

Five Stages of Dating Relationships



There are at least four stages of a romantic relationship a couple should progress through towards marriage, and one more stage that influences all of them. Navigated correctly and given enough time, patience and effort, these stages of dating relationships either lead to a proper engagement at a **healthy, timely point** in their relationship, OR, one or both of the individuals will correctly decide it has reached a plateau and is not destined for marriage. Either way, the stages should be considered to have served a couple well, whether arriving at a mutually- accepted continuation of the relationship, or one or both individuals deciding that their union is not meant to continue.

Without taking enough time and effort to progress through each stage, the relationship faces the huge risk of premature commitment and the almost inevitable reality of huge issues and problems that will arise. The time to discover these challenges and differences in each other is **before both commit themselves for life**; In other words, before engagement while there is still an incentive to be gained, and while there is time for adjustments and resolution of the issues before the many additional pressures that marriage brings are thrust upon them.

Unfortunately, many relationships prematurely move to engagement and, sometimes, even marriage while in the first or second stage. This creates unnecessary pressure, stress, and difficult surprises concerning the other person's weaknesses or differences of opinions which surface in the future, and the challenge and need of working though the next two or three stages after marriage.

Because not enough time was allowed for significant crises and issues to arise before the two committed themselves to each other through engagement, the couple now discovers each other's character flaws, different values and perspectives, weaknesses, etc **after the engagement and/or marriage**. They now surface in the daily rigors and challenges that engagement and/or marriage brings. These difficult surprises require adjustments which become so great that one or both may be tempted to terminate the engagement or marriage, causing much hurt, confusion and difficulty.

The five stages of dating relationships are influenced by...

- Age of the individuals
- History of dating
- Models of marriage each has had
- Emotional maturity
- Spiritual maturity
- Frequency of being together
- Quality of time together
- Willingness to be vulnerable and transparent
- Integrity of each individual

1. Infatuation

This is the time period of initial and continual physical attraction between two people. Attraction is based on many physical and external traits of interest such as stature, eyes, hair, scent, smile, outward appearance etc, and is fueled by a desire for romance and the realization that someone is attracted to you and desires you. Significant differences are hardly noticed, and if so, are suppressed and dismissed with the thought that "he will change", "she will change"...and "he or she doesn't really think that." One or both even rationalize and minimize their thoughts and values by thinking, "I will change my attitude on that subject so there will not be a conflict between us."

During this time it is wise to spend many, if not most dates in groups to allow each other to see reactions, emotions, and responses of the other to many people and situations. These cannot be seen during one-on-one dates. It is essential to be able to observe and learn about the person you may consider spending your life with in a variety of circumstances. Many dating couples begin spending regular time alone too early in their relationship. This robs them of the opportunity to know their significant other in many areas, as well as may create situations that are physically tempting and difficult to resist.

This stage usually lasts from 3-5 months depending on the maturity, life experiences of both individuals, and frequency of time together. The “love” that is felt by both individuals is based on feelings, not decision. It is “eros” love (physical and biological), not “agape” love (decisional and unconditional).

2. Illumination

This is the time of discovery in the relationship. It is a time of finding out that although you are still attracted to this person, you are now recognizing some weaknesses or flaws. The other person is probably noticing weaknesses and differences in you as well. Differences of opinions, character, convictions, lifestyle, values, personal habits of eating, working, relating etc are now surfacing. Realizations of one or the other being detail oriented, functioning well in orderliness, functioning better in clutter, structured about when, what and where to eat are now beginning to show. Differences in flexibility, preferences in reading materials, television shows, movies, church involvement, community involvement, charitable giving, sleep patterns, effects of weather etc...All these and more are being discovered.

This is the stage where “**crisis**” situations begin to arise, and need to arise so that each person’s true colors of conflict resolution will show. ...Examples such as, “He wants to eat lunch with me everyday.....I want to have lunch with friends or other business associates....” are common.” “She wants to go to R rated movies and I refuse to go to anything over a PG 13 rating is another example.” “He wants to show everyone how much he loves me by constantly touching, hugging, and patting me in public, but I feel that it is inappropriate to display a lot of affection when we are in the presence of others” is another possible scenario. These and many other differences begin to reveal themselves in this stage of the relationship.

