**Enriching Your Relationship Program**

**Through the Lens of Evidence-Based Research**

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<div align="center">**Enriching Your Relationship Program**</div>

The Enriching Your Relationship with Yourself and Others (Enriching) model is an experiential and psycho-educational brief intervention program based on the skills of Virginia Satir and being applied to various populations such as gang prevention counselors, parents of children with special needs, couples groups, young adults on probation and Syrian-American women suffering from trauma of war. While Satir, the pioneer of family therapy, was recognized for her charisma and popularity, her work has been criticized for lack of theoretical and empirically based structure without a clear guide to clinical application (Brubacker, 2006; Nichols, & Schwartz, 2008). In an effort to respond to this criticism and in the "era of evidence" (Sexton, Weeks, & Robbins, 2003, p.460) characterizing the psychology of the twenty-first century, the Enriching program is reviewed here for components which are evidence-based.

The core skill set described and taught in the Enriching model includes: Making Contact, Validating, Becoming Aware, Opening to Greater Understanding and Acceptance, Making Conscious Choices and Changes and Reinforcing Positive Changes.

The following is a description of each of the skills, the key components within each and evidence-based research supporting their effectiveness.

<div align="center">**Skill 1: Making Contact**</div>

The skill of "Making Contact" involves the conscious process of attending to and connecting with oneself and others at the spiritual level. As defined by Satir, "making contact involves two people at a time and three parts, each person in contact with himself or herself and each in contact with the other" (2011, p 11.). The key components with this skill include: Spirituality and Mindfulness.

**Spirituality**

**Nurturing the Spirit** is central to the Satir process. The term "Spirit" is understood in the Enriching program as the energy space, life force and unique essence of each person as well as the capacity to observe oneself, to have compassion, to love, to be curious, to be calm, to have perspective and to be wise. Sprung, Stiler and Jex (2012) found that spirituality is associated with positive outcomes within a workplace. Hadzic (2011) demonstrated that spirituality affects the well-being of humans as it plays a significant role in people's lives, thoughts and behaviors.

**Making Heart Connections,** another aspect of the Enriching program is based upon Satir's emphasis on the importance of connecting with others, Spirit to Spirit or Heart to Heart. For Satir (1995), establishing a relationship in which people felt seen, heard, understood and accepted was the foundation of her clinical work. "Heart Connections" corresponds with the construct of therapeutic alliance, a clinically significant factor that has been studied in several clinical trials and is consistently found to be a robust predictor of therapy success (Fluckiger et.al., 2012). For instance, Del Re et. Al. (2012) found that therapists who developed a stronger alliance with their clients demonstrated better measurable outcomes of their clients than those in a control condition.

The need for heart connections and therapeutic alliance has not only been supported through clinical research as a crucial component for effective psychotherapy, but also for healthy relationships in general. The research of Brown (2006) focusing on "shame resilience," suggest that we are "biologically, emotionally, socially and cognitively wired for connection. . .Shame is about the fear of disconnection. . . When we experience shame, we are steeped in the fear of being ridiculed, diminished or seen as flawed. We are afraid that we've exposed or revealed a part of us that jeopardizes our connection and our

worthiness of acceptance (pp.20-37))".  Consequently, Brown concluded that empathy is a key piece in feeling connected and that it is not a quality that is innate or intuitive, but a skill that needs to be learned and practiced.  The Enriching program provides the opportunity to practice empathy and other skills fostering positive human connections.

**Mindfulness**

**Mindfulness** involves the capacity to pay attention in a present moment nonjudgmentally, focusing on breathing, arising emotions, cognitions and behaviors (Kabat-Zinnm 2003). Kabat-Zinn elaborated on the meaning of the words for "mind" and "heart" and concluded that their meaning overlaps.  Therefore, mindfulness includes "an affectionate, compassionate quality within the attending, a sense of openhearted friendly presence and interest" (p. 145), which is a part of "Making Contact".

