

The Five Stages of Close Relationship

DRS. Gay & Kathlyn Hendricks

Discover how relationships unfold, why folks get stuck along the way and what we could do differently to create the kind of relationship we really wanted.

Five predictable stages relationships pass through as they develop. If you and your partner know what to expect, you can enter each stage with an attitude of discovery rather than being bowled over by the ride that all relationships go on.

How and why the five stages unfold in close, intimate relationship. Look at the unconscious choices that can cause relationships to falter and the conscious choices that can take you and your partner into more intimacy, creativity and love.

There is considerable overlap and cycling between the stages.

Stage 1: The Romance Stage

The first stage of close relationship is the Romance Stage. This is the stage where you meet another person and experience a strong attraction on the physical, mental, emotional and/or spiritual level.

You begin dating and everything your new partner says, does and thinks seems magical. You want to be with, call, text or think about him or her all the time. Endorphins are flooding your bloodstream. You find yourself walking around with a huge grin on your face and may even forget to sleep or eat.

The Romance Stage usually lasts from 5-6 months. For some couples it is a much shorter period of time before their unconscious patterns and dynamics begin to surface and sour the sweetness of the romance stage.

And this is what has to happen. Here's why when two people come together in a close, intimate relationship, both of them begin to experience more energy and love than either of them had on their own before they came together.

This increase in energy and love has the effect of pulling to the surface any unresolved, unloved patterns in each person. We all bring past conditioning from our earlier relationships (particularly with our mother and father, or other primary caregivers) into our adult relationships with our partners. For example, one or both partners may have the unconscious need to control, criticize, seek approval, conceal feelings or withhold love in the relationship.

It's important to know that the emergence of unconscious patterns in each partner is a to-be-expected outcome of the Romance Stage. When you and your partner realize this, you can both move into the next phase of your relationship with more confidence. Rather than being freaked out by the unconscious dynamics and strong feelings that are playing out between the two of you, you can recognize it all as part of the natural evolution of your relationship.

The passing of the Romance Stage presents you and your partner with the opportunity to learn -- as a couple -- how to create a reliable foundation for learning and love in your relationship, by consciously moving through the uncomfortable issues that are surfacing. The good news is that you can return to the Romance Stage again and again, at deeper, more genuine-loving levels, once you learn how to navigate the other stages that follow.

Exercise:

What was your romance stage like with your partner?

What sensations(s) are you noticing in your body as you remember your romance stage?

How long did it last?

What troublesome patterns began to emerge for you during your romance stage? For you partner?

What feelings (anger, fear, sadness...) began to emerge for you? For your partner?

What sensations(s) are you noticing in your body now?

Stage 2: The Inevitable

You and your partner's troublesome patterns inevitably move into the foreground, resulting in power struggles, conflict and stuckness. It is especially helpful to know what to expect at this stage so you and your partner can understand what is happening and learn how to move through it as gracefully as possible with each other.

These unconscious patterns, which were submerged when the Romance Stage started, can emerge slowly or quickly and cause conflict and struggle between you and your partner.

For example, one or both of you may have the unconscious need to control, criticize, seek approval, conceal feelings or withhold love in your relationship.

When patterns such as these begin to play out, partners often think that something has gone wrong. It's not uncommon to have thoughts like "Oh my god, I've made a terrible mistake. What was I thinking? Can I trade this person in for another person?"

This stage is aptly named, because it is inevitable that the increased energy and love that you and your partner are feeling will bring into the light any troublesome patterns and dynamics that you each need to resolve to move to a deeper level of intimacy and love in your relationship.

Some couples try to hold on to the Romance stage and avoid The Inevitable, but no couple can do this for very long. It's like trying to keep winter or spring from arriving. It's going to come, so rather than resist, you can prepare for it and open your consciousness to it as it arrives.

Whereas the Romance stage is like flying high in a plane, light and free with your partner, The Inevitable is when you and your partner land and go to the baggage claim and are shocked by the suitcases full of issues you've each carried into your relationship from the past.

In this stage partners begin playing out troublesome relationship patterns from the past that were set into motion long before they met.

These patterns are usually fueled by unresolved trust, self-esteem, abandonment or authority issues in you and/or your partner. These underlying issues are usually accompanied by strong emotions like fear, anger and sadness.

Many couples have no idea what is occurring at this stage except that the relationship that once felt so sweet and promising has turned sour.

Societal myths perpetuate the idea that once the Romance Stage is over, relationship is about struggle, compromise, settling for less or just getting along with your partner. But once you know that you and your partner's troublesome patterns will emerge in the Romance Stage, this awareness leads to an entirely new possibility.

Rather than continuing to play out your unconscious dynamics with each other, you can become aware of them, tell the truth about them, take responsibility for them, love them and learn how to shift them. All these conscious choices allow you and your partner to move beyond The Inevitable and into deeper, felt-sense of intimacy, trust and love.

Many couples become adversaries or even enemies as their old, unconscious dramas unfold in The Inevitable stage. Actually couples can become allies in this stage, supporting each other in discovering, loving and resolving any unconscious patterns and dynamics they have brought into their union with each other.

