



Russ Hardesty, Ph.D.

At Which Stage Do Your Relationships Stop?

Ignorance is sometimes considered bliss. Ignorance gives in to the unconscious self. Emotions reside there, too, and we all know that love is a powerful emotion. This means we can often get “stuck” in patterns that define our romantic relationships and, rather than give any conscious attention to them, we remain ignorant of our own patterns. We spend years thinking there’s something wrong with the other people we’ve been involved with instead of delving into what it is, unconsciously, that we think about ourselves in a romantic relationship.

By not understanding our patterns, we simply repeat the history again and again, not only in romance, but in relationships with our family and friends.

The stage of romantic love – where it’s healthy and where it’s not ...

In all my years of marriage counseling and individual therapy, I’ve come to the conclusion that there are just 7 factors or stages that can occur in romantic relationships. If you’re in a healthy,

supportive relationship, you’re rarely going to experience all 7 stages – this model of mine covers the good, the bad *and* the ugly. They are:

Attraction

Appreciation

Habituation

Expectation

Threshold

Rationalization

The Land of Limbo

How you act, react and “show up” within any of these 7 stages determines the course of every one of your romantic relationships.

Now, you might unconsciously or consciously have very strong and supportive paradigms in your head that support healthy partnerships, and this will be reflected in a long-term, healthy and happy relationship with a partner or spouse. Commonly, though, we have unconscious patterns of thought in our heads – patterns as a result of past experiences or even by merely hearing or witnessing events around romantic relationships through our parents, family and closest peers. These unconscious patterns of thought are so deeply imbedded that we often remain ignorant when they kick in and begin to cause trouble in any one of the stages I’ve listed above.

Let’s do a brief exploration of these stages first ...

1. Attraction

Attraction actually occurs first at an unconscious level. Our physical senses are attuned to its programming – we are only attracted to a specific look or are drawn to a certain kind of energy

because we have paradigms deep in our subconscious that remember pleasure, comfort and other positive emotions around a certain “look!”

2. Appreciation

When you find something you're attracted to, you're appreciative! Appreciation of the object of our attraction occurs immediately. This stage of the relationship is critical if it is to become a living thing. This appreciation is expressed by noticing both physical and personality attributes that are attractive.

From there, appreciation may be expressed in various ways, directly in a statement like, "You are so beautiful" to non-verbal responses that indicate approval or acceptance. The relationship is ripe with romance – a time for discovery – a time for surprise. "Noticing" is fundamental for this stage of the relationship. Two lovers may spend hours just looking into to each other's eyes – not unlike the 'looking' of infant and mother. Hours are spent talking about things that have never been important before. More hours can be spent on the telephone and in non-sexual touching. This stage is often referred to as "falling in love."

3. Move over, Appreciation. Habituation is moving in

"Love at first sight" and "Love lost" are the themes many songs, ballads and writings attest to the unconscious state of 'falling in' or 'falling out' of love. These experiences seem to victimize and tantalize most everyone. So much attention is given to either of these stages of love that we don't commonly recognize it as movement from the Attraction and Appreciation phase into the Habituation phase.

Now, Habituation isn't as bad as it sounds – in fact, this Habituation phase is absolutely critical for the ongoing survival of the relationship. Some people, however, are hooked on Attraction and

Appreciation – they don't know how to go further into a relationship that is more about give-and-take and partnership. As soon as the “newness” wears off, they're off – to another partner or experience that continues to feed those needs.

Those who choose to stay and see this stage through are moving in the right direction. See, the critical elements of this Habituation portion allow both individuals to function in essential activities of livelihood and self-care – in other words, life interferes again. The hours spent on the telephone and in each others' arms have to be shortened at some point in time if any of us are to earn money, grocery shop, maintain friendships, and continue with activities that defined us as individuals before our “falling in love” stage. It's healthy – it begins to mix the “real” lives of its partners to determine if the relationship can continue on more than co-centric focus on one another.

Granted, moving briskly and abruptly into all the activities you used to do before you met this wonderful person can have serious and immediate negative effects – but the healthy and vibrant relationship is like a wonderful entrée with the right blend of “real life” ingredients to further expand and grow your new relationship. All Attraction and Appreciation wears even the most hopeless romantics out, while too much Habituation will bore you to death. A sustainable and healthy relationship requires liberal amounts of continued Attraction and Appreciation anchored in a smaller amount of Habituation.

As you can guess, too much Habituation carries the potential to bring a slow death to the earlier part of the relationship. How you handle Habituation often reflects the other programs (or paradigms) that are resident on the hard drive of your subconscious. As an example, when you've decided to spend a Friday night with your friends and have yet to discuss this with your new

partner, I can already guess that you've got several "results" of that *pending* discussion floating up from your subconscious mind into your conscious mind. Your mind immediately reverts back to past experience ... or witnessed past experience ... or experiences you've just been told about that you've never lived yourself ... and it sets up Expectation about how this discussion will go. You haven't even had the discussion, and your mind is already flagging you on what the eventual outcome will be.

