

Exercise 3: Who Am I?

The more you know about each other's inner world, the more profound and rewarding your relationship will be. This questionnaire is designed both to guide you through some self-exploration and to help you share this exploration with your partner. Work on this exercise even if you and your spouse consider yourselves open books. There's always more to know about each other. Life changes us, so neither of you may be the same person who spoke those wedding vows five, ten, or fifty years ago.

Many of the questions in this exercise are powerful. Please make sure you have enough time and privacy to do them justice. In fact, it may be best to reserve this exercise for an uninterrupted stretch when you do not have work to do, deadlines to meet, phone calls to answer, or children (or anybody else) to look after. Most likely you won't be able to complete this questionnaire in one sitting, nor should you try. Instead, break it up by section and do it slowly, over time together.

“Answer the questions in each section as candidly as you can. You don't have to answer every aspect of each question—just respond to the parts that are relevant to your life. Write your answers in your private journal or notebook. If writing so much is hard, you can do it in outline form—but the process of writing this down is important to the success of the exercise. When you're ready, exchange notebooks and share with each other what you have written. Discuss each other's entries and what this added knowledge implies for your marriage and the deepening of your friendship.

My Triumphs and Strivings

1. What has happened in your life that you are particularly proud of? Write about your psychological triumphs, times when things went even better than you expected, periods when you came through trials and tribulations even better off. Include periods of stress and duress that you survived and mastered, small events that may still be of great importance to you, events from your childhood or the recent past, self-created challenges you met, periods when you felt powerful, glories and victories, wonderful friendships you maintained, and so on.

2. How have these successes shaped your life? How have they affected the way you think of yourself and your capabilities? How have they affected your goals and the things you strive for?

“3. What role has pride (that is, feeling proud, being praised, expressing praise for others) played in your life? Did your parents show you that they were proud of you when you were a child? How? How have other people responded to your accomplishments?

4. Did your parents show you that they loved you? How? Was affection readily expressed in your family? If not, what are the effects and implications of this for your marriage?

“5. What role does pride in your accomplishments play in your marriage? What role do your own strivings have in your marriage? What do you want your partner to know and understand about these aspects of your self, your past, present, and plans for the future? How do you show pride in one another?

“My Injuries and Healings

1. What difficult events or periods have you gone through? Write about any significant psychological insults and injuries you have sustained, your losses, disappointments, trials, and tribulations. Include periods of stress and duress, as well as any quieter periods of despair, hopelessness, and loneliness.

Also include any deep traumas you have undergone as a child or adult. For example, harmful relationships, humiliating events, even molestation, abuse, rape, or torture.

2. How have you survived these traumas? What are their lasting effects on you?

3. How did you strengthen and heal yourself? How did you redress your grievances? How did you revive and restore yourself?

4. How did you guard and protect yourself against this ever happening again?

5. How do these injuries and the ways you protect and heal yourself affect your marriage today? What do you want your partner to know and understand about these aspects of your self?

My Emotional World

1. How did your family express the following when you were a child:

- Anger
- Sadness
- Fear

- Affection
- Interest in one another

2. During your childhood, did your family have to cope with a particular emotional problem, such as aggression between parents, a depressed parent, or a parent who was somewhat emotionally wounded? What implications does this have for your marriage and your other close relationships (friendships, relationships with your parents, your siblings, your children)?

3. What is your own philosophy about expressing feelings, particularly sadness, anger, fear, pride, and love? Are any of these difficult for you to express or to see expressed by your spouse? What is the basis of your perspective on this?

4. What differences exist between you and your spouse in the area of expressing emotion? What is behind these differences? What are the implications of these differences for you?

My Mission and Legacy

1. Imagine that you are standing in a graveyard looking at your own tombstone. Now write the epitaph you would like to see there. Begin with the words: "Here lies . . ."

2. Write your own obituary. (It does not have to be brief.) How do you want people to think of your life, to remember you?

3. Now you're ready to write a mission statement for your own "life." What is the purpose of your life? What is its meaning? What are you trying to accomplish? What is your larger struggle?

4. What legacy would you like to leave when you die?
5. What significant goals have you yet to realize? This can be creating something, or having a particular experience. Minor examples are learning to play the banjo, climbing a mountain, and so on.

Who I Want to Become

Take a moment now to reflect on what you have just written. We are all involved in becoming the person we most want to be. In that struggle we all have demons to fight and overcome.

1. Describe the person you want to become.
2. How can you best help yourself become that person?
3. What struggles have you already faced in trying to become that person?
4. What demons in yourself have you had to fight? Or still have to fight?
5. What would you most like to change about yourself?
6. What dreams have you denied yourself or failed to develop?
7. What do you want your life to be like in five years?
8. What is the story of the kind of person you would like to be?

“THE NEXT STEP

All of the above exercises and questions will help you develop greater personal insight and a more detailed map of each other’s life and world. Getting to “your spouse better and sharing your inner self with your partner is an ongoing process. In fact, it’s a lifelong process. So expect to return to these pages from time to time to update your knowledge about yourselves and each other. Think about questions to ask your partner, like “If you could add an addition to our home what would it be?” or “How are you feeling about your job these days?” One therapist I know has taken to wearing a Bugs Bunny pin and advising couples that the key to sustaining a happy marriage is to ask periodically, “What’s up, doc?”

But love maps are only a first step. Happily married couples don’t “just” know each other. They build on and enhance this knowledge in many important ways. For starters, they use their love maps to express not only their understanding of each other but their fondness and admiration as well.”

Excerpt From: John Gottman, Ph.D. “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.” iBooks. Excerpt From: John Gottman, Ph.D. “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work.” iBooks.