



# Know

## *Maintaining Knowledge of Your Partner's World*

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### What Know Looks Like

- Asking about our partner's life, thoughts, and feelings
- Being sensitive to our partner's worries and needs
- Recalling positive experiences together
- Expressing sincere interest
- Seeing things through our partner's eyes
- Discussing what you expect in the relationship

### Introduction

For the development of a strong, lasting relationship, knowledge must be built by partners both about the other and themselves (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009). *Know* refers to a never-ending process of developing knowledge and understanding about one's partner (e.g., sharing details about each other's day and becoming aware of each other's likes, dislikes, and background). *Know* also refers to taking the time to update each other on daily happenings and maintaining knowledge about each other as the months and years pass. This concept also includes a person's own willingness and ability to gain knowledge about one's self and to self-disclose and express this information with the partner. The *Know* domain has connections to the *Care* and *Share* domains described later. *Know* applies to both singles, who may be starting the process of getting to know potential dating partners, and couples, who might be working to maintain a healthy relationship and getting to know more about each other while maintaining knowledge of each other's daily lives.

### Know Before You Go

For singles, *Know* applies to learning more about a potential partner to decide whether to date that person or begin a relationship with them (see *Choose*). Very few people would be willing to get into a car with a complete stranger. The individual would not know where the stranger was going, where they had been, whether or not they are a safe driver, or whether they could be a dangerous individual. Jumping into a relationship without knowing very much about someone is also dangerous, but many individuals try it. For many single parents, entering a relationship may be seen as a way to improve their situation, financially, practically, or emotionally (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004; Graefe & Lichter, 2002; Kathryn, 2000). Caution is warranted in not overlooking or downplaying risk factors





(substance abuse, violent tendencies, criminal history, etc.) when forming romantic relationships (Huang, Postmus, Vikse & Wang, 2013; Knight, 2011; Waller & Swisher, 2008). When deciding to enter a relationship with an individual, it is important to have some basic background knowledge to protect oneself and one's family.

### *Knowing As You Are Going*

Those who are already in a relationship can also benefit from learning more about and maintaining an understanding of one's partner. Certain aspects that receive much attention at the start of the relationship, like physical attraction, appear to become less important to individuals' relationship satisfaction and support for one another over time (McNulty, Neff, & Karney, 2008). In addition, couples

who share accurate knowledge about each other tend to be more supportive of each other and have a more stable relationship (Neff & Karney, 2005). Just like going for a long time without talking to a friend or family member, couples can easily get out of touch when they do not make the time to communicate and learn about each other on a continual basis. Each individual in a partnership changes and grows over time and it is important that each partner is aware of these changes as well as day-to-day stresses and events in each other's lives. In some situations, however, it may be difficult to maintain open communication. For example, after a couple becomes new parents, whether biological, adoptive, or foster, the majority of their time and energy may be put into making sure the child's needs are met. This may lead to the couple losing touch with each other, spending less quality time together, and feeling less satisfied with their marriage (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003).

### **Developing Intimacy**

Getting to *really* know one's partner is important throughout all stages of a relationship, but particularly during the initial stages. During dating and the early years of marriage, partners are more likely to idealize the other and ascribe qualities and characteristics that are more positive than is truly warranted (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). This concept, known as positive illusions, can help improve relationship satisfaction and stability. However, when positive illusions are too extreme and individuals fail to have a solid, robust understanding of the true nature of the other

### **Why Know Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being**

- As single parents develop relationships with new partners, it is important for them to truly get to know potential partners so they can be sure they are not exposing their child(ren) to risk and are providing them a safe environment.
- New parents whether biological, foster, or adoptive parents need to focus a lot of attention on children as they become part of the family. As a result, couples may lose touch with one another during this time, which can be a source of stress and isolation, and consequently impact their relationship with each other and their child. Thus, parents may need reminders to stay in touch with what is going on in other aspects of their lives and focus on continuing to get to know one another through this transition.
- Parents who have long distance relationships (e.g., those in the military; those who are incarcerated) may struggle with maintaining those relationships from a distance. Consequently, when they are reunited, they may struggle with reconnecting. The stress put on their relationships can affect their parenting. To lessen the risk of losing touch and the stress created when they are reunited, these couples may need help establishing rituals for keeping in touch when they are apart.
- Parents who live together and those that live apart need to know and understand what each person believes is important when it comes to raising children. Knowing how the other person wants to raise your children is an important part of co-parenting.

