Impact of Brief Marriage and Relationship Education Classes on Dyadic Adjustment

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Abstract

Findings from a large, federally funded, multi-year study of adult participants in nine hours of marriage and relationship skills training are presented in this brief report. The study found statistically significant improvements in consensus, satisfaction, affectional expression, and cohesion for both "distressed" and non-distressed participants completing the *PAIRS Essentials* (PAIRS Foundation, 2008) curriculum as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). Improvements either increased or were sustained six and 12 months later. Mean DAS total scores for participants who measured in the distressed range prior to training were nearly 25 points higher 12 months later.

Brief Overview of the PAIRS Approach

PAIRS ("Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills") classes provide a comprehensive system to enhance self-knowledge and enhance the ability of participants to sustain pleasurable intimate relationships. The program delivers a unique technology built on a skills-based approach to enhancing empathy, bonding and emotional literacy.

In developing the original PAIRS curriculum, Marriage and Family Therapist Lori Heyman Gordon integrated a wide range of theories and proprietary methods from psychology, education and psychotherapy into an educational format in classes that today range in length from four to 120 hours. PAIRS endeavors to bridge therapy, marital enrichment, and marriage and family development through a low-cost, replicable group educational approach to reducing marital and family breakdown.

PAIRS programs focus on enhancing competencies in three areas:

(1) Emotional literacy;
(2) Skills for building and maintaining intimacy;
(3) Practical knowledge, strategies and attitudes for sustaining positive marriage and family life with the goal of enabling couples to create relationships that both partners can live with joyfully.

According to Gordon, for this to happen, each partner must be able to identify his or her own feelings and needs, communicate them in such a way that they can get met, and

integrate skills that lead to constructive conflict resolution based on empathy, good will and a shared relationship vision.

This study evaluates the impact of the nine-hour *PAIRS Essentials* (PAIRS Foundation, 2008) curriculum delivered in public settings by non-mental health professionals.

Methodology

In October 2006, PAIRS Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit headquartered in Weston, Florida, was awarded a multi-year grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, to conduct a marriage education demonstration project in South Florida. To date, approximately 5,000 adult couples and singles have participated in brief PAIRS grant-funded classes in Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. Participants represent an economically and culturally diverse population of men and women in all stages of relationship with significant inclusion of minorities and couples entering the program at high levels of marital distress.

In designing evaluation of the demonstration project, PAIRS Foundation collaborated with Dr. Andrew Daire of the University of Central Florida's Marriage and Family Research Institute. The study utilizes a range of assessment instruments to measure marital cohesion and the level of pleasure couples experience in their relationships. Key instruments include:

- Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), a widely used 32-item instrument that measures four areas of relationship quality and adjustment: dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, dyadic consensus, and affectional expression.
- Relationship Pleasure Scale (PAIRS, 1992), a proprietary PAIRS assessment that has been validated as providing an accurate measure of key relationship dynamics.

Some participants also complete the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2006) and OQ45 Outcome Questionnaire (Owen & Imel, 2010). All of the instruments are provided in English and Spanish.

South Florida is home to one of the nation's largest Hispanic/Latino communities, who represent the majority of participants in the study, including a significant percentage of couples who primarily speak Spanish at home. The majority of participants have minor children.

While the size of the research sample has allowed evaluators to analyze and interpret data on a broad range of variables, the purpose of this presentation is to report the impact on dyadic consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression following nine-hours of class, and again six and 12-months later based on statistically significant samples. The analysis considers the impact of training both on participants generally and participants whose pre-test assessments scored in the distressed range on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale specifically.

Classes evaluated for the study were offered in a variety of formats, from one-day and weekend intensives to multi-week sessions that generally include one and a half to three hours of instruction one time per week over three to six weeks, delivered through area faith-based, neighborhood, and educational organizations, including colleges, libraries, churches, synagogues, hospitals, recreational organizations, rehabilitation centers, and supportive housing communities for the formerly homeless.

Individual classes range in size from eight to as many as 150 participants, delivered by a primary instructor, teaching assistant, administrative and research support staff. Generally, one additional teaching assistant is provided for every 15 participants beyond the first 20. All staff involved in program delivery complete a minimum of PAIRS Level One training (32 hours) and are certified and licensed annually by PAIRS Foundation.

Confidential assessments are completed by participants prior to the first delivery of services, at program conclusion (multi-week programs only), and again six and 12-months subsequent. All participation is voluntary.

Prior to the delivery of services, participants also complete informed consents and demographic questionnaires, either online or manually, with the opportunity to review their answers for accuracy and completion upon arrival at their first class. Follow-up questionnaires are requested at their final class and by mail, phone, online or in-person six and 12-months after program completion.

The majority of participants are referred to PAIRS by a friend, family member, colleague or professional in the community; others have been recruited in response to key-word advertising on the Internet, flyers, news articles, posters, brochures, newsletters, and previews. Most participants have at least one phone, e-mail or in-person contact with a member of PAIRS staff prior to enrollment. More than 99 percent of participants completing PAIRS say they would recommend the program to others.

Overview

There were approximately 2300 Pre-Post test and 720 Post-Tests of the DAS administered.

Traditionally, couples who have a total score more than 102 are considered to be “Non-Distressed” while couples who have a total score less than 101 are considered to be “Distressed.” More recent revisions have put the cutoff score at 97. Scores range from 0-150. For the subscales higher numbers indicate more distress in each of the areas measured:

- Dyadic Consensus (Range from 0-65)
- Dyadic Satisfaction (Range from 0-50)
- Dyadic Affectional Expression (Range from 0-12)
- Dyadic Cohesion (Range from 0-24)

Overall, from Pre- to Post-test, scores across all subscales and the total scale went up (reflecting positive change in each).

	Pre Test			Post Test			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
DAS Consensus	809	46.6972	9.75928	49.3251	8.60358	-9.327	.000
DAS Satisfaction	806	34.4467	8.01018	36.5732	7.39860	-11.018	.000
DAS Affection	814	7.8477	2.79543	8.4914	2.45587	-8.286	.000
DAS Cohesion	812	14.2106	5.01231	15.5086	4.65439	-8.679	.000
DAS Total Score	794	103.2028	21.84170	109.9219	19.94555	-12.343	.000

All t tests are significant, p. <.001.

Figures 1-4 show mean scores for the DAS scale scores for pre- and post-tests.

