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PREPARE/ENRICH Program for Premarital and Married Couples

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The chapter details the two components of the PREPARE/ENRICH couple program: the online assessment and the relationship skill-building exercises. While this program is used with dating, engaged, and married couples, the clinical case study is that of a premarital couple. The program is designed so that it can be integrated into most other theoretical and therapeutic models for working with couples.

The fifth version of PREPARE/ENRICH, released in 2008, is called the Customized Version, since it tailors the assessment to each couple based on their responses to background questions (Olson & Larson, 2008). The Customized Version is designed for couples across various relationship stages—from premarital, cohabiting, engaged, and married—and various family structures, including those with children, stepchildren, or intergenerational issues. Based on their stage, the couple receives scales and items that are relevant for their relationship. To minimize couple collaboration in taking the assessment, the items are randomly presented to each person in a different order. After each person has completed the online assessment, the counselor can immediately view and print a comprehensive PREPARE/ENRICH Facilitator's Report (20–25 pages) on the couple relationship.

Theoretical Foundations and Assumptions of PREPARE/ENRICH

PREPARE/ENRICH is rooted in systems and multidisciplinary theories of structural theory, personality, strengths, and communication. The first component of PREPARE/ENRICH is the assessment, which measures the personality of each person, the couple's interpersonal dynamics, their couple and family system (Circumplex model), their relationship strengths, and major stressors. There are 10 core scales in PREPARE/ENRICH and they are: communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, financial management, leisure activities, affection and sexuality, family and friends, children and parenting, relationship roles, and spiritual beliefs. The individual and couple are conceptualized as mutually dependent, interactive subsystems, and the variables assessed are also considered interactive and systemically interrelated.

The second component of PREPARE/ENRICH is theoretically psycho-educational, solution-focused, and structural as it attempts to teach relationship skills the couple needs based on the assessment findings. The program contains over 20 couple exercises that teach and build relationship skills while resolving problematic issues. Each couple receives a *Couple Workbook* that contains the 20 couple exercises. The six specific goals of the couple exercises are:

1. Identifying and sharing strength and growth areas
2. Strengthening communication skills—teaching assertiveness and active listening
3. Helping the couple define and articulate what they desire for their relationship
4. Understanding couple and family systems (based on the Circumplex Model of cohesion and flexibility)
5. Identifying and resolving major stressors
6. Comparing personalities and increasing compatibility

There are several assumptions of this program that relate to how the assessment and program were developed and how it is delivered. First, it is assumed that if a couple is taught relevant relationship skills, they will be able to deal more effectively with their current and any future problems. Second, it is assumed that the PREPARE/ENRICH couple assessment will significantly increase the effectiveness of the intervention and the couple relationship. This finding is based on several studies, including one completed using PREPARE/ENRICH (Knutson & Olson, 2003), which found that the assessment increased the impact of the program by about 30%. Third, it is assumed that the impact of the assessment and exercises are systemic, so that making a positive change in any component will have an impact on the entire system. This was in fact found in the study by Knutson and Olson (2003) that used six couple exercises, but found significant improvement in 15 major areas. A similar finding was reported in a study using the RELATE Couple Inventory, where skill-based training in addition to assessment and feedback resulted in the best relationship satisfaction and skill outcome (Halford, Verner, Wilson, & Larson, 2010). Lastly, it is assumed that the program empowers couples to take greater control over their own relationship and enables them to apply these principles to help their relationship grow over time.

Case Study

Treatment Process With a Premarital Couple: Early Phase

Daniel and Maria are a typical premarital couple in that they have some strengths and some issues (growth areas), and they are quite idealistic about their relationship. The PREPARE/ENRICH couple typology showed Daniel and Maria as being a “conventional” couple (see Figure 1.1). As a conventional couple, Daniel and Maria have

