

## The Couple's Journey

The aim of the couple's journey is to experience a quality of relationship where my love for myself and my love for my partner are two inseparable parts of a whole – where getting what I want serves *us*, and giving to *you* serves me as well. This inseparability of self and other is what the term “wholeness” implies: we recognize our unity, even while celebrating our uniqueness. The following stages are the stages most couples experience.

### Stage 1: Romance

Here the couple is inspired by their vision of “how it's supposed to be”: by the promise that this person has some special something that one has longed for. There is the illusion of unity; fantasies of a harmonious future; a diffuse and undifferentiated sense of “we-ness”. Partners deny feelings of difference or separateness by creating various “dependencies” within the relationship, such as the “can't live without you” feeling. Often, such feelings of “promise” stem from men's and women's stereotyped visions of an ideal mate.

The obstacle to be overcome at this point is the illusion of romance – that dreams come true for the dreaming, that wishing makes it so, that life is just a bowl of cherries, and that people naturally relate harmoniously without regard for vested interests and individual differences. This stage comes to an end once the going gets rough and partners see that their visions and dreams are not going to be realized as easily as they had hoped. Some couples end the relationship once this begins to happen. Others face the loss of their vision by moving on to the next stage.

### Stage 2: Power Struggles

This stage begins with the recognition that “you're not who I thought you were” or “we're not who we thought we were”. The illusion of unity is replaced by the disillusion of dis-unity. Instead of a vision, we experience di-vision; differentness, difficulty. The relationship held such promise, but the promise has been broken. We feel disillusioned, disappointed, or angry. But maybe, just maybe, we can get what we want after all if we really *try*. If we're willing to fight for it. Thus, some people's power struggle is an attempt to get the partner to be the way he or she was *supposed* to be, the way he or she promised to be (an attempt to overcome our sudden sense of powerlessness). For others, the power struggle becomes (unconsciously) a way of hurting the partner in retaliation for the disappointment one has suffered. It can take the form of a “spite war” where each time you disappoint me, I return with a spiteful act designed to hurt you back.

The obstacle to be overcome in this stage is the illusion of power (i.e., the belief that threat, force, manipulation, or domination, no matter how subtle, can get us what we want). The stage comes to an end when we recognize who we are and what we do have, and give up our attachment to fantasies of harmony without struggle, achievement without effort, pleasure without pain. In other words, the stage is resolved when we surrender to life as it is.

The “battle of the sexes” can dominate much of the play during this stage, with sexual differences being blamed for much of the difficulty. The struggle continues as long as men and women continue to see another and themselves as members of stereotypical categories rather than as free and unique beings. This stage can go on for years once the partners learn the routine – as in the case of George and Martha in Albee's play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* It can also end abruptly if either or both partners see that they are going to have to confront aspects of themselves that may be too painful to face. If the relationship survives the power struggle, it moves into a more accepting, more peaceful stage, called Stability.

### **Stage 3: Stability**

This stage begins with the experience of forgiveness. Partners give up their tenacious hold on “making it work” and allow themselves and one another their foibles and failures. They come to accept one another as individual persons and learn from their conflicts rather than being upset by them. They may focus more of their attention outside the relationship or within their own psyches, having recognized that the pair relationship, being only *one* part of their lives, is not going to meet all of their needs. They have now evolved a stable set of rules for negotiating differences and a stable set of role expectations. Since these rules and patterns seem to “work”, they are generally content not to question them. Often, the pattern adopted parallels the culture’s definition of how a “married couple” should look and behave. In other cases, great care is taken to make sure that roles are defined equally and non-stereotypically.

The obstacle to be overcome in this stage is the illusion of peace, the attachment to stability at the cost of novelty and change. When feelings of peace are so hard-won, we do not like to let go easily. And so we make a god of our new-found comfort, forgetting that growth involves risk, pain, and uncertainty, all of which may be felt as we continue the journey.

### **Stage 4: Commitment**

In this stage, the partners truly surrender to what is – and to their acceptance of the realities and human shortcomings of the relationship. They can give up trying to “remodel” the partner and trying to be agreeable at all costs. They are able to handle the tension and conflict inherent in the problem of loving the person and hating something the person does. They can love one another without necessarily liking one another at all times. This ability to “bind tension” to manage seemingly polarized opposites allows them the freedom to challenge and question one another without getting into a power struggle. And, it fosters in the relationship the ability to deliberately choose one’s action with a sense of commitment over time, since freedom is experienced in the act of choosing and is not tied to some pre-structured set of regulations guaranteeing one’s autonomy. Thus the commitment stage is marked by the dissolution of familiar “either-or” –type categories and by the development of creative solutions to conflicts. Thinking is paradoxical rather than dichotomous, so that apparent dichotomies such as “living in the now” vs. “commitment to a future together” do not tear the couple apart or throw them into taking the “two sides” of the argument. There is, however, one major pitfall that can occur with couples at this stage – the illusion of separateness: “we have done what’s necessary to harmonize our differences as a couple...our work is complete...we need not concern ourselves with the world beyond ourselves”. Couples who continue their evolution through this stage come to understand the interconnectedness among all human beings everywhere – an interdependence which parallels that experienced by the couple.

### **Stage 5: Co-Creation**

In this stage, the couple applies to the world beyond their partnership all they have learned during the previous four stages. They are now able to extend the feelings of human unity experienced in their relationship, and to offer to others the fruits of their mutual creativity. Thus, at this stage, couples often engage in shared creative work aimed at making a contribution in the world. A potential pitfall of this stage is the tendency of some couples to focus so much attention on their relationship to “the world” that little energy is available for the “care and feeding” of the pair relationship itself.