

## Where Did Our Love Go?

**W**e've all seen the cartoons and heard jokes about marriage ruining a perfectly good relationship. And you might even know a situation where that seemed to happen -- maybe it even feels like that in your own relationship. Why does something that starts out feeling so good seem to go downhill once you take that step of commitment.

One reason is that relationships go through predictable stages, although the intensity may vary from person to person and couple to couple. You may notice that even relationships with friends, a boss, a job, or an adopted child all progress in a similar way. We commonly talk about the "honeymoon period" being over after we settle in to a new job or relationship and start having more frustrations. But in marriage or in a deeply committed love relationship, these basic stages take on new intensity. There is much more at stake when we make a public commitment to love and be loved -- and to spend our lives together doing so.

So why does the love seem to go away? One of the culprits is that couples get stuck in one of the early stages and are no longer moving through them. They begin to feel trapped in frustration and disappointment. Take a look at the basic stages.

### **Stage I: Romantic Love:**

The Romantic Love stage often feels so good that you want it to last forever. In fact, you expect it to last forever!. In a new job or with a new love, everything seems perfect at first. When you see things that you don't like, you might deny or at least minimize them. You tend to go above and beyond what is required or expected. You feel energized, alive, and filled with new dreams. In our culture, this stage is usually the reason you decide to get married in the first place. Your heart is filled with love and you know that this person loves you. You both find creative ways to show your love. When you're apart, you are thinking of one another.

Everything feels right. Some people feel a sense of finally 'being home' or of being 'complete'. Isn't marriage supposed to make these feelings and chemistry last forever?

What we now know through research is that not only do people experience this intense love on an emotional level -- there are actually physiological processes that occur. When human beings fall in love, a peptide, PEA (phenoethylamine) is produced in the body. PEA increases energy, feelings of well being, positive outlook, and diminishes pain. It increases sexual desire. PEA is what helps you stay up until 4am and go to work the next morning as if you've had a full night's sleep. You can get so caught up in being with the other person, that you miss a meal and don't really notice. If you usually tend to be anxious, PEA may help you feel calm. If you are usually depressed, you might have more energy and see things more positively. You believe that it is this other person that brings the best out in you--at last you've found the one! And to some extent, that may be true, but some of it is increased PEA!

The beliefs of this stage are: *"Everything's right with the world."* *"Love will conquer all."* *"You're the one for me!"*

It is a wonderful time of hope, dreams, love and some illusion. You are 'under the influence!' So, enjoy!!

### **Stage II: Disillusionment / The Power Struggle. I like to call this stage, " The Invitation to Growth."**

One of the biggest illusions in our culture is that Romantic Love will last forever, if you just find the right partner. We hear that love is supposed to continue happening 'naturally' and if you have to 'work' on it, it must not be real love. These illusions are one of the reasons our divorce rate remains around 50%! When people get stuck in this stage, they believe they just made a mistake in choosing their partner. He or she isn't the right one.

One reason for the let-down feeling is that

PEA production begins to decline. And because we see the other person as the source of our good feelings, we blame them when we don't feel as good-- not realizing that part of it is simply biological! People who go from relationship to relationship are caught up in trying to feel those PEA produced feelings! Affairs are often attempts to recreate those feelings and the danger of being caught only adds to the intensity of the 'high' because PEA production increases.

In this 2nd stage, you might start feeling anxious or disappointed. Things that you once liked about your partner have become sources of frustration and hurt feelings. You find fault with each other and blame each other for how you feel. You may ask, "What has happened to him/her/us?" And that unspeakable fear begins to creep in that maybe you've made a mistake.

It is common in this stage to go through a process of grieving very similar to someone who has lost a loved one. What have you lost? Some of your illusions begin to die. You are both burdened by unmet expectations of yourself and the other. It sometimes feels like love is dying. One or both of you might keep trying to pretend that the disappointment, frustration, and hurt are not really there, or that you shouldn't be upset. You may try to explain things away. This is called denial.

Denial gives way to bargaining -- "If you would just. . . , then I will. . . ." Anger and resentment may increase. Sometimes it feels as if you are walking on eggshells. Certain topics are avoided. Little things turn into great big things. Frustration and hurt builds on both sides.

