Strengthening the Marriage Bond in Newlyweds: Factors and Strategies for Successful Outcomes

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Abstract

Marital satisfaction is associated with numerous positive factors while dissolution of marriage is associated with numerous negative factors, especially within the first four years of marriage. Positive factors that contribute to successful marital outcomes are being first married at age 25 and older, possessing a higher level of education, and homogeneous traits such as race, age, and education. Risk factors associated with dissolution of marriage are cohabitation, remarriage, and having children in the family. Identifying strategies to reduce divorce proneness is critical since 20% of first marriages end within five years.

*Keywords:* attachment behavior, marital satisfaction, marital adjustment, marital quality, newlywed couples, first years of marriage, divorce proneness
Dedication

To Kent, my husband of 34 years, who has taught me so much about the act of loving—what it is to show love and what it is to be loved. Sharing marriage with you is a thrilling adventure!

To my daughters, McKenzie and Mikala: You are my greatest accomplishment by far, my love for each of you has no bounds, and my heart bursts with pride in the loveliness and wisdom about relationships you both embody.

To all newly married couples that long for deep, intimate, and loving marriages — Open your hearts and let the refining fire of marriage transform you without fear or reservation.
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Strengthening the Marriage Bond in Newlyweds: Factors and Strategies for Successful Outcomes

Our future as a healthy society is dependent, in part, upon creating successful marital unions, while simultaneously developing prevention strategies that will help to reduce the rate of divorce in the early years of marriage. Effects from the result of divorce include economic costs as well as psychological and physical consequences for all parties involved, especially children (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). Research outcomes state that children of divorced parents are vulnerable to various consequences, such as increased depression and emotional distress, economic hardship, low academic achievement, and loss of connection with the non-custodial parent. Furstenberg & Teitler (1994) point out that “children from disrupted families are significantly more likely to express discontent with their lives as measured by an index of life satisfaction” (p. 174). In other words, the effects of divorce can last a lifetime.

Our government alone spends a good percentage of its budget supporting programs that attempt to counter the effects of divorce. In first-ever estimates given for the nation in all 50 states, Scafidi (2008) reports “family fragmentation [i.e., divorce and unmarried childbearing] cost taxpayers at least $112 billion per year. [...] Of these taxpayer costs, $70.1 billion are at the federal level, $33.3 billion are at the state level, and $8.5 billion are at the local level” (p. 5). The burden that the dissolution of the family places on society, social services, and other charities is an increasing strain on limited resources due to increased budget cuts. It is questionable whether, we as a society, can continue to support the economic and psychological costs that post-divorce families suffer, therefore it is imperative that marital therapists and educators offer early interventions and psycho-educational opportunities that reduce divorce proneness, especially during the challenging first four years of marriage.
This researcher examined critical factors of influence that contribute to strengthening marital satisfaction in newly married couples, specifically those married four years or less. The population of newly married was selected because this population has a higher risk of divorce proneness, due to declining levels of marital satisfaction after the “honeymoon” period is over. “Statistics indicate that approximately 40% of first marriages end in divorce, one-fifth of first marriages end within 5 years, and one-third end within 10 years” (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001, as cited in Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003, p. 253).

The significance of the topic chosen will assist newly married couples in identifying attributes that contribute to a successful outcome during the first four years of marriage. Isolating these attributes will help facilitate the following:

- To reduce divorce proneness within the first four years of marriage by identifying risk factors and obstacles to avoid; all of which contribute to marital dissatisfaction.

- To create self-awareness in the couple of the attachments necessary to form a new couple bond. This newly acquired awareness normalizes the adjustment during this family life cycle transition so difficulties are not mistakenly attributed to having married the wrong person.

- To acquire new relationship skills and prevention strategies for both premarital and newly married couples, which will serve to strengthen attachment and the marriage relationship so that couples stay happier and stay married longer.

One danger for many newlywed couples is that they enter into marriage in an idealistic state and often view their spouse through rose-colored glasses. All of the unrealistic expectations that they married the perfect partner who will be able to meet all of their needs, wants, and desires will begin to crumble around them as they encounter real life together as man and wife.
The key to surviving these first years is by providing couples with a stronger base of preparation that emphasizes crucial knowledge regarding the transitions they will experience, as well as key prevention strategies that help to increase the couple’s awareness of obstacles to avoid, while embracing the positive factors which strengthen the bonds of the new relationship. Thus, the newly formed marital union will be no stronger than the foundation upon which it rests.

**Adult Attachment Theory**

Foundational to the couples bond, is the theory of attachment first postulated by John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist. According to Bowlby’s attachment theory, we are all born with a biological “attachment behavioral system” that manifests whenever we are in distress or danger (Bowlby, 1969/1982, as cited in Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The evolutionary goal of this attachment system is survival, which encompasses such things as feeding, protection from predators, and maintaining a feeling of security by monitoring and staying in close proximity to the caregiver. According to Cassidy & Shaver (1999) “proximity seeking” (i.e., seeking closeness for security or protection) in infants is activated whenever preset limits (e.g., distance or time apart) are breached, thereby activating the attachment system and requiring emotional regulation on the part of the infant (p. 6). Maintaining the desired homeostasis of attachment proximity becomes the primary goal of the infant. The deactivation of the system requires a return to the “safe haven” of the caregiver. “Safe haven support occurs when a caregiver supports a partner’s need to ‘come in’ to the relationship for comfort and assistance in times of adversity” (Collins, Ford, Guichard, Kane & Feeney, 2010, p. 372).

Bowlby hypothesized that these early patterns of attachment are relatively stable from infancy to adulthood. Depending on how well the caretaker/parent met earlier primary needs, an attachment foundation is established—whether secure or insecure—and sets the tone for future
intimate adult relationships. Whereas adult attachment does not serve the same purpose as infant attachment, the four components of attachment bonds—proximity maintenance, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base—are also found in adult romantic partners (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Cassidy & Shaver (1999) writes, “According to Bowlby, the pair bond—in which sexual partners mutually derive and provide security—is the prototype of attachment in adulthood” (p. 337).

Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) originally identified three major models of adult attachment styles as 1) secure, 2) avoidant, and 3) anxious-ambivalent (as cited in Hazen & Shaver, 1987; Collins, Cooper, Albino & Allard, 2002). A fourth style of attachment was added later and was termed fearful attachment (Lopez & Gormley, 2002). Identification of “internal working models (IWM)” reflects how a person views self and others and exhibits as two variables: either positive (worthy of love and attention) or negative (unworthy of love and attention). This primary sense of attachment ultimately carries into the adult attachments within the marital relationship as core features of each partner’s personality. According to Collins et al., (2002) “[. . .] attachment styles predispose individuals to develop relationships that differ in their emotional tone and their likelihood for success [and] that reflect both the biological and psychosocial history of the individual” (p. 968-969).

Secure Attachment

Characteristic of this group, couples are supportive, open, and collaborative; they exhibit low anxiety and low attachment avoidance. Secure couples feel safe when their partner is nearby (i.e., a safe base or safe haven) and can engage in close, intimate contact with each other without anxiety due to their higher internal feelings of self-worth (Hazen & Shaver, 1987). These adults
have fewer tendencies to display negative behaviors such as contempt and hostility and view attachment figures as warm, responsive, and dependable (Creasey, 2002; Collins et al., 2002).

**Anxious-ambivalent and Avoidant Attachment**

Both styles of attachment in this group represent negative *internal* models of self-worth. The *anxious-ambivalent* adult expresses increased anger or fear towards attachment figures, along with high anxiety concerning rejection or abandonment. Attachment figures are seen as relatively untrustworthy, yet essential to procuring a sense of well-being and acceptance. The *avoidant* adult represents a negative internal model concerning the *other* partner’s role. Seeing attachment figures as uncaring, they prefer to remain independent and will distance themselves to prove they have no attachment needs. The avoidant adult exhibits less comfort with intimacy and emotional expression, thus affirming higher attachment avoidance (Collins et al., 2002).

Both anxious and avoidant adults have less reinforcement and less expectations of positive experiences with those in caretaking roles, thus increasing the risk of conflict and marital dissatisfaction (Lopez, Riggs, Pollard, & Hook, 2011). These insecure internal working models are contributors to challenges in both social skills and affect regulation, which can lead to more frequent problems with conflict management within romantic relationships (Creasey, 2002).

The contributions of attachment theory are many and it is a helpful theory in identifying important patterns of attachment in adult relationships based upon earlier infant–caregiver bonds. In this theoretical sense, marital satisfaction depends upon how well the partners trust each other to meet their basic needs for security, support and comfort, and sexual intimacy. Attachment theory is useful as a predictor of marital success or failure in the respect that each partner’s family of origin patterns will play a role in the formation of the couple’s relationship. However,
attachment theory has not been useful in the ability to predict changes that happen in the
development of marriage over a period of time.

