

Couple Checkup: Tuning Up Relationships

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There is considerable evidence that marriage is good for both adults and children and marriage education programs are designed to help build stronger marriages. However, these programs have a variety of problems that limit their effectiveness and impact and the Couple Checkup overcomes some of those limitations. The Couple Checkup can also be used by a couple on their own or used with marriage education programs to improve its impact. The Couple Checkup is based on the PREPARE/ENRICH Program, and it customizes the assessment for each couple. The couple can view and print their Checkup Report and a Couple Discussion Guide. The goal is for the Couple Checkup to reach a more diverse group of couples, to empower couples to deal with issues on their own, and to emphasize prevention over remediation. The Couple Checkup can also be used in a group setting and group leaders can create a Group Summary to help them better understand and work with the couples in a group.

KEYWORDS couple assessment, prepare-enrich, counseling, prevention

RATIONALE FOR MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS

Building stronger marriages is a worthwhile goal since marriage benefits individuals, society, and any children within the family (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Close couple relationships and marriages have also been linked to a variety of positive health outcomes from the reduction of cardiovascular

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reaction to stress to increased psychological and personal well-being (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). There is also some evidence that children from intact marriages may have better academic achievement, self-concept, and social competencies (Amato, 2001).

Premarital education is associated with reduced risks for divorce (by 30%) and improved overall marital satisfaction (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). Research on the effectiveness of premarital and marital enrichment has been positive, particularly among those well-designed programs emphasizing relationship skills. In a meta-analysis of 11 experimental studies that randomly assigned participants to control or comparison groups and two quasi-experimental studies, Carroll and Doherty (2003) found significant differences favoring couples who received premarital education. The overall effect size was large (0.80), corresponding to 79% of treatment couples scoring above the median of scores for control couples on all marital outcomes.

Premarital couples who marry through a church or synagogue have a logical access point to premarital programs, yet only about 30% of engaged couples receive any premarital education at all (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). Since married couples tend not to seek counseling until their marriage is under a lot of strain, there are fewer options for the average couple, who may be doing quite well, but would like to take an active role in keeping their marriage healthy. Unfortunately, couple enrichment programs have been limited in their use and outreach (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Silliman & Schumm, 2000).

One of the major problems with marriage education is that they are offered in a "one-size-fits-all" manner (Larson & Halford, in press). This canned approach to the curriculum is problematic because it fails to target those who most need the programs and it fails to address the specific needs of the couples in the groups. This paper will address in more detail the limitations of the current marriage education programs and how they could be improved by integrating the Couple Checkup into their programs.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE COUPLE CHECKUP

The Couple Checkup (www.couplecheckup.com) was designed in response to a changing market of couples and a changing social context in marriage and relationship education. There has been increasing recognition that the field is moving toward competency-based, preventative approaches, and couple empowerment rather than only remedial treatments (Deacon & Sprenkle, 2001; Berger & Hannah, 1999). Also, the online marketplace appears to be the arena of the future and an efficient and effective way to reach a more diverse population of couples. The *Couple Checkup* is designed to reach a more diverse set of couples, to reach couples at different stages of their

relationship (dating, engaged, and married) and to encourage them to seek more intensive help if their problems are serious.

The Couple Checkup is an online couple assessment consisting of over 30 relational content areas that have been found to be significant for couples. The Couple Checkup is based on the PREPARE/ENRICH Program (Olson, 2002) and contains many of the same categories.

In selecting the items for the Couple Checkup scales, seven of the best items from the 10 items in each scale from PREPARE/ENRICH were used and so the alpha reliability of the Couple Checkup core scales is generally high (average $r = 0.83$; range $r = 0.75$ to 0.89). While PREPARE/ENRICH was designed for counseling, the Couple Checkup is designed for relationship education and enrichment for an individual couple or a group of couples. The Couple Checkup report is made available directly to the couple, but the couple can also forward their report to a counselor or facilitator.

The Couple Checkup is designed specifically to be an online tool where the payment, administration, scoring, and report generation are all done via the Internet at the website www.couplecheckup.com. Once both partners have completed the assessment, couples can view their Checkup Report in a 19- to 22-page report delivered as a PDF file. This format has proven to be very flexible as PDF files can be opened to view online, printed, saved, and emailed as an attached file.

