

The Five Stages of Marriage

By Mark Goulston, M.D.

There's a joke about marriage that goes, "Where does sex take place in a marriage? Early on, anywhere and everywhere; later on, in the bedroom; and finally, in the hallway when you and your spouse walk by each other and say, 'Screw you!'"

Many married couples laugh at such jokes about how marital bliss turns into blisters, not just because they're funny, but because they ring true. Understanding these marital stages can help us tame our expectations and feel more satisfied in our relationships.

Does every couple go through these? Yes and no. Every marriage has its ups and downs. These are periods where you may question the relationship or when outside influences like financial, career, child rearing or personal issues take priority over the marriage. Healthy relationships recognize when they are entering danger zones like stage two and three and take steps to reverse the trend together. Together is the key word. Both people in the relationship are committed to making it work.

Unhealthy or unfulfilling relationships may have one person trying to keep it together and the other not caring or both still in their own world and oblivious to the needs of one another. In these cases, if action isn't taken to fix the problem, the couple becomes more distant until eventually the relationship disintegrates somewhere in stage two or three. This does not mean the damage cannot be fixed. It just means it will take twice as much effort and commitment to bring the relationship around.

Stage One: "Why don't we do it in the road?" --The Beatles

Early on in a marriage, we are swept away by being in love. We are euphorically transported from being psychologically distant from our parents and feeling intimately alone in the world to being attached at the hip and heart with our soul mate. The rush we feel in going from unconnected to viscerally attached is intoxicating. We can't get enough of each other sexually. At this stage, we love the way our partner makes us feel as much as we love him or her. We love because of everything our partner does right by and for us.

Often this stage is referred to as limerence, the period of relationship intoxication. Limerence lasts for about five years. You'll notice when the limerence wears off, many couples divorce. Suddenly marriage isn't so much fun or exciting anymore! This is why so many marriages never make it past 5 years. Couples believe the euphoria they feel in the first years will continue a lifetime. When it stops, couples mistake the missing roller coaster for a lack of love and passion. In actuality, euphoria is replaced by more solid emotions like trust, respect, empathy and admiration. The highs aren't as high and the lows aren't as low; the relationship becomes more stable, predictable and dependable.

Stage Two: "Sex in bed, missionary style -- and don't forget to turn out the lights when you're finished!"

This stage is most common for people between 25 and 50, the family years. Reality and a wide range of roles and responsibilities start to impose upon our lust and love. Whereas we used to

squeeze in the rest of life to accommodate our loving, we now find ourselves squeezing in the loving between being parents, workers, homemakers and caretakers to our aging parents. Fun still finds a way to survive in spite of our becoming slaves to our many routines, but it takes work. This is marriage's vulnerable stage. It's the time when a woman can go from feeling cherished to being taken for granted and when a man can go from feeling admired to belittled.

Getting back on track if you're mired in stage two may require an outside arbitrator like a marriage counselor, coach or clergy. If you're just starting to slide into stage two, regular couple vacations from real life (kids, work, responsibilities and other distractions) on a regular basis should help you reverse the trend. Couple vacations can be as short as three hours out to dinner, (or breakfast) or a real vacation like a ten-day cruise. The key is frequency, at least one a week and no kids, no family, and no friends...JUST THE TWO OF YOU.

The third strategy to prevent communication alienation is to establish couple time either in the morning or the evening, five or ten minutes where you just check in with each other and talk about your day. This little bit of time goes a long ways to keeping you connected, especially when you both work. Neglect to take the time and one day you may wake up one day in your forties or fifties lying next to a stranger in bed you haven't known for years, wondering what is the point and how did you grow so far apart.

Stage Three: "Screw me? Screw YOU!"

When inevitable disappointment and hurt are left unaddressed, they deteriorate into bitterness, coldness and indifference. Relating drops out of the relationship and we're left with an arrangement. We've gone from lovers to roommates -- and unhappy roommates at that. This is what happens when people don't work at their relationships. Sadly, most people don't do the work, not because they don't want to, but because they don't know how. They don't realize that getting angry at their mate or feeling sorry for themselves are actual choices that they can make or *not* make. Or, they fail to notice that instead of jumping to conclusions and down their spouse's throat, they can try to listen to all the facts.

Stage three is volatile and it can be the loneliest part of your life. There is no quick fix to reversing stage three. Most couples require a counselor to assist in opening up to each other. The therapy is much like peeling an onion. Below the crispy distain and catty remarks are and many layers of anger, hate and disgust. It takes months to peel through these layers to the heart. Within the heart most couples discover a frightened little girl and a terrified little boy. It is within this heart the deepest fears lie: her fear of being no longer cherished (desired/wanted) and his of losing her respect. The little girl is hurt because she feels like he doesn't love her anymore, desire her anymore or care about what she feels. She's feels neglected, unappreciated and lonely. She is invisible to him, except when she screams, criticizes or complains. This negativity, though it gets his attention causes him to pull even further away. She reads this as "He doesn't care what I say" and cycle for attention continues pushing them further and further apart.

The little boy shows bravado to the outside, but inside her nagging, criticism and indifference chip away at his soul. She once thought of him as her hero. Now the little boy only hears what's wrong with him. Can't he do anything right? This anger, criticism and complaining translates to him, "She has no respect for me." And if she no longer respects him, how will she ever want him again?

If you are mired in step 3, here are some steps to BEGIN working on your relationship:

- 1) Realize that *working* means doing what doesn't come naturally or even comfortably (that's why it's called work) to help something outside your own personal needs;
- 2) Probably the most unnatural, but beneficial thing to do is stop yourself when you're having trouble in your relationship and look at the problem *and you* from the other person's point of view. You may discover that you've been so busy being frustrated, hurt and disappointed *by* them that you didn't see how you could be frustrating, hurtful and disappointing *to* them. Just realizing this will take the steam out of your resentment and make you more conciliatory. To take it a step further and communicate this to your partner with full humility is likely to cause her or her to reciprocate;
- 3) When you find yourself feeling let down by your partner, immediately think of what you're grateful to them for;
- 4) When you're feeling high and mighty and a bit self-righteous (another closeness killer), immediately think of flawed character traits that you have that bring you back down to earth; finally
- 5) When all else fails and an argument is not going anywhere good, make your default position forgiveness and trust.

Do the work to prevent drowning in stage three or head off the issues before they become destructive. Around age 50, you'll enter stage four.

Stage Four: "Still in love"

This is what is possible when we continue to feed our relationships with tender loving care, counteract our tendency to blame problems on our mate, and choose to think of why we are grateful to our partner. People in this stage do indeed have disagreements that are not easy to resolve. Yet, rather than holding on to their anger, they instead choose to forgive and trust. Armed with these tools to fight for love, we easily learn to live the lesson of mature and lasting love: loving someone in spite of what he or she does wrong.

Stage Five: "Till death do you do part."

If we make it through stage three or four, which usually occur when we are in our 50s, the final stage of marriage is ours to enjoy when we're in our 60s and beyond. This has a lot to do with giving up the non-winnable fight in our 50s to be who we were in our 20s and 30s, or perhaps letting go of our need to make that final big killing in our careers. We realize we can continue to want what we don't have and be unhappy, or else want what we *do* have and be content. Instead of focusing on the love that's missing, we begin to see and appreciate the love that's present. We realize that we're not settling for less, we're waking up to the more that has always been there.