

# National Survey of Remarried Couples

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## Executive Summary

This National Survey is one of a few major studies on the strengths of marriage versus the exclusive focus on problems. Using a sample of 50, 575 premarital couples (both partners) from all 50 states, whose marriages were about to create a stepfamily, this survey used a comprehensive premarital assessment tool called PREPARE-MC which focuses on 20 significant areas and contains 195 questions.

This survey identified the *Five Keys to Intimacy*, which is made up of the top five strengths that clearly distinguish great relationships from unsatisfying ones, along with the *Top Ten Strengths of Happy versus Unhappy Couples Creating Step Families*. Using these top ten strengths, it is possible to discriminate between happy and unhappy marriages with 90% accuracy. This survey also identifies the top twelve *Remarriage Stumbling Blocks*.

The top five categories in rank order of importance were *personality, communication, conflict resolution, leisure activities, and couple flexibility*. While most past studies have identified the importance of communication and conflict resolution, the significance of couple flexibility and couple closeness identified demonstrates their growing importance in our high stress society.

Another important discovery was the role in conflict resolution in remarried couples, especially in the creation of stepfamilies. Problems arise in everyday marriage issues in addition to the various stressors of step-parenting. In healthy couples 91% resolve these problems while 84% of unhappy couples are unable to do so.

This national survey also identified twelve *Remarriage Stumbling Blocks*. Out of the 12 items, 4 deal with stepfamily concerns. The other items deal with money issues, fear of relationship failure, and resolving damages from the past. Seven of the 12 items deal with specific issues relating to the resolution of their past or the complexity of their present stepfamily.

In summary, the primary goal of this national survey is to encourage couples and professionals to focus more on the strengths of marriage, especially remarriage and the creation of stepfamilies, rather than only problems.

## **Overview of National Survey of Remarried Couples**

The primary goal of this national survey was to learn what happy remarried couples are doing correctly and what specific strengths they have as a couple. In order to empower couples, it is important to focus on the resources used by strong marriages.

This study of marital strengths is in contrast to most studies of marriage that focus on only marital problems. The national survey used the PREPARE couple inventory that assesses twenty areas of a couple's relationship. For this report, the most important areas for building strong marriages are highlighted.

### **Description of Sample:**

The total research sample is 50, 575 premarital couples from fifty states who took the PREPARE-MC couple inventory between 2006-2007. For the discriminate analysis comparing happy versus unhappy couples, the most happily married couples (15,056) and most unhappily married couples (15,433) were taken from the total sample. The middle group was excluded because one partner reported being happily married and the other reported being unhappy. A total sample of 50,379 couples was used to identify the major problematic issues for married couples.

The sample was obtained from all fifty states and the states with the largest percentage were Minnesota (11.2%), California ( 8%), Michigan (6.9%), and Texas (6.3%). Almost two-thirds (32%) of the sample were 41 years of age or older, while 15% were between 21 and 25 years of age, 17% were between 26 and 30 years and age and 18% were between 31 and 35 years of age. Another 17% were between 36 and 40 years of age; only 1% of the sample was less than 20 years of age. Eighteen percent of survey participants reported knowing their partner for less than one year, 35% reported knowing their partner for between one and two years, 22% reported know their partner for between three and four years and 26% reported knowing their partner for five or more years.

A majority (59%) of the individuals in the sample were divorced. Thirty-seven percent were never married, and 4% were widowed. While only 8% had one child, 27% had two children, 27% had three children, 17% had four children, and 20% had five or more children.

While about one-fifth of the total sample had completed high school as their highest level of education, about 40% had some college. About 19.6% of males and 20.5% of females had a four year degree and over one-sixth had a graduate or professional degree.

The majority (87%) of the sample were Caucasian, while 5% were African American, 3% were Hispanic/Latino, 3% were identified as “other”, one percent was Asian American, and two percent were mixed ethnicity. In terms of religious affiliation, a majority (44%) of the sample were Protestant. About 16% were Catholic, one percent were Jewish, and thirty-nine percent reported as “other” (a range of diverse denominations). About one fifth of the couples lived in rural areas (18%); twenty-seven percent lived in the suburbs; thirty-one percent lived in a small city, and twenty-four percent lived in a large city.

### **Survey Instrument:**

The survey instrument used was the *PREPARE–MC* (Married with Children) *Couple Inventory* developed by David Olson, David Fournier and Joan Druckman and distributed by Life Innovations. PREPARE-MC was developed as a research and counseling inventory for premarital couples. It contains 20 major categories which are assessed by 165 questions and there are also 30 background questions.

PREPARE-MC has a high degree of reliability, validity and clinical utility. It provides a comprehensive picture of “his” and “her” perspectives of the couple’s relationship and also the couple as a whole. The level of couple consensus is measured using the *Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) score* for each area of the relationship.

### **Data Analysis:**

The results from this national survey of married couples describe the characteristics that distinguish “happy” couples from “unhappy” couples. Based on their scores on a marital satisfaction scale, couples were classified as either “happily married” or “unhappily married.” There were 15,056 happily married couples and 25,433 unhappily married couples. The middle group was excluded because either their marital satisfaction scores were either both moderate or one partner was high and one was low on marital satisfaction.

Through in-depth analysis using “PREPARE” distinct differences between happily married and unhappily married couples were identified. In addition, the major issues faced by married couples are addressed.

