

# While you're on your computer, why not strengthen your marriage?

March 7 2013, by Stuart Wolpert

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(Medical Xpress)—If you communicate with friends online, pay bills online, listen to music online and post photos online, why not strengthen your marriage or relationship online too?

Andrew Christensen, a UCLA [psychology professor](#) who has worked with hundreds of couples over more than 30 years, and a colleague have designed a website, [www.OurRelationship.com](http://www.OurRelationship.com), that allows you and your partner to do just that—for free and from the comfort of your own home.

"I'm very confident that couples with mild to moderate problems will benefit from it," he said. "They may not live in bliss, but I'm very confident that our online program can strengthen marriages and reduce [psychological problems](#) in a very efficient, convenient and cost-effective way.

"There will always be a need for one-to-one therapy, just as there will always be a need for [bypass surgery](#) and heart transplants—but there is also a need to help people, with diet and exercise, reduce the likelihood that they will need [heart transplants](#) and bypass surgery. That [analogy](#) applies here too, but we're not trying to over-sell it; this won't solve every problem."

While face-to-face therapy can be lengthy and expensive, the new website-based couples program is designed to take only six hours for each person, said Christensen, who in addition to his own therapeutic

work has trained and supervised many other [psychologists](#) in conducting couples therapy.

"Our goal is to keep OurRelationship.com free so we can help as many people as possible," he said. "We want to make couple interventions much more broadly available and not so time-consuming. I would like for couples not to have to go to a therapist's office once a week."

## **How the online program works**

Christensen developed the website with Brian Doss, a UCLA alumnus and associate professor of psychology at the University of Miami, with a five-year grant from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), a branch of the National Institutes of Health.

The online program is based on integrative behavioral couple therapy (IBCT), which focuses on making positive changes and finding better ways of working toward solutions, with an emphasis on understanding your spouse's emotional sensitivities. The website features videos of actors demonstrating problems couples face, analyzing the problems and working to resolve disagreements.

Considerable research has supported the effectiveness of this IBCT in improving relationship satisfaction, Christensen said. The NICHD grant will fund a study by Christensen and Doss examining how effective the therapeutic technique is when used online.

## **Therapy that pays you**

By participating in the research program on the site, couples can earn \$180 to \$250. They will be asked to complete questionnaires at the beginning and end of the couples program, and again in the months that

follow program's completion.

As part of this research, some couples will only use the website, while others will receive additional support over the phone from a trained psychology graduate student from UCLA or the University of Miami. The study will evaluate whether this additional support leads to better outcomes for the couples. The results may lead to tweaks in the program, Christensen said.

Most of the work is done separately by the two partners, and at the end of each phase—there are three phases total—the two work together in a way that is directed by the website and that is customized to their responses.

## **The O-U-R of 'Our Relationship'**

The "O" in "Our," Christensen said, stands for observe: First you observe and evaluate your relationship. Each partner identifies one problem in the relationship, such as disagreements about how to raise your children or how to spend your money. The "U" is for understand: You perform an analysis of the two problems you have each identified. And the "R" is for respond: You each try to respond in a better way to your partner and create alternative ways to resolve the dispute.

A goal of couples therapy, whether online or with a therapist, is to better understand your spouse's point of view and work together toward middle ground, said Christensen, who has been married for nearly 30 years.

Christensen and Doss developed [www.OurRelationship.com](http://www.OurRelationship.com) over more than three years, drawing on decades of relationship research. For [couples therapy](#) to be effective, they say, it is important for both partners to be strongly committed to saving the marriage, and both need to be willing to do their share to work at the relationship and not just blame

the other.

"It takes only one person to end a marriage but two people to make it work," Christensen said.

In addition to couples who participate together, [www.OurRelationship.com](http://www.OurRelationship.com) has a program for individuals who participate without their partners. There is also a special program for couples in which one partner struggles with excessive anxiety, the most common psychiatric condition.

In any year, about 25 percent of the American population meets criteria for a psychiatric condition, such as depression or an anxiety disorder, Christensen said. Over a lifetime, about 50 percent of the population will at some point meet the criteria for a psychiatric disorder. Only about 30 percent of these people ever receive treatment, he said. Online programs like [www.OurRelationship.com](http://www.OurRelationship.com) are designed to reach people who might not go to a therapist, he added.

Christensen will teach a UCLA course this spring on alternatives to one-to-one therapy, including online interventions and self-help interventions.

## **Working through 'reconcilable differences'**

In his book "Reconcilable Differences" (Guilford Press, 2000), Christensen notes that people in marriages are unlikely to change fundamental aspects of themselves, no matter how much their spouses demand it.

"People cannot change their basic essence, even if they try, and it is futile to demand that they do so," he has said. "To love and marry someone, you must accept the essence of the other person; you must

accept who he or she is. You can push for change at the periphery but not at the core. Marriage is a package deal. You don't get a line-item veto over your partner's personality where you can discard the traits you don't like."

All [couples](#) have conflicts, Christensen said, but these conflicts can be, as the book title says, reconcilable. "The crimes of the heart are usually misdemeanors, even though they sometimes feel like felonies," he said.

"Most of the change we seek in our relationships is gradual change in everyday behavior," Christensen said. "Do more of the housework, spend more time with the kids, don't be so critical, pay more attention when I talk to you, be more ambitious at work, put more energy into our relationship."

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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