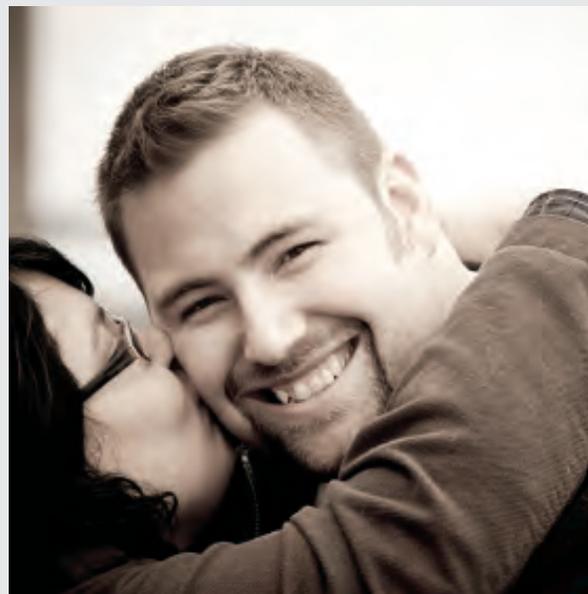
person and the skills that person brings to the relationship, detrimental effects can occur in relationships (McNulty & Karney, 2004). Love grounded in accurate perceptions and knowledge of the specific qualities of one's partner appears to result in stronger relationships than general global assessments (Neff & Karney, 2005). Knowledge about another individual must be rooted in reality, not idealized aspirations.

Stable and satisfying relationships result, in part, from a commitment to constantly learn about each other. An intimate knowledge base of one's partner has been found to be important for good communication and satisfying couple relationships (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2004). Furthermore, the more partners know about and understand each other's daily experiences, thoughts, feelings, needs, and dreams, the easier it is for a couple to develop an emotional connection (Pollman & Finkenauer, 2009). This commitment to learning entails an ever evolving curiosity about each other, sharing of intimate thoughts and feelings at appropriate times and places, and being intentional about allocating quality time to each other on a regular basis (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). True intimacy is built on truth, knowledge, and understanding of one's partner.

## Commitment to Learning

Learning about a partner's preferences in daily life and using this knowledge in supportive and appreciative ways helps a couple turn toward each other, even during conflict. Gottman (1998) calls this process building "Love Maps" in which partners create a wealth of knowledge about each other and use it for relationship building. For instance, knowing and respecting a partner's preferences for expressing closeness and intimacy helps to maintain mutual interest, physical attraction, emotional closeness, and the likelihood that he/she will continue to express closeness in intimacy. Perhaps one partner often likes to physically touch as a sign of affection, whereas the other partner is a "hands-off" type. Learning about each other and incorporating this information into daily responses might allow the "hands off" partner to be more receptive to these types of bids for connection, while the other partner works at not feeling rejected when loving touches are rebuffed. Making a commitment to learn more and more about one's partner allows the couple to be able to understand each other better and support each other during times of need.

When partners get to know each other, they create the ability to see situations and events through each other's eyes. Knowing about each other's visions for the future, aspirations, and ways of doing things makes it possible to understand more of where the other is coming from, creating more understanding and helping couples to weather the inevitable storms (Gottman, 1998, 2011).



### Understanding our partners: Making sense of things our partners do.

Attributions concern how individuals make sense and explain events, actions, and behaviors, both of ourselves and of our partner. These attributions inform what we believe we know about why a person acted a certain way or made a particular comment, and in turn influence our behavior (how we react) and overall marital quality (Bradbury, Beach, Fincham, & Nelson, 1996; Fincham, Harold, & Gano-Phillips, 2000). Attributions can be either relationship-enhancing or distress-maintaining to a relationship. When one's partner does something positive, *relationship-enhancing attributions* view those actions as intentionally-performed by the person and reflecting more internal, stable characteristics. Relationship-enhancing attributions also interpret partners' negative behaviors as more unintentional, caused by some external, temporary circumstance. In contrast, *distress-maintaining attributions* ascribe positive events and behaviors to external, temporary, and unintentional factors, and attribute negative events and behaviors to internal, stable, and intentional factors (Horneffer & Fincham, 1996; Manusov & Koenig, 2001). By developing a better understanding of their partner, individuals can potentially make more accurate attributions or interpretations about a partner's relationship behaviors. When these attributions are relationship-enhancing, relationship well-being is strengthened.

