

Enriching Your Relationship Program Through the Lens of Empirical Research

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Abstract

The Enriching Your Relationship with Yourself and Others (Enriching) program is an experiential and psycho-educational brief intervention program based on the skills of Virginia Satir which has been applied to a broad spectrum of populations. The premise of the program is that the skills that Satir used therapeutically could be modified and taught to the general public to enrich their lives. The skills include: Making Contact, Validating, Becoming Aware, Opening to Greater Understanding and Acceptance, Making Conscious Choices and Changes and Seeking and Giving Support. Although the Enriching program is being recognized around the world for its effectiveness by those receiving it, the empirical validation of the program has not been provided yet. Therefore, this is an initial attempt for a literature review of empirically based approaches and their connection to elements in the Enriching program.

Keywords

Virginia Satir, Enriching, life skills, empirical validation

The Enriching Your Relationship with Yourself and Others (Enriching) program is an experiential and psycho-educational brief intervention program based on the philosophy and skills of Virginia Satir. The premise of the program is that the key skill sets that Satir used to help people clinically, as identified in the *Satir Process* (Loeschen, 2002), could be modified and taught to the general public to help them relate more positively to themselves and others. The program was first presented by Suarez and Loeschen at the Satir Conference in Waterloo, Canada in 2005 and has expanded ever since, with trainers in Asia, Europe, North America, South America and the Middle East, where it has been applied to a broad spectrum of groups including parents of special needs children in Hong Kong, Muslim women university students in Amman, Jordan, undergraduate university students in New Jersey, African-American and Latino gang prevention and intervention counselors in Los Angeles, California and Syrian-American women dealing with the trauma of war.

Although the Enriching program is being recognized around the world for its effectiveness by those receiving it, the empirical validation of the program has not been provided yet. Regretfully, Satir's work in general, although widely recognized for its effectiveness by those using it, has been criticized for lack of theoretically and empirically based structure (Brubacher, 2006; Nichols & Schwartz, 2008). In an effort to respond to this criticism and in the era of evidence (Sexton, Weeks, & Robbins, 2003) characterizing the psychology of the twenty-first century, the Enriching program is being reviewed from a wide range of empirical literature supporting the effectiveness of the elements within it.

The program teaches participants the skills of: Making Contact, Validating, Becoming Aware, Opening to Greater Understanding and Acceptance, Making Conscious Choices and Seeking and Giving Support. The skills are taught in a systematic, structured and sequential method so that they build upon each other. The trainers use a standardized process when teaching each skill set: description of the purpose of each skill, demonstration of the skill, guided experiential exercises and processing of the experience. Detailed instructions of the process are provided in a training manual. Exercises are suggested for practicing each skill, however, trainers are given the flexibility to create additional exercises relevant to the particular population they are training. The skill practice is designed sequentially, but also incorporates repetition to provide reinforcement.

Although the structure is standardized, the modality for delivery is flexible so that the program can be offered face-to-face or online. Face-to-face training can be offered in the form of a workshop whereby all of the skills are covered in one or two days or it can be offered in separate classes over a period of time. The online form of the program involves a series of two sets of six modules each. The first six modules focus on the theoretical basis of each skill, examples and assigned exercises. Once the participants have completed an exercise, they write a personal reflection about the experience and have it reviewed by a trainer for feedback. The second six modules focus on the same skills; however, the assignments are designed to deepen the self-reflection and integration of the skill.

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

Skill 1: Making Contact

Making Contact is the first skill taught in the program because it was central to Satir's way of relating and working. Satir (as cited in Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991), revealed her thoughts about her process for making contact:

"I see the individual's internal essence. That's what I am connecting with. I reach out to touch them. I can reach out with my eyes, my voice, my arms. I can tell you that there has to be a reaching out . . . the most important thing for me about a human being is their worth, then the second most important thing is respecting that. Therefore, I try giving that worth some validating from me in any way I can. That respecting and validating precedes any kind of acknowledging of problems the person might have. That is paramount. I couldn't think about moving with anybody unless I had gone through that step of respecting and validating the person at his or her level of essence. . . One needs to manifest congruency and a willingness to risk intimacy. . . I think it (making contact) is beyond words, beyond culture. . . You are in tune with the universal of that individual. I want to give the life force of the individual all the support I can give and all the connectedness I can give. That will give the Self, the "I am," a chance of being seen, heard and loved." (pp. 255-256)

Key components within the process of *Making Contact* include making heart connections and being congruent. Validating is also a component, which will be described separately as a skill.

Making Heart Connections

When speaking about connecting with the unique energy of each person, Satir used many different terms including the: Self, I am, Essence, Life Force and Spirit. The authors have chosen to use yet another term, "heart", which they believe has the same meaning and yet reflects more clearly to the general public the goal of the program, i.e., to help people connect to their own hearts and to those of others.

