FINDING
STRENGTHS
AND
WEAKNESSES
BEFORE MARRIAGE

Using the RELATionship Evaluation
by Thomas B. Holman and Lisa B. Hawkins

IN AN IDEAL WORLD, EVERY COUPLE WOULD SPEND CONSIDERABLE TIME EVALUATING THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP. THE MOVIE FANTASY OF A WHIRLWIND COURTSHIP AND SPECTACULAR WEDDING IS ACCOMPANIED BY HOPES FOR A LONG AND WONDERFUL MARRIAGE.

But we know that, however spectacular the wedding, some marriages are anything but "happily ever after." If only someone could help couples understand which relationships would result in long, happy marriages. Researchers have been trying to find a way to make that prediction for more than sixty years.

Now, dating, engaged, and married couples can learn more about their relationships by means of pre-marriage counseling and by filling out a questionnaire, such as PREPARE (available through Life Innovations in Minneapolis) or FOCCUS (developed by the Catholic Archdiocese of Omaha). The questionnaire we have worked with is called RELATE (short for RELATionship Evaluation),¹ and was designed to assess important areas that a couple can discuss as similarities and differences. Those areas are (1) personality characteristics and values, (2) amount of support for the relationship from family and friends, (3)
communication and conflict-resolution skills within the relationship, and (4) family background.

Earlier generations of couples may have wondered if an evaluation like RELATE could provide any meaningful information about a relationship. But young people today—many of them children of divorced parents—want guidance before they make the commitment to marriage. As an example, unmarried cohabitation, or "living together," increased from half a million adults in the United States in 1960 to more than four million adults in the United States in 1998. People sometimes believe that living together before marriage is an "audition," a way to avoid an unhappy marriage and perhaps divorce. However, there is strong evidence that those who live together before marriage increase their chances of a later divorce.

Others have sought to provide help to a growing pre-marriage movement. Marriage therapists, family life educators, clergy, and others are working to create counseling practices, information, and workshops for engaged couples. State legislatures are providing incentives for or requiring premarital education. Family scholars are working to create pre-marriage assessments that will allow couples to make informed decisions about their similarities and differences, often as part of pre-marriage counseling.

RELATE provides more information for couples to evaluate than any other comparable instrument. RELATE is a 271-item survey, taken separately by each individual. It is easy to take, with detailed instructions to walk the taker through the evaluation. Most people complete RELATE in about an hour. Currently, about four thousand people take RELATE each year.

The RELATE Report, which is created from each person's responses, comprises twenty pages of computer-generated charts, graphs, and explanations that can be easily understood. The report gives information on strengths and weaknesses in more than sixty areas of a couple's relationship.

RELATE is not designed to tell couples how their relationship will turn out—no survey can do that. But it does show many of each person's strengths and weaknesses, as well as similarities and differences between partners, so possible problem areas can be identified and addressed. After the results of RELATE are compiled into a report, a couple can pick up a copy or receive it through the mail, or have it sent to a pre-marriage counselor, member of the clergy, or therapist who is helping the couple prepare for or adjust to marriage. When a couple takes RELATE on the Internet, their RELATE report will be returned through the computer in a few minutes.

Although some couples discuss their RELATE Report together and don't see a need to consult a third party, couples are encouraged to meet with a counselor because a counselor can help them understand the report and its implications.

For example, Andrew and Heather, who took RELATE after they had been married eight months, learned more about the information in their

Dr. Thomas B. Holman is a professor of Marriage, Family, and Human Development at Brigham Young University. Dr. Lisa B. Hawkins is managing editor of Marriage & Families.
"EVERYONE MARRIES A STRANGER. FORGET THE PERSON YOU THOUGHT YOU MARRIED AND WORK ON THE RELATIONSHIP."

RELATE Report when they talked with a counselor, even though they had studied the report together. They already knew of some differences that occasionally caused tension between them. Their counselor "pointed out that we have different ways of resolving conflicts," Heather said. "I'm more volatile and hostile, and Andy's more avoidant and validating." (These terms are used and defined in the RELATE report.) "We also interpreted a couple of questions differently and so the results showed a difference where we really agreed," Heather continued. "Our counselor helped us figure that out." The couple also found the counselor's interpretation more complete than their own.

Andrew listed some of the "good stuff," or ways in which their similarities and differences could strengthen their marriage. He and Heather have religious unity—shared beliefs and spiritual goals—and neither tends to dominate in decision-making. Their mutual kindness, problem-solving skills, compassion, and willingness to learn from experience will, they believe, help them weather storms that may come. The discovery of some potential weaknesses in their marriage through RELATE led their counselor to remind Andrew and Heather that all marriages face difficulties. His perspective was encouraging to Andrew and Heather because "we used to compare our inadequacies to everyone else's public presentation."

Helping couples chart their strengths and weaknesses based on sound research, rather than "everyone else's public presentation," is part of the work of the Marriage Study Consortium, which developed RELATE. The Consortium is a group of scholars, researchers, family life educators, clergy, and counselors with an interest in premariage and marriage relationships. Although the Marriage Study Consortium is housed at Brigham Young University, which is owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the RELATE instrument is non-denominational and the governing board of the Consortium includes many scholars, researchers, and practitioners from varied religious and educational backgrounds. RELATE is the most recent version of a relationship assessment instrument created by the Consortium and has demonstrated the reliability and validity required for questionnaires concerning human relationships.

