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SIMR Practice Brief

Tips for Creating a Motivating and Supportive Environment for Staff Success in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Services

Staff are the face and the heart of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services. They are essential for successful implementation, including recruiting and enrolling participants, delivering curriculum workshops, providing case management, and carrying out the behind-the-scenes work that makes an organization run smoothly.¹ The overall quality of HMRE staff, including the passion they bring to their work and the relationships they forge with participants, can make a difference in participants' satisfaction with services and, ultimately, whether they complete the program or are motivated to make lasting changes in their lives.²

A number of factors and staff characteristics affect high-quality service delivery. Research on how to adopt promising and evidence-based practices points to three factors:³

- ▶ **Capacity:** whether staff have the knowledge and skills to provide HMRE services;
- ▶ **Motivation:** the buy-in and confidence of program staff; and
- ▶ **Opportunity:** the extent to which work environments and resources enable staff to perform at their best.

¹ Strong 2022

² Friend et al. 2020; Horvath 2017; Asheer et al. 2022

³ Michie et al. 2011



HMRE leaders often help staff implement new and evidence-based strategies by offering training and professional development to build their **capacity**, but it is just as important to consider ways to support staff **motivation** and **opportunity**.⁴

The Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) study was designed to develop and test promising approaches to address implementation challenges related to recruitment, retention, and content engagement in HMRE services. For the 10 HMRE grant recipients that participated in the study, addressing these challenges often meant developing tools to make the jobs of staff easier and supports to help them do their work successfully. This brief shares four tips for supporting HMRE staff **motivation** and **opportunity**, based on the experiences of grant recipients in SIMR.

■ What is rapid cycle learning?

Grant recipients in SIMR tested strategies using a rapid cycle learning approach. Rapid cycle learning is a method for quickly and iteratively testing strategies to strengthen programming. It often involves successive cycles to pilot strategies, collect feedback from staff and participants on how these strategies are working, and gather data to demonstrate whether the strategies are supporting improvement. Based on what grant recipients learn, staff can refine and test strategies again in another learning cycle.

Tip 1. Include staff in the process of developing and refining staff supports to build their motivation



Open communication and feedback loops between program leaders and staff are key ingredients in the successful implementation of HMRE services.⁵ Encouraging staff to take an active role in charting the direction of HMRE services promotes a sense of ownership, buy-in, and motivation. It can also result in a stronger improvement strategy. Staff have their own expertise, drawn from experience working directly with participants, that is not always given voice in program improvement.

Encouraging staff to provide feedback on improvement strategies led several grant recipients in SIMR to make important adjustments to their strategies. Youth & Family Services, for example, initially focused on strategies to help co-facilitators plan and debrief workshop sessions. Through debriefing together, co-facilitators learned they

⁴ Friend et al. 2020; Higginbotham and Myler 2010

⁵ Friend et al. 2020

■ What is SIMR?

Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) is a national evaluation overseen by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation with funding from ACF's Office of Family Assistance. It aims to strengthen the capacity of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) grant recipients to improve their services by addressing implementation challenges in three core areas:

- 1. Recruitment.** Challenges related to identifying and communicating with potential participants, as well as enrolling them in services.
- 2. Retention.** Challenges with initial and sustained participation in services.
- 3. Content engagement.** Challenges related to sustaining participants' interest and attention during activities and services.

Through SIMR, Mathematica and its partner, Public Strategies, collaborated with 10 HMRE grant recipients (5 that serve adults and 5 that serve youth) to engage in iterative, rapid cycle learning aimed at strengthening their services. These organizations are funded by the Office of Family Assistance from 2020–2025. Through this work, the team co-created, tested, and refined promising strategies to address recruitment, retention, and content engagement challenges. The study had two main goals: (1) to improve the service delivery of grant recipients in the study and (2) to develop lessons for the broader HMRE field about promising practices for addressing common implementation challenges.

For more information about SIMR, see the study's [project page on the OPRE website](#).

were experiencing challenges working with classroom teachers and establishing inclusive classroom environments. In the learning cycles that followed, Youth & Family Services pivoted to work on these challenges (See the brief [“Strategies to Support Co-Facilitation in Classroom Sessions”](#) for more information).

■ **SIMR in action: Asking facilitators where they would like support at MotherWise**

Engaging program staff at all stages of the rapid cycle learning process—from identifying challenges to designing strategies to testing and refining the strategies—was a key principle in SIMR.

The University of Denver’s MotherWise program actively included facilitators when designing strategies to engage participants in virtual services and build participant relationships. One strategy MotherWise tested, using short videos to cover program content, emerged directly from staff input. Facilitators shared that the videos would make their jobs easier because they would free the facilitators up to focus on preparing group discussions after the video. To identify videos, MotherWise leaders discussed facilitation “pain points” with facilitators and identified topics that MotherWise participants had difficulty discussing and comprehending in past virtual workshop series or that tended to lead to particularly challenging group discussions. MotherWise leaders prioritized producing videos that covered this content. At the end of the learning cycle, facilitators reported that participants had productive, positive, and engaged conversations after viewing the videos and believed that they made it possible for them to prepare more enriching discussions. MotherWise leaders reported that directly involving facilitators in shaping the videos helped make HMRE services more engaging and participant-centered.