The importance of heart connections is supported by the research of Brown (2007) who was inspired by her desire to understand the anatomy of connections. As a result, Brown (2009) developed a psycho-educational program for the general public related to connections and also created a set of guidelines for what she termed, "Wholehearted Living" (Brown, 2010, p. 9). Brown (2006) indicated 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.

Being Congruent

Another key component of *Making Contact* is congruency. Satir's description of congruent communication included the following elements:

Be aware and accept that you have choices about how you respond; be in touch with what is going on within you in the present; own what comes from you (words, body messages or actions); respond with "I" messages; convey ownership of what you say and do, in descriptive, rather than judgmental, language; share what is happening with you as well as what you see and hear the other person saying and doing. (Satir et. al, 1991, p. 82)

Satir (1976) recognized that being congruent was a life-long journey, calling for patience, wisdom and courage. But she believed the result would be strengthened relationships with oneself and others.

Skill 2: Validating

The Enriching program builds on the skill of *Making Contact* by teaching validating skills. Validating involves eliciting awareness of inner resources and affirming people in their ability to access and use them. This is a concept that has gained acceptance through the work of researchers such as Seligman (2002) founder of Positive Psychology, which promotes focusing on mental health rather than mental illness. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) identified strengths such as courage, future mindedness, honesty, perseverance and hope as having adaptive and preventive functions. Their premise is very similar to Satir's (1991), as she promoted a growth model focusing on inner resources rather than pathology and symptoms. Key components of *Validating* include accessing the resources of hope, emotions and courage.

Accessing the Resource of Hope

Early in her career, Satir (1978) wrote about the importance of helping people access hope in order to have the energy for making changes and termed the resource of hope as the "energy provider" (p. 23).

She often began her sessions by asking the clients, “What do you hope to have happen here today?” (Loeschen, 2002, p. 19). The focus on the necessity of accessing hope has been identified as a key factor for positive outcomes in the seminal work by Duncan, Miller, Wampold, and Hubble (2010) which also emphasized the benefits of treatment due to re-igniting the client’s hope.

Accessing the Resource of Emotions

The resource of emotions is understood to be a significant factor in relationships. To be able to acknowledge and accept one’s feelings, to be empathic toward others and to be in charge of one’s feelings are all important skills emphasized in the Enriching program. Goleman (1998), 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 domains 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 increase pro-social behavior, decrease antisocial behavior and boost academic achievement of young participants (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Johnson (2004) also emphasized the need for helping clients access their emotions in her Emotionally Focused Therapy approach. For instance, Johnson specified that a sense of loss may underlie anger or the sense of failure may underlie anxiety. Similarly, Brown (2006) emphasized the importance of empathy, i.e., that the ability to be aware of and sensitive to another’s feelings, thoughts and experience can reduce aggression and prejudice and increase altruism.

Accessing the Resource of Courage

Throughout Satir’s trainings, she invited and supported participants to use their courage and take risks to try new behaviors such as voicing their feelings, asking for what they wanted, and speaking their truth. Woodard (2010) considered using courage to say ‘yes’ to oneself as key to being authentic. Similarly, the Enriching program provides opportunities for the participants to practice using their courage to grow toward greater authenticity and emotional health.

Skill 3: Becoming Aware

Satir knew the importance of self-awareness and attempted to facilitate it in those with whom she worked. Her intuition about self-awareness has been researched in more recent studies. Goleman (as cited in Siegel, 2010), declared from his research on emotional and social intelligence that self-awareness and empathy are essential for success in life. Key components of *Becoming Aware* include becoming mindful and increasing awareness of behaviors, feelings, thoughts, and yearnings.

Becoming Mindful

According to Kabat-Zinn (2003), being mindful involves the capacity to pay attention in the present moment nonjudgmentally, focusing on breathing, arising emotions, cognitions and behaviors. The impact of Mindfulness on the field of psychotherapy has been well documented in several studies examining its effectiveness. For instance, Greeson (2009) 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, Jedel et al. (2012), suggested that mindfulness training, as part of a stress management program, led to improvement in physical and emotional functioning. Furthermore, Toomey, Dorjee, and Ting-Toomey (2013) concluded that when communicating mindfully with others, the feeling of being understood, respected and being affirmatively valued is being achieved.

