

Welcome to Engaged Couple Checkup Discussion Guide!

Congratulations! Taking the **Engaged Couple Checkup** is a great first step in helping you build a stronger relationship and laying a solid foundation for marriage. After you have completed your Couple Checkup and discussed the results, there are some other important things you can do that will help bring you a more happy marriage and family life.

First, we want to highly recommend the book **EMPOWERING COUPLES: Building on Your Strengths**. This self-help book is a great resource that you can use at your own pace. It will teach and reinforce the skills discussed in your Checkup. There is also a DVD included in the **Empowering Couples Kit**. Together, the book and DVD provide a great deal of information and content that will give you new ideas that can help strengthen your relationship. To review the book and DVD, and order them online, visit our website at:
www.empoweringcouples.ca

Second, if you have relationship/marital problems that don't go away after several months, it is time to get some professional help from a counselor or trained clergy. These individuals can give you the entire PREPARE/ENRICH Program, including the inventory, feedback, and skills training. Under their guidance, you can have help as you work to resolve issues and improve your relationship. To find a counselor trained in your area, visit the *Find A Counselor* section of www.empoweringcouples.ca. As with any problem, the sooner you seek help, the easier it will be to resolve.

Third, do not take your relationship for granted. Remember, that a satisfying relationship can only occur when you give it the time and attention needed. Always look for ways to continue to do things that will enrich your relationship.

*Coming together is a beginning,
Keeping together is progress,
Working together is success.*

Wishing you a Fulfilling Relationship!

Foundation for the COUPLE CHECKUP is the Popular PREPARE/ENRICH Program

Over 2 million couples have taken the popular and highly effective PREPARE/ENRICH Program nationally. The goal of the program has been to build stronger marriages. It has been used by over 70,000 counselors and clergy with premarital and married couples. National studies have demonstrated that the program is highly effective in helping couples develop their strengths and overcoming their ongoing issues.

This Couple Checkup is based on the PREPARE/ENRICH Program. The major difference is that the Couple Checkup Report goes directly back to you the couple, rather than to a professional counselor. As such, it provides you with a wealth of useful information about how to improve your couple relationship.

DEVELOPERS OF THE COUPLE CHECKUP

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Engaged Couple Checkup Discussion Guide

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Introduction

“Prepare for your Marriage, not just your Wedding”

Most premarital couples spend a great deal of time, energy and money on a wedding ceremony that lasts a few hours. But they spend little time acquiring relationship skills needed to build a marriage that could last 50 years. Granted, it’s much easier to prepare for a successful wedding than a successful marriage. Wedding preparation focuses on concrete tasks, while preparing for marriage means you have to take time to share feelings – both positive and negative. It also means you have to be intentional about planning for your future together.

One goal of the Couple Checkup is to celebrate your relationship strengths. You should be proud of the areas where you and your partner are doing well. Keep nurturing these aspects of your relationship so they remain strong. Strengths can help you compensate and address other areas of your relationship that need improvement. For example, if you have strengths in communication, but struggle with finances, take time to communicate about financial issues and talk about your concerns with one another. Next, use your communication skills to brainstorm possible solutions and offer support to one another as you begin to make changes.

Another goal of the Couple Checkup is to help you identify issues you disagree on and resolve them. Just like a mechanic determines what is working and what is not when tuning up your car, relationships require direction, maintenance, and attention to keep growing and running smoothly. By identifying your relationship growth areas, issues can be resolved. The exercises in the Discussion Guide will give you suggestions to improve each area of your relationship.

A third goal is to encourage you and your partner to talk about your relationship. By sharing your feelings and ideas, you will discover ways to build a stronger relationship. Remember, there is no such thing as a perfect relationship. All couples have challenges and issues - as well as strengths that attracted you to one another in the first place. You should take time to digest these results and discuss the checkup with your partner. Try not to defend yourselves or judge your partner. Listen to one another with the goal of understanding.

Instructions:

Step 1: Review each section of your Couple Checkup report.

Step 2: Next, use this Discussion Guide to go deeper into each topic, facilitating growth and new relationship skills. Pace yourselves by discussing one topic per day.

Step 3: If serious relationship issues and concerns persist, you should contact a counselor who can administer the complete PREPARE inventory and/or give you professional feedback and assistance, go to the “Find a Counselor” link at www.empoweringcouples.ca.

We hope you will enjoy the process of growing together as a couple. Remember, the more you invest in your relationship, the more you both will benefit. We wish you much success as a couple!