Spending time together and communicating is the best way to build this knowledge (see *Share*). Couples can ask each other questions about their day, discuss positive experiences from the past and what they want in their future, talk about their daily stressors, and share what they need and expect for themselves and the relationship.

## What Do Partners Need to Know?

While an individual will never know all there is about one's partner, having sufficient knowledge about certain areas is particularly important for relationship functioning and maintenance. Three important areas for knowledge about partners include: (1) relationship expectations, (2) core beliefs, and (3) family background experiences (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001).

### Relationship Expectations

Every person enters into a relationship with a set of expectations for it. These expectations range from mundane, everyday matters (such as who will do the grocery shopping) to deep foundational issues (such as how decisions should be made). These expectations – and differences between partners about them – often appear as areas where conflict and disagreements arise in relationships. Specifically, marital expectations have been related to attributions for marital problems, problem-solving behaviors, and marital adjustment (Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996).

Researchers have identified three broad domains of expectations that influence relationship quality (Baucom et al., 1996; Epstein & Baucom, 2002): boundary expectations, investment expectations, and control/power expectations. Expectations of *boundaries* refer to beliefs regarding the extent to which partners share time, activities, thoughts, and feelings. These also reflect how much independence versus interdependence appears between individuals in the relationship. For instance, a new wife may expect she and her husband to go out to eat every week together or watch the same television show, though the husband may not

have any of those expectations. Expectations of *investment* involve the standards for what each partner does and shares with the other person in the relationship. Such expectations shape thoughts for how much time one should devote to the relationship, from tasks ranging from washing dishes to sharing one's thoughts. Thirdly, expectations for *control/power* reflect beliefs about the role each individual has in the process and outcome of decision-making and allocating resources (Schwarzard, Kolowsky, & Izhak-Nir, 2008).

Given how pervasive these expectations are in relationships, a logical next question is to examine and understand from where these expectations originate. Markman, Stanley, and Bloomberg (2001) have identified three primary sources for the expectations individuals bring into relationships: families, previous relationships, and societal ideals.

- For better or worse, the marriage models experienced in one's family shape all of the domains of marital expectations (boundaries, investment, and control/power). For instance, regarding investment, a man who grew up in a family where the wife prepared nearly all of the family meals will likely unknowingly carry a similar expectation for his own wife. In regards to boundaries, a woman whose family was very loud and open in conversation with one another will have very different beliefs about how everyday conversations occur and how feelings are shared compared to a partner with a quiet, withdrawn family.
- Previous relationships also shape expectations. Such relationships often provide a script or schema for the expected progression stages of a relationship and what behaviors and reactions can be expected by a partner (Surra & Bohman, 1991). Past relationship experiences create models for expectations of events that partners then carry with them into present relationships. This may be especially true for those in remarriages.
- Societal ideals – from media, culture, ethnic backgrounds, etc. – also come to shape the expectations individuals have towards relationships. Most movies, television shows, and music lyrics all offer some sort of blueprint or belief about relationships, which can very easily become expectations of people exposed to them. Studies linking the exposure to media and its impacts on relationship behaviors support this (e.g. Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, & Berry, 2005).



### Core Beliefs

A second key area to know and understand involves the core beliefs of each partner. Regardless of whether a person self-identifies as being religious, every person possesses a core set of beliefs and values that shape how they view the world. Such core principles relate to beliefs and values about what makes life meaningful and purposeful, what issues are important, and what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable. In many relationships, these topics are rarely discussed between partners, though their impact on a relationship is inevitable (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001).

