

David H. Olson, PhD, University of Minnesota

# Which Type of Marriage Do You Have? Which Type of Marriage Would You Like to Have?



Fifteen years ago, my colleagues at the University of Minnesota and I started a research project to learn how to help couples prepare for marriage more effectively.

The result was the *Prepare* program for couples planning to marry. Several years later, we started the *Enrich* program to help couples who were already married increase their satisfaction with their relationships.

Continually refined during the past 15 years, the *Prepare/Enrich* program includes a 125-item questionnaire that assesses the health of the relationship and two to five counseling sessions that teach proven skills for resolving problems constructively.

To date, *Prepare/Enrich* has been used by more than 500,000 premarital and 250,000 married couples to enhance their relationships. More than 20,000 counselors and clerics around the country have been trained in its use.

Our research has shown that it's possible to determine the quality of a marriage—or other serious romantic relationship—based on how well a couple rates on 11 *relationship dimensions*:

**Realistic expectations** about the demands and problems of marriage.

**Personality issues:** How well you like your partner's characteristics and habits.

**Communication:** Ability to share feelings and be understood.

**Conflict resolution:** Ability to discuss disagreements and resolve them.

**Financial management:** Agreement about budgets, spending, long-term goals and other financial issues.

**Leisure activities:** Enjoyment of hobbies and other interests, both together and apart.

**Sexual relationship:** Taking pleasure

in sex, and feeling free to talk about sexual topics and preferences.

**Parenting:** Agreement on the number of children and how they should be raised.

**Family and friends:** A good relationship with both your own and your partner's family and social circle.

**Egalitarian roles:** Agreement on decision-making procedures and division of household and other responsibilities.

**Religious orientation:** Shared values and beliefs.

## FIVE MARRIAGE TYPES

Based on these 11 dimensions, we've identified *five different types of marriage*—each one representing a different degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the relationship...

**Vitalized couples**—at the top end of the scale—are strong in nearly all of the above areas. These couples continue to thrive over the long haul because they have so many resources upon which to draw. Even if a problem crops up in one area, their communication and problem-resolution skills are good, enabling them to deal with conflicts before they get out of hand.

**Devitalized couples**—at the other extreme—have almost nothing going for them. They may be on the verge of splitting up or may stay together for the sake of the children or for religious reasons.

Not only are devitalized couples dissatisfied with their communication, they don't even like each other much. *Sad:* There might have been a time when counseling could have helped these couples to work out their conflicts. But

*Bottom Line/Personal* interviewed David H. Olson, PhD, professor in the Family Social Sciences Department at the University of Minnesota. He is president of *Prepare/Enrich*, Box 190, Minneapolis 55440, which trains counseling professionals to work with premarital and married couples.

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devalitized couples don't even bother to fight anymore. By the time they come in for counseling—if they come at all—there's rarely enough motivation left to save the marriage.

In between those two extremes are three types of couples—*conflicted*, *traditional* and *harmonious*.

**Conflicted couples** may be unhappy but at least they're fighting—and they are attempting to deal with their problems, if not in the most constructive ways. There's some energy left in the relationships.

Conflicted couples can often be helped greatly by counseling that teaches them better techniques for communicating and resolving conflicts.

**Traditional couples** are better matched in external dimensions than they are in internal ones.

Traditional couples are strongest in areas such as religion, family/friends, parenting and leisure activities but lack strengths in communication and conflict resolution—and they may not be crazy about each other's personalities.

Traditional couples do fine as long as their external support systems are in place. But if a highly stressful situation should arise—such as a job loss, major illness or crisis with the children—those systems may fail to sustain a traditional couple. They, too, can benefit from communication training.

**Harmonious couples** aren't quite as happy as vitalized couples, but they do pretty well. Their problems tend to arise during particular situations more than from personality differences. Although their communication might stand some improvement, their skills are basically strong—and if they hit a crisis, they're capable of negotiating it fairly effectively, possibly with the help of short-term counseling.

#### EVALUATING YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Figuring out how your own marriage rates on the 11 relationship dimensions can serve two important functions:

- First, it opens up communication about these issues, which couples too often avoid.
- Second, it can draw attention to

**"I love what I'm doing. My only advice is to fall in love with your future. That's what I've always done and it works."**

—George Burns

trouble spots—before they become too difficult to resolve.

Try this exercise with your spouse or partner:

- Review the 11 dimensions described earlier. Select three areas that you see as strengths in your relationship—and three that could use improvement. We refer to these as growth areas.

**Important:** Each person should do this part of the exercise independently, without input from the partner.

- Now share your observations with each other, using the following format:

One person describes and discusses a strength area.

Then the other person shares one strength he/she has identified.

Repeat this process until each of you has discussed all three strength areas.

Next, use the same procedure to talk about the three growth areas you chose.

- Finally, discuss whether any of your partner's responses surprised you and where you had the most agreements—and disagreements.

This process can help you acknowledge and capitalize on your strengths and begin to think about what you'd like to improve.

**Helpful:** Set a date for exploring the growth areas further. At that time, you'll get the best results if you define the problem together. Talk about how each of you contributes to the problem, brainstorm possible solutions, pick one to try and decide how you'll evaluate your progress—together.

If you have so many problem areas that it is difficult to narrow them down to just three—or if you have trouble identifying three *strong* areas—that's a powerful signal to consider counseling. Almost any couple can benefit from some skill-building assistance, but people who feel this negative about their relationship shouldn't wait. With outside help, they may be able to rediscover the life in their marriage.

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