

## Chapter 4

### Types of Relationship

Relationships are mysterious. They grow in a spontaneous way out of our hopes and dreams, fantasies and needs. No one teaches us how to choose the right mate, how to create a life-long bond. We absorb impressions of relationship by osmosis throughout our early life. Then we try to fit those images onto the reality of living with another person. For some it is a miracle; for many it is hard labor.

After a honeymoon period we can find ourselves caught up by the irritations and hassles of living. Our spouse does not think or act as we expect. Married life and living together are much more complicated and puzzling than we hoped. There is joy and companionship but also fights and silences. Often we do not know why difficulties arise or what to do when they do. We hope the bonds of love will overcome our differences. Often they do—but just as often they are not enough.

Certainly in the beginning, few of us understand what it means to build a whole life with another person. As we saw in the previous chapters, we all bring psychological baggage into the relationship: unrealistic expectations, odd familial patterns, incompatible attachment styles and our own quirks and irritating habits.

While the relationship may appear harmonious, there are always hidden strains when sharing physical and emotional space. Without exception, we are all somewhat difficult to live with—all of us. We have to build unbreakable connection and acceptance with our loved one in order to face inevitable difficulties and grow through them. To begin that process, we first have to gain a little more understanding of the kind of relationship we are currently experiencing.

Each couple and each relationship is different. However in general, marriages tend to conform to particular patterns depending on how much they have developed. Inevitably, relationships start out *undeveloped* and immature. As we see below, if certain issues are not faced and resolved, these developing marriages tend to settle into negative patterns of relating.

A proportion of developing relationships grow towards maturity. This may be a relatively trouble-free process or it may be difficult and tortuous. However they do it, these *mature* couples work together to achieve a happy marriage. A small group of mature relationships evolves further to become positively *transformative* for the individuals involved. This is what we need to aspire towards, whether we know it or not. Below, I give a general description and examples of three kinds of relationship: *Developing, Mature and Transformative*.

### **Types of Relationship**

While we can theoretically distinguish these three kinds of relationship, in the real world they tend to be mixed up. Developing relationships often have islands of maturity and seeds of transformation. Mature relationships are fairly common and usually have at least some undeveloped aspects—while a few reach towards the transcendent after years together. Even those couples who achieve a positively transformative relationships have their difficulties, their conflicts and misunderstandings. No relationship is perfect.

While there are no picture-perfect relationships, there are many that are bound to fail. Humans have flaws, so all relationships are somewhat flawed—some fatally. If a relationship does not grow, if it gets stuck repeating the same destructive patterns again and again, it will eventually die. To avoid this stuckness and develop a lasting bond, we have to understand what kind of relationship we are creating together. Then we can contrast that with where we hope to be. As we look at landmarks on the relationship journey, we determine how far we have to go and what we have to do to get there.

As you read the descriptions and examples below, think about how they relate to your situation. Do not use the information to compare yourself to others; it is not useful to either applaud or disparage your relationship. We are all on a similar path—some are fortunate to be further along the road, while others have a heavier burden to carry.

## 1. Developing Relationships

Developing relationships struggle to grow towards maturity but tend to become stuck in negative relational patterns. The couple wants to be close, intend to be loving but are often get overwhelmed by stress and negative feelings.

At times, the couple gets on well and shares good times but unresolved conflicts and hurt feelings easily rise to the surface. Both members are sensitive to signals of neglect, rejection, criticism and intrusion from their partner. Sometimes these are caused by real betrayals and unkindness; other times they are imagined insults and projections.

Each partner responds to difficulties in the relationship with their own unhelpful behaviors. A common pattern is criticism and withdrawal leading to an uneasy stalemate. If neither person is willing or able to back down or say, "I'm sorry," conflicts will escalate out of control leading to deeper hurt. Then both partners withdraw into a heavy

### *Developing Relationship*

Jennifer and Brett are a couple in their 40's. They have been married for 4 years. Jennifer has convinced Brett to come to counseling because she feels is unhappy about their sex life .

Jennifer sits on the edge of her chair as she lists her complaints: their sex life is non-existent, Brett is constantly on his computer and he hardly ever helps around the house.

"He never does anything except look at his laptop. I'm at my wits end—I can hardly get his attention. And he won't talk to me—I feel so alone sometimes."

Brett sits sullen and silent. I invite him to speak. "I can't get any peace. She is always at me, nagging and telling me what I've done wrong." She interrupts him, "That's not true. I always thank you when you do the dishes—but that's about all you ever do."

He rolls his eyes and looks out the window. "See what I mean? My only escape is at work and on my computer. I do all the maintenance and the dishes but she is never satisfied."

They both look sad. Jennifer tells me, "It was so much better when we were just dating—before we moved in together. He was so much more fun—we talked for hours and went out to concerts—now it's nothing."

Jennifer starts crying quietly. Brett look guilty and confused. He tries to comfort her...

resentful silence for days or even weeks.

When undeveloped couples stay together they hope something will shift but their attempts at change are unfocussed, inconsistent and often misdirected. They may not be able to envision a different way of being but are frightened to face change or divorce. They remember when their partner was loving and attentive and look backward rather than towards the future. Many times there is a general sense of things being wrong but no solution offers itself.

*General characteristics:*

- Occasional periods of companionship and getting on well together
- Some sharing of tasks and leisure activities
- Avoidance of deep emotional intimacy and vulnerability
- Sporadic feelings of being misunderstood and unaccepted
- Conflicts over minor issues leading to periods of emotional distance
- Changeable feelings of loving connection with occasional thoughts of leaving the relationship
- A sense of often being stuck and unable to move forward
- Uneasiness or dissatisfaction around sex and physical affection

Over 50% of relationships in the US tend to be undeveloped or developing. There is a range of reasons why relationships get trapped in immaturity, including basic incompatibility, personality problems, infidelity and addictions. However, negative relational patterns are not linked to the amount of time married, the presence or absence of children or the financial status of the couple. Unless the relationship changes positively, it often ends in divorce but in many cases, the couple stays together but they lead increasingly disconnected lives.