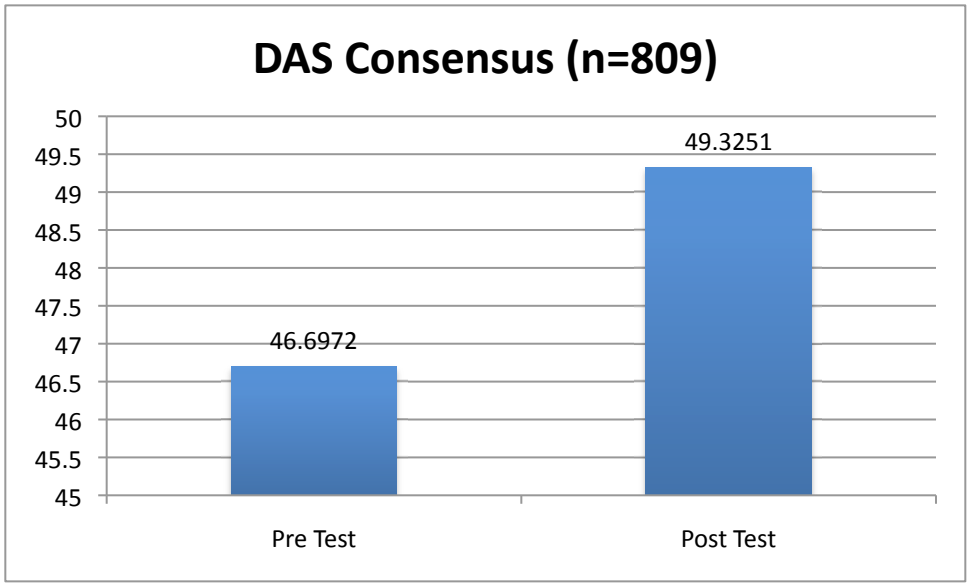

Figure 1: DAS Consensus, Pre/Post, n=809

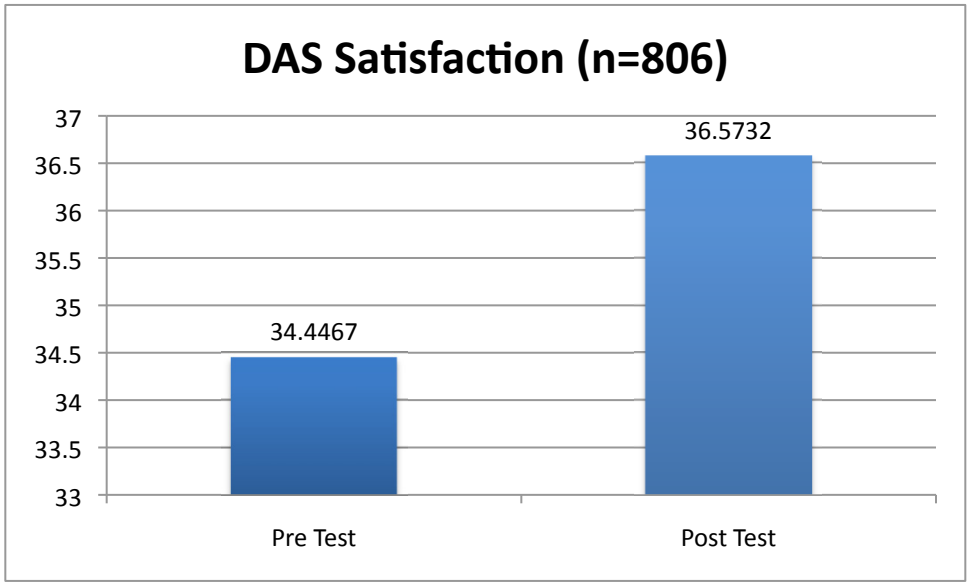

Figure 2: DAS Satisfaction, Pre/Post, n=806

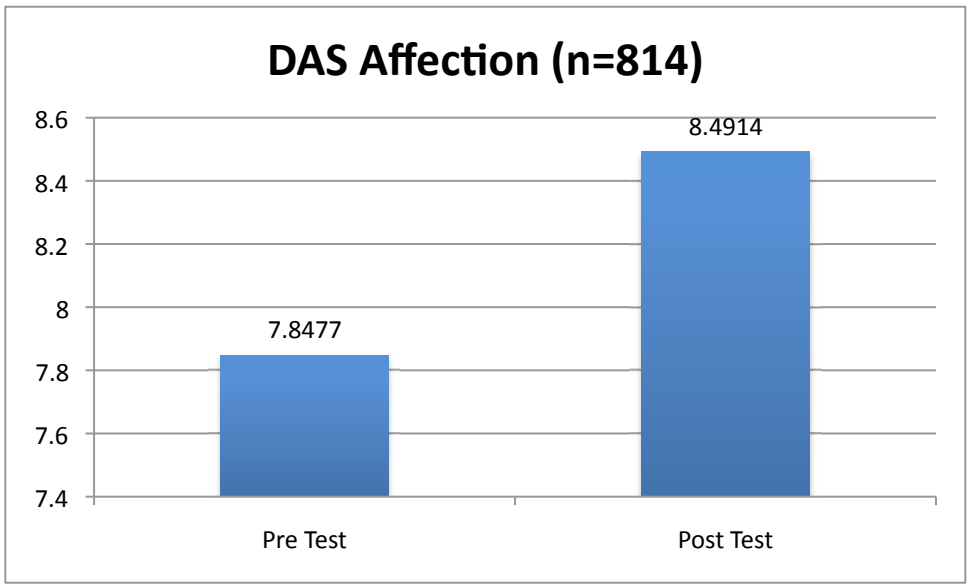

Figure 3: DAS Affection, Pre/Post, n=814

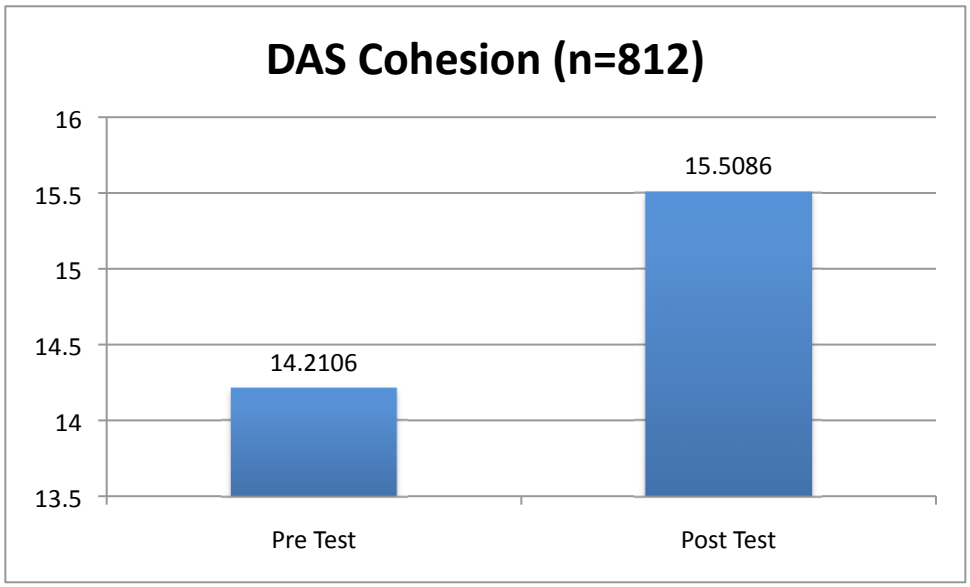

Figure 4: DAS Cohesion, Pre/Post, n=812

It is worth noting that, on average, pre-test scores are only slightly above the traditional score for distressed couples. At post-test, this score is significantly higher. Figure 5 shows mean scores for the DAS Total score for pre- and post-test for all participants.

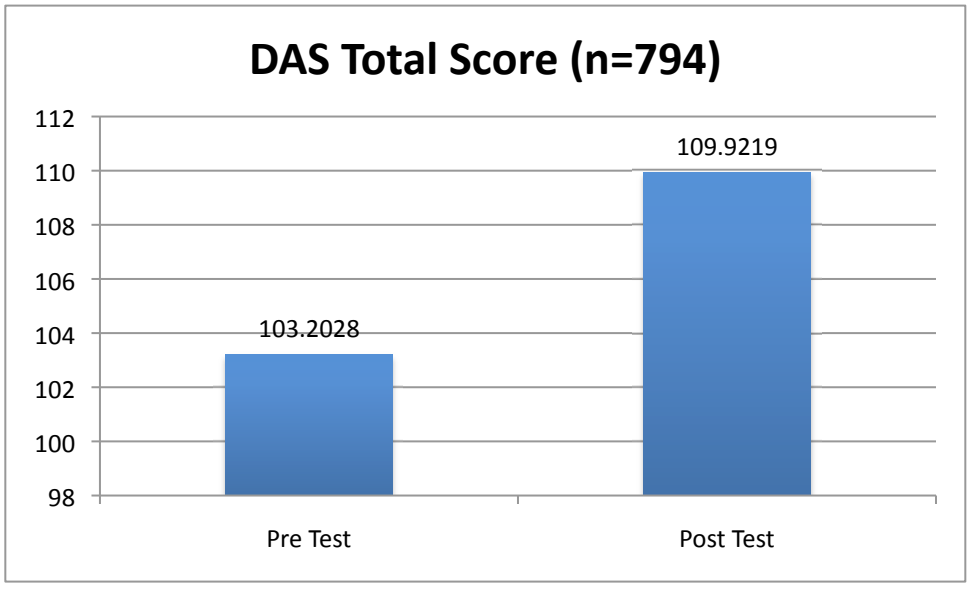

Figure 5: DAS Total, Pre/Post, n=794

Six-Month Follow-Up

A diverse sample of participants were followed up six months post-training, including 56% female, 44% male; 68% Hispanic, 16% White, 16% Black; 33% low-income (Individual income below $26,000; couple income below $48,000). Six months after training, significantly higher scores were detected on all DAS scales.

	Pre Test			6 Months Post Test			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
DAS Consensus	866	48.1028	9.22574	52.3961	9.03757	-14.615	.000
DAS Satisfaction	851	35.1363	7.60373	38.7027	6.90301	-15.688	.000
DAS Affection	863	8.1506	2.70353	9.3395	2.44701	-13.859	.000
DAS Cohesion	880	14.7500	4.87582	16.3114	4.63438	-8.778	.000
DAS Total Score	790	105.9937	20.64348	116.9127	19.32784	-17.613	.000

All t tests are significant, p. <.001.

Figures 6-9 show mean scores for the DAS scale scores for pre- and 6-month post-test for all participants.

