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## **PREPARE-ENRICH Program: Overview and New Discoveries about Couples**

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### **Abstract**

*This article highlights a variety of new discoveries made about premarital and married couples from data collected using the PREPARE-ENRICH assessment. A brief overview of the Customized Version is provided and evidence about its effectiveness when used with a couple or in a group setting. The Customized Version contains a variety of new scales that are producing compelling relationship findings in the areas of personality, cohabitation, stress, commitment, forgiveness, and spiritual beliefs. The authors provide practical information regarding the application of the program in faith group settings and in pastoral counseling.*

### **Introduction**

Over 3 million couples have participated in the PREPARE-ENRICH marriage program since it was developed 30 years ago. Data collected from participating couples has resulted in a large national and international database that provides unique research opportunities to make discoveries about premarital and married couples. This article provides a brief overview of the Customized Version of PREPARE-ENRICH (sixth edition of the assessment) and studies on the effectiveness of the program for helping couples build stronger relationships. The authors review recent discoveries based on the new scales in the Customized Version including the typology of couples, SCOPE personality scale, personal stress profile, cohabitation, commitment, forgiveness, and spiritual beliefs.

More than 100,000 professionals (counselors and clergy) have been trained as facilitators in the PREPARE-ENRICH Program. Counselors include marital and family therapists, psychologists, social workers, and other counseling professionals. Clergy from all denominations, including military chaplains, have used and endorse the program as being highly relevant and user-friendly to learn and use with the couples. Also, couples are very pleased with the feedback and new information they gain about each other. They also learn relationship skills they can use to deal with current and future issues.

### **Brief Overview of the Customized Version of PREPARE-ENRICH Program**

Widely known as a leading relationship inventory, PREPARE/ENRICH is called a “program” because it contains both a couples assessment and a semi-structured feedback process. As part of the feedback process, the program teaches the couple relevant relationship skills like communication and conflict resolution.

The goal of the program is to help premarital couples prepare for marriage (PREPARE) and married couples enrich their marriage (ENRICH) by increasing their awareness of relationship strengths and growth areas and providing them with skills to improve their

relationship. The Customized version is totally online and is designed for dating, engaged, and married couples. It is called Customized since it tailor-makes the assessment for each couple based on background information they provide.

PREPARE/ENRICH has been scientifically developed and has high reliability, high validity, and large national norms with couples from various ethnic groups. Numerous studies demonstrate the rigor of the assessment and its relevance to couples from a variety of ethnic groups (Olson, 1998; Asai & Olson, 2004; Allen & Olson, 2001). Larson, Holman, Klein, Stahmann, and Peterson evaluated premarital assessment questionnaires and found PREPARE to be “most psychometrically sound” and rated it as “the best instrument for premarital counseling” (1995, p. 251). The program has been adopted by professional counselors from various fields (marital and family therapists, social workers, and psychologists) and clergy from many diverse religious groups.

The Customized Version of PREPARE/ENRICH (Olson and Larson, 2008) is the sixth revision, and the distinctive feature of this online tool is its ability to dynamically adapt the content for each couple based on their relationship stage and family structure. In this way, the program is relevant for dating, engaged, or married couples.

The core scales in PREPARE/ENRICH cover the topics of communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, financial management, leisure activities, affection and sexuality, family and friends, relationship roles, and spiritual beliefs. Customized scales include topics such as cohabitation issues, cultural/ethnic issues, interfaith/interchurch, dating issues, forgiveness and a variety of scales for parenting based on the age of the child and parenting situations (parenting expectations, step-parenting, intergenerational issues, etc.). Beyond these core and customized scales, PREPARE/ENRICH assesses a couple’s closeness and flexibility, family-of-origin, personal stress, four areas of relationship dynamics, and five factors of personality. Finally, facilitators can select customized spiritual belief scales when working with couples from a variety of faith traditions (Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, etc.).

During the feedback process, the facilitator receives a **Facilitator’s Report** (20-25 pages) and uses it to work with a couple. The couple is given their own **Couple’s Report** (10 pages) and **Couple’s Workbook** (25 pages) containing exercises covering the major topics from the assessment. The facilitator typically meets with a couple over 3-6 sessions and is trained to share the results of the assessment while teaching skills from the Couple’s Workbook. The goals and core exercises of the program are to explore strength and growth areas, strengthen communication skills, identify and manage major stressors, resolve conflicts using a ten-step model, develop a more balanced relationship using the couple and family maps, and understand personality differences in order to maximize teamwork.