When a couple makes a commitment to change and work through their issues, there is most often a period of increased uncertainty and volatility. This can feel very disheartening as if all efforts to change are bound to fail. However, for deep change to happen, the relationship may need to go through a period of upheaval before it settles into a more positive state. If this applies to your situation, be prepared for things to be a bit shaky before they get better.

## 2. Mature Relationships

Mature relationships are self-defined by the couple as *good* or *happy* marriages. They are generally satisfying and supportive. While there are sporadic conflicts or friction, the partners do not view these as serious and do not entertain thoughts of separating. Differences and arguments are resolved or avoided but do not seriously damage the sense of companionship and love.

### *Mature Relationship*

Frank is 45 and owns a small business; Valerie is 51 and a retired schoolteacher. They have been married for 15 years. Valerie has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and they seek counseling to deal with the affects it has on their relationship.

They discuss how Frank has to do more now. Valerie is concerned he is overdoing it and the business will suffer. Frank worries about Valerie falling and hurting herself.

Valerie says, "I love that he gets me coffee in bed in the mornings—I am slow to get going. But it makes him late for work. I try not to be a burden" She looks at Frank with concern.

He smiles and tries to reassure her, "It's the least I can do. Val is such a soldier—always trying to do more. The MS is terrible but she keeps at it."

"Yes, I know—but you don't have to hover over me. I'll tell you when I need help."

"I'm not sure you will. That's what bugs me. I have to know how you are doing—and I worry you are hiding things. You have to let me help you."

They discuss how they can be more open about what is happening with the disease. He agrees to back off a little if she will be more forthcoming.

...They are sad that the MS makes sex physically awkward but they find ways to be close and intimate. Cuddles on the sofa are the best part of the day.

While these relationships and their members have natural flaws and difficulties, each partner supports and shares with the other in many ways.

*General characteristics:*

- Generally satisfying sense of companionship and connection
- Sporadic conflicts that get resolved or let go of
- A balance of joint and separate activities and interests
- A feeling of being settled, secure and at ease with each other
- A satisfying sexual life and/or acceptance of its limits
- Partners feel supported in their development
- Shared responsibilities for the tasks of everyday life
- A feeling of appreciation and concern for each other

Mature relationships are relatively common. Over 30% of older married couples say they are happy or very happy. These relationships tend to mature over a period of 10 or more years and last until one of the couple dies.

While these couples have few substantial complaints, mature couples may settle into a state of complacency and accommodation. This can stifle the potential for growth and lead to the couple feeling as though they are on different life paths. In a mature marriage there is often the unspoken question: Can there be more to the relationship?

### **3. Transformative Relationship**

Transformative relationships are relative rare but exist throughout our communities. They usually evolve over a period of 20 or more years and may not reach fruition until the couple is older.

In these relationship there is a deep sense of caring, love and appreciation for each other. The couple delights in each other's company but are strong individuals in their own right.

Frequently, the couple share deeply held religious or spiritual values that bond them together. They are intimately involved with sharing their lives and inner worlds and place a high value on personal growth.

*General characteristics:*

- Deep acceptance of each other
- An enduring bond that is undisturbed by external circumstances
- Appreciation for each other and a selfless generosity in giving
- Strong commitment to personal and spiritual growth
- Occasional shared transcendent experiences
- A deep understanding and acceptance of each other that extends beyond the personality
- Well developed skills in resolving conflict and forgiving each other

In 2010, I interviewed three couples for the a chapter, in the book, *Jung and Aging*. Those interviewed were over 60 and had been married for 20 or more years. Here are quotes from the interviews:

*We feel more naturally intimate with each other and more connected.*

*I experience love, a deep sense of integrity inside myself from watching her.*

*It's also necessary to know the partner loves you anyway with your foibles and faults and failures.*

*Just appreciation... To see that unfold with a partner and share insights is wonderful.*

*A lot of that is communication. In our situation it has been inner communication as much as interpersonal.*

*My experience of love has taken the form of her feeling her greatness, feeling her depth."*

*I feel our hearts get to a place of communion and eyes filled with tears.*

*Sexuality is so much bigger than usually defined. I like when we wake in the night and talk for a couple of hours and then go back to sleep. That is deep intimacy—often more than physical sex.*

*Bring everything back to your own process, self observe, take responsibility for it, and work on it.*

These transformative couples have a special quality. They tend to be modest and generous with their time without asking much in return. They are loved and respected by their friends and in the wider community.

**Summary**

- All relationships start out as immature with the possibility of developing greater connection and acceptance.

- Three types of relationship can be distinguished: Developing, Mature and Transformative.
- Developing relationships are most common and tend to get stuck in negative patterns unless the couple actively works on them.
- Mature relationships are perceived as 'good' or 'happy' marriages with mutual love, companionship and support.
- Transformative relationships are relatively uncommon, develop over many years and are characterized by a deep sense of caring, appreciation and acceptance.

### **Practice**

Think about the following questions. Jot down notes to remind yourself of your answers.

- In what ways is our relationship still developing? In what ways is it mature or transformative?
- What features do I believe describe a 'good' relationship?
- Do I believe our relationship can keep growing and transforming? What is currently holding it back?

Have a conversation with your partner.

- Share your insights from the questions above.
- Discuss: Are we both committed to creating the best possible relationship we can with each other?