Communication: Assertiveness & Active Listening Skills

"It takes two to speak the truth...one to speak and another to hear."

—Henry David Thoreau

Assertiveness:

Assertiveness is the ability to ask for what you want and need, and express your true feelings.

Assertiveness is a valuable communication skill. In successful couples, both individuals tend to be assertive. Rather than assuming their partner can read their minds, they ask clearly and directly for what they want.

Assertive individuals take responsibility for their messages by using "I" statements. They avoid statements beginning with "you." In making constructive requests, they are positive and respectful in their communication. When each person knows what the other person wants and feels -- when each knows they have been heard and understood -- intimacy is increased. Assertiveness also helps people to feel good about themselves and increases the likelihood that they will achieve their personal goals.

Examples of Assertive Statements:

- *"I enjoy spending time with you, but I also want to spend time with my friends. I would like us to find some time to talk about this."*
- *"I feel upset and insecure when you bounce a check. I want to make sure you understand how I feel when this happens."*

Active Listening:

Active listening involves listening attentively without interruption and restating what you hear until the speaker is satisfied.

Good communication depends on you carefully listening to another person. The active listening process lets the speaker know whether or not the message sent was clearly understood by restating both the content and feelings communicated. Active listeners avoid judgment and criticism, and instead listen curiously with the hope of understanding their partner. Instead of thinking about what they will say next, the active listener tunes into what is being said, while remembering they'll have their turn to be the speaker soon enough.

Examples of Active Listening:

- *"I heard you say that you enjoy the time we spend together but that you need more time to be with your friends. You want to plan a time to talk about this."*
- *"It sounds like the check I bounced leaves you feeling insecure, and you want me to understand how upsetting this is to you."*

Communication Exercise: Creating and Sharing a Wish List

In this exercise, you will each individually make a Wish List of things that you would like your partner to do more often. Next, you will be asked to take turns sharing your Wish Lists with each other.

In sharing your Wish List with your partner, you will be demonstrating your **assertiveness skills**. In giving feedback to your partner about their Wish List, you will be demonstrating your **Active Listening skills**.

- **Assertiveness** means your ability to express feelings and ask for what you want.
- **Active listening** is the ability to listen accurately and repeat back to the speaker the message you have heard.

Make a Wish List of three things that you want your partner to do more often.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

After completing the Wish List Exercise, discuss the following questions:

- **In what ways are you good at being assertive? Where could you improve?**
 - **In what ways do you effectively use active listening skills? How could you improve?**
-

Communication Tips that will Increase Your Intimacy:

1. Look for the good in your partner and give him/her a compliment.
2. Praise your partner as much as possible.
3. Take time to listen to each other.
4. Listen to understand -- not to judge.
5. Use active listening, which involves summarizing your partner's comments before you share your reactions or feelings.
6. Be assertive. Share your feelings by using "I" statements (i.e. I feel... or I think...).
7. When issues arise, avoid blaming each other and seek solutions.
8. If problems persist, use the Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict.
9. If problems still continue, seek counseling before they become more serious. Doing so will make it easier to find solutions.
10. Give your relationship the same priority and attention you gave it when you were first dating.

Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict

"Marriage is a team sport. You either win together or lose together."

Every couple has differences and disagreements. But healthy couples find ways to resolve disputes without turning them into relationship wars. Couples who accept and appreciate the fact that their partner has independent feelings and opinions tend to reach successful and satisfying resolutions.

In some cases, conflicts involve hurt feelings where one partner offended the other through their words or actions. In these cases, the Assertiveness and Active Listening Skills, taught in the last section, can help you "clear the air" by listening and understanding.

When you have issues that are ongoing and require a decision or solution to resolve, use this Ten Step approach to deal with them. The exercise below may boost your success in ending issues that resist resolution. As simple as the Ten Step exercise looks, remember it is not a game. Take time to work on all of the steps. Focus on one issue at a time and you will discover new solutions to old problems.

1. Set a time and place for discussion.
2. Define the problem or issue of disagreement.
3. How do you each contribute to the problem?
4. List past attempts to resolve the issue that were not successful.
5. Brainstorm. List all possible solutions.
6. Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions.
7. Agree on one solution to try.
8. Agree on how each individual will work toward this solution.
9. Set up another meeting. Discuss your progress.
10. Reward each other as you each contribute toward the solution.

