

**ENNEAGRAM
+ MARRIAGE**

Learning

ALL ABOUT

Instincts



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What are Instincts?

We all have instinctual drives that are part of our human experience. These are felt as bodily, primal forces. These instincts, which are distinct from our personality and ego, are behind many of the unconscious survival strategies we employ in our lives. As such, instincts powerfully direct our fundamental way of being, and this mode of being sometimes occurs outside of our awareness.

Within the context of the Enneagram, once a person finds out his or her main Enneagram type, moving on to understand their primary instinct can add another layer of distinction and knowledge of the self and their partner.

The three instincts are:

1. Self-preservation (*sp*)
2. Relating to others generally and in Social (*so*) groups, and
3. Sexual relationships (*sx*), or One-to-One bonding, and other types of fusion experiences.

The importance of each of these instincts and the potential pitfalls that come from overuse will be explained in the goal section of this resource. First, here is a little background to contextualize the significance of this component of the Enneagram.

Understanding Instinctual Sequencing

Each person has a unique relationship to the three instincts and utilizes them in a specific way. Some of us lead first or mainly with the *sp* instinct, some with the *so* instinct, and still

others lead with the *sx* or one-to-one instinct. The ordered combination of the three varies from person to person and may be referred to as a person's instinctual stacking.

In general, one of the above instincts is dominant or employed most often as a conscious or unconscious means of survival and method for engaging with the world. Next, there is a secondary instinct which is employed often, but not with as much frequency as the dominant instinct. Finally, each person typically has a repressed instinct which is employed least often and may even be difficult to engage.

This preliminary structure of a person's sequencing is the foundation upon which he or she can pursue the goal of this component of the Enneagram, which is to bring balance and harmony to the three instincts.

What Determines Instinctual Sequencing?

So, why do people differ in the way they interact with and utilize their instincts? Since the reason for instinctual stacking is largely unconscious, the most likely hypothesis is that at some time your particular sequencing helped to keep you and/or your family safe. Or at the very least, your sequencing made you *feel* safe as a child, or at another pivotal time in your life. Genetics also plays a role.

These patterns of behavior don't usually shift much once we're adults, at least not without intentional work. This is because they are often locked into us by the time we become adults or get married. Occasionally, specific seasons of life such as illness or disruption of attachment will yield a shift in the sequence of instincts. However, this only usually lasts until the person or situation stabilizes. Then, the instincts go back to the predictable sequence. The hope is that each time there is such a disruption in the sequencing, whether due to circumstance or engagement in personal growth work, that the person is able to bring more balance to their initial sequence as a result of temporarily emphasizing another method of relating to the world.

What is the Goal?

Although we don't want to lose the main focus of our personality work (which is essentially about not letting our personality or ego get in the way of God's good plan for our lives), we also need to make sure we pay attention to our instincts. They are essential because they are so deeply embedded in our relationship behaviors.

As we begin to pay attention to how our instincts and those of our partners play out in our relationships, it is vital that we remember one instinct is dominant while the others remain repressed, or at the very least, more difficult to access.

With this in mind, the ultimate goal of your instinctual work is threefold:

1. To learn to intermix all three instinctual systems (*sx*, *sp*, and *so*) for a balanced and healthy life.
2. To make sure you don't let your dominant type take over. (It tends to run the show in a big way when left unchecked!)
3. To let your third/repressed instinct run the show more frequently. When given the opportunity, you may learn that your repressed instinct may even be where you truly shine best in the world (for God and in your relationship with your partner).

Here are a few examples of the instincts at work in life and relationships. For each instinct, we will consider what it is like to perceive the world when that instinct is dominant. Next, the analysis will consider what harm may come to an individual and/or their relationships when this instinct is repressed. Finally, the goal of balancing the instincts will be advocated for based on the essential components of life that instinct enables individuals to engage in.

The Self-Preservation Instinct	
Sample Inner Dialogue of a <i>sp</i> Dominant Person	“I tend to pay attention heavily to the basic survival needs of food and/or shelter for myself and my people because I realize how important these are. I may overemphasize some of the areas and not others, but the bottom line is that I like to make sure I feel good in my body. I do this by saving resources both materially and energetically. I usually put on my own “oxygen mask” first by implementing self-care and am skilled at anticipating how those needs will shift in the future.”
Why it's Essential	When this instinct is repressed, some of these needs (i.e., showering, saving money, basic clothes or furniture, eating healthfully, etc.) are forgotten altogether.
Goal	Whether <i>sp</i> needs are over or underemphasized, the goal is a balance. We all need healthy amounts of self-care, planning, and rest.

