



COUPLE TALK

Communicating with Your Partner

Knowing Your Partner

**Ted G. Futris, Ph.D., Family Life Specialist,
OSU Extension**

How well do you know your partner? Could you describe in detail your partner's major goals and hopes in life or the most special times in your partner's life? What are your partner's current major worries? Who are the important people in your partner's life?

How familiar partners are with each other and their relationship has important implications for maintaining a satisfying and lasting marriage. In fact, according to Dr. John Gottman, author of *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, strong and happy marriages are based on the foundation of a deep friendship where partners know each other intimately. In other words, they remember the major events in each other's history, they know each other's likes, dislikes, personality quirks, worries, hopes, and dreams, and they keep updating their information as the facts and feelings of their partner's world change. Gottman calls this intimate knowledge of each other a "love map," or the amount of "cognitive room" a person gives to the marriage and the life of their partner.

Why are love maps important to maintaining a happy and lasting marriage? Couples who really know each other very well are more likely to feel honored and respected by each other. In turn, they are more likely to express this fondness and admiration in big as well as little ways each day. And, during conflict these couples are more likely to focus on positive thoughts (vs. negative feelings) about each other and their marriage. According to Gottman, "their positivity causes them to feel optimistic about each other and their marriage, to assume positive things about their lives together, and to give each other the benefit of the doubt" (p. 21).

Also, when couples have detailed love maps of each other they are better prepared to cope with stressful events and conflict. For example, Gottman's research on couples who became par-

ents for the first time (an event that typically results in decreases in marital satisfaction for many couples) showed that couples who were in the habit of keeping up to date with each other's feelings and thoughts before the birth did not experience a drop in marital satisfaction after the birth. Gottman points out that "if you don't start off with a deep knowledge of each other, it's easy for your marriage to lose its way when your lives shift so suddenly and dramatically" (p. 49).

Unfortunately, many married couples fall into the habit of not paying attention to the details of their partner's life. Losing touch with your partner can easily occur with the passage of time. Developing and maintaining detailed maps of each other's life is an ongoing and never-ending process.

How can you build a love map of your partner's everyday life? Regularly check in with and "interview" one another. Take turns as speaker and listener, and discuss the most important events in your personal recent and upcoming life. Invest and schedule time together to update your knowledge about each other. The more you know, the more rewarding your relationship will be.

ACTIVITY

How well do you and your partner know each other? Here are a few questions adapted from Gottman's "Love Map 20 Questions Game" that you and your partner can discuss during your next "interview."

- What makes you feel most competent?
- What is one of your favorite ways to be soothed?
- Other than your partner, who is your greatest source of support?
- What was your most embarrassing moment?
- What is your favorite song? food? color?
- Who is your favorite relative?
- What is your favorite way to spend an evening? a weekend?
- What personal improvements do you want to make in your life?