The impact of Mindfulness on the field of psychotherapy has been well documented in several studies examining its effectiveness.  For instance, Greeson (2009) reviewed databases of 52 studies between 2003 and 2008 about mindfulness and concluded that clinical research demonstrated that mindfulness practice is significantly related to lower emotional distress, more positive states of mind and better quality of life.  Similarly,the research of Jedel et.al. (2012), suggested that mindfulness training, as part of a stress management program, led to improvement in physical and psychiatric functioning.  Furthermore, Ting-Toomey (2010) concluded that when communicating mindfully with another, the feeling of being understood, respected and being affirmatively valued is achieved.

Participants in the Enriching program are frequently invited to consciously attend to their breathing, sensations, feelings, thoughts and behaviors making Mindfulness an integral part of the training.

## Skill 2:  Validating

**Validating,** as reflected its root word, "value," refers to helping people feel their value and worth.  Validation in the Satir process is implemented through helping people become aware of and more fully use their inner resources such as hope, compassion, courage, curiosity and wisdom.

**Highlighting Resources**

Strengths focused approaches have been emphasized through the work of Seligman (2000), referred to as Positive Psychology.  Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) declared that strengths such as courage, future mindedness, honest, perseverance and hope have adaptive and preventive functions.  Three of the resources that are included in the Enriching program are hopes and dreams, emotions and courage.

**Hopes and dreams.** Hubble, Duncan and Miller (2005) described engendering hope and expectancy as the second key factor in creating a successful therapeutic outcome.  Additionally, hopes and expectations represent significant parts of the work related to values, which is an integral component of several psychotherapy approaches including Client-centered Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Radical Behaviorism and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Yadavaia & Hayes, 2009).

**Emotions.** The resource of "Emotion" is understood to be a significant factor in life and more specifically in relationships.  The ability to acknowledge and accept one's feelings, to be empathic toward others, and to be in charge of one's feelings are skills taught in the Enriching program.

Goleman (1999(, the author of the term, "emotional intelligence," argued that human competencies like self-awareness, self-regulation and empathy add value to cognitive abilities in many domain of life, from workplace effectiveness and leadership to health and relationships. Goleman found that children are better prepared for life when they are taught emotional and social skills.  Use of programs focusing on developing and fostering emotional and social skills was demonstrated to increased pro-social behavior, decrease antisocial behavior and boost academic achievement of its young participants (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Johnson (2004), in her model, Emotionally Focused Therapy, emphasized the need for helping clients access their emotions, more specifically, to access their underlying emotions, such as the sense of loss underlying critical anger or the helplessness and sense of failure underlying withdrawal, in order to help them step out of defensive stances.  Similarly, the Enriching program teaches the participants about reactive versus underlying emotions and helps them build skill in identifying and voicing underlying feelings.

Additionally, Brown (2006) emphasized the importance of empathy, i.e., the ability to be aware of and be sensitive to another's feelings, thoughts and experience. She stated "in the growing body of empathy research, we are finding that successful leaders often demonstrate high levels of empathy, which can reduce aggression and prejudice and increase altruism (p.45). Empirically based studies prove that empathy is a vital component of successful marriages and effective organizations (Gotham, 2007).

**Courage.** The resource of courage is accessed in the Enriching program by helping participants to become aware of how many times they have used their courage to cope and how that can help them to take practice new ways of taking risks, such as sharing feelings and being congruent.  Woodard (2010) proposed, "the central role of courage is to say 'yes' to oneself." (p. 123).

### Skill 3:  Becoming Aware

The skill of becoming aware is presented in the Enriching program as paying attention to what one is seeing, sensing, thinking, feeling and doing and the key components include becoming aware of emotions, thoughts, behaviors and yearnings.