The Social Instinct	
Sample Inner Dialogue of an <i>so</i> Dominant Person	“I tend to pay a significant amount of attention to the social groups in my life and I tend to ruminate/reflect on how I fit into those groups. I realize how important give-and-take is for survival in society, whether it be religious, political, environmental, career, etc. I like to make sure I stay away from unsafe groups and I like to align myself with both familiar groups as well as groups that resonate with my standards and

	values. This alignment is sometimes to the detriment of my individual time or one-to-one relationships.”
Why it’s Essential	When this instinct is repressed, some of the social needs are forgotten or neglected. This may look like not paying attention to what’s happening socially, not voting, being antisocial, and ignoring your wider family, community group responsibility, and global concerns. These actions can be exhibited either moderately or extensively.
Goal	Whether so needs are over or underemphasized, the goal is balance. We need to pay attention to how we can come together to help the world as a community.

The Sexual Instinct	
Sample Inner Dialogue of an sx Dominant Person	“I tend to place my greatest attention on my one-to-one relationships in friendship, marriage, and family. I desire connection and realize how important nurturing these relationships is to my personal and familial survival. I also like to make sure I’m attractive and powerful in my relationships so that I am not taken advantage of with any form of abuse. Sometimes I may do this to the detriment of my personal time or my involvement in the care of my community.”
Why it’s Essential	When this instinct is repressed, some essential human needs may be abandoned. These include the desire to have close bonds, to marry, to enjoy intimacy (sexual or otherwise), and the ability to work through conflict.
Goal	Whether sx needs are over or under emphasized, the goal is balance. We need to pay attention to the quality of our relationships because avoidant behaviors breed further anxiety and depression in humans who were made for close, nurturing bonds.

Pursuing Instinctual Balance with your Partner

With this goal of balance in mind, let’s turn more specifically to how instincts are important in the context of relationships. In your marriage, the ultimate goal is to find your instinctual balance with your partner so that together your instinctual sequences are smooth and well-balanced. With two people in the mix, it takes even *more* effort to pursue balance, so it can be tricky!

The good news is your spouse usually doesn't have the exact same sequence as you. For this reason, your spouse may be able to help you pursue balance because they may be gifted in these opposite areas, unlike your family of origin where people often share the same dominant instinct. In this way, it's important to learn from your spouse how to slowly work in your repressed instincts so that you are truly balancing all three. Often then, marriage is a safe place to discover and to try out other variations of finding safety in the world. It is a place where we can expand our ability to help others uniquely. (This is where we find our [Enneagram Glow!](#))

In time, you may also find trauma healing together due to your collaborative work finding ways to balance your instincts. This has the greatest likelihood of occurrence when you patiently offer your wisdom and grace to one another and grow together.

Another important tip regarding instinctual work in marriage is this:

Don't tease a spouse who is sequenced differently than you.

If you don't think one of these instincts is important to the point that you're making fun of them about it, it usually indicates you have work to do in this area. In fact, the discomfort you feel regarding their dominant instinct may help reveal that you have a blind spot regarding that instinct. So, if this happens, recall Matthew 7:3 and remember that it's easier to see the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and ignore the log on your own.

This is all to say do your homework versus trying to push your spouse into theirs. They *will* see your beautiful balance and they *will* want to get healthier. If and when they *choose* to do the work is up to them. Remember, there are seasons of life in which we pull each other along to some degree. This is the ebb and flow of life and relationships. Set your boundaries accordingly so you don't expect them to be everything to you, but find ways to offer them tools for growth.

Reflection Questions

Here are some questions to get you started on the journey of finding individual and relationship health by balancing your instincts!

1. Consider your instinctual stacking. In your life, which one of these instincts seems to be most dominant? Which is secondary? Which one is least prominent/repressed?

2. Consider your spouse's instinctual stacking. Which is most dominant? Which is secondary? Which one is least prominent/repressed?

3. Did anyone in your family of origin (or even older generations) share your dominant instinct? Who was it and in what ways did you see that instinct leading their actions, speech, life, etc.?

4. Looking back, can you observe a pattern in which that instinct was commonly dominant in the society or social context in which they lived? (*Potential formative contexts could include being born into slavery, being the victim of bullying or abuse, suffering from starvation, etc.*) If so, please explain.

If not, why do you think this person or these people led with this instinct? Did their parents also do this? Did it serve them well or perhaps hurt them if it was overused?

5. Do you have any early memories that illuminate how your instinctual sequencing began solidifying?

6. In your marriage, how has your dominant instinct been a help to you in times of stress? How has it helped your marriage to thrive?

7. How has your dominant instinct been overused in your life and relationships? What is the result when your dominant instinct leads too strongly?

8. Consider your least dominant/repressed instinct. How does the underuse of your repressed instinct negatively impact your life and relationships?

9. Has your spouse ever complained about you ignoring your repressed instinct? If so, do you agree with their observations and claims?

10. How about your middle instinct? Does this feel neutral, slightly dominant or slightly repressed? What impact does this have on your primary relationships?

Engaging with Your Partner on the Topic of Instincts

Here are a few more questions to help you think through your instinctual patterns as you learn to shift them!

If your partner is willing to discuss the reflection questions above, try to come up with several ways the two of you can take small, tangible steps to be a bit bolder when engaging your repressed instincts. Even if they aren't ready to join you in the vulnerability of discussing their repressed instinct, they still may have valuable insights about how you can engage yours!

