

The Progression of a Healthy Relationship

Susan Peabody

As a child growing up in a dysfunctional home, I spent endless hours dreaming about growing up, leaving home, and find the love I never got from my parents. Unfortunately, I was so needy that I fell in love too quickly and with anyone who would give me the least amount of attention.

After 15 years of hopeless and abusive relationships I had a nervous breakdown and went to Alcoholics Anonymous to deal with my drinking. I had turned to drinking to drown my sorrows or never finding love.

It never occurred to me that I was chasing after men just like my dad who could not love me because of his own alcoholism.

Eventually, I realized that I did not know what I was doing and started to research healthy relationships. Then I adopted the following plan of progression of a relationship with someone with whom I was compatible. Romantic love was not enough for me anymore.

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Misses! The Tale that I relate
This lesson seems to carry —
Choose not alone a proper mate,
But a proper time to marry.
*Charles Churchill in
Pairing Time Anticipated*

The proper progression of a relationship might vary but here are some guidelines:

Before you get started:

- Develop a fulfilling relationship with yourself before you attempt to have a romantic relationship. Romantic feelings can be like a tidal wave sweeping you out to sea if you are not securely tied to a relationship with yourself. *Many of you may want to be swept out to sea, but this is not really healthy; and sometimes it is even dangerous.*

Selection is everything:

- Take your time;
- Do everything you can to keep from being blinded by your emotions;
- Know what you *don't* want (people who trigger your dysfunctional behavior);
- Look for someone healthy, and observe them objectively before you plunge in;

- Look for someone who does not have to change very much to please you; but don't be *too* picky. Find the middle ground.

- Know what you *do* want. Make a list of the things that are mandatory and the things that are optional. Prioritize your list.

·Dating:

- This is when you find out what this person is really like – any false fronts should crumble after a few dates;

Be yourself – you want someone to know who you really are;

- Measure your compatibility during this time;

- Establish trust;

- Hold off on sex if it blinds you to what this person is really like, and keep a lid on any budding romantic feelings (you may feel them, but don't give them a lot of power by fantasizing too much);

- Be willing to change your mind if you usually "cling" to unhealthy people and be willing to hang in there if you usually "run."

Friendship:

- See if you can relax and have fun together;

- See if you can count on this person;

- Continue to see if there is enough compatibility to sustain the relationship;

- Build a strong foundation for a future romantic relationship.

·Courtship:

- This is friendship combined with romance.

- Romantic feelings can now have a free reign – see if they mix well with the friendship;

- You can let romantic love blossom now – you don't have to put a lid on your feelings anymore;

- Now you can test your readiness for intimacy; this is usually the time when a fear of intimacy comes up – if you have any.

Commitment:

- Now things are getting serious;

- Set ground rules for the relationship;

- Discuss things like:
- * Fidelity
- * Growing closer
- * The future
- * How much time you will have for each other

...anything that is important to you.

Partnership: (This used to be called marriage, but now the wedding ceremony is optional.)

During a partnership you should:

- Maintain what you have established up to now;
- Honor the values you have in common;

- Grow as a couple, as well as individuals;

- Get to really know each other and experience intimacy. (Intimacy comes from revealing yourself to a non-judgmental partner.)

Switch:

- At any point in the progression of a relationship, one partner may experience a fear of intimacy and pull back. Don't panic. Give your partner some space. However, if he or she does not come around in a few weeks, you should move on. (This is discussed more fully in *A Fine Romance* by Judith Sills.)

Now, I want to give you a word of encouragement and a warning. Intimate relationships are wonderful and something to aspire to. They can enhance your life in unbelievable ways. They can be very fulfilling and help you grow to your full potential. But always remember that they are a "want" not a "need." Your self-esteem should never depend on finding someone special.

Also, love (as attraction and desire) is not enough. Love that follows a careful selection, and is coupled with a willingness to work hard and extend yourself is also necessary.

Finally, you must not become slaves to the myth that preferential love will always span an entire lifetime. Only spiritual love lasts forever. Therefore, as *you* change, your relationship will change; and sometimes (but not always) it will fade away. You should not be discouraged by this. Change is part of life. It is what makes life interesting.