Similarly, at the end of a learning cycle focusing on virtual workshop engagement, Montefiore Medical Center staff noted that challenges in the virtual workshop also affected their virtual skills coaching sessions. Based on this feedback, Montefiore developed Little Love Bites, a series of 15-minute skill coaching sessions in which staff coached couples to practice skills taught in the curriculum (See the brief [“Tips for Providing Skill Coaching to Reinforce Workshop Content in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs”](#) for more information). For these grant recipients, asking for staff feedback on improvement strategies—and taking it seriously—led to insights that would not have emerged otherwise.

Tip 2. Offer tools to help staff identify and reduce sources of stress and increase the opportunity for them to do their best



No matter how motivated staff are, working in a social service organization can be stressful. Working closely with participants is emotional and taxing work, especially when the participants have experienced significant challenges and trauma in their lives, such as poverty or intimate partner violence.⁶ Emotions such as stress and anxiety can reduce staff members’ motivation, commitment, and job performance.⁷ Burnout can be a threat when staff feel like they do not have the resources to meet the demands of their work.⁸

Organizational cultures, work environments, and resources can intensify or relieve these pressures. Workplace strategies that help staff regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors may build staff capacity to work with HMRE participants.⁹ For example, they might get less flustered when they have to pivot during a workshop or respond compassionately when a participant is upset or angry.

⁶ Baird and Jenkins 2003

⁷ Cane et al. 2012

⁸ Cherniss 1980, Abramson 2022

⁹ Baumgartner et al. 2020

■ SIMR in action: Testing T3 with Auburn Youth Relationship Education (AYRE) program

When AYRE first started participating in SIMR, AYRE facilitators were preparing to fully re-open in-person schools after a year of virtual school brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The return to in-person learning, combined with the fact that many of the facilitators had no previous facilitation experience, promised to be especially stressful for facilitators and students.

A group of AYRE facilitators participated in a SIMR training to learn about self-regulation development. In this training, they developed a toolkit of short-term actions they could take to manage stress, anger, sadness, and lack of focus when they found themselves becoming overwhelmed. Then, they used a three-step process called T3 (Take Note, Tag It, Tune It) several times per week while teaching HMRE workshops to notice and write down body sensations, assign an emotion to the sensation, and practice a self-regulation strategy to manage the feeling. For more information, see [“Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Youth: Findings from the Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs \(SIMR\) Project.”](#)

The box above describes the focus of rapid cycle learning in SIMR for the Auburn University Youth Relationship Education (AYRE) program, which trained staff on how adults can support youth self-regulation development (called co-regulation), and tested a strategy called T3 to help facilitators recognize and reduce sources of stress, which would help them increase their capacity to build and maintain strong relationships with youth. At the end of the school semester, AYRE asked youth to rate their facilitators on a number of dimensions. An analysis by the SIMR team found that students rated inexperienced facilitators who participated in training and practiced T3 throughout the semester higher on measures of co-regulation behaviors (such as providing positive feedback to youth and being sensitive to their feelings and comfort), student–facilitator relationships (such as students’ feelings of trust and respect), and classroom management.¹⁰

Literature on self-regulation suggests a number of other workplace strategies that could enhance the self-regulation capacity of human services staff.¹¹ Examples include mindfulness practices and training to increase staff knowledge of self-regulation. HMRE leaders can make changes to the work environment to encourage positive interactions between staff or increase their sense of support. For example, in another rapid cycle learning study, a past HMRE grant recipient found success by creating a meditation room in its offices and establishing a practice for staff to regularly praise one another for their work and contributions to the organization.¹²

Tip 3. Be mindful of existing staff burdens and time constraints and how additional responsibilities may affect staff motivation and opportunity



When introducing changes to program practices and processes, it is important to prioritize changes that can help staff manage their busy schedules and, if possible, reduce unnecessary work. It is also important to ensure that any program changes don’t increase burden on staff who might already be stretched thin. If that happens, the changes could backfire by contributing to staff members’ feelings of stress and reducing their motivation, even if they are intended to improve services or make staff members’ jobs easier.