Menolly and Spencer took RELATE in February and became engaged in August. RELATE helped them feel confident that they would be compatible, despite some differences that had concerned them. For example, Menolly was from an urban area in North Carolina, while Spencer grew up on a farm.
in Idaho. The counselor who helped them interpret their RELATE report helped them understand the possible importance or unimportance of the geographic difference. "He said that the similarities in the way our parents related to each other was good," Spencer said. "And I was really interested to see what she [Menolly] thought about me."

"Me, too," Menolly added. "We had a lot of similarities and no major differences."

"It was comforting that our different backgrounds didn't mean different values or answers," Spencer said.

RELATE, in addition to helping couples evaluate their relationship, may also help them realize how much work goes into a successful marriage. Andy summarized the ups and downs that he and Heather have experienced: "Marriage is different than I expected—better and rougher." He had learned in a class that "everyonemarries a stranger. Forget the person you thought you married and work on the relationship."

The first section of the RELATE Report is a beginning for couples who want to "work on the relationship." It includes graphs that demonstrate how each partner rated him- or herself and each other in seven personality areas: sociability, calmness, organization, flexibility, emotional maturity, happiness, and self-esteem. The second section compares partner agreement on values and attitudes concerning marriage roles, employment, sexuality, children, and religion. A third section compares perceptions of background experiences. The questions address family process, parents' satisfaction with marriage, relationships with parents, family stresses, physical and sexual abuse (which are not included in the RELATE Report), and parental and couple conflict resolution.

The fourth section of the RELATE Report summarizes relationship experiences, including couple communication styles, conflict styles, and relationship satisfaction and stability. The report also includes an assessment of problem areas in the relationship, for example, differences over whether one or the other person is "in charge," alcohol or drug problems, or money problems.

When asked if they would recommend RELATE to other couples, Menolly and Spencer answered, "Yes, definitely!"

"We've discussed things now that we wouldn't have thought to bring up," Spencer said.

Menolly agreed. "Some couples don't even discuss basic things. They assume that because they are from the same culture, they have the same attitudes. RELATE makes you think for yourself before you discuss and compare opinions. We've had good discussions—we understand each other better and have more patience and understanding."

"If you were scared or cautious about the commitment to marriage, it would help you to take RELATE," Spencer said.

"I was cautious about RELATE," Menolly admitted. "I wasn't sure I wanted to know what it would say. But it was okay."

Alternating daisy petals ("he loves me, he loves me not"). love at first sight, overwhelming romantic feelings, a crystal ball, maybe even a magic wand would be among the fairy tale ways to choose a husband or wife. A person's good sense, opinions of friends and relatives, and long discussions with one's prospective mate are more common methods of choice. But the old saying that "love is blind" has proven sadly true for too many couples. A scientific look at a loving relationship won't destroy the romance and may give a couple the confidence to make their best choices. Using one of the pre-marriage assessment instruments and seeking counsel from a therapist, member of the clergy, or other respected third party can be interesting and helpful. In our experience, RELATE has been an organized, statistically valid questionnaire that can tell couples more
about themselves, as well as highlighting important issues for thought and discussion. A little preparation could provide every couple with an idea of what all those days after the wedding day will be like; it could help them work together toward a real-life "happily ever after."

Notes

6. Ibid., 15, 17.
7. J. H. Larson and T. B. Holman, "Premarital Predictors of Marital Quality and Stability," Family Relations 43 (1994): 228–237. Although the data reported in this article are derived from Prep-M, a predecessor of RELATE, the data are comparable for RELATE.
8. Information on abuse currently is used only for research. The RELATE Report also states, under "General Guidelines for Interpreting RELATE," p. 2: "2 Be aware that especially sensitive information assessed by RELATE (e.g. some answers related to your family of origin) is not reported on this printout. If serious problems related to your family of origin are hampering your ability to maintain satisfying relationships in the present, you should seek assistance in taking care of these problems prior to marriage. Marriage does not usually resolve problems from the past. The resolution of these problems may require the assistance of a qualified therapist. . . ." Legal reporting requirements concerning abuse of minors dictate that a person must be 18 or older to complete RELATE.

RELATE is available by mail in a booklet or over the internet at http://relate.byu.edu. Each RELATE evaluation costs $5 per person ($10 per couple); including the cost of the questionnaire, processing, and the resulting RELATE Report. Payment on-line is by credit card. The on-line questionnaire and payment for it are handled through a secure server; booklet questionnaires and results are also confidential. RELATE is available in English or Spanish (for U.S. residents). On-line versions are being prepared in Portuguese, French, German, Italian, Danish, Finnish, Turkish, English UK, English Australia, and Spanish International. Also, versions of RELATE will be available for couples who are remarrying and for high-school-aged couples.

For more information, contact:
The Marriage Study Consortium
Box 25391
Provo, UT 84602-5391
Telephone: 801-378-4369
FAX: 801-378-4385
Email: RELATE@byu.edu
Internet: http://relate.byu.edu