

## Take a couple's checkup: Assessments measure key factors for healthy relationships

By Edward M. Eveld, (Biloxi, MS) Sun Herald Mar. 12, 2009

Being one half of a couple puts us in harm's way. How are you faring?

Tending to the health of your intimate relationship is not only the purview of advice columns and amusing magazine quizzes. It's a serious endeavor. And an evolving one. Assessment is the key.

Taking a formal assessment of a relationship, often with a counselor or minister, used to be for engaged and married couples. Now, experts say, best to start earlier than that.

Couples often are in the "dating" stage of their relationships much longer than in the past. And individuals in loving relationships sooner or later - often sooner - are emotionally dangerous to each other. (Cruel irony, of course.) This universal circumstance requires action, not despair.

An assessment can provide a heads-up: information that can prevent pain and even a breakup.

"Inevitably there's a betrayal, big or small," said Larry Ro-Trock, a psychologist and marriage and family therapist in Kansas City, Kan., who has been working with couples for 25 years. "There's this sense when you look at the other person, he or she isn't the person you thought they were."

So, how to test the health of your relationship and find out areas of conflict or concern? Assessments usually take the form of an inventory of statements answered separately by you and your partner. Some of these assessment questions can be found on the Web.

"We've brought out a new dating assessment," said Peter J. Larson, clinical psychologist and president of Life Innovations Inc., which creates research-based programs for couples. "We see the case for seriously dating couples to take an assessment before they get engaged."

"You want to see how your relationship is measuring up compared with a healthy standard," he said, "and to understand where you're headed."

Ideally, Larson said, assessments are analyzed with the help of a trained counselor, clergy member or therapist. But some couples aren't comfortable with that or prefer to start the process on their own. So his company offers the "Couple Checkup" online.

Larson said this "over-the-counter approach" provides a report that compares a couple's

responses with those of 100,000 others. Also, just sitting together and talking it over will be enlightening, he said.

The assessment examines personality traits plus relationship topics such as communication and financial and sexual issues. There's also a new focus on "closeness" or "connection."

The matter of how well a couple communicates has long been considered a crucial component of healthy relationships. Experts are now finding that how close and connected they feel is also critical, including how well they balance their time together and time apart.

As for gauging personality, couples are not always aware of the extent of their differences, don't talk about them or figure there's room for change - usually, for the other person to change.

"What we know about personality is that it's probably not going to change," Larson said. "You need to work with and embrace one another's personality."

The assessments are helpful, but they're not perfect predictors, Larson said. His company's premarital assessment predicts marriage success with 80 percent accuracy.

"But that means it misses 20 percent of the time," he said. "We want to say, 'Here's the data. Make the best choices you can.'"

Ro-Trock said early assessment makes sense because patterns are formed in the first year or two of a relationship that play out for a lifetime. And couples often concoct "toxic cures" for their problems: accusation, avoidance, overreaction, underreaction, blaming, coercion.

Recognize any of those?

Ro-Trock recalled one couple who, through assessment and counseling, confronted divergent ideas about family closeness, which they had drawn from the families they grew up in.

"Their personal histories were quite different," Ro-Trock said. "One family valued a lot of connection, the other valued independence. He loved to talk to his dad every day, she found that smothering."

Is the other person too needy, too cold? It's a potential conflict and source of hard feelings that can be worked out, he said. How much time would they spend with their families, an issue that would grow larger if they had children? What about their own time together?

"The differences are still there," Ro-Trock said. "But knowing about this took the intensity out of it. They were less reactive to it."

Relationships can be complementary or symmetrical, he said. That is, "you complete me" or "we're completely compatible." Both can work. Either way, couples must understand and prepare for the coming disappointments and hurt.

"There's such a vulnerability about loving someone," he said.

## **PROGRESS REPORT**

Tracy Hull is 28, works for a Kansas City nonprofit and is pursuing a second college degree full time.

Beau Graves is 30 and in his second year of law school at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

They met on the online dating site match.com in November. Hull was still in her three-day trial period. After a flurry of e-mails, they met for real Nov. 29. Things seemed right, right from the start.

"If this doesn't work, I don't know what would," Hull remembered thinking.

Both were in "serious dating" mode. Graves had experienced the breakup of a six-year relationship and was ready to move forward.

"I made a lot of mistakes in that relationship," he said, "so I kind of had an understanding of who I am and what I needed to work on in the next relationship."

Their first few dates weren't dates so much as hanging out together, studying for semester exams side by side.

"There was this feeling of security, of lovingness," she said. "But we also found things we perceived differently."

And so, 2 months into their relationship, we asked Hull and Graves to try the do-it-yourself, online assessment ...

We paid the \$30 fee. They each spent about 15 minutes responding to the inventory of more than 100 statements. The result was a 19-page report highlighting their areas of strength and those termed "growth areas."

Overall, the checkup rated the couple as "vitalized," meaning that most areas of their relationship were strong. "Vitalized" is the highest of four ratings. "Conflicted" is the lowest.

Communication was a strength area. One growth area, according to the report, was "conflict resolution."

"We have different perspectives on how things are solved, so we've been talking about that," Hull said.

He likes a quick resolution and worries that working too hard or too long on a conflict serves to deepen it, which could threaten the relationship. She doesn't share that worry and wants him to understand that working through a conflict, however long it takes, is no threat to them as a couple.

"The cool thing is that our communication skills are so strong, we can use that to get us through," Hull said.

The report pointed out other areas for discussion, including:

## **SLEEP HABITS**

He's a night owl, even a "wee hours of the morning" owl.

She keeps a more traditional schedule, earlier to bed and up before 7 a.m.

"We talked about, 'How do we turn this into a potential strength?'" Hull said.

The solution, they decided, was partly practical, partly attitude adjustment. She would go to bed when she needed to, and he would use that time as his personal time. She would do the same with her mornings.

"We cherish the time we do have together," she said. "So we turned the lens a little bit on what we were seeing as a conflict."

## **FINANCES**

She likes to plan. "I've already been in all the financial trouble I want to be in."

He thinks caution can be overrated. "I'm not very good with money at all."

For now, their finances aren't combined, but they know that ironing out money matters is important long term.

In all, the checkup was more confirmation than surprise, they said, but they thought it was helpful even for their healthy relationship.

"It's a good tool because it's a way to bring up these conversations," she said.

"If you're able to be completely honest when you take the test," he said, "I think it shines a light. It's a good first step."

**ON THE WEB** We suggest you take the "Couple Checkup" at [www.everymarriagematters.org](http://www.everymarriagematters.org) and then encourage seriously dating, engaged, and married couples you influence to do the same.