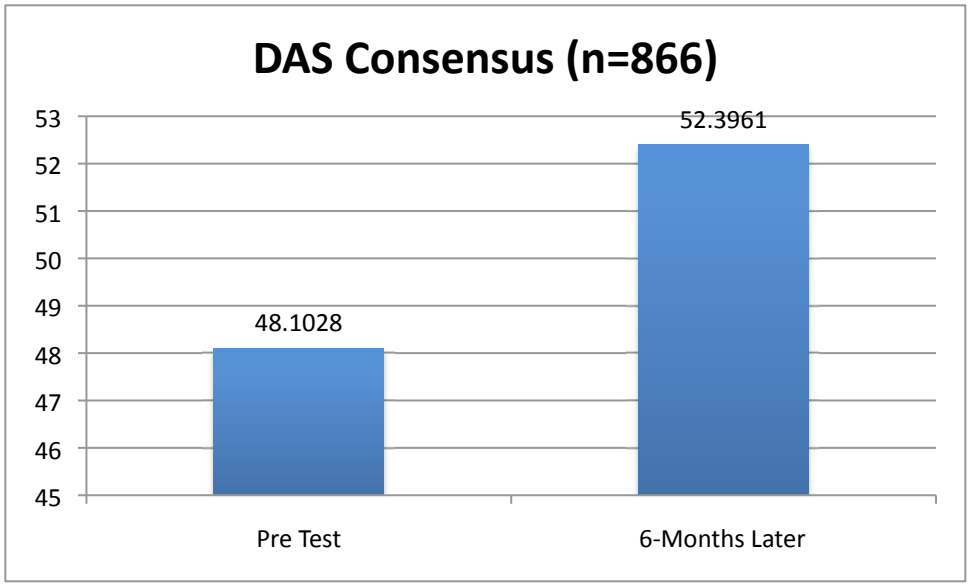

Figure 6: DAS Consensus, Pre/Six-Months, n=866

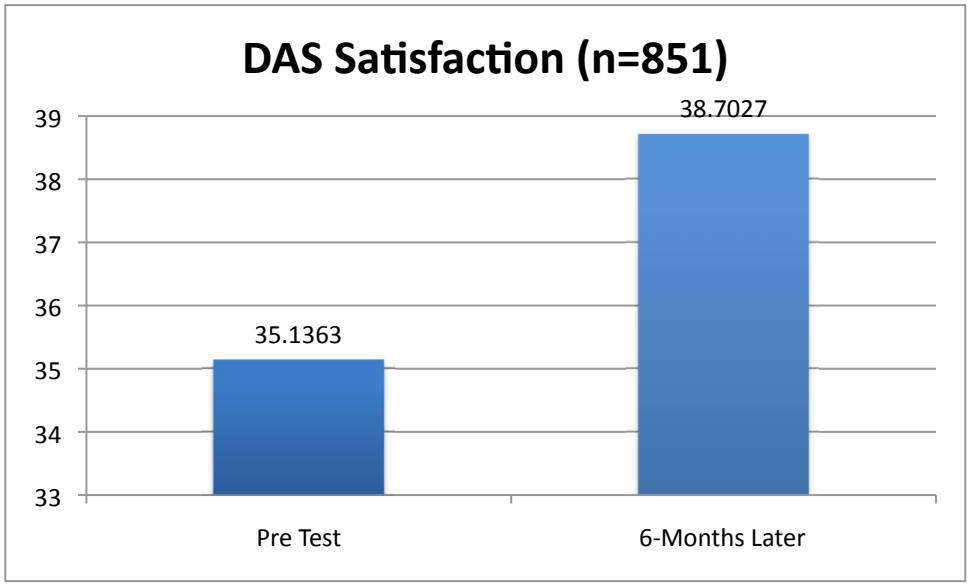

Figure 7: DAS Satisfaction, Pre/Six-Months, n=851

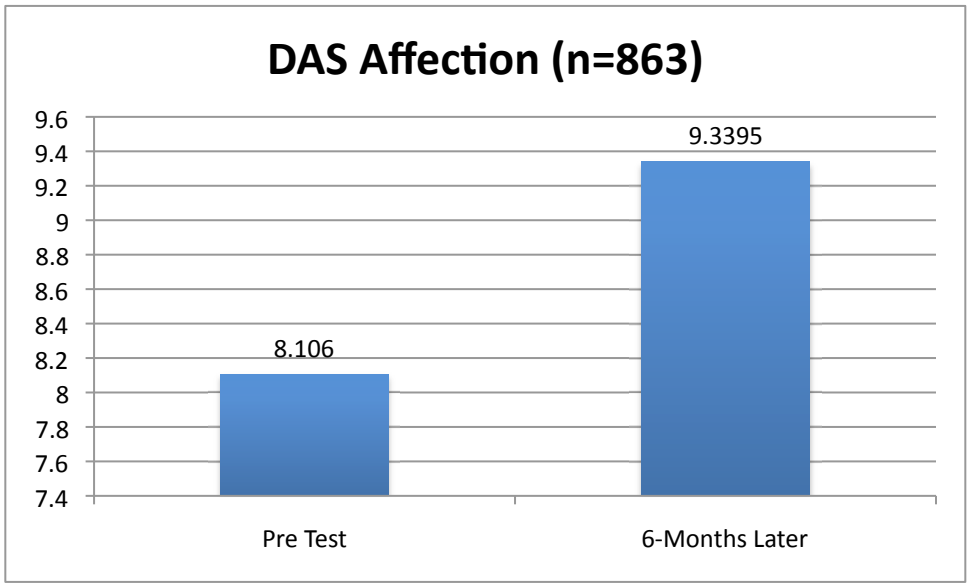

Figure 8: DAS Affection, Pre/Six-Months, n=863

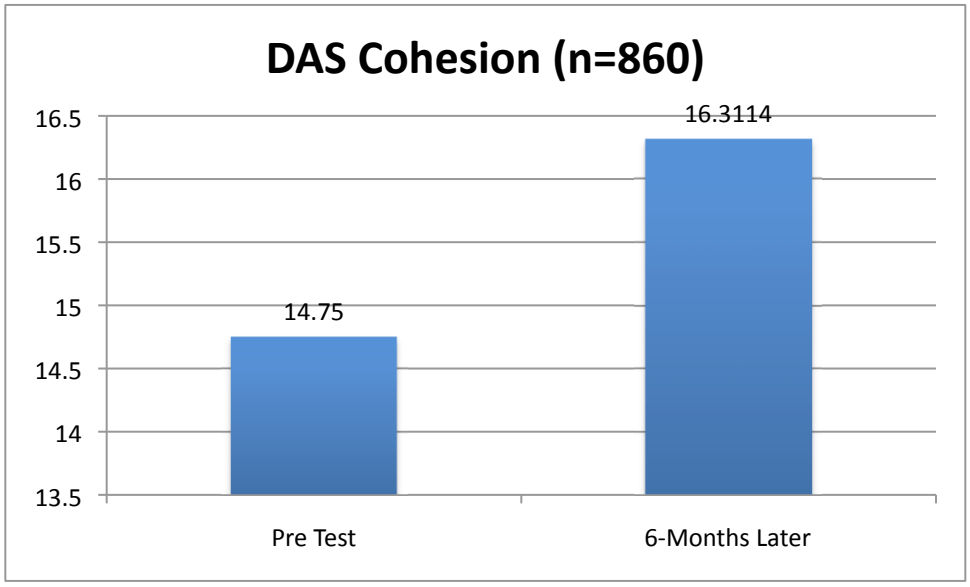

Figure 9: DAS Cohesion, Pre/Six-Months, n=860

Figure 10 shows mean scores for the DAS Total score for pre- and 6-month post-test for all participants.

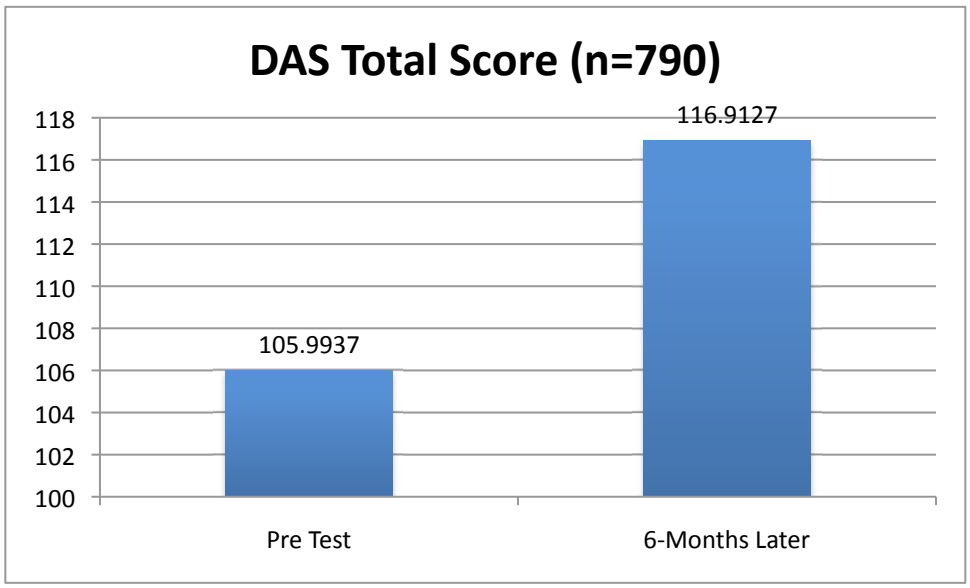

Figure 10: DAS Total, Pre/Six-Months, n=790

12-Month Follow-Up

A diverse group of participants were followed up 12 months post-training, including 55% female, 45% male; 67% Hispanic, 15% White, 18% Black; 30% low-income (Individual income below $26,000; couple income below $48,000). Twelve months after training, significantly higher scores were detected on all DAS scales.