On average, research suggests that similarity in core beliefs – often identified by similar religious or spiritual beliefs and participation – leads to more positive relationship outcomes, such as higher marital satisfaction and lower rates of divorce (see Mahoney, 2010). Couples will not agree on everything, and couples with different beliefs are not inevitably bound to failure; however, core beliefs do need to be known, and differences should be acknowledged and discussed.



### **What to Know: The 10 P's**

1. **Personality:** What are your partner's qualities and characteristics?
2. **Passions:** What are their interests? What do they really care about?
3. **Plans and Priorities:** What hopes and dreams do they have for their life? Where do they see themselves in 10 years?
4. **Previous Partners:** What do you know about your partner's past relationships and experiences within those relationships?
5. **Perspective Taking:** How good is your partner at seeing things from someone else's point of view? Does it come naturally for them to be empathetic?
6. **Problem Solving:** How do they manage conflict and disagreement?
7. **Past Family Experiences:** Find out about the dynamics and interactions within their family of origin.
8. **Physical/Psychological Health:** How is your partner feeling today?
9. **Parenting Experience and Approach:** Does your partner want kids? What type of parent would they like to be?
10. **Provider Potential:** Will your partner be able to help provide for your needs as a couple?

### *Family of Origin and Emotional Heritage*

As previously noted, experiences in one's family of origin have a significant influence in shaping relationship expectations. Yet, influences from family background extend beyond relationship expectations. Overall, research findings suggest a connection between family background experiences and one's beliefs and behaviors in later adult romantic relationships (Dinero, Conger, Shaver, Widaman, & Larsen-Rife, 2011). For instance, the nature of parenting received as a child appears to influence later levels of warmth and hostility in romantic relationships (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Gottman, 2011).

As another example, experiencing parental divorce can have many influences on children, both during childhood and adulthood. Children of divorce have comparatively weaker normative commitments to the institution of marriage and a slightly increased risk of divorce in their own relationships (Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

Another family of origin issue to consider is how well differentiated individuals are from their family-of-origin. Healthy adult relationships are more likely when individuals have a strong, distinct sense of self and identity (Anderson & Sabatelli, 2011). Well-differentiated individuals are able to maintain appropriate degrees of connection with family members, while those who lack this often struggle with maintaining a healthy degree of separateness from their family of origin. Although past family experiences do not entirely determine later behavior, getting to know one's partner clearly involves an awareness of his/her past experiences.

Additionally, each person's emotional heritage impacts intimate partner relationships. Rooted in one's



family of origin, a person's "emotional heritage" involves the emotional beliefs and practices experienced when a child, including how the family expressed, valued, and handled emotions (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). Illustrative of this, brain research is showing that past experiences and feelings, whether pleasant or painful, accumulate within the brain processes to influence current and future emotional connections (Roberts & Koval, 2003). Fixed interaction patterns to specific cues become established over time, but are believed to be malleable to change when one becomes aware of personal emotional history. This can be especially important when these patterns are harmful to building emotional connections with one's intimate partner (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). If a past experience sparks something in one's memory and the partner does not know the circumstances, then this can lead to communication breakdown. For instance, during childhood, one partner may have experienced his or her family's bankruptcy, which could have resulted in negative consequences, including moving away from close friends and family members. If the partner suggests taking out a loan to remodel their home without knowing this history, the reaction could be stonewalling (i.e. changing the subject, walking away from conversation, refusing to talk, etc.). The cue that shuts down communication for one partner is borrowing money. Only when both partners understand this past emotional history