Ten Steps for Resolving Couple Conflict Worksheet

1. Schedule a specific place, date and time for a couple meeting within the next week. Allow at least 30 minutes.

Meeting Place: _____
Date: _____ Time: _____

2. Select one important issue you would like to resolve. List the specific issue or problem for discussion below:

3. How do you each contribute to the problem? Without blaming each other, list the things you each do that have not helped to resolve the problem.

Male:

1) _____
2) _____

Female:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____

4. List past attempts to resolve the issue that were not successful.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

5. Brainstorm—pool your new ideas and try to attain ten possible solutions to the problem. Do not judge or criticize any of the suggestions at this point.

- 1) _____ 6) _____
- 2) _____ 7) _____
- 3) _____ 8) _____
- 4) _____ 9) _____
- 5) _____ 10) _____

6. Discuss and evaluate each of these possible solutions. What are your feelings and thoughts about the suggestions from step 5? Talk about how useful and appropriate each suggestion might be for resolving your issues.

7. After you have expressed your feelings, select one solution that you both agree to try. Keep in mind the right solution can often be a combination of several ideas listed above.

Trial Solution: _____

8. Agree how you will each work toward this solution. Be as specific as possible.

Male: _____

Female: _____

9. Set a place, date and time within the next week for another meeting to discuss your progress.

Meeting Place: _____
Date: _____ Time: _____

10. Pay attention to each other as the week passes. If you notice your partner making a positive contribution toward the solution, praise his/her effort.

Future Weekly Meetings

At your next weekly meeting, if you have not improved, go through Steps 5–9 and try a different solution. As you make progress, use this exercise to overcome other problems.

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

"The golden rule of budgeting: Spend less than you earn and save and invest the rest."

Money is a powerful word that conjures up a number of emotions, among them power, envy, fear, anger, hope, freedom and disgust. Little wonder then, that the most common source of disagreement in families in the United States is money. In fact, 37 percent of all married couples indicate that the number one problem in their marriage is money.

Budgeting doesn't mean having less; it means doing more with what you have. Most couples agree that budgeting is a good idea, but the majority still don't create a budget. Unfortunately, many people avoid managing their money because they think it will mean they have less to spend. In the long-run, tracking and managing your finances will result in peace of mind and a more comfortable and secure lifestyle.

A Word to the Wise about Saving:

In addition to budgeting, savings are also important to any financial management plan. It's a simple fact: interest on savings compounds. Money invested in a safe place at a good rate of return grows at a steady rate. By saving a few hundred dollars a month over 30 to 40 years, a person can become a millionaire. It takes some planning and careful budgeting but the result is financial gain that can help secure your future.

The flip side is also true: interest on credit card debt compounds. Too many fall into the trap of "buy now, pay later." Unfortunately, such couples often end up paying for years and still don't get out of credit card debt.

What is Budgeting?

Budgeting is simply the process of allocating expenses on a regular basis. A good budget is simple, realistic, and clear. It builds in some personal control for each partner. In creating a realistic budget, focus first on the most basic needs like food, housing, and clothing. Second, focus on what you would like to purchase in the future. Third, look at those areas you are most at risk for overspending, and set some appropriate limits on those areas.

The goal is to help you construct a workable budget. Start by establishing how much income you can count on. Next, outline your expenditures by category and estimate how much money you need for each category.

A healthy final step in budgeting is to set financial goals. With a target or goal in sight you'll be more motivated to work together to achieve your goals. You will be asked the following questions: What are your short-term goals? What are your long-term goals?

BUDGET WORKSHEET

<u>INCOME:</u> (Take Home Pay)	<u>Current Budget</u>	<u>Future Plan</u>
Male: _____	_____	_____
Female: _____	_____	_____
Other Income: _____	_____	_____
TOTAL INCOME: _____	_____	_____
<u>EXPENSES:</u> (Monthly)		
<i>Housing:</i>		
Rent or Mortgage: _____	_____	_____
Utilities: _____	_____	_____
Phone: _____	_____	_____
<i>Loans/Debt:</i>		
Car: _____	_____	_____
Personal: _____	_____	_____
Credit Cards: _____	_____	_____
<i>Transportation:</i>		
Gasoline: _____	_____	_____
Repairs/Maintenance: _____	_____	_____
<i>Food:</i>		
Food at home: _____	_____	_____
Food away from home: _____	_____	_____
<i>Health Care:</i> _____		
<i>Insurance:</i>		
Car: _____	_____	_____
Home: _____	_____	_____
<i>Charitable Contributions:</i> _____		
<i>Clothing:</i> _____		
<i>Personal Goods:</i> _____		
<i>Household Supplies:</i> _____		
<i>Services:</i>		
Cell phone: _____	_____	_____
Cable/Dish: _____	_____	_____
Internet: _____	_____	_____
Dry Cleaning/Laundry: _____	_____	_____
Garbage: _____	_____	_____
<i>Other expenditures:</i>		
Gifts: _____	_____	_____
Personal "Mad" Money: _____	_____	_____
Daycare: _____	_____	_____
Child Support: _____	_____	_____
Other: _____	_____	_____
TOTAL EXPENSES: _____	_____	_____
Surplus or Deficit: _____	_____	_____

