not just to help them rebuild their relationship but to continue to build it throughout the years."

Military involvement

According to Van Epp, his program's versatility allows it to be presented in a variety of settings, be it churches, organizations for singles, divorce recovery groups, women's shelters or high schools. Even the military has embraced his simplified design for successful courtships.

The U.S. Army started implementing the PICK program five years ago, Van Epp said. "Before, they didn't have any type of program geared toward choosing a partner and building a relationship," he said. Now, several chaplains and family advocacy officers are certified to teach the program.

"About three years ago the Army took a more serious interest," he said, "and the Chief of Chaplains Office orchestrated a funding of a research project that would look at how useful this program would be for single soldiers in both Army bases and academic settings." The research project was recently completed, and the findings will be submitted for publication this summer. "The findings were extremely positive in terms of altering attitudes and intentions of single soldiers toward dating and relationships," Van Epp said. "The military has really struggled to try to help singles slow down these accelerated relationships. Military bases are like incubators for these types of relationships. So the PICK program has really taken off in that environment."

Spreading the RAM gospel

Van Epp encourages counselors, both secular and pastoral, to become certified in the PICK program and to use the model with clients and in the community. "Psychoeducational programs are a tremendous asset to a counseling practice," he said. "It helps to take the information that is so necessary for personal change and personal growth and put it in a structured educational format so that it becomes hand-and-glove with your counseling practice. Being certified in the PICK program will help you not only address singles' needs better but also help you organize your own seminars where you can teach the course."

While attending a marriage conference five years ago, Bob Ruthazer and his wife discovered Van Epp's program. Impressed by the program's principles, the Ruthazers, who have been married 26 years, purchased the video for their two young-adult children. "It had a pretty significant impact on our college-aged daughter," Bob Ruthazer said. Since implementing the program, he said, his daughter can tell within the first two weeks of dating someone whether the courtship has potential for turning into a happy and healthy relationship. "She can avoid that serial dating trap which many singles get stuck in - being in a relationship for six months to a year and then realizing it just can't work out," Ruthazer said. "Then they break it off and start another."

Ruthazer, a certified family life educator through the National Council of Family Relations, is now also a certified instructor of the PICK program. He has presented the program to a variety of religious groups, universities and area community organizations and once held the presentation at a local coffeehouse over the course of two days. "The program has great value in helping people understand the basic ideas of relationships and how they work," he said. "It's helpful in preventing people from getting hurt over and over. It gives them a better start to forming a healthy relationship that might lead to a long-term commitment. Every single or single again should familiarize themselves with this program."

Beth Miller is also a certified PICK instructor and believes the program is too effective not to use and teach. In fact, Miller and Epp collaborated last summer on the first seminar for teens. Miller picked 15 teen-agers from her church congregation's youth group to attend the three-day retreat. "They were really receptive to it," she said. "John puts this in an application that just makes sense to people. That simple (RAM) board is such a great visual that people can wrap their minds around very easily and really understand. Regardless of whether it's taught from a Christian perspective or a secular one, people can see that when things are out of balance, that's when they are in pain."

Miller also taught an abbreviated version of the program to previously homeless individuals who were seeking services at an inner city outreach agency in Richmond, Va. "No matter what walk of life or where you are coming from," she said, "it just makes sense. One of the agency employees told me the next day that one of the men came up and said, 'I learned something tonight ... I'm a jerk.' John's material helps people recognize the poor choices that they are making in terms of relationships, but they are also, in a nonconfrontational way, forced to look at themselves and see where they may be a 'jerk.'"

In the works

Van Epp is currently updating the program's website (www.nojerks.com) to include a password-protected instructor's section that will make supplemental materials available for

download free of charge. Instructors will be able to tailor the program to their specific populations. For example, if an instructor is teaching the program to singles who have previously had abusive relationships, the instructor can download information that can be added to the "trust" lesson or one of the other key parts of the RAM. Other areas to be addressed include issues concerning single parenting and stepfamilies.

For more information about the PICK program or the

How to Avoid Marrying a Jerk video, contact Van Epp at vanep@nojerks.com or 330.321.3527.