

Stages in Relationships

written by Gary Brainard, PhD.

Just as children go through normal, predictable stages of development so do relationships. And just as it is helpful for parents to understand their children by understanding the phases of development, so it is helpful for couples to know the stages of relationships, know which one they are in and thereby see what is happening from a perspective of intelligence and wisdom.

The Enchantment Stage

Most love relationships start off in what is usually called the "Romantic" phase or the "Enchantment" phase. It is a wonderful phase. The brain secretes a special endorphin in this phase that makes the lovers feel happy, complete, alive, and very positive. When you are "in love" you literally are on drugs. In this phase the partners want to spend lots of time with each other (that's when the endorphin gets secreted and the partners want that wonderful feeling).

When we are "in love" and on endorphins, we actually feel different, respond differently and in some ways ARE different. The endorphins make us feel whole and complete so that we are less easily hurt or bothered and our reactivity is greatly lessened. That's why the poet can say, "I love you not because of who you are, but because of who I am when I'm with you". There is truly something wonderful about this first phase of being in love.

In the "enchantment" phase there is a lot of laughter, playfulness, affection and sexual energy. Negative traits are minimized or ignored or rationalized. Wounds and Adaptations are softened and soothed and minimized during this bonding phase.

There is a great emphasis on similarities and "sameness". "You play tennis? That's great! I love tennis!" The person who says that may have played tennis once or twice and sort of liked it, but in the romantic phase only the positive is remembered and many hours of fun and pleasure playing tennis are eagerly anticipated. The person is not lying or deliberately exaggerating; in the romantic stage while on "drugs", that is a genuine expression of the present experience. In many ways, love really is blind.

Even the "sophisticated" couple is not immune to this phenomenon. One partner will say, "I don't believe in this "we are so alike" stuff. I value differences and believe differences should be acknowledged and respected!" Their partner will say, "Wow! SO DO I. We are going to have a great marriage! We both respect differences!" Neither one will see that they are still focusing on "sameness".

The enchantment or romantic stage is necessary, but temporary. In this stage the couple is hopefully bonded and connected and appropriately committed. I tend to see this enchantment stage as a little bit of grace in nature. We are given a taste of the potential of the relationship, but unfortunately, it is a chemically induced taste and cannot and should not last forever. The enchantment stage will gradually evolve in the next stage - the Power Struggle Stage.

The Power Struggle Stage

The Enchantment Stage lasts on average 6-8 months. I have worked with couples where it lasted only a few weeks before the power struggle emerged and have known other couples where it lasted 2-3 years. How long the romantic stage lasts seems to depend on how much time the couple spends with each other and the amount of "woundedness" or "baggage" the individuals bring to the relationship.

But eventually, for virtually all couples, the enchantment phase ends, the drugs wear off and are no longer secreted, the negative traits emerge with a greater impact, wounds and protections from childhood start being activated and the relationship moves into the "Power Struggle".

Sometimes also known as the "Growth Struggle" by those who like to think positively, this stage is often very stressful to a couple.

Where a partner once wanted to spend lots of time and energy in the relationship (very different than the parents who were always too busy); now the partner is quiet, pre-occupied, unavailable (very much like the family of origin).

Where a husband or wife was, in the Romantic Phase, kind and respectful and listening; now in the Power Struggle Phase, he or she becomes impatient, authoritative, unresponsive -- again somehow familiar from childhood or teen experiences.

This can be very distressing and even frightening. At some point there is often the panicky thought, "What have I done? I've married my Mom!" Or it could be Dad or grandparent or older brother or sister, or step-parent or minister, etc -- the ones I've had trouble with".

While this is not a universal experience and while the intensity and precision of this experience varies greatly, this is a very, very common and "normal" experience in intimate, committed relationships.

The Fork in the Road

At this point there is a fork in the road. One way is what happens to couples who sort of "do what comes naturally". The other way (and I'm afraid it is the Road Less Traveled) is what we hope will happen for couples who choose to try to understand what is happening in intimate, committed relationships and who choose to do the necessary "work" of the relationship. (See [How to Work on a Relationship](#)).