**Stages of the Family Life Cycle**

Carter and McGoldrick (1980) consider a new family life cycle beginning with the
unattached young adult as one “whose adequate or inadequate completion of the primary task of
*coming to terms with his or her family of origin* will most profoundly influence whom, when,
and how, he or she married and all succeeding stages of the new family life cycle. Adequate
completion of this task would require that the young adult separate from the family of origin
without cutting off or fleeing reactively to a substitute emotional refuge” (p. 13).

In the past, much effort to prevent divorce has been influenced by family development
theory, which emphasized the completion of stage-appropriate tasks as the young adult
transitions through stages, such as *The Young Adult Stage* to the *Newly Married Couple Stage.*
Successful completion of the tasks required in each of these transitions is considered vital to the
success of the newly formed marital union. One major task required for each young adult is to
differentiate and separate from their family of origin and to formulate their own opinions, values,
and decision-making capabilities. As two individuals become one in marriage, the locus of
power then shifts to be contained within the couple dyad, which places all others—family, in-
laws, and friends—outside the circle of influence and they become secondary to the decision-
making authority of the couple. This is a very difficult transition for young couples to make
because of resistance from the family of origin, but it is essential to forming the couple’s bond.
As this bond is formed, the couple begins to identify each other’s strengths and uses these to
formulate and assume new roles and responsibilities within the newly formed marital
relationship. This may call for a rejection of previous roles that were established in one or the
other’s family of origin. In lieu of successful completion of these tasks, these unfinished transitions become potential sources of conflict in the newly formed union.

Previous studies have hypothesized that the newly married couple is at the pinnacle of happiness at the beginning of marriage with a gradual decline in marital satisfaction taking place over the first four years of marriage (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). In fact, it has been said that a newly married couple is at their peak of happiness on their wedding day. That might be satisfactory if the couple’s happiness with their relationship was at its very highest when they entered marriage. However, this researcher contends that couples are not as happy as they could be and they may not even be aware of this fact. In working with premarital couples, this researcher has observed that most couple’s self-reported satisfaction rating falls between 60 and 80 on the overall satisfaction scale. This observation is derived from this researcher’s work with over 50 premarital couples who have taken the PREPARE/ENRICH online assessment, which rated the couple’s current level of overall satisfaction with the relationship on a scale from very low (zero), to very high (100). If these couples are at their happiest, then their scores should be closer to 100; however they have no comparison to know what that kind of marital satisfaction feels or looks like at this stage.

Unbeknownst to these couples, another sharp decline in marital satisfaction takes place after the birth of the first child when the couple will again have to reassess roles and responsibilities as new parents (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). All of this points to another opportunity to raise the couple’s awareness of their responsibility to increase satisfaction within the relationship before they marry, rather than leaving them in an idealistic state of thinking that marriage itself, will make them happier and more satisfied.
These possible declines in marital satisfaction illustrates that even the transitions between the life cycle stages that are considered normal and expected, can prove to be challenging, requiring many adjustments to new roles and circumstances. This leads this researcher to conclude that there is a distinction between what might be termed the “normal problems” of newlyweds and ones that may possibly be more pathological—rooted in dysfunctional or insecure attachment patterns of the family of origin. Therefore, it seems that both attachment behaviors in couples and the family life cycle provides a framework for evaluating dysfunctional patterns in couples, while being equally useful as strategic intervention points.

**Key Terminology**

**Validating/Vitalized**—defined as couples that are emotionally engaged and are skilled in communication, listening, and conflict negotiation. “Validating couples are those that handle their differences openly and cooperatively, incorporating high levels of positive affect and voicing respect for each other’s opinions” (Gottman, 1994a, as cited in Holman & Jarvis, 2003, p. 268).

**Hostile/Detached Couples**—defined as couples that are less engaged as listeners in the communication process and show more verbal contempt. “These couples display the highest frequency and greatest intensity in their conflict interactions, utilizing personal attacks, and displaying very little positive affect” (Gottman, 1994a, as cited in Holman & Jarvis, 2003, p. 268).

**Marital Happiness**—measured on a scale from not to happy to being very happy with the amounts of understanding, love, affection, responsibility, sexual satisfaction, responsibility in the home, shared activities, and spousal faithfulness (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995).
Marital Quality—“According to the VSA model of marriage, marital quality is a function of *enduring vulnerabilities*, which are defined as stable characteristics that spouses bring to their marriage (e.g., attachment style, personality traits, education level); *stressful events*, including normative and nonnormative events, transitions, and circumstances that spouses encounter; and *adaptive processes*, (e.g., behaviors spouses express while solving a marital problem and their appraisals of marital interaction” (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997, p. 114).

Divorce Proneness—defined as the “propensity to divorce and includes both a cognitive component (thinking the marriage is in trouble, considering the idea of getting a divorce) and a component regarding actions (talking to friends or spouse about the possibility of divorce, consulting with clergy, a counselor, or an attorney, separating from the spouse, or filing a petition)” (Booth et al., 1995, p. 665).

Theories Underlying Marital Research

Karney and Bradbury (1995) investigated volumes of longitudinal research that have influenced marriage perspectives and condensed the outcomes into an overview of the major theories that have influenced marital research. Presented here is a synopsis of two of these theories and how they portray change in marriages over time.

The *social exchange or social-learning theory* was introduced by Thibaut and Kelley’s foundational psychological study in 1959 on interdependence, where it was stated that "[intrapersonal] relationships grow, develop, deteriorate, and dissolve as a consequence of an unfolding social-exchange process, which may be conceived as a bartering of rewards and costs both between the partners and between members of the partnership and others” (as cited in Karney & Bradbury, p. 4). When applied to marriage, this theory suggests that spouses will rate their level of relationship satisfaction according to the exchange of positive and negative affect
or behaviors exhibited in the marriage (Johnson et al., 2005). Much of the research conducted by Gottman (1993) rests upon this foundation since many of his studies deal with the importance of couples’ achieving a healthy balance of positive to negative interactions—maintaining that every negative interaction or criticism must have five positive interactions to balance it out.

The behavioral theorists also built upon the foundation of the social-learning theory. “The behavioral model suggests that cognitive responses affect marriage through their influence on subsequent interaction behaviors. Over time, the accumulation of experiences during and after interaction are thought to gradually influence spouses' judgments of marital quality” (Karney & Bradbury, 1995, p. 5). Research suggests couples that exhibit greater skills in the area of problem solving would lessen or circumvent marital failure since distressed couples were more likely to engage in and display more negative problem-solving skills. Since these types of behaviors foreshadow and predict marital dissatisfaction, many skills-based behavioral training programs were designed to increase couples’ skills in conflict management in order to produce more positive outcomes (Johnson et al., 2005).

Current research has established a clear connection between observable problem-solving behaviors and spouses’ simultaneous ratings of marital satisfaction, however more research was desired to ascertain how specific patterns and day-to-day marital interactions affects change in marital satisfaction in the first four years of marriage. Johnson et al. (2005) accepted this challenge in his observational study of the problem-solving interactions of 172 newlywed couples where couples were examined in 8-wave, 4-year trajectories of marital satisfaction. Couples engaged in communication were observed to determine skill levels, as well as the affect (i.e., facial expressions, gestures, posture) that accompanied the exchange. Findings showed that couples that expressed high levels of negative communication and problem-solving skills with
accompanying low levels of positive affect have the greatest possibility of marital declines, whereas couples that possess greater positive affect somewhat equalizes higher readings of negative skills. Longitudinal studies that focus on specific variables over a period of time are more accurate predictors of change in marriages.

**Adlerian Marital System**

An additional theory worth mentioning is the theory of *Individual Psychology*, which was developed in 1926 by Alfred Adler (Adler, 1978, as cited in Kern, 1989). Adler recognized marriage, or the love/intimacy task as he termed it, as one of the basic life tasks that an individual must accomplish for the benefit of self and ultimately for the benefit of society and mankind. Adler firmly believed in a systemic, yet holistic, perspective in examining human behavior and the underlying purpose that all behavior serves.

Much like current systems-based approaches of marriage and family therapy, Adler advocated to first look at the broader context of the marital system within the framework of the family, community, or environment. From there, the focus shifts to look at the interpersonal dynamics in the marital dyad, or that of a particular member. Interventions that occur at any level of the system reflect the circular causality of change—change in one spouse affects the whole marital system and its interactional patterns, which affects each individual. The Adlerian perspective views “marital systems as interacting in repetitious sequences or patterns based upon a small, salient set of explicit and implicit rules and assumptions” (Kern, 1989, p. 6). Exploring these rules and assumptions reveals the attitudes each partner has adopted regarding marriage and interpersonal relationships, which according to Dreikurs (1968) is the “single crucial variable responsible for success or failure in the marriage” (as cited in Kern, 1989, p. 15). One
limitation is that Adler focused more on the individual in formulating the foundations of his theory, thereby limiting a broader application to research with married couples.