## Cultural Considerations

- Reciprocal self-disclosure may not be comfortable or possible for couples whose culture supports traditional roles. Men and women do not have equal power in all cultural groups, and may not be allowed or feel comfortable sharing feelings about pressures, needs, hopes, and dreams (Allen & Beitin, 2007; Walsh, 2012). For example, Asian cultures may be influenced by Confucianism where emphasis is placed on hierarchical relationships with men having the highest position of power in the family, and women may not feel comfortable sharing feelings (Ishii-Kuntz, 1997; Sue & Sue, 2008).
- Intimacy may be viewed as very complex by people in some cultures, and may be dependent upon several factors related to personal well-being. American Indian tribes view the mind, body, and spirit as interconnected (Sue & Sue, 2008). Asian Americans also view the mind and body as inseparable and emotional stress may manifest itself in physical symptoms rather than being discussed with one's partner. Intimacy, therefore, in couple relationships, may be more dependent on these components than on self-disclosure.
- Harmony and cooperation are highly valued by some cultures, and it may be culturally inappropriate to raise issues about things that might result in conflict. American Indian tribes often promote cooperation, with the tribe and family needs taking precedence over sharing individual needs (Sue & Sue, 2008). According to these authors, harmonious interpersonal relationships are also highly valued in Asian American culture and directness or sharing feelings that might cause conflict are often avoided.

*Contributed by Dr. Linda Skogrand, Professor and Extension Specialist, Utah State University*

about family finances can they overcome this block to emotional connection.

Developing awareness about one's partner is essential to developing intimacy, trust, and commitment in the relationship. Also, it is important to recognize that it is not only helpful to develop knowledge about one's partner, but also about *oneself*. It is helpful for an individual to get in touch with his or her own relationship expectations, core beliefs, and family of origin influences as equally well as they do their partner's.

## Self-Disclosure and Partner Responsiveness

Individuals only get to know their partner to the degree that the other person allows himself or herself to be known. Accordingly, healthy self-disclosure becomes another important aspect for the practice of *knowing* in a relationship. Closely associated with self-disclosure is the concept of partner responsiveness, which facilitates greater knowledge being built into a relationship. These constructs also relate to the *Care* and *Share* dimensions.

Self-disclosure describes the process of verbally communicating information about oneself that is not common knowledge to everyone. Self-disclosure can occur regarding personal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Informally, this is often described as opening up and putting one's guard down and is important for *knowing* to occur and healthy relationships to be built. As Harvey and Omarzu (1997) describe, "a never-ending reciprocal knowing process involving a complex package of interrelated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors represents an essential condition for creating and sustaining closeness in mutually satisfying relationships" (p. 224). Self-disclosure helps determine the quality and characteristics of relationships (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Additionally, the process of self-disclosure helps each partner move from superficial and idealized information to a more intimate and in-depth understanding of the other.

Equally important to self-disclosure is the nature of partner responsiveness (or lack thereof) in encouraging or discouraging ongoing self-disclosure. For example, when one person shares thoughts and feelings about the day's events, the other person can respond by asking questions and self-disclosing information about his/her day. This encourages the first person to respond back with more personal information, questions, and so forth. The flow of information back and forth contributes to how well partners know each other, which helps foster the relationship closeness (Dindia, 2000, 2002). In contrast, if one person shares information and receives no caring response, whether verbally or non-verbally, self-disclosure most likely will be hindered and the opportunity for relationship building will have been missed. This feedback loop includes both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as persons "leak" signs about their thoughts and feelings, even if no words are spoken (Harvey & Omarzu, 1999). Finally, the reciprocal nature of a positive self-disclosure environment helps a person learn more about one's self as the partner listens, observes, and asks questions, creating an environment for self-reflection during the exchange.

Intimacy, a sense of being connected to each other even if it is brief, is an outcome of the transactional nature of self-disclosure and positive partner responsiveness (Laurenceau, Rivera, Schaffer, & Pietromonaco, 2004;

## Working with Youth

- Adolescence is a period of development where young people are still learning about themselves (Schwartz, 2001). In general, adolescents need help to get to know themselves, focusing on the development of identity, talents, interests, values, and future goals. Note the importance of getting to know oneself – establishing a clear sense of personal identity as part of a healthy relationship (Kerpelman, Pittman, & Adler-Baeder, 2008).
- Many adolescents have a superficial understanding of what intimacy within a romantic relationship involves. Review with youth the different types of intimacy and emphasize aspects of intimacy that go beyond the physical.
- Adolescents may be overly concerned with acceptance within a relationship and at the same time fearful of rejection (Kerpelman et al., 2012). They often have limited experience within romantic relationships and may be uncomfortable sharing who they truly are with a romantic partner. Adolescent romantic relationships can be as much about social status as they are about companionship.
- Many adolescents may feel awkward when attracted to someone and have difficulty knowing what steps to take to learn about the other person or how to share information about themselves. Have adolescents engage in different learning activities that demonstrate for them different ways to get to know a person.
- Trust is something built in a relationship over time (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Rubin, 2010); some adolescents may disclose highly personal information that they later regret because the recipient of that disclosure betrays their trust. Helping adolescents understand the process for gradually disclosing within a relationship is often needed. Have them consider what kinds of information they should learn about a potential partner, such as values, interests, ways of handling disagreements, past relationship patterns, and family relationships.