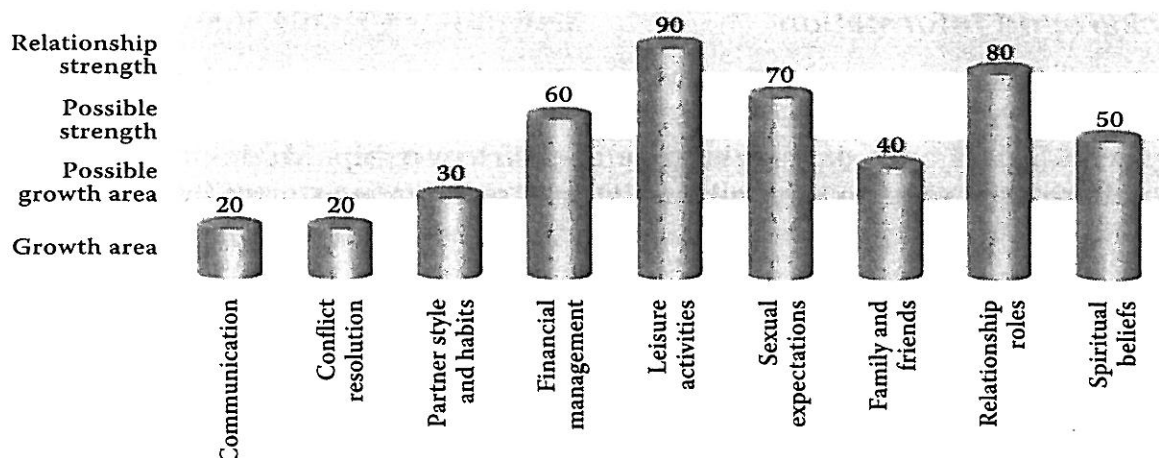


FIGURE 1.1 Conventional couple type as determined by PREPARE/ENRICH couple typology.

several strength areas, including leisure activities, relationship roles, sexual expectations, and spiritual beliefs. Their growth areas (issues) are in communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, and family and friends.

The Relationship Dynamics section of the Facilitator's Report indicated low assertiveness for Daniel and high assertiveness for Maria. Daniel also tends to minimize issues (high on avoidance) and is reluctant to deal with them directly, while Maria is generally able to identify and discuss issues they are having in their relationship. As a result, Daniel feels controlled in their lives together (high in partner dominance) and he has lower self confidence (see Figure 1.2).

The Personal Stress Profile section of the Facilitator's Report reveals Daniel's top stressors as being "current living arrangement" and "decisions about wedding details." Maria's top stressors were "financial concerns," "dealing with the wedding party," and "decisions about wedding details." Overall, Daniel reports very high levels of personal stress, and Maria reports moderate levels of personal stress.

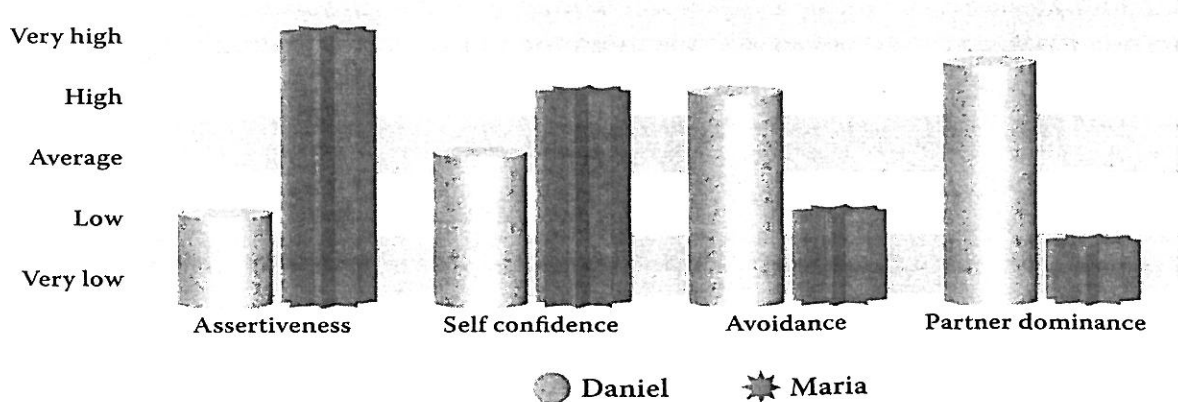


FIGURE 1.2 Relationship dynamics section of the facilitator's report.