Each of the theories listed here have limitations and weaknesses, just as any research study will have as well. As clinicians, our strengths lie in the comparison of many comparative studies that either substantiate or refute the hypothesis. Having the perspective of time gives further credibility to the outcomes and substantiates broader therapeutic applications.

**What Factors Increase Marital Satisfaction?**

Many research studies have spent copious amounts of time attempting to isolate and/or manipulate variables that increase or decrease marital satisfaction. Numerous studies concur that there is a connection between marital quality and adaptive processes (i.e., behaviors that couples express while solving a marital problem or dealing with other life events or stressors) (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). It is hypothesized that by identifying critical variables that this should increase couples’ self-awareness of areas that negatively affect the quality and satisfaction of their marriage. This valuable insight allows couples to formulate new strategies and acquire the necessary knowledge and/or skills to improve vulnerable areas. Variables that contribute to marital success in a long-term marriage and that have been identified in research studies are listed as follows.

**Communication and Conflict Resolution**

Ask any married couple to name a few critical skills necessary for a successful marriage and many of them will acknowledge the importance of acquiring and perfecting the marital skills of communication and conflict resolution. Both social-learning and systemic theories supports this belief by revealing that couples’ support and conflict management skills were accurate predictors of change in marital satisfaction levels. Lower overall levels of satisfaction were
found in couples with negative interactions and higher overall levels were found in those couples with positive interactions (Sullivan, Pasch, Johnson, & Bradbury, 2010). These findings support the efficacy of current models of communication—such as active listening or the speaker-listener technique—that incorporate speaking, listening, empathy, understanding, and validation, as key supportive elements.

Marital studies have shown that there are two important aspects exhibited during problem solving behaviors in marital couples: verbal content consisting of positive and negative behaviors and affective expressions such as humor, anger, and sadness (Cohan & Bradbury, 1997). While poor communication skills have been linked as contributors to decreased marital dissatisfaction, rapid declines are attributed to riskier conflict behaviors, termed by Gottman (1994a) as “the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and withdrawal” (as cited in Holman & Jarvis, 2003, p. 269). The construct of criticism “involves attacking someone’s personality or character—rather than a specific behavior—usually with blame,” while the construct of contempt/defensiveness portrays “words and thoughts that show a lack of respect for the partner during an emotionally charged situation like an argument” (Gottman, 1994b, as cited in Holman & Jarvis, 2003, p. 273).

In Gottman’s longitudinal research on couple conflict types using PREP-M (PREParation for Marriage), he found that the overall negative affect between the partners have been linked to a higher prediction of divorce due to the lack of empathy and having poor impulse control (i.e., being less regulated). For example, husbands with positive speaker and listener behaviors such as “affection/caring, humor, interest/curiosity, or joy/enthusiasm have an 18% chance of considering divorce” while husbands who exhibit negative affect, such as “anger, disgust/contempt, sadness, fear, or whining” have a 52% chance of considering divorce (Holman
& Jarvis 2003, p. 7-8).

**Religion or Religiosity**

The moderating effects of religion on marital adjustment are numerous—couples that share a strong religious faith are more committed, stay married longer, and have more satisfying marriages (Lopez et al., 2011). Lower divorce rates were reported by couples that share the same beliefs versus couples where only one partner was involved in a denomination (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2008). Couples who have high levels of spiritual agreement also exhibit higher levels of satisfaction in key areas of their relationship such as:

communication, conflict resolution, financial management, flexibility and sexual intimacy (Larson and Olson, 2004). These shared spiritual values provide a strong foundation for couples and these same values are further reinforced by the community support that couples derive from being part of a faith community.

Others have contradicted this view and reported mixed outcomes or little correlation between religion and marital satisfaction (Sullivan, 2001; Booth et al., 1995). However, results may have been skewed due to widely differing variables displayed in the married couples surveyed, that is heterogeneous couples (more divorce prone) versus homogeneous couples (less divorce prone). In addition, studies that used a less reliable single-item measure of religiosity attenuated the validity of the connection between variables. When a comprehensive ten-item instrument was used with homogeneous couples, the results were more conclusive (Lopez, et al. 2010).

Another study, which examined married couples that were both more traditional and more religious, reported that these couples do have less marital satisfaction overall, yet they were also the least likely to divorce (Fowers & Olson, 1992). This researcher believes that if a
married couple shares a true biblical faith in God that those same couples will fight to stay together, and stay married, even though they may be unhappy in the process. In fact, research confirms that two out of three unhappily married couples who are considering divorce or separation as a way to solve their marital problems, but do not follow through with it, report renewed feelings of happiness and satisfaction in the same relationship five years later (Waite et al., 2002).

It has been posited that marital difficulties may be the reason that couples turn to religion or increase church involvement as a way to strengthen the relationship. Today’s religious institutions have fostered increased involvement by married couples in taking on a more supportive role with its members by providing couples with increased access to nurturing support groups, instructional classes, and concerned clergy. The take-away from these studies on religion and marital satisfaction is the importance of the couples’ shared religious beliefs and that they incorporated those beliefs into their daily lives; this alone accounts for some of the differences in outcomes. Thus, increased church attendance and the role religion plays in a couple’s daily life are two dimensions of religiosity that have been shown to affect a slight increase in marital happiness (Booth et al., 1995). More importantly, the values concerning life-long marriage held by religious couples would increase the chances that the couple would work harder to save the marriage, reducing the probability of divorce as a viable solution (Fowers, Montel & Olson, 1996).

**Homogenous Traits: Age, Education and Income**

Using data from national surveys of married couples conducted in 1980 and in 2000, researchers looked at information affecting three dimensions of marital quality: marital happiness, marital interaction (i.e., shared activities), and divorce proneness. Contributors to
increased marital happiness or satisfaction during these periods included the following constructs of age, education, and income (Amato, Johnson, Booth & Rogers, 2003). Median age for first marriages increased from 24.7 to 26.7 years for men and from 22 to 25 years for women. A 2012 study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) on first marriages show that couples are delaying marriage even longer with the median age for first marriage jumping to 28.3 for men and 25.8 for women (Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012). Findings showed that marrying later contributes to increased maturity, more financial resources, and more time to search for compatible partners versus marrying at younger ages, which is a key factor in divorce proneness (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998, cited in Amato et al, 2003, p. 2; Kurdek, 1991).

Between 1980 and 2000, the number of men and women aged 25 and older completing college also increased, which correlated with higher levels of marital satisfaction as the level of education increased. These individuals exhibited more skill in communication, higher income levels, more control of their future, and less depression leading to more marital happiness (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, Table 250, cited in Amato et al, 2003, p. 3). Another reason for increased incomes during this time period was that more women were entering the workforce as full-time wage earners. As women shifted roles from homemakers to business executives, they also shifted the power dynamics in the marriage by taking on more decision-making roles and becoming equal financial contributors. One result of this shift in gender attitudes was a decrease in wives contribution to household work and an increase in husbands spending more time doing household tasks. Whereas, this shift did produce a decline in marital satisfaction for the husband, the wives satisfaction increased. Overall, for both husbands and wives, marital satisfaction and intimacy increased as the relationship became more egalitarian and power was shared. Research indicates that marriages exhibiting asymmetric power (i.e., wives having less
power than their husbands) were more indicative of dissatisfied couples than satisfied couples (Gottman, 1994, as cited in Holman & Jarvis, 2003).

Social Support from Spouse, Friends, and Family

A study of 427 husbands and wives, in newlywed or remarried stages, utilized the Social Support Questionnaire, which consists of 27 items assessing the extent to which an individual is accepted, loved, and involved in relationships with open communication such as spouse, family, in-laws, and friends. Support in intimate relationships is important because studies show that having partner support correlates with greater marital satisfaction (Lawrence, et al., 2008; Sullivan et al., 2010) better health, positive adjustment and personal development (Saranson, Levine, Basham, & Saranson, 1983). The most frequently chosen providers of support were identified as spouse, friends, and family of origin. Since social support was found to be of greater importance to women than to men, wives reported greater satisfaction and greater interaction with social support groups. Research data supports the finding that support from extended networks, especially spouses, can shield the effects of stress (Kurdek, 1989).

Perceptions regarding the availability of social support by spouses are also affected by attachment style differences. Each attachment orientation (i.e., secure, anxious, avoidant or fearful) has corresponding mental representations of whether “others” will be supportive or non-supportive. These perceptions of supportiveness will either heighten or diminish “perceived social support,” which is defined as having “feelings that you are loved, valued, and unconditionally accepted” (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990, as cited in Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, p. 110).

One final consideration in evaluating support behaviors between couples is that overprovision of support is a strong predictor of marital dissatisfaction (Brock, 2009, p. 3).
Support needs to be tailored to the specific needs of the other partner rather than the partner’s own preference, so that the other partner perceives that the balance is just right – neither too much nor too little. Whereas underprovision of support is associated with declines in marital satisfaction, overprovision was more so.

