

# Introduction to the Couple Connection Discussion Activity

When it comes to marriage, I believe partners should go into this union with their “eyes wide open.” In order to be truly intimate with your partner, it is important that they know you as completely as possible—your past experiences, triumphs, challenges, goals, and current expectations. In fact, noted scholar and researcher, Dr. Blaine Fowers has said that most marital dissolution is a result of *disappointment due to unmet expectations*.

There is nothing wrong with having expectations, 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 you marry. 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.

As you both go through this process of preparing for marriage, before each session, you will have an opportunity to discuss your expectations and experiences related to that particular topic. This document offers you an introduction to the *Couple Connection Discussion* activities, explains their importance, and gets you started in the process of understanding one another and your relationship more in depth.

One of the goals of this activity is to help you answer the questions, “*How well do I really know my partner?*” and “*What do we expect from ourselves, each other, and our marriage?*” Dr. Jeff Larson, an excellent scholar and therapist who specializes in the area of 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. 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.

The research also tells us that having high expectations and positive expectations of your partner and your marriage leads to greater marital happiness. Consequently, I hope that you are 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. Nevertheless, 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, there are certain areas that are particularly important to discuss. Contained in this document and at the end of each essential principle is a *Couple Connection Discussion* activity that will help you discuss these areas and ask those vital questions. It is understood that you might not be able to answer all of these questions at the current stage of your relationship. It is also likely that you may have already addressed many of these topics. Some of the 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 honest* in your responses. Anything less could (and most likely will) bring frustration later on. However, be cautious as some questions and/or answers might bring up uncomfortable thoughts or emotions. Therefore, make sure you are prepared for some discomfort as it is possible that not all answers your partner provides will be to your expectations or liking. 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 in and of 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 there is a great amount of trust and emotional safety in your relationship.

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 throughout the duration of 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 stage of your relationship, where you are preparing for marriage, complete 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 in privacy and in a setting where you are both comfortable sharing your thoughts. In addition, confidentiality is crucial. None of what you share 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 another person outside of the relationship, it is best if both partners agree on this. Perhaps your therapist and/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 better and on a deeper, more intimate level. Also be aware that the responses you give are not meant to create some sort of “contract” that is now “written in stone.” People and relationships change and develop over time, and what is discussed 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.

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 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.

## **Healthy Marriage**

*For each question, read the question out loud to each other.*

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?
4. What *personal characteristics* and *attributes* do you think are most important in a satisfying marriage?
5. Can you think of two couples you know personally who you would say have a great and healthy marriage?
  - a. What is it about their *relationship* that you see as healthy and that you would like to have in our marriage?
  - b. What *individual characteristics* do each of them have that contributes to their healthy relationship?
6. What is your expectation about remembering birthdays, anniversaries, or other significant dates?
7. How do you define *love* when it comes to a romantic relationship?
8. What does being *romantic* mean to you? What are some of your expectations of me when it comes to romance?
9. Do you feel like you can leave the dating scene at this point in your life?
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 be supportive of marital therapy and going together?
12. Would you be open and supportive of reading relationship books and going to relationship workshops to strengthen our relationship?
13. How are you feeling about going to premarital counseling and education? How do you think it will be helpful as we prepare for our life together?
14. Besides our love and attraction for each other, how do you feel about our friendship?
  - a. Do you feel like we are really good friends?
  - b. Is there a difference between our friendship and the friendship you have with other people?
  - c. What are some things we could do to strengthen our marital friendship?

## **Getting Married and Our Relationship**

1. Why are we getting married? (*Note: If the primary reason is pregnancy, financial security, loneliness, to get away from your family, because all of your friends are getting married, or because of religious expectations, these are not sufficient reasons to get married.*)

2. Tell me why you want to marry me? What is it about me that “pushed you over the edge” to want to marry me?
3. Thinking back to when we first met, what do you remember about me that was most attractive?
4. How do you think our relationship will change after we get married?
5. What parts of our marriage do you anticipate will be the best?
6. What parts of our marriage do you anticipate might be challenging?
7. Is your family supportive of our relationship and pending marriage?
8. Do you feel like we have taken enough time in our dating relationship to really get to know each other?
9. 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?
10. 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?

### **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?
  - a. What level of involvement do you see our parents or family having?
  - b. What level of involvement do you see (or want) me to have in the planning?
  - c. How many guests do each of us get to invite?
    - i. Is there a potential for people getting offended by not being invited?
    - ii. How should we manage this?
  - d. Who do you expect to be your bridesmaids and groomsmen? Is there a potential of people being offended by this?
  - e. 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?
  - a. What are your expected boundaries related to this?
  - b. 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?
  - a. Back to reality, what are your expectations of our honeymoon?

- b. Where would you like to go?
- c. How long will we be gone?
- d. What is our budget?
- e. Would you like to do a lot of activities or just take it easy and relax most of the time?
- f. How soon after the wedding would you like to leave town for our honeymoon?

### **Leisure, Hobbies, and Interests**

1. What are your hobbies or interests?
2. What are your thoughts and feelings about *my* hobbies and interests?
3. How much money do you spend (or expect to spend) on your hobbies and interests?
4. Are you interested in understanding more about or participating in my hobbies?
5. What are your feelings about having separate hobbies and/or interests?
6. How often do you expect to go on a vacation?
7. How would you define a vacation?
8. If money weren't an issue, what would be your "dream" vacation?
9. Some people say that the difference between a trip and a vacation is that a vacation is just the two parents and a trip involves children. Would you agree with that?
10. What do you like to do to relax or "unwind"?
11. If you had a completely free day with no work, school, or other responsibilities, what would you do?
12. How often do you expect to watch sports?
13. How often do you play video games? Do you see yourself maintaining this level in our marriage and after we have children?
14. What things are you *passionate* about?
15. If any of your hobbies or interests begin to interfere with our ability to have time together or with our family, how do you think we should approach this issue?

Copyright © 2023 by Jeremy S. Boden, PhD, LMFT

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the author, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at [jeremysboden@gmail.com](mailto:jeremysboden@gmail.com).