

MARRIAGE STAGES Rx.

“Prescription for Keeping Your Marriage on Track Through the Stages”

Here are some ideas you will find very useful discussing as a couple.

Five Stages of Marriage

Stage 1: Passion prevails.

Like people, marriages also go through different developmental stages and predictable crises. Everyone is familiar with the infancy stage of marriage—the "honeymoon period"—but what happens after that? Because people are unfamiliar with the emotional terrain, the normal hills and valleys of marriage, predictable transitional periods are often misunderstood, causing overreactions. Those who manage to weather these universal stormy periods usually come out the other side with greater love and commitment to their spouses. That's why I offer you a marriage map.

The marriage map is meant to give you a broad overview of the experiences most couples have when they negotiate the marital terrain. As you read through these stages and developmental passages, don't get too hung up on the timetable. Some couples move through stages more quickly than others, and some bypass certain stages entirely.

Head over heels in love, you can't believe how lucky you are to have met your one and only star-crossed lover. Everything other than the relationship quickly fades into the background. Much to your amazement, you have so much in common: You enjoy the same hobbies, music, restaurants, and movies. You even like each other's friends. You can finish each other's sentences. When you pick up the phone to call your partner, s/he is already on the line calling you. You are completely in sync. When little, annoying things pop up, they're dismissed and overlooked.

At no other time in your relationship is your feeling of well-being and physical desire for each other as intense as it is during this romantic period. The newness and excitement of the relationship stimulates the production of chemicals in your bodies that increase energy and positive attitudes, and heighten sexuality and sensuality. Never, never, have you felt this way before. "It must be love," you tell yourself. While in this naturally produced state of euphoria, you decide to commit to spending the rest of your lives together. "And why not," you reason, "we're perfect together." And marry, you do. Unless you elope or opt for a simple, judge's chambers-style wedding, your euphoria takes a temporary nose-dive as you plan and execute your wedding. Once you get past the superhuman challenges of dealing with family politics and hosting a modern-day wedding, your starry-eyed obsession with each other re-emerges and takes you through the honeymoon period. And for a period of time, nothing could be more glorious. But soon, your joy gives way to an inevitable earth-shattering awakening; marriage isn't at all what you expected it to be.

Stage 2: What was I thinking?

In some ways, Stage 2 is the most difficult because it is here that you experience the biggest fall. After all, how many miles is it from bliss to disillusionment? Millions. What accounts for this drastic change in perspective? For starters, reality sets in. The little things start to bother you. You realize that your spouse has stinky breath in the morning, spends way too long on the toilet, leaves magazines and letters strewn on the kitchen counter, never wraps food properly before it's put in the refrigerator, and to top things off, snores. There are big things too.

Although you once thought you and your spouse were kindred spirits, you now realize that there are many differences between you. Although you share interests in hobbies, you disagree about how often you want to participate in them. You like the same kinds of restaurants, but you enjoy eating out often while your partner prefers staying home and saving money. Your tastes in music are compatible, but you prefer quiet time in the evening while your mate enjoys blasting the stereo. You have many common friends, but you can't agree on which nights to see them. You're confused about what's going on. You argue. You knew life wouldn't always be a bed of roses, but you never thought all you'd get was thorns. You feel disillusioned and you wonder if you made a mistake.

Ironically, it is in the midst of feeling at odds with your once kindred spirit that you are faced with making all sorts of life-altering decisions. For example, it is now that you decide whether and when to have children, where to live, who will support the family, who will handle the bills, how your free time will be spent, how in-laws fit into your lives, and who will do the cooking. Just at the time when a team spirit would have come in mighty handy, spouses often start to feel like opponents. So they spend the next decade or so trying to "win" and get their partners to change, which triggers Stage 3.

Stage 3: Everything would be great if you changed.

In this stage of marriage, most people believe that there are two ways of looking at things, your spouse's way and your way, also known as the Right Way. Even if couples begin marriage with the enlightened view that there are many valid perspectives on any given situation, they tend to develop severe amnesia quickly. And rather than brainstorm creative solutions, couples battle tenaciously to get their partners to admit they are wrong. That's because every point of disagreement can define the marriage. Do it my way, and the marriage will work, do it yours and it won't.