## Five Keys to Intimacy

*A loving heart is the beginning of all knowledge.*  
—Thomas Carlyle

So why is it that some couples seem so happy, regardless of life situations, transitions, or circumstances they may encounter, and others don't? Are they simple well-matched individuals? Are they doing something different from less-happy couples? What's their secret?

Our study of over 50,000 couples revealed a list of the strengths of strong, happy re-married couples. The top five strengths that clearly distinguish great relationships from unsatisfying ones are called the Five Keys to Intimacy:

*Personality compatibility* was the area found to be most predictive of happily married couples. Happy couples are much less likely to report their partner being too controlling compared to unhappy couples (84% vs. 25%).

*Communication* was the second most important predictive area of happily married couples. The most predictive issue was whether partners agree that they are satisfied with how they talk to each other. Most (90%) happily married couples agree with this statement, whereas only 37% of unhappily married couples do so.

*Conflict resolution* was the third most important category. Happily married couples are much more likely to agree to feeling understood when discussing problems than unhappily married couples (happy 87%; unhappy 19%).

*Leisure activities* is a major component in distinguishing between happy and unhappy couples. Most happily married couples are more satisfied with the level of affection and sexuality than unhappily married couples (happy 68%; unhappy 17%). A majority (63%) of happy couples have high agreement on issues about leisure activities. Happy couples also have much higher agreement than unhappy couples on issues regarding family and friends (happy 84%; unhappy 21%), financial management (happy 85%; unhappy 43%), and spiritual beliefs (happy 85%; unhappy 40%). Table 1.1 presents the specific items that best differentiate best between happy and unhappy couples in these areas. These findings clearly demonstrate that happy couples have significantly more relationship strengths in their leisurely activities than unhappy couples.

*Couple flexibility* was the fifth most important category distinguishing happy couples from unhappy couples. Eighty-five percent of happily married couples agree they compromise when problems arise, whereas forty-four percent of unhappy couples do the same.

**Five Keys to Intimacy:  
Happy vs. Unhappy Couples**

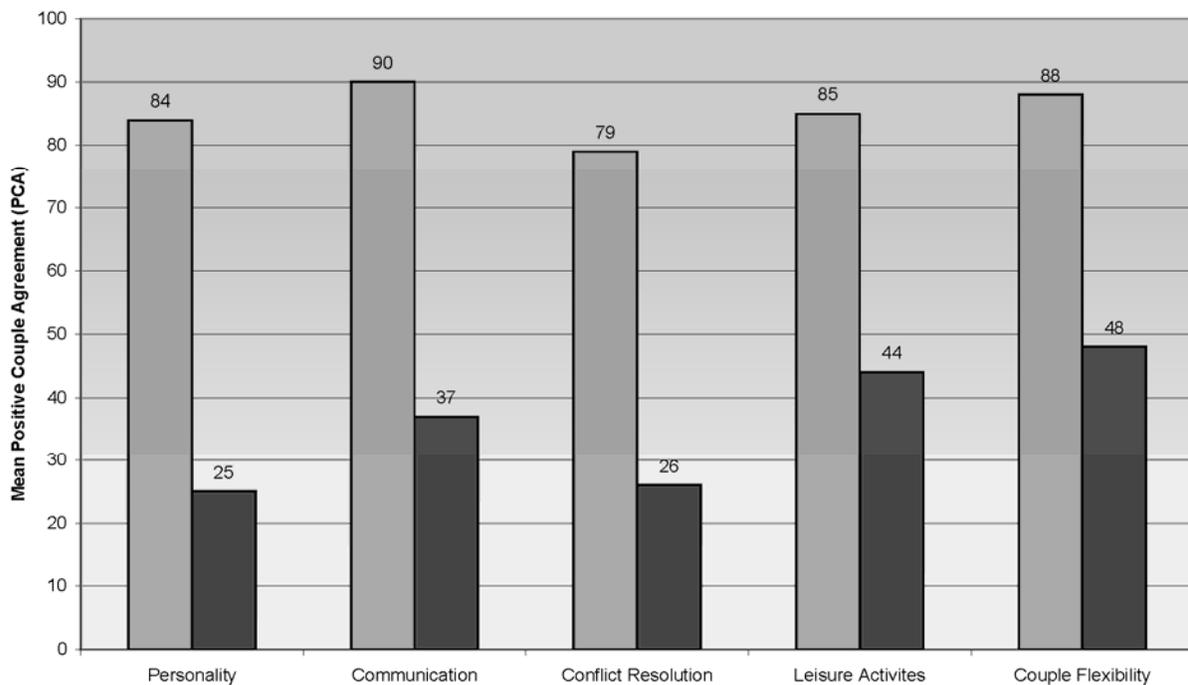


Figure 1. Five Keys to Intimacy

## **Key Strengths of Highly Satisfied Remarried Couples**

*Brief is life, but love is long.*  
—Alfred Lord Tennyson

Marriage can be the most nourishing and most enduring of human relationships. Ironically, marriage can also be the most disappointing, frustrating and conflicted of human relationships.

Given these extremes in emotions, marriage can be a source of great joy and deep pain as well as a unique combination of strength and vulnerability. Within marriage, individuals have a source of happiness and a haven from the rest of the world. But marriage can also affect partners negatively, making them feel as if they need a retreat *from* their marriage.

