

DIVERSITY WITHIN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: INCREASING CULTURAL COMPETENCE THROUGH "OURRELATIONSHIP" DIVERSITY PROCESS GROUPS

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Over half of romantic relationships result in divorce, and at any given time, one in five married couples are considered clinically distressed (Bradbury et al., 2000). Unsatisfying romantic relationships are also shown to be associated with several mental and physical health ailments such as higher rates of depression and anxiety, lower immunity, premature mortality, and higher risk for coronary heart disease (Robles et al., 2014). The impacts of relationship distress are difficult to overstate, however, only about 15% of couples seek couples therapy (Doss et al., 2009). Barriers to couples therapy include time commitment, mental health stigma, cost of treatment, and scheduling difficulties

(Hubbard & Anderson, 2022). The OurRelationship program, a web-based translation of Integrative Behavioral Couples Therapy (IBCT), is an effort to increase the accessibility of couples therapy, especially to same and opposite-gender low-income, military, and veteran couples. Federally funded by the Administration for Children and Families, the OurRelationship Program provides free services for these populations. Couples are presented with personalized feedback and relationship psychoeducation that allows partners to identify, better understand, and rectify a core issue within their relationship. In addition to the online content, couples are paired with an

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OurRelationship Coach to guide them through conversations to apply what they have learned to their own relationships.

The mission of an OurRelationship Coach is to aid couples in resolving their core issues, with special emphasis on socially, racially, and economically diverse couples. Since the conception of the coach-led program, coaches have always served a diverse group of couples nationwide. As the program advanced, specialized OurRelationship programs - with unique content specific for same-gendered and military or veteran couples - were created. While the program was advancing, the supervision model for program coaches remained stagnant - coaches did not have a space dedicated to processing their questions, experiences, or worries regarding treating diverse couples, correcting potential biases, or sharing current research regarding diverse couples that were being treated. To address these supervision limitations, OurRelationship Diversity Process Groups were created. OurRelationship supervisors first identified the most frequent diverse couple populations that are treated (i.e., Black/Afro-Caribbean couples; Latino/Hispanic couples; lesbian, gay, and bisexual couples; military couples; low-income couples; transgender and nonbinary couples; interracial and multiracial couples; older adult couples). For each identified diverse couple population, an OurRelationship coach led a monthly process

group. These collaborative groups began by establishing rules to engender a safe space, followed by an open discussion regarding personal experiences and potential concerns in working with the specified population, cultural nuances, a review of current research, and closed with an emotional processing of how the group went. Results from post-presentation assessments have demonstrated that OurRelationship Coaches have increased their cultural competency as well as feel more confident in their abilities to treat diverse couples.

To showcase the OurRelationship program and how diversity process groups improve coaches' cultural competency, we share Toni and Vanessa's OurRelationship success story and their Coach's perspective on how the diversity process groups enhanced her knowledge to best guide this couple with several intersecting identities. To protect the identity and confidentiality of this couple, their names were changed and other identifying information was omitted.

Toni and Vanessa are a married, Black, same-gendered couple who initially met at a concert in 2018 and have been together since. Within their Welcome call, Toni stated initially being attracted to Vanessa because until they met she "hadn't felt that happiness in a little while." When asked what made Vanessa want to take the next step within their relationship, she reported feeling secure in being loved by

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someone with a “good heart, who gives and cares for others.” At the conclusion of their Observe call, this couple identified lack of communication and accountability regarding duties around the home and lack of emotional intimacy as the relationship issues to focus on in the program. They reported feeling like their relationship had become more like roommates than partners.

Within the first part of the Understand phase, the Coach utilized unified detachment, an IBCT technique, to facilitate this couple’s discussion on how their differences and external stressors impact their core issues in a non-judgmental and mindful way. During this call, the couple was able to recognize and reflect upon how their differences in mental health, organization, and accountability/reliability impact their ability to communicate and be emotionally intimate with one another. As they explored external stressors, Toni discussed how her physical health was easily impacted by Vanessa’s mental health leading to self-isolation. Vanessa shared how the lack of local social support and dislike of her job resulted in feeling “trapped” and as though she is “losing [herself],” impacting her ability to communicate effectively.

In the second half of the Understand phase, the couple discussed how their surface-level emotions, Toni’s lack of emotion and Vanessa’s annoyance, actually mask their

hidden emotions, Toni’s feeling of insignificance and Vanessa’s worry. Additionally, both partners identified and discussed how their communication pattern of Blame/Avoid tends to arise during difficult discussions. After rating their conversation as going well overall, their Coach used empathic joining, an IBCT technique, to heighten the couple’s positive emotions and experiences. During this call, Toni recognized the progress Vanessa has made in being accountable and noted feeling a sense of relief now that she takes initiative around the house, to which Vanessa reported that she feels more appreciated. Vanessa added that with this conversation, they felt like they were getting back to the way their relationship used to be, which brought up feelings of happiness and excitement toward the future. “It feels great that we are both feeling like this,” Toni replied, growing emotional as she gave this response. Finally, both partners expressed that continuing to have deep discussions would resolve a lot of issues in the future and recognized that their core issues feed into each other, so in having better communication they can connect more emotionally.

While this couple did not complete the Respond call with their Coach due to scheduling difficulties, they did complete the program on their own. Post-program assessments indicated that this couple experienced an increase in relationship

satisfaction, a reduction in psychological distress and were overall satisfied with the program.

During the OurRelationship Diversity Process Group, Toni and Vanessa's Coach shared her experience in working with this couple. Reflecting on the experience, the coach shared: "The diversity process groups provided a safe space for open discussion surrounding our work with diverse populations. Through these conversations, I was able to honestly reflect on my own cultural perspectives, as well as both my strengths and limitations when working with diverse couples. I learned about some of the nuances in working with Black and Same-Gender couples that shifted my approach to coaching. I was also provided with a summary of research findings for each of these populations that helped inform some of the topics that came up on coaching calls.

For example, for this couple - the lack of a strong support system in their new home and living away from family and friends played a big role in their core issues. In our process groups we talked about the importance of a strong sense of community in both Black and LGBTQ+ populations. As Black, Lesbian women who had previously relied on that community support to manage their external stressors, they found it difficult to navigate their relationship without that external support. They frequently argued about topics such as health and mental health because they were not accustomed to being the only source of support for one another. Awareness of these cultural nuances and the population-specific challenges facilitated my ability to validate their experiences, build rapport, and engage them in both unified detachment and empathic joining. The diversity process groups were a valued addition to my training that made an impact on my clinical approach and ability to connect with couples."



Caption: Description of each phase within the OurRelationship program (**O**bserve, **U**nderstand, **R**espond).

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