

10 Ways Couple Assessment can Improve Any Relationship Education Program

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When we describe couple assessment, we are assuming a comprehensive assessment that focuses on 15-20 major aspects of a couple's relationship with 5 to 10 questions for each major scale. Many of our studies are based on the PREPARE/ ENRICH Program or the Couple Checkup.

Assessment is a critical component of most professions, but professionals working with couples or families have often failed to take advantage of these assessments. Physicians typically run a variety of diagnostic tests before they make their final decisions on treatment. Teachers use examinations to determine a student's achievement level. Police officers use radar to determine the speed that a car is driving. Engineers use stress tests to determine whether a structure will be functional for the task.

The following are ten ways that couple assessment can increase the impact of any marriage or family education program.

1. Couple assessment can improve the impact of a couple or family program by 30%.

Several independent studies have found that just taking a couple assessment at the beginning of your program can improve the impact of a relationship education program by 30 percent.

One of the first studies to demonstrate the power of couple assessment was done by Worthington and colleagues (1995) who studied the effect of couple assessment with and without feedback. The couple assessment included the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, the PAIR Inventory and a Commitment scale. The main group received 3 sessions of assessment and feedback and the other group did the assessment without feedback.

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The assessment and feedback group improved in couple satisfaction and commitment more than just the couples who only took the assessment without feedback. Based on their findings, they concluded that 30% of the total intervention size for relationship education programs was based on the couple assessment. They stated that: *“Assessment interviews, questionnaires, and feedback may not only help couples understand their relationship better but may also stimulate couples to act to improve their relationship....assessment of the relationship may be an ideal, cost-effective way to stimulate the reflection of partners concerning their relationship”* (p. 473).

A second study by Larson (2007) and colleagues that also demonstrated the value of the RELATE couple assessment and additional benefits when a therapist gave feedback. This study involved three groups: assessment and feedback from a therapist, assessment and self directed feedback and a control group. The control showed no significant change (mean difference was .61), but both the therapist feedback group (mean difference was 4.31) and the self directed feedback (mean difference was 5.81) groups had significant change across a variety of outcome scales.

The third study by Knutson and Olson (2003) used the PREPARE couple inventory and this study also clearly demonstrated that just taking the couple assessment without feedback accounted for 30% of the improvement on the outcome measures. This study had three groups and two groups took PREPARE and one received 4 feedback sessions and the other group simply took the inventory and there was also a control group. On the marital satisfaction scale, both the PREPARE groups improved significantly, while there was no significant change in the control group. Of the 13 outcome scales, the PREPARE group with feedback changed on 10 scales (77%) and the no feedback group changed on 4 scales (30%).

In summary, these three studies all found that just taking a comprehensive couple assessment accounted for 30% of the improvement in the couple's scores. So adding a couple assessment increases the impact of any marriage or family education program.

2. Assessment provides a comprehensive picture of the couple relationship.

A good couple assessment will provide a wealth of information about a couple's relationship. As an example, the PREPARE/ENRICH assessment includes over 30 scales that tap into the most relevant aspects of a couple's relationship. There are 10 core scales that include the following: communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, role relationship, spiritual beliefs, personality issues, parenting, family & friends. There is assessment of the couple system and family system (based on cohesion and flexibility), a major stress scale and six SCOPE personality scales.

3. Assessment can help identify couple strengths as well as problems.

A major component of the PREPARE/ENRICH is that it identifies couple strengths in addition to specific relationship issues for the couple. One goal of the program is to not only identify strengths, but to help build couple strengths. Couples are often surprised to learn what strengths have been identified by the assessment.

4. Assessment stimulates discussion between the couple.

One of the interesting outcomes from couples taking a couple assessment is that it stimulates the couple to talk more directly about their relationship. Couples that return for their first feedback session often comment how they have already talked about a variety of issues that they had not discussed recently or ever. This finding is not surprising when you consider that the couple has been asked over 150 specific questions about their relationship.

5. Assessment provides surprising information about each other's perspective on the relationship.

One surprising experience for most couples is that they discover that do not agree with their partner as much as they think they do. The average correlation of the husband and wife on PREPARE/ENRICH scales is about .50. In order to determine the accuracy of predicting a partner's responses from knowing the other person, you would square the correlation between the responses. This means that if you know one person's response, only 25% of the time will be able to accurately predict their spouse's response. So most couples are seldom aware of their partner's perspectives (ideas, thoughts, feelings) as they assume. So the assessment provides a reality check and often many surprises to each person.

6. Couples like to know the results of the assessment.

One consistent finding is that couples are very curious about how well they did on the assessment. As a result, they are very interested in returning after they have taken the assessment to get feedback. They particularly like to know about their couple strengths, but are generally interested in all the feedback. Counselors have found a reduction in their dropout rates when they know that they will be receiving feedback about their couple assessment.

7. Primes couple for openness to program topics.

Because the assessment and feedback have identified areas that need further development, the couple is now more open to dealing with a variety of topics. Since many programs have experience couples not being ready to deal with important relationship issues, this priming experience motivates couples to participate more fully in the program.

8. Assessment provides an objective way to connect with each couple and men particularly like the concrete results.

One common challenge in working with couples is connecting with both partners and their relationship. A major advantage of the assessment is that it helps the professional (counselor, mentor, etc.) connect with the couple by demonstrating that they know them more personally after a short period of contact.

Another interesting outcome of providing feedback is that men particularly like the objective nature of the assessment. Men have commented that it is more relevant to them when there are quantitative scores and specific issues rather than general comments.

9. Group summary results can help a group leader tailor the program to the needs and issues of the couples.

One advantage of the Couple Checkup, which is the light version of PREPARE/ENRICH, is that the leader can obtain a Group Summary Report that provides in-depth information about the couple. The report describes the couple strengths and problematic issues for the couples in the group. In addition to summary scores, it also identifies specific items and the percentage agreement on the items. By sharing this concrete information, the couples feel that they have more in common with each other and they also feel more understood. Also, the group leader can adjust the program to

the needs of the group rather than just presenting the same program for all couples.

10. Initial assessment serves as pre-test and post-test can be used to determine impact of program.

While the initial assessment is useful for a variety of reasons previously identified for the couple, it opens the opportunity to evaluate the impact of the program by doing a post-test assessment. This can be done with the same pre-assessment or it can be done with a smaller subset of scales. Typically, the post-test is done at the end of the program and is combined with a program evaluation. Ideally, there is also a 3-6 month follow up study to examine the long term impact of the program.

References:

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