

# The Stages of Relationship

by

Dr. Elsbeth Martindale, PsyD

*How slowing down, asking questions and progressing easily through the natural stages of relationship can bring long-lasting happiness and vitality to every partnership.*

## Progressive/Progressing

A topic that I find often neglected in the discussion of romance is the fact that relationships are progressive, usually passing through particular and identifiable stages as things develop between a couple. Rarely do we acknowledge the clear outline of the steps involved in relationship development. As a therapist often in the position of dispensing relationship advice, I think it is valuable to look closely at each of the steps in order to see the actions and considerations of each stage. This awareness can help an individual assess and make a conscious choice about moving to the next stage, rather than being swept along by the oftentimes overwhelming emotions of infatuation. Clarity about the stages will help anyone take wise and reasoned steps towards lasting love.

The natural progression in the unfolding of romance generally moves through five distinct stages; hanging out, dating, relationship, intimacy, and commitment. The names of these stages may be different, for example, “going out” is often used interchangeably with “dating.” The ordering of these stages also varies somewhat depending on the individuals involved. When I ask teens, for example, to order the stages of relationship during my workshops they tend to have the most confusion about the order and placement of intimacy and commitment. There is no universally right or wrong answer here. The act of defining the stages often helps individuals get clear about their own personal expectations and preferences.

The most important thing I often find myself pointing out to clients is that the stages change and are distinguished by the progression to more and more openness and vulnerability. At deeper levels of connection, greater emotional pain is likely if the relationship becomes conflictual or ends. In light of this fact, the advice I offer is that the best way to proceed in relationships is to go only as fast as the slowest part of you is willing to go. Keep the vulnerable parts of yourself protected until there is sufficient evidence that it is wise to trust and deepen your involvement.

## Hanging Out - Stage 1

Hanging out often takes place in a larger social setting like a party, office, church, or classroom. At this early stage you have a chance to watch someone from a distance. You can see how they interact with others and how they take care of themselves. A lot of valuable information can be gathered at this, the least vulnerable stage, of relationship development.

At some point, eyes meet or conversations happen, numbers are exchanged, and clarity emerges about mutual interest. At this point, potential couples move into the next phase of relationship development: dating.

It is not always possible to have the luxury of this hanging out stage. When you are set up on a blind date or use a dating service you aren't always given the chance to see this person in a social context where you are not considered “paired”. It may be valuable to spend the first several of these arranged dates in a larger social

setting so you have a chance to observe the person of interest as they interact with others.

Here are several important questions that you can answer in the early part of the hanging out stage:

- Am I physically attracted to this person? (unfortunately some people stop with this question!)
- Is this person playful and fun to be with?

As you hang out a bit longer you may be able to answer the following questions:

- How does this person manage drugs, alcohol, gambling, and other addictions?
- Is this person depressed, sad, or unhappy much of the time?
- Do I like what this person does for play and recreation?
- Does this person take good care of their physical health?
- Are my religious beliefs compatible with this person's beliefs?

If some of these issues are deal breakers for you then early on, you should be able to turn your interest elsewhere and not waste your time or energy with dating this person (no matter how intense the physical attraction might be!).

## Dating - Stage 2

The second stage in partnership exploration is the dating phase. At this level you begin to gather more personal information. You start observing how they live, what they value, and how they treat others in their life. Ideally, you are also listening to yourself, noticing your reactions, concerns, and expectations.

Don't move quickly through the dating phase. You are most objective at this point because you have not yet decided you can or will make a relationship work with this person. You are simply exploring. You may already be fantasizing about what kind of partnership or future you could have together, but there is a great deal to consider so don't be in a rush.

Here are a sample of the important questions you can have answered by observing your partner and yourself during the dating phase:

- Do we have compatible intellectual levels and interests?
- Does this person "get" my sense of humor?
- How does this person get along with family and friends?
- How do I get along with this person's family and friends?
- Does this person speak the truth?

There are dozens of other questions that need to be addressed at this stage, before choosing to move deeper. Questions of boundaries, investment in growth, time management, listening skills, and emotional self-care can all be examined and answered during the early part of the dating phase.

Dating several individuals will increase your objectivity and allow you to experience the power of choice. At this phase you are sharpening your skills of saying "yes" to the things you like and "no" to the things that cause you discomfort. This assertive skill will be a great asset when you eventually are in a relationship.

You may wish to let the person or persons you are dating know you are in a dating phase. You might use words like, "I'm currently exploring several dating relationships," or "I am in a dating phase, not yet ready to settle into one relationship." This way you set expectations and keep your connections from developing too quickly. Don't be in a hurry to move into the next phase of relationship. Don't move forward just because you are afraid that "this one might get away." Keep your heart protected until you have a clear sense that deepening the connection will be both safe and in line with your truest hopes.

As dating becomes more serious there will either be a natural desire to make the relationship exclusive or, conversely, clarity that you, or they, have not found the person with whom there is comfort for moving deeper. Deciding to end the dating phase will be much easier and much less painful at this juncture than if the partnership develops further. Discuss your conclusions as openly as possible so expectations are clear. For the dating phase to move into a relationship it is essential to have a mutual understanding and agreement of this decision.