¹⁰ For more information on the analysis, see the SIMR report, [“Conducting Rapid Cycle Learning with Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs for Youth.”](#)

¹¹ Baumgartner et al. 2020

¹² Baumgartner et al. 2020

■ **SIMR in action: Reducing the burden of new case management processes with Family Service Agency of Santa Barbara (FSA-SB) and More Than Conquerors, Inc.**

FSA-SB and More Than Conquerors, Inc. implemented motivation-driven approaches to case management. These strategies represented substantial changes to the way that case managers typically did things. As a part of this change, FSA-SB replaced its existing assessment tools with a single tool that reduced the questions that case managers asked participants. FSA-SB uploaded the new tool to the organization's case management system so it was accessible to staff and easy for them to use. More Than Conquerors, Inc. used nFORM, the management information system used by all ACF HMRE grant recipients, to record case management meetings. As a part of its strategy, it co-created a tool to standardize case notes so that case managers would know exactly what they were supposed to record. (For more information on motivation-driven approaches to case management, see the brief "[Integrating a Motivation Driven Approach to Case Management into HMRE services.](#)") Staff at both organizations reported that these additional supports helped them adjust to a new approach to their work.

Some of the strategies that HMRE grant recipients tested in SIMR represented fundamental changes in the way that staff performed their work. When developing these strategies, the grant recipients and SIMR team paid special attention to how they could affect staff workloads. To minimize increases in burden, program leaders worked with the SIMR team to streamline the processes and practices. The box above describes the steps that two grant recipients took to minimize the burden on case managers implementing a new approach to working with participants.

HMRE leaders can also monitor service provision to understand pain points for the staff involved in providing those services. Montefiore, for example, focused its work in SIMR on adapting successful in-person services to a virtual setting. By observing virtual workshop sessions and gathering input from facilitators, Montefiore leaders learned that content delivery took longer in a virtual setting than it did in an in-person workshop. This resulted in facilitators consistently feeling pressed for time and unable to get through all of the content they were supposed to cover. Based on this insight, Montefiore worked with a developer of the HMRE curriculum it used to streamline it for virtual service delivery.

Even strategies designed to reduce staff stress might need adjustment. For example, although survey results indicated that participating in training and T3 was beneficial for AYRE facilitators, the SIMR team found that facilitators were often unable to fully practice the strategy. Facilitators, who were often managing other time pressures such as full college class loads and additional job responsibilities, told the SIMR team that they didn't always have time to practice T3 and that reminders to complete the strategy sometimes made it feel like a chore. These insights led the SIMR team to suggest that a lighter-touch strategy focused on training and knowledge building could be less burdensome and achieve the same benefit.

Tip 4. Encourage staff to set goals to build motivation to practice new skills



Goal setting is a common management technique. Asking staff to set their own performance goals taps into their intrinsic motivation, helps staff know where to focus their efforts, challenges them, and activates their problem-solving skills.¹³ Studies have shown that individual goal setting improves job performance.¹⁴

¹³ University of Minnesota 2017

¹⁴ Latham and Locke 2006

■ **SIMR in action: Encouraging staff to set their own goals as part of program improvement efforts**

As a part of its test of motivation-driven case management, **FSA-SB** supervisors practiced goal setting with the case managers they supervised before using it in case management meetings with participants. This helped HMRE staff practice the strategy and become comfortable with it. It also helped case managers understand what the goal setting process would be like from the participants' perspective. Supervisors and case managers found the strategy promising and were eager to implement it, but they also found it challenging to use and, after one round of practice, wanted more practice and support.

To help facilitators support and engage students in curriculum content and manage classroom disruptions, **Youth & Family Services** asked facilitators to implement a variety of co-regulation strategies. Facilitators participated in an initial training on the strategies and four follow-up coaching calls while teaching HMRE workshops. In the follow-up calls, facilitators chose co-regulation strategies they wanted to practice, set individual goals for practicing them, and discussed their experiences with the strategies. After completing the training and coaching calls, facilitators reported that their confidence grew in their ability to manage challenging situations and classroom disruptions and provide socioemotional guidance to youth. One facilitator noted that the coaching calls and goal setting were particularly useful because they helped him intentionally practice the strategies he learned about.

In SIMR, grant recipients asked staff to set goals about when and how often to use the strategies they were testing. Setting individual goals encouraged staff to practice the strategies and become more comfortable using them. The examples in the box above show two different ways that HMRE grant recipient staff used individual goal setting to help implement program improvement strategies. FSA-SB case managers and supervisors practiced setting individual work-related goals with each other before rolling out a new case management approach that was based around helping participants set motivating personal goals. After an initial training about co-regulation, Youth & Family Services facilitators selected strategies they wanted to practice. They then met with a SIMR coach every other week to discuss how their practice went. The facilitators also discussed the areas in which they wanted to improve next and set new practice goals for those skills. In both cases, grant recipient staff believed that setting individual goals helped them implement new approaches to their work.

Next steps

This brief provided tips for supporting staff so that they are equipped with the motivation and opportunity to deliver high-quality HMRE services. These tips drew on the experiences of HMRE grant recipients participating in the SIMR rapid cycle learning study. Service providers are encouraged to apply these strategies and those from other SIMR products and refine them to work in their contexts. Through testing and evaluation, HMRE service providers can continue to contribute insights that benefit the HMRE field.

Readers can find more information about the SIMR study in the full reports, additional practice guides, and digital essay available on the [Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation SIMR web page](#).

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