

# A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON PROBLEMS IN COUPLES RELATIONSHIPS

Problems and disillusionment eventually happen in almost every relationship. How you think about your difficulties, how you manage your feelings, where you focus your attention, and how you act and communicate under stress will determine the quality of your relationship. If you can change your conviction that your partner is the source of your unhappiness – if you can understand that struggles are not a sign of a failing relationship – if you can see your relationship as a journey along a path of development, then you will be well on your way to a more positive outlook.

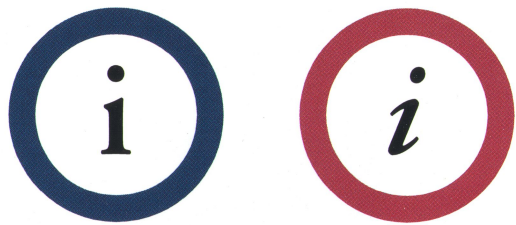
In the pages that follow you will learn about the normal and natural stages and struggles that growing couples encounter. Equipped with this clear overview of the terrain and a 'map' that points to the stepping stones of differentiation, you can redirect your efforts and energy toward a more vital, satisfying relationship.



# STEPPING STONES TO INTIMACY

A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON THE  
CHALLENGES ALL COUPLES FACE





## Separate Selves No More: The "I" And the "We"

The words and illustrations which follow describe a sequence of developmental stages that relationships go through over time. In the very beginning, two separate individuals, each represented by an encircled "i", join together to form into a "we". This "we" begins to exert a strong influence on the two "i"s. From this point onward, the balance between the two "i"s and the "we" will fluctuate due to the struggle between the need for autonomy of the "i" and the desire for intimacy of the "we".

Because you are two different individuals, you may not progress through the stages at the same time. The five stages that follow will help you know and identify the appropriate next steps and goals that can move you both towards greater intimacy while remaining true to yourself, your values, feelings and thoughts.



### #1 Symbiosis: Exclusive Bonding

This blissful merging of the two "i"s into a "we" is known as symbiosis\*. This is often called the romantic stage – a time to experience 'oneness' and the ecstasy of giving and being given to by a special someone. The "i" of you and your partner is less sharply defined. In hindsight, you may notice that a significant part of your beliefs, behaviors and personality were temporarily suspended in order for the "we" to become primary.

Differences were minimized, and similarities were emphasized.

You may have seen only the best parts of each other and experienced unconditional love. **Love is**, somewhat, **blind**. So far, so good. However, the "we" that forms is inevitably based in fantasy. The bliss of the powerful connection of symbiosis eventually fades, creating a need/opportunity for change. This crucial stage had a valuable purpose.

This strong, exclusive bond provides a foundation of nurturance and trust – a resource you can draw upon as you journey onwards.



### #2 Differentiation: Managing Anxiety Over Differences

Eventually as each individual "i" re-emerges, differences between you begin to appear.

Parts of you or your partner that may have been dormant begin to surface.

Disillusionment and disappointment may arise as you notice each others' imperfections.

The desire to spend more time alone or with other friends as well as the ongoing expression of different values, desires, and behaviors can become quite disturbing. This

can be truly a difficult and stressful time. Some couples rise to the challenge by

developing effective means of dealing with differences through healthy conflict management & negotiation. More often, however, struggling couples attempt to solve

this crisis by two ineffective solutions designed to return to the comfort of symbiosis:

1) hiding/denying differences to avoid conflict, or, 2) engaging in angry escalating arguments, hoping to convince their partner to agree in order to find togetherness.

Both of these may result in repetitive, stifling, unproductive interactions.

Ironically, these same sources of tension also hold the greatest promise of personal growth and relationship evolution.

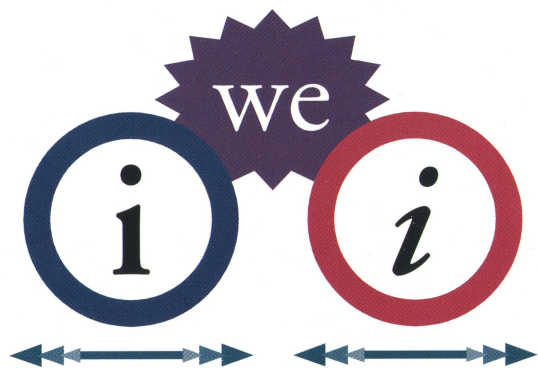


### #3 Exploration: Moving From "We" Back to "I"

When you are able to resist the pressure to return to a symbiotic state, you begin to reestablish your own identity and self-esteem that are independent of how your relationship is faring. The "we" loses its dominance – now the balance shifts strongly toward the "i". This vital and important stage can present a real crisis for each of you. It may well seem as if love and caring have all but disappeared. To make matters worse, the timing may be different for each of you. The more one distances, the more the other may cling. If both of you distance simultaneously, you may feel more like roommates than lovers. You may feel isolated and emotionally disconnected. The objective of this stage is to redefine and sustain your identity under stress. This will bring greater richness to your relationship and form a new foundation for reconnection.

\*Adapted from Mahler M., Pine F., and Bergman A., *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*. New York: Basic Books, Inc 1975.





#### #4 Re-Connection: Back and Forth Patterns of Intimacy

In this stage you have strengthened your identity and learned to maintain your own point of view without hostility. You think more productively about your differences and disagreements instead of having automatic negative reactions. A return to a deeper, more sustainable level of intimacy is occurring. This is often accompanied with an enlivened sexual relationship. Though there may be moments of back and forth oscillation, this is a time when a different quality to the "we"-ness comes into being – one which includes a respect for the existence of two separate "i"s. You feel much more supported than stifled in this relationship. You hear fewer statements of the "I need" from your partner and hear more of "I would like" or "I really want." When your partner hears a "no" from you, it will more than likely be heard as an expression of who you are vs. a harsh barb of rejection. Every difficult discussion does not turn into a high wire act because of the increased tolerance of, and respect for, your differences.



#### #5 Synergy: Independence & Interdependence

Intimacy deepens as you increase your abilities to manage your emotional reactions when differences cause tension. You are capable of, and committed to relating in ways that are true to your most deeply held values and beliefs. You can actively support your partner's right to do the same – even if this becomes inconvenient. The flow between the "i" and the "we" is becoming easier ... almost automatic. The relationship is now more vital than either partner separately. Each benefits from the synergy and the "we" has an energy all its own. Partners desire to create and give back to the world. Deep intimacy, vulnerability and emotional sustenance abound.

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