The First Turn in the Fork in the Road`

Couples who courageously struggle with what is happening in the Power Struggle Phase without the understanding, skills and tools will tend to do one of two things:

This is where almost fifty per cent of all married couples divorce. Someone concludes that they have made a selection error; they feel the despair of the Power Struggle and decide to end the relationship. 76% of them will try again, hopefully making a better choice. Of these 57% will again divorce.

Up to 90% of the couples who stay together report their marriages as "unsatisfactory" but choose to stay together for a variety of reasons, ranging from religious values, family values, wanting to keep the family together, financial stressors, etc. These are the couples who create the famous "U" on the marriage satisfaction charts (more about that later).

Some look at these statistics and say there is something wrong with marriage. I believe that the problem is not with marriage, but with our understanding of marriage, what it is, what is trying to happen and what to do about it. Intimate, committed relationships will go through a period that requires work and healing. We need to start seeing this as normal and desirable, not an indicator of a bad relationship. And we need to create "smart marriages" that know how to handle the Power Struggle and how to tap into the healing qualities of the relationship.

These courageous couples who stay together through the unhappiness of the Power Struggle tend to adjust by creating what is called a "parallel marriage". They both put their time and energy into other activities and interests (school, work, children, faith communities, hobbies, books, computers, etc) and the energy that goes into the relationship is minimized. They may periodically try to connect again, but they again discover that the wounds and protective patterns learned in childhood emerge. Since they do not know what to do when that happens, they move back into the Parallel Relationship.

The good news for these couples is that in the latter years of their marriage, usually after the children are in college or remarried, there tends to be a period of rapprochement. With years of maturing and growth and experience, they try again and this time many of them have a much greater success. This is the famous "U" chart on marital satisfaction. For marriage that last, the satisfaction starts high, drops to low as the Power Struggle starts. It stays low throughout the parallel marriage and then rises again in the latter part, again usually after the children are out of the home.

Does this mean that children are hard on marriages? While most parents are loath to acknowledge it, the painful truth is that children require a lot of energy, as do jobs and careers. Children are not to blame for the Power Struggle (Couples without children go through the same stages); but the time and energy it takes to make a marriage work when the skills and understanding are not present are too much for many of us.

The Second Turn in the Fork in the Road

I call this the route of the Conscious and Healing Marriage. Couples who select this route usually do so because they do not want either a divorce or a parallel marriage. And they have some understanding that the Power Struggle is "growth and healing -- trying to happen". ([See Why We Really Choose Our Mates](#)) They understand that the source of much of the relationship conflict lies in the ways we learned to cope with life's stresses as children or teens and how those coping strategies in marriage will simply not work; they will tend to replicate some of the partner's early, painful experiences--thus creating the pain of the Power Struggle.

These couples catch the vision of a relationship journey that slowly, carefully, determinedly works toward understanding and healing old hurts, creating safety and romance consciously in the relationship and growing or developing the skills and abilities needed to make this happen.

The Process

Couples who choose this route will find themselves learning a lot about themselves, about their partner, about relationships. (See *How to Work on a Relationship*). There will be articles to read, forms to fill out and a lot of honest thinking and feeling. Couples will learn and develop new skills; they will master processes that are designed to help them along the relationship journey. If you take this route you will learn how to take relationship frustrations and hurts and transform them into healing experiences. You will learn how to support your partner's growth and provide healing experiences and will understand how this can be difficult but ultimately good for you.

You will learn attitudes, skills and processes that you will practice for several years. You will discover again and again the wisdom of the speed of going slowly. Solid growth and lasting healing is a slow process and should not be hurried. That doesn't mean it will take years before it starts feeling better or getting better, but it does mean that consistent love and availability is what is required before you can relax into a higher level of safety, trust and aliveness.

The Goal

The final stage of this fork in the road is what is sometimes called "Realistic Love". It is a much higher level of marital or relationship satisfaction, but unlike the Romantic Phase, it is based on a mature, realistic love that is grounded in understanding, healing and growth. It is a goal worthy of the best you have to offer.

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