

# Introduction to the Couple Connection Discussion Activity

By Jeremy Boden, PhD, LMFT

You might be surprised to learn that most marital dissolution and breakdown is a result of disappointment due to unmet expectations. True intimacy, then, requires that you know your partner as completely as possible—their past experiences, triumphs, challenges, goals, and current expectations. And they know yours. Therefore, when it comes to marriage, partners should go into this union with their “eyes wide open.”

Having expectations is not wrong, but problems can occur if those expectations are unrealistic or not discussed beforehand. As a therapist, researcher, and educator, I have heard too many stories from clients, research participants, and students who have discovered things about their partner that they wish they would have known *before* they got married. In other words, ignorance is *not* bliss. While surprises are often fun in romantic relationships, unexpected revelations can be harmful to marriage and are better disclosed before well before the wedding day. As such, several years ago I began “collecting” questions that I saw come up in therapy, class, my readings, or through other circumstances in my life and in the lives of others. I have spent hundreds of hours going through research literature and professional writings and have found several topics that strongly impact the marital relationship.

Before each session, you will have an opportunity to discuss your expectations and experiences related to that particular topic. One goal of this activity is to help you answer the questions, “*How well do I know my partner?*” and “*What do we expect from ourselves, each other, and our marriage?*” Dr. Jeff Larson, an excellent scholar and therapist who specialized premarital factors that predict future marital satisfaction, claims that couples who do the best are those who have a significant *depth of knowledge* about their partner as well as a *breadth of experiences* with them.<sup>1</sup> Study after study has found that the longer you know someone and the more you know about them, the greater your likelihood of future marital satisfaction.

We all have *scripts* that we have learned throughout our life that have built up our expectations. We have scripts about how money, parenting, communication, love, romance, conflict, sexuality, forgiveness, apologies, friends, work ethic, religion and on and on. You should get to know and understand your partner’s scripts. What they think and feel about all these topics. Going forward and throughout your marriage, you should set the goal to be an *expert* on your partner and their scripts. You should know each other as well as you know yourself and more about your partner than anyone else. You should know their dreams, triumphs, joys, failures, insecurities, flaws, fears, apprehensions, how they like to connect to you, hobbies, interests, trauma, life history, pet peeves, family background experiences, who they are close to and who they struggle with. You should know their medical history, sexual history, financial history, and relationship history. All this information will help you be better partners to each other and strengthen your marriage.

The research also tells us that having high expectations and positive expectations of your partner and your marriage leads to greater marital happiness. So, I hope that you are both headed into this significant commitment with a sense of optimism and excited anticipation. Marriage is a wonderful institution where some of our deepest joys and triumphs are experienced. Yet research has shown that individuals with “unrealistic” or “overly romanticized” expectations tend to struggle, and some even end their marriage when expectations are not met.

While it is impossible to anticipate and discuss every single detail in one’s life or relationship, certain areas are particularly important to discuss. It is understood that you might not be able to answer all of these question at the current stage of your relationship. It is also likely that you may have already addressed many

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<sup>1</sup> Larson, J. (2000). *Should we stay together: A scientifically proven method for evaluating your relationship and improving its chances for long-term success*. Jossey-Bass Press.

of these topics. Some questions are meant to induce discussion and others are just fun topics designed to help you simply learn more about each other.

As you go through these questions and subsequent discussion activities, I strongly recommend that you be *completely open and honest* in your responses. Anything less could (and most likely will) bring frustration later on. However, be cautious as some questions, answers, or both might bring up uncomfortable thoughts or emotions. So, prepare for some discomfort as it is possible that not all answers your partner provides will be expected or liked. At the same time, if you are not willing or ready to discuss some of these questions, you may not be ready to get married and will likely need to address your hesitancy itself. In addition, if you have any significant “secrets” that you have not yet shared with your partner, this may be the right opportunity to do so as long as you share a great amount of trust and emotional safety in your relationship. Let’s now talk about some more specifics about these discussion questions.

First, these are not necessarily “get-to-know-you” questions to be used in a budding relationship. Rather, these questions were written for those individuals who are in an established and committed relationship and have spent a significant amount of time together. It is also important that you have had some pattern of trust, openness, and honesty during your relationship. If you’ve only known your partner for a short time, be careful that you are not sugar-coating your responses for fear of rejection. At this preparing-for-marriage stage of your relationship, complete openness and honesty should be the rule. Anything less prevents emotional intimacy and limits trust.

Second, the questions in the *Couple Connection Discussion* activities should be discussed privately, in a setting where you are both comfortable sharing your thoughts. In addition, confidentiality is crucial. None of your responses should be passed on to friends or family unless there is a potential for harm to you or your partner. If any issue does arise that needs to be discussed with a person outside of the relationship, it is best if both partners agree on this and agree on whom to talk to about the issue. Perhaps your therapist or your relationship educator would be a good person to discuss any significant issues that arise.