In addition to the Couple Report, each couple can also view and print a 25-page Couple Discussion Guide that contains 24 couple exercises. This Guide can be downloaded and printed for use by couples who want to learn new skills and complete relationship exercises designed to enrich their relationship. There are somewhat different versions for dating, engaged, and married couples. The online system automatically provides access to the appropriate version for each couple completing their checkup.

SEVERAL CHALLENGES FOR MARRIAGE EDUCATION

While marriage education has helped couples build stronger marriages, there are numerous challenges we believe it must overcome to increase its outreach and effectiveness. We will highlight several of the major challenges and describe how the recently developed Couple Checkup can help overcome these issues.

1. Marriage education programs typically do not provide a comprehensive perspective on a couple's relationship.

The Couple Checkup evaluates up to 30 important areas in a couple's relationship including 10 core scales (i.e. communication, conflict resolution, finances, etc.), a Couple Map and Family Map (each assessing closeness

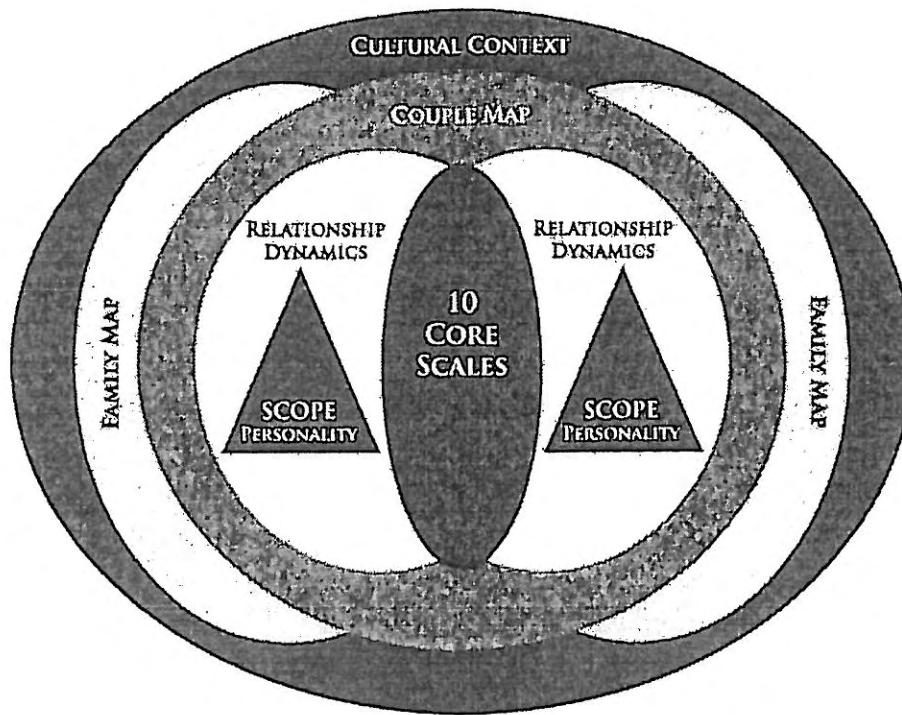


FIGURE 1 Major Scales in the Couple Checkup.

and flexibility), the SCOPE personality scales (based on the Big Five Personality Scales), and a variety of scales relevant to the age and stage of the couple based on background questions (i.e. cohabiting, children from previous relationship, and intergenerational issues) (Figure 1).

The Couple Checkup includes a new personality scale called SCOPE, which is based on the Big Five Model of Personality, often considered the most robust and commonly referenced personality assessment framework in current psychological literature (Costa & McCrae, 2003; Widiger and Trull, 2007). The acronym used in the Couple Checkup is called SCOPE reflecting the five personality dimensions: *Social, Change, Organized, Pleasing, and Emotionally Steady*.

The Couple Checkup includes a comprehensive assessment of the couple system and family of origin on the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems, developed in 1979 as an attempt to bridge the gap that typically exists between research, theory, and practice (Olson, 2000). This widely researched theory integrates the dimensions of cohesion and flexibility into a simple, but comprehensive, model. The Couple Map and Family Map are used to plot how the couple perceives their couple relationship and their family of origin.

