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Unrealistic Marriage Expectations as the Norm

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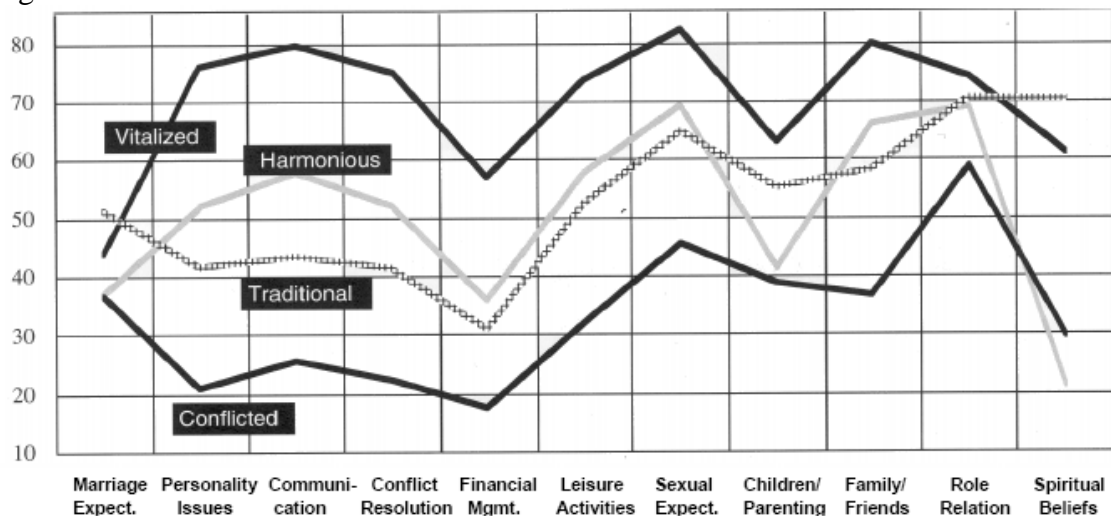
Unrealistic Expectations for Marriage

Many PREPARE/ENRICH counselors struggle to know what to do with the Marriage Expectations category from PREPARE. This is compounded by the fact that most premarital couples struggle with the items in this category, leaving it as a Growth Area in their relationship. This article is intended to enhance your understanding of this content area of PREPARE and give you some ideas on how to approach the topic with couples.

It may be no surprise that seriously dating and engaged couples are more prone to “agree” or “strongly agree” with statements such as “*We are as happy as any couple could possibly be!*” Almost intoxicated by love, engaged couples are often known for being infatuated with one another. They tend to be confident that they’ll never have problems or that existing problems will just fade away with time, they’ll never question their love, never experience a drop in romance, and already know everything there is to know about their partner. They truly are *love struck*.

Recent Findings and Couple Types

Because this is a core content area in the PREPARE Inventory, we gather Marriage Expectations data on thousands of couples per year. It doesn’t seem to matter if a premarital couple is in the Vitalized or Conflicted Type; they often have lower Positive Couple Agreement scores in the Marriage Expectations category. In reviewing data from a sample of 15,000 couples who have taken PREPARE in 2006, the average PCA score on Marriage Expectations was 35%. In other words, the average couple expresses healthy agreement on just 3 or 4 items out of 10. In the case of the Marriage Expectations category, healthy agreement often means both partners need to disagree with a naïve or unrealistic notion. In viewing the breakdown of couple types, it is clear that all 4 premarital types score poorly on Marriage Expectations, graphed on the far left in the figure below.



This data demonstrates that it is common and perhaps even normal to be oblivious to the natural challenges and difficulties that accompany marriage.

Addicted & Obsessed?

Science is beginning to explain the phenomenon of being love struck. One recent article (Slater, 2006) summarized several intriguing findings on the topic. Helen Fisher, a professor from Rutgers University, has used MRI technology to study couples who report they are “madly in love”. While in the MRI machine, subjects were shown two photographs, one neutral and the other of their lover. The results showed that the pictures of the loved ones evoked a powerful chemical reaction in the pleasure centers of the brain, lighting up the neuronal receptors for a neurotransmitter called Dopamine. Dopamine is associated with intense energy, focused attention, exhilaration and motivation. Certain addictive drugs, such as cocaine, can activate the same regions and chemicals in the brain. In other words, brain physiology suggests couples can feel “addicted to love”. It may not be unusual for such couples to feel like they have found their one true soul mate, the only person on earth with whom they could have a happy marriage.

Italian researcher, Donatella Marazziti, explored the similarities between being passionately in love and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The neurotransmitter, serotonin, seems to be the culprit in OCD. Marazziti looked at three groups of subjects, one group of “lovers”, one group suffering from OCD, and another group free from mental illness and passionate love. Results showed that the levels of serotonin in both the OCD groups’ blood and the lovers’ blood were 40 percent lower than in the normal subjects. In other words, there were similar chemical markers in OCD and being madly in love. We’ve all seen young couples who seem to be obsessed with one another, spending every moment possible together. Perhaps this is why premarital couples taking PREPARE expect all of their needs for companionship, even after marriage, to be met by their partner.