Background Information

Daniel and Maria are both 27 years old, have known one another for 1.5 years, and have been engaged for 6 months. Maria reports having broken off the relationship with Daniel once during the time of their courtship. Maria owns a home in the suburbs and rents to a roommate; Daniel rents an apartment in a city. Daniel works as a chemistry teacher in an urban high school; Maria is completing her MBA and is employed part-time. She receives financial assistance from her parents to help with bills while she finishes school. Maria is an only child and her parents are married. Daniel's parents are divorced, and he was reared in a blended family and is the second of two biological children and has also two stepbrothers and one stepsister.

Assessment and Case Conceptualization

PREPARE/ENRICH results show relationship dynamics that may be interfering with Daniel and Maria's ability to communicate effectively and resolve conflict. Daniel's low assertiveness and Maria's high assertiveness, along with Daniel's high avoidance tendencies, may be contributing to Daniel's very high levels of stress and frustration as well as low scores in conflict resolution and communication. Maria scored considerably higher in these areas, because it is believed that her assertiveness increases the likelihood she will get what she wants. Daniel may have learned avoidance in his family of origin as a way to cope with feelings of helplessness in his family.

The SCOPE Personality scale reveals personality traits that may contribute to the stressors Daniel and Maria are currently experiencing (see Figure 1.3). Daniel scored very low on the "social" and "change" areas, but much higher than Maria in "organization" and "pleasing." These differences in personality also are reflected in how they handle stress. Maria tends to get angry, while Daniel internalizes and becomes more anxious. It is theorized that Maria's high stress over wedding planning may be due to her lower level of organization and that shifting some of these responsibilities to Daniel may alleviate stress for Maria, increase Daniel's self-confidence, and allow a space to practice communication and conflict resolution skills.

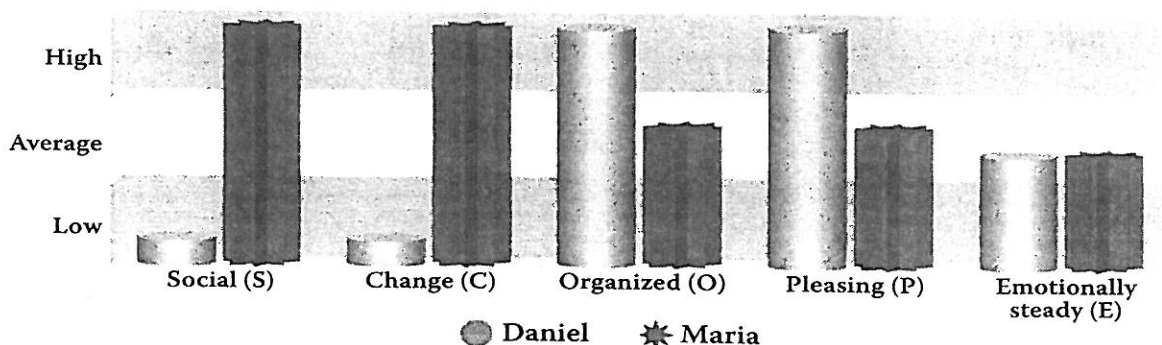


FIGURE 1.3 SCOPE Personality scale.

Major Treatment Goals Established

The first goal of therapy was to improve Daniel and Maria's communication skills, specifically his lack of assertiveness and their difficulty with active listening. The second goal was to use their improved communication skills to help them reduce some of their current stress around the wedding and new living plans. The third goal was to help them better understand the relationship between their current couple relationship and their family of origin and to help them to be more proactive about not repeating destructive patterns from their families.

Treatment Process and Strategies: Middle Phase

Daniel and Maria met with their therapist for four 90-minute sessions. During these sessions they completed the core six PREPARE/ENRICH exercises in addition to two other exercises on "stress," a "leisure" exercise, and three "financial" exercises. The exercises they completed were collaboratively determined by the therapist and the couple using PREPARE/ENRICH Report results as one data point. Daniel and Maria were given a *Couple's Workbook* (containing over 20 exercises) with additional exercises to complete on their own and with tips to continue building closeness and flexibility in their relationship.

The communication exercise (teaching assertiveness and active listening) is considered to be one of the core areas. The goal is to help Daniel gain control and structure in the relationship by expressing his feelings to Maria, particularly his negative feelings. Facilitating this process of assertiveness and active listening will allow Daniel to be heard and for Maria to demonstrate understanding. Daniel and Maria will establish goals and identify and deal with their immediate stressors using these communication skills.

