



Truly, madly, deeply: understanding the stages of relationships

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Contrary to popular myth, the course of true love never did run smooth. But understanding the stages relationships go through can make for more fulfilling and long-lasting partnerships. In classic love stories, eyes meet across a crowded room. A couple falls in love, gets married and set up a home together.

But what comes after 'happily ever after'? This is the question addressed by relationship therapist Andrew Marshall in his book, *I Love You, but I'm Not in Love With You: Seven Steps to Saving Your Relationship*. The big myth is that 'true love conquers all', that if two people are meant for each other, love will survive come what may. But this romantic ideal, fed to us by popular culture, is based on the first love-struck phase of a

relationship, not the realities of sustaining a long-term partnership.

Problems can arise if couples expect the relationship to stay the same or get stuck at one stage. Or if they don't understand the stage they're at. Others may have difficulties moving between stages, or experience a gap in needs and expectations when one person moves onto a different stage more quickly than other. Couples often assume the relationship is failing, or they're 'falling out of love', when in fact the relationship is simply entering a different stage. To enjoy more lasting and fulfilling relationships, we need to adjust our expectations of how love 'should be' and understand the natural rhythm that relationships take. Here's Marshall's 'roadmap' of the six stages that

characterise romantic relationships — from the first tentative 'I love you' to a whole lifetime together.

STAGE 1: 'BLENDING' – YEARS ONE TO ONE AND A HALF

What to expect: You're so love-struck, you may not be able to think of anything else except when you'll see each other again. In this heightened state of passion, you probably can't keep your hands off each other. Your desire for togetherness means you ignore or overlook any differences. Indeed, you're so immersed in each other, it's almost as though you're 'blending into one'. No other stage can compare in magic and excitement, but it can also be scary because of the loss of control.

Problems: One person may hold back because of fear of losing their identity. You both do anything to avoid conflict for fear of upsetting or losing each other. Rows or disagreements are seen as the end of the world because you've no experience of falling out with each other. Every new relationship needs a leap of faith. So unless there's a good reason not to, give yourself over to it and feel the magic.

STAGE 2: 'NESTING' – YEARS TWO AND THREE

What to expect: Unbridled passion is replaced by a growing sense of commitment — it's at this stage that couples commonly move in with each other. Building a home together is a bonding experience, but it's also when reality sets in and differences start to surface.

Problems: Some people struggle with the idea of commitment. You may worry about your emerging differences and even see it as a sign that you're 'falling out of love'. Habits that once seemed endearing can become annoying as familiarity grows. Domesticity and mundanity can 'reawaken

old role models from childhood' causing friction and rows. Disagreements 'go round in circles without being resolved'. Friends and family become important again, which can cause tensions. Some things seem so petty you don't want to make a scene, but don't be tempted to brush them under the carpet. Minor problems are a good testing ground for how to settle disagreements between you. Catching them early also stops problems from building up.

STAGE 3: 'SELF-AFFIRMING' – YEARS THREE AND FOUR

What to expect: From giving your all to the relationship you start to become aware of your own needs again. It's about acknowledging that however much you love each other, you don't have to do everything together. Achieving this balance between 'I' and 'we' is not always easy, but it's crucial to a healthy relationship.

Problems: If your self-esteem is low you may prefer to 'hide in a couple'. One of you may see your partner's time out as a threat or feel unable to assert their own needs. You may pretend that personal needs are not important because you fear the end of the relationship. Power struggles can come to the fore. If you've managed the minor disagreements of the last stage, you'll find it easier to work through these larger issues. Compromise is key — negotiate with your partner how much personal time is acceptable so you find the right balance.

STAGE 4: 'COLLABORATING' – YEARS FIVE TO FOURTEEN

What to expect: Insecurity is replaced by 'reliability and dependability'. You know how your partner ticks without the illusions of when you first met so it's easier to manage your differences. It's also a time when individuals feel confident and supported enough to start new ventures, or embark on joint ones with their partner, such as having children together. This can bring excitement and novelty back into the relationship, a sense of shared endeavour. But it can also introduce new pressures that are hard to manage.

Problems: Probably the hardest stage to manage because there's 'a fine line between separate activities that enrich a relationship and those that cause a couple to drift apart' and a danger that couples take each other for granted. One person may grow faster than the other, leaving their partner behind, especially if they met as teenagers or in their early 20s. One of you may be so engrossed in a new project that you neglect the other. Be generous in your support of each other, allowing space to develop individual interests. You need to believe that this will enrich your relationship, rather than undermine it.

STAGE 5: ADAPTING – FIFTEEN TO TWENTY-FIVE YEARS

What to expect: You've given up your fantasy of what your partner might be and have learned to accept them as they are. And now that you're not trying to change them, your partner is more likely to meet you halfway. Contentment and companionship deepen. At the same time, the growing self-confidence that comes with age can herald a 'sexual reawakening' — you might not have as much sex as in the early stages, but it's often more satisfying. However, it's also a time when couples commonly have to deal with life changes outside the relationship, such as children leaving home, redundancy or aging parents.

Problems: Again, there's a danger of taking each other for granted and not expressing your love for each other. If you are dissatisfied with the relationship you may feel like throwing in the towel because 'nothing's going to change'. Major life changes may make one of you 'retreat back to the safety of an earlier stage' so your needs diverge from those of your partner, or cause problems from the past to resurface. You may not confide your own problems, feeling your partner has enough on their plate. Take time to listen. You may think you know your partner inside out, but major life changes can hit in unexpected ways. Paying close attention to what they say — as well as what they leave unsaid — is more important than trying to fix it for them.

STAGE 6: RENEWING – TWENTY-FIVE YEARS PLUS

What to expect: You've come so far together, the deepening bond between you is almost like coming round full circle — except this time the closeness is based on the reality of a lifetime together rather than the promise of a shared future. Your attention shifts back to each other and away from outside factors — which is why elderly couples can often be the closest and most romantic.

Problems: You may hold back from voicing differences, particularly when others





encroach on your time together — for example, children expecting too much help with the grandchildren. Health problems can be isolating and turn closeness into suffocation. As we get older, certain traits become magnified, making us more difficult to live with. But with a little patience and understanding, you can still make this the 'best of times'.

TREAT THIS AS A 'GUIDE NOT A PRESCRIPTION'

Not all couples follow this pattern exactly. You may do some things in a different order. For example, embarking on a joint venture such as having children before you move into together. Or you may move in with each other and then decide you prefer living

separately. Similarly, stages 5 and 6 may be shorter for couples that meet later in life, or are on their second or third long-term relationship. It's also common for couples going through tough times to revert for a short while to an earlier stage, say if they get back together again after splitting up. As Marshall points out, doing things differently can make for a 'bumpier ride, but then the potential for growth is even greater'. What's more important is to understand the natural rhythm of relationships and the challenges and rewards of each stage. This can help avoid some of the problems and setbacks that can derail even the best of relationships.

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