	Pre Test			12 Month Post Test			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
DAS Consensus	542	47.5517	9.59706	51.6937	8.29395	-10.26	.000
DAS Satisfaction	224	36.1071	6.72304	39.6875	5.62750	-7.696	.000
DAS Affection	552	7.9402	2.78674	9.2391	2.50388	-11.37	.000
DAS Cohesion	563	14.6448	4.91040	17.0551	4.76331	-10.55	.000
DAS Total Score	205	107.8049	19.09473	120.7171	15.0064	-10.64	.000

All t tests are significant, p. <.001.

Figures 11-14 show mean scores for the DAS scale scores for pre- and 12-month post-test for all participants.

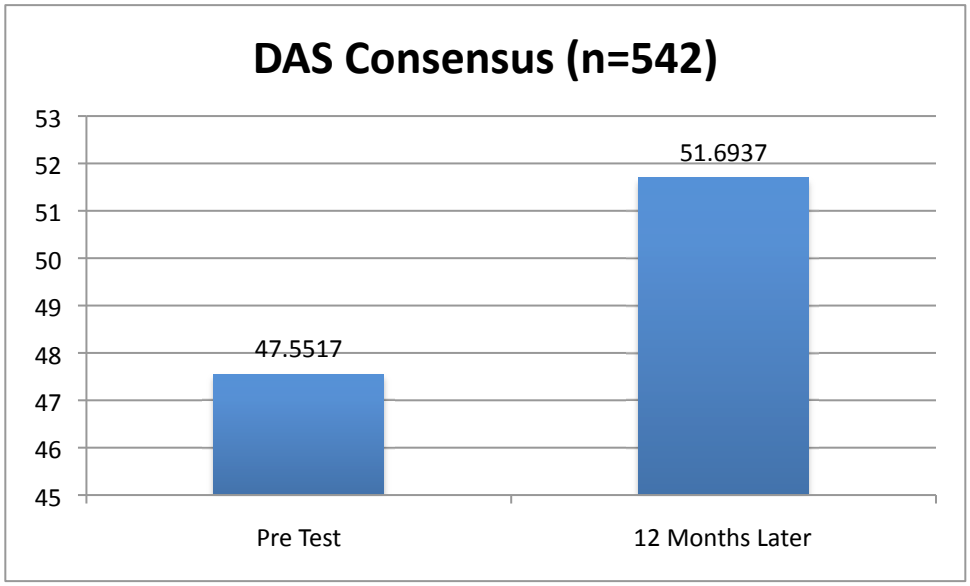

Figure 11: DAS Consensus, Pre/12-Months, n=542

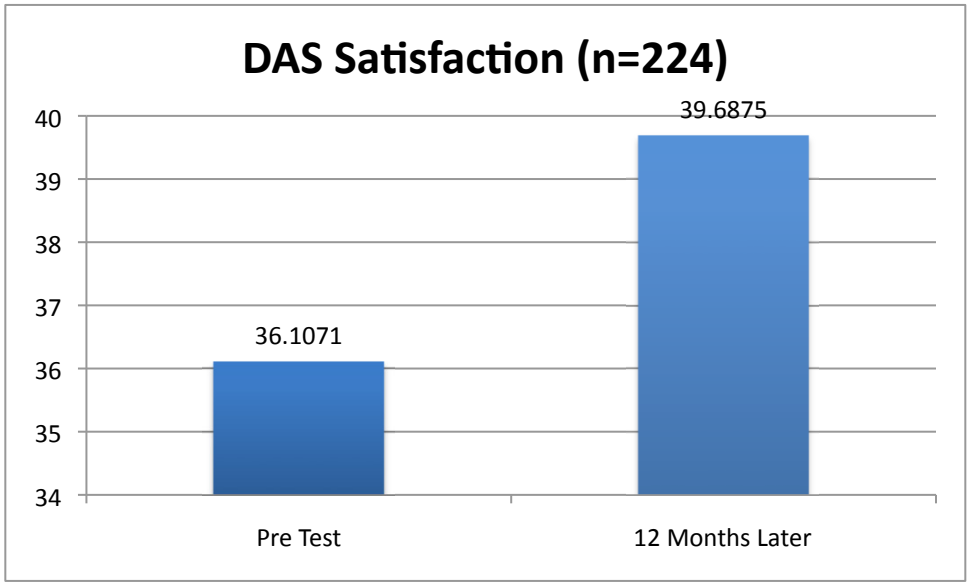

Figure 12: DAS Satisfaction, Pre/12-Months, n=224

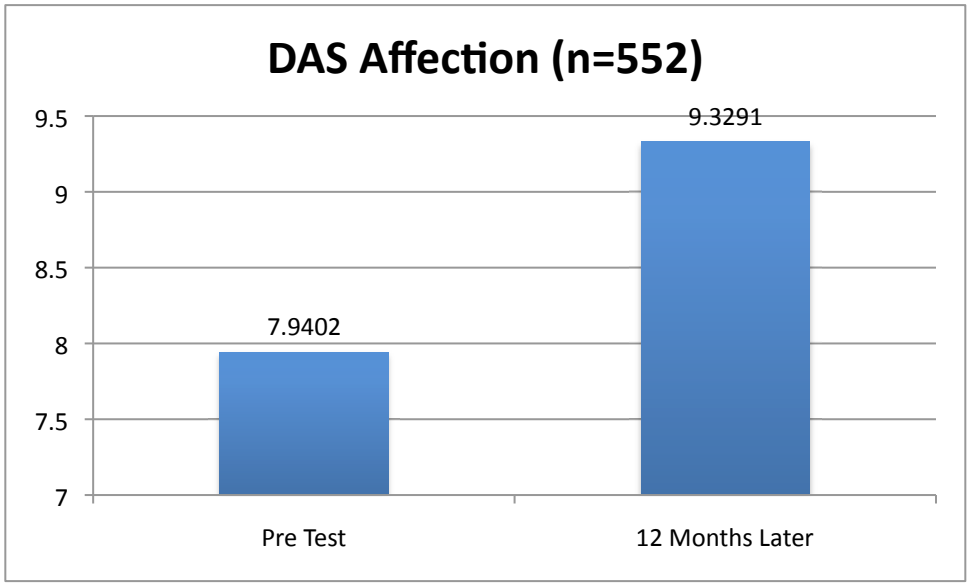

Figure 13: DAS Affection, Pre/12-Months, n=552

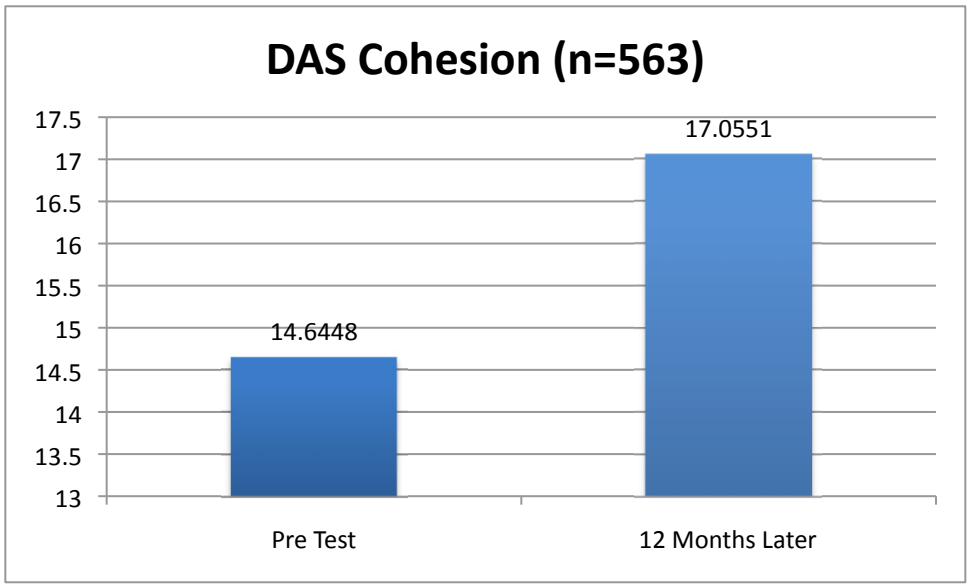

Figure 14: DAS Cohesion, Pre/12-Months, n-563

Figure 15 shows mean scores for the DAS Total score for pre- and 12-month post-test for all participants.

