Five Stages of Relationships

(as identified by Dr. Susan Campbell during a study of hundreds of couples)

**1. The Romance Stage: Falling in Love**

After you meet someone interesting, you spend time getting to know them. You consider first impressions, gather preliminary information, and are somewhat cautious. Overtime, you develop a level of comfort with the person and begin to let your guard down. When you fall in love, your brain releases a cocktail of chemicals *(including Oxytocin, Phenylethylamine and Dopamine)* designed to set your heart thumping and light a fire in your loins. You see all the things that make you feel good and similar to your lover. You have a tendency to ignore what makes you feel bad, hiding you partner’s flaws and making you say and do anything to get along and please each other. (**TIP**: Hollywood has glamorized this stage, making it out as the pinnacle of romantic achievement, when it is just the beginning and is fairly effortless. As a result, when our relationship hits the Power Struggle stage, we panic and incorrectly assume that because our relationship doesn’t look all starry-eyed like in the movies, it must be flawed.) When the high wears off, which can take anywhere from 2 months to 2 years, couples break up and look for more compatible mates, only to discover that the same thing happens in their next relationship. At this point, your brain stops or slows production of the love chemicals and you wake up with what I call a *“Love Hangover”,* lying next to the most incompatible person in the world.

## Couple Fighting****2. The Power Struggle Stage: the love hangover****

The highest percentage of first marriage divorces happen here – around the 3 to 4 - year mark. This is such a painful time as the illusion that ‘romantic love will last forever’ falls away and is replaced with feelings of disappointment and anger. You begin focusing on your differences and your partner’s flaws. So, you get to work trying to change your partner back into the person you thought they were, or punish them for not being that way, or both. Often one partner pulls away and withdraws, needing space… and the other partner needily chases them, feeling emotionally deserted. The goal of this stage of the relationship is to establish your autonomy inside your relationship, without destroying the love connection between you. This stage can last anywhere from a few months to years, depending on the support and guidance you have and your willingness to grow. (**TIP**: Without the skills to navigate this stage and resolve your differences, you’ll keep returning to it.) There are 2 ways *most* couples deal with the Power Struggle stage.

* **THEY BREAK UP**: Very often these people are serial daters, never fully committing, always looking for love, but finding disappointment instead.
* **THEY SURVIVE:** They suffer in but do not leave a relationship that is stuck in the past and no longer growing. Their relationship eventually emotionally flatlines, along with their sex life.

The other alternative is that you **OVERCOME**  [the Power Struggle](http://www.loveatfirstfight.com/relationship-advice/conflict/overcome-power-struggle-stage/), either on your own, or with professional guidance. G[etting through the power struggle stage](http://www.loveatfirstfight.com/relationship-advice/conflict/overcome-power-struggle-stage/) is not an easy ride for most couples. It’s all too easy for one person to quit halfway along the journey and end the relationship because it feels like too much hard work. In reality, they’re usually unwilling to face aspects of themselves that feel too scary to confront.

You graduate from the Power Struggle stage when you:

* accept and appreciate each other’s differences
* learn to share power, and realize that using force will never get you what you want in love
* realize *who you are* and *what you have* (as a couple)
* give up your fantasies of harmony without struggle
* surrender to life just the way it is

## ****3. The Stability Stage****

Once you’ve learned how to fight in a way that both of you win, you move to the Stability stage.

The thrill of being in love returns and if you’ve completed the Power Struggle stage, it returns to an even deeper, more mature form than in the Romance stage. In this stage, it finally becomes very clear that you’re never ever going to succeed in changing your partner and you’ve given up the desire to. You’re OK with your partner being different from you. You both have clear boundaries and learn mutual respect. If you don’t, you go back to the Power Struggle. (**TIP:** You can get stuck in this stage if you get too attached to the peace and stability that comes with it. Remember that all growth requires change and getting outside your comfort zone.)

## The Commitment Stage****4. The Commitment Stage****

In the commitment stage, you fully surrender to the reality that you and your partner are human and that your relationship has shortcomings as a result. You have learned to love each other by having to like each other and you **choose** each other consciously. You can honestly say to your partner, “I don’t need you. I choose you knowing all I know about you, good and bad.” You begin to experience a beautiful balance of love, belonging, fun, power, and freedom. The trap in this stage is thinking that all your work is done. While this may be somewhat true on an individual level, your work in the world as a couple is just beginning. (**TIP:** This is the only stage where you’re actually ready to be married. However, being married does not mean that you’re in the Commitment stage. Most people get married in the Romance stage before they have learned to navigate conflict.)

## The Bliss or Co-Creation Stage****5. The Bliss / Co-Creation Stage****

In this stage you become two people who have chosen to be a team moving out into the world. Often, couples in this stage work on a project together – some kind of shared creative work that is intended to contribute to the world in some way e.g. a business, a charity or a family. (**TIP:** If you’ve been together many years and are in the Bliss stage, be careful not to invest so much energy into the outside world that you forget to nurture your relationship.) These stages are not a linear process; they are more like a spiral, circling upwards. You retain the lessons you learned at each stage and bring them forward as you grow – you are in one stage or another at any given time with bits of the others thrown in for good measure. You’ll keep coming back to the Power Struggle stage until you learn to love each other’s differences and fight in a way that deepens your intimacy and connection instead of eroding it.

(adapted from “The 5 stages of relationships: Which relationship stage is yours at?” by Bruce Muzik)