It was possible to predict with 90% accuracy whether a specific couple was happy or unhappy using these top ten items. Table 1.1 lists the top ten strengths

of happy versus unhappy couples creating stepfamilies based on items in PREPARE-MC using the Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) score.

**Table 1.1 Top Ten Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples Creating Step Families (PCA)**

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. We are able to resolve our differences	91%	16%
2. My partner understands how I feel	93%	21%
3. My partner's moodiness is not a problem for me	79%	12%
4. We agree on how to spend our money	80%	26%
5. We enjoy many of the same leisure activities	85%	32%
6. We are creative in handling differences	89%	44%
7. My partner does not use affection unfairly	97%	51%
8. Jealousy is not an issue in our relationship	89%	44%
9. We are satisfied with how we express our spiritual values and beliefs	88%	47%
10. We have worked out issues and hurts from past relationships	61%	21%

## Identifying and Overcoming Common Stumbling Blocks

*Learn from the mistakes of others,  
you won't live long enough to make them all yourself.*  
—Anonymous

Understanding common relationship problems can help normalize relationship experiences for couples. Unless you are a professional therapist, you are unlikely to hear about the problems that couples face and must work through in their relationship. It is much more common for couples to share with others only the positive aspects of their lives together.

To identify the most common problematic issues for couples, we analyzed the entire sample of over 50,000 couples. The analysis revealed the most common problematic relationship issues for step-couples.

The top twelve specific issues for married couples come from six general relationship categories: marriage expectations and concerns; children, parenting and step parenting; finances and debt; personality issues; conflict resolution; and communication (See Table 1.2 for specific issues).

**Table 1.2 Remarriage Stumbling Blocks** (in rank order)

Items are in rank order

1. They expect difficulty dealing with complex stepfamily issues (88%)
2. They believe having children from previous relationships will put an additional strain on their marriage (86%)
3. Creating a stepfamily puts more stress on their relationship (85%)
4. Having different patterns of childrearing in their birth family can be problematic (82%)
5. They expect stepfamily adjustment to be difficult (78%)
6. They don't have a specific plan for money management (73%)
7. They have concerns over unpaid bills, debts, or settlements (66%)
8. They feel their partner is too stubborn (65%)
9. One or both of the partners goes out of their way to avoid conflict with the other (63%)
10. They have a fear of marital failure (63%)

11. One or both partners feel responsible for the problems when they argue (61%)
12. One or both partners have not yet worked through the issues and hurts from previous relationships (58%)

It is important to notice how many of the stumbling blocks pertain to the complexity of marriage in a stepfamily and the couple's past. In all, seven of the top twelve specific issues for remarriage couples relate to the resolution of the past or the complexity of their current stepfamily. It is also worthy to note that 88% of remarried couples expect to have difficulties with stepfamily issues. Our clinical experience shows that although many couples are aware that issues within a stepfamily will be challenging in their marriage, most couples don't fully anticipate that magnitude of these stressors and often are not equipped with the knowledge to deal with them. These problems within remarriages present themselves in both happy and unhappy relationships.

## **Communication**

*"Communication works for those who work at it."*  
—John Powell

Communication has the power to bring couples together and the ability to push couples apart. The willingness and ability to communicate contribute greatly to the health and happiness of a relationship. The good news is that good communication skills are something that can be learned and improved upon.

### **Strengths of Happy Couples in Communication**

One important goal of the study is to discover the specific communication strengths that distinguish happily married and unhappily married couples (see Table 2).

The percentage of partners in happy couples who feel that their partner understands their feelings is four and a half times more than in unhappy couples. Those in satisfying relationships report that their partner sometimes makes comments that put them down much less than those who are in a struggling relationship. Critical and contemptuous messages predict with a high degree of accuracy couples who will divorce. This means that each partner must manage their speech and choose words very carefully, because while words may not break bones, they can destroy a marriage.

**Table 2 Strengths of Happy versus Unhappy Couples Regarding Communication (% Agreement)**

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
1. My partner understands how I feel	93%	21%
2. My partner makes comments that put me down	8%	64%
3. I am very satisfied with how my partner and I talk with each other	97%	45%
4. I feel good about how much my partner shares his/her feelings with me.	72%	15%
5. When we are having a problem, my partner often refuses to talk about it.	17%	74%

### **Stumbling Blocks in Healthy Communication**

*“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”*  
—Proverbs 15:1

Communication and intimacy are closely interrelated. Couples, especially unhappy spouses, are often heard to complain that, “We don’t communicate.” But it is impossible not to communicate. In fact, the absence of conversation, physical contact, smiles or self-disclosure “communicate” a lot about the feelings people have toward one another. Our survey of married couples identified specific communication issues that are problematic for married couples.

### **Making Assumptions**

One pattern couples fall into that may contribute to feelings of being misunderstood is the tendency for spouses to assume they know each other. While couples are dating, they usually ask questions and talk about their life experiences. The longer a couple is together, the more they think they know each other and begin to neglect to ask questions and continue learning about each other. The assumption that the couple knows each other well can lead to more assumptions, accusations, arguments and defensiveness.

### **Failing to Listen**

If there is one communication skill that could be considered paramount for developing and maintaining intimacy in a relationship, it would be listening. It is possible to hear but not listen. Good listening skills require patience as well as the ability to withhold judgment and spend concentrated energy trying to understand.

