Passages of Marriage: Five Growth Stages
Topic(s): Marriage Stages

Our very nature throws into marriage certain clinkers that we do not recognize and cannot anticipate. Those clinkers are generated by our families of origin—by the way our relatives did things, said things, and hid things. Dr. Hemfelt likens them to time-release capsules. Things can be chugging along comfortably. Suddenly, with no warning, one of those time-release beads goes off. The union is not what it was, and something has gone dreadfully awry.

Yet these and other changes in a marriage, can be turned from bad to good once you recognize what they are. A marriage that appears dull and mundane can be made to sparkle. A hopeless situation can emerge into bright promise. A good union can be made better. It all depends upon finding and managing the sources of trouble, the clinkers and changes. We want to help you do that.

Because no marriage is perfect, every couple weathers these problems to some extent. But when the problems loom too large to handle and threaten the union, trouble will follow.

When Doctors Newman’s or Minirth or Hemfelt deal with a marital problem, they deal with 3 entities: the husband, the wife, and the marriage itself, as if the marriage were a living, breathing organism. We have found that if a marriage is not growing, it’s dying, just as any living organism. When a marriage gets hung up in a passage, it ceases growing. Growth is, therefore, critical.

By definition, then, PASSAGES ARE PREDICTABLE AND NECESSARY STAGES, INVOLVING THE PHYSICAL, THE EMOTIONAL, AND THE SPIRITUAL. Through them, partners journey toward the lifetime goal of growth as individuals and as a couple.

We’ve identified 5 distinct stages, passages through which marriage passes. The developmental stages through which a child passes from birth into adulthood are well known. Similarly, a marriage matures from developmental stage to stage—from passage to passage—according to the number of years it has existed. Remarriage may differ somewhat; because the partners have been married previously, they might telescope a passage into a briefer time or extend a passage beyond its normal life span.

THE PASSAGES OF MARRIAGE: Not counting courtship, which by definition is a passage of pre-marriage, we divide the lifetime of a married couple into 5 distinct units. Although some people hasten ahead of time into the next passage, or linger a little longer than average in one passage or another, in general, marriages hew pretty close to this outline. The passages are these:

• The First Passage—Young Love, the first 2 years
• The Second Passage—Realistic Love, the 3rd through the 10th year
• The Third Passage—Comfortable Love, the 11th through the 25th year
• The Fourth Passage—Renewing Love, the 26th through the 35th year
• The Fifth Passage—Transcendent Love, 36 years and there-after

Each of the passages through which every married couple travel, like bases on a softball diamond, must be appropriately dealt with if the next one is to count. And the tasks that accompany these passages must be completed before the next tasks commence. By tasks we mean attitude changes one must make and jobs one must complete in order to maintain an intimate marital relationship.

Should a runner skip over a base, inadvertently or on purpose, dire problems result. Should a runner get stuck on one base, the only way he can leave is by walking away scoreless that’s less satisfying than making it to home plate, for the aim from the very beginning is to make it home.

What If My Marriage Doesn’t Fit the Pattern? Remember the age-guessing booth at fairs and carnivals long past? A man would offer to guess your age within 3 years. If he guessed, he won and you paid him. If he missed, you won and he paid you. And he almost always won. Why? Because age makes itself known in certain ways, and the trained eye can see those ways in every person.
A marriage also ages in certain ways regardless of the persons involved, regardless of the circumstances. The same patterns prevail even though yours may be a most unusual union. In fact, what is “normal?” The passages themselves are the norm, the common denominators of any marriage. They are universal. They form the skeleton upon which problems are pleasures attach.

If you’re reading this at a later passage in your marriage, we advise you to read through the early passages. We have counseled couples whose marriages were in the Third and Fourth Passage, but their relationship was actually stuck in one of the tasks of Passage One or Two. In counseling we walk them back through these earlier passages so they can examine their marriage history. Then we show them how to complete these earlier tasks by rewriting their marriage contracts.

If you know chess or backgammon, you recognize that the strategy changes as the game proceeds. Your goals at the beginning of play are not the same as those at the end. It’s the way with marriage too. The original contract ceases to serve and must be rewritten. [Editor's note: But the foundation—-Covenant vow to each other—-stays constant.]

