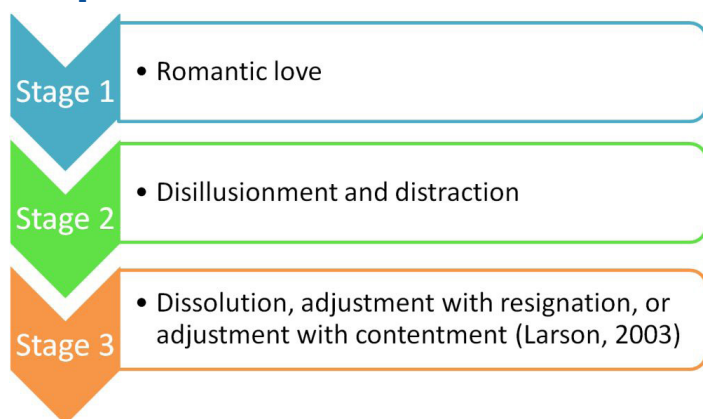


Three Stages of Marriage¹

Victor William Harris²

The majority of couples across America expect their marriages to be lifelong commitments. The inevitable ups and downs of marriage have prompted many couples to ask, “What should we expect in a long-term relationship?” “What challenges will we face?” “How can we face these challenges successfully?” [Note: The word “marriage” can be used interchangeably with “relationship” in this publication if you are not married.]

Helpful Information



Three Relationship Stages Couples Experience

Most marriages go through at least three distinct stages: 1) romantic love, 2) disillusionment and distraction, and 3) dissolution, adjustment with resignation, or adjustment with contentment (Larson, 2003).

Stage 1 typically occurs prior to marriage and within the first several years after couples tie the knot. It is characterized by passion and strong feelings of romance.

Stage 2 unfolds when couples may become disillusioned with the reality that it takes hard work to make marriages and families happy and stable. Distractions such as balancing school, work, finances, children, and extracurricular activities can decrease the time couples have to spend with each other to communicate and nurture their marital friendship.

Stage 3 inevitably occurs as couples contemplate whether or not they would like their marriages to continue. The reality is that more than 40% of couples eventually decide to dissolve their marital unions. The rest decide to adjust to marriage with contentment or resignation—the latter resigning themselves to the fact that their marriages probably aren’t going to get much better. However, a growing number of married couples have decided to work on their marital friendship by gaining new relationship knowledge and skills. These couples tend to adjust to the realities of long-term marriages with contentment.

In fact, two independent statewide studies found that of the people surveyed who considered their marriages to be in serious trouble at some point (i.e., who faced Stage 3), more than 90% said that they were glad they were still together (Johnson et al., 2002; Schramm, Marshall, Harris, & George, 2003). What does this all mean? It means that there are many things we can do as couples to improve our

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marital friendships. It also means that we are more likely to be glad we are still together if we are willing to work on our marriages and gain new relationship knowledge and skills.

Things You Can Use

What are some things we can do to adjust to the realities of long-term marriages with contentment? Researchers have found that couples utilize at least four general strategies (Duncan, Childs, & Larson, 2010):

- 1. Read relationship enhancement books together.** This is one of the easiest ways we can improve our marital friendships. There are some excellent books out there, such as *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last* and *Seven Principles for Making Your Marriage Work*, both by John Gottman. Other excellent choices include *The Great Marriage Tune-up Book* by Jeffry Larson and *Take Back Your Marriage* by William Doherty. For information regarding sexual intimacy, *The Act of Marriage* by Tim and Beverly LaHaye and *The Sex-Starved Marriage* by Michele Weiner-Davis could prove helpful.
- 2. Use helpful couple relationship websites.** A number of excellent websites are designed to deliver the latest research and resources to strengthen marriages. The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (<http://www.healthy marriageinfo.org/>), for example, offers a wide range of resources from relationship dynamics and health to domestic violence and military family needs. Stronger Marriages (<http://www.strongermarriage.org>) is another excellent website that provides hands-on information from dating and marital communication to divorce and remarriage.
- 3. Attend community-/religious-sponsored classes.** Relationship education classes can provide meaningful support for strengthening marital friendships, especially when both partners attend together. An increasing number of community-based organizations and religious groups sponsor activities like couple date nights, retreats, and classes focusing on topics such as couple communication, conflict resolution, expectations, finances, intimacy, and enhancing marital friendship. Being willing to attend these kinds of classes sends a clear message to our partners that we are willing to invest in our relationships.
- 4. Take advantage of marriage counseling.** All couples hit some snags as they seek to nurture their marital friendships over the life course. Rather than waiting until a snag becomes serious, wise couples seek help early. Regardless

of the issue, counseling can provide a positive step toward growing and strengthening our marriages. Putting our marriage and marital friendship first and making our partner and relationship our number one priority can help us overcome any barriers or stigmas that might prevent us from getting the help we need. In some cases, divorce may be the best option. A licensed and qualified therapist can help us sort out these issues.

What is the reward for all of the blood, sweat, tears, and joy we experience by working on our marital friendships and remaining committed to making them last? Therapist and educator Michele Weiner-Davis (2011) shares some excellent insight into some of the rewards of navigating the ups and downs of marriage:

It is really a tragedy that half of all couples who wed never get to [the last] stage . . . [of marriage], when all the pain and hard work of the earlier stages really begins to pay off. Since you are no longer in a struggle to define who you are and what the marriage should be, there is more peace and harmony. You start “liking” your spouse again By the time you reach [the last] stage . . . you have a shared history. And although you’d both agree that marriage hasn’t been easy, you feel proud that you’ve weathered the storms. You appreciate your partner’s sense of commitment to make the marriage last. You feel more secure about yourself as a person and you begin to appreciate the differences between you and your spouse. And what you don’t appreciate, you find greater acceptance for. (p.1)

Weiner-Davis (2012) explains that couples start having what she calls “old day feelings” again and reminds us that when we as couples get to this final stage of marriage, then we “have come full circle,” meaning that we arrive back at the beginning of our relationship when it was the most important thing in our lives. She continues:

I’m certain that if more couples realized that there is really a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, they’d be more willing to tough it out through the downpour. The problem is, most people fool themselves into believing that whatever stage they are in for the moment is where they will be forever. But it’s important to remember that nothing lasts forever. There are seasons to everything in life, including marriage. The wiser and more mature you become, the more you realize this. The more you realize this, the more time you and your spouse spend hanging out in [the last] stage . . . Together again, at last. (p. 1)

Websites

National Health Marriage Resource Center: www.healthy-marriageinfo.org/

Stronger Marriages: www.strongermarriage.org

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