

# You're In Love (*But Will It Last?*)

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By Liz Brody

***More than a Million couples have taken a Compatibility Test to find out if they are marriage material. Should You?***

Why are these couches so uncomfortable? If I sit back into the pillows, my legs stick out like kabob skewers. If I scoot forward so my feet touch the floor, I'm going to have bad body language (anxious, overeager, needy). My boyfriend, Jamie (not his real name) sits next to me, oblivious to my geometric quandary. But I can sense his mind fidgeting. Yep, it's that kind of couch: We're looking smack into the eyes of a therapist.

This is nothing short of a miracle. I've managed to drag Jamie here only by saying we are going to take a compatibility test; most men I know will avoid therapy at all costs.

Our therapist, Leslie Quinn, M.F.C.C., doesn't do me any favors when she begins by clarifying that we actually aren't taking a test. **PREPARE** (*short for Pre-Marital Personal Relationship Evaluation*), she explains, is an "inventory" or tool, for marriage-minded partners. There are not right or wrong answers. You can't pass or fail. But, as Quinn puts it, Jamie and I still are in the "rose-colored glasses" phase of your relationship PREPARE will give us a peek at life on the other side of "I do," including what issues are likely to provoke disagreements, how we'll have trouble dealing with them and why we might be incompatible in the first place.

As she hands us two clipboards with pencils, she directs us toward separate rooms. My stomach suddenly knots up. Why cut this honeymoon short?

## **Prenuptial Disagreements**

If you're heading for the altar, you may as well stop by divorce court first. Odds are 50-50 that's where you'll end up, according to data for the 1994 National Center for Health statistics, which indicates that for every two couples who marry, one will call it quits. Or you could try to better the odds for yourself by taking PREPARE. The brainchild of David H. Olson, Ph.D., professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul, PREPARE is a sophisticated questionnaire that evolved from a research project some 20 years ago. "*Back then,*" says Olson, "*if there was any marriage preparation at all, it was done in large lecture groups. But people*

*said, 'This doesn't apply to me.' So we developed a couples questionnaire that directly asked each partner how they communicate, resolve conflict, enjoy their sexual relationship.... We found it got couples talking right away about difficult issues."*

Further research indicated that couples get more out of the inventory when it is accompanied by feedback, so Olson designed PREPARE to be given with three to six follow-up sessions to discuss the results and work on relationship skills.

Over the years, the PREPARE inventory has gone through several revisions. According to two follow-up studies on 343 couples, it determined with 80-85 percent accuracy who would be happily married and who would be divorced within three years. "If you followed the couples longer, [the accuracy rate] could be higher," says Olson, who has been happily married for 16 years. *"This data not only tells us that PREPARE is working well, [but also that] what goes on early in the relationship predicts what will happen later. Love will not conquer."*

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Liz Mohler, a 31-year-old career counselor who took PREPARE before marrying Dan four years ago, says: *"Certainly the whole thing was a reality check. It brought to light important issues and sort of exaggerated the fact that marriage is work."* One issue that came up for the Mohlers during counseling was the subject of children. Dan, an advertising executive who is six years older than Liz, was ready to have kids, and lots of them. Liz, still feeling footloose and fancy-free, was thinking maybe two at the most, but later. *"We had to disagree on the number of children and when to have them,"* she says, *"and then to compromise."* It must have worked. They recently had a baby boy and plan to have at least one more child.

At the Mohlers' parish, St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, PREPARE is not an option: It's a requirement for any one who wants to get married there. This is true for a growing number of synagogues and churches in all denominations. Even civil magistrates are following suit. In June, Lewanee County in Michigan became the first community in which some of the area's judges refuse to perform any wedding until the bride and groom complete a pre-marital inventory and attend counseling sessions. (County offices refer couples to religious or psychological counselors who administer the inventory.)

## The Score

Couples who take PREPARE respond to 165 statements- such as *"Sometimes I am concerned about my partner's temper"*, or *"My partner and I sometimes disagree regarding our interest in sex"*, by choosing from five options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The topics include both the practical (handling money, family roles, raising children, work and leisure, spiritual and religious beliefs, sex and affection) and the emotional (communication, intimacy, resolving conflict).

PREPARE's survey also includes 30 background questions asking about the family in which you grew up and what you want to bring from these early experiences to your current relationship.

Completed inventories are scored and analyzed by computer, producing a 15-page report for the counselor. Depending on a number of factors, couples fall into one of four categories, which pinpoint the strong and weak aspects of their relationship. One factor included in the analysis is how positively the partners agree with each other. *"Despite the myth that opposites attract, if there's one element psychological research has contributed, it's that similarities are what attract and keep people together,"* say Jeffrey Tirengel, Psy.D., M.P.H., a Los Angeles psychologist who teaches at the California School of Professional Psychology and uses PREPARE in his private practice. *"When people have views that are similar to your own, you're likely to like them."*

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Beyond positive agreement, the scores suggest how well couples communicate and solve problems together. Ultimately, say experts, even when two people disagree on a large number of issues, they still can be compatible if they are willing to discuss the issues productively.