2. Marriage education programs are often standardized rather than being tailored for each couple.

One of the innovative features of the Couple Checkup is that it is customized for each couple, automatically adapting to maximize the relevance for couples in different relationship stages and relationship structures. Unlike previous couple assessment tools that assess overall couple functioning across predefined scales, the Couple Checkup is dynamically customized, based on how a set of introductory decision tree questions are answered. It selects specific scales based on the stage of the relationship (dating, engaged, married), the living situation (cohabiting or living separately), the age of the couple (younger, middle age or older), whether children are involved in the relationship, and whether or not they are stepparents (custodial or noncustodial). Instead of one standard Couple Checkup tool, there are hundreds of customized variations better suited for each couple. This ensures maximum relevance for each couple's relationship background, age, and stage. A list of the key scales for dating, engaged, and married couples are summarized in Table 1.

3. Marriage education usually lacks a preassessment to identify specific issues each couple should resolve—a preventive approach.

The Couple Checkup helps to identify current issues for each couple that they need to resolve. All intimate couples have issues and areas where their relationship could improve, but couples seldom discuss or work on these issues. By identifying and highlighting issues, couples will be more likely to talk about these problems and will be more interested in resolving them. This is a preventative approach because it encourages the couple to work on current issues before the issues become more serious and, therefore, more difficult to resolve.

Prevention is emerging as an important model across a variety of disciplines, including medical care, dental care and mental health. Early cancer detection is a good example of the value of the preventative approach in reducing the mortality rates of cancer patients. Currently about 50% of women older than 40 receive regular mammograms (National Breast Cancer Foundation, 2006). Early screening helped to increase the 5-year survival rate for breast cancer, which is now 96%, compared to 74% in 1982. There are now 2.3 million breast cancer survivors. This is largely due to the acceptance and application of early detection techniques, such as regular mammograms and educating women to perform monthly self-exams.

While we take dental exams for granted, it was not until the 1950s that dental exams were actively promoted. Now it is accepted as a standard preventative practice embraced by our culture. In the field of mental health, various

TABLE 1 Couple Checkup Scales

	Dating	Engaged	Married
Core Categories by Stage	Communication Conflict Resolution Financial Management Spiritual Beliefs Family and Friends Relationship Expectations Sexual Expectations	Communication Conflict Resolution Financial Management Spiritual Beliefs Family and Friends Marriage Expectations Sexual Expectations Relationship Roles	Communication Conflict Resolution Financial Management Spiritual Beliefs Family and Friends Sexual Relationship Roles and Responsibilities Leisure Activities
Couple and Family Scales	Couple Flexibility Couple Closeness Family Closeness Family Flexibility	Couple Flexibility Couple Closeness Family Closeness Family Flexibility	Couple Flexibility Couple Closeness
SCOPE Personality Scales	Social Change Organized Pleasing Emotionally Calm	Social Change Organized Pleasing Emotionally Calm	Social Change Organized Pleasing Emotionally Calm
Customized Scales	Cohabitation Issues Dating Issues Habits and Preferences	Cohabitation Issues Aging Issues Step-Family Expectations	Emotional Climate Expecting First Child Children and Parenting Step-Parenting Intergenerational Issues Life Transitions

professional organizations have promoted National Depression Screening Day or National Anxiety Screening Day, knowing there are those individuals in the general public who need to access services but will only get help if their issues are proactively identified.

Early detection, prevention, and education are also important for relational issues. Unfortunately, most distressed married couples do not seek counseling until one or both are considering divorce. In fact, treating couples who wait too long to come for marital therapy is much like treating terminal cancer. The relationship has been so destroyed that it is very difficult to rebuild the marriage. One research study (DiMaria, 2000) reported the surprising results that couples seeking an intensive marriage education program called PAIRS were not happy couples needing a little enrichment but were mainly very distressed couples who were hoping the program would save their marriage.