*Contributed by Dr. Jennifer Kerpelman, Professor and Extension Specialist, Auburn University*

Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006; Prager, 1995; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Consistent with this, self-disclosure on the part of both partners has been found to be a significant predictor of intimacy, with partner's responsiveness also being crucial (Harvey & Omarzu, 1997; Laurenceau, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Furthermore, disclosing positive personal experiences increases everyday positive affect and enhances relationship well-being. These benefits are even greater if the listener reacts in a constructive way to the positive message (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). The process of self-disclosure and partner responsiveness can build intimacy at multiple levels in a relationship, including physically, cognitively, affectively, and relationally (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006; Moss & Schwebel, 1993).

It must be remembered, however, that social norms and cultural expectations impact a person's willingness and comfort level with self-disclosure (Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). For example, perhaps one partner was raised in an environment where stoicism (i.e., having an indifference to pain or pleasure) was highly valued and there was an expectation that highly personal information should not be revealed. In contrast, the other partner might have grown up in a family where emotional reactions were expected to be shared and discussed with each other as an indication of familial love and support. Couples who work together to find a healthy level of self-disclosure that both partners feel comfortable with can reach a level of knowledge that is healthy for the couple relationship.

## Conclusion

Learning about each other takes time, but doing so will help to establish an initial level of closeness and develop greater intimacy within a relationship. This process is also ongoing and may change over time. Life is not static, thus the need for learning about one's partner never ends. As people face each day's challenges and joys, their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, hopes, and dreams do not necessarily stay the same. Therefore, it can never be assumed that persons will know all they need to know about their partners. The process for getting to know one another will be different in the beginning of a relationship compared to years down the road – it may become less scripted, but it needs to occur at some level for a well-connected relationship (Gottman, 1998; Gottman, Schwartz Gottman, & DeClaire, 2006; Harvey & Omarzu, 1997). For example, dating couples and young married couples may have more time to devote to sharing

## Implications for Practice



- Encourage couples to become better friends. Ask them how they became acquainted as friends and have them try to use some of those same strategies with each other with the goal of deepening their understanding of one another.
- Create activities that allow couples to recall and share the story of how they met, fell in love, and began their relationship. For example, have couples bring in photos and create scrapbooks that tell their story.
- Have couples establish a daily routine for continually getting to know one another. This could be sharing daily highlights at meal times, calling each other during breaks, or using car rides to fill each other in about the day's events. Encourage couples to spend 10-15 minutes every day getting to know each other better.
- Model positive partner responsiveness during meetings and conversations. Try to get to know your clients better by asking them to share information about themselves. When they share something, respond with interest and enthusiasm.
- Encourage single parents to move slowly into new relationships as they get to know new partners. Help them explore important things to learn about new partners and the influence of their relationship choices on children's safety and well-being.

the day's happenings and learning how each of them responds to the world around them. A couple with children may struggle to find as much time and thus would have to become more deliberate, giving themselves as much time as possible (e.g., 15 minutes at the end of the day) to do the same. However, an older married couple may be less scripted, but still very intentional in checking in with each other and observing how the other is feeling and acting, not slipping into "alone" lives within the marriage.



How to Cite: Olsen, C. S., Barton, A., Futris, T., & Schramm, D. (2013). Know: Maintaining Knowledge of Your Partner's World. In T.G. Futris & F. Adler-Baeder (Eds), *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Core Teaching Concepts for Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Programming* (Publication No. HDFSE-157). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Available at [www.nermen.org/NERMEM.php](http://www.nermen.org/NERMEM.php).

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HDFSE-157