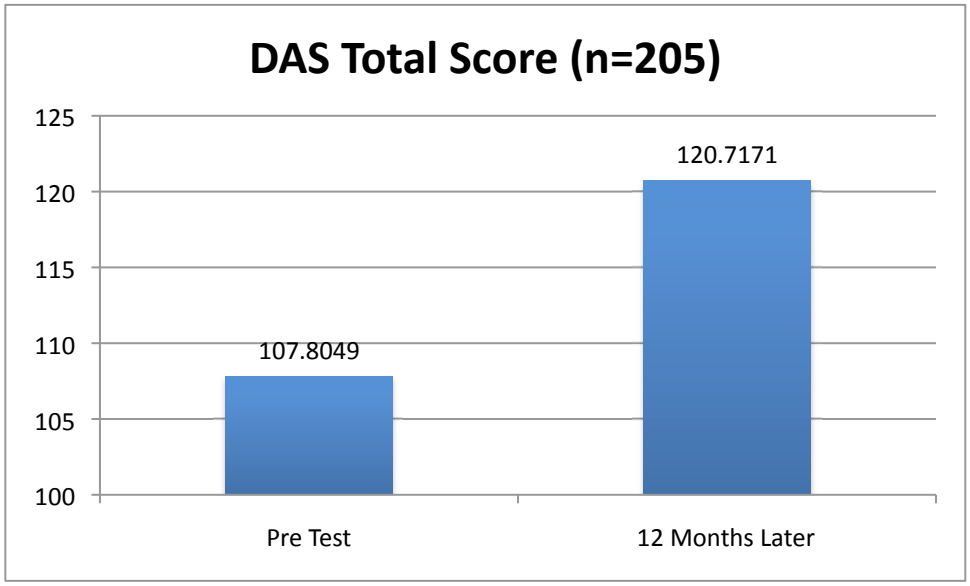

Figure 15: DAS Total Score, Pre/12-Months, n=205

Six to 12-Month Change

Finally, in order to determine if there were any significant gains from 6 months to 12 months, an analysis was performed (*n*= 234). The DAS scales of consensus affection and satisfaction were not significantly differ from 6 to 12 months (meaning that they neither increased OR decreased). However, the Cohesion scale *t* (233) = -5. 72 and the

Total DAS scales *t* (215) = -2.52 were significantly higher at 12 months compared to 6 months.

Distressed Couples

While statistical significance is important for any research findings, this must also be balanced with *practical significance* and *clinical significance.* This means that the findings must also translate into meaningful differences in the lives of participants.

There are a number of ways to investigate this. Using the DAS, there are published thresholds for "distressed" couples (DAS Total score = 102). Approximately 40% of the total sample could be classified as "distressed" at Pre-test (under 102). We sought to investigate if those participants that scored below this threshold benefitted from PAIRS training. The results of this analysis were identical to the analysis of the total sample. Pre-post, pre-6 months, and pre- 12 months were all significantly different.

These results are described below:

	Pre Test			Post Test			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
DAS Consensus	339	38.7522	8.91266	44.4779	8.99451	-11.587	.000
DAS Satisfaction	339	27.7847	6.80525	31.7404	7.68406	-11.919	.000
DAS Affection	342	5.9649	2.60136	7.2749	2.55850	-9.955	.000
DAS Cohesion	339	10.3982	4.10413	12.9646	4.51348	-10.623	.000
DAS Total Score	333	82.8559	16.61679	96.4024	19.91867	-14.533	.000

All t tests are significant, p. <.001.

Figures 16-19 shows mean scores for the DAS scale scores for pre- and post-test for "distressed" participants.