4. Marriage education programs are typically built on a deficit model rather than a strengths model.

The Couple Checkup builds on the strengths model, which has become increasingly popular in the fields of counseling and psychology. Instead of mainly focusing on issues, there is a growing trend to introduce a more positive perspective building on strengths. Historically, the field of psychology emphasized emotional disorder and marriage and family therapy mainly focused on relationship problems. In the last decade, psychologist Martin Seligman and colleagues have popularized positive psychology. In his book, *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002) describes the value of a more positive approach to emotions that helps individuals more effectively deal with issues, which leads to greater happiness.

In the field of industrial consulting, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton (2001) have created a best selling book called *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. The book also describes the Gallup's *Strength Finder* assessment, which helps individuals identify their major strengths from a list of 34 areas and allows corporations to integrate this positive perspective into making their workplace more productive and successful.

In the field of family studies, John DeFrain and colleagues (2006) have identified six major strengths of families, including affection, commitment, enjoyable time together, spiritual well being, ability to manage stress, and positive communication. These findings are based on a study of over 24,000 families from the United States and has been replicated in over 25 countries around the world (DeFrain et al., 2006).

In the field of marriage, David Olson and colleagues have emphasized couple strengths rather than dealing only with marital conflict and distress. In their book, *The Couple Checkup*, Olson, Olson-Sigg, and Larson (2008) used a national survey of over 20,000 married couples to identify the major strengths of happy couples compared to distressed married couples. This is one of the few studies to identify marital strengths and to help couples develop skills to build more strengths. Benefits of drawing couples attention to their strengths include an improvement in their own abilities due to a shift of focus, empowering the couple to capitalize on their strengths by feeling good about them, and instilling hope that they already possess the tools they need to improve their relationship.

One of the advantages of doing an online Couple Checkup is the report reveals a couple's relationship strengths, some of which they have not discovered or ever discussed. In the field of marriage education, a positive approach would begin with identifying strengths and building on those rather than only talking about issues and problems. For example, a couple who have good relationship skills can get validation for those skills and feel empowered to use them in areas where they may have conflict. This positive approach can help the couple become engaged

in the process of finding solutions, rather than on just measuring their deficits.

5. Marriage education programs do not systematically help couples really understand each other.

While couples often assume they know each other, Olson and Larson (2007) found in a study that couples only agree with each other on the characteristics of their relationship about 33 percent of the time. This study compared husbands and wives in over 5,000 married couples who took the ENRICH Couple Inventory. The average correlation between the husband and wife on the major scales (i.e., communication, conflict resolution, roles, sexuality) was 0.65. When 0.65 is squared, the shared variance is 33%, which means if you know one person's response, you can predict the partner's response only one-third of the time.

For couples, this means that rather than assuming they know their partner's feelings and ideas, they should assume their guesses will often be incorrect. Therefore, couples can greatly benefit from taking an assessment that will reveal how they each feel about different aspects of their relationship.

6. Marriage education programs are often not relevant for diverse populations in terms of different stages of the relationship, ethnicity, and education.

Too often, marriage education programs are offered to homogeneous populations and the programs tend to be less relevant to more diverse groups. The Couple Checkup is designed to work with diverse populations and it creates an assessment that responds to their diversity. The Couple Checkup will determine the stage of the relationship (dating, engaged, married) and select relevant scales for that stage. It also has different scales based on the age of the couple, whether they have children and/or stepchildren, and whether they are cohabiting. The Couple Checkup is also designed to work with less educated individuals and it has been written at a seventh grade reading level. Table 1 provides more details about the specific scales the Couple Checkup selects to maximize the relevancy of the assessment for each couple.

7. Many marriage education programs are not effectively using new technology such as the Internet, DVDs, and online programs.

Only about 30% of engaged couples receive any premarital education (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). These findings were based on over 3,000 adults who were surveyed in four states across the Midwest. This study demonstrates that the Internet and other new technology are

needed to expand the programs and the number of people reached with marriage education.

The fact that the Couple Checkup is online not only makes it more available from any Internet connection, but it enables a couple to take it at their own time schedule. The Internet also reduces the cost of the assessment and increases the efficiency since couples can view and print their own Couple Report and Couple Discussion Guide. Because the Couple Checkup is online, this also means that the couple does not have to attend a group experience to learn more about their relationship. The couple can review their report and complete couple exercises privately at any location and on their own schedule.