To be sure footed in your steps towards forming a relationship you should know the answers to some of the following questions:

- Does this person follow through on commitments and obligations?
- Is this person willing and able to express their needs and desires?
- Does this person take responsibility for their own behaviors?
- Do I trust this person?
- Can this person say "no" to things they don't want?

### Relationship - Stage 3

Choosing to be in a relationship with someone is much more serious than just dating them. When you are in a relationship you are willing to be seen as partners and you have each decided to stop dating others. If you've dated this person for awhile, you know important things that will allow you to trust this person and be open with them. This openness will provide the opportunity for an even deeper exploration of them as well as a deeper examination of your own feelings in the relationship.

When you are in a relationship your expectations of yourself and your partner begin to change. Adjustments and agreements, for the sake of the relationship, become necessary. A sense of partnership obligation takes precedence over your individual needs. You both will check in with each other more regularly and big plans will not be agreed upon without consulting each other.

The goals for this phase continue to be about making sure this person is right for you, but at a much more thorough and in-depth manner. You can see whether this person works as a team player and how they respond to being emotionally vulnerable. You can begin to explore their capacity and skills for facing conflict and challenges. You can learn more about their communication style and get a closer view into their significant relationships with others.

Here are some questions that can be explored now that you are in a relationship:

- How does this person manage conflicts in our relationship?
- How does this person deal with past romantic relationships?
- Can this person accept things about me I am unable or unwilling to change?
- Does this person show investment in their work, career, or education?

The risks of emotional injury are much greater now. It will be harder now to exit the relationship. Gathering as much information as possible again allows you confidence should you desire to move the relationship deeper. It is essential that you are asking yourself if this person matches your preferences and desires and not just considering whether or not they are liking you. The stakes are high and the exit can be deeply painful.

Before moving to intimacy and commitment you may want to consider these questions as well:

- Does this person show investment in the growth of our relationship?
- Does this person treasure me?
- Does this person do their own share of the work?
- Does this person respect my right to socialize and give me freedom?
- Does this person have a passionate interest in their life?

## Intimacy - Stage 4

When you are at the stage of readiness for intimacy you should be pretty clear with yourself that this person is safe, emotionally and physically, that they are going a direction that fits well with your own plans, and that they respect and adore you. You will likely know, at this point, this person's weaknesses as well as their strengths. You might begin to conclude their faults are tolerable and their imperfections manageable. You may decide the "good" clearly outweighs the "bad." You can now, with confidence, take the relationship to an even deeper level, called intimacy.

It is in intimacy that hopes and dreams for the future begin to be examined together. Discussions may include building a life together, creating a family, combining resources or households, and possibly marriage. The stakes are higher than ever; your heart is really on the line. It is this risk of emotional injury that makes it essential to go as slowly as you possibly can in getting to this place.

These are some of the specific questions that can be addressed at this stage:

- Does this person share my pace and vision for our relationship?
- Do my attitudes and expectations about sexuality match with theirs?
- Have we discussed a plan for protection from pregnancy and STDs?

Unfortunately, many people move into intimacy without sufficiently assessing their partner or listening to their own reactions. These individuals are vulnerable to severe emotional pain and injury if they or their partner decide, at this point, to disengage from the relationship. The purpose of an extended dating phase and a thorough relationship assessment is to reduce the possibility of such heartache.

It's helpful to understand that intimacy at this stage is not necessarily sexual intimacy, which may have started in an earlier stage. Many people prefer to wait until a committed phase to become sexually intimate. This is a matter of personal preference. The point is that it is not wise to be either emotionally or sexually intimate until important information is gathered.

These additional questions can be addressed at this stage before moving into commitment:

- Does this person attend to what brings me pleasure?
- Do our attitudes and desires about children match?
- Do our expectations about roles match?

## Commitment - Stage 5

The final stage in partnership selection is commitment. Now both individuals make the claim that this is a relationship to be preserved, prioritized, and treasured. With the knowledge your partner matches your desires, is capable of working well within a relationship, and is willing and able to sustain emotional intimacy, you can wisely choose to commit to a deep and evolving relationship.

How long it takes for someone to move through these stages is dependent on a variety of factors. Certainly the ability of both partners to communicate clearly, openly and with true honesty will effect the gathering of necessary information. But words alone may not be enough. Observing someone closely over a long enough period of time brings validation to feelings and evidence to stated intentions. Actions often speak much louder than words. Two pieces of wisdom are recommended here: 1) travel through all four seasons with someone before you commit to a life with them, and 2) go only as fast as the slowest part of you is willing to go.

Relationships can be tremendously fulfilling and joyous. Choose wisely so you can open yourself fully to the incredible possibilities of deep and lasting love.

### **About Elsbeth Martindale, Psy.D.**

Dr. Martindale is a clinical psychologist in Portland, OR and author of *The Things to Know Before You Say "Go"* and *The Questions* iPhone app. She is the creator and collector of kinesthetic and visual tools for growth and change. She shares these tools at [CourageToBloom.com](http://CourageToBloom.com) and writes about them in her blog. Dr. Martindale has interests in the following areas: consciousness in relationship choice, women's empowerment, positive psychology, and psycho-educational tools.