THE FIRST PASSAGE: Young Love, the First 2 Years: Geometry buffs understand why a stool sits best on three legs; three points define a plane. They also define a stable marriage. A 4-legged stool will wobble if all four legs aren’t exactly even and sitting on a flat surface. A 1- or 2-legged stool cannot stand alone. But you can perch a 3-legged stool on uneven ground and you can sit securely. A 3-legged stool adapts solidly to any situation. Every marriage exists as a 3-legged stool. One leg is the husband; another is the wife. Their third leg changes through time; it might be the kids, or the job, or buying and furnishing a home, the kids leave home, retirement, etc…

Right in the beginning, as in the Fourth Passage of marriage, the stool is 2-legged, and therefore unstable. The happy newlyweds are certain that in each other their lives are complete. They don’t think they need a third leg. Their lives don’t have room for one. As a result, the marriage bond at first is extremely fragile and easily hurt, as are the marriage partners.

The First Task:
Mold Into One Family: The first task newlyweds must accomplish if they’re to complete the First Passage is to mold two absolutely different, independent persons into one unit. That won’t come easily. Take two headstrong individuals and forge them into a unit without sacrificing their individuality. What a formidable task! To get through the passage of Young Love with flying colors, you, as well as every other newlywed, have to master this task. Several things help in completing it.

On the Plus Side… A powerful tool comes built into this task of Young Love: excitement and enthusiasm. Raw, exuberant energy.

On the Other Hand… One thing seriously hinders the move to unity: the possibility of breakage. Regardless of what the couple think (or imagine), their intimacy in the beginning is superficial. true intimacy grows only as a couple get to know each other better. Persons in a new relationship haven’t had enough chronological time to do that in depth. This is true no matter what the actual age of the persons involved. Teenagers and 70 year olds suffer equally. They feel compelled to walk on eggs, as it were, when dealing with each other. “Will this upset her?” “How will I tell him about this?”

A new couple, regardless of chronological age, has simply not logged enough time in harness to develop deep intimacy. Often a new couple inadvertently strain their fragile intimacy by loading it with burdens it cannot carry. “This is the intimate relationship that will solve all my other relationship problems from the past. I will finally receive what I need.” Friction with parents, failed prior relationships, perhaps even failed marriage—all melt away in the brilliant heat of this new and encompassing love.
Putting Original Family Patterns Behind… Pulling up roots exists in another dimension. The bride and groom have successfully left home. They’re on their own. But the home has not left them. The old patterns from home color nearly everything in the new marriage. Do you open gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning? Do you make your bed immediately upon rising or when you go through the house tidying up? Which is right? The way you did it when you were growing up is right, of course. Another way, though not exactly wrong, isn’t right either. Obvious examples such as these seem overly simplistic, but far more subtle “rights” and “not rights” color our day-to-day living. What’s more damaging, they color a mate’s perception of the spouse.

The Second Task: Overcome the Tendency to Jockey for Control… The second task is one which will resurface off and on throughout all the passages of marriage. Each spouse will ask, “Who’s in control here?” as different situations arise, from the choice of a restaurant for a Friday night date to the purchase of a new home. The source of conflict will change, as will the couple’s methods of responding to it, but conflict itself is present in all relationships.

Conflict is inevitable, no matter what the ages or backgrounds. The new couple aren’t far enough into their relationship to know that conflict is nothing more than a normal part of marriage. How the couple deal with that conflict, however, can make or break the union. [Editor's note: for help in this area of your marriage look in the "Communications" section of this web site for tools to help you work through conflicts in less damaging ways.]

Also, expectations transfer from courtship into marriage and so does every unresolved issue. conflicts the couple thought would disappear, little things in their engagement, blossom into big things in marriage.

Attitude Adjustment in Conflict… The couple in the throes of Young Love, not yet fully comfortable with each other, will instinctively guard what they say and do. They know (although they might not articulate that knowledge) that the greater the openness, the greater the potential for conflict. What they may not realize is, the greater the openness, the greater the potential for improved intimacy.

The Third Task: Build a Sexual Union… Unlike other biological needs — food, shelter, water — the sex drive is profoundly influenced by factors outside biology. Physical factors such as drugs or alcohol, fatigue, stress, and physical disabilities alter sexual response. But the most active sex organ, and the least appreciated, is the brain. It does its thing largely beyond the conscious level. Personal problems and distractions, fear, misconceptions about sex (“hang-ups”) and the emotional states of both parties are subconscious mental factors.