Mindfulness practice is incorporated throughout the Enriching program as the participants are invited to become aware of their inner and outer process after each experiential exercise. In addition each session begins with a centering meditation. Similarly, Satir began her trainings with a meditation, such as this one:

Perhaps, today as you contemplate giving yourself a message of appreciation, it feels more and more natural for you to think of yourself appreciatively, without reference to any other human being—knowing that you are a unique human being, but in no way do you add up exactly like anyone else in the world: not your mother, your father, your sisters, your friends. You are unique, and as you go more comfortably toward allowing yourself to accept your uniqueness, and allowing yourself to give appreciation to you, feeling it is a natural, normal thing to do, see what happens in your body. Does it smile inside? Does it feel like a smile or relaxation wants to come out? Just be aware. Most of us are new to the idea of appreciating ourselves. And now go to that place deep inside where you keep the treasure that is called by your name. And as you move to that place, comfortably, notice your resource—your human heritage. (Banmen, 2003, p. 24)

Increasing Awareness of Behaviors

Participants are educated as to what the defensive stances of blaming, placating, distracting and being super-reasonable look like and feel like through experiential exercises whereby they posture themselves in stances that Satir (1976) developed for each defense. Following these experiences, the participants are given opportunities to shift out of defensive stances into more centered, congruent ways of relating. They also are given opportunities to see how it feels to relate from a more centered, congruent way.

Increasing Awareness of Feelings

Satir was famous for teaching through simple sayings such as, “Feelings give us our juice; feelings are merely barometers, they do not dictate our behavior; and anger is often a defensive feeling with softer feelings underneath” (as cited in Loeschen, 1991, p. 107). The concept of softer feelings underlying defensive feelings corresponds to Johnson’s (2004) approach identifying two different levels of feelings, primary and secondary. She described secondary emotions as the reactive, defensive ones and primary emotions as the more vulnerable. Her research revealed that when clients can be helped to identify and voice their more vulnerable feelings, deeper connections can be made. The Enriching program educates participants regarding different levels of feelings and helps them increase awareness of these levels within themselves.

Increasing Awareness of Thoughts

Satir taught that, “the beliefs that made it possible for us to live, may keep us from living fully” (as cited in Loeschen, 1991, p. 33). Becoming aware of constraining beliefs is an important element for empowerment.

The process of challenging maladaptive thoughts has been a main focus of applied research conducted in the application of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. Hoffman et al. (2012) described this process as one of helping a person become a scientist 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 that are no longer serving them well. According to Satir, five of the most common unhelpful beliefs, or “survival rules”, across cultures are: “it’s not okay to see what is going on, it’s not okay to feel, it’s not okay to comment on what you see or feel, it’s not okay to ask for what you want and it’s not okay to take risks” (Satir, 1976, p. 26).

Increasing Awareness of Yearnings

One of the key ingredients of Satir’s process was helping people identify their yearnings and see how they could empower themselves to fulfill these. Empowerment might take the form of voicing the yearning to someone meaningful or choosing other ways to fulfill it for oneself. It is believed that Satir’s focus at this level is what made her work powerful (Loeschen, 2002). Similarly, Johnson (2004) determined that helping people re-connect and deepen their connection is facilitated by helping them voice their attachment needs or longings.

Skill 4: Opening to Greater Understanding and Acceptance

Satir (1991) regarded acceptance as a crucial aspect of congruence, i.e., being able to be in touch with and accept feelings in order to deal with them. More recently, acceptance has been recognized as a critical skill in the process of change and the missing link in traditional behavior therapy (Christensen, Sevier, Simpson, & Gattis, 2004; Hayes, Levin, Plumb-Villardaga, Villatte, & Pistorello, 2013). Key components of *Opening to Greater Understanding and Acceptance* include accepting disliked feelings and aspects of oneself and opening to greater understanding of the differences of others.

Accepting the Disliked Feelings and Aspects of Oneself

Paradoxically, the acceptance of disliked feelings and aspects of oneself help one to be in charge of them (Satir, 1978). This principle has been elaborated by Hayes, Strosahl and Wilson (2012), who proposed that effective coping comes from being able to have unwanted internal experiences listened to, rather than oppressed. Similarly, Siegel (2010) emphasized that instead of being swept up by shoulds, people need to accept themselves and their experiences.

Neff (2011) added to the importance of this skill by proposing that persons who are able to be self-compassionate are able to create closer, more authentic and mutually supportive friendships than those who are self-critical. In alignment with this concept, the Enriching Program includes exercises for identifying disliked feelings and/or aspects of oneself and practicing acceptance and self-compassion.

Opening to Greater Understanding of Others

Another of Satir's well known sayings was, "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, such as temperament, gender, culture and work-style. Likewise, the Enriching program has incorporated experiences for the participants to become aware of differences and practice opening to greater understanding and letting go of "right and wrong." This fosters greater psychological flexibility, the center of the hexagon used in the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes, 2004).