### Becoming Aware of Maladaptive Behavior versus Adaptive, Congruent Behavior

Becoming aware of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors in order to have the choice to respond rather than react, is a core part of the program.  Self-awareness is the ability to describe and be aware of thoughts and feelings and behavioral responses, corresponding with the Mindful Awareness concept (Siegel, 2010) discussed previously.  Siegel concluded that, "self-awareness lays the foundation for the rest of the key life skills of empathy, self-mastery and social skills" (p. vii).

In the Enriching program, participants experience the maladaptive stances of blaming, placating, withdrawing, distracting and becoming super-reasonable, as well as the adaptive, centered stance.  With this awareness, the range of choices responding adaptively increases.

### Becoming Aware of Feelings

In relation to the necessity of self-awareness of feelings, Siegel (2010) elaborated more on the key ingredients of effective interactions and concluded that they are linked to the integration of self-awareness, mastery and empathy.

The Enriching program facilitates participants' understanding of different levels of their own feelings and identifying the feelings underlying the reactive emotions, which is the key piece of stepping out of defensiveness. This corresponds to the research of Johnson (2004) who indicated that helping people to more aware of their feelings and sharing mutually more vulnerable feeling is a vital ingredient in heart connections.

**Becoming Aware of Thoughts**

Our behavioral and emotional responses are strongly influenced by our perceptions. Satir noted, "Whatever you perceive is what you believe. Your world is the outcome of what you perceive" (as cited in Loeschen, 1991). Becoming aware of perceptions, and the beliefs and expectations influencing them, is an important element for empowerment. If the awareness is present, appraisal of beliefs and expectations can follow to distinguish the adaptive and/or maladaptive functioning.

The process of challenging maladaptive beliefs has been validated through the research conducted on the application of the Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. Hofman (2012) described this process as one of helping a person become a scientist or detective to test out the accuracy of his or her beliefs. Similarly, Satir invited people to symbolically use their "detective hats" to explore their perceptions in a nonjudgmental way. Participants of the Enriching program are encouraged to become aware of the beliefs and expectations that they carry, and challenge those which are no longer serving them well. Five beliefs, or as Satir referred to them, "rules", that are highlighted in the training are: "it's not okay to see what is going on, to feel, to comment on what you see or feel, to ask for what you need and to take risks." (Satir, 1976, p. 26).

**Becoming Aware of Yearnings**

One of the key components of the Satir Process is helping people identify their heart yearnings and see how they can empower themselves to fulfill their yearnings. Empowerment might take the form of voicing a yearning to someone meaningful or choosing others ways to fulfill it. It is believed that Satir's focus at this level is what made her work so effective.

Similarly, Johnson (2004) determined from her research with couples and families that helping people re-connect and deepen their connection is facilitated by helping them to fulfill their attachment needs of longings for "comfort, care and protection" (p. 18).

### Skill 4: Opening to Greater Understanding and Acceptance

This skill involves opening to greater understanding and acceptance and oneself and others. Acceptance is being recognized as a critical skill in the process of change and the missing link in traditional behavior therapy (Christensen, Sevier, Simpson, & Gattis, 2004; Linehan, 2009). The key components of the Enriching program include accepting the disliked feelings and aspects of oneself and opening to understanding the differences of others.

**Accepting the Disliked Feelings and Aspects of Oneself**

Paradoxically, the acceptance of disliked feelings and aspects of oneself, helps one to be in charge of them. (Satir, 1995). Acquainting participants with this concept, as well as ways to further self-acceptance is part of the training. And "acceptance" is the key component of the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach. Hayes (2005) noted that acceptance represents openness to the vitality of the moment all of the feelings including the unpleasant feelings and experiences so the person

can live life more completely.  Similarly, Neff (2011) implied in her theory that self-compassionate individuals are able to create more close, authentic and mutually supportive friendships than those who are self-critical.  Self-Compassion represents another important aspect of the program.