When people are in this state of mind, they have a hard time understanding why their spouses are so glued to their way of seeing things. They assume it must be out of stubbornness, spitefulness or a need to control. What they don't realize is that their spouses are thinking the same thing about them! Over time, both partners dig in their heels deeper. Little or no attempt is made to see the other's point of view for fear of losing face or losing a sense of self.

Now is the time when many people face a fork the marital road. They don't want to go on this way. Three choices become apparent. Convinced they've tried everything, some people give up. They tell themselves they've fallen out of love or married the wrong person. Divorce seems like the only logical solution. Other people resign themselves to the status quo and decide to lead separate lives. Ultimately, they live unhappily ever after. But there are others who decide that it's time to end the cold war and begin to investigate healthier and more satisfying ways of interacting. Although the latter option requires a major leap of faith, those who take it are the fortunate ones because the best of marriage is yet to come.

Stage 4: That's just the way any partner is.

In Stage 4 we finally come to terms with the fact that we are never going to see eye to eye with our partners about everything and we have to figure out what we must do to live more peaceably. We slowly accept that no amount of reasoning, begging, nagging, yelling, or threatening changes our partners minds. We look to others for suggestions; we seek religious counsel, talk to close friends and family, **attend marital therapy**, read self-help books, or take a relationship seminar. Those of us who are more private look inward and seek solutions there.

We more readily forgive our spouse for his/her hard-headedness, and recognize that we aren't exactly easy to live with either. We dare to ask ourselves whether there's something about our own behaviour that could use shaping up. When disagreements occur, we make more of an effort to put ourselves in our partners shoes and, much to our surprise, we have a bit more compassion and understanding. Fights happen less frequently and when they occur, they're not as intense or as emotional as in the earlier years of marriage. We know how to push our partner's buttons and we consciously decide not to. When we slip, we get better at making up because we remind ourselves that life is short and very little is worth the pain of disharmony. And because we're smart enough to have reached this stage, we reap the benefits of the fifth, and final, stage.

Stage 5: Together, at last!

It is really a tragedy that half of all couples who wed never get to Stage 5, when all the pain and hard work of the earlier stages really begins to pay off. Since you are no longer in a struggle to define who you are and what the marriage should be, there is more harmony. Even if you always have loved your spouse, you start to notice how much you are really liking him or her again. And then the strangest thing starts to happen. You realize that the alien who abducted your spouse in Stage 2 has been kind enough to return him/her. You are pleased to discover that the qualities you saw in your partner so very long ago never really vanished. This renews your feelings of connection.

By the time you reach Stage 5, you have a shared history. And although you'd both agree that marriage hasn't been easy, you can feel proud that you've weathered the storms. You appreciate your partner's sense of commitment and dedication to making your marriage last. You also look back and feel good about your accomplishments as a couple, a family, and as individuals. You feel more secure about yourself as a person and you begin to appreciate your differences. And what you don't appreciate, you accept. You feel closer and more connected. If you have children, they're older and more independent, allowing you to focus on your marriage again. You have come full circle. The feeling you were longing for during those stormy periods is back, at last. You're home again.

I'm certain that if more couples realized that there really is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they'd be more willing to tough it out through the downpour. The problem is, most people fool themselves into thinking that whatever stage they are in at the moment, is where they will be forever. That can be a depressing thought when you're in the midst of hard times. And in marriage, there are lots of hard times—unexpected problems with infertility, the births of children (marital satisfaction goes down with the birth of each child), the challenges of making a family, children leaving home, infidelity, illnesses, deaths of close friends and family members.

Also, it's important to remember that people generally don't go through these stages sequentially. It's three steps forward and two steps back. Just when you begin to feel more at peace with each other in Stage 4, a crisis occurs and you find yourselves slipping back to Stage 3. But if you've been fortunate enough to have visited Stage 4, sanity sets in eventually, and you get back on track. The quality and quantity of love you feel for each other are never stagnant... (Source: Weiner-Davis)

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