Listening is integral in order to relate effectively with anyone. This means that you should not be planning your response while they are speaking, or listen

while still holding onto your perspective. Effective listening requires the individual to withhold their own beliefs and prior judgments. When responding, the listener should paraphrase what they heard by relating the speaker's idea by rephrasing it and reflecting the speaker's feelings. This will minimize misunderstanding and conflict.

## **Conflict Resolution**

*The amount of conflict in a marriage only determines the speed at which the marriage is moving toward greatness or toward destruction*

—Neil Clark Warren

Author, *The Triumphant Marriage*  
Founder, eHarmony.com

The way we handle problems, more than the problems themselves, often can be the problem. Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of human relationships. Couples are going to have differences, and partnerships will not always be harmonious. And as partners become closer, these differences inevitably will cause some disagreements. However, the fact that conflict exists in intimate relationships does not necessarily mean that love is absent. In fact, conflict can be beneficial to a relationship if it is handled and resolved in a healthy way.

### **Strengths of Healthy Couples in Conflict Resolution**

Table 3 summarizes the key differences between happy and unhappy couples. The most significant item that distinguished happy and unhappy couples as they deal with conflict is whether or not the individuals feel understood when discussing problems.

Individuals in happy relationships are much more likely than those in unhappy relationships to feel understood by their partners and to feel able to share feelings and opinions during disagreements. Happy couples are also much more likely to agree that their disagreements get resolved than unhappy couples are. Finally, partners in happy couple relationships are much more likely to agree that they have similar ideas about how to resolve conflict and to take disagreements seriously.

**Table 3 Resolving Conflict:  
Healthy vs. Unhealthy Couples**

<b>Healthy Couples</b>	<b>Unhealthy Couples</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 91% resolve problems</li> <li>• Over time they weed out unhealthy parts of their relationship by dealing with issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 84% are unable to resolve problems</li> <li>• By avoiding conflict they stockpile debris in their relationship</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 95% feel understood during problem discussion</li> <li>• They have good listening skills and affirm each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 62% don't feel heard by their partner</li> <li>• The end result is feeling disconnected</li> <li>• Fears of another relationship breakup become more real</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 79% are able to keep small disagreements small</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 83% turn molehills into mountains</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 74% have unity in the process by which they tackle disagreements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 86% can't even agree on how to disagree</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 90% give serious consideration to disagreement and the need to resolve issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 44% overlook or invalidate the other's concerns</li> <li>• They don't see the potential hazards of allowing debris to build up</li> </ul>

### **Common Problems in Conflict Resolution**

*Have a heart that never hardens, and a temper that never tires,  
and a touch that never hurts*

—Charles Dickens

When you think of the word conflict, what images come to mind? Are these images positive or negative? The first obstacle in conflict resolution is probably a faulty perception of conflict itself. If two individuals immediately see conflict as negative, and therefore avoid talking about it, their relationship will suffer.

Conflict is common and it does not have to damage a relationship. Rather, problems arise when couples do not know how to manage conflict. Our national survey identified common stumbling blocks within conflict resolution.

Our national survey of 500,000 couples found that the number one stumbling block to resolving conflict is conflict avoidance. At least one partner in

nearly two-thirds (63%) of the couples in our study admitted to going out of their way to avoid conflict with their partner; this commonly leads to a buildup of debris in the relationship. Every couple has some buildup in their relationship, but when one partner habitually avoids issues with the other, they are sure to find a growing pile of debris that can be easily set ablaze by the most simple of issues. Why do people avoid conflict? In 52% of couples, at least one partner does it to avoid hurting their partner's feelings.

The second most common stumbling block for couples is one or both partners usually feeling solely responsible for the problems they argue about. The truth is both partners usually have some responsibility for conflict to a point. Resentment may begin to grow if one partner is made to feel the blame most of the time when marital conflicts become a story of "I win, you lose." Instead of feeling safe to explore the issue at hand, this dynamic sets up a competition where everyone loses in the end.

## **Parenting in Step Families**

*Although there are many trial marriages... there is no such thing as a trial child*  
 . ~Gail Sheehy

Nothing impacts a stepcouple's relationship more than the presence of their children. In all marriages (first or subsequent), the couple's relationship sets the tone for parenting. But in a remarriage when children are involved, what is equally true is that parenting sets the tone for couple happiness. For both men and women, there exists a strong correlation between couple happiness and stepfamily dynamics. In fact, stepfamily issues account for 41% of what contributes to a husband's satisfaction level in the couple relationship and 46% of a wife's satisfaction level.

For most people, their parenting style is heavily influenced by the family they grew up in. Eighty-two percent of all couples acknowledge that they were parented differently as a child than their spouse was. This can become a significant stumbling block for stepcouples unless they negotiate toward a unified position in parenting. It may be difficult to parent step-children at first because the child is so invested in their parent's original parenting style. Or, one who has been a single-parent for so long may find it difficult to release control to the stepparent, even though they want them to be included.

Five parenting strengths of happy versus unhappy couples that were found in our study are described in Table 4.

