



# *Relationships*

## Stages of Growth for Men and Women

by MARIE WALL

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“Understanding the stages of growth help in accepting natural changes that occur.”

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I heard a story of an older fisherman who gave his opinion on marriage. “It is like rowing a boat,” he said. “If you are not pulling together, you will be going around in circles.” Do you remember the first time you rowed with someone? What may have appeared as second nature was down right uncomfortable in the early stages. Learning to thrive in a relationship is a lot like rowing a boat and requires skills which allow you to navigate the waters with ease. Whether it is common sense or learned behaviour, understanding the dynamics of a relationship is useful in navigating the most important connection of your life.

Relationships, like people, grow and develop, and understanding the stages of growth help in accepting natural changes that occur. Each stage includes challenges and the need for resolution brings growth and a more satisfying relationship. This article looks at five stages that are often experienced in a maturing relationship. Men and women will often experience them differently. Specific examples may not be true for every aspect of your experience; however, you may be able to apply some of the information to your own arrangement, whether it be marriage, common law, or any committed long-term relationship.

### **Negotiation – Newly Married**

The first years of marriage are often an exciting time for couples as there are many dreams, hopes and expectations. At this stage negotiation and compromise are necessary when two people who have different rules, values and rituals, unite to make a home. There can be power struggles because both naturally want what is familiar and comfortable for them. Much of the time negotiations take place without understanding and communication regarding what is happening and either or both spouses may wonder why they chose the relationship.

Individuals often marry or commit to a relationship hoping their lives will be better. Surprisingly for some, however, this may also be a time of sadness or grief. When this occurs people are naturally confused and wonder whether a mistake was made. Grief always occurs when there has been an ending, and every beginning results from an ending of some kind. The start of a relationship is the end of being single, the anticipation of one’s wedding day and the energy that this requires, and the beginning of learning what marriage means.

During these first years of marriage many women focus on building relationships with their spouse and children. These relationships give meaning and purpose to a woman’s life and work outside the home is usually secondary to the main purpose of cultivating these relationships. At this stage in the relationship men concentrate on creating structures for themselves and families, and career often takes the priority. While relationships are part of a man’s life, it is being able to provide for the care of the family that validates him as a husband. A woman, on the other hand, finds this validation through her relationship with her husband and children.

Moving through this stage means letting go of past expectations and developing new horizons. It is like rowing your boat with your sight set on a point of land. Once you get there, you have to dream new dreams and together set your sights on new skylines.

### **Expansion – Infant Children**

For many couples wanting to have children is a natural instinct. They want to recreate part of themselves, figuratively and literally. Usually a time of great joy for both spouses, the expansion of the family can also be accompanied by feelings of isolation, frustration, and even depression.

The arrival of children can result in numerous changes for both men and women. Women feel the constant demands on themselves, their space, time and freedom, to name but a few. Men often feel displaced, as attention is now shifted to the children and their needs.

It is necessary for adjustments to be made during this time of expansion. In the midst of these changes the couple now has a huge demand – they must care for their children while caring for themselves and their relationship. Many people are surprised to learn that the greatest gift to their child is to love and cherish their spouse. When children are the center of a love triangle it is confusing for them. When they witness the love of their parents for one another it acts as a mirror that teaches them it is safe and comfortable to love.

### **Family Life – Young Children**

This stage of life with young children is another critical time in your adult relationship. Raising young children puts new and interesting demands on your relationship. There is so much energy and time spent in providing for children financially, physically, and academically that a couple may drift apart. While it is essential to nurture children, paying attention to one another is essential to maintain a healthy balance to the relationship.

Having time with and for each other is necessary. There will be times when urgent matters arise, but it is important to care for each other on a daily basis. If one or both spouses are focussed exclusively on the demands of the children and/or events at work, they will lose touch with the relationship.

When a relationship ends, a predominant comment from men is that they thought the marriage was pretty good, (in another word, tolerable), and they are completely surprised by its ending. A marriage can be a place to just hang out or a place for you to nurture an important relationship. Pay attention, it is worth it.

### **Letting Go – Teen Children**

It is often at this stage in family life that 'mid-life reflection' takes a prominent role. Time, effort, love and affection have been spent nurturing family relationships. The children have grown up and friends take precedence over the family. There is more free time which can often be lonely for both women and men.

Whether we intend to or not, our natural inclination is to ask deep and moving questions. We want to know that our life has been worthwhile. We take stock of what has been accomplished, and look to the future. Since the natural inclination for men had been on the external accomplishments, providing financially, setting structure in place and career advancement, they often begin to ask, "what has all this been for and what about

me?" At this time men are often ready to let go of past dreams and to find personal meaning in their relationships. This can be very painful and crowded with doubts and fears. Women may have regrets regarding their lack of attention to public achievements and may consider ways to find meaning in a broader context other than family. When a woman asks, "what has all this been for and what about me?", she may opt to continue her education or seek promotions that may be available to her.

Another demand on couples at this time is aging parents who may need physical care, financial assistance or other attention that had not been necessary before. It is even possible that both spouses have parents in need.

This is a very important time in relationships. It has been hard work to get this far and the struggles of family life may have taken a toll. People may wonder if there is any marriage or relationship remaining with their spouse. They need a spark and they don't think it can be at home. Think again! Learning to reconnect with each other in this time of change can provide the spark you are looking for.

### **Empty Nest – Grown Children**

What you foster is what you will have. The empty nest stage is a very demanding time for couples as they deal with the many factors which may come into play. The children are grown, retirement is nearby, and the effects of age are beginning to be felt. Many people think this stage will be a time to travel, to enjoy each other and to catch up on all the things that they did not have time for throughout the earlier years of their relationship.

Research shows that many of us will not have extra money to travel and in very few cases do people start activities that have not been a part of their lives up to this point. So, what to do? There are two things to keep in mind. If you want to travel or play sports in retirement it is essential to integrate them into your relationship through the years. Secondly, looking to money, travel and the like may not be your way to fulfillment. Fulfillment may be accomplished by being reflective. Although this may not come naturally and may have to be learned, reflection can be the means to great satisfaction in your relationship.

**S**o, when you look at your relationship, are you both pulling together or is your boat going around in circles? If it's the latter, focus on the changes necessary to get the boat moving in the right direction.

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