In the area of sexuality, as in the areas of many decisions within the new family, time capsules from your childhood family may begin to affect your sexual intimacy. We have never yet seen an exception to the rule that a woman (or man) abused in childhood will suffer some degree of sexual dysfunction in adulthood. Problems within the person include damage done by sexual abuse and other traumatic sexual experiences. Such damage almost always affects marital sex. In these cases professional counseling is almost always necessary. We also recommend reading the book, The Wounded Heart… Hope for Adjust Victims of Sexual Abuse by Dr. Dan Allendar.

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THE SECOND PASSAGE: Realistic Love, the Third Through the Tenth Years…
Can two people learn to walk together without tripping over each other? The first task of this Second Passage in marriage is simple and yet extraordinarily difficult:

The First Task: Hang On To Love After Reality Strikes… A pervasive so-far-so-good feeling helps the couple to hang on to love after reality strikes. “We’ve made it to this point; we’ve the impetus to keep going.” Lord willing in those first couple of years, the young marrieds (and remember this young-married business applies as much to elderly newlyweds as to teens) have ironed out some of the issues causing
conflict. One person or the other has made a love gift of compromise in easing tensions, or they decided to make the problem a non-issue. Comfortable adjustment has begun.

There’s also a momentum in this passage, like a strong tidal current, washing the couple along from day to day. Of course, getting caught in a riptide is no fun. Busy-ness also works to disadvantage. But a lot of things other than busy-ness can mess up the smooth progress of this passage.

What Hinders Completion? This marriage is no longer new. And yet, neither has it a long history. There’s great power in the ability of a common history to unite a married couple. Add to that the fact that couples in the Second Passage are on the run, pursuing careers, making a living, raising the kids, trying to pay for the house or car or perhaps just the daily food. The very tidal surge that carries them along also washes the gloss off all their dreams.

Now is the time the partners start taking each other for granted. Add to that complacency the familiarity of sex. No longer is it an exploration. The same old marital partners engage in the same old sexual practices. The gloss, the new, has worn off that aspect as well. Too often, disillusionment replaces the sparkle of Young Love. [Editors note: This is the time to be aware of “The Seven Year Itch” when ”a husband or wife, bored, doubting, and anxious in the marriage relationship, find a sympathetic ear of the opposite sex” and attraction multiplies outside of the marriage.]

People who feel restless and frustrated in this passage start going back through the files of their mind, digging out the reasons they shouldn’t have married in the first place: “I was too dumb to know I wasn’t in love. I was trying to escape from my parents, but I just didn’t know it then.” “He’s a nerd. Boring. My friends even told me so. But I blinded myself to it. Now my marriage is so boring I can’t stand it. It’s been one big, tragic, continuous mistake.” And on and on the rationalizations go.

All marriages have unwritten secret contracts, hidden agendas. That’s exactly why Passage Two is Passage Two. Hidden agendas, the fine print of the marriage contract which we never read, do not surface as much during the First Passage. The stars in the newlyweds’ eyes obscure them even if they do. (This, incidentally, really hobbles premarital counseling. The couple try their best, but 80% of the issues they face later fail to surface before the wedding.) Now, during and following the Second Passage, is when they tend to appear. The hidden contract may lie dormant for years, only to be triggered by some supposedly random event.

The Second Task: Recognize the Hidden Contracts in Your Marriage… We’ve found that most hidden contracts remain submerged during the First Passage of marriage. They usually emerge during the Second Passage or later. As illustration, recall the timeworn plot gimmick in films and novels a generation ago. The battleship commander leaves port under sealed orders. He has no idea where he’s taking his fleet until he crosses a certain longitude. Then, in a dramatic moment, he opens his sealed orders and learns for the first time of his destination.

Marriage contracts work just like that. The happy couple go steaming off into the sunset unaware where they’re really going. Then the sealed orders spring into effect and they find themselves on a totally different course. Apparently God allows a lot of unconscious stuff to remain sealed until the marriage gets rolling. After all, if we saw all the thoughts of our partner’s and our own darkest corners of the mind, we would become so disillusioned we’d never get together.