**Table 4 Parenting Strengths of Happy vs. Unhappy Couples**

	Percent of Happy Couples	Percent of Unhappy Couples
Have concerns about the kind of parent or stepparent my spouse will be.	6%	40%
Have discussed the responsibilities of raising children and stepchildren.	84%	54%
My partner's family raised children in a similar manner to mine.	69%	6%
We have agreed on how to discipline our children/stepchildren.	68%	36%
We agree on the type of religious education for our children/stepchildren.	74%	44%

### **Three Keys to Parenting in Stepfamilies**

#### ***Key 1: Biological Parents Must Pass Authority to Stepparents***

The main challenge in step-parenting is earning or building a relationship with a stepchild that affords the stepparent the necessary authority to make rules and impose consequences for disobedience. Parents pass authority to the stepparent when they make it clear to their children that the stepparent is an extension of their authority. Say something like, "I know Sarah isn't your mom, but when I am not here, she will be enforcing the household rules we have agreed on. I expect you to be courteous and respect her as you would any authority figure." This communicates your expectations clearly. Be sure then to back up the stepparent just like you would a babysitter or your child's teacher at school.

### ***Key 2: Biological Parents Should Build Trust in Stepparents***

One of the greatest barriers to entrusting your children to your spouse is a fundamental lack of trust in the stepparent's intentions. In a two-parent biological home, couples don't seem to question the motives of their spouse. Parents generally assume the best about the other biological parent's motives. Stepparents are not always granted that same benefit of the doubt.

In order to give your spouse the benefit of the doubt, you just force yourself to trust her motives. Sometimes stepparents *are* jealous, but that doesn't mean they are mean-spirited towards their step-child/children. Open yourself to the stepparent's input and trust them. Talk, listen, and negotiate.

### ***Key 3: Stepparents Should Move Into Relationship and Discipline Gradually***

Since authority is based on relationship and trust with the child, stepparents should move gradually into relationship first, then discipline. Researcher James Bray says one of the most important step-parenting skills after remarriage is monitoring the children's activities. The focus of monitoring is strengthening the relationship with the child. This involves knowing their daily routines, where they are, who they are with and what extracurricular activities they are involved in, but does not necessarily include being involved in the child's emotional life. Monitoring allows the stepparent to slowly be involved in the child's life and be able to listen to the child's level of openness. A good step-parent tries to make a connection again and again, even after many rejections.

There are two types of authority: positional authority and relational authority. Positional authority is what a boss at work has over his employees or a teacher over her students. Relational authority is more influential and difficult to obtain because it is afforded to someone who has the trust of the other. Stepparents come into the stepfamily with positional authority because they are an adult and are given the authority as any adult, teacher or neighbor would have. When the children come to care about the stepparent as a person and value their relationship, then the stepparent has gained relational authority.

### **Styles of Parenting**

Differing ideas about the best way to parent is an issue for 64% of unhappy stepcouples. It is also an issue for about one-third of happily married couples. There are five different styles of parenting: Democratic, Authoritarian, Permissive, Rejecting, and Uninvolved.

### ***Democratic Parenting***

Also known as, authoritative, the democratic parent establishes clear rules and expectations and discusses them with the child. Although they acknowledge the child's perspective, they use both reason and power to enforce their standards. On the Parenting Styles and Family map (Figure 2), democratic parenting represents a balance of closeness and flexibility. Connected parents provide loving relationships with their children and provide the child with a safe environment with unconditional support, encouragement and affection. The balanced flexibility of the home provides structure, clear expectations and limits. Research on parenting has demonstrated that more democratic parents have children who are more emotionally healthy and happy, are more successful in school and life, and have a greater value-based outlook on life. They are also self-reliant, cope with stress well, and are achievement oriented.

### ***Authoritarian Parenting***

Authoritarian parents have more rigid rules and expectations and strictly enforce them. They expect and demand obedience from their children. The authoritarian style is characterized by very structured to rigid parenting while closeness and loyalty to the family are highly demanded. It is located in the lower right quadrant of the Family Map. Children of authoritarian parents are often conflicted, irritable in behavior, moody and unhappy, vulnerable to stress, and unfriendly.