FINANCIAL GOALS

*"Thrift used to be a basic American virtue.
Now the American virtue is to spend money."*

—David Brinkley

Importance of Financial Goals:

Couples argue about finances more than any other topic. Regardless of how much or how little money a couple has, deciding what to purchase and how to spend their money is problematic for most couples.

Typically, most couples focus on only short-term financial goals like: *"Today I will pay \$100 on my credit card bill."* But short-term goals should also take into consideration your long-term goals like: *"We want to save enough to make a down payment on a house."*

One way to reduce the amount of conflict regarding finances is for you and your partner to discuss and decide on your short-term and long-term financial goals. Setting common goals as a couple can increase your sense of teamwork and collaboration in this complex area of finances.

Identifying and Deciding on Your Financial Goals

Each person should individually brainstorm their short-term and long-term financial goals and then share them with each other. *Short-term* goals should be what you can achieve in six months to one year. *Long term goals* might be achieved from one to ten years. Remember, your goals should be realistic, clear and specific.

Short-Term Goals: (six months to one year)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Long-Term Goals: (one to five years)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Discussion Questions:

- Next, share your lists with one another. What do they have in common?
- Where are they different?
- Decide together as a couple on your common goals (you may have more than three short and long term goals).
- Talk about how you can each contribute to achieving these goals.
- Revisit them from time to time so you will stay on track.

Affection & Sexual Expectations

The Foundation for a Better Sex Life

Premarital couples can grow their emotional connection and communication skills now in an effort to foster a better sex life in the future. Couples who have a good emotional connection have the best physical relationship. For them, sexuality flows from emotional intimacy based on open and honest communication. A relationship that is characterized by a lack of trust, or that is stressed with destructive conflict is probably not sexually satisfying for either partner. In one classic study of 5,945 couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) discovered that couples who fought about such things as parenting, household responsibilities, or finances tended to have less satisfying sexual relationships.

Studies have shown that, for a majority of men, sex can be easily separated from the relationship. For instance, if he is angry at her for spending more time at the office than she spends at home, he still may be interested in sex. But women tend to view sex from a relational perspective. For instance, if she is angry at him for forgetting to run some errands he had promised to take care of, she may not feel affectionate toward him. Feelings of emotional intimacy in the relationship usually precede sexual expression for women, whereas males often view sex as a way to increase intimacy.

Difficulty Talking about Sexual Relationship

The process of talking about sexual expectations and feelings about affection can be very difficult, even for married couples. One reason for this is that we rarely have had models for talking about sex. Sex was most likely something you did not frequently discuss with your parents, or even your friends, while growing up. Because of this, sexual issues acquire a taboo-like quality.

In fact, over half of all married couples find it difficult to discuss sexual issues. Therefore, the ability to communicate about sex is important in developing and maintaining both sexual and relationship satisfaction. Even in the premarital phase, couples can begin to learn to talk about sex and affection, discussing their expectations, hopes, and fears.

Remember that the quality of the communication affects the quality of the relationship, and the quality of the relationship affects the quality of the sex. Refer to previous sections for ways to improve communication skills, such as practicing active listening, being assertive, and using “I” statements. An easy way to build intimacy through communication is self-disclosure. Share with your partner your feelings and interests about sexual issues.

Past, Present, and Future

Regardless of how sexually active you have been, all people have a sexual history. Somewhere you learned about sex, you developed attitudes and feelings about sex. You may remember a first kiss or first sexual experience. You’ve seen and heard sexual messages portrayed in popular culture, media, movies, and songs. Tragically, some have been victims of sexual abuse or trauma. All of this is part of who you are as a sexual being. Like it or not, your past can impact who you are and who you will be in the future.

Be patient and understanding with one another as you discuss your sexual history and your sexual expectations. In some cases, counseling can help provide healing and resolution for past hurts that could interfere with your physical relationship.