Fidelity Matters… The Second Passage is a time of high vulnerability for an affair (so for that matter is the Fourth Passage). In the Second Passage an affair usually represents a flight away from intimacy. Here is the poor married man or woman, struggling with control issues, financial and career pressures, kids, and, in some, a fear of true intimacy. An affair offers an easy pseudo-intimacy; intimacy with no strings.

The new love approves of the harried married person and accepts him or her without conditions. No one worries about who takes out the garbage or who handles the finances. Control issues aren’t a problem. Persons involved in an affair need not deal with boredom and everyday minor crises. That’s the hard work of marriage. Yet these issues create a special, rich kind of intimacy.
The bottom line of your marriage contract is a bottom line of any of Ian’s union contracts—two entities helping each other succeed and move forward.

The Period of Drifting—School-Age Kids… We call this a period of drifting for several reasons. For one, it seems the family members are each cast adrift, going separate ways, aimlessly. For all the churning activity, you see very little real progress day to day. In fact, with school-age kids, how do you measure progress, if any?

Also, the family itself tends to drift. Pressed severely by all the issues school-age kids dump into the family stew, parents have little time for work, for play, for each other—even the kids. It just didn’t seem this hectic a generation ago.

The Stability Flutter… What children need most of all, though, at any age but particularly during the school years, is a stable family life. Unfortunately, as the kids get wrapped up in school with all their needs and demands, and the parents struggle with work demands, stability tends to flutter.

Family stability is no stronger, no less fluttery than the stability of the marriage itself. Parents who would give their children the best possible schooling, then, would make the marriage their first priority. We’ve long known that the child blossoms when the father loves the mother. Children learn love and family unity best by being part of the loving family unit.

As children grow, the marriage continues its inexorable changes, from reality into comfort. You’re slipping into the next passage much as you would slip into a comfy pair of old house slippers.

THE THIRD PASSAGE: Comfortable Love, the Eleventh Through the Twenty-fifth Years… As couples build a history together, they may become so melded that their individuality suffers. They may become codependent upon each other. In the beginning, a couple’s task is to forge a marital identity out of two diverse personalities. By this stage, the task is nearly the reverse: to maintain an individual identity along with the marriage identity.

The First Task: Maintain an Individual Identity Along With The Marriage Identity. The object, of course, is to stay balanced. As Frank Minirth explains it, “The goal in marriage is a healthy interdependence. A mistake is when one partner tries to feel all the feelings (or do everything) in the marriage. “We’re not saying dependency is bad. Healthy dependency is excellent. Be dependent on God, on friends; that’s okay in itself. You have to watch out for the danger of codependency. And incidentally, divorce never cures codependency. The problem lies below the level of the marriage, deep inside the individual.”

The Second Task: Say the Final Good-byes. Only by saying good-bye to one thing can you embrace another. You must put down the pen in your hand if you wish to pick up the pencil. That is what good-bye is about. For every good-bye there is a hello. Important good-byes remain, and you just about have to reach this stage of life before you can do it well.

All couples in this passage face the realities of middle age which causes us all to pause and take note of where we are and where we are going. An important task of the Third Passage is to accept the losses surfacing now saying good-bye to lost youth and lost health.

By this Third Passage, most couples must face and accept certain limitations on their financial and vocational achievements. “Is this all there is?” they ask themselves. Or, “Has it been worthwhile?” To paraphrase the words of a retired friend of the Minirth’s: “When I graduated from high school I was going to change the world. By the time I finished college I hoped to make my mark in America. In graduate school, I thought I might change a little of Arkansas. Now I’d be content to redecorate my office.”
Rare is the person who meets or exceeds the dreams of the beginnings of life. All the rest of us mourn shattered hopes. We wanted our kids to be farther above average than they are. We wanted to be higher up the vocational ladder and more elevated in the community than we are. Regrets. Emptiness. Too much of life is gone and not enough has been accomplished.

Foundational tasks of Passages One and Three of your marriage involve individuation. Passage One requires that the couple meld their singleness into a team. The Third Passage calls upon each of them to not let individual-ness get lost in the marriage union.

By the Third Passage (or frequently even before then), serious threats to intimacy abound. At times they cannot be resolved by a few simple changes or even by writing a new contract. They must be ferreted out and reversed, or the marriage partners will find themselves either stranded on base or deliberately walking off the field. A task of the Third Passage—Comfortable love — is to maintain an intimate relationship with your spouse.