The theoretical assumption and empirical finding is that the quality of the marital relationship can be predicted from the premarital relationship. In a predictive validity study using PREPARE, it was found that marital success (happily married vs. separated/divorced) three years into marriage could be predicted with 80-85% accuracy with PREPARE taken three months prior to the wedding (Fowers and Olson, 1986). This study was replicated by Larsen and Olson (1996) with another three year longitudinal sample of married couples.

Therefore, it is possible to identify the relationship factors that, if improved, will make a difference to the quality of a marriage. This program applies four important characteristics of an effective preventative approach. First, factors which relate to marital success need to be identified. Second, couples need to be assessed on those critical variables. Third, feedback and

exercises need to be given to couples, which will help them deal with problem areas. Fourth, couples need skill-building exercises focusing on communication and conflict resolution skills.

An assessment and program which attempts to improve a couple's relationship should obtain information on the most critical factors in premarital relationship development that are predictive of later marital satisfaction. In a comprehensive review of eight Marriage Preparation Education Programs (MPEP), Childs (2009) found the PREPARE/ENRICH program ranked first in terms of Content with a score of 92%. This overall Content Score was based on four criteria: theory and research (97%), context (82%), practice (96%), and premarital predictors (88%). In another study, Stahmann and Hiebert (1997) identified factors which relate to marital success. A diverse group of 238 clergy who did premarital counseling were asked to estimate the percentage of premarital couples experiencing problems or complaints in 29 possible areas. The five problem areas ranked as occurring most frequently were: communication (63%), unrealistic expectations of marriage or spouse (62%), money management/finances (60%), decision making/problem solving (55%), and power struggles (51%). All these topic have been systematically integrated into PREPARE/ENRICH.

### **Effectiveness of Premarital Counseling with PREPARE-ENRICH**

Helping a couple prepare for marriage is a positive and effective experience for couples. Good premarital counseling helps the couple get their marriage off to a more positive start and has been shown to reduce their chance of divorce by 30% (Stanley, 2001). Premarital counseling stimulates meaningful dialogue for the couple and teaches them communication and conflict resolution skills they can use to resolve current and future issues. Couples also learn the value of proactively working on their relationship and how they can maintain a healthy relationship. Whether done with an individual couple or in a group setting, recent studies have found that the PREPARE/ENRICH Program helps premarital couples get their relationships off to a great start.

One study (Knutson & Olson, 2003) compared three levels of premarital programming; one group took the PREPARE/ENRICH assessment and had four feedback sessions (PE & Feedback), the second group only took the assessment (PE only), and the third group received neither (they did receive PE and feedback after the study). The PE Feedback group changed the most, with 8 of 10 areas significantly improving. The PE-only group improved in 3 of 10 areas and the control group made no changes. The PE & Feedback group had a 52% increase in the number of Vitalized couples (most happy couples) and an 83% decrease in the number of Conflicted couples (who are at high risk for divorce).

Another study compared the PREPARE-ENRICH Program with an individual format versus a group format and found that both approaches were equally effective (Futris, Barton, Ahoulou, & Seponski, 2011). It was found that the couples in both approaches had positive gains in knowledge, felt more confident in their relationship, engaged in more positive conflict management behaviors, and were more satisfied with their relationship.

### **Identifying & Building Couple Strengths**

There are several reasons why strengths are assessed and highlighted in PREPARE-ENRICH. Strengths are a foundation of a strong relationship. When couples experience stress, their strengths provide resources to help them cope with and manage their stress. Strengths also supply hope and contain overt or latent skills that can be utilized in weaker areas. Strengths are

the building block for a healthy relationship and can be foundational in learning relationship skills.

Strengths operate differently than “growth areas” across stages of a couple’s relationship. While premarital couples are most aware of their strengths and tend to minimize issues, married couple can readily list issues and have a harder time describing their strengths. Unhappy couples focus mainly on issues (growth areas) and have difficulty identifying any strengths. PREPARE-ENRICH assesses both strengths and growth areas, allowing a more balanced approach helping premarital couples become aware of potential issues and married couples remembering their strengths.

Two major analyses with over 50,000 couples in each study were done to identify the strengths of happy couples as well as the common problematic issues (growth areas) with all married couples. The first was a national survey of 50,000 married couples (newlywed to over 50 years) from all 50 states.