Discussion Questions for Spouses

- What is one hope you have for yourself socially (so)?
Example of a personal social hope: "I hope we can get to know safe people in our community that we can learn to trust as good friends, even if they're a bit different."
- What is one hope you have for the next generation and/or the world socially? I.e.,
Example of a social hope for society: "I hope world slavery ends and that more people come to God for help versus addiction. I want to be part of helping that."
- Describe your commitment to making this happen, even if it's a baby step? Try to find ways you and your spouse or partner can enact some of these plans together.
- What is one hope you have for yourself in the area of one-to-one (sx) intimate relationships?
Example of a one-to-one hope for a close relationship: "That we would be more sexually intimate and have a weekly date."

- What is one hope you have for the next generation and/or the world in this area?
Example of a one-to-one hope for society: “That my children would know how to form intimate bonds through my example of nurture and trust.”
- Describe your commitment to making this happen, even if it’s a baby step? Try to find ways you and your spouse can enact some of these plans together.
- What is one hope you have for yourself in terms of personal self-care and basic survival needs (sp)?
Example of personal self-preservation hope: “That we can grow more in how well we take care of our savings account and/or emergency fund.”
- What is one hope you have for the next generation and/or the world in this same area?
Example self-preservation hope for society: “I hope the church can build a well for a specific community and I want to help fund this or actively contribute my own labor.”
- Describe your commitment to making this happen, even if it’s a baby step? Try to find ways you and your spouse can enact some of your plans together.

Having considered your hopes regarding each of the instincts, both personally and on a societal level, the next step is to create an initial list of one thing you can do each week to move toward balancing your instincts. Consider both how you’ll actively engage your repressed instinct while at the same time slightly subduing your dominant instinct.

Our Plan to Initiate Growth and Balance of the Instincts Over the Next Month	
Week 1	
Week 2	
Week 3	

Week 4	

The Interplay of Instincts, Passions and Virtues

As you consider working through your instinctual issues, don't forget to work on your basic Enneagram type passions first. If you skip this crucial step, your instinctual work may sabotage itself.

If you can't recall your type's passion, see the E & M podcast episode [The Enneagram Passions and Virtues in Marriage](#). This episode also touches upon fixations (mental formations that can inhibit growth), yet another crucial piece of the puzzle. In the meantime, here's a quick reminder about the passions! Beside each passion, you'll see the type's virtue. Remember, the goal is to move away from the passion and work toward embracing virtue.

Passions and Virtues by Type		
Type	Passion	Virtue
1	Anger	Serenity
2	Pride	Humility
3	Self-deceit	Veracity/Truth
4	Envy	Equanimity/ Equal Ranking for All
5	Avarice	Non Attachment/ Trust that there is enough energy for life flow
6	Fear	Courage
7	Gluttony	Sobriety
8	Lust	Innocence

9	Sloth	Action
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Application via Case Studies

So, what does this information look like in real life? Here are a few examples

Example 1: Sexual/One-to-One 4

A sexually dominant person who is also an Enneagram 4 struggles with the passion of envy. For an sx 4, this often comes out as anger and depression. This person may find a struggle in reducing anger within the context of their one-on-one relationships if they don't *first* embrace their virtue work of moving toward equanimity. In virtue work, everyone is intentionally acknowledged as equal and no one is ranked above or below others. This requires the 4 to accept that God made them, *and* everyone else well.

As you can see in this example, moving toward virtue and away from the vice of the 4 precedes instinct work. Without this baseline understanding of equanimity, it will be difficult for the 4 to make progress balancing the dominant sx instinct.

Example 2: Socially Repressed 9

For the next scenario let's consider a socially repressed 9 who is dealing with the passion of sloth. Their vice/instinctual stacking combo is manifested in group settings by the 9 unintentionally putting others in the group to sleep. Since they aren't using their power to really step in with their voice and bodies, no one listens to them. Before they will feel successful in working through and shifting instinctual patterns, they need to take tangible steps to work on their type 9 passion and embrace their virtue of action as they become awake themselves.

Just as with the previous example, the passion work takes precedence over instinctual stacking. However, both are essential to growth and relational happiness, so be sure to return to instinct work after putting in some time with the passions and virtues!

All of this can be difficult work, so remember that we do well to spend brave time in releasing painful emotions to God and simultaneously allowing God to minister to us.

Finally, it's always best to do your Enneagram work with a great team and support staff so make sure you find a counselor or coach who is trustworthy to help support you as you do inner work!

Encouragement for the Journey

As you do your work, remember this:

Work takes time and change usually happens when we finally find out our other ways of doing things just don't work. Give yourself grace and be patient with your spouse, too. Anything worth doing takes time, process, and surrender!

Love living intentionally with you,

Christa

PS: For more freebies, pairing guides, and podcasts, head back to the [Enneagram + Marriage website!](#)