A task of this passage is to overcome the now-or-never syndrome, the disillusionment that is frequent during this passage is compounded by the fear, “It’s now or never. I’ve got to get out of this marriage so I can build another life.”

Intimacy is the sharing of the soul—hopes, dreams, fears, shames, joys, sorrows. Intimacy is knowing another person deeply and well and appreciating him anyway. It’s an easy, comfortable balance between dependence upon another and independence—the living of one’s own life; of aloneness and sharedness; of distance and closeness. By the end of the Third Passage the fine balance can be achieved.

If by this Third Passage your needs are not being met, you will start to make negative assumptions about what your spouse feels. Those assumptions, apart from being unjust, destroy intimacy. Sometimes the assumptions are true or at least border on truth. The vast majority are not.

Considerable temptation looms in this Third Passage. Temptations to quit trying and just to get a divorce; to seek with someone else what you feel is lacking in your marriage (understanding, affection, whatever); to marry your job because on the job you get all sorts of positive strokes and at home you get nagged.

THE FOURTH PASSAGE: Renewing Love, the Twenty-sixth through the Thirty-fifth Years…

The primary task of this Fourth Passage is the intimacy of companionship and unity. That’s not the same as sex and romance, particularly if both marriage partners are content. When a couple have been at it all these years, the sexual relationship easily slips into a benign dormancy. The vivid, eager sexual dynamic you and your spouse enjoyed at the beginning is probably a thing of the past. The young stud who handled several episodes a day has aged into the old stud who manages a couple a week… maybe. You will find some work involved in keeping your sexual union fresh and satisfying. Says Robert Hemfelt, “This Fourth Passage is an extremely vulnerable time for affairs. The line of thought goes I want to know if I’m still lovable. Most commonly, though, that thought lies below conscious level. The person becomes insatiably attracted to a neighbor or a fellow employee. It feels like true love or intense romance. Actually, it’s a part of that person that’s questioning his or her worth in other areas of life.”

Probably no area of life is more poorly perceived, and invites more just plain ignorance and stigma, as sex-over-forty. Even if you make that sex-over-fifty, myths and errors hold sway. Those untruths can ruin your sexual relationship and even open the partners to sexual dalliances with younger persons.

If you have been married more than twenty-five years, you know that this is a time of either renewal or alienation. Intimacy involves opening up to each other, becoming vulnerable. It also requires learning new things about each other.
Young Love, the first two years. Realistic Love, the third through the tenth year. Comfortable Lord, the eleventh through the twenty-fifth year. Renewing Love, the twenty-six through the thirty-fifth year. You’ve been together a long time now. The final passage lies ahead: Transcendent Love. True love at last.

THE FIFTH PASSAGE: Transcendent Love, the Thirty-sixth Year and On…

The first task: prepare for retirement. Previous generations didn’t have the benefits of modern medicine and financial safety nets. Their experience colors our perceptions. Their retirement years too often brought disillusionment and sadness compared with what today’s retiree can expect.

Celebrate the new opportunities. Grieve and accept the unavoidable limitations. Amend the dream, if necessary, as circumstances require. “You have to be flexible or you’ll never get anywhere,” Mary Alice Minirth is fond of saying.

A major transition and adjustment is to be mentally prepared for shocks and bumps. A very damaging myth promises that two people, together for decades already, can slip quietly and friction-free into retirement. Expect some surprising rough spots. They’re coming. Many psychologists claim that the life change of retirement is as great as that of puberty or of marriage itself.

Persons who have not resolved the control issues and individuation-versus-union issues of the first three passages are going to slam into those unresolved problems right here, at retirement. you may have been able to put off facing certain issues for twenty or thirty years. When one of you reaches retirement, there will be no escaping the problem. Control and personal boundaries are the two big factors in retirement adjustments.

In this stage each person needs his or her own space. There must also be neutral space, shared as a couple, in order to be content with the increased amount of physical and residential togetherness. These spaces may be in or outside the home, but they must exist. Also, each spouse must be willing to respect the other’s territory.

Time must be reapportioned as his, hers, and ours. Negotiate to agree how much time you’ll be spending together and how much will be set aside for individual use. Neither partner ought to feel chained to the other.