8. Marriage education is not couple driven, but driven by instructors and facilitators.

The Couple Checkup is a couple-driven process. Couples themselves access the assessment online, they set up their own couple account and take the checkup online from any computer with Internet access. Once both partners have finished, the results are immediately processed for the couple to download as a PDF report to be viewed online, printed, or saved. When working with a counselor or pastor, couples often print or email a copy of their Couple Checkup Report to their facilitator.

There are several strengths of the couple-driven checkup approach. First, it is very easy to access and use. Second, couples can take it on their own schedule from any Internet connection. Third, the Checkup can confidentially let them know where they stand and either confirms their relationship is functioning well, or encourages them to get the help they need. If they are distressed, the computer report encourages them to seek counseling and directs them to referral options. Fourth, the couple receives a report that is easy for them to understand and digest on their own with or without a facilitator. Finally, the Couple Checkup approach is very affordable and well within the reach of most dating, engaged, or married couples.

The Couple Checkup encourages couples to explore and discuss their relationship with one another. It helps the couple learn how they each feel about the relationship. In general, couples rarely talk directly with each other about their perceptions and feelings regarding their relationship. It is easier to talk about work, children, activities and interests, but not about their relationship. "Relationship talk" is hard because it leaves one vulnerable when opinions, feelings, and needs are openly discussed.

There is also a Couple Discussion Guide to facilitate the couple's dialogue about the results. The Couple Checkup Report and Couple Discussion Guide are designed to be used together to give power to the couple (hence empower them) so they can resolve ongoing issues and create a stronger relationship. For each major area in the Checkup there are specific couple

exercises to improve that area. Ultimately, couples need to feel equipped to resolve issues so they can turn relationship challenges into strengths. If couples have too many issues, they are encouraged to seek professional help. With a good base of knowledge and skills, couples can tackle many of their difficult issues and increase relationship satisfaction.

9. Many marriage programs do not include couple relationship assessments.

Because of the powerful impact that couple assessment can have on the overall effectiveness of any marriage program, it would be wise for all marriage education programs to include a couple assessment in their program. This finding was first highlighted in which Worthington et al. (1995) found that assessment accounted for about 30% of the impact of marriage programs.

A study by Knutson and Olson (2003) demonstrated that there is about a 30% improvement in couples who only completed a couple assessment with no feedback. In the study, there were three groups: group one took the PREPARE Program, which included the assessment and feedback using six standard couple exercises ($n = 59$ couples). The PREPARE No Feedback group only took the assessment but required no feedback ($n = 46$). The control group served as a wait list control group and did not take PREPARE until after the study ($n = 48$). Based on pretest and posttest analysis, the PREPARE Program group made more significant gains on 10 of 13 scales while the PREPARE No Feedback group improved on 4 of 13 scales (30% of the scales). The wait list control group made no significant changes. This study demonstrated that just taking PREPARE with no feedback had a positive impact on the couples.

Using the RELATE inventory, Larson, Vatter, Galbraith, Holman, and Stahmann (2007) compared the value of a counselor feedback approach versus the couples working on their feedback without a counselor. The study assigned 39 dating couples to one of three groups: (a) RELATE and couple interpreting results on their own; (b) RELATE and interpretation with a therapist; and (c) RELATE after study completed—control group. Both groups that took RELATE improved significantly on major relationship areas, but the therapist assisted group improved the most and the control group did not change. So just taking the couple assessment and having the couple handle their own feedback was a significant value to the couples. Another study by Larson (2003) also found that couples benefited from completing a marriage tune-up book with couple assessments without having any additional counseling.

A recent study by Cordova and colleagues (2005) used an interview and feedback process called the Marriage Checkup. The first session was an intensive interview with questionnaires and a second session was feedback dealing with intimacy, we-ness, and communication. The treatment group

improved significantly in marital health and couple satisfaction, while the control group decreased in these areas.

In summary, all of these studies have demonstrated that simply taking a couple assessment can have a positive and significant impact on a couple's relationship. It is reasonable to conclude that a couple assessment can increase the impact of a marriage education program by about 30%.