The Problem with Unrealistic Expectations

While the phenomenon of being love struck is quite normal, it can also be a setup when experienced in extremes. There are several problems associated with unrealistic marriage expectations.

- *Moving too quickly.* If I believe that nothing could cause me to question my love and I already know everything there is to know, why wait? Some couples move too quickly towards engagement and marriage, not allowing themselves time to really get to know one another.
- *Set up to take a fall.* It has been said that the distance between one’s expectations and the reality experienced is equal to the hurt and disappointment one will feel. It is not a matter of “if” but “when” reality will set in for couples. Passionate romance always fades or at least changes to something less intense, and all couples face challenges and problems at some point in their marriage.

- *Failure to deal with relevant issues.* Several of the items in this category reveal a tendency to deny and minimize issues. One item hints at the notion of time alone resolving issues. Another suggests difficulties experienced prior to marriage will somehow fade after the wedding. A third states it may be easier to change things I don't like about my partner after marriage. The sum total of these items is avoidance and reluctance to deal with issues. Being proactive, however, is more effective than avoidance or waiting until small issues become major problems.
- *Where is my Soul Mate?* Perhaps the most confusing items for couples suggest "My partner is the only person with whom I could have a happy marriage" and "Nothing could cause me to question my love." On one level, these are positive statements revealing a sense of commitment and confidence in the relationship. Still, a risk for those who believe they've found their one true "soul mate" is equating that with the assumption that things will be easy. When they hit the inevitable challenges of marriage, are they tempted to believe that they made a mistake and "the one" must still be out there somewhere? The truth is there are likely several people on this earth with whom one could have a successful relationship.

Tips for PREPARE/ENRICH Users

1. **Anticipate a Surprise:** Anyone planning to give feedback to a premarital couple should realize that the results of the Marriage Expectations category may be a surprise to the couple. One main reason Marriage Expectations catches couples off guard is that the "healthy" responses to these items is not readily obvious. It is usually not difficult to discern the healthy response to a communication item such as "I can share my true feelings with my partner." But many of the Marriage Expectation items sound good on the surface, while the underlying message reveals a potentially problematic assumption.
2. **Look at the Level of Idealistic Distortion:** The PREPARE/ENRICH inventories (Olson, 2004) have a scale devoted to detecting the level of idealism in a premarital or married couple. Predictably, the average idealism scores for premarital couples are significantly higher than for married couples. Typically, the higher the Idealistic Distortion score, the lower a couple will score on the Marriage Expectations category. You can review the Idealistic Distortion items in your Facilitator's Manual (Chapter 2) to get a feel for how extreme and unrealistic these items are. Consider these two categories together; noting each partners individual/revised scores, for the most complete picture.
3. **Normalize:** As mentioned above, it is the norm for engaged couples to be love-struck, embracing romanticized notions regarding love and marriage. Indeed, it may even be how humans are designed to function at a physiological level. Don't sound the alarms or be overly critical of couples who score poorly in this category. Let them know that most couples have Marriage Expectations as a Growth Area. Help them understand their results as you encourage them to become more realistic about their relationship expectations.
4. **Create Dialogue:** Healthy dialogue is a positive goal for this category. As you balance the feedback, review any agreement items, along with disagreement and special focus

items. Allow the couple to discuss and wrestle with some of these items. You can even ask them questions such as: “Why do you think the authors of PREPARE would highlight this item as a potential problem?” or “Which statements sound the most believable to you? What is the potentially dangerous assumption behind each statement?”

5. **Consider the Context:** Do not rely on the assessment alone for the complete picture. Consider the following two couples who both strongly agreed with the item, “*My partner is the only person with whom I could have happy marriage.*”
 - a. One couple, deeply committed to their faith tradition, each spent years praying for the “right person” to enter their life. They met and dated for over a year, and got engaged only after a great deal of counsel and consideration. Believing that God had brought one another into their life, they felt deeply committed to one another. Both families felt very positive about their marriage plans. As a counselor, it would not be productive to discourage or criticize the commitment this couple is feeling.
 - b. On the other hand, a second couple was matched by an online dating service, engaged within a month of meeting one another, and felt they had found their one true “soul mate”. While their families disapproved, they were planning to be married as soon as possible and believed they already knew everything there was to know about one another. As a counselor, you would want to challenge this couple to consider their motivation and expectations.

The considerations and tips outlined above are designed to help counselors feel more effective in processing this category. Marriage Expectations is a challenging, yet fun, section of PREPARE to share with premarital couples. They often have a lot to discuss and consider as counselors share the results. We wish you much success preparing couples for marriage!

Olson, D. H. (2004). *PREPARE/ENRICH Counselor's Manual*. Minneapolis: Life Innovations.

Slater, L. (2006). True Love. *National Geographic*. February, 32-49.