Activities should be scheduled according to two needs: the universal need to feel needed, and gratification of personal interest. Outline and share activities to participate in daily, weekly, monthly, whatever. Then indicate shared activities.

Given that retirement is a beginning and not an end, look closely at goals. Husband and wife should each have several. They should share several as a couple. When writing goals, also mention a few words how those goals ought to be pursued. Goals definitely must provide for each other’s needs. Both spouses should establish goals before entering the actual retirement phase. It is far easier to come up with acceptable goals when you’re feeling good about yourself, active and working. If you are lonely, sitting about with time on your hands, goals come hard and assume less apparent importance. “Why bother?” smothers “Let’s do it!”

Spiritual growth should continue until death, just as temporal wisdom grows. Not only should your spiritual dimension not be neglected, this is the time of life when it should be nurtured.

After you talk about these items together, build a new working outline, not unlike a contract. It then becomes your template for everyday life. The outline in addition offers one more chance to iron out any unresolved issues from previous passages. The plan need not be embedded in stone; but it promotes good solid teamwork right from the beginning.

A fount of troubles frequently is the situation where one spouse has had little or no outside interest throughout pre-retirement. The workaholic husband who does nothing else, the isolated homemaker whose idea of recreation is watching TV in the afternoon, suddenly find themselves at sea, confused and aimless.
Establishing goals and shoving the horizons out is absolutely essential for situations of that sort. Sit down and think of something new to try, some place new to explore, a hobby or volunteer project to begin. Deliberately talk about goals and purpose, and then set some.

To avoid trouble of another sort, maintain utmost care in respecting each other’s turf. His place, her place, and their place is an immensely important concept.

When dissatisfaction crops up, go back to the chart to pinpoint the trouble spot. And don’t expect the same chart to work forever. As people change, so do their needs, and as needs change, so must the spouse. Revise the chart as necessary.

Another trouble spot we find often is the interference in the couple’s daily life posed by adult children and grandchildren. If solid, comfortable boundaries are not in place, grandchildren and adult children can become too much of a good thing. The retired couple find themselves curtailing their own plans as they serve as hosts, baby-sitters, or emergency counselors. To an extent, this is good; older people have a wisdom and balance that youth need. Too much is not good.

There is no right or wrong plan when it comes to setting boundaries. Some couples like a total open-door policy. Others cannot live with that. Make your policy known and don’t be afraid to stand up to family members who fail to honor it.

We often say that relationships are everything to young children. As we mature, material objects and financial security become too important. Now in the Fifth Passage we come full circle again. Couples begin to reorder their priorities. Relationships become most important. Not the mortgage. Or the bank account. Or the membership in the country club. All of that pales in comparison to relationships with other human beings and with God.

We’ve found that couples in the Fifth Passage can have an unusual perspective toward sex. Their sexual relationship can go either way. If good sexual channels are open (if there is no real physical impediment to sex), this experience can be deeper than ever. If, however, illness or the death of a spouse makes sex impossible, spouses have a better capacity to accommodate that situation. A true paradox exists here. At this time when we are nearing the end of our story, we can feel greater sexual fulfillment rather than the leftovers, as some would have us believe.

Transcendent love is a profound and peaceful perspective toward your partner and toward life. Transcendent love does not depend upon smoothness. It’s not a tidy ribbon tied on the Fifth Passage package. It means, rather, that there has been a quantum shift in perspective. It is not that you somehow become oblivious to pain, that you suddenly can say an easy good-bye to all you cherish, but that you can rise above it.

We’re sorry to say that this book, Passages of Marriage… Five Growth Stages That Will Take Your Marriage To Greater Intimacy and Fulfillment, by Dr Frank and Mary Alice Minirth, Dr Brian and Dr Deborah Newman, and Dr Robert and Susan Hemfelt (published by Nelson Publishers) is no longer in print. That’s why we worked hard to put within this article the essence of what it had to say.

There of course is so much more that the book contains including great self-tests and worksheet pages which coach you through some of the difficult passages of marriage. If you have the opportunity to find this book somewhere, you’ll want to obtain it because it’s filled with so much valuable advice and guidance and pages filled with worksheets to help you and your spouse work through this journey together.