

The background of the entire image is a close-up of a sandy beach. Two smooth, light-colored stepping stones are placed on the sand, arranged in a way that suggests a path. In the background, a faint rainbow is visible, arching over the stones. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful.

STEPPING STONES TO INTIMACY:

A POSITIVE OUTLOOK
ON CHALLENGES ALL
COUPLES FACE



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A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON CHALLENGES ALL COUPLES FACE

If you believe problems and disillusionment are inevitable, you're right. Fortunately, they are not a sign that your relationship is doomed. Your relationship satisfaction will actually depend upon the following things as you experience different stages of intimacy:

- How you think about your difficulties
- How you manage your feelings
- Where you focus your attention
- How you act and communicate under stress

If you can change your conviction that your partner is the source of your unhappiness, if you can understand that struggles are not a sign of a failing relationship, if you can see your relationship as a journey along a path of development — then you will be well on your way to a more positive outlook.

In the pages that follow you will learn about the normal and natural stages and struggles that growing couples encounter. Equipped with this clear overview of the terrain, you can redirect your efforts and energy toward a more vital, satisfying relationship.

SEPARATE SELVES NO MORE:

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU FALL IN LOVE

Our professional experience and informal research has revealed a sequence of developmental stages that relationships go through over time. In the very beginning, two separate individuals join together and form into a “we.” This “we” begins to exert a strong influence on the two individuals.

From this point onward, the balance between two individuals and the “we” will fluctuate due to the struggle between the need for autonomy of the individual and the desire for intimacy of the “we.”

Because you are two different individuals, you may not progress through the stages at the same time. The five stages that follow will help you know and identify the appropriate next steps and goals that can move you both towards greater intimacy while remaining true to yourself, your values, feelings, and thoughts.

1. **SYMBIOSIS: EXCLUSIVE BONDING**

This blissful merging of the two individuals into a “we” is known as symbiosis*. This is often called the romantic stage — a time to experience “oneness” and the ecstasy of giving and being given to by a special someone. The individuality of you and your partner is less sharply defined. In hindsight, you may notice that a significant part of your beliefs, behaviors, and personality were temporarily suspended in order for the “we” to become primary. Differences were minimized, and similarities were emphasized.

You may have seen only the best parts of each other and experienced unconditional love. Love is, somewhat, blind. So far, so good. However, the “we” that forms is inevitably based in fantasy. The bliss of the powerful connection of symbiosis eventually fades, creating a need and opportunity for change. This crucial stage has a valuable purpose. This strong, exclusive bond provides a foundation of nurturance and trust — a resource you can draw upon as you journey onwards.

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2. **DIFFERENTIATION: MANAGING ANXIETY OVER DIFFERENCES**

Eventually you and your partner re-emerge as individuals, and differences begin to appear. Parts of yourselves that may have been dormant begin to surface. Disillusionment and disappointment may arise as you notice each others' imperfections.

The desire to spend more time alone or with other friends, as well as the ongoing expression of different values, desires, and behaviors can become quite disturbing. This can be truly a difficult and stressful time. Some couples rise to the challenge by developing effective means of dealing with differences through healthy conflict management and negotiation.

More often, however, struggling couples attempt to solve this crisis by two ineffective solutions designed to return to the comfort of symbiosis:

1. Hiding/denying differences to avoid conflict, or
2. Engaging in angry escalating arguments, hoping to convince their partner to agree in order to find togetherness.

Both of these may result in repetitive, stifling, unproductive interactions. Ironically, these same sources of tension also hold the greatest promise of personal growth and relationship evolution.

3. **EXPLORATION: MOVING FROM "WE" BACK TO "I"**

When you are able to resist the pressure to return to a symbiotic state, you begin to reestablish your own identity and self-esteem that are independent of how your relationship is faring. The "we" loses its dominance — now the balance shifts strongly toward the individual.

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This vital and important stage can present a real crisis for each of you. It may well seem as if love and caring have all but disappeared.

To make matters worse, the timing may be different for each of you. The more one person distances, the more the other may cling. If both of you distance simultaneously, you may feel more like roommates than lovers. You may feel isolated and emotionally disconnected. The objective of this stage is to redefine and sustain your identity under stress. This will bring greater richness to your relationship and form a new foundation for reconnection.

4. **RE-CONNECTION: BACK AND FORTH PATTERNS OF INTIMACY**

In this stage you have strengthened your identity and learned to maintain your own point of view without hostility. You think more productively about your differences and disagreements instead of having automatic negative reactions. A return to a deeper, more sustainable level of intimacy is occurring. This is often accompanied with an enlivened sexual relationship. Though there may be moments of back and forth oscillation, this is a time when a different quality to the “we”-ness comes into being — one which includes a respect for the existence of two separate individuals.

You feel much more supported than stifled in your relationship. You hear fewer statements of “I need” from your partner and hear more of “I would like” or “I really want.” When you say “no” to your partner, it will more likely be heard as an expression of who you are vs. a harsh barb of rejection. Difficult discussions are no longer high wire acts because of the increased tolerance of, and respect for, your differences.

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5. **SYNERGY:** INDEPENDENCE & INTERDEPENDENCE

Intimacy deepens as you increase your abilities to manage your emotional reactions when differences cause tension. You are capable of, and committed to, relating in ways that are true to your most deeply held values and beliefs. You can actively support your partner's right to do the same — even if this becomes inconvenient. The flow between the individual and the “we” is becoming easier... almost automatic.

The relationship is now more vital than either partner separately. Each benefits from the synergy and the “we” has an energy all its own. Partners desire to create and give back to the world. Deep intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional sustenance abound.

As you might expect, these stages do not unfold in a smooth linear fashion. There is stress and angst along the way. But it might be encouraging to know you are very normal in your struggle.

** Adapted from Mahler M., Pine F., and Bergman A., “The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant.” New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1975.*