

IS THERE A QUICK WAY TO IMPROVE YOUR MARRIAGE?

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In an article written by Peter J. Larson, Ph.D., Life Innovations, the company we use for our marriage preparation testing, recently published the results of work they had done with married couples. These couples had completed ENRICH, which is a version of what we use in pre-marriage counseling, but for married couples. They looked at a sample of 10,000 individuals (5,000 men and 5,000 women) who took ENRICH.

They identified and compared the top issues men and women most often highlight as concerns in their relationship. The top 5 concerns for men and women are listed below.

Top 5 issues women reported:

1. My spouse can be too stubborn
2. Some differences never seem to get resolved
3. *I wish my husband were more willing to share his feelings with me*
4. Wish Partner were less critical/negative
5. *My partner often doesn't understand how I feel*

Top 5 issues men reported:

1. My spouse can be too stubborn
2. *Difficulty dealing with partner's moodiness*
3. Some differences never seem to get resolved
4. *Serious disputes over unimportant issues*
5. Wish Partner were less critical/negative

Larson pointed out that in digesting the items on these lists, it was striking that 3 of the top 5 issues for men and women show up in both lists. Both men and women complain that their partner can be too stubborn and critical, and wish their differences could get resolved. Out of 165 items in ENRICH, men and women both gravitate towards these same areas of complaint.

Another interesting finding is what is unique on the men's and women's lists. The issues of communicating and expressing feelings emerge as clear problem areas. The women want to connect with their husbands on an emotional level (#3 and #5 of the female list), but men seem to feel overwhelmed by strong expressions of emotion and don't realize that the surface issues are often fueled by powerful underlying feelings (#2, and #4 from the male list). These findings are consistent with the research of John Gottman, Howard Markman & Scott Stanley, who are well known for their work with troubled couples.

The findings point out what the vast majority of marriage and family therapists already know: **feelings are critically important when working with couples**. There is one very powerful communication exercise that can potentially address every one of the concerns on the lists above. Based on the Rogerian ideas of being genuine, accepting, and understanding, it is an exercise that can be quickly taught to couples in 1 to 2 hours. While it often takes some practice for couples to become proficient, when the technique is mastered, amazing things begin to happen in relationships.

It's hard to be stubborn and critical when you're working on being accepting and understanding your partner's feelings. Men begin to understand their partner's moods and the *important* feelings that fuel the "unimportant issues". Women begin to connect with their partner on an emotional level, feeling genuinely understood. And since a large percentage of conflict is based in misunderstanding, many issues begin to get resolved.

This aspect of communication is a feature of both our marriage preparation program and of the marriage enrichment work being done here at Church of the Holy Communion in the workshops that are offered and on occasion. Check the current issue of *Make the Connection* for dates or click on the website under Relationship Ministries to find dates for these experiences.