Third, these questions are intended to make your expectations known and understood and to give you and your partner an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper, more intimate level. Also be aware that the responses you give *are not meant to create some sort of contract*. People, perspectives, circumstances, and relationships change and develop over time, and what you discuss today might change one, five, or ten years from now. However, while circumstances and opinions can change over time, your shared core beliefs won’t change drastically. Unless your partner was holding on to a significant secret before your marriage, the responses to these questions shouldn’t be used to hold your partner to any sort of standard years later in your marriage. With that said and as noted earlier, *complete openness and honesty* should be rule during this entire process of premarital preparation.

Finally, some of these questions require a deep amount of openness and vulnerability. If you do not feel emotionally (or physically) safe with your partner, please discuss this concern privately with your therapist or relationship educator or seek other professional help for yourself and/or your relationship before you increase your commitment or decide to marry. Emotionally safe relationships have the qualities of trust, forgiveness, kindness, gentleness, and love. Each of you should create a place of security and acceptance within the relationship. That doesn’t mean that you will be “okay” with or accepting of all your partner’s answers. It is possible that the answers to some questions might require you to postpone your wedding or even end the relationship. If that is the case, that is okay. It is expected, however, that you and your partner won’t criticize, belittle, or dismiss what you share.

Some couples use these questions at the end of a date as a way to relax and be together; others pull them out when they are driving to their destination or waiting for their food to arrive at a restaurant. Either way, be intentional about these discussion topics. Discussing your expectations together can be one of the most helpful strategies to deepen your love, commitment, and bond with one another.

## Our Marriage Vision

As you have initiated this intentional plan to prepare for marriage by participating in premarital education and/or counseling, it's likely that you have goals, dreams, and a general vision for your marriage. You'd likely agree that before starting any journey it's good to have a plan, a vision. Many engaged couples have a dream of living "happily ever after." Unfortunately, that dream is often shattered when couples quickly realize after the wedding reception is over and they are back from their honeymoon that happily ever after takes intentional planning, compromise, time, communication skills, effort, patience, forgiveness, and much more. As you know, life is unpredictable and full of ups and downs. Married life will be much the same. Therefore, it's important to have something that is foundational that will guide you through rough patches and keep you on target during the great times as well. I can't think of a better way for engaged couples to begin their marital journey than by developing a solid vision for their marriage.

Crafting a marriage vision invites you to be more mindful about your relationship because you can define and articulate your goals which can then create and prioritize shared purpose, shared goals, and shared direction in your marriage and foster a *team mentality*. Creating a marriage vision creates an environment where you can be *intentional* about your marriage which is a theme of this entire premarital preparation program. The vision for your marriage should be grounded in shared core values and principles such as service, honesty, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, commitment, safe communication, and/or faith. It should address several topics such as communication, emotional and mental health, finances, conflict resolution, priorities, expectations, goals, and plans for the future.

To get you talking about your shared purpose, goals, and vision, I've included some discussion questions and prompts below. After completing your *session preparation activities* for each session and after each online or in-person session with your therapist or relationship educator, I would invite you write down some "takeaways" in a section that will be provided in the workbook after each section. These notes will become content to write your Marriage Vision and Goals at the end of your journey through the *Before We Say "I Do"* program.

*For each question, read the question out loud to each other and take turns responding:*

1. In your mind, what are the *essential elements* in a healthy and satisfying marriage?
2. What are some reasons some marriages "make it" and others don't?
3. In your opinion, what is the *most significant* thing that destroys a marriage? Why do you believe this, and where do you think this belief comes from? What are the smaller steps that often lead up to this most significant thing that destroys a marriage?
4. What *personal characteristics* and *attributes* do you think are most important in a satisfying marriage?
5. When you think of the term marital team, what comes to your mind?
6. Think of two couples you know personally who you would say have a great and healthy marriage.
  - What do you see in their *relationship* that is healthy and that you would like to have in our marriage?
  - What *individual characteristics* do each of them have that contributes to their healthy relationship?

7. (Here's your chance to be a bit judge-y☺) Think of two additional couples you know personally who you'd say might not have the best marriage.
  - What do you see in their *relationship* that is perhaps problematic or unhealthy and that you'd like to avoid in our marriage?
  - What *individual characteristics* do each of them have that might contribute to some issues in their relationship?
9. What does being *romantic* mean to you? What do you expect of me when it comes to romance?
10. What does *commitment* mean to you? When someone is committed to a marriage, what would you see them doing or not doing?
11. If our relationship struggles to the point that we need outside help, would you support of couples therapy and going together?
12. Would you be open to and supportive of reading relationship books and going to relationship workshops to strengthen our relationship?
13. How are you feeling about going through this premarital preparation process (counseling and/or education)? How do you think it will help us prepare for our life together?
14. Our life together is going to get very busy (or busier). How can we maintain connection when we are in school, pursuing schooling, working long hours, busy with kids? How can we maintain that balance and make each other a priority?
15. How can we encourage and support each other in personal growth?
16. What are some of our *strengths as a couple* that we are bringing into this marriage?
17. What are some of our *personal strengths* that we are bringing into this marriage?
18. What are some of our *challenges as a couple* that we have right now and/or that we are bringing into this marriage?
19. What are some of our *personal challenges* that we have right now and/or that we are bringing into this marriage?