As allies, the issues that emerge between you and your partner during The Inevitable stage become grist for the mill, the very things that allow each of you -- and your relationship -- to evolve to a new level.

That's why it's vital to treat this often unnerving stage as an essential part of the development of a true conscious relationship with your partner. When each of you know that this stage is a springboard for the evolution of your relationship, you can move through it with less resistance and more confidence.

You can even enjoy your growth and have fun along the way.

Exercise:

What troublesome patterns/issues are emerging in your Inevitable Stage with your partner?

What sensations(s) are you noticing in your body as you as you think about these patterns/issues?

How do you feel (angry, afraid or sad) about these issues/patterns?

Are you willing to move through The Inevitable stage in ways that are kind and loving for you and your partner?

Are you willing to use everything in your relationship for transformation?

Stage 3: The Choice Point

As the intensity of feelings and troublesome patterns increases between you and your partner, your relationship moves to the next stage, known as the Choice Point.

At this stage you and your partner will either make unconscious choices that take the two of you into more conflict and struggle, or you will make conscious choices that take you into more learning, intimacy and love in your relationship.

Imagine you are walking down a path in the woods. You come to a fork where the path splits in two directions. To the right, there is a hand-carved wooden sign that says "Conscious Path."

To the left, there is a sign that says, "Unconscious Path." When you and your partner are at the Choice Point, you get to choose which path you will go down.

For many thousands of years human beings have been going down the unconscious path, simply because that was what was one generation modeled for the next.

In fact, most couples do not realize that they have a choice. So they head down the unconscious path again and again, and end up feeling stuck and unfulfilled in their relationship.

Many couples are now realizing that they can take a different path -- the conscious path of relationship. This less-traveled, yet infinitely more rewarding path requires an openness to learning on the part of each partner. It asks you to become aware of your feelings as well as how your unconscious patterns sabotage your intimacy with your partner.

For example, say you've been together with your partner for a while and you start to feel a strong fear of abandonment, which causes you to try to control your partner in overt and covert ways.

You are at the Choice Point. You choose to withhold your experience from your partner, pull back your energy from the relationship, then project the issue onto your partner and blame him or her for being the source of it. This withhold-withdraw-project pattern runs rampant at the Choice Point and is what keeps most couples from moving forward in their relationship. When this happens, you have gone down the unconscious path.

To go down the conscious path, you do something very different. You become aware of what you are feeling, you tell the truth about it to your partner and you take full responsibility for the issue.

Here's how it might sound: "Honey, I want to let you know that lately I've feeling afraid of being abandoned by you. I can see how my fear is causing me to pull back in our relationship, and to become controlling with you. I want you to know that I take full

responsibility for what I'm feeling and doing. I'm open to learning what this is about for me, and for resolving this issue completely."

That's the kind of communication that can transform a relationship.

It's important to remember that the Choice Point comes around again and again in relationship. Your relationship dramas with your partner will repeat, so you get chance after chance to head down the conscious path and into more love and creativity with your partner.

Exercise:

What are troublesome issues or patterns are coming to a head in your relationship with your partner?

What choices have you been making that take you down the unconscious path of relationship?

What choices can you make that will take you down the conscious path of relationship?

Stage 4: The Unconscious Path

Remember, there is considerable overlap and cycling between the stages.

For example, you might find yourself swinging back and forth between the Romance Stage and The Inevitable. You might wake up feeling incredible love for your partner, but by the end of the morning wonder whether you will be able to stand him or her for another minute.

In the same way, you may find yourself swinging back and forth between The Inevitable and the Choice Point. In one moment, you may feel totally stuck on some issue with your partner -- then you remember one of the conscious choices that can allow you to get unstuck and change the destiny of your relationship.

The troublesome patterns of relating that you and your partner brought into your relationship come to a head at the Choice Point. At this pivotal point, you and your partner will either make unconscious choices that create more disharmony in your relationship, or you will make conscious choices that take you into more learning, intimacy and love.

Most couples don't know that the Choice Point exists, so they continue to make unconscious choices that sabotage their relationship and lead to more conflict. In other words, they go down the Unconscious Path, which turns into the next stage of their relationship.

For example, you and your partner are enjoying a fantastic Romance Stage. Then, you begin to notice that whenever your partner wants something different than you do in your relationship, you feel angry.

So you create overt power struggles with him or her, or you get sneaky and try to manipulate your partner in order to get what you want.

Instead of revealing what you are feeling and the pattern you are noticing in yourself, you don't say anything. As a result, you pull back from your relationship and begin to mentally and/or verbally criticize your partner.

The choices to withhold your experience, pull back and criticize your partner are all unconscious choices that will take you down the Unconscious Path. Choices such as these create more distance between you and your partner and result in more dissatisfaction in your relationship.

Over time, if you continue to go down the Unconscious Path, your relationship will falter even more. You can expect more disconnection, less aliveness and more struggle.