Discussion Questions:

- After looking at this section of your Couple Checkup Report, what affection and sexual expectation items need to be discussed?
- How comfortable are you with your current level of affection & sexual activity?
- What are your expectations for your wedding night? Are they realistic?
- Are you concerned about any issues from your past that might interfere with a satisfying sexual relationship in marriage?

Sex & Affection Tips

1. Remember the importance of being affectionate aside from being sexual.
2. Talk with your partner about sex. Discuss your feelings, concerns, hopes, and expectations regarding sex.
3. Let your partner know he or she is valued and appreciated. Nurture the romance in your life.
4. Remember that improving the emotional connection with your partner will lay the foundation for later physical connection.
5. Try to keep your sexual expectations realistic.

Spiritual Beliefs

*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience;
we are spiritual beings having a human experience.*

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Breathing Life into Relationships

Spirituality and faith are powerful dimensions of the human experience. Spiritual beliefs can provide a foundation for the values and behaviors of individuals and couples. But what is meant by spiritual can be very different both across various religious denominations and within individuals. In a broad sense, spirituality refers to the relationship everyone has with God, others, and self. “To speak of your spirit, then, is to speak of the power of life that is within you,” writes theologian Frederick Buechner.

People who profess a spiritual faith do, indeed, feel that their beliefs breathe life into their relationships. In contrast, those whose religious upbringing was uninspiring place little importance in faith.

Nevertheless, given the potential benefits of spiritual beliefs in a relationship, it makes sense for partners to explore and evaluate their compatibility regarding spiritual beliefs. Couples with strong spiritual beliefs and practices say their faith provides a foundation that deepens their love and helps them grow together and achieve their dreams.

Discussion Questions: Exploring your Spiritual Journey

How much do you know about your partner’s religious history? How much do you know about your own religious history? Family heritage lends a sense of stability and tranquility to relationships.

Set aside some time to discuss the following questions together and share your individual responses. If you do not have the answers, ask other family members or visit the historical society.

1. What is your family’s religious tradition and heritage?
2. What holidays (holy days) and rituals does your family observe?
3. How similar or dissimilar are your personal religious and spiritual beliefs compared to those of your family?
4. What holidays (holy days) and rituals do you find personally meaningful?
5. What holiday/religious symbols hold special meaning to you (the Menorah, a Cross, or a Christmas tree)?
6. Is there significance to the food you prepare?
7. What is the meaning of the gifts you exchange?
8. How does your spiritual life inform your values and the decision you make?
9. To what extent would you like to integrate your faith or spiritual life into your future marriage relationship?
10. Do you have strong feelings or opinions about the religious upbringing you’d like to provide for your children?

Marriage Expectations

- Every disappointment involves an unmet expectation.

Expectations about love and marriage can have a powerful impact on relationships. “To a large degree, you will be disappointed or happy in life based on how well what is happening matches up with what you think should be happening” (Markman & Stanley).

Three Common Pitfalls Regarding Expectations

- **Couples are often unaware of their own expectations.**
Not until they already feel the frustration or disappointment of unmet expectations do couples realize they had made some dangerous assumptions about how things “should” go. Unfortunately, we often make the assumption that our relationships will just naturally fall into the rhythm and flow we expect. “My father always did the dishes for my mother after dinner; I guess I just assumed my partner would too.”
- **Expectations are unrealistic.**
Hollywood, love songs, and pop-culture have a way of promoting and romanticizing unrealistic expectations. Sadly, this sets many couples up for real disappointment. There is nothing wrong with wanting a great relationship, but expecting perfection is a slippery slope. Phrases like “one true soul-mate” and “you complete me” paint unrealistic pictures of relationships. Sometimes expectations need to be held in check. The following humorous announcement about expectations was reportedly heard on an airline: “Thank you for flying with us today. I hope our airline has met your expectations. If not, you should definitely lower your expectations before flying with us again.”
- **Couples fail to discuss their expectations with one another.**
There is sometimes a risk in expressing expectations. It opens one up to disagreement or rejection, and is therefore a vulnerable thing to do. The risk of not expressing expectations, however, is to set your relationship up for disappointment, hurt, and anger.

Couple Exercise I: Children & Parenting Expectations

1. Discuss if and when you would like to have children.
2. How many children would you like?
3. What are your expectations for the roles of a father and mother?
4. How would you prefer to handle parenting and discipline?

Couple Exercise II: Unrealistic Marriage Expectations

1. Review the list of 25 unrealistic expectations on the following page.
2. Think about why and how each of these statements is unrealistic.
3. Identify the statements you are most tempted to believe.
4. Discuss the list with your partner.