**Social Interest**

Sharing many of the traits of social support is the construct of social interest, which is a basic tenant of Alfred Adler’s Individual Psychology. This construct manifests as the interactions and feeling of community that an individual has with others and the world. Applied to the couple’s relationship, it represents a sense of belonging to and a responsibility for the welfare of the other person. Leak and Gardner (1990) commented: “Because Adler believed that social interest was required to solve all the life tasks [especially those tasks related to sex and love], mature love should be a characteristic of individuals high in social interest” (p. 55).

Adler recognized love and intimacy as one of the basic social tasks that face individuals in human personality development. He also recognized the challenges many couples face in not being adequately prepared to successfully meet this life task. Adler attributed “mistaken beliefs” in the attitudes and ways men and women approach life and intimate relationships with each other. Some of these mistaken beliefs can be attributed to dysfunctional family of origin patterns or insecure attachment styles that have been brought into the current relationships. Overall, Adler thought that most couples begin marriage from a “self-centered, expecting, getting approach to relationships rather than a . . . task-centered, self-transcending, contributing, mature cooperative outlook” (Adler, 1978, as cited in Kern, 1989, p. 336). This self-centered or “me” approach certainly underscores the individualistic tendencies that most Americans possess, however.
successful marriages require a more other-centered or “we” approach which requires a higher level of social interest or “cooperative fellowship,” as Adler put it (Bickhard & Ford, 1991, p. 62).

Congruent with Adlerian theories, Crandall and Harris, (1976) has shown that high levels of social interest have been correlated with empathetic responses, cooperative behaviors, and interpersonal attractions between romantic partners (as cited in Leak and Gardner, 1990, p. 55). Positive correlations between social interest and marital adjustment were also cited by Markowski and Greenwood (1984), which assessed 52 married couples using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and the Social Interest Index (SII). Their findings support three positive outcomes that social interest is accountable for, such as: 1) more cooperative tendencies in achieving agreeable outcomes in the couple dyad, 2) increased intimacy and cohesion due to higher levels of feelings of belonging, and 3) possessing a higher degree of sociability, which is critical to intrapersonal interactions in couples (p. 305).

Another highly significant finding was that male social interest was more positively related to marital adjustment, while female social interest was less so (Markowski & Greenwood, 1984). This infers that any relational interventions will be most successful if the husband first gets onboard and commits to the changes needed. Overall, enhancement of social interest is therefore advised in all premarital and marital education programs as a way to improve marital adjustment and satisfaction.

Marital Types

Gottman (1993) was one of the early advocates of using couple types as predictors of marital satisfaction as well as predicting divorce proneness. Couples’ affective behaviors in communication and problem solving were correlated with couple types of either “validating” or
“hostile.” Validating couples were more regulated, and posited a ratio of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction with their partners. Validating couples had greater stability and the highest degree of marital satisfaction. The less regulated hostile couples had the lowest marital satisfaction, relational stability, and less positive interactions.

A similar longitudinal study was conducted by Fowers and Olson (1992), which utilized marital types as predictors of marital satisfaction using a premarital inventory entitled PREPARE. This study intentionally focused on couple types rather than on variables stating that this approach better captures the intricacies of the couples’ dyad and further enhances premarital interventions. The PREPARE inventory assessed the following dimensions: realistic expectations, personality issues, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship; children and parenting, family and friends, equalitarian roles, and religious orientation.

Outcomes of the research showed that the Vitalized couple type reported the highest scores and the highest degree of overall relationship satisfaction in most areas. They stated a very high level of comfort with their ability to resolve problems and communicate feelings with each other, even though they were more idealistic about marriage. These couples have the best chance of having a stable marriage relationship and the lowest divorce rate (Fowers et al., 1996).

Exhibiting a level of more moderate satisfaction, the Harmonious couple type lacked agreement on 3 or more of the dimensions, specifically in the area of the number of children wanted, parenting roles, and being unrealistic in their view of marriage – and being less religious (Fowers et al., 1996). The variables reported in this couple type raised some important questions for this researcher. Is religion a moderator for couples who have increased conflict or does more conflict propel couples into religion as a panacea to their problems?
Traditional couples reported themselves moderately dissatisfied and less skilled in areas such as communication and conflict resolution, thereby producing less satisfying interactions in the relationship overall. Premarital interventions in these two areas would increase the chances of these couples obtaining more marital satisfaction (Knutson & Olson, 2003). Traditional couples found challenges and disagreements in partner habits, sexual interactions, and how they spend their free time. These couples were quite religious, had a realistic view of marriage, and using the time frame of 3 years, only separate or divorce 16% of the time (Fowers et al., 1996).

This outcome raised some questions for this researcher. Could it be that sharing the same religious beliefs is a stronger connector than good communication and conflict resolution skills? Or are all three equal contributors? This would be an interesting hypothesis for a future research study.

The final category of Conflicted couples revealed dissatisfaction in all areas assessed. The low pattern of scores indicates a higher likelihood of marital discord and divorce proneness. In fact, more than half of these couples divorce or separate after three years. These couples require immediate and intensive premarital intervention, in order to have successful marital outcomes (Fowers et al., 1996).

Gottman (1993) pointed out another limitation in a study identifying the typology of five groups of couple types; data was obtained by self-reported input from couples rather than through interviews or by direct observations of interactional patterns and behaviors. Gottman believed that both methods should be combined for better outcomes.

What Factors Increase Divorce Proneness?

Divorce Proneness is defined as the “propensity to divorce and includes both a cognitive component (thinking the marriage is in trouble, considering the idea of getting a divorce) and a
component regarding actions (talking to friends or spouse about the possibility of divorce, consulting with clergy, a counselor, or an attorney, separating from the spouse, or filing a petition)” (Booth et al., 1995, p. 665). Research shows that there are many factors that contribute to an increase in divorce proneness in couples.

**Remarriage**

With the divorce rate hovering around 50% in the United States, it should be no surprise that remarriage and blended families are becoming more of the norm in today’s marriages. Research shows that remarriage is a contributor to decreased marital satisfaction and stability in the decrease of marital happiness since “about half of all marriages involve a second [or third] marriage for one or both spouses” and these marriages tend to report decreased marital quality and higher divorce rates (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, Table 145, cited in Amato et al, 2003, p. 2). It has been hypothesized that couples with multiple divorces that remarry are at an even higher risk of marital distress due to their heightened awareness of marital problems and their low tolerance to deal with any marital distress (Kurdek, 1991), as well as a breakdown in social support networks (Kurdek, 1989).

**Heterogeneous Traits: Age, Education, and Income**

Marital quality decreased and divorce proneness increased in heterogamous marriages where there was a difference in race, age, education, or religion. The converse was true as well; marital satisfaction increased in couples that shared compatible traits in these same areas. It seems that differences may cause more conflict than shared traits, which are a type of bonding glue that brings individuals closer together as a couple (Amato et al, 2003).

**Cohabitation**

The number of unrelated adults, of the opposite sex, that are living together has risen
rapidly since 1980, growing from 1.6 million to a high of 4.5 million in 1997 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000, Table 57, cited in Amato et al, 2003, p. 3). Between the years 1997-2001 68% of couples chose cohabitation over first-time marital unions delaying the onset of marriage (Copen et al, 2012). Data regarding cohabitating couples shows less happiness overall, less interaction, less sexual satisfaction than married couples (Waite & Gallagher, 2000), plus increased conflict and more divorce proneness (Amato et al., 2003). Cohabiting couples tend to have lower incomes and education, which gives them fewer choices in their living arrangements (Amato et al., 2003). Couples who expressed less religiosity and more acceptance of divorce were also more prone to cohabitate. These same couples tend to have less effective social support skills and poorer communication skills (Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002).

Another contributing factor to cohabitation is the ideals that these couples hold, which are in opposition to the traditional view of marriage as being a life-long commitment. Waite and Gallagher (2000) point out that “a desire to retain one’s autonomy—to keep a life apart—is one of the prime factors that drives individuals toward cohabitation over marriage” (p. 73). This raises the question as to how successful cohabitating individuals are in bonding as a couple when the “me” is a stronger desire than the “we.” Approaching marriage as a “try it before you buy it” mentality, leaves these couples less satisfied and in an ambiguous state of weakened commitment. Research also shows that break-ups that happen in the cohabitating state have the same psychological costs as divorce and happens more frequently than divorce: long-term cohabitating couples are rare in America (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

In a recent study by The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), findings reveal that couples that were engaged at the time of cohabitation had the same probability that their marriage would last 20 years as couples who had never cohabitated (Copen et al, 2012). This positive outcome
upends some of the findings from previous studies, which found an increase in divorce proneness for *all* cohabitating couples whether they were engaged or not. It could be that the commitment to become engaged prior to cohabitation is as strong as the commitment to marry providing that the couple is actively moving towards a marital union.