10. Marriage programs have difficulty getting couples to attend several sessions because couples have very busy schedules and stressful lives.

One of the major advantages of the Couple Checkup is that couples can complete all aspects of the program on their own time schedules. They can take it online 24/7 from any location, and they can view their Couple Report and print it for use at any time. They can also view the Couple Discussion Guide and complete any of the 20 couple exercises at a good time for them. They can also choose which areas of their relationship they want to work on and select the couple exercise that they want to complete.

11. Leaders of marriage programs are often unaware of the strengths or issues of the couples in the group.

A useful feature of the Couple Checkup is a Group Leader's Guide and the ability of a group leader to set up a group code that can be used to generate a Group Summary Report of all couples in their group who have completed a Couple Checkup. This feature is designed to equip a leader with knowledge and understanding of the couples in his or her group at a powerfully detailed level.

The Couple Checkup can help the group leader better understand the strength and growth areas, specific stressors, personality patterns and issues for males versus females in their group and many details about the group itself. This specificity about the group enables the leader to better tailor the program to the needs of the couples.

The group summary report is over 20 pages and includes the following information:

- *Couple Typology*: Percentage of couples falling into each of five typology categories (*Vitalized, Harmonious, Conventional, Conflicted, or Devitalized*).
- *Strength and Growth Areas*: Percentage of couples with strengths, possible strengths, or growth areas in over 20 core areas. Average male/female satisfaction scores are provided, as well as a breakdown of the specific male/female strengths and issues.

- *Couple and Family Map*: Percentage of individuals scoring in each area of the Couple and Family Map.
- *SCOPE Personality Scales*: Percentage of individuals scoring high, average, or low on each personality dimension, listed separately for male and female respondents.
- *Background Characteristics*: Detailed demographic information and relationship history of respondents.

While the Group Summary Report provides information on several couples at a time, the privacy of individuals and specific couples is protected. First, no names are listed in the report. Second, a minimum of five couples must complete their assessments before a group summary report can be generated. This means scores are reported in percentages and averages and there is no way to tell how any one couple scored.

Feedback from group leaders who have used the Couple Checkup have found the Group Summary Report very valuable to them as it helps them have a better understanding of their group. Also, feedback from leaders using the Couple Checkup and Group Summary Report with the *PREPARE to Last* curriculum (Olson, Larson, & McElroy, 2007) has been very positive. This approach also appears to hold promise for speakers conducting enrichment events and clergy wishing to conduct a church-wide checkup.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The Couple Checkup has both strengths and limitations as a premarital and marriage intervention tool. On the positive side, it is affordable and easily accessible for couples at any stage of their relationship. The online design and voucher payment options make it a convenient choice for groups or events. It holds promise for being a proactive way to reach more premarital couples before they get engaged and married couples before they experience severe marital problems. The dynamic design and technology allows for the assessment to be automatically customized for couples at any stage of their relationship. The Couple Checkup's many new scales and topics, such as the SCOPE personality assessment and scales for different stages of parenting, reflect relevant issues for couples today. Finally, it is built on the foundation of the well-researched PREPARE/ENRICH Program.

The limitations of the Couple Checkup emerge mainly because it is built as a "direct-to-couple" education tool. The tool's feedback is limited to appropriate topics and questions that couples can successfully process on their own. The lack of a required facilitator removes the built in support and expertise provided by a professional (individual or as a group leader) who could interpret and provide relevant feedback to couples. These limitations make the Couple Checkup an enrichment tool as opposed to an

in-depth clinical assessment. Some counselors who are used to controlling the assessment process and receiving the computer report themselves may be frustrated by having limited access to the Couple Checkup report, depending on the couple's willingness to share their results. Finally, while it is built on the well researched foundation of PREPARE/ENRICH, the Couple Checkup has not yet undergone extensive evaluation. Our claims regarding the strengths of the Couple Checkup need to be subjected to rigorous empirical studies.

There is no certification training required for the use of the Couple Checkup, but certification in the PREPARE/ENRICH Program is a great way to become familiar with the underlying concepts and foundation of this assessment approach.

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