### ***Permissive Parenting***

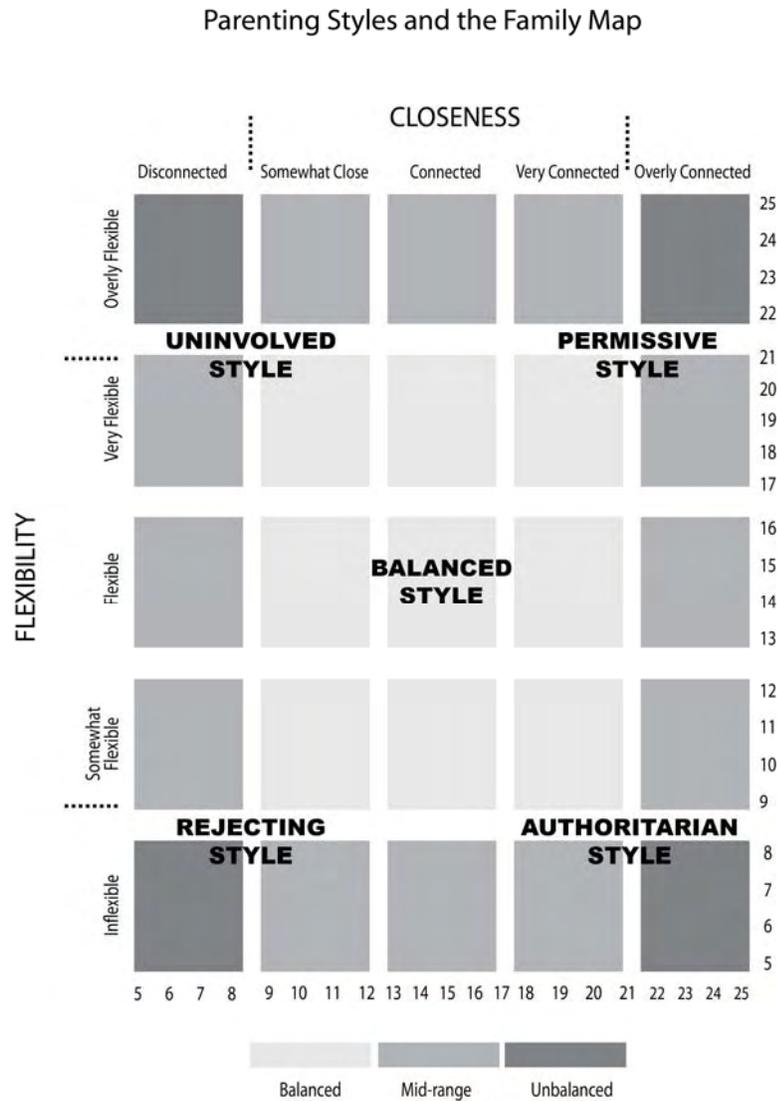
Permissive parents let the child's preferences take priority over the parents' ideals, and they rarely force the child to conform to reasonable behavioral standards. Expectations and rules are chaotic at times and are easily manipulated because these parents prefer to keep the peace with their children. A warm, affectionate friendship with the child is the number one priority with this parent, even though it results in children who are impulsive, aggressive, often rebellious, domineering, and low achievers. This parenting style is located in the upper right quadrant of the Family Map.

### ***Rejecting Parenting***

Rejecting parents do not pay much attention to their child's needs, but rather have high expectations regarding how the child should behave. These families have little emotional connection; children are unsure if they are loved due to their parents' disengaged style. This environment creates children who feel they aren't good enough. Failure comes with insecurity and shows itself in low self-esteem, immaturity, and a variety of psychological problems. This style is located in the lower left quadrant of the Family Map.

### ***Uninvolved Parenting***

Also called neglectful parenting, these parents often ignore the child, letting the child's preferences prevail as long as they do not interfere with the parents' activities. Uninvolved parents are emotionally disengaged and don't have rigid rules or expectations. Rather, they are overly flexible in their structure, leaving the child alone without consistent boundaries. These children are often withdrawn loners and low achievers. This style is located in the upper left quadrant of the Family Map



**Figure 2 Parenting Styles and Family Map**

## **Spiritual Intimacy**

*We have always been involved in spiritual evolution.  
We are spiritual beings, we have always been spiritual beings and we will  
always be spiritual beings.*