Skill 5: Making Conscious Choices

Helping people realize that they have choices was a goal for Satir, believing that awareness leads to choice and to new possibilities for positive change. She described the process of helping people to expand their choices as: "Identifying, acknowledging, examining, and employing our parts, rules, and inner wisdom help us transform our internal process and deal with present circumstances. By removing our self-made limits, we expand our choices" (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gomori, 1991, p. 181). Similarly, Siegel (2010) identified creating choices as critical to effecting positive change. Key components of *Making Conscious Choices* include increasing awareness of choices and increasing self-leadership and self-efficacy.

Increasing Awareness 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 ones, challenging unexamined perceptions, beliefs and expectations and voicing heart feelings and yearnings. Glasser (1998) declared that maintaining relationships involves making conscious choices to replace destructive behaviors, such as controlling and punishing, with supportive behaviors, such as caring, listening and loving.

Increasing Self-leadership and Self-efficacy

With a greater awareness of choices regarding the inner and outer process, Satir challenged people to be in charge of themselves:

We are in charge. We are in charge of how and when and in what way we take in our breath. We are in charge of how we see ourselves and how we are with ourselves. What we aren't in charge of is whether it rains, whether it snows, whether somebody yells at

us, whether somebody criticizes, or whether somebody loves us. We really are not in charge of that, only how we respond. (as cited in Banmen, 2003, p. 45)

The importance of this ability to be in charge of oneself is now recognized by others such as Schwartz (1995) who coined the term, self-leadership, and others in the cognitive behavioral field who used the term “self-efficacy” (Benight & Bandura, 2004). Self-efficacy has been found to be positively related to motivation and achievement with mediating effects of social support (Deno et al., 2012; Guay, Ratell, Roy, & Litalien, 2010), and is a goal of the Enriching program.

Skill 6: Seeking and Giving Support

When Satir worked with people, she would guide them in practicing new ways of being with each other. Guiding people to practice was integral to her process and in her conceptualization of the universal “Process of Change.” Satir et al. (1991) identified the fifth stage as, “Practice for Strengthening a New State” (p.118). Along with guiding the practice of new behaviors, she would give people strong support to take risks and try on new behaviors. Loeschen (2002) identified this final phase of Satir’s process as “Reinforcing Change” (p. 73). However, for the Enriching program, this was changed to, “Seeking and Giving Support”, in order to give participants practice in being able to reach out and ask for support, or give support, recognizing that for many, their fear of rejection or judgment stops them from doing so. Key components of *Seeking and Giving Support* include practicing and seeking and giving support.

Practicing

Practicing is integral to the Enriching program as it is believed to be an important aspect of skill acquisition. This assumption was corroborated by biological and educational research suggesting that repetition is the key component for integration of learning (Ellis, 2005). Results from various social sciences studies have suggested that practicing professional helping skills does help to master them (Fortune, Lee, & Cavazos, 2007; Petrovich, 2004, Wise & Trunnell, 2001).

Additionally, the importance of mindfulness practice was validated in several third wave cognitive-behavioral research studies focusing on the short-term and long-term benefits of practicing mindfulness (Farb et al., 2007; Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010). Practice of mindfulness elicited positive emotions and led to reduced anxiety and negative affect (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). Additionally, practicing has positive interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits (Block-Lerner, Adair, Plumb, Rhatigan, & Orsillo, 2007; Siegel, 2009). Several outcome studies suggested that mindfulness practice promoted empathy (Shapiro & Izett, 2008), compassion (Shapiro, Brown, & Biegel, 2007), better counseling skills (Birnbaum, 2008;) and client outcomes of therapists who practiced mindfulness (Bruce, 2006; Grepmaier et al., 2007).

Seeking and Giving Support

Multiple studies focusing on effectiveness of peer support documented favorable results across different settings (Grant et al., 2012; Klein, Cnaan, & Whitecraft, 1998; Kyrouz, Humphreys, & Loomis,

2002; Mead & MacNeil, 2006). Researchers demonstrated that peer support has gained an important role within systems of mental health care. Similarly, research 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).

Conclusions and Future Directions

The presented Enriching program has been applied to various populations (e.g., gang prevention and intervention counselors, parents of children with special needs, couples groups, young adults on probation and Syrian-American women suffering from the trauma of war). Anecdotal evidence indicates that the program has positive impact on its participants. However, further empirical validation of the Enriching program is warranted and could reveal additional aspects related to its efficacy. Future research examining cause and effect relationships and using mediational analyses may help better understand seemingly fruitful benefits of the Enriching program in the actual practice. Additionally, the effects of mutual support, congruence and self-compassion of participants in the Enriching program needs to be empirically evaluated. Further research needs to examine whether these components specifically lead to improved well-being with positive benefits such as helping people to become self-aware and accepting in order to be more creative, productive, empathic and compassionate toward others.

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