25 Unrealistic Expectations About Love & Marriage

1. We will live “happily ever after” with no major problems.
2. The loving romantic feelings in our marriage will never fade.
3. It’ll be better when we’re married.
4. Just spending more time together will improve our relationship.
5. My partner is my one true soul-mate, the only person in the world with whom I can have a successful marriage.
6. We’ll do things just like my family did.
7. We’ll do things nothing like my family did it.
8. Our blended family will be like the Brady-Bunch.
9. Our blended family will be just like any other family.
10. We will/must agree on everything.
11. Our relationship will be better when we have a baby.
12. The right person will fix my life.
13. “you complete me . . .”
14. My partner will meet all my needs, and be totally loving and attentive.
15. If it’s true love, he/she will know what I want without me having to ask.
16. If I have to ask, it’s not as meaningful.
17. Nothing could cause us to question our love for one another.
18. Our relationship will remain the same.
19. After marriage, it will be easier to change those things about my partner that I don’t like.
20. My partner will stay the same.
21. My partner’s interest in sex will be the same as mine.
22. We’ll have a great sexual relationship; it will be easy and just happen naturally.
23. Our wedding night and honeymoon will be the most amazing sexual experience, EVER!
24. I believe that I know everything there is to know about my partner.
25. I believe that the difficulties we’ve shared before marriage will diminish after the wedding.

Relationship Roles

Household Tasks: His, Hers, & Ours

1. List some things you do or expect to do around the house and some things you expect your partner to do around the house. (For example; planning meals, doing yard work, cleaning, caring for a child, or paying bills). Next, list things you expect to share or both do around the house. Your partner should also separately create the same three lists.

Things You Will Do Around the House	Things You Expect Your Partner will Do	Things You Will Share or Both Do
1. _____	1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____	2. _____
3. _____	3. _____	3. _____
4. _____	4. _____	4. _____
5. _____	5. _____	5. _____
6. _____	6. _____	6. _____
7. _____	7. _____	7. _____
8. _____	8. _____	8. _____
9. _____	9. _____	9. _____
10. _____	10. _____	10. _____

2. After you have each completed your lists, compare and discuss them. Any surprises?
3. Are roles mainly divided by interests and skill, or by more traditional male/female roles?
4. Consider for a moment how similar or dissimilar these lists are to what you witnessed in your parent's roles growing up.
5. Discuss what each of you would like to adjust in your lists of roles. If needed, agree on how you might revise your current lists.
6. Are there other roles, away from the house, in which you have adopted a "his, hers, & ours" approach?
 - For example, who drives the car when you are going somewhere together?
 - If you've set a wedding date, how have you divided the wedding planning?
 - Will one person's career or education take priority over the others?
 - Does one person take the lead on planning and coordinating your social life and activities?

Mapping Your Couple & Family Relationships

*In your couple relationship, you either repeat what you learned
in your family or you tend to do the opposite.*

—David H. Olson

The Couple and Family Map

Whether you were raised in a small or large family, by one or two parents, and whether you lived with biological, step-, half- or no siblings, your family was unique in its makeup and functioning. When you consider all the facets of families and the complex, interconnected relationships within them, you will realize that no two are truly alike. The fact that families are so diverse can add to the challenge of merging individuals from two families into a new couple relationship.

The Couple and Family Maps help you describe and visually depict both your couple relationship and family of origin. They enable you to see the linkage between your couple relationship and your family of origin, which otherwise may not be so obvious.

Couple and Family Closeness

Closeness refers to how emotionally connected you feel to another person. It involves how you balance separateness and togetherness— your private space and your intimate connection. It describes your level of closeness, loyalty, independence/dependence, and shared activities. The Couple and Family Maps break closeness into five levels, from disconnected at the lowest level, to connected in the middle, to overly connected on the high end.

Finding the right balance between separateness and togetherness is the key to healthy couple and family closeness. Although being disconnected (too much separateness) or overly connected (too much togetherness) can be appropriate at times, relationships that always operate at these extremes tend to be unhealthy.

Couple and Family Flexibility

Flexibility refers to how open to change couples and families are in their relationships. It describes the amount of change that occurs, for example, in leadership, relationship roles, discipline and rules. As with closeness, there are five levels of flexibility: from inflexible on the low end, to flexible in the middle, to overly flexible on the high end. Again, the two extremes can work within relationships in the short run, but over time they are unhealthy.