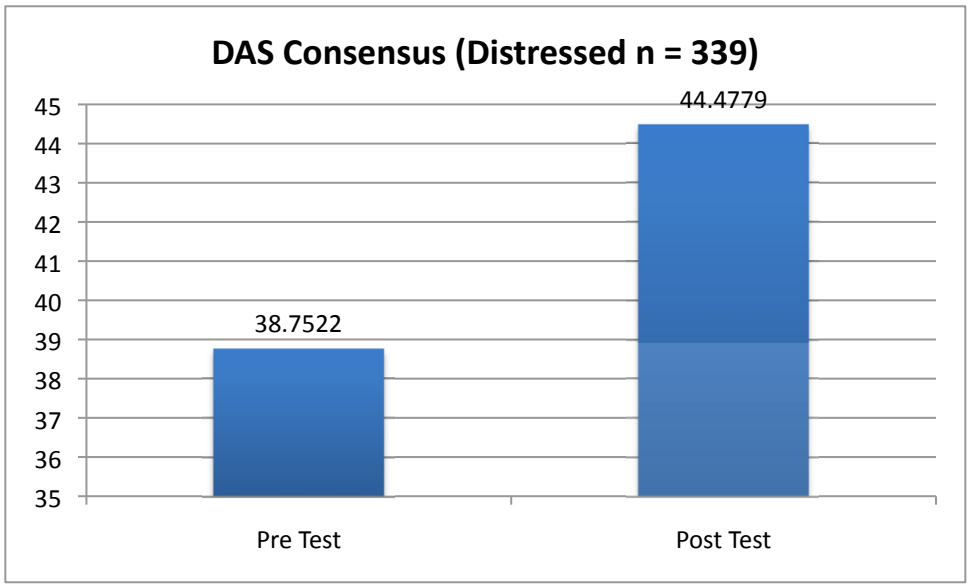

Figure 16: DAS Consensus for Distressed Participants, Pre/Post, n=339

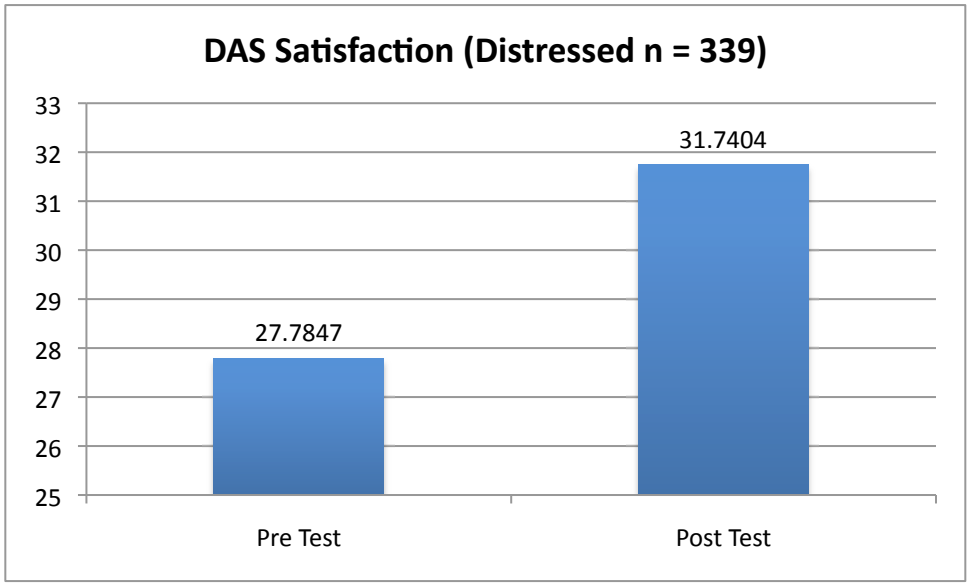

Figure 17: DAS Satisfaction for Distressed Participants, Pre/Post, n=339

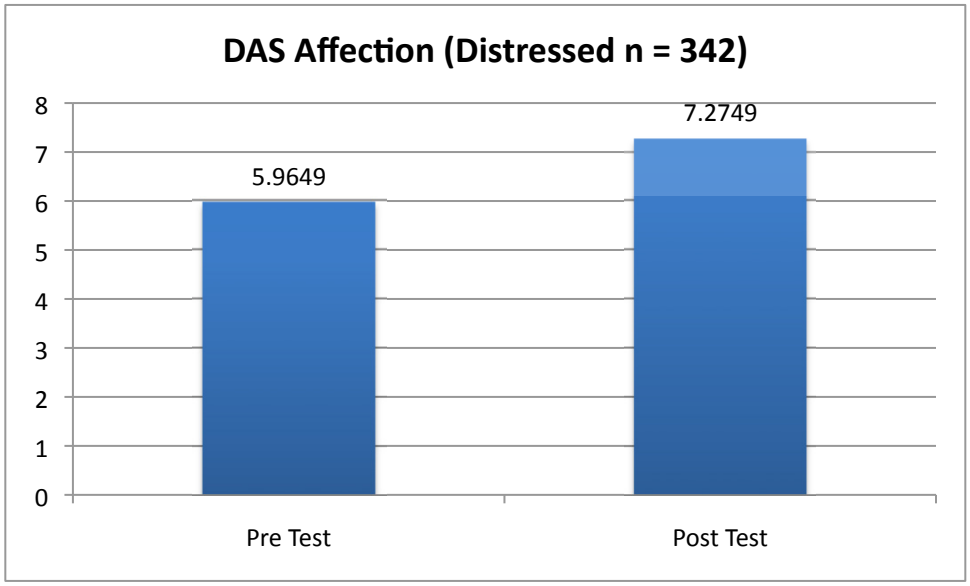

Figure 18: DAS Affection for Distressed Participants, Pre/Post, n=342

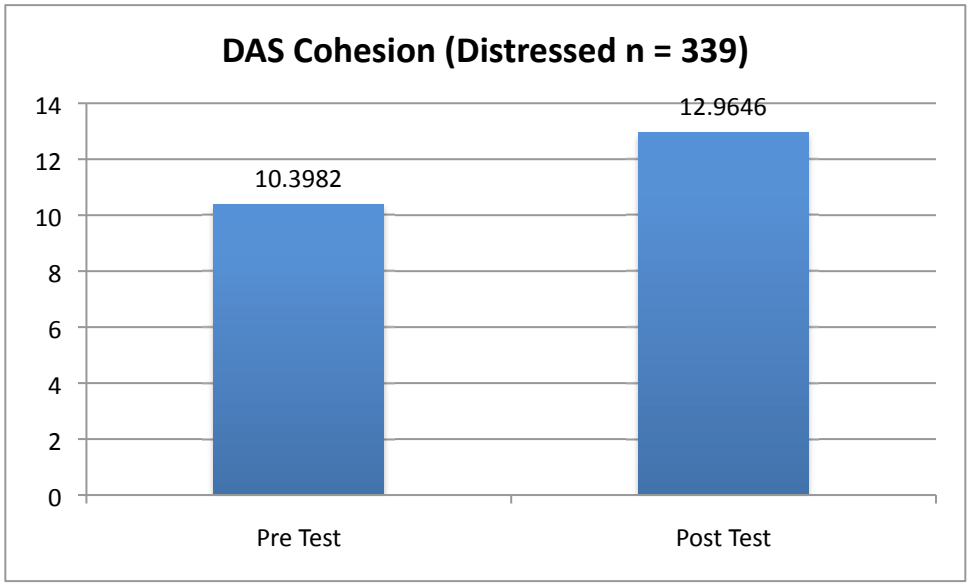

Figure 19: DAS Cohesion for Distressed Participants, Pre/Post, n=339

Figure 20 shows mean scores for the DAS Total score for pre- and post-test for "distressed" participants.

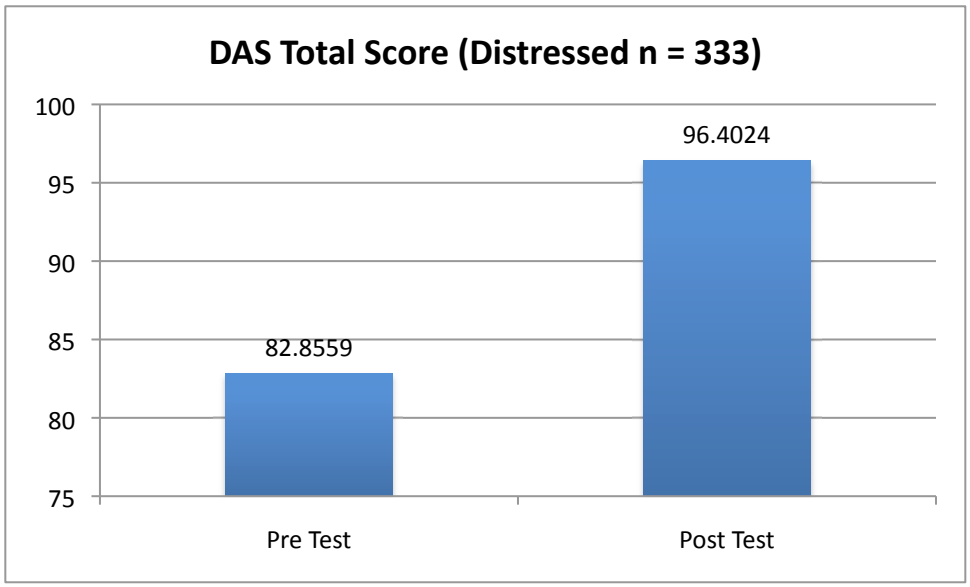

Figure 20: DAS Total Score for Distressed Participants, n=333

Distressed Participants: Six-Month Follow-Up

Some "distressed" participants were followed up at six months post-training. Six months after training, significantly higher scores were detected on all DAS scales.

	Pre Test		6 Month Post Test			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig.
DAS Consensus	309	39.8803	8.06559	47.2589	10.45573	-12.81	.000
DAS Satisfaction	306	28.0327	6.23309	34.6503	7.80491	-14.80	.000
DAS Affection	309	5.9903	2.42616	8.0388	2.73240	-12.58	.000
DAS Cohesion	311	10.4469	3.80953	14.2315	5.22319	-12.12	.000
DAS Total Score	298	84.4866	14.22149	104.5034	22.20311	-17.04	.000

All t tests are significant, p. <.001.

Figures 21-24 show mean scores for the DAS scale scores for pre- and 6 month post-test for "distressed" participants.