The crises come when speaking your opinions and perspectives, (**which should be and need to be spoken**), that are in disagreement with the other person and may tend to cause hurt feelings. These spats can be tiring and usually this is when a couple begins to question the validity and permanence of their relationship. If the relationship does not progress to this stage before emotional commitments are made, there will be much turmoil in the marriage. **This stage usually lasts 4-6 months.**

3. Evaluation

This is the stage of serious evaluation, when one begins to actively and volitionally **evaluate the differences and determine if the relationship is worth the differences you both recognize**. One or both gradually evaluate and decide if they can live with this person whose manners, habits, perspectives, and attitudes are somewhat different than theirs. This takes careful observation and deliberation.

It is true that love is somewhat blind. The differences that were not so obvious in the early stages now seem to be stark and both are faced with the need to adjust in many areas. The issues that need

resolution will possibly be many, and the realization that some things are not going to change must be accepted. Can you live with his/her differences? Can you live with him/her and not expect him/her to change to be more like you? If you choose to change your opinion or attitude to become more compatible with his/hers, will you be able to sustain that change permanently, or will you grow to resent the feeling that you were “forced” to change? **This stage usually lasts 2-4 months.**

4. Maturation

This is the stage when a couple settles into the relationship and volitionally begins resolving conflicts for the long haul. This is a time of decisional love, not just emotional, romantic love. The “syrupy,” romantic, infatuation type of love has evolved throughout the previous stages into the mature, steady, forgiving, serving love. Each person is now intent on what they can **bring to the relationship and give to the other, not what they can receive from the relationship and get from the other. This is the acceptable, ideal time for an engagement to occur. If it occurs much before the fourth stage it is usually premature and based upon wrong and incomplete conclusions.**

The decision to love, even through times of anger, disappointment, extreme personal differences, and possible feeling that the other person does not care about my perspective, sustains the relationship. There is much listening, discussion, and acceptance of each other which allows for differences. **This stage usually lasts 3-4 months before marriage**, and then continues throughout life.

Intentional and dedicated involvement through all four of these stages helps to prepare people for one of the largest, most consequential decisions anyone could make! It is ironic that this **enormously significant decision** which is intended to last a lifetime is one which has **the least amount of planning and training available in today’s society! The church NEEDS to assist adults with training and planning for this enormous commitment.**

Planning a wedding is simply a detailed plan of a ceremony to be held on a particular day in the future. The ceremony will not give a person the skills with which to manage and maintain a healthy marriage. These must be developed during the dating process and augmented by a rigorous, thorough pre-marital counseling program to give a marriage the best possible chance of health and survival. In this world filled with many complex and diverse pressures of life, isn’t this what any couple destined for marriage desires and deserves?

What is the ideal timeframe before a couple should become engaged to embark on a lifetime commitment (after all we are talking about a marriage, not just a wedding) **It is wise to allow a relationship to develop at least 12 months before engagement.** Going through the 4 seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter) allows a couple to observe and evaluate each other through many different situations, circumstances, emotional challenges and hopefully, absences from each other. If the relationship has not progressed through all four stages before making a commitment for marriage, both individuals may be disillusioned and extremely challenged in the early years of marriage. Certainly engagement during the infatuation or illumination stage greatly contributes to the high divorce rate.

5. Preparation

There is one other stage that plays a huge part in the life of a man and woman and highly influences the success of their romantic relationship. This stage also affects the quality of each of the other stages and is really the foundation for all of them. It is the preparation stage. This is actually the time a person intentionally spends **before getting into a dating relationship** preparing him/herself to be a quality, dateable individual. Time and attention is given to grow and mature in many areas of life so that when a

person he/she would like to date does come into view, thought and work has already been done to make personal improvements.

Areas a person should evaluate and seek to improve include:

- Spiritual life
- Home cleanliness
- Personal hygiene and appearance
- Management of finances
- Personal responsibility
- Emotional health
- Family life

See an evaluation questionnaire pertaining to these by clicking [here](#).

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