During the first session, Daniel and Maria appeared hesitant, anxious, and uncomfortable. They laughed nervously when discussing their "strengths" and "growth areas," and Daniel made several jokes, perhaps in an attempt to provide comic relief. Daniel was challenged by the assertiveness exercise and used explanative comments and humor to soften the effect of his assertiveness.

Daniel and Maria completed an exercise called "creating a wish list using assertiveness and active listening." This exercise interrupts dysfunctional communication patterns by providing a new way to communicate. This process slows down communication and forces the speaker to use assertiveness and the listener to tune into both the content and feeling of the speaker's message. The therapist attends to body language and eye contact, redirecting the couple when necessary to speak to each other rather than to the therapist. Because Daniel and Maria had to attend to the structure of this new way to communicate, their behavioral sequences were altered. In the "wish list" exercise, Daniel and Maria each took turns being assertive in describing their hopes for the relationship and in being an active listener.

Transcript Segment From "Creating a Wish List" Exercise

Therapist: Let's take another wish that you would like to have happen more or less often.

Daniel: This doesn't affect us now as much as it will soon, but I wish that we could be more organized overall in our living situation, which is yet to happen.

Therapist: How would it feel if that happened?

Daniel: I would feel a little bit more at peace and I would feel less responsible for having to keep track of everything.

Therapist: Now (to Maria) share back what you heard him say.

Maria: Well, it's hard ... he didn't say that directly, but I think that it is more he wishes I were more organized because he ...

Therapist: (redirects) Talk to him.

Maria: I think that you wish I were more organized because you already are organized and I know that. So I think what you are saying is that it would improve our relationship if I were more organized ... and that would make you feel less like you kind of have to—not necessarily take care of me in that vein—but kind of keep us both organized together.

Daniel: I don't mind taking care of you, but at the same time, I hope—I wish we could find a balance between sort of the chaos that can exist sometimes for you. (chuckles)

Maria: Yeah, yeah.

Therapist: We are getting into a topic that we will explore later about how organized you each are, but I think we want to stay focused on the skill? Now have you ever talked about these topics before?

Daniel: Ah ... Yeah, I feel like for the most part the things that we're bringing up aren't a total surprise; we just haven't presented them in such a calm, direct manner as we are now. Um ...

Maria: And there are definitely things he has said that have surprised me ... just things he hasn't come out forthright and said to me. So this is opening ... windows.

Therapist: What I want to encourage you to do, because this is a skill and it's an awkward skill at first for you to learn, is to be assertive—to say what you want and that is particularly important for you, Daniel. And (looking to Maria) when you see that, not only show you understand, but praise him for doing it, because that will make it happen more often. We have found that with couples, if they are both assertive and are good at active listening, they have a better and stronger relationship. It is a skill that will help you over time get more connected and feel more connected with each other.

Couple and Family Map of Couple Relationship and Family of Origin

The therapist will identify and label patterns of homeostatic imbalance by drawing comparisons for Daniel and Maria to their families of origin. The Couple Map is a summary of how each person perceives their couple relationship, and the Family Map indicates how they each describe their family of origin (see Figure 1.4).

While Daniel describes the couple relationship as “connected” and “somewhat flexible,” Maria describes it as “very connected” and “very flexible.” Daniel reports that his family, particularly his stepfather, was very rigid and rule-oriented. On the Family Map, Daniel's family was “inflexible” and “somewhat connected.” Maria reports feeling very close to her parents and having a childhood with many opportunities,

