

# How to Get Men to Open Up in MRE Classes

It may seem a difficult task to engage men in your marriage and relationship education (MRE) classes. While women may be more willing to talk freely about their relationships in any setting, men may need a little more coaxing. In couple-based services, there are ways to facilitate an open discussion that will help men reveal their thoughts and even their feelings toward children, relationships and marriage. This Tip Sheet provides a few helpful suggestions to engage men in discussions and activities in your MRE classes.

## Create the Right Atmosphere

*The classroom setup is key.* Men tend to be less comfortable when they cannot easily see the other people in the room, including the facilitator. So, with that knowledge, your class setting alone may keep men from feeling free enough to open up and share. Try to position chairs/tables so that the participants can see one another. Avoid a “classroom” style set up with rows of people with their backs to each other. Rectangular or circular settings make men feel more comfortable, ultimately encouraging participation.

*Avoid lecture only classroom teaching.* Not everyone has had great experiences in school settings, and the mere thought of being back in school can be threatening and intimidating for some men. A co-facilitation team can help decrease the feeling of being lectured to. It is also important to engage couples/men by asking questions. Facilitators may want to ask all the men a question or provide an opportunity for them to meet as a group and discuss a particular issue.



*Set ground rules in the beginning that articulate your expectations of the group.* Some good rules may include:

- Every person’s opinion is important
- No one should monopolize the group
- Others have a right to express their opinion
- No threatening language
- No foul language

This is also a great place to set the tone and say something like, “To get the most out of this class, everyone should contribute to the learning process.” This type of statement does not say that you want men to “share their feelings.” Rather, it suggests you would like the class participants to assist and advise others with their problems, which men are more likely to do. It is important not to assume or project to the class that the men in the group won’t share their feelings. Participants often rise to the facilitator’s expectations as long as the expectations are communicated in a non-intimidating manner.

*Be prepared for men to try to shock you.* Often men use the art of shock and awe to weed out those they will allow to hang with them. One way to lose your edge is to appear defensive and unable to handle shocking situations.

*Keep a straight face when issues arise.* The last thing you want to do is give the impression that you have NEVER encountered a situation a man may raise in the group. You may be viewed as unattached from the “real world,” naive, green or wimpy -- all huge turnoffs to the male gender.

## Have the Right Attitude

Men have often overcome many obstacles to attend an MRE class. Although many of the obstacles may be in a man’s own mind, the obstacles are still there. You may want to try the following.

*Never speak in an authoritarian voice or in a condescending manner.* Accept his critique or comment as his opinion and allow him to freely speak.

*Demand respect.* For men, the issue of respect is an extremely important one. With that in mind, men should know that the group is there to learn and support each other and that respect is a main ingredient.

*Draw in the man who may be silent.* Call on the man by name and ask, “What do you have to say about this?” or “John, do you have anything to add?” or “What do you see that we might be missing?” This expresses an attitude of inclusion and individual importance.

*Understand that “not today” does not mean never.* Since we often do not know what men are facing outside our MRE class, we should be prepared to let them off the hook from time to time. It is alright to have an “off” night. Though he’s not talking, he is still communicating. Try to understand his body language, facial expressions and other non-verbal cues.

## Keep Men Active

*Try to involve the men in some form of a competition...*men against women! Some men are very competitive. Just the thought of a friendly competition can excite them. Prepare them by saying, “You have to list more than the ladies do!” as this will engage them in the activity while pushing for the victory of the team.

*Develop men-only subgroups.* In order to discuss a particularly sensitive topic in your MRE class, it may be helpful to separate the men and women into groups. This can preserve the anonymity of the participant while still giving him a voice about the topic. If possible, have your subgroups led by a facilitator of the same sex.

### Keep Men Active

- Divide the men and women into groups and create a competition... over anything!
- Develop gender-specific subgroups for sensitive discussions
- Ask a man to report back to the class after break-out sessions

*Have one of the men report back after group break-out sessions.* When you are breaking your class into small groups (made up of both men and women), pick a man to report back to the class.

*Involve men in role-playing.* Even the silent man may be willing to do something that allows him to be in another role. This can feel safer than sharing personal experiences. Some men will amaze you at the depth that lies beneath the surface and the passion they can muster doing role-play to show a point.

*Check in with the men from time to time.* Try to participate in a brief conversation with each man in the class at least once during your class sessions. Ask him what his thoughts are on how the class is progressing, what topics you are covering, etc.

Barriers that may prohibit men from participating in your MRE classes include a lack of feeling safe to talk, fear of being misunderstood, fear of embarrassing himself or his spouse/girlfriend, lack of trust for the group, or feelings of inferiority or insignificance. If you can create an MRE setting that can remove these barriers for men, you may find them more willing to engage. It is important to know what men think and feel in order to reach them. If you create an environment of trust and openness, you and your class will be the benefactors of wisdom, knowledge and understanding that

can assist in developing wholesome, healthy relationships. At the same time, you are providing tools that men can use in any situation to make their personal relationships stronger.

***The NHMRC would like to thank Rozario Slack, DMin, for his contributions to this Tip Sheet. Rev. Slack is a marriage educator in the African American community and is the co-author of a relationship education curriculum written to appeal to an African American audience ([www.rozarioslack.com](http://www.rozarioslack.com)).***

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