

# PREPARE ENRICH

• *building strong marriages* •

## Using the Couple and Family Maps

The Couple and Family Maps are powerful tools that provide couples a simple visual representation of how they each perceive their relationship on the dimensions of “closeness” and “flexibility”.

### Key factors in understanding the Couple and Family Map:

The Maps use two major dimensions (“closeness” and “flexibility”) to describe twenty-five (25) types of relationships. These are grouped into three basic categories: *balanced*, *mid-range*, and *unbalanced*.

- *Balanced* exhibit balanced levels on both closeness and flexibility. This tends to be most functional for couples and families as it enables them to cope well when under stress. These couples and families balance their needs for separateness and togetherness while also maintaining a balance between stability and the capacity to adapt to change.
- *Mid-range* are typically balanced on one dimension (closeness or flexibility) but unbalanced on the other. These couples and families generally function well in a variety of circumstances, although stressful events and certain transitions (e.g., births or deaths) can cause problems.
- *Unbalanced* are unbalanced in both closeness and flexibility. These couples and families are at the extremes or outer edges of the map. They typically have difficulty negotiating levels of intimacy that enable all family members to feel included and nurtured. They also struggle in their attempts to stay organized as a unit, and in their abilities to adapt to change.

The Couple and Family Maps are “dynamic,” meaning the placement of a given couple or family on the map varies over time due to influences and events shaping their lives. Factors affecting map movement can be life transitions such as the birth of a child or retirement. Map placement (and movement) can also be due to unexpected stressors or trauma such as a catastrophic illness of a family member. Although there is no absolute “best level” or placement for any relationship, couples and families generally function best if they are in the balanced or mid-range categories. Family-of-origin experiences are important in shaping subsequent relationship expectations. Individuals learn relationship patterns from their past and there are tendencies to bring these into relationships.

### **Using the Couple and Family Map during feedback sessions:**

The PREPARE/ENRICH Couple's Workbook discusses how to use the Couple and Family Maps in the feedback process. Among the topics to cover are a description of terms like "closeness" and "flexibility", and how they apply to couples and families.

A key part of this session is to review where the couple placed on the Map and their respective family-of-origin placements. Here is where a discussion of similarities and differences in the couple's description of their relationship can help each individuals gain insight into their own perceptions and their partners. Couples can also explore how their family-of-origin experiences affect their current interactions and expectations for their relationship

### **Helpful questions when discussing the Couple and Family Map:**

- How does each partner view the relationship? In what ways do they perceive it similarly, and in what ways do they see it differently?
- Given where they currently are on the Couple Map, where would they like to see their relationship move? Why?
- Where on the Family Map did each partner's family-of-origin experience show up? How did they compare to each other? In what ways were they similar or different?
- Ask the couple to discuss how their respective family-of-origin experiences shape their current relationship. What do they want to keep from those experiences? What do they hope to avoid repeating?