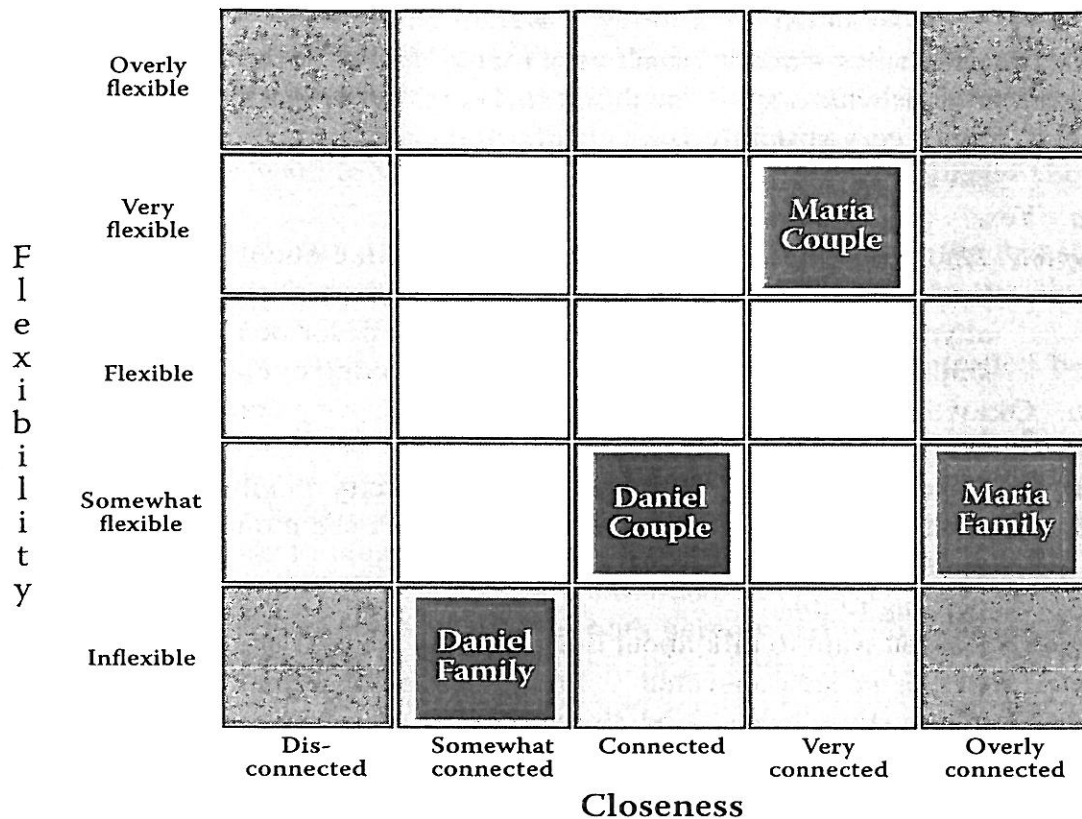


FIGURE 1.4 Couple Map and Family Map.

although she also reports feeling pressured to excel in these activities. On the Family Map, Maria's family was "overly connected" and "somewhat" flexible. Illustrative of their interaction style, when discussing the Couple Map, the therapist points out that Maria sees their couple relationship as more "flexible." Daniel, passive-aggressively (and nearly inaudibly), says, "Of course she does."

Transcript Segment From Couple and Family Map Exercise

Therapist: Now you have each described your families of origin, and we've summarized it here, and Maria, you describe your family as being very, very close.

Maria: Yes.

Daniel: (nods in agreement)

Therapist: And it kind of fits from what I'm hearing about the wedding plans and everything. And you can feel it, right?

Daniel: Yeah.

Therapist: So you like your family feeling close and connected.

Maria: I do.

Therapist: Daniel, you came from quite a different family. Your parents were divorced. Tell us a little bit more about that.

Daniel: Well, my Mom and Dad divorced when I was 12. And a lot of what I remember during my formative years is from living with my stepdad, who was

really strict. And it's funny, it was basically a very rigid environment—a lot of rules—and it wasn't very touchy-feely.

Therapist: That is what it said; you didn't feel very close emotionally, and it was very rigid, very structured, very authoritarian. So, you come from very different families.

Maria: Yes.

Therapist: And we're going to talk about what you like about your families—what you'd like to bring and what you don't want to bring. But first let's look at your couple relationship: how you each described your couple relationship. Maria, talk about how you see your couple relationship.

Maria: Okay, it got plotted out as very flexible and very connected, which I still think.

Therapist: So you feel close and you feel it is a pretty flexible relationship. Now, what's interesting, Daniel, is that you don't see it quite as flexible and not quite as close.

Daniel: According to this.

Therapist: Do you want to talk about that?

Daniel: I feel that we are connected ... I mean it changes sometimes, it's less depending on stress levels. And, but you know (pointing to the Couple Map), it's still in the white [Balanced] zone. And then in terms of the flexibility ...

