

Do You Really Know to Whom You Are Married?

Taking a personality test with your spouse can be a little scary, especially when you're not getting along.

"Do you think we're a bad fit ... as a couple?" asked a young lady when she and her husband saw how different their personalities were during one of our counseling sessions. The looks of panic on their faces were clearly evident as they stared at each other across what seemed like a wide gulf between them.

It's been my privilege to marry many young couples and to perform marriage counseling for newlyweds and couples whose "honeymoon" had worn off, so I'm no longer surprised to see how important and misunderstood personalities are in a relationship.

Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a couple is vital in a society in which divorce is too common, although fascinating research by author Shaunti Feldhahn indicates things are not as bad as reported and less dire for those who have a strong faith and fierce commitment to marriage.

Over the years, I've discovered three main truths that link personality, differences and communication, which can be unveiled through a little personality testing. I've seen couples that work to understand each other build better marriages, as Proverbs 24:3 (NIV) notes, "By wisdom a house is built, and through understanding it is established."

First, I've seen that our personality drives our perception of reality—what we believe or feel is true.

God has given every person a unique design that includes a specific and unique personality for we are "fearfully and

wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). Some people are detailed orientated; some are more unstructured. Some are people are relationally driven, while others are more socially reserved and task oriented. The differences are vast leading to a wide array of perceptions on any given event or person.

If you are a bit distant and non-emotional, you probably see most issues as something to fix or sometimes ignore when you find them not that big a deal. Meanwhile your spouse might see the same issue as requiring conversation and feel slightly hurt because you don't agree.

So who is right? Well, you both are, from your perspective!

It's important to realize that your perspectives and preferences on how to manage a situation are not necessarily the only way to see things.

Personality is the primary lens through which we interpret and make decisions about an event, or a person, including our spouse. And these interpretations and perceptions are based upon who we are, which is why it's so important to really know yourself AND your spouse.

Second, I've learned that our personal bent leads us to make certain assumptions about the things we don't know about a person. I call this lack of information, "gaps." We instinctively fill in the gaps with what we perceive as true.

These thoughts and perceptions are based upon who we are ... not who the person we are interpreting may actually be. Our gap interpretations often lead to premature, misguided judgments and decisions.

For example, consider when a husband (a non-talker) meets one of his wife's new friends (a talker), and the two smile and exchanges normal pleasantries. He doesn't continue the ear to ear smiling nor readily engages in the open dialog, while she

continues to show the permanent grin, asking numerous questions.

While this is going on at the surface level, another set of opinions and decisions are being made. He might be thinking, "Why does my wife like her? She is already driving me nuts. She thinks she knows everything." She is may be thinking, "How in the world can she live with a person so cold and uncaring?"

While this scenario might be a little silly or extreme, everyone fills in the gaps about what we don't know about someone with what we perceive as true. By filling in these gaps with wrong conclusions, we are left with wrong perceptions and ultimately make wrong decisions about the person.

Take time to learn how both of you understand things. As Proverbs 18:13 says, "He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him. Later in verse 17, we're reminded that there are two sides to every story; "He who is first in his own cause seems just, but his neighbor comes and searches him."

And third, I've discovered that our misperceptions severely affect the level of continued communication between the two people because they don't really know each other and therefore struggle to trust the each other. This breakdown in communication is a perfect recipe for long-term struggles.

So what does one do? The most important change begins by asking the Lord to give you a perspective beyond your own, to see—really see—things from another's vantage point. The Golden Rule provides a framework for this. Do unto others as you want them to do to you.

You also don't have to figure this out alone. Connect as a couple with a mentor couple or counselor to flush out these misperceptions. I can't recommend enough that you and your spouse work through a reliable personality assessment. At

Crown, we have such a tool called Personality ID where people can come to understand areas of struggle and of strengths.

Being on the same page is not the same thing as being the same. Couples can enjoy their differences and work toward mutual goals without having the same operating style or strengths.

Was my newlywed couple a bad fit? Not at all! They were different of course, but once they saw each other for who they truly were, they were encouraged, excited and hopeful. And they learned that some things in another person should be accepted, not changed.

After a little counseling, the wife laughed and asked, "So this means he'll probably never pick up his socks, right?"

Jon Sommer is the Director for Crown's Career Development division in North America and has been pastoring and counseling couples for more than 10 years.