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Happy, Enduring African American Marriages

Before the 1970's, the majority of Black households were married families. Recent statistics, however, show that African Americans have a lower marriage rate and a higher divorce rate than other ethnic groups. A good way to understand what is happening is to talk with Black married couples. Are there unique challenges for Black couples? A team of researchers from Louisiana State University, headed by Loren Marks, Ph.D. asked this question in a recent qualitative study published in the April 2008 issue of *Family Relations*. They used a strengths-based approach to study how African American couples are able to create strong, happy, lasting marriages in spite of challenges and barriers they may face.

Some Family Challenges

- Too much work and not enough time The LSU study found that African American couples struggle with issues of time, stress and taking care of their families. Learning to balance family time with the ever-increasing demands of work and earning a living is a big source of stress. Many couples borrow from the "family time bank," to put in extra hours at work, and are rarely able to repay the time taken from their family.

• Family-related stress

Another source of stress for African American couples is dealing with the needs within their family and community. Examples include: Violence and substance abuse associated with "street life" touched most of the couples in the LSU study. Responding to "knocks of need." When someone in their circle has a need, African American families respond with help. A good example of this response is taking a non-biological child into their home to help with daycare. Being part of the "sandwich generation" and caring for their children and friends in need, and providing care for aging parents.

Together We Are Strong

While these challenges may create stress for African American couples and result in unhappy marriages or in some cases, divorce, there are couples who have created healthy, loving marriages, even in the face of frequent challenges. What can we learn from them? What do they have to share? Here's what the researchers found:

What Helps:

- Seeing the marriage as a source of strength. Being able to rely on a spouse,

and together deal with the challenges life hands out. Using struggles to grow closer.

- Having a strong faith and using prayer to get through tough times.
- Having a commitment to keeping the family strong and together.
- Understanding that conflict with a spouse is a normal part of being married. Partners in strong marriages are able to face their conflict in ways that don't damage the relationship. They work on learning to manage their differences through communication and understanding.
- Being "equally yoked," where both partners share a unified vision for their marriage and family.
- Sharing time together in meaningful activities.
- Both partners are relatively strong in terms of emotional, mental and physical health.

Strengthen Your Marriage Little by Little

Schedule time to sit down with your spouse and talk about this list of things that help African American marriages stay strong and enduring. Notice where you are "on track," and talk about where you could apply a little more effort. Pick one area to work on, write down what you'll do, and post it where you'll see it every day. Check in with each other often and celebrate your

Sources:

Loren Marks. (April 3, 2008). EurekaAlert. In *LSU Spotlights Strong African American Marriages*. Retrieved March 9, 2010, from http://www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2008-04/lss-lss040308.php#.

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