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Marriage Check-up paves way for harmonious relationships

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The Jewish Family Services (JFS) of Baron de Hirsch Institute is introducing Marriage Check-up, an innovative program for engaged or newly married couples.

Funded by the Sharon Steinberg Fund, it is part of the institute's anti-conjugal violence program. It's a pragmatic program being introduced to promote harmony in marriage by encouraging couples to communicate and understand each other.

It is customary for a couple to meet with a rabbi before the wedding. The spiritual leader invariably discusses kashrut and the couple's future.

According to JFS, this is an opportune time for the rabbi to present the couple with a Marriage Check-up certificate called "Stay on Track with Marriage." The certificate gives the couple two or three free sessions with a marital therapist at JFS. They can arrange the sessions before the wedding or

soon after. And it doesn't have to be the first marriage.

If a couple wishes to arrange more meetings, they can, and they are charged on a sliding-scale based on income.

Clients receive an appointment within two weeks from the time they call JFS counselling services. When couples arrive at JFS for their first appointment, they fill out a questionnaire. The questions and answers are used as a tool to promote discussion.

Marriage Check-up, created by Gleam S. Powell, was introduced in Georgia in the early 1990s.

"Basically, we have a discussion, and it presents an opportunity to explore all aspects of the relationship," says Paula Merovitz, supervisor of Counselling Services at JFS. "The objective is to allow couples to identify and build upon strengths that already exist in their relationship."

JFS Counselling Services have expanded, Merovitz points out. "We've taken on a list of associates and we refer clients to them.

Therefore we are able to refer clients to highly trained experts who are certified in different fields."

JFS has 16 people on staff, working in different areas of expertise. They are able to help clients in English, French, Spanish, and Hebrew. JFS counsellors address bereavement, eating disorders, stress management, gambling addictions, conjugal violence, sexual dysfunction and infertility, parenting, family issues and depression.

Merovitz, a marital and family therapist, says Marriage Check-up is an effective communication vehicle for broaching topics before issues arise.

Here is a sampling of the check-up questionnaire. "Tick off whether you strongly agree or disagree on the following:

- Do you feel appreciated by your partner?
- Are you satisfied with the way you handle anger?
- Do you like the way you make decisions?
- What happens when you fight?
- How do you look at each other's differences and do you accept them?"

Couples may also be asked to rate strengths or weaknesses regarding relationships with in-laws, money, sex and household chores. If it's a second marriage, there may be a child involved and they may be asked how the reconstituted family is functioning.

"The focus here is the strength of the relationship," says Merovitz. "This is a non-threatening way to look into a relationship. Critical information can be obtained. Issues are pretty innocent but target crucial dimensions of any relationship."

Merovitz says the couple can benefit because the marital therapist addresses communication skills.

"We want to look at the quality of the love attachment," she says. "The emotions are a motivator. Every adult needs to feel loved."

Rabbi Sidney Shoham of Beth Zion Congregation will be participating in the program and JFS is in the process of contacting rabbis of other synagogues in the community.

For further information, phone Paula Merovitz at 342-0000, ext. 3406