

PREP Principles Promote Intimacy in Marriage

by Fred & Lisa Everett

Scott Stanley and Howard Markman, co-directors of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver, have developed a nationally recognized program to help couples increase their intimacy in marriage called PREP, which stands for Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program.

PREP is based on fifteen years of research into what makes married couples feel close to each other and remain committed to one another. One important aspect of this research relates to the presence of certain negative patterns that can destroy, over time, much of what is positive in a relationship. The researchers found that many of these patterns are in place before a couple even marries. Fortunately, these negative patterns can be prevented or even changed with effort. It is very helpful for all couples, whether engaged, newly married or married for many years, to be aware of the following four patterns and to take steps to avoid any which might be present in their own relationship.

Escalation – This pattern occurs when partners respond negatively back and forth to each other, spiraling into increasing frustration and anger. A particularly damaging tactic is when one person uses intimate information about the other to hurt him or her. What started as a trivial incident has escalated into a full-blown fight. To “short circuit” this pattern, one person has to summon the humility to “back off” and say something to de-escalate the situation. Just softening one’s tone of voice and acknowledging the other person’s point of view can have a dramatic effect.

Invalidation – This pattern occurs when one person puts down the thoughts, feelings or character of the other. Research shows that this pattern is one of the best predictors of serious marital discord. Invalidation can happen when one person simply dismisses the concerns or viewpoint of the other, when one person tells the other that they shouldn’t feel the way they do, or when something positive or praiseworthy that one person does is ignored by the other. To avoid this pattern, partners simply have to acknowledge and show appreciation for the other person’s feelings, point of view and accomplishments. You don’t have to agree with your partner to have him or her feel empathy and understanding.

Negative Interpretations – This pattern occurs when one partner consistently believes that the other’s motives are more negative than is really the case. It is akin to mind reading, jumping to conclusions and taking things personally, when one person assumes that he or she knows what the other is thinking and why he or she did or did not do something. An example might be when a husband forgets to run an errand for his wife and the wife accuses him of not caring about her needs. This tendency is something that the person who does it has to confront. The best way to counter this destructive pattern is to

become aware of it, to examine one's motives for doing it, and to look for evidence to counteract the negative interpretation.

Avoidance and Withdrawal – This pattern occurs when one partner shows an unwillingness to discuss or see through discussions of important issues. Typically, men are more prone to this pattern, while women are more likely to be the ones who bring up issues or concerns. To avoid this pattern, both partners must be willing to make adjustments. The person who wants to pursue a discussion might postpone it until the other person has time to get his or her thoughts together, while the partner who would rather avoid the discussion must realize the importance of resolving a difficult issue and make a commitment to set aside a specific time to talk about it.

All of this research and more, including many real life scenarios and steps to build specific skills to increase intimacy in marriage, is contained in a book entitled *A Lasting Promise*, published by Jossey-Bass in 1998 and co-authored by Scott Stanley. It is an excellent resource. The book is available through local bookstores or through the publisher at www.josseybass.com or (888) 378-2537.