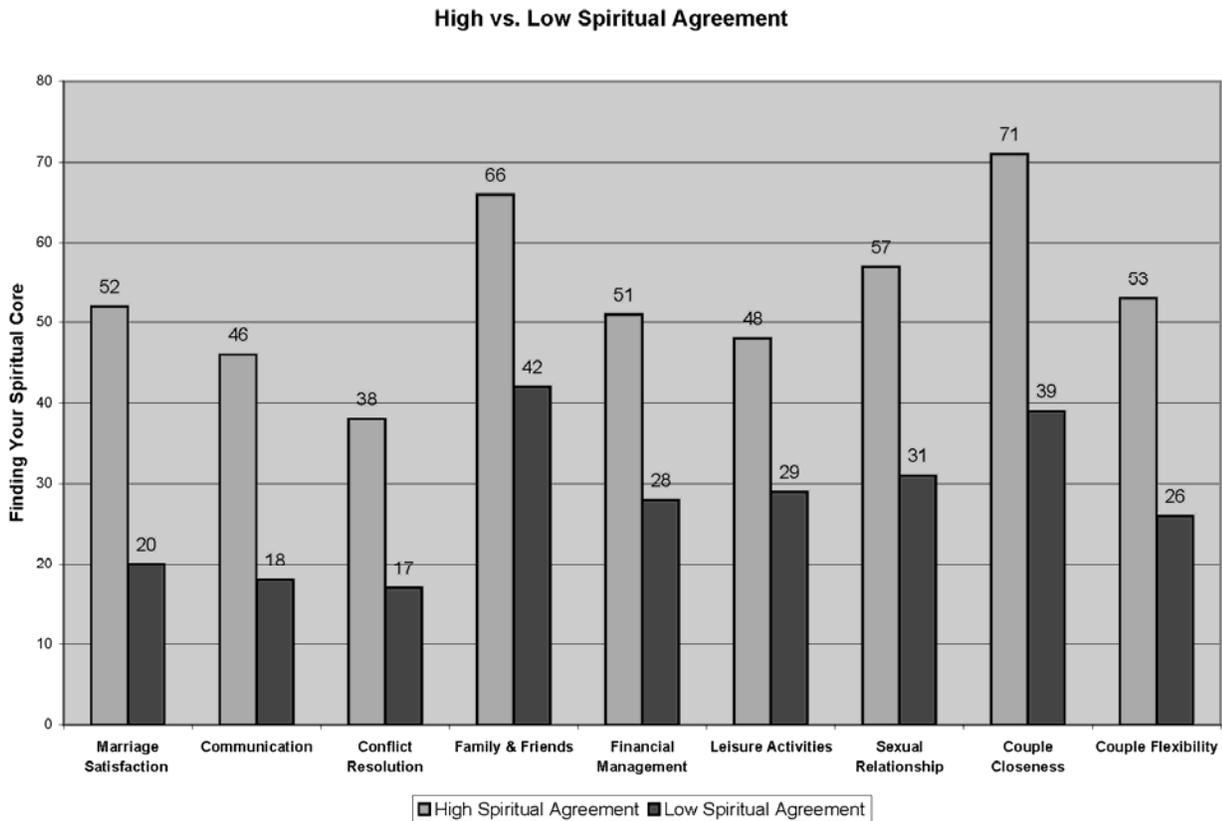
— Gary Zukav

Despite the fact that 90% of Americans pray, 60% report that religion is “very important” in their lives, and 70% claim membership in a church or synagogue, the notion that spirituality is an important aspect of marriage is growing increasingly controversial in certain circles of America. The empirical data in support of spirituality being a significant part of intimate marriage is compelling.

The most extensive series of studies on strong families conducted by Nick Stinnett, John DeFrain and their colleagues has discovered that shared spirituality is one of six qualities that are commonly present in strong families. This research spanned 25 years and included families from every U.S. state as well as 27 countries around the world. In spite of the many differences between countries and people (cultural, economic, social, etc.), spirituality consistently proves to be a significant component of happy, stable, growing families.

In 2004, Peter Larson and David Olson examined data from a study of 24,671 couples and found that couples with high agreement on spiritual beliefs were more happily married, had significantly better communication, had greater ability to resolve conflict, and felt closer in their relationship than those who did not (see Figure 3).

Our study of over 50,000 couples forming step-families found similar findings to the aforementioned studies. Couples with high shared spirituality tend to have other relationship strengths such as better communication and conflict resolution skills, fewer negative personality traits, more flexibility, and greater emotional closeness. On the other hand, those with low agreement on spiritual matters tend to have more problems in these dimensions of their relationships. High shared spirituality in remarrying couples is able to predict with 76% accuracy whether they have strong, happy relationships or fragile, unhappy ones



**Figure 3 High vs. Low Spiritual Agreement**

## Sexual Connection

*The married are those who have taken the terrible risk of intimacy and, having taken it, know life without intimacy to be impossible.*

—Carolyn Heilbrun

The sexual relationship acts as the emotional barometer for the relationship in that it can reflect a couple's satisfaction with other aspects of the relationship. A good sexual relationship is often the outcome of a good emotional relationship between the partners. Paradoxically, sex can also suppress the expression of deeper concerns and issues. This is because sex is one of the most difficult topics for individuals to discuss and to share personal feelings about.

### **Strengths of Healthy Couples Sexually**

Our research found that sexuality, including sexual expectations, affection, matters of desire, and how a couple communicates about sexuality, is the seventh most important predictor of a high-quality remarried relationship. Without

question, sex is part of a healthy relationship. But, while the sexuality scale itself proved to predict with 84% accuracy whether couples were happy or unhappy, sexuality only accounted for 13% of what contributes to a high-quality relationship.

When sex is going well, it adds excitement to marriage and acts as a regular emotional bonding agent for the couple. The surge in oxytocin in the body that occurs at orgasm stimulates feelings of affection, intimacy, and closeness between partners. Consistent mutual sexual pleasure increases bonding within the relationship. But when affection and sexuality are not functioning well, it can be a considerable drain on the marriage.

Table 5 compares the sexual connection between healthy and unhealthy couples.

**Table 5 The Sexual Connection: Healthy and Unhealthy Couples**

Healthy Couples	Unhealthy Couples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>97% agree that affection and sexuality is used fairly within the relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>49% disagree as how sexuality is used in the relationship and report that affection is sometimes used or refused unfairly</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>93% agree that they are completely satisfied with the amount of affection their partner gives them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>55% are hungry for affection from their partner</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>89% agree that their level of interest in sex is about the same</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>53% are concerned that their partner's level of interest is different from theirs</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>95% are secure in how their partner interprets affection; they aren't afraid of being misinterpreted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>38% are reluctant to be affectionate because it is often interpreted as sexual advance; the meaning of affection is unclear</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>90% don't have concerns about the previous sexual experience of their partner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>42% have concerns about how their partner's previous sexual experiences will impact their relationship</li> <li>They are four times as likely to be concerned about this than happy couples</li> </ul>

## Sexual Connection and Closeness

A clear pattern emerged in our research of healthy versus unhealthy remarried couples. Happy couples have a high degree of affection and sexual comfort with each other, including open communication regarding their expectations and issues in the relationship. Unhappy couples, however, report that affection is lacking and the meaning of sex is unclear. Sex is much more than just pleasure. It is a meaningful connection between partners that arises when they share the deepest part of themselves.

## Couple and Family Map

*In your couple relationship, you either repeat what you learned in your family or you tend to do the opposite*

—David H. Olson

The Couple and Family Map (Figure 4) helps to distinguish a couple's current relational style from 25 possible styles and it allows the couple to share how they would prefer their relational style to be. It also links them to their past by assessing the style of the family in which they grew up. This is important to know because each of us tends to gravitate toward either reproducing that style in our own marriage and family or away from it.