**Wives Extended Hours of Employment and Husbands Increased Share of Housework**

Research conducted between the years 1980–2000 by Amato et al., (2003) exhibited a trend toward more women entering the workplace, especially towards the year 2000. Positive outcomes were shown as resources in family income increased due to dual wage earners in the home. At the same time wives’ job demands increased, the husbands’ share of household work increased as well, which positively correlated with more marital interaction and increased marital satisfaction for wives, but negatively correlated with decreased marital satisfaction for husbands. As women shared in the financial contribution to family incomes, decision-making within the marital relationship became more equal, which also correlated with increased marital satisfaction for both sexes. Nevertheless, the change in gender roles and the husbands’ decrease in marital satisfaction due to increased share of housework produced a significant link to a rise in divorce proneness among husbands, albeit a decrease in divorce proneness for wives (Amato et al., 2003). It seems that men have found out something that women have known for a long time and that is carrying the brunt of household chores is a thankless job that demands a lot of time and effort on the part of the provider.

Traditionally, men received much of their self-esteem in the accomplishments and tasks they performed within their careers in the marketplace, whereas women were more content to assume the roles of homemakers and mothers. Shifting these gender roles creates new challenges for young couples. Thus, it is advantageous for newly married couples to pay close
attention to the equality or perceived equality in formulating roles and responsibilities within the new relationship, especially in the area of household tasks and decision-making. The opportune time to discuss gender roles within the relationship is in the premarital state prior to marriage when couples are more accommodating and open to new ideas about how the new relationship should be structured. This also gives couples a chance to discuss the type of marital relationship they would like to form, be it traditional (male is dominant decision-maker, traditional gender roles), transitional (shared roles but less equality in decision-making) or egalitarian (shared roles, shared responsibilities and shared decision-making).

**Increased Use of Technology in Young Couples**

Amato et al., (2003) found that marital conflict increased and marital interaction decreased between 1980 and 1997. This researcher hypothesized that this decrease in marital interaction may be due to the increased use of technology by the Millennials generation (ages 18–29), who use texting and social media sites like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter as their main forms of interaction. The danger for this generation is that the use of technology to maintain relationships may decrease important face-to-face communication, which expresses the nuances of body language and tone of voice that enriches and deepens romantic relationships. Add to that, our contemporary fast-paced style of life and many young couples end up fatigued with not enough time to spend with each other and too much career stress to have much energy left over for meaningful interactions.

**Poor Communication, Affective Expressions, and Problem-solving Skills**

The most frequently cited problems which couples sought therapy about were communication and conflict resolution issues, power struggles, unrealistic expectations, and sexual problems (Miller, 2003). Communication not only tops the list of problems, it is also the
most detrimental of all presenting complaints by married couples. “Even outside the clinic context, daily marital satisfaction ratings provided by couples themselves are more highly correlated with daily amounts of displeasing communication (commanding, complaining, interrupting, and dominating the conversation) than with any other type of behavior” (Smith, Vivian, & O’Leary, 1990, p. 790).

Direct causality of marital discord and marital dissatisfaction is linked to dysfunctional communication patterns, such as wives’ interrupting their husbands’ speech—even to the degree of predicting the husbands’ marital dissatisfaction up to 60 months later. Even the number of positives experienced by premarital couples in communication is predictive of marital discord up to five years later. Research outcomes showed that the quality of marital satisfaction is derived more from the affective features than the couples’ communication skills (Smith, Vivian, & O’Leary, 1990).

Bradbury and Karney (2004) studied 172 newlywed couples, where husbands and wives were observed solving problems while coding their interactions for both positive and negative skills and affect. Some of the positive attributes that couples’ offered up were disclosing feelings and desires, accepting the other’s opinions, and looking for agreeable solutions while exhibiting positive emotions such as interested listening, humor, and affection. The negative skills that couples’ employed were criticism, defensiveness, being disagreeable, and offering up negative solutions with anger or contempt.

Research outcomes also report that positive affect was shown to have a moderating effect on negative skills. This means that couples that are lacking good problem-solving skills will obtain similar marital outcomes as couples that are highly skilled, if they exhibit higher levels of humor, interest, and curiosity in their interactions. Poor skills are especially detrimental when
these positive affects are missing (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). High levels of positive skills were found to be accurate predictors of marital satisfaction. Furthermore, couples that possess high levels of negative skills and affect in combination with low levels of positive skills and affect produce faster declines in marital satisfaction in both husbands and wives (Johnson et al., 2005).

A study of 91 premarital couples by Smith, Vivian, and O’Leary (1990) showed a clear picture of how newly married couples change and adapt their affective expressions, both negatively and positively, within the first 30 months of the marriage. Outcomes reveal couples that exhibited the negative threesome of contempt, anger, and fear, all at the same time, were highly correlated with decreased marital satisfaction; yet three years later they were unrelated to marital satisfaction. Perhaps these couples realized that their negative affective expressions were not giving them what they wanted and found new ways to relate more positively towards each other. In this same study, it was also noted that the relationship of change to marital satisfaction in the first years of marriage showed an increase of stability over time, which further supports the idea that couples may be finding more positive ways of communication over the long term.

Researchers have examined the importance of the broader content of communication skills, such as active listening and problem-solving skills, however newer research has focused on specific affects underlying the couples’ communication revealing evidence that “affective features of [interspousal] communication are more indicative of the current quality of the relationship than are the actual content components of the communication” (Smith, Vivian, & O’Leary, 1990, p. 791). Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, and Thurmaier (2006) agree that, “nonverbal communication appears to be a particularly salient dimension of couples communication and might in some way indicate how an individual actually feels about a partner
or the relationship” (p. 453). Seems that our involuntary somatic responses do indeed speak louder than our words and is harder to fake or hide these types of affect. Unfortunately, much of the content of premarital preparation does not include information on what these affects are (see Table 1) nor how couples can integrate these into their relationship, and even more importantly, the consequences they will reap if they do not. This would be important content to add to all premarital interventions.

Table 1. Types of Affect during Spousal Interactions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative affect</th>
<th>Positive affect</th>
<th>Disengaged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfied</td>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upset</td>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>Sluggish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distressed</td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td>Silent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annoyed</td>
<td>At ease</td>
<td>Weary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Tired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disgusted</td>
<td>Calm</td>
<td>Sheepish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry</td>
<td>Cheerful</td>
<td>Nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Lighthearted</td>
<td>Quiescent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downhearted</td>
<td>Affectionate</td>
<td>Cruel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aroused</td>
<td>Tender</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tormented</td>
<td>Attentive</td>
<td>Stubborn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bewildered</td>
<td>Interested</td>
<td>Defensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sad</td>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fearful</td>
<td>Excited</td>
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</table>


Other studies found that even though negative affect was often positively correlated at the premarital stage, almost three years after marriage, it was negatively correlated with marital
satisfaction. Whereas negativity in affective expression has been found to decrease marital satisfaction overall, the dimension of disengagement displays different affective patterns. Initially disengagement is uncorrelated with marital satisfaction at the premarital stage, whereas at the 18- and 30-month assessment, disengagement was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction. This dimension requires much more research to understand the serious implications of disengagement. Gottman and Krokoff (1989) report, “Our major finding is that conflict engagement of a specific kind may be functional for a marriage longitudinally, but conflict that is indicative of defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal (particularly on the part of husbands) may be dysfunctional longitudinally” (as cited in Smith Vivian & O’Leary, 1990, p. 796).

Some fluctuations in these dynamics might be attributed to the couples’ idealism in the premarital stage, where negative issues and behaviors are minimized and/or overlooked so that the couple can view each other in a more positive light. As couples come to know each other more intimately, the rose-colored glasses come off and they are confronted with their partner’s true personality, behaviors, and feelings, perhaps contributing to increased dissatisfaction. Findings reveal couples that use positive expressions of affect report the highest marital satisfaction for all months in follow-up assessments.

If we understand that this area of affective expression is a direct contributor to both positive and negative marital satisfaction, it would behoove us as therapists and educators to teach couples to identify and use positive expressions rather than falling prey to the more dysfunctional expressions of negativity and disengagement. This insight is most beneficial when it is offered in the premarital stage so that couples can, first of all, identify their own patterns of affective expressions and secondly, to begin the process of change in learning to use more
positive expressions. It is also an opportune time to identify any resistance in this area, which may require more in-depth therapeutic interventions.

Complete and effective change in behaviors or affective expressions takes time and couples should be aware of the commitment it takes in the process of change. The six stages of change are: 1) precontemplation, 2) contemplation, 3) preparation, 4) action, 5) maintenance, and 6) termination (Prochaska, Norcross & Diclemente, 1994). Any one of these stages can take a year or more to be fully completed, so couples should be aware that changes begun in the premarital stage might not be completed until well into the first years of marriage.