## Opening to Greater Understanding of Others

Satir was known for saying, "In our sameness we connect and in our differences we grow" (Loeschen, 1991, p. 25).  With this understanding, Satir incorporated into her process opportunities for people to connect at the level of their common humanity and opportunities for growth in relation to their differences. And, likewise, the Enriching program has also incorporated in experiences for the participants to become aware of differences, such as working style, and "lighten up" and let go of "right and wrong". This fosters greater psychological flexibility, the center of the hexagon used in ACT (Hayes, 2004).

## Skill 5:  Making Conscious Choices and Changes

Awareness and acceptance lead to greater choice and change, according to Satir, which aligns with the value direction typical for the ACT approach (Hayes, 2004).  With this understanding, one of the major goals of the Enriching program is helping participants to become conscious of their choices and take responsibility for them. Therefore, the key components of the skill of Making Conscious Choices and Changes are: becoming aware of one's choices and increasing self-efficacy.

## Becoming Conscious of Choices

The Enriching program highlights the choices one has in relation to thoughts, feelings and behaviors and offers skills training in shifting out of  automatic defensive behaviors to congruent/centered ones, challenging unexamined perceptions, beliefs and expectations and voicing heart feelings and yearnings. According to William Glasser the author of Choice Theory (1998), "To achieve and maintain the relationships we need, we must stop choosing to coerce, force, compel, punish, reward, manipulate, boss, motivate, criticize, blame, complain, nag, badger, rank, rate, and withdraw.  We must replace these destructive behaviors with choosing to care, listen, support, negotiate, encourage, love, befriend, trust, accept, welcome and esteem" (p. 21).

## Increasing Self-efficacy/Self-leadership

According to Social Cognitive Theory, self-efficacy is defined as perceived capabilities for learning or performing actions at designated level (Benight, & Bandura, 2004).  Self-efficacy has been found to be positively correlated with motivation and achievement (Guay, Ratell, Roy, & Litalien, 2010). For example, parental self-efficacy predicted adolescents' outcomes in family-based therapy for eating disorder (Robinson, Strahan, Girz, Wilson, & Boachie, 2012).  More recent studies showed that self-efficacy and social support have mediating effects on the relationship between social and emotional distress (Deno et. Al., 2012). In conclusion, based on these findings, facilitating self-efficacy and self-leadership of the participants in the Enriching program is likely to beneficial.

## Skill 6:  Reinforcing Positive Changes

In order to sustain positive changes, participants in the Enriching program are offered opportunities for practicing the skills described previously. In addition, they made aware of the benefit of support in making changes.

**Practicing**

In addition to cognitive-behavioral studies validating the importance of behavioral reinforcement for change, several studies focusing on the short-term and long-term benefits of practicing mindfulness were conducted.  A study by Cifuentes (2012) examined the effects of practicing mindfulness-based interventions to present and reverse burnout.  Several outcome studies examined by Cifuentes showed clear evidence of positive outcomes of practicing across different populations of health care providing professionals.

**Seeking and Giving Support**

The components of seeking and giving support were added to the Enriching program to further the integration of positive changes.  Multiple studies focusing on effects of peer support documented favorable results across different settings. (Grant et. al, 2012; Klein, Cnaan, & Whitecraft, 1998; Kyrouz, Humphreys & Loomis, 2002; Mead & MacNeil, 2006) demonstrated that peer support has gained an important and effective role with systems of mental health care.  Similarly, research outcome studies examining effectiveness of substance abuse support group programs concluded that the likelihood of a successful treatment outcome was maximized when treatment included a support component, in addition to the group outpatient treatment (Strickler, Reif, Horgan, & Acevedo, 2012).

The effects of mutual support of participants in the Enriching program needs to be empirically evaluated to see if this component specifically leads to positive benefits such as helping people to become self-aware and accepting in order to be more creative, productive, empathic and compassionate toward others.

## Conclusions

The presented Enriching program has been used with various populations (e.g., gang prevention counselors, parents of children with special needs, couples groups, young adults on probation and Syrian-American women suffering from trauma of war).  Further research and empirical validating of the program is warranted.

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