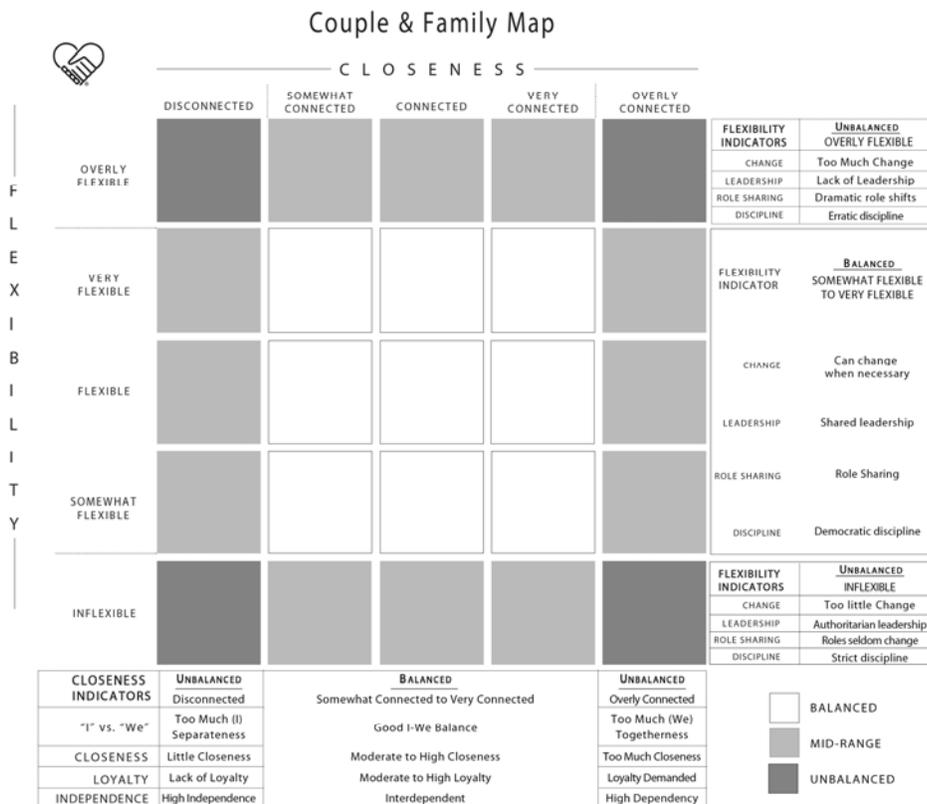


Figure 4 Couple and Family Map

## Couple and Family Closeness

Closeness refers to the level of emotional bonding in your relationship. It involves the feelings of closeness or connectedness, the action you take to be involved with each other, as well as how you balance time together and time apart. As indicated on the Couple and Family Map, the intersection of these aspects of closeness results in either a balanced or unbalanced relationship. You will also see when combined with the flexibility scale, a third type of relationship is created: mid-range.

Our study found that in strong couples, the word *closeness* is generally associated with *feeling* close to one's partner. But closeness also involves doing things together that create the feelings of closeness. Our study revealed that the contrast between happy and unhappy couples is best measured by the things couples do to create warmth and affection for each other in the relationship. At least 94% of satisfied couples have hobbies and interests that bring them together and they find it easy to think of things to do together. In addition, 94% said that togetherness was a top priority for them, revealing strong couples' intentional effort to invest in their relationship. Table 6 describes five items that discriminate happy couples from unhappy couples in terms of couple closeness.

Closeness also involves balance. Healthy relationships have a balance of time spent together and time apart. Couples have both a desire to be together and a respect for the individual interests, pursuits, and freedoms of their partner. In strong relationships, individuals place emphasis on the "self" as well as the "we."

**Table 6 Couple Closeness: Staying Connected** (% agreement)

	Happy Couples	Unhappy Couples
Jealousy is not an issue in our relationship	90.1%	52.2%
We find it easy to think of things to do together	95.1%	67.5%
We share hobbies and interests	94.3%	68%
Our togetherness is a top priority for us	94.3%	71%
We consult each other on all important decisions	97.6%	71.6%

## Couple and Family Flexibility

Flexibility refers to how open to change a couple's relationship is in the areas of leadership, relationship boundaries, roles within the marriage, and problem solving. Healthy couple relationships maintain a balance between a predictable pattern of interaction and the ability to adapt or change when circumstances call for it.

Our research discovered that a healthy dose of flexibility in the couple's relationship and individual attitudes toward the management of their family was the fifth predictor of a satisfying relationship and account for nearly 20% of what predicted a healthy, strong remarriage relationship. Table 7 illustrates the differences between Happy and Unhappy couples in terms of couple flexibility.

**Table 7 Couple Flexibility: Making Life Work**

<b>Happy Couples</b>	<b>Unhappy Couples</b>
Are creative in how they handle differences (80%) and are open to exploring new solutions with each other	Have a rigid mentality to problem solving and get stuck (72%)
Compromise and seek win-win solutions; they consider the other's opinions and are open to being influenced by the other (96%)	Seek to personally win and may fear giving the other too much control (48%)
Work together to organize their daily life, schedule, and household (84%)	Cannot seem to get organized (61%)
Work as a team to make decisions; they seek unity in leading their household (96%)	Make most decisions independently of the other (41%)