Some studies have debated the importance of affective expression and whether being skilled in communication is a more accurate predictor of marital satisfaction. Some blame it on research methodology or the lower number of research participants but rather than joining the debate on which is most important—communication or affect—suffice it to say that both skill and affect are extremely important to couples’ interpersonal communication and both skill and affect have the potential to either contribute to marital satisfaction or to marital dissatisfaction—most likely when the ratio of positives to negatives tips the scale from functional to dysfunctional. Since communication skills and affective expressions are both learned behaviors, uncovering the source for why couples attack, withdraw, or stonewall may require a deeper investigation into family-of-origin patterns and attachment behavior styles. Again, we see another strategic intervention point for addressing potential problems at the life cycle stage of a premarital couple—interventions that pay big dividends in longer more satisfying marriages.

Couples who do not adopt more effective communication and problem-solving skills may manifest ineffective coping strategies such as avoidance, withdrawal, passive aggression or direct aggression like anger, manipulation, or control. Sadly, couples with lower marital
agreement in relationship dynamics were found to divorce more frequently within three years of their engagement than those who had higher spousal agreement (Holman, 2002).

One final contributing factor to acknowledge is that other relationships stressors, like employment regularity or chronic unemployment, may be attributed to undesirable character traits (e.g., stability versus instability) rather than affective traits. Further in-depth research exploring the interaction between personality variables and affective features would be beneficial in painting a more complete picture of how each contributes to marital dissatisfaction.

Couples’ Adaptation to Stress

When the challenges of life, work, or financial difficulties become too much to handle, many couples find that the effects of stress in other areas begin to negatively affect the marital relationship—an effect termed “stress spillover” (Neff & Broady, 2011, p. 1050). When couples spend so much time and effort towards dealing with stress, they find that they have less energy and resources to devote to the marital relationship. Theories of self-regulation come into play here as well. It is hypothesized that self-control is like a muscle—over exercise the muscle and it will become weakened through repetition. Applying this analogy to the couple, the more effort and resources the couple devotes to dealing with outside stress, the less energy they will have to resolve issues, weakening the relationship. So if your spouse is exhibiting more irritability and anger at home, stress at work might be the culprit (Neff & Broady, 2011).

Experiencing numerous stressful circumstances places increased demands upon the marriage relationship and most couples will usually respond in one of two ways to counter the stress, they will unite and face it together or they will withdraw from each other and try to cope separately. The solution that the couple chooses depends on the resources that the couple possesses. Couples who find themselves in highly stressful situations, like the death of a child or
being diagnosed with cancer, may dig deep within and find they possess the resilience, the faith, and/or the problem-solving skills to overcome the situation together. For these couples facing the stressor and overcoming it together can deepen the couple’s bond and bring them even closer together. Neff and Broady (2011) report that in these cases, positive stress can produce marital improvements and even increase future resilience within the relationship. This model of “practice makes perfect” is built upon the belief that by exercising adaptive behaviors in less stressful situations the couples’ reserve is strengthened and the ability to handle even greater stressors is increased.

Neff and Broady (2011) examined changes in stress and marital satisfaction finding that marital satisfaction decreased after spouses faced multiple high stressors and increased after periods of lower stress. Couples that faced extreme stress in the early years of marriage, showed even greater declines of marital satisfaction. “According to theories of stress inoculation, individuals who are exposed to manageable stressors and have initial resources available to help them effectively combat those stressors may become more resilient to future stress” (Neff & Broady, 2011, p. 1055). The big “if” here is that couples must have the resources (i.e., problem-solving behaviors) to cope with the stressor. Husbands and wives exhibit different gender reactions to stress. For instance, steeper declines in early marital satisfaction were found in marriages where husbands were under great stress, even though they had adequate support from their wives, whereas wives under stress who had their husbands support, showed less marital decline (Brock & Lawrence, 2009).

**Length of Marriage and Birth of First Child**

The first four years of marriage are critical years for newly married couples as these years are most susceptible to marital dissolution due to events and circumstances that produce
fluctuations in marital quality and satisfaction, such as the birth of a couple’s first child.

Bradbury and Karney (2004) conducted a 4-year longitudinal study involving newly married couples, which assessed relationship satisfaction. Couples reported in at 6-month intervals beginning shortly after marriage and continuing for four years. The chart represents the scores from a participating couple showing the upward and downward fluctuations of marital satisfaction scores over the first four years (as shown on the vertical axis in Figure 1.).

*Figure 1.*

![Marital Quality Chart](image)

*Note.* Data were collected using the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983), which yields scores that can range from 6 to 45. Higher scores reflect higher levels of marital quality. The thick vertical line marks the arrival of the couple’s first child. Copyright (2004), Wiley. Used with permission from (T. N. Bradbury and B. R. Karney, Understanding and altering the longitudinal course of marriage, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, p. 863. National Council of Family Relations).

Even normal marriages have good days and bad days and plenty of ups and downs within the relationship, all of which could affect levels of marital satisfaction. What is noteworthy for
newly married couples is the gradual downward trend that takes place over the course of four years for both husband and wife as the marriage transitions through the early years of adjustment. Kurdek (1998) utilized growth curve modeling to measure marital quality—measured as attraction to the marital relationship—and found that marital quality decreases rapidly over the first four years and then stabilizes. Another phase of accelerated decline happens around the eighth year, which is where we get the reference to the “7-year-itch” effect. The median length of marriage for most divorced couples is seven years. Kurdek’s research also found marked patterns of linear decline—equal for both partners—in marriages that ultimately dissolved (Kurdek, 1998).

On average, couples will transition into parenthood with the birth of their first child within the first four years of marriage. Though the birth of a child is a happy celebration, the transition to parenthood has been shown to be a highly stressful event producing high levels of both personal and marital stress (Kurdek, 1998). In figure 1, the chart reveals how the birth of the child increases stress spillover, which hastens decline in marital quality for both husband and wife but more so for the wife whose marital satisfaction hits the lowest point possible (Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Neff & Broady, 2011). Interestingly, couples that remained childless did not report the same declines in marital satisfaction (Shultz, Cowan & Cowan, 2006).

Schulz, Cowan, and Cowan (2006) also found similar trajectories of marital decline in couples expecting their first child, hypothesizing that marital decline may even continue after the birth of a child into the toddler years. Since most studies have focused on the months before the birth and though the first postpartum year further research on this period is needed to validate this hypothesis. Schulz, Cowan and Cowan (2006) remarks:
Despite research findings that emphasize the vulnerability of the couple relationship during the transition to parenthood and the centrality of marital quality to subsequent family relationships and children’s adaptation, systematically evaluated interventions to help couples function more optimally during the transition to parenthood are virtually nonexistent (p. 21).

Furthermore, the few programs that were instituted to help new parents adapt to the birth of a child showed that mothers maintained the same levels of marital satisfaction they had before the birth of the baby. Those mothers in comparison groups did not fare as well; their levels of marital satisfaction declined (Schulz, Cowan & Cowan, 2006).

Certainly some of the early harmonious bliss that couples experience can be attributed to the “honeymoon period” of marriage when couples’ idealism is at its highest and the reality of who they really married has not yet been revealed. But, what if these couples understood that they were up against a downward trend? How might these newly married couples change and adapt in light of this knowledge? What if there was a clear-cut strategic plan that was laid out before them with specific tasks that needed to be accomplished in order to establish a secure attachment and greater marital satisfaction? What if we were not resigned to accepting an almost 50% divorce rate and worked harder to develop community-wide strategies that would prevent marriages from dissolving. What then? Perhaps more couples would make it through the treacherous land mine of the first four years and beat the statistical odds that “about one-third of all divorces occur within the first 4 years of marriage” (Kurdek, 1991, p. 627). As educators and therapists, we need to re-envision our roles in regards to premarital and newly married couples in providing help at strategic points of intervention, by communicating the importance of the tasks
they need to accomplish as husband and wife, and to no longer blithely ignore that what we have been doing up to this point is really not working that well. It is time for a new strategy.

**Premarital Education as an Intervention Strategy**

There is much that can be done to increase the odds that newly formed marriages will have successful outcomes. This researcher believes that quality premarital enrichment programs are the first step in prevention and aid in improving marital dissatisfaction. In fact, Hawley and Olson (1995) support intervention at the critical juncture where couples are starting to adopt new roles and form fresh ways of approaching communication and problem solving since newlywed couples exhibit a stronger commitment to the relationship at this stage and are more motivated to cooperate and be forgiving of past offenses.