Now, you might expect the "insertion of regularly scheduled life" to go smoothly ... and, if that's your paradigm, that's what you will attract. On the other hand, if you're expecting static or fighting or hurt feelings ... you will reproduce that event again.

As you move past that first "announcement" that temporarily separates the two of you, you're on your way to molding and melding a partnership from two individual lives. That's a great thing – to a certain point. When the portions of Attraction and Appreciation are overpowered with Habituation, the relationship begins to suffer from a case of not noticing or neglect. I can't tell you how many individuals and couples I've worked with to better stabilize this "see-saw" of growing Partnership and maintained Individuality – it *can* be done, and the results are really tremendous. It's a neat process to see people work, both individually and together, toward this better end.

If the healthy attitude, action and response to Habituation does not exist in a relationship, things can go downhill pretty quickly. The paradigms impressed upon the subconscious during those critical formative experiences you had together begin to gain a stronger voice ... you or your partner might begin saying, "How come you don't do this anymore?" or "We used to do this together all the time. What happened to that?" Those glory hours, days and months of "falling in

love” re-assert themselves. Suddenly, they want to know what happened to the “love.”

Expectations begin to be based on lost or unexpressed Attraction and Appreciation.

It is common that partners begin to mirror their family of origin as they progress farther into this phase. What did they see growing up when Habituation set in? Where was Expectation realized or not realized? These patterns emerge and one or both parties appear to be different from the person that seemed so alive and loving in the earlier phases of the relationship.

Sustainable and vibrant ... or degenerative and dying?

The relationship can be either a sustainable vibrant living entity or become degenerative and dying. The sustainable vibrant relationship is cyclical in nature – it has its ups and downs, but it has a core of strength and commitment that keeps it alive.

The degenerative relationship, on the other hand, is linear. The linear nature of a relationship eventually leads to a stage of Expectation, a time of noticing that which no longer exists.

Some people with high levels of tolerance can stay in this kind of relationship to their dying days. They're not happy, the partnership isn't growing, but they stay.

For others, once the relationship becomes linear and the discomfort level *exceeds* the tolerance capacity for either of the partners, a small or insignificant occurrence will become the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel's back.” A threshold of discomfort or pain has been reached and the next stage of the relationship has begun.

Should I stay or should I go?

This stage of the relationship begins with an emotional vacillation that may be described as some form of insanity. With the “last straw” comes a tremendous turmoil of “being in” or “being out” of relationship. The energy required for this stage of the relationship may interfere with daily routines, job performance, and self-care. Unhealthy or bizarre behaviors may also emerge and, in some cases, endanger the well being of self and/or others.

This phase sets into motion a mental process that I refer to as “rationalizing.” You’ve probably done it yourself, and you’ve witnessed plenty of friends in this phase as well – you begin to “excuse” your falling-in-love-phase.

Rationalizing re-writes the history of the early stages of Attraction and Appreciation. Human are rational beings seeking to justify and make sense of their actions and behavior, even if nonsensical. You cannot exit a relationship that originated in Attraction and Appreciation with just cause! The re-written may include a psychological evaluation; statements about dysfunctional families; admissions of immaturity; not knowing what one was doing; dishonesty and so on until leaving is the only thing a “rational person” could do. In fact, it would take a crazy person to remain in such a “sick” relationship, right?

Having reached this conclusion, the newly “rationalized” human can go in one of two directions – find the “Exit” door, or enter the Land of the Standing Dead, also known as Limbo.

The Land of Limbo doesn’t have a lot of discomfort, but it does offer ample amounts of numbness. It is possible for a couple be together 50 years, 48 of which are spent in the Land of Limbo after 2 spent mostly in Habituation after a brief interlude of Attraction and Appreciation.

Some end their tenure in this life form in Limbo, while others exit the relationship physically – divorce in one form or another.

You don't look like a Limbo person to me.

If you've been in Limbo Land at some point in your life, you wouldn't be reading this article if you weren't ready for a one-way ticket out. Or, perhaps you feel that your romantic relationships reach a certain stage and never go any further – and you're ready to interrupt that pattern. These stages I've outlined aren't supposed to depress you – they're guidelines to consciously work within to develop new or existing relationships to much greater, deeper levels.

For 25 years, I have taught individuals and couples how to move into, recover or maintain healthy, creative and loving relationships. *Anyone* can create a viable and healthy relationship with a significant other – the process is the same! I'll be distributing more material about this very process through MentorsOnLove.com (also known as LOASinglesMentors.com) and look forward to helping you with any questions of the process you might have.



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Russ Hardesty is an Independent Licensed LifeSuccess Consultant - and a business partner of Bob Proctor and Paul Martinelli, of LifeSuccess Productions. A Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma and license as a professional counselor opens many opportunities of service.

Russ Hardesty has helped thousands have richer, happier, and more abundant lives during 43 years of service as a teacher, trainer, speaker, coach and therapist. Russ brings the gift of healing and hope to those who want to Be, Do and Have more in their lives. He uses his creativity and insight to bring relevance and empowerment to his workshops and seminars. Russ's Purpose Statement, "I am a free and loving man

committed to being used by God to assist men and women to know their purpose and to experience wholeness, health, prosperity and their holy nature.”

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