Exploring Your Family of Origin

Your family of origin—the family you grew up in—still has a powerful influence in your current life. Your family is, therefore, very much alive in your relationships. What you saw and experienced growing up shapes many of your expectations. Particularly when responsibilities and stress increase, you will tend to revert to the scripts you learned and followed in your upbringing.

Gaining a deeper understanding of your family of origin will help you to understand yourself and your partner better. You may be surprised to find that certain attitudes or beliefs originated from your early family life. And these ideas and beliefs directly affect your actions.

Take, for example, Lori and Tim, a married couple. In Lori's family, everyone was expected to be present at dinnertime. Lori's family used this time for family members to

socialize and reconnect with one another. Lori has many fond memories of shared dinners—laughing, talking, and discussing family issues during this time.

In contrast, Tim’s family did not place much importance on shared mealtimes. Since his was a large family, and individuals had different schedules, even if dinner was prepared, family members often came and went as they pleased. It was even common for family members to grab a plate of food and watch the evening news or retreat to their bedrooms.

What do you suppose happened with Lori and Tim in regard to dinner meals together? Not surprisingly, their different experiences and values about dinnertime caused some initial problems. Lori expected that she and Tim would be together during dinner, whereas for Tim this was not a priority. He wondered why Lori seemed so withdrawn if he stayed late at the office or decided to go out with his teammates after their company softball games. And Lori also felt upset if Tim watched television while he ate, since she hoped they would have a conversation.

Although this is a fairly non-threatening example of how our families of origin can affect us, there are unlimited potential differences that could cause even more serious problems for couples. And many times it is not the big things that cause a decline in the quality of relationships but the many little things, which eventually affect couples in big ways.

Be aware that we will often repeat styles we learned from our families of origin, especially under stress. Also, keep in mind that good communication is the facilitating factor for negotiating and making changes in the closeness and flexibility of your relationship.

Discussion Questions

- Review your Couple Checkup report, comparing your family of origin with the family of origin of your partner in terms of closeness and flexibility.
- Consider the following topics as you discuss the 4 questions below:
 - Family gatherings during a holiday
 - Celebrating a birthday or anniversary
 - Dinner time / Meal time
 - Handling discipline & parenting responsibilities
 - Closeness in your parent’s marriage
 - Flexibility in your parent’s marriage
 - Adjusting to a stressful change (a move, job transition, illness, birth/death)

- 1) How similar or different were your families in terms of closeness & flexibility?**
- 2) How might the similarities or differences impact your current relationship?**
- 3) What from your family of origin would you like to repeat in your couple relationship?**
- 4) What from your family would you not like to repeat in your couple relationship?**

Personality SCOPE

Exploring your personality can be a fascinating and fun process. It can also point out challenges for couples who love one another, but have very different preferences and approaches to life.

Question: Do “opposites attract” or do “birds of a feather flock together”?

Answer: Both are true.

There is no right or wrong combination of personality traits to form a successful relationship. While some couples may have an easier time and others will face challenges, in the end, how you communicate, respect, and work with one another’s differences can determine your relationship compatibility.

A common misperception is that you can change personality traits if you don’t like them. While there may be slight transitions throughout the life cycle, personality is pretty much set in childhood. Don’t fall into the trap of criticizing one another’s personality traits, or trying to change someone to be something they are not. Instead, identify and discuss your similarities and differences and create solutions that allow you to work with one another rather than against one another. Remember, your personality differences can be advantageous as you each bring unique abilities and perspectives to the relationship.

Discussion Questions

First, Review the personality SCOPE section of your report.

- 1. In what areas are your personalities similar?**
 - a. How might the similarities affect your relationship positively?
 - b. Are there any drawbacks to being alike in these areas? (i.e. both score low on organization?)
- 2. In what areas are your personalities different?**
 - a. How might the differences impact your relationship, both positively and negatively?
- 3. Do the roles you expect to fulfill in your relationship match your personality strengths** (i.e. Is an individual who scores low on organization being asked to manage the checkbook)?

Tips for Couples

- Don’t try to change your partner’s personality. It won’t work!
- Remember the positive aspects of your partner’s personality that attracted you to them in the first place.
- Consider where you may be out of balance in your own personality and behavior. Think of strategies that could bring more balance to your life.

Blended Families: Finding Realistic Expectations

Experts agree that unrealistic expectations for stepfamily life often set couples up for great disappointment. Below is a chart with common unrealistic expectations. Read through the chart and discuss in what ways you are tempted to believe the unrealistic expectations. Then, read the case study in one stepparent's expectations*.