Rigorous intervention strategies and mentoring at key transition points in the life cycle, such as the unattached young adult to the newly married couple, could provide newlyweds with a comprehensive plan for increasing marital satisfaction, if marital educators and therapists provided such relationship education and therapeutic interventions. The efficacy of premarital preparation has been proven to improve stability and increase marital satisfaction while decreasing marital discord (Markham, Floyd, Stanley & Storaalsi, 1988), as well as being a critical preventative measure to stay the rising costs of divorce for families and society. A study on the impact of the PREPARE program for premarital couples clearly demonstrated that couples can improve their couple type—by one to two types better—as a result of taking the PREPARE couple inventory and receiving 6-8 hours of feedback and premarital education (Knutson and Olson, 2003). Silliman, Schumm & Jurich (1992) found greater benefits for premarital couples that participated in at least six to eight sessions of premarital preparation than those couples who attended fewer sessions.
There are many benefits of group premarital sessions for today’s young couples. The Millennial generation (ages 20-29) is a highly interactive cohort and tends to consult online reviews and friends before making a purchase. This bent towards increased social interaction lends itself well to group premarital as an instructional tool for this demographic. Group interaction promotes open acceptance of each member, voluntary interaction and self-disclosure at own pace, non-judgmental acceptance, increased trust between members, expressions of feelings, and honest feedback and support from members. “Within the group’s accepting climate, which focuses on interaction as the medium for growth, each couple can explore attitudes, values, expectations and self-image (Maxwell, 1971). The group norms provide each couple greater freedom to explore and modify views . . .” (as cited in Gleason & Prescott, 1977, p. 278).

Other benefits of group premarital include: 1) economies of time for therapists in meeting more than one couple at a time, 2) admission of conflicts and difficulties in the relationship by other premarital couples helps to diminish romantic idealism concerning marriage, 3) increased speed in group learning of relational skills, such as listening and empathy, which continue working after the group dissolves, 4) preference by couples for positive group learning versus a somewhat negative resistance for private counseling, 5) opportunities for couples to try on new behaviors and methods for communication and problem-solving in a safe venue, as well as observe how their fiancé interacts with others, 6) increased insight of verbal and non-verbal behaviors for each partner that are incongruent in their actions and speech and may need to be changed and, 7) groups can be a spring board for further private counseling once motivation to change is ignited in the group (Gleason & Prescott, 1977). One other benefit this researcher sees is that premarital groups give couples that are in the same life cycle stage opportunities to meet
other committed couples, in order to form new couple friendships that will be support networks after they are married.

Another usage for premarital inventories is that they can be used to predict marriages that might be more susceptible to divorce. In fact, in a follow-up study of 164 couples that had taken the PREPARE inventory three months before they married, results correlated with an 80-90% accuracy in identifying those couples who were more divorce prone and those couples who would stay happily married (Fowers & Olson, 1986). Premarital preparation has ongoing benefits for couples that go through one of these programs and is eagerly sought out by 88% of young college adults between the ages of 18-25 who view premarital preparation as being very beneficial to a healthy marriage (Fowers & Olson, 1986). Many couples gain needed insight, countering the idealism and unrealistic expectations in the relationship that is so typical of newly engaged couples. Skills training in communication and conflict resolution would be another important building block for these couples since the most frequently cited problems of couples who sought therapy were communication, conflict management, unrealistic expectations, sexual problems and power struggles (Miller, Jorgason, Sandberg & White, 2003).

Finally, premarital enrichment programs can allow couples to explore whether this is the right person for them to marry or whether the relationship needs to be dissolved before the marriage takes place. Dissolution of the relationship, while still in the engaged stage is another equally relevant intervention, which happens in 5 to 15% of couples that are engaged (Risch, et al., 2003). The old concept that marital enrichment programs are mainly for couples in trouble is being replaced by positive empowerment tracks that enable young couples to succeed. As couples practice key skills and begin to use them regularly in the relationship, their self-awareness increases and they realize that they can achieve the positive outcomes they desire.
Research supports the efficacy of premarital education; benefits are ongoing, couples enter into marriage with a stronger foundation, less risk of marital instability, and even at-risk couples improve after participation in these programs.

**Successful Intervention Curriculums**

There are numerous comprehensive, multi-item, assessment instruments available to therapists, counselors, and clergy to assess premarital couples. Two of the most widely used assessments are profiled here—PREPARE/ENRICH and PREP-M—along with a couple of other innovative programs to consider.

**PREPARE/ENRICH**

Building upon research pioneered by Burgess and Wallin (1953) and Terman (1938), Fowers and Olson (1986) attempted to formulate a model for predicting marital success by designing a premarital inventory, which prior to 2009 was entitled PREPARE. They conducted a 3-year study, using a discriminant analysis of 164 couples that took the PREPARE/ENRICH inventory during their engagement. Using the couples’ scores, Fowers and Olson were able to predict with at least 80-85% accuracy which couples were happily married versus those couples that were divorced or separated. More commonly known as PREPARE/ENRICH, PREPARE is the premarital inventory and ENRICH is the married couples checkup.

PREPARE/ENRICH is a very popular premarital program utilized by more than 50,000 clergy, therapists, and counselors nationwide in working with over 1.5 million engaged couples (Knutson & Olson, 2003). The PREPARE/ENRICH assessment consists of a 165-item inventory and can be taken online or in paper form. Results are viewed as a 26-page computer printout highlighting the strength and growth areas of the couples’ relationship and numerous other measurement scales. (See Appendix A for a detailed listing). Simple bar charts are used to
depict information in a format that is easy to understand for younger couples. The assessment can be customized for premarital or married couples and has multiple religious orientations to choose from such as Non Faith-Based, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, Jewish, and Interchurch/Interfaith versions. Additional customizations provide assessment for previous marriage, step parenting, and cohabitation. Three to four feedback sessions are recommended to go through the inventory results. The goals of the PREPARE/ENRICH program are to “build relationship skills (communication and conflict resolution) and increase insight and awareness so that couples can be more proactive in strengthening their relationships over time” (Knutson & Olson, 2003, p. 530).

**PREP-M**

PREParation for Marriage (PREP-M) is a widely applicable premarital program, which reported at least 96% accuracy and has been viewed as one of the “most comprehensive assessment of premarital factors known to predict later marital satisfaction” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006, p. 168). This assessment is given on a bubble sheet comprised of 204 questions. PREP-M measures “marital compatibility (similarity as a couple) and degree of readiness for marriage [specifically] (a) couple unity in values, attitudes, and beliefs; (b) personal readiness for marriage; (c) perception of partner readiness for marriage; and (d) couple readiness for marriage” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006, p. 176). An additional subscale not included in research parameters was “background and home environment factors” as these were factors that could not be changed (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006, p. 176).

Research on premarital program structure implied that most couples prefer conjoint (i.e., single) sessions rather than a group (i.e., 3 or more) format, however further research suggested that other formats are just as effective (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). Little or no research has
been conducted comparing the efficacy of different formats; most research focused solely on the couples’ format preference. Future research on group premarital education would be beneficial, to help identify the efficacy of the group format, and the possible savings derived from this format in both time and money for providers. It was also hypothesized that women were more interested and motivated to seek out premarital education than their male counterparts. Whereas, some women do tend to be more relational than men, this question remains to be answered in regards to which gender seeks out premarital programs.

**Marital Assessment and Preparation (MAP)**

McGeorge and Carlson (2006) reviewed all the current empirical literature and existing premarital programs and developed an intervention curriculum that combined the most effective components existing in premarital studies, meta-analyses, and other sources. From these resources, the “Marital Assessment and Preparation” (MAP) curriculum manual was created. “The goals of MAP were to improve participants’ knowledge concerning marital relationships and to teach healthy patterns of interacting that are believed to lead to improved readiness and preparation for the transition to marriage” (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006, p. 174). The MAP curriculum was divided into eight sessions and included “interactive group discussions, skills training, mini-lectures, probing questions, and dyadic experiential activities” on a wide variety of topics critical to the success of premarital couples (p. 175). It also included handouts and weekly homework assignments for the couple to complete before the next session. (See Appendix B for additional information on the content for each session).

Results from the study, which assessed the MAP curriculum and its efficacy as an intervention tool, suggests that both group and conjoint structures in premarital education are equal in producing effective results. Use of the curriculum significantly increased the couples’
“readiness for marriage” scores, as measured by the PREP-M. Results also showed that couples that participate in premarital education have greater benefits than those that have no premarital education (McGeorge & Carlson, 2006).

The more comprehensive models of prevention, such as PREPARE/ENRICH and PREP-M, have been designed with important features in mind that are useful to premarital educators, clergy, counselors, therapists, or even individuals. Both programs have been designed to assess key factors in the premarital relationship that both predict and affect marital satisfaction, as well as offering application to other groups such as married or remarried couples, dating couples, cohabitating and same-sex couples. Other features include: 1) a user-friendly format, 2) simple to administer and interpret, 3) economical cost, 4) high reliability and validity, and 5) a theoretically and empirically tested instrument that provides an abundant source of meaningful data for future research and development.