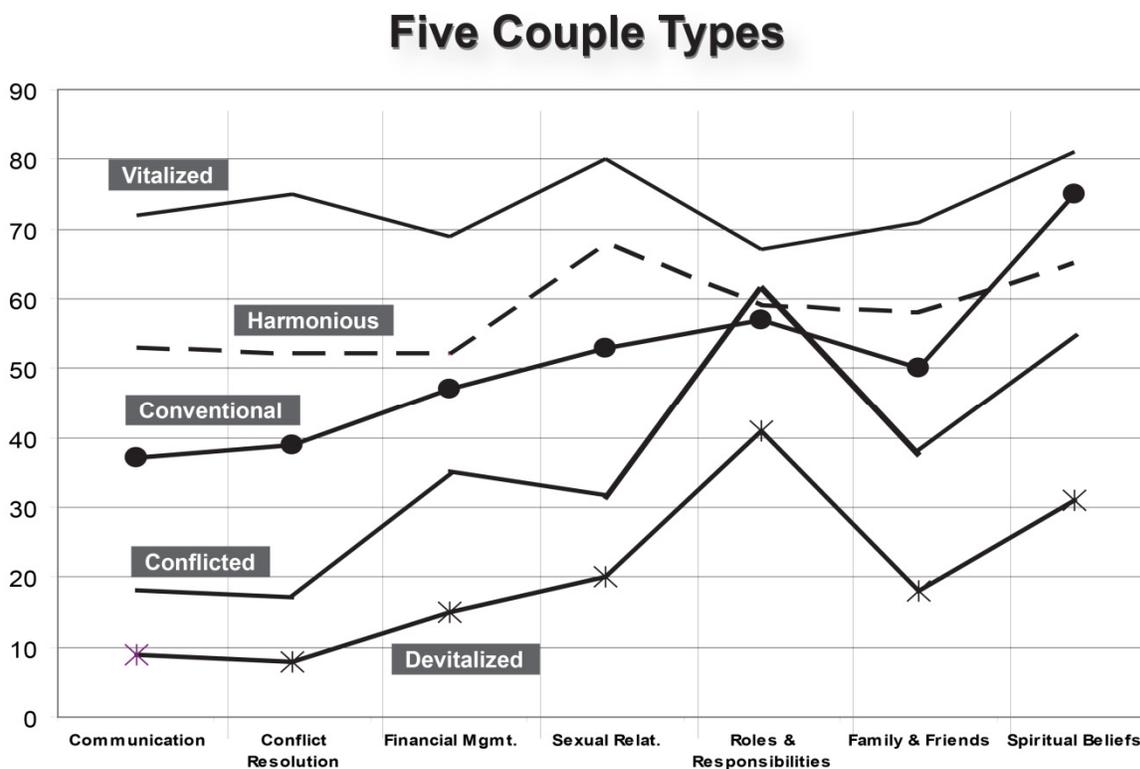
The five areas most predictive of happy versus unhappy couples were (in rank order): *communication, flexibility, closeness, personality compatibility, and conflict resolution*. Happy couples had significantly higher scores (positive couple agreement) on these five areas compared to unhappy couples. More details on the results and other studies are on the website ([www.prepare-enrich.com/research](http://www.prepare-enrich.com/research)). Findings are also integrated into a self-help book called the *Couple Checkup* (Olson, Olson-Sigg, & Larson, 2008).

The second national sample of over 50,000 consisted of couples who were creating a step-family and had taken PREPARE-ENRICH prior to remarriage with children. The five areas which were most predictive of happy remarried couples (in rank order) were: *personality compatibility, communication, conflict resolution, leisure, and couple flexibility*. Couple compatibility in leisure and was more important than couple closeness. Detailed results are summarized and integrated into a self-help book by Ron Deal and David Olson entitled the *Remarriage Checkup* (2010).

### **Typology of Married Couples**

Five distinct “types” (patterns) of couples was discovered when cluster analysis was used with a sample of 6,267 couples across ten core categories of PREPARE-ENRICH (Fowers & Olson, 1993). The five types of married couples range from those very high in marital satisfaction to very low: Vitalized, Harmonious, Conventional, Conflicted, and Devitalized. About 15-20% of the couples fell into each of these types. These types are very useful descriptive terms for groups of couples. Another useful aspect of the types is that other findings can be linked to these types. For example, the research shows that with the most happily type (Vitalized), there is very little spouse abuse, but abuse is very high in the Conflicted and Devitalized types (Asai & Olson, 2003).

Figure 1. Five Couple Types



This couple typology has been replicated with African American (Allen & Olson, 2001) and Hispanic (Olson & Garrett, 2006) couples in the United States and it has also been replicated in other countries (Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea). What varies across the countries is the percentage of couples in the various types. For example, a higher percentage of married couples in Asian countries are “Harmonious” and “Conventional” when compared with the United States and other western cultures. This couple typology will be used in other parts of the paper to illustrate the findings as they relate to couples.