### **Marital Readiness, Getting Married, and Our Relationship**

1. We are going to be married soon. We will be telling our friends and family that we are committing our lives to each other. What does that feel like to you? Joyful, excited, nervous, indifferent, overwhelmed?
2. Do you feel like you can leave the dating scene at this point in your life? If yes, can you tell me more about why you believe you are ready? (If either one of you realizes that you aren't ready, it is best to meet with a mental health professional or a trusted person to discuss this issue before moving forward with the wedding.)
3. When I say, "Are you ready to take on all that marriage has to offer—the good, the great, not so good, the really hard—and to make sacrifices for each other and for the relationship, and put your whole heart into us and the growth of our relationship?" What thoughts and emotions come up for you? How would you

answer that question about being ready to take on all that marriage offers and to put in the effort and make the necessary sacrifices?

4. Do you feel like we have taken enough time in our dating relationship to really get to know each other?
5. Can you share why you want to marry me? What is it about me that “pushed you over the edge” to want to spend the rest of your life together?
6. What does love in a marriage mean to you? Based on your definition and understanding of love in a marriage, do you feel like you love me? What are the reasons you love me?
7. Thinking back to when we first met, what do you remember about me that was most attractive?
8. Your marital friendship is going to be a vital part of your relationship. There will be moments in your marriage where the love might ebb and flow and you will need to rely on your friendship. Besides our love and attraction for each other, how do you feel about our friendship?
  - Do you feel like we are good friends?
  - What about our relationship makes you feel like we are good friends?
  - What are some things that we have in common, shared interests, shared leisure activities, similar personalities traits, complementary differences?
  - Is there a difference between our friendship and the friendship you have with other people?
  - What could we do to strengthen our marital friendship?
9. As with everyone, we will get old, wrinkles will emerge, weight will shift, health will vacillate, and our physical appearance will change.
  - Do you believe that we have enough compatibility, friendship, shared interests, shared values, and attraction in *other areas besides physical* that we can sustain this relationship for the rest of our lives?
  - How can we maintain our attraction toward each other as grow old?
  - How can we best grow old together and stay in love?
10. How do you think our relationship will change after we get married?
11. What parts of our marriage do you anticipate will be the best?
12. What parts of our marriage do you anticipate might be challenging?
13. Is your family supportive of our relationship and pending marriage?
14. Even the happiest marriages take a lot of work and sacrifice. Do you feel like you are ready for the level of commitment that a marriage requires? If yes, what is it about you and our relationship that brings you to that conclusion?
15. How do you think our relationship with our mutual and/or separate friends will change after we are married? Do you expect to spend as much, more, or less time with your friends?

16. For those who will be moving in together before or after the wedding, what is it about moving in together that you are most excited for? What are you most nervous about?

- Complete this sentence: Something you should know about me before we move in together is...
- What is going to be better for us when we move in together? What is going to get more difficult?
- Are we going to pay for movers or are we going to have friends and family help us or are we just going to do it ourselves?
- Are we going to eat all our meals together? Who do you expect to do most of the cooking?
- Which one of us will be more responsible for searching, buying, and dealing with home décor or do you expect we are going to do all of that together?
- What time do you expect to go to bed and get up in the morning?
- What are your morning and nightly routines?
- What are chores you expect you will do and what chores are you expecting me to do? Are there any chores (or parental care) you *refuse* to do (e.g., mow the lawn, change a diaper, clean toilet, etc.)?
- If something needs to be fixed and neither of us know how to fix it, what options do you think we have in the first few years of our marriage? For example, hiring someone, asking a friend or family member, researching it online until we figure it out.

### **The Wedding and Honeymoon**

1. Although it may not be realistic, what would be your *dream* wedding?

2. Back to reality, what are your expectations of our wedding?

- What level of involvement do you see our parents or family having?
- What level of involvement do you see (or want) me to have in the planning?
- How many guests do each of us get to invite?
  - Is there a potential for people getting offended by not being invited?
  - How should we manage this?
- Who do you expect to be your bridesmaids and groomsmen? Is there a potential of people being offended by this?
- What is our budget for the dress, cake, reception center, catering, etc.? What financial responsibility (me, you, parents, grandparents, etc.) do you anticipate in this? Who should or will be financially responsible for each area?

3. Are you going to have a bachelor/bachelorette party?

- What are your expected boundaries related to this?

- In your opinion, what are appropriate and inappropriate activities at my party?
4. Again, it may not be in our budget or ability, but what would be your *dream* honeymoon?
- Back to reality, what are your expectations of our honeymoon?
  - Where would you like to go?
  - How long will we be gone?
  - What is our budget?
  - Would you like to do a lot of activities or just take it easy and relax most of the time?
  - How soon after the wedding would you like to leave town for our honeymoon?

### **Just for Fun** 😊

1. If you were given \$5,000 in cash and you couldn't use it to pay bills, save it, and you had to spend it on yourself, what would you buy?
2. Do you ever sing in the shower? If so, what are your go-to songs? Can you sing it for me right now?
3. Do you have any hidden talents that I'm unaware of? If so, what is (are) it (they) and why have you kept them from me this long?
4. What was your first impression of me?
5. If you could pick one age to be for the rest of your life, what would it be and why?