**The Marriage Checkup**

Another program of interest is “The Marriage Checkup,” which postulates that all marriages should have a yearly checkup, in order to stay healthy (Morrill, Eubanks-Fleming, Harp, Sollenberger, Darling & Cordova, 2011). This program was developed as an alternative to traditional therapy and as a way to address the numerous excuses that couples put forth as to why they do not seek help. A preventative approach like this just might seduce men to engage in marriage enrichment programs since men are especially resistant to seeking professional help thinking that they should be able to fix the relationship themselves. It also might be the vehicle by which organizations or churches can band together and form a community-wide outreach to the public promoting the benefits of premarital and marital education. After all, it is common to have a yearly medical physical, why not a yearly marriage physical?
Conclusion

Making the decision to enter into a marriage relationship is one of the most important decisions that a young adult will make in his/her lifetime and the consequences of that decision will impact them for a long time. Yet, the decision is often made with less examination than one would use in purchasing a new car. It is somewhat ironic that we require mandatory training, education, and minimum age requirements for young people to operate and drive a motor vehicle, yet there are no policies that require engaged couples to attend any sort of premarital preparation. However, in some cities like Minneapolis, the city offers incentives for premarital couples in the form of a discounted fee on the marriage license for couples that complete 12 hours of premarital education with a licensed minister or therapist. This is a forward-thinking model that other cities should take note of and work towards implementing.

Other than “safe sex” messages proffered by liberal educators, the dearth of any sort of relationship education offered in our public schools or colleges, sends a message to young adults that relationships are either not important or that they are simple enough to maintain without instructions or preparation. One could measure the success of this logic by considering that for all first-time marriages, 43% will fail within 15 years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001, as cited in Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003). Utilizing preventative psycho-educational strategies that teach relationship skills and the multiple factors that contribute to building healthy and strong interpersonal relationships should be the new norm, rather than post-marriage counseling as a divorce prevention strategy. Perhaps the current rise of cohabitating couples is, in part, due to the fear of marital failure and the reasoning of some couples that living together would circumvent or solve some of these problems prior to marriage. At the very least, by providing earlier relationship education and comprehensive marital preparation, it might just alleviate
couples’ concerns that marriage is just not meant to last that long and give them tools and strategies that will help them succeed.

It is imperative that educators and schools begin to incorporate empirically based relationship education into school curriculums—beginning in middle school. The earlier that students get the message of what healthy relationships look like, the easier it will be for them to eventually build healthy ones that last. Curriculums that deliver healthy relationship education, such as the Relationship Attachment Model (RAM) developed by Dr. Jon Van Epp of *Pick a Partner*, can serve as models for low-cost programs that schools, community organizations, and even prisons can adapt and utilize (Manning, Trella, Lyons, Gulbis and du Toit, 2008). Having the right tools and proven strategies may give couples the confidence they need to enter into romantic relationships with a positive and confident mindset, rather than being blindsided by the many challenges of marriage and giving up out of despair or by thinking they would be successful—*if* only they had a different partner.

As we move forward in both research and program development for premarital interventions, there are some challenges that need to be addressed. Unfortunately, much of the major research on marital relationships was concentrated in the years between the 1980s and the 1990s, thus the results may not accurately represent the changes that have taken place in society and within marital relationships. What was true for one generation may not be the experience of the next, since the cultural background shapes the meaning of, and the factors associated with satisfaction in marriage. Views concerning the roles of men and women in marriage have changed since our parents and grandparent’s generation. The shift from a more traditional or transitional viewpoint to a more egalitarian view of marriage is characteristic of the type of relationships that most young couples choose in today’s contemporary society. Tracking
the cultural views of marriage throughout subsequent generations becomes an important focus for future research.

In addition, most studies on marital satisfaction have paid little attention to the role that culture, ethnicity, or race plays in influencing marital experiences, despite the strong speculation that cultural background shapes the meaning of, and the factors associated with satisfaction in marriage. In fact, preliminary research suggests increased marital satisfaction in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Asian or Southern-European) attributed to the importance of family (Amato et al., 2003). Other areas overlooked in studies were race and homosexual couples: the majority of the studies had higher percentages of Caucasians and heterosexuals.

In sum, research supports the view that successful marriages are associated with positive outcomes such as strong support, communication and problem-solving skills, as well as homogeneous traits of age, education, and income. Waite and Gallagher (2000) reviewed numerous studies of marriage and found that “married couples had healthier lifestyles, lived longer, had more satisfying sex, and were wealthier than single persons” (as cited in Knutson & Olson, 2003, p. 529). Marriages that dissolve are associated with negative outcomes such as cohabitation, remarriage, heterogeneous traits such as age, education and income, as well as negative affect, poor communication and conflict resolution skills. Divorce is not the panacea for marital problems. In fact, literature suggests “unhappily married adults who divorced or separated were no happier, on average, than unhappily married adults who stayed married” (Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, & Stanley, 2002, p. 4).

Premarital education is one answer to divorce prevention that has proven both its efficacy and its value to couples. Research analysis from a study of 3,344 adults examined the association between premarital education and increased levels of marital satisfaction in the
general population. Results showed that the probability of divorce in the first five years of marriage declined by 31% for couples who use premarital education services (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). Other findings show that education and religion were two variables that increased the odds of adults utilizing premarital education. Blacks were less likely than Whites to seek out premarital services, while Latinos were more likely than Whites to do so, probably due to the Catholic Church’s strong stance towards premarital preparation. Of note is the increase in premarital education overall, from a meager 7% of couples that obtained services in the 1930s to 44% of today’s married couples (Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006). This is an encouraging trend.

Premarital education is but one step in a multi-faceted prevention strategy. Perhaps having annual marriage checkups every year, especially in the first four years, would allow couples to have multiple connection points that would make the adjustment to married life easier and more successfully. George Levinger, the marriage expert, once said, “What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility” (as cited in Markham et al., 1988, p. 211).

Successful marital outcomes take hard work, intentional effort, and increased support on the part of the couple and on society. There are to be no illusions in this task that lies before us, as so pointedly penned by journalist, Sydney J. Harris, who writes that “almost no one is foolish enough to imagine that he automatically deserves great success in any field of activity; yet almost everyone believes that he automatically deserves success in marriage” (BrainyQuote.com, 2011, n.d.).
## Appendix A
### PREPARE Premarital Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Area Assessed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>*Sharing Strength and Growth Areas</td>
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</table>
| Two    | Communication: Assertiveness and active listening,  
*Creating a wish list using assertiveness and active listening, Daily dialogue and daily compliments |
| Three  | Personal Stress Profile: *Identifying most critical issues, Balancing your priorities, Wedding stress |
| Four   | Conflict Resolution: *Ten steps for resolving conflict, How to take a time-out, Seeking and Granting Forgiveness |
| Five   | Partner Style & Habits |
| Six    | Financial Management: The challenges of money, Importance of financial goals, Budget worksheet, The meaning of money |
| Seven  | Leisure Activities: The Dating Exercise |
| Eight  | Sex and Affection: The expression of intimacy |
| Nine   | Family & Friends |
| Ten    | Relationship Roles: Sharing Roles |
| Eleven | Spiritual Beliefs: Your Spiritual Journey |
| Twelve | Children and Parenting: Couple discussion about children Planning a weekly family conference, Stepfamilies: choosing realistic expectations |
Appendix A (Continued)
PREPARE Premarital Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Area Assessed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Additional Scales Included</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Couple Typology</td>
<td>Couple Type, Strength and Growth Areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Dynamics</td>
<td>Assertiveness, Self Confidence, Avoidance, Partner</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dominance, Overall Satisfaction, Idealistic Distortion</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Personality Scales</td>
<td>Five traits: Social, Change, Organized, Pleasing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and Emotionally Steady</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Couple and Family Maps</td>
<td>Mapping your Relationship, Closeness and Flexibility</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exercises</td>
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*Six Core Exercises
## Appendix B
The MAP Premarital Education Session Objectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Session 1 | Introductions and curriculum overview  
Premarital assessment (pretest)  
Homework: Diagram relationship history documenting relationship events and feelings associated with events |
| Session 2 | Relationship history and patterns  
Identification of strengths and relationship rituals  
Relationship roles and rules  
The concept of marriage: what does it mean? What will be different in the relationship after marriage?  
What will be the same?  
Advantages and disadvantages of marriage  
Homework: Family of origin genogram |
| Session 3 | Family of origin  
Parental models of marriage  
Similarities and differences between partners’ families of origin  
Identification of relationship supporters (social support)  
Future family of procreation  
Homework: Evaluation of styles of communication |
| Session 4 | Map cycle of communication  
Communication skills  
Conflict Resolution skills |
| Session 5 | Marital roles and expectations (present & future)  
Division of Labor  
Power and control  
Homework: Creating a couple budget for today and 5 years from now |
| Session 6 | Finances and budgets  
Sexual adjustment and intimacy  
In-Laws  
Homework: Traditions and rituals |
### Appendix B (Continued)
The MAP Premarital Education Session Objectives

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Objective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 7</td>
<td>Differences and similarities between partners in terms of personalities, beliefs, and background characteristics</td>
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<td>Individual and couple expression of emotions</td>
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<td>Holidays, rituals, and traditions</td>
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<td>Homework: Love letter</td>
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<td>Session 8</td>
<td>Weddings plans</td>
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<td>Review</td>
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<td>Lingering questions</td>
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<td>Premarital Assessment (posttest)</td>
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References