### **Personality: Do Opposites Attract or Birds of a Feather Flock Together?**

The SCOPE Personality scale was created and integrated into the most recent (Customized) Version of PREPARE-ENRICH. SCOPE is based on the “Big Five” personality assessment that has been validated worldwide by psychologists (Costa & McCrae, 2003). SCOPE is an acronym for the five areas assessed: Social (introvert vs. extrovert), Change (openness to change vs. closed and conventional), Organized (orderly vs. flexible), Pleasing (agreeable vs. assertive), and Emotionally Stable (calm vs. reactive).

In a recent study (Kaufman & Larson, 2011) of 10,000 married couples who took the PREPARE-ENRICH assessment, a cross-tabulation was done on each of the scales to examine whether people tend to marry those with similar or dissimilar personalities. SCOPE categorizes

individuals into a high, average, or low score on each personality factor. In 60% of the cases, couples married someone quite different—one person scored in a higher range while the other was in a lower range. In about 20% of the cases, both persons had moderate scores, in 10% both had low scores, and the remaining 10% were both high.

Further analysis was conducted to investigate whether similarities or differences in personality were related to couple satisfaction. In 80% of the couples, marital satisfaction was not related to similarity or differences in personality. However, in the 10% where both were high on the Emotionally Steady, Pleasing, or Organized scales, these were the happiest couples and the 10% that were both low on these scales were the least happy.

### **Stress in Premarital and Married Couples**

The Personal Stress Profile is a new scale that has been integrated into the Customized Version. This scale contains 25 of the most frequently cited stressful issues based on research by David Olson and colleagues. Each person indicates how often each item is a stressor for them in the past year. An analysis was done by Larson & Olson (2009) with about 10,000 premarital couples and 10,000 married couples who took PREPARE-ENRICH in 2009.

Significant differences were found in the top five stressors for premarital couples and married couples. The top issue for premarital couples was “my job” and the top issue for married couples (and individually for both husbands and wives) was “my partner.” Premarital couples also had stress about finances, cost of the wedding, lack of exercise, and sleep. Married couples were stressed about their job, feeling emotionally upset, inadequate income, and too much to do around the house. Husbands and wives had similar top five issues, although they were in a slightly different order.

Table 1. Top stressors reported by premarital and married couples.

<b>Premarital Couples</b>	<b>Married Couples</b>
Your job	Your spouse
Financial concerns	Your job
Cost of wedding	Feeling emotionally upset
Lack of exercise	Inadequate income
Lack of sleep	Too much to do around the home

### **Cohabitation and Marital Success**

Over 7 million couples between the ages of 18 and 65 are currently cohabiting (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Earlier studies of cohabitation and divorce have indicated that cohabiting couples have higher divorce rates than non-cohabiting couples. However, more recent studies are finding that if the couple is engaged, the divorce rate is no different than non-cohabiting couples. This finding was replicated in a very comprehensive study of 20,000 couples by the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2012).

The relationship between cohabiting and dating status was investigated by Larson and Olson (2010) using data from 35,684 couples who had taken PREPARE-ENRICH. Four groups of couples were created for the analysis: dating cohabiting, dating living apart, engaged cohabiting, and engaged living apart.

For dating couples, living together is related to less robust and satisfying relationships. While 51% of the dating couples living apart were “Vitalized” (most happy type), only 21% of the dating couples cohabiting were “Vitalized.” Conversely, almost half (48%) of the cohabiting dating couples were “Conflicted” (most problematic type), while only 16% of non-cohabiting dating couples were “Conflicted.”

For engaged couples, cohabiting did not make a large difference in the quality of their relationship. While there were more “Vitalized” couples that were non-cohabiting versus cohabiting (60% to 51%) and fewer “Conflicted” couples that were non-cohabiting versus cohabiting (5% to 13%), the differences were not large.

The happiest couples are those that are engaged and not cohabiting, and the least happy are dating couples that are cohabiting. More specifically, while 60% of the engaged non-cohabiting couples were “Vitalized” and only 5% were “Conflicted”, only 21% of the dating cohabiting couples were “Vitalized” and 48% were “Conflicted.”

Table 2. Cohabitation and Couple Types

<b>Couple Type</b>	<b>Dating Cohabiting</b> (n=714)	<b>Dating Living Apart</b> (n=2622)	<b>Engaged Cohabiting</b> (n=14,309)	<b>Engaged Living Apart</b> (n=18,039)
Vitalized	21%	51%	51%	60%
Harmonious	10%	4%	16%	6%
Conventional	21%	29%	20%	29%
Conflicted	48%	16%	13%	5%

### **Commitment and Forgiveness**

The CDC study found that commitment is an important concept that helped to explain the findings on cohabitation. Commitment and forgiveness are two new scales added to the Customized Version of PREPARE-ENRICH. Commitment is assessed by four questions related to commitment to their partner. Forgiveness is a new 10-item scale that assesses whether a partner has requested and was granted forgiveness. This scale was validated in a dissertation by Mouttet (2009), who found that it correlated well with other established scales of forgiveness.