Often there is conflict about issues like control, neatness, doing one's part, closeness or space, feeling unimportant or alone, etc.. Winning and being right becomes more important than working together. You become adversaries instead of partners. Frequently one or both partners engage in blame, criticism, sarcasm, put-downs. Demonstrations of love, respect, appreciation decline and might even disappear.

This stage can get to the point of desperation where you've tried everything you know and it seems the only option is to get out -- temporarily or permanently. Separation or divorce seem to be the only options left.

Too many couples give in to hopelessness and despair at this stage. And often well-meaning friends or family encourage you to get rid of your partner.

Other couples decide this must be what marriage is, and try to just cope with it. Some stay together because of the kids, but live in the same house disconnected from one another.

**GOOD NEWS! You are not meant to live in distress! That is NOT what marriage is meant to be! This stage can be the door to deeper connection and intimacy, and a fulfilling relationship — if you learn and use some of the tools to transform it into the path to real love.**

This conflict and distress hold the keys to mutual growth, healing, and fulfilling your potential as individuals and as a couple! It is the point where you choose together to make it so. It is the point where you wake up, decide to become conscious and intentional, and begin a whole new chapter in co-creating the relationship you both dreamed of.

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## *Conflict and distress are growth trying to happen!*

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### **Stage III & IV: Knowledge, Awareness and Transformation:**

This is the stage in which you not only recognize that there are some areas that can use improvement in your relationship, but make a conscious commitment to do the work of transforming your relationship into one that is fulfilling for both of you.

While one or both of you may continue to feel anxious, confused, afraid, and may resist making some of the changes, you do have the power to strengthen and change your relationship. This is the stage where you take charge as partners of the direction of your happiness as a couple. And you do that best by taking charge of your own behavior. You start *being* the change you want to see.

In this stage you gain new information and insights about yourself, about your partner, and about the nature of marriage or relationship. You learn and practice new tools and skills to help you move forward. Where do you get this information and skills?

1) Find a couple who has been happily married for 30 or more years and ask them the secrets of their happiness and what they did to get through the rough times.

2) Read books that explain some of the information and tools. I highly recommend the following: *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix. He also has other books and tapes. Another is *Fighting FOR Your Marriage* by Howard Markman.

Both of these books help you understand some of what is going in your relationship and offer practical skills to help change it.

3) Focus on your OWN behavior. Look at some of the things *you* do that are not helpful to the relationship. What are you putting into that space between you and your partner? Does it cultivate the relationship or pollute it? Then begin taking one step at a time to change those things that don't cultivate it.

4) If you find that the new skills are not helping or think you might need some help, go to a counselor who focuses on teaching skills. A certified Imago Relationship Therapist is trained to do just that. You can find one close to you by checking in two places: The Association for Imago Relationship Therapy at 1-800-884-6246 or visit their Website: <http://www.airtonline.com> Another place to check is the Institute for Imago Relationship Therapy at 1-800-729-1121, Website: <http://www.imagotherapy.com>

### **Stage IV: Transformation**

In this stage you commit to becoming more intentional in your relationship instead of reacting to one another. You practice the skills you are learning about communication, stretching into new behaviors, creating emotional safety, etc. You become partners in the healing and growth of the relationship. You hold in your mind and heart the vision of the relationship you want and you work each day to make it a reality.

### **Stage V: Real Love**

This is the stage of deep respect and appreciation of one another as separate and unique individuals. It is a stage of joy, passion, intimacy, happiness and having fun together. It is the stage of living out the vision of true partnership, unconditional love and safety, and of coming to see your partner as your best friend. It is the stage of moving toward the spiritual potential of committed relationship -- the journey toward wholeness, the love in which you taste Divine Love.

Know that this Real Love is possible for you if you are both willing to do the work it requires. If you need help, get it! Don't throw away your relationship because it feels uncomfortable or looks difficult. You will most likely only repeat the process in the next relationship. ( Certainly, if you are in a physically abusive relationship, you need to protect yourself and your children and there are many groups to help you.) But remember, most divorce does not need to happen. You can make marriage a gift for yourself and your partner. ♦

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