The 5 Stages of every marriage

Learn the phases every relationship takes and how to get through them.

By Dr. Rita DeMaria

All marital unions are not created equal; but they all go through some predictable stages. The timing may differ, and the way a couple manages the phase they’re in varies widely, but most of the stages happen, to most of us. Understanding the stages gives you the tools you need to move through with your loving union intact.

Here’s what you need to know.

**Stage 1: Honeymoon heaven**

Usually the first year or two (or three, depending on the arrival of children as well as whether you lived together beforehand) is a passion-fueled period that’s all about the two of you and your intense focus on the attraction that made you want to walk down the aisle to begin with.

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**Your Challenge:** As much as this stage is full of lovely things like lust, affection and late-night romps, you’d be wise to also use this time to cement your sense of coupledom outside the bedroom. Who are you, as a couple? For example, do you want to focus on your careers exclusively for a few years, or would you prefer to spend time traveling or taking classes? Will one or both of you want to get an advanced degree? Also spend time figuring out how you envision the rest of your marriage — such as whether and when to have children, or whether you see yourselves living in a city or the suburbs.

**Stage 2: Settling in, settling down**

This encompasses the realization stage, during which you learn things you might not have known (or happily ignored) about your spouse’s strengths, weaknesses and personal habits. Also in this post-honeymoon, pre-children stage, power struggles can arise as the two of you work toward both separate and shared goals. This
is the time to learn teamwork.

**Your Challenge:** As the shine fades a bit and reality sets in, you need to safely navigate what can be the first divorce danger zone of a young marriage, says Beverly Hyman, PhD, coauthor of How to Know If It's Time to Go: A 10-Step Reality Test for Your Marriage. "After a couple of years, too many couples find that their values and goals aren't always on the same page." For example, if one of you wants children, or expects to spend every Sunday with his or her parents, and the other disagrees, you need to reach a compromise. Though you should have done this before you wed, if you haven't, it's not too late to discuss hot-button subjects like children, money, how often you'll see your families, religion, etc. If you find you can't see eye-to-eye, it may be time to seek counseling, says Dr. Hyman.

**Stage 3: Family Central**

Welcome to the "meat" of marriage, the years most couples spend raising their families, buying a home, building and/or changing careers and all-around trying to hold a busy, crazy modern life together. This can be another danger time. You may have a couple of kids, a mortgage to pay, possibly two demanding jobs — this puts enormous strain on the resources of a marriage. Too many couples start to wonder: 'Is this all there is to life?' And some of them answer that question by starting an affair or asking for a divorce.

**Your Challenge:** Not losing sight of your couple-ness in the swirl of all the other demands on your time and energy. "Pay close attention to your marriage," advises Dr. Hyman. Don't assume your relationship will be OK if one or both of you is on autopilot. "One thing that's essential to building an enduring marriage is open, honest and tender communication," she adds. Give yourselves a chance to communicate by — if you have to — scheduling together time, planning a regular date night or agreeing to turn off the TV after the kids go to bed so you can discuss important issues (or have sex!).

**Stage 4: Back to the two of you**

Some call this stage the "empty nest," but that implies that your home is devoid of love (i.e. empty) after your children grow up and leave. Hopefully, it's not that way (though it can be). In the best scenario, this stage is about reunion. You are getting to know each other all over again, unpacking old baggage and having fun.

**Your Challenge:** Assuming you've weathered the earlier storms of marriage, this time can be exhilarating.

"You have the luxury of time," says Dr. Hyman, "So you can have new adventures, learn things together and take pride in your accomplishments, such as your history together and your children's successes." But many couples find it a struggle to be together again with nothing else to concentrate on. Spend some time figuring out things you can do together (such as a vacation or new activity, like tennis or a couples' book club) and apart (such as a sport or an adult-education class). If the issue is that you've ignored resentments toward your
partner while you were busy with work and kids, you'll need to be honest about these thorny problems, says Dr. Hyman, "You can rescue a marriage that's been ignored for a long time, but it will take work," so seek couples' therapy.

**Stage 5: You did it!**

You've enjoyed the lust, lived the love and come through the chaos of family life — without splitting up in the face of troubles. You've reached "completion," a stage that retired, empty-nest couples who still enjoy being together can bask in for the rest of their lives.

**Your Challenge:** Continue to show each other affection and attention. Remember, says Dr. Hyman, if you've remained a loving, harmonious couple, you won't have an empty nest for long. Children and grandchildren gravitate back to the happy home they remember.

**At any time: Explosion**

This is less of a discrete stage than the others because it can happen at any time in a marriage. It's when major life stressors interrupt the forward motion of your life together — such as fertility issues, a death in the family, a major illness or the loss of a job that leads to serious economic upheaval.