There is a very positive relationship between commitment and couple satisfaction. In a study of over 1,200 married couples that were “Vitalized” it was found that 95% of them had scores high on the commitment scale. Conversely, in a sample of over 2,000 “Devitalized” married couples, only 23% of them scored high on commitment and 26% were in the low range (Larson & Olson, 2010). It is, of course, unclear whether high commitment leads to higher marital satisfaction or vice-versa.

Forgiveness was found to be a very significant component in the relationship of happy couples. In a study of over 7,000 married couples, 87% of the Vitalized couples had high scores in forgiveness indicating it as a strength in their relationship. Conversely, Devitalized couples had low scores in forgiveness indicating this was a growth area in their relationship (Larson & Olson, 2010). An important part of feedback with PREPARE/ENRICH in working with Devitalized and Conflicted couples is to teach them effective ways to seek and grant forgiveness.

Table 3. Forgiveness and Couple Types

	<b>Growth Area</b>	<b>Possible Growth Area</b>	<b>Possible Strength</b>	<b>Strength</b>
Vitalized	1%	3%	10%	87%
Harmonious	5%	13%	31%	51%
Conventional	19%	30%	29%	23%
Conflicted	58%	28%	11%	3%
Devitalized	87%	11%	2%	1%

### **Spiritual Beliefs and Couple Satisfaction**

To better understand the relationship between spiritual beliefs and marital satisfaction, Larson and Olson (2005) did a national survey of almost 24,671 couples. About half were Protestant, 15% Catholic, and the other 35% were from a range of Christian denominations. Unlike past studies that have used single item measures of beliefs and couple satisfaction, this study used 10-item scales for both areas.

The greater the agreement between a couple on their spiritual beliefs, the more satisfied they are as a couple. Comparing couples high and low on agreement on spiritual beliefs, 36% of the high agreement couples were “Vitalized” (very happy), but only 5% of the low agreement couples were “Vitalized.” Conversely, 82% of the low agreement couples were “Conflicted” (unhappy) but only 9% of the high agreement couples were “Conflicted.” These are rather dramatic findings and it is, in part, because of the comprehensive and reliable nature of the spiritual beliefs scale and methodology in PREPARE/ENRICH.

### **Premarital Counseling and Marital Counseling with PREPARE-ENRICH**

While PREPARE was originally designed for premarital counseling, ENRICH was created to be used with married couples. Now with the Customized Version, it tailor-makes the assessment for each couple based on the relationship status (dating, engaged, or married) and other background and family factors (age, first marriage, children, etc.). Once the couple has taken the assessment, their facilitator receives an email notifying that the couple has completed their assessment and the results are ready to review, save, and/or print. There are three documents available to use with each couple: a Facilitator’s Report, a Couple’s Report, and a Couple’s Workbook with over 20 couple exercises to use in the feedback process. PREPARE-ENRICH is an important resource for clergy who are frequently called upon to provide pastoral care or counseling for couples in their congregation or community.

Most counselors and clergy use PREPARE-ENRICH with an individual couple; however, there is also a Group Program that builds off of the main program. The group program can be used with couples at the same stage of the family life cycle (dating, engaged, or married) or they can be combined in the same cross-generational group—which is often a great learning experience for all couples. The program is easily adaptable to faith-based settings and can be incorporated in various types of weekly small groups.

The PREPARE-ENRICH program is a valuable tool in assisting couples preparing for marriage and improving the quality of the marital relationship for couples at various life stages.

Author Note: To be trained in PREPARE-ENRICH, the best approach is to go to a day training workshop. Over 500 workshops are offered nationally each year. A person can find one in their area by going to the website ([www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com)) and clicking on “Become a Trained Facilitator.” There is also a Self-Training approach with “Continuing Education” credits available as an option for mental health professionals. For more information about all aspects of PREPARE-ENRICH, go to the website: [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com).

The authors all work at Life Innovations where the main product is PREPARE-ENRICH. Send correspondence to: [dolson@prepare-enrich.com](mailto:dolson@prepare-enrich.com) For more information on studies cited in this paper, go to: [www.prepare-enrich.com/research](http://www.prepare-enrich.com/research)

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