In that same situation, another set of choices can take you down the Conscious Path of relationship. Here's how it might sound:

"Honey, I want to let you know that I've been feeling angry when you want something different from me in our relationship. So I've been creating power struggles with you and manipulating you to get what I want, and I feel sad about that. I want you to know that I take full responsibility for what I'm feeling and doing. I'm open to learning what this is about for me, and for resolving these issues completely."

That's the kind of communication that can change a relationship.

Unfortunately, most couples have little or no training in skills like these that allow them to navigate the Choice Point and choose the Conscious Path. These skills include emotional awareness, the ability to communicate transparently about your experience with your partner, taking healthy responsibility for an issue and opening up to more learning and love.

Instead, most couples have learned to deny their feelings and go numb, withhold important communications from each other, blame each other for issues that emerge, defend their positions and withhold love.

These are all actions that we saw modeled in relationships around us as we were growing up. Our body-minds absorbed these patterns as children and now we play them out as adults, causing us to go down the Unconscious Path with our partners.

Couples who have been heading down the Unconscious Path for a while often report feeling like "roommates," or "ships passing in the night." The end result of going down this path is emotional, spiritual and even physical divorce from your partner.

The good news is that even if you have been going down the Unconscious Path for years, you can step back onto the Conscious Path at any time.

Exercise:

What troublesome issues or patterns are coming to a head in your relationship with your partner?

What choices have you been making that take you down the unconscious path of relationship?

What choices can you make that will take you down the conscious path of relationship?

Stage 5: The Conscious Path

Whether you've been going down the Unconscious Path with your partner for hours, days or years, you can step back onto the Conscious Path at any time.

Some of the key choices and skills that allow you and your partner to choose the Conscious Path and move into deeper intimacy and love.

Being Open to Learning

Many couples use their interactions to be right, defend their positions and make each other wrong. Each of these choices will take you down the Unconscious Path.

When you use your relationship interactions as opportunities to learn, you move down the Conscious Path with your partner. The next time an issue surfaces in your relationship, ask yourself: "Hmmm...I wonder what I can learn from this." "Why is that happening FOR me?"

Emotional Awareness

To be able to choose the Conscious Path, it's vital that you become aware of what you are feeling, particularly your anger, fear and sadness. This involves allowing your awareness to rest on the sensations you experience in your body.

Anger is often felt in the neck and jaw area. Fear is often a racy, queasy feeling in the stomach. Sadness is often a heaviness or hollowness in the heart. Being able to identify sensations and feelings puts you in a position to communicate transparently with your partner about your emotions.

Transparent Communication

Concealing your feelings, actions, desires and dreams from your partner will take you down The Unconscious Path. Communicating these things to your partner in non-blameful, loving ways allows you to step back on the Conscious Path of Relationship.

For example, think of something you want that you've been afraid to communicate to your partner and say it to him or her. "I really want to _____ (go away with you for a weekend without the kids, go back to school, get a dog...)"

Healthy Responsibility

Blaming your partner (or yourself) for any issue that emerges in your relationship will also take you down the Unconscious Path. You can step back onto the Conscious Path by taking full, healthy responsibility for any issue that arises in your relationship.

Here's how it might sound: "You know that issue we've been stuck on lately, I take full responsibility for creating it and for resolving it completely."

Loving What Emerges

Relationship is always showing us the next thing we need to learn to love about our self and our partner. Withdrawing love from your own experience and from whatever experience your partner is having will take you down the Unconscious Path.

Loving whatever is occurring in yourself, your partner and your relationship (or starting by loving yourself for not liking it) will take you down the Conscious Path and lead to an easeful resolution of issues and concerns.

Appreciation

Verbally and/or mentally criticizing your partner will also take you down the Unconscious Path. Spoken and non-verbal appreciation (such as loving touch and acts of assistance) will take you down the Conscious Path with your partner.

On a daily or even hourly basis, think of what you appreciate about your partner and communicate it to him or her. For example: "I really appreciate _____ (the sound of your laugh, the way you listen to me, the way your mind works...)"

There are many other ways to head down the Conscious Path with your partner, including: breathing and moving in ways that feel good, choosing playfulness, listening generously, expressing your creativity and supporting your partner's creative expression.

All of these choices allow you and your partner to move into a new, expanded version of your initial Romance Stage, filled with deeper intimacy, passion and love.

This new Romance Stage marks the return to the cycle of the Five Stages, and as before, will draw to the surface any issues that still remain for you and your partner to resolve.

Only this time, because you are each more familiar with the terrain, you can move through The Inevitable and Choices Point stages more quickly and easily, by continuing to make choices that take you down the Conscious Path.

As you cycle through the five stages again and again, you'll find that fewer and fewer issues remain for you and your partner to resolve. You'll spend less time in drama and struggle with each other, and more time in the flow of creativity and love.

With an on-going commitment to practicing the skills of conscious relationship, you and your partner can enter a new paradigm for your relationship, where you discover there is no end to the love you can experience together.

Exercise:

Are you open to learning from all your interactions with your partner?

What sensations and feelings are you aware of in your body right now?

What important communication(s) have you withheld from your partner?

What issue(s) have you avoided taking responsibility for in your relationship?

What most needs to be loved in yourself, and your partner?

What do you appreciate about your partner?