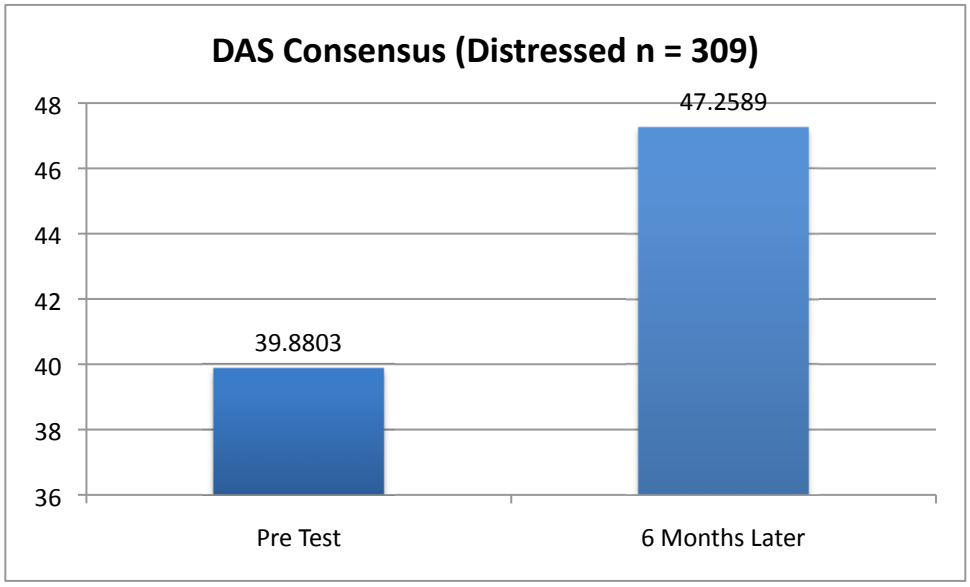

Figure 21: DAS Consensus for Distressed Participants, Pre/6-Months, n=309

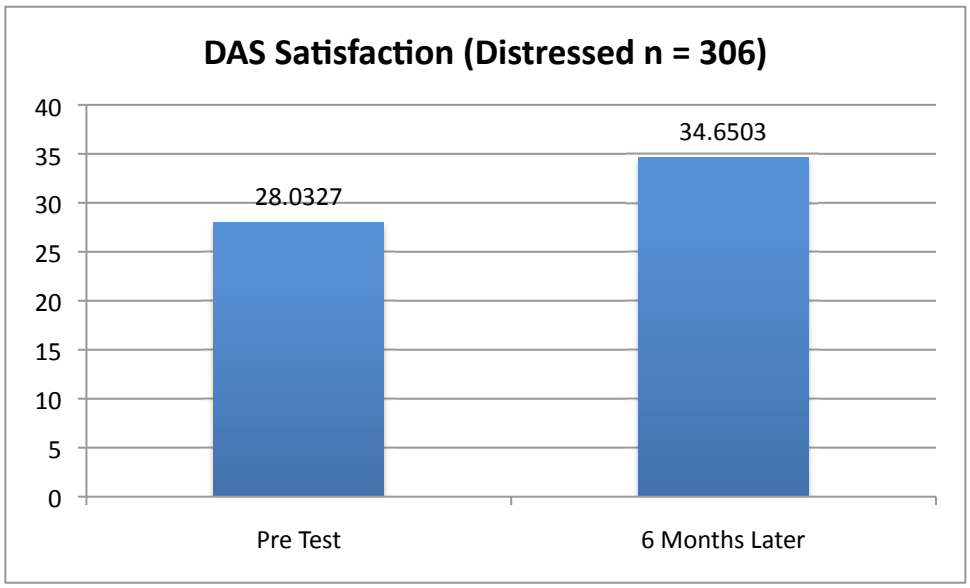

Figure 22: DAS Satisfaction for Distressed Participants, Pre/6-Months, n=306

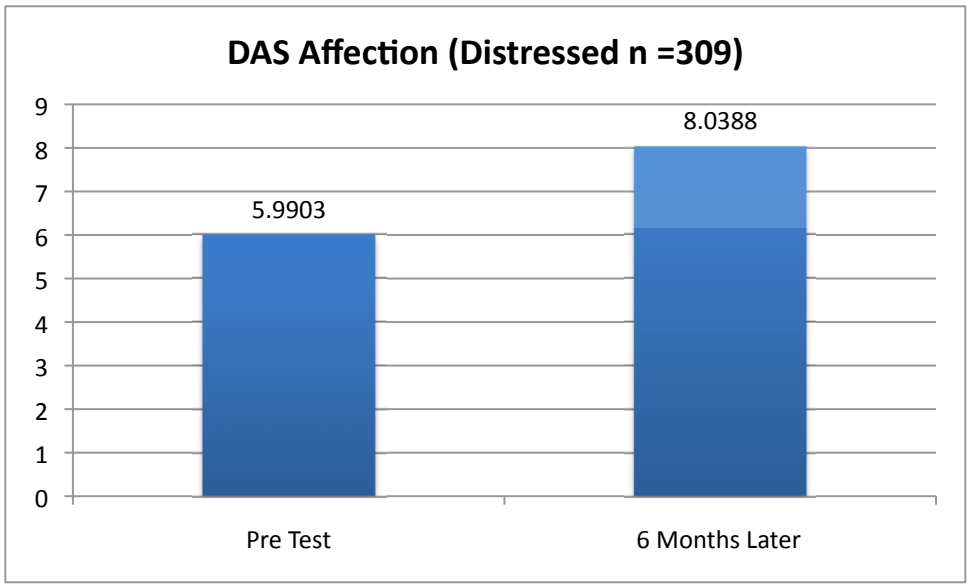

Figure 23: DAS Affection for Distressed Participants, Pre/6-Months, n=309

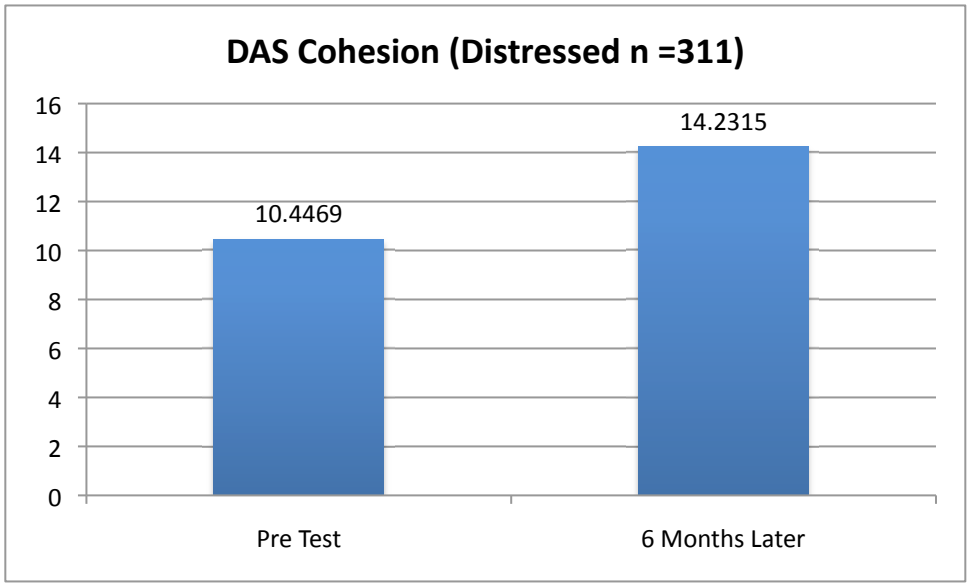

Figure 24: DAS Cohesion for Distressed Participants, Pre/6-Months, n=311

Figure 25 shows mean scores for the DAS Total score for pre- and 6 month post-test for "distressed" participants.

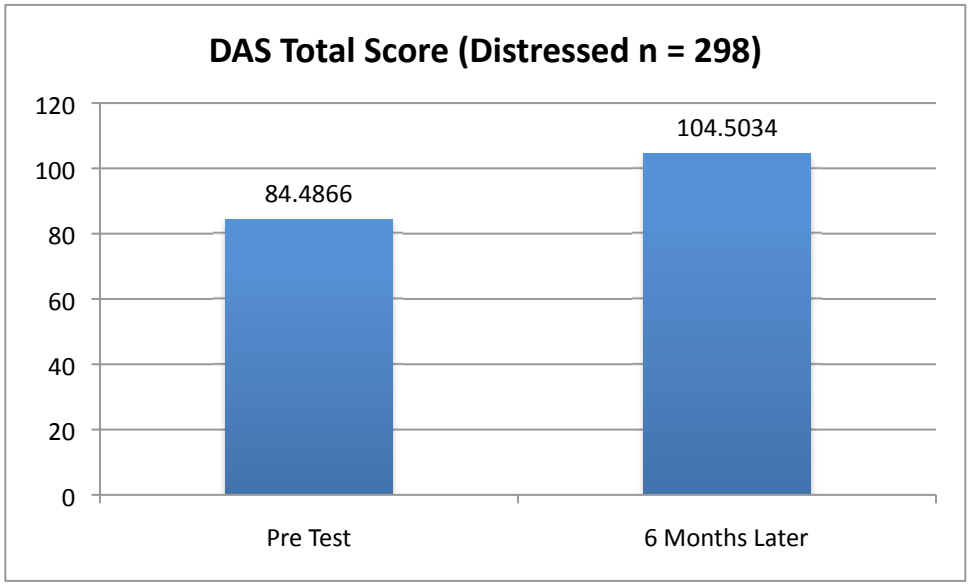

Figure 25: DAS Total Score for Distressed Participants, Pre/6-Months, n=298

Distressed Participants: 12-Month Follow-Up

Some "distressed" participants were followed up at 12 months post-training. Twelve months after training, significantly higher scores were detected on all DAS scales.

		Pre Test		12 Month Post Test			
	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	T	Sig.
DAS Consensus	199	38.9698	8.72412	47.8241	10.17495	-11.408	.000
DAS Satisfaction	79	30.3165	5.67619	37.3671	5.48232	-9.159	.000
DAS Affection	203	5.7980	2.41972	7.9507	2.80691	-10.426	.000
DAS Cohesion	205	10.2976	3.59251	14.9171	5.27833	-11.61	.000
DAS Total Score	77	88.0000	12.62308	112.9091	16.59992	-12.89	.000

All t tests are significant, p. <.001.

Figures 26-29 show mean scores for the DAS scale scores for pre- and 12 month post-test for "distressed" participants.

