

ACCESSIBILITY • RESPONSIVENESS • ENGAGEMENT

[A Quick Couple Tune-Up: A-R-E](#)

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I remember working once with a young couple who I believe had been married less than a year. Though the symptoms were common (periods of distance followed by conflict and more distance), I struggled as a therapist to understand the cause of the problems. After several sessions, I finally asked them to describe their daily routine and was surprised to find out that as newlyweds they spent, on some work days, less than 90 minutes in each other's presence, and that time was often in front of the TV. They seemed to spend a majority of time on separate interests, and with separate friends, and had quickly evolved to a roommate type of marriage, with little deep connection or intimacy of any kind.

I have noticed particularly over the last five years that this is a real and common problem for couples in this fast-paced, hectic world. Has your marriage slowly slipped to a co-parent or roommate arrangement? If so, what are the causes, and how can you return to the "full enchilada" model of marriage, where spouses are best friends, lovers, and true equal partners? Although there are many excellent books and programs aimed at improving marital connection, may I suggest a simple acronym and a way to measure and improve marital closeness.

The acronym is A-R-E and stands for:

Accessibility

Responsiveness

Engagement

Research on attachment in couple relationships has shown that in order to build a secure bond in marriage, partners need to demonstrate accessibility and responsiveness that leads to engagement.

Accessibility can be simply defined as, "I can find you; you are available to me." Accessibility requires frequent physical proximity and emotional availability. Common, modern threats to accessibility include physical separation from a partner (e.g., work, church, kids, travel, hobbies) and a multitude of distractions (e.g., technology, screen time) that prevent emotional presence. In the case of the couple mentioned previously, they were often in the same house, but in separate rooms working on a laptop or watching TV or reading a book. Accessibility means I can find you and approach you. A lack of accessibility prevents connection. Problems related to accessibility can often be resolved by making concrete changes in our schedule and habits to be more present, physically and emotionally.

Responsiveness means when you approach me, I respond with emotional attentiveness. It means I look at you, hear you, feel you, and respond in loving and affirming ways. Again, one of the greatest threats to responsiveness is technology-based distractions. It is astounding to me how many students and even adult friends or colleagues are in the habit of not-responding to phone calls, texts, e-mails and even face-to-face communication. It has become common to say, "I heard you" or "I got your message, but did not respond." In marriage, this is dangerous because it communicates to a partner, "you are not important now," and, "I care about other things more than you." Non-responsiveness erodes trust and connection. Problems related to responsiveness can often be resolved by "unplugging" the distractions that prevent us from looking into our partner's eyes and reaching out to them.

Engagement means that when you are accessible and sincerely try to respond to my needs, we connect. This type of connection, built over time, forges a safe haven and secure base in marriage and brings a sweetness, peace, and strength which is unique and powerful among human relationships. Common threats to engagement,

beyond a lack of accessibility and responsiveness, are often skill-based. For example, I can be accessible and sincerely responsive, but when my wife comes to me in tears about an insecurity or fear, I may give advice instead of validating and reassuring her worth and value. This advice-giving can block engagement. A consistent lack of engagement fosters isolation and disconnection. Problems related to engagement (when A and R are present) can often be resolved by simply learning new and more effective ways to communicate love and support to our spouse.

A quick A-R-E- tune-up conversation can be prompted by the following brief 12-item questionnaire. I urge you to take a few minutes to answer the questions then discuss how you can improve as a couple. Remember, the peace, love, and joy that come from experiencing a safe haven and secure base in marriage is worth the effort.

A-R-E Assessment

Circle the number that best represents your experiences in your current relationship with your partner. (To score, first reverse the scores for items 3, 4, 9, 10 (that is, for these items, 5=1, 4=2, 3=3, 2=4, 1=5). Then sum the items. Lower scores mean behaviors are present that lead to stronger attachment, and higher scores mean lack of behaviors that lead to strong attachment.)

1= Never True 2= Rarely True 3= Sometimes True 4= Usually True 5= Always True

Accessibility					
1. I am rarely available to my partner.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is hard for my partner to get my attention.	1	2	3	4	5
Responsiveness					
3. I listen when my partner shares her/his deepest feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am confident I reach out to my partner	1	2	3	4	5
Engagement					
5. It is hard for me to confide in my partner.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I struggle to feel close and engaged in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
Partner's Accessibility					
7. My partner is rarely available to me.	1	2	3	4	5
8. It is hard for me to get my partner's attention.	1	2	3	4	5
Partner's Responsiveness					
9. My partner listens when I share my deepest feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I am confident my partner reaches out to me.	1	2	3	4	5
Partner's Engagement					
11. It is hard for my partner to confide in me.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My partner struggles to feel close and engaged in our relationship.	1	2	3	4	5
TOTAL:					

For additional reading see:

Sue Johnson. (2008). Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love. Little Brown Books: NY.

Sandberg, J. G., Busby, D.M., Johnson, S.M., & Yoshida, K. (in press). The brief accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement (BARE) scale: A tool for measuring attachment behavior in couple relationships. Family Process.