Therapist: She sees it quite a bit more flexible than you do.

Daniel: (quietly) Of course she does. (then turns to Maria and laughs)

Maria: (gasps)

Therapist: Why is that?

Daniel: You know—I ... she, she gets her way a lot ... and I'm ... not ... opposed to it that much. I mean, it's easier for me to sort of ... bend on something that—just because it makes things easier and—there hasn't been anything too dire that I've had to ... fight for.

Therapist: That's how it is now. One thing we know about relationships is they change over time. And there might be a time when you don't feel so comfortable letting her take over so much. And this is saying you're feeling more controlled. And it might be that as the relationship moves forward, you might want to get more involved in making decisions, taking charge a little more. A really important question that we often ask is ... because you are not only marrying each other, you are marrying your partner's family.

Maria: Ah-ha.

Daniel: Right.

Therapist: Two questions. One is what do you each like about your own family and your partner's family that you would like to bring into your couple relationship? So let's stay with that and have each of you answer.

Maria: I think definitely the closeness of my family is something that I really cherish. And maybe not necessarily quite as intensely do we need to bring it into our relationship, but, you know, holding that as a standard, nowadays I don't think people hold that as such of a standard—staying close to your family, and that is important to me and I'd really like to bring it in.

Therapist: Daniel, how do you feel about that?

Daniel: Um, before my parent's divorce—from what I remember—it was very close. I mean, I have four siblings. I have three brothers and one sister. And it's so I know what it's like to be in a larger family and to have that bond, so I definitely appreciate that. (points toward Maria)

Therapist: So you do want to feel more connected than the kind of family you grew up in?

Daniel: Right. Though what I do appreciate from my own family is the fact that we have this large family bond and we did have freedom and the ability to make our own choices, because there were so many of us.

Therapist: You can be a little more independent; you're not so controlled by your family.

Maria: And that is one thing I do like about his family—that it's kind of ... there wasn't so much expectation put on him—or these high, high standards that he was held to that I felt that I was held to, and so I think that's a good compromise to make. That we want to stay that close but we also don't want to smother the other person and make it too much.

Therapist: You're learning something from both parents and both families that you can bring in and make a relationship that's better for you.

Daniel: And when we do have a family, I would want to have two or three children just because that is the way I know it, and it worked for me.

Therapist: Have you talked about that?

Maria: We have ... it's something ... it's hard. This goes back to something we were talking about earlier in sessions with ambition, and right now I am so career-oriented that it's hard for me to picture a family. And I grew up as an only child, and there were so many things that I got from being an only child—the extra attention, the extra parenting—that I think a lot of kids don't get, that I really liked ... so I've always pictured myself having one child, so that's something that we definitely need to talk about and figure out before we get to that point. But we definitely do want kids, which is nice.

Daniel: I always wanted to have a family, and she is the one I want to have one with.

Therapist: The other question is what do you *not* want to repeat from your family of origin; what do you not want to bring that you saw going on in your own family or your partner's family.

Therapist's Perception of Change Process Dynamics

The “wish list exercise of assertiveness and active listening skills” created meaning and order for Daniel and Maria's interactional patterns that challenged their existing unproductive patterns. This exercise involves an educational component of learning how new strategies like assertiveness lead to a better couple relationship. The structural and strategic challenge for Daniel and Maria was to reorganize their interactions and help increase their flexibility by using Daniel as a resource for organization. The goal is to increase their flexibility and repertoire of behaviors for problem resolution while decreasing Daniel's avoidance and Maria's partner-dominance tendencies.

In the Couple and Family Map exercise, Daniel and Maria were able to talk about the connection between the personal boundaries they experienced in their families of origin and the type of relationship they desire. This process also has educational as

well as strategic and structural functions, while the clinical focus remains on specific solutions. The intention of the family-of-origin assessment and discussion is to help the couple understand expectations embedded in patterns of interactions. It also helps them to be more proactive about their relationship by having them discuss what they want to repeat and not repeat from their family of origin.