Unrealistic Expectations of Stepfamily Life	Realistic Expectations
1. Love will happen instantly between all family members.	1. Love may or may not happen between stepfamily members. It will take time for relationships to develop; some will bond quickly, others slowly.
2. We'll do marriage better this time around.	2. Individuals who have experienced a break-up or divorce often have learned tough lessons from the past. But a new marriage cannot be compared to a prior one. It involves different people and different marital dynamics.
3. "Blending" is the goal of this stepfamily.	3. When relationships "blend" they are equal and everyone feels connected. It's common for couples to want their family to "blend" quickly. But the truth is that some stepfamily members may never "blend" while others form close bonds. Instead of trying to force people to blend, be patient and accept whatever connection is possible. The average stepfamily with minor children needs seven years to form a new family identity.
4. Our children will feel as happy about this new family as we do.	4. The truth is that children will at best feel confused about the new marriage and at worst, they'll resent it. Remarriage is a gain for adults and another loss for children, at least initially. Only after much time, when family stability is obtained, does the remarriage also become a gain for children. Be patient with them.

<p>5. Child Expectation: My stepparent will not try to act like my parent.</p>	<p>5. Sometimes stepparents want so badly to be accepted that they try to manage the children as a parent would. They may also try to show affection like a biological parent would. Initially give children space to build a relationship with you; let them set the pace and follow their lead.</p>
<p>6. Child Expectation: When my stepparent does discipline me, they will act just like my biological parent.</p>	<p>6. What's familiar to children is their biological parent's parenting style. A different parenting style and different rules can be difficult to adjust to. Before marriage, try to bring each household's rules in line with each other (e.g., same bedtime, curfew, etc.). After marriage, each parent should strive to be the authority with their own children and agree to the same rules for everyone.</p>

A Case Study in Stepparent Expectations:

A stepmother expressed the following expectations two years into her remarriage. How do you identify with her desires? How realistic do you believe them to be? Discuss as a couple.

1. I thought my husband would appreciate how overwhelming and difficult it would be for me to care for his children.
2. I thought that raising his children would fulfill my need to be a mother.
3. I thought I would have more say in the children's visitation schedules (e.g., when we watch them for their mother, when they spend the night at a friend's house, etc.).
4. I expected to fit in, to be welcomed by his children, and to be treated well.
5. I expected to immediately take priority over all his other relationships, even his children.

Recommended Reading:

- Ron L. Deal (2002). The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers.

Recommended WebPages:

- www.SuccessfulStepfamilies.com – Christian resources for church and home use from stepfamily expert Ron L. Deal. Provides online articles, recommended resources, conference information, and training opportunities.
- www.StepFamilies.info – National Stepfamily Resource Center.

Ron L. Deal is President of Successful Stepfamilies, author of *The Smart Stepfamily*, and a popular conference presenter on marriage, parenting, and stepfamily matters. He is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist.

* Adapted from *The Smart Stepfamily: Seven Steps to a Healthy Family* by Ron L. Deal, Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers (2002), and *Strengthening Your Stepfamily* by Elizabeth Einstein & Linda Albert, Circle Pines, MN: American Guidance Service, Inc. (1986).

Setting Personal, Couple, & Family Goals

Congratulations! You have now completed the Couple Checkup and worked through the contents of the Discussion Guide. By now, you've learned a great deal about yourselves, and your relationship. You've likely identified strengths and growth areas as a couple. Now is the right time to think about setting goals for the future.

Importance of Goals

Why are goals important? There is an old saying that defines three things we need in life: something to do, something to love, and something to hope for. We all need hopes and dreams for the future. If we do not have a goal, we may not feel motivated to keep going through tough times. Goals provide direction and give hope.

It is valuable for couples to review their personal, couple, and family goals. Discussing and sharing goals facilitates closeness, emotional bonding, and increases the chances of achieving your goals. Our goals are an expression of who we are, so they touch on a myriad of deeply personal issues and feelings. When you share your goals with each other, you get to know each other better.

Identifying Your Goals

Each person should first take time to identify their personal, couple and family goals. Then, as a couple, share and discuss your goals and agree on which ones to give priority to over the next year or so. Remember, the goals should be specific and clearly stated.

Personal Goals:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Couple Goals:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Family Goals:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Suggestions for achieving your goals

1. Decide exactly what you want. Define and share with your partner your personal, couple, and family goals.
2. Discuss with each other steps you can take to make your goals a reality.
3. Encourage and support each other in achieving your goals!
4. Never, ever give up.