



## Brief Communication

# Navigating the couples match: Key challenges and lessons learned from two general surgery applicants

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## ABSTRACT

The Couples Match presents unique obstacles and considerations to medical students who are already participating in a rigorous residency application process. We aim to describe the distinct challenges presented by the Couples Match and present advice from our own experience successfully matching into general surgery residency as a couple.

## Introduction

The Couples Match (CM) allows medical students to link their rank order lists to obtain residency positions in the same geographic region [1]. Published data consistently demonstrates a > 90 % success rate for the CM and a steadily increasing number of CM participants annually [2]. An important caveat to consider is that this success rate only considers both students matching at any institution and fails to include personal preferences (e.g., preferred location or specialty). The CM is laden with challenges for participants. Here, we will discuss some of the unique challenges and lessons learned from a couple who matched into general surgery (GS) together in 2021.

## Challenges

*Lack of CM-specific advising*

At most medical schools, there are limited opportunities to receive CM-specific advising, especially for competitive specialties. The limited advice we received included suggestions to apply broadly and target large metropolitan areas with multiple GS residencies. This advice is important, but is disheartening to CM applicants, many of whom are competitive applicants, that are led to believe they are not desirable candidates for residency positions. We were lucky to find a couple that had previously matched into GS together, who proved to be a rich resource. Applicants seeking advice on the CM may choose to interact with surgical residents and faculty who have personal experience with

the process through online forums (e.g., Twitter, Reddit) or national organizations (e.g., American Medical Association or Association of American Medical Colleges).

*Increased financial burden*

CM applicants need to pay several additional fees. Applying to over 30 programs can cost over \$500 [3]. As the traditional advice given to couples is to apply broadly, it is not uncommon for CM applicants to rank up to 300 program combinations leading to significant costs. Prior to implementation of virtual interviewing and universal interview release dates, couples also had to consider the travel costs for each interview, regardless of if their partner had an interview at a program in close vicinity at the time [4].

*Relationship stressors*

The CM requires applicants to identify the personal significance of their relationship early on in medical school. Depending on a variety of personal factors, this can be a difficult and somewhat unnatural process. Deciding to structure our career choices on one another was a substantive decision for us. While the CM is designed to prioritize geographic proximity, it can be challenging to identify whether your priority should be program fit or being near your partner. We would advocate that neither is the wrong choice, and each decision is highly personal. Additionally, we caution that even if these priorities are established early on in the CM process there is the possibility that the

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interview offers received may change how a couple navigates the CM.

### *Specialty choice*

Much of the CM experience is dictated by the competitiveness of the specialties applied to. We both applied into GS which brought its own unique challenges including considering program size and the feasibility of training at the same institution. A concern of ours was how we would be perceived for applying into the same specialty. We anticipated that possible concerns programs may have with accepting a couple include potential relationship dissolution during training, similar vacation requests, and shared maternity/paternity leave. We feared that as a couple applying to the same residency program in the same field we may be viewed disadvantageously compared to others depending on the viewpoints of the program leadership. Fortunately, we found that several programs expressed excitement about our unique situation and had even successfully trained same-specialty couples in the past.

### *Consider sacrifices*

The CM often comes with sacrifice, which can take many forms including geographic proximity to your partner, residency location, or program fit. Weighing which sacrifices are worth making to match together as a couple is extremely personal and challenging, but it is an inherent part of the CM. If you're lucky, you and your partner will gravitate towards the same institutions or those within close proximity. However, often differing career aspirations or perceptions of program fit between applicants can complicate this. Perhaps the most harrowing reality is the possibility of one partner matching at a poor fit program or not matching at all. While it is rare, couples should rank many combinations of programs to avoid the possibility of not matching.

### **Lessons learned**

#### *Identify individual and shared values*

As a medical student, knowing what you want for the next 5–7 years of your life is not easy. We encourage applicants to consider what is important to them during the match process, such as hobbies, interests, and proximity to personal support networks. Wakim and colleagues emphasize the importance of applicant self-reflection, and we cannot emphasize how important it is to do this continually throughout the application cycle [5]. Residency applicants are often encouraged to consider various program aspects such as call schedules and prior fellowship matches. However, while these opportunities are important, they may not be the rewarding aspects of life that will keep you feeling well throughout residency. Once you decide your own individual priorities, come together as a couple and discuss these. Consider which areas are negotiable or non-negotiable and seek compromise [4]. We suggest couples make individual rank order lists and then come together to create a final shared rank order list. For us, this felt like the most important way to honor our own goals and desires while making this shared decision together.

#### *Prioritize communication*

Our biggest recommendation is to start the CM process with a clear and honest conversation with your partner regarding your priorities and goals. Try to understand what the CM means to you and what compromises you are and are not willing to make when considering residency programs [6]. Discuss to what extent you want to use the CM to match in the same geographic location as your partner. Perhaps, your priority may be best possible program fit rather than close proximity to your partner. That is a decision only you can make. While sacrifices may have to be made throughout the match process, hopefully the couple can have more clarity in their decisions knowing that they are rooted in shared

decision making. We highly recommend frequent check-ins with your partner as this will help you both align closely to your personal and shared priorities.

### *Trust your gut*

It is essential to seek insight into how each residency program would support you and your partner in achieving your personal and career goals. Throughout the CM process, you will get a feeling of where you think you will be the most supported and celebrated, perhaps this may come in the form of passive comments from program faculty or trainees. Trust those feelings you get as there are not a lot of opportunities to ask program leadership pointed questions regarding their culture of supporting couples. Speaking to current trainees can also provide valuable insight into the residency culture at a specific program.

### *Know the rules*

Do not be surprised if program faculty are unaware that you are participating in the CM at your interview. We found ourselves organically talking about our partner during interviews, especially since we applied into the same specialty. Additionally, programs should not ask you about your marital status, family size, or future plans for expanding your family. We are now married, but we were not when we applied to residency and felt that our relationship would be potentially viewed as less serious if we openly discussed this. Therefore, we chose to refer to each other as “partners” to purposefully be vague.

### *Market yourself*

We embraced the added potential value we could provide programs as a couple. While there is no script to successfully market yourselves to programs, we identified programs that we were both extremely passionate to learn more about and expressed our interest early. We did not have the opportunity to do away rotations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but completing sub-internships at the same institution could be one way to market yourselves. When only one of us received an interview invitation, we promptly emailed the program to advocate for our partner to get an opportunity to interview as well. We felt lucky to receive positive responses from several programs. For those programs that did not offer such a response, we believed that to be a reflection of how we would be supported as a couple at that institution.

### *Together is better*

We believe that couples have a unique advantage compared to other applicants. Often couples can broaden their geographical reach when applying due to having a built-in internal support system. To us, going through the CM made the match process overall more enjoyable. We had someone to constantly debrief with after each interview and were even more open to the idea of living in a new city together. While we experienced many challenges, it felt so empowering to know that we were advocating for ourselves and our future together.

### **Conclusions**

A successful CM is possible through prioritization of individual and shared values and constant communication between you and your partner. CM applicants should seek advice from those who have successfully gone through the process and mentors who have experience advising couples applying to residency. Lastly, know your worth individually and together and remember to advocate for yourselves to obtain the opportunities you deserve.

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**Ariana Naaseh:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Steven Tohmasi:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

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