Treatment Process: Late Phase

The length of therapy is determined by the specific needs and goals of a couple. Since Daniel and Maria had several relationship strengths or possible strengths, they chose to meet biweekly with their therapist for the four feedback sessions. The couple was encouraged to try out the new relationship skills they were learning and bring questions to the next session. The homework assignments were very helpful to them as they continued to deal with current relationship issues, many centering around planning their wedding and where they would live after their upcoming marriage.

At termination, they were encouraged to have a weekly meeting to discuss how their relationship was progressing. On their first wedding anniversary, they were encouraged to take the online Couple Checkup. This checkup is based on PREPARE/ENRICH, but the report goes back to the couple along with a Couple Discussion Guide to help them better process the results.

Outcome of PREPARE/ENRICH With This Couple

Daniel and Maria evolved from avoiding current issues to dealing directly with issues that were causing stress, anxiety, and frustration in their relationship. The PREPARE/ENRICH results helped them learn their strengths and understand how subverting their needs created new personal and relational challenges.

The couple exercises provided opportunities for Daniel and Maria to speak for themselves and to express their ideas without falling into their old patterns of her interruption and his avoidance. Challenging the way they related to each other allowed them to be heard and to give and accept feedback that Daniel was having a hard time previously expressing. Daniel and Maria ended up feeling more hopeful about their upcoming marriage and also more realistic about the challenges. Daniel developed confidence in allowing his voice to be heard along with an understanding of how his avoidance may increase Maria's dominance. These new experiences in relating increased the three established goals of improving communication skills (assertiveness and active listening), reducing stress, and understanding intergenerational patterns of behavior.

Conclusion

Therapist's Reflections/Commentary on the Case

PREPARE/ENRICH proved to be an efficient, reliable, and valid assessment of a wide range of interpersonal, personality, and family characteristics that were clinically

relevant. The assessment helps to illuminate the interconnection between the multifaceted aspects of the person, couple, and family systems. The Internet-based assessment is an efficient way for couples to complete the assessment from a variety of locations. One goal of the assessment is to prime the couple to talk with each other about their relationship by engaging mutual curiosity about each other's perceptions.

The semistructured couple exercises helped Daniel and Maria learn new relationship skills and become more able to talk directly with each other about their relationship. Discussion of their family of origin helped them understand how they perceive things differently and also opened a discussion about what they do and do not want to repeat in their relationship from their families of origin.

One of the strengths of the PREPARE/ENRICH program is that it is compatible with other theoretical models and therapeutic approaches. Therapists can integrate techniques and ideas from their preferred theory or integrated theory, as well as use their preferred style of interaction. For example, a rational-emotive therapist may use PREPARE/ENRICH to give more direction and education, whereas a narrative therapist may use PREPARE/ENRICH more collaboratively with a couple. A cognitive-behaviorist may use the results to focus on changing thoughts and limiting beliefs while exploring the relationship between these thoughts and the emotional experiences of a couple. A narrative therapist may use PREPARE/ENRICH as a foundation for discussion while still creating a space for new ways of thinking about issues by using techniques such as externalizing problems and exploring unique outcomes.

One potential limitation of the PREPARE/ENRICH program is that a beginning therapist might rely too heavily the computer results and not be as active in questioning and observing couple dynamics. Another limitation is that the therapist might try to only use the couple exercises in the program rather than being open to a large variety of ways to help couples deal with current relationship issues.

Implications and Training and Supervision

Training in PREPARE/ENRICH

In order to be able to use PREPARE/ENRICH with couples, a person needs to attend a one-day training session conducted by an approved seminar director. However, persons with a master's or doctoral level degree in a field of professional counseling may choose to complete the self-training program and may receive 7 CE credits upon receiving a minimum score of 70% on a post-test.

A variety of counseling training programs have integrated training on PREPARE/ENRICH into their couple programs. One reason is because they have found the assessment and relationship skill building a useful foundation for working with couples. The semistructured approach gives beginners a basic understanding of relevant concepts and issues for couples, and the exercises are useful techniques that can facilitate working with a couple. Also, using the objective summary of the couple provided by the Facilitator's Report is useful for diagnosis of strengths and growth areas (issues) as well as providing a framework for treatment planning and goal setting with a couple. In supervision situations, having a couple report gives the supervisor and the supervisee common ground to discuss clinical cases with less subjectivity than a

supervisee-generated report. It also provides a potential for assessing change related to specific goals.

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