*"PREPARE immediately puts a wealth of diagnostic data at my fingertips,"* says the Rev. James Newman, the Mohlers' pastor at St. Bede's Church, who has been using PREPARE for 19 years. *"Do high scores indicate everything is fine? No. Human beings are all wild cards that are so complex. You can't just say, 'If this happens, that will happen.' Getting a definite answer about something as amorphous as a relationship is impossible."*

In fact, PREPARE is not intended to give marriage the green or red light. *"Ethically and professionally, I can't give a couple that kind of feedback,"* says Geoffry White, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Los Angeles. *"If the Scores were poor, I would tell*

*them, 'From the way this looks, the two of you are facing a lot of obstacles, and it would not be advisable to get married until you've made progress in these areas.' I would also quote research, saying: 'The issues you're concerned about now will not get better [by themselves]. They will get worse.'*"

### **Incompatible???**

About 10-15 percent of the couples who take PREPARE decide to postpone or cancel the wedding. Jack, a patient of White's wishes he had been among that percentage. *"Now that my wife and I are separated,"* says the 32-year-old landscape architect, *"I went back and looked at our PREPARE results. It was a trip. The very things we split up over were identified on the survey."*

The PREPARE results showed that Jack had come from a very close family, while hers hadn't talked to one another in eight years. *"That should have been the first clue,"* Jack says, *"but I was in love, right?"* After they got married, Jack says his wife depended on him to meet all her needs, seeking extreme closeness to compensate for what was lacking elsewhere in her life. Jack, who was fulfilled by his family, work and friends, found her neediness smothering. *"The survey kind of pointed to this,"* he says. *"But at the time, we were both looking for reasons to get married. We focused on the good things and thought, 'We'll work on the others.' Now I would probably say, 'Let's work on those things first and put the wedding off.' It's a lot cheaper than what I'm going through right now, emotionally and financially."*

The most common incompatibilities, according to Olson and others, are in the areas of communication, conflict resolution and money. The first two problems are the very issues that keep therapists in business. As for the money issue, Olson says: *"Premarital couples typically don't talk about their financial situation. Then, after they get married, they start fighting about it. We think it's important to talk about these things before marriage, because then you have a better chance for getting off to a good start."*

Indeed, the whole idea behind taking a relationship inventory is to put potential issues on the table before the stakes are raised by "till death do you part."

*"One of the big problems among couples is they're afraid to ask each other questions. They want the relationship so badly, they don't want to find anything negative that suggests it may not work out,"* says Mary Ann Bartusis, M.D., author of ***Off to a Good Start: A Guide for Engaged Couples and Newlyweds of All Ages*** (Donald I. Fine, 1991), who lives in Las Vegas, the quickie-marriage capital of the world. *"They find this person who has some of the qualities they're looking for and fantasize the rest. After they get married...surprise!"*

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### **To Take or Not to Take?**

Though many experts support PREPARE, at least in concept, some question the way it's administered. As it stands, anyone who completes an eight-hour workshop is eligible to offer the inventory and counseling to couples. *"I think potentially that [the PREPARE program] may be very destructive for a relationship,"* says Ann Turkel, M.D., assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons in New York City and a psychoanalyst. *"You need a competently trained person, an experience person, who can interpret and convey the results. The computer is not a therapist, and neither is someone who has minimal training."*

But PREPARE advocates counter that this is not rocket science, or any kind of science, for that matter. Lay people who administer PREPARE say their own experiences give them a lot to offer. *"If you've been married 20 or 30 years, you've got some common sense and life stories to share with a younger couple,"* says Michael McManus, author of *Marriage Savers: Helping Your Friends and Family Avoid Divorce* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1995). McManus, along with his wife, Harriet, is one of the many lay "mentors" to offer PREPARE.

Whether you work with a member of the clergy, a psychologist or a mentor, you should look for someone with whom you feel comfortable when sharing your innermost thoughts. At your church or synagogue, PREPARE is likely to be free except for the \$30 computer-analysis charge; a professional therapist could cost you \$30-\$700. *"Every engaged couple thinks they don't need it,"* say McManus. *"Every married couple thinks they did."*

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### **Settling Our Score**

As Jamie and I return to Quinn's office two weeks after taking PREPARE, it feels as if we're shopping for a down parka in the dog days of August. It's weird to go for counseling when we don't have any problems yet.

Once we're settled on the couch, Quinn begins with the good news. She says according to the results, our "**strength areas**" are communication, conflict resolution and sex – at least that's how we both have rated our relationship. But we also scored very high on something called idealistic distortion. *"Right now, everything is rosy, and you tend to minimize problems,"* she says, *"which is normal. But you're not prepared for challenges. My job is to help you get ready."*

After giving us each a "**Building a Strong Marriage**" workbook, she biopsies a piece of our conversation to show that we actually aren't communicating as well as we thought. *"Jamie, you didn't really listen to what she said. You just went ahead and told her your feelings."* He's startled. After a long moment, he says, *"You're right."* I'm equally startled. I do that to him all the time, and worse.

The wind knocked a bit out of our sails, we brace ourselves for what in the positive parlance of the trade are called "**growth areas**," e.g., problems. One of them, Quinn says, is personality issues. Temper is mentioned. So is humor. And teasing. After Quinn suggests that we communicate more directly, Jamie counters: *"We can't go around all the time talking like therapists. Otherwise, we'll take all the fun out of life."*

Which is perhaps what prompts her to conclude, *"I don't think you two are ready for marriage yet."* She goes on to say that we have a high degree of compatibility and strength in areas that tend to be good predictors of success. But she thinks we still are in the honeymoon phase of our relationship and perhaps should take more time before making a lifetime commitment.

*"There were some useful points,"* Jamie says later. *"I walked away realizing that I don't listen enough to you."* And, really, that's worth all the tea in China. But hey, check back with me in a few years.

- Liz Brody