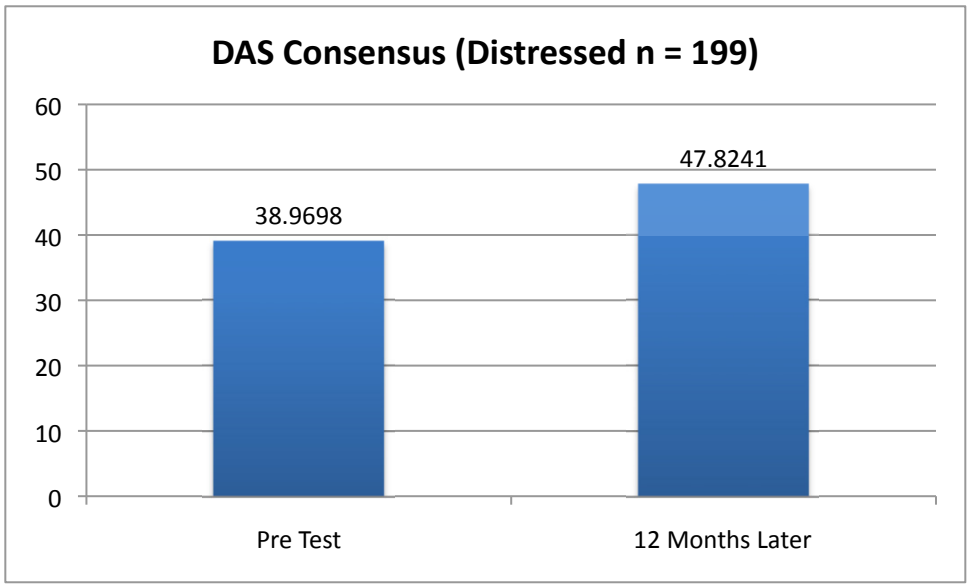

Figure 26: DAS Consensus for Distressed Participants, Pre/12-Months, n=199

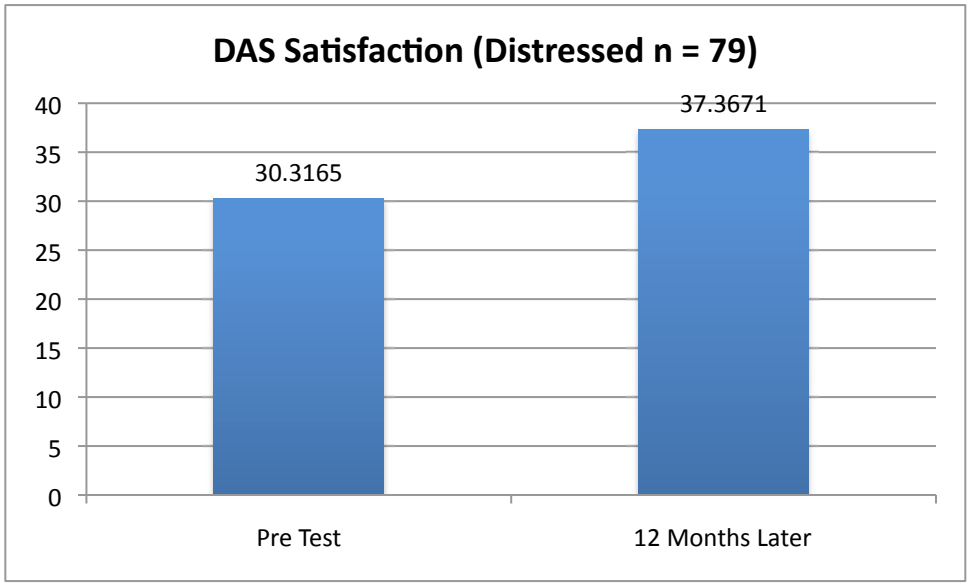

Figure 27: DAS Satisfaction for Distressed Participants, Pre/12-Months, n=79

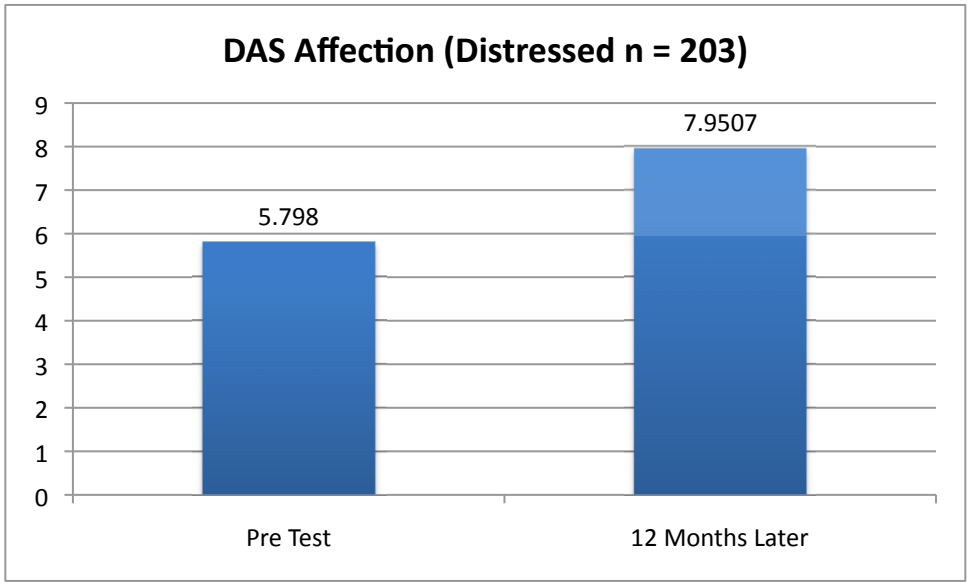

Figure 28: DAS Affection for Distressed Participants, Pre/12-Months, n=203

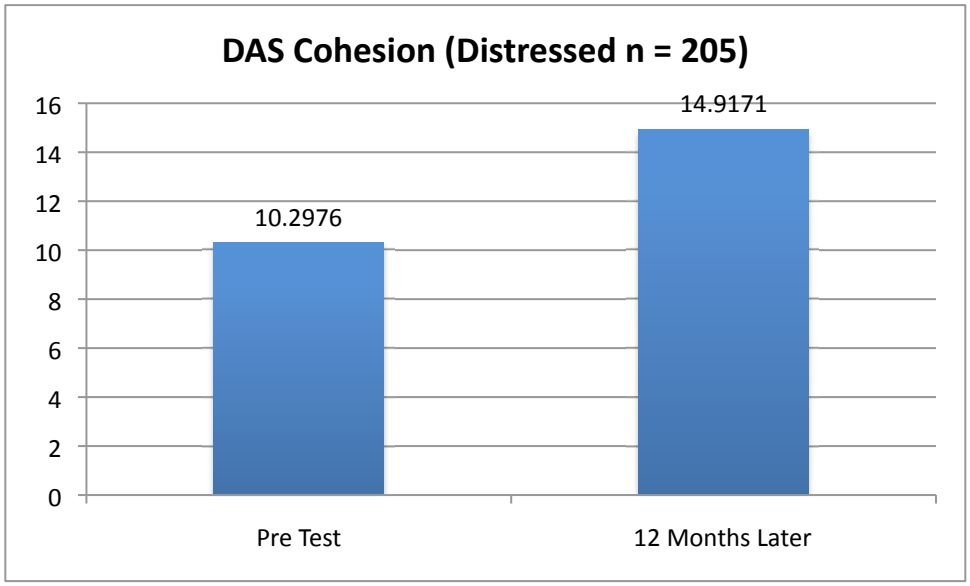

Figure 29: DAS Cohesion for Distressed Participants, Pre/12-Months, n=205

Figure 30 shows mean scores for the DAS Total score for pre- and 12 month post-test for “distressed” participants.

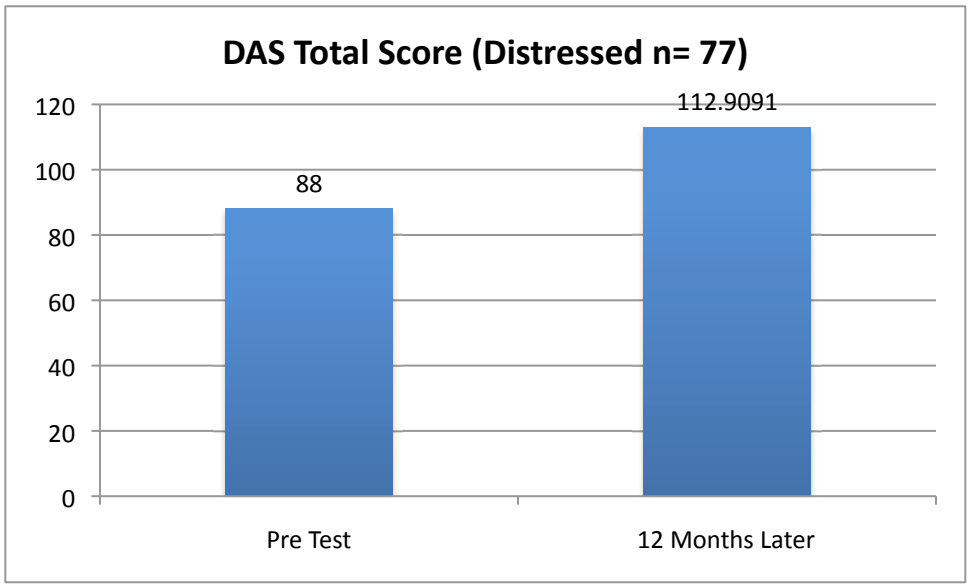

Figure 30: DAS Total Score for Distressed Participants, Pre/12-Months, n=77

In addition, when looking at the 6-month to 12-month scores, consensus affection and satisfaction were not significantly different from 6 to 12 months (meaning that they neither increased OR decreased). However, the Cohesion scale *t* (79) = -3.470 and the Total DAS scales *t* (76) = -2.457 were significantly higher at 12 months compared to 6 months. Participants started, on average, well below the threshold for distressed couples, but at 6 and 12 months were far above the average (n= 333 and 77, for 6 and 12 months, respectively).

Reliability Coefficient

A Cohen's alpha coefficient was calculated for the DAS total score for pre, post, 6 month and 12 month follow up. Alphas ranged in the .93-.94 range indicating high reliability. This is consistent with previous research using the DAS.

Conclusion

Participants completing the nine-hour *PAIRS Essentials* class demonstrate significant attitude change about their relationship following participation in the program (as measured by the DAS) at six and twelve months post training. Both "distressed" and "non-distressed" participants have significant, positive (and persistent) changes in their attitude toward their partner.

Authors

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