

## Love's Stages

The passionate love that begins a marriage cannot sustain a marriage. The love that you have for your partner will undergo numerous changes and evolve into many different forms over a lifetime together. Accepting love's changeable nature allows you to relax and enjoy its many manifestations.

Marriage is a journey through predictable passages, or stages of love. These stages: romance, power struggle, cooperation, mutuality and co-creativity are sequential seasons of love in marriage. Each stage has its own challenges and opportunities and each builds on each other, eventually bringing your love life to its full potential.

### Stage One: Romance

The initial stage of love in marriage is romance, a time when couples nearly forget that they are unique individuals with separate identities. In this stage of enchantment, the couple takes complete delight in each other. Reaching out to fulfill their deepest needs for intimacy, they experience a kind of mystical union and they celebrate the ecstasy of bliss and belonging.

### Stage Two: The Power Struggle

This stage, rife with tension, begins when idiosyncrasies emerge and differences become glaring. Two independent people forming a way of life together eventually run into power struggles and must learn to adjust to each other's ways. The intensity and turmoil of this stage vary among couples, but almost every couple engage in the struggle. Successful passage through this stage enables each partner to say, "Okay. So I am willing to admit that my romance with a perfect partner is an illusion. However I am still fascinated with the mystery of who you are and am willing to pursue romance with you and journey together toward a more mature love."

### Stage Three: Cooperation

This stage is like a breath of fresh air for couples who have stayed the course and successfully navigated the perilous passage of power struggles. Now a sense of acceptance and willingness to change enters the relationship. A new

depth develops as more healthy ways of being together begin. Couples in this stage realize that love is not so much about looking outward at each other as it is about looking inward at themselves, taking responsibility for their own personal problems. In this stage couples relinquish the illusion that their partner needs to make them happy and they redefine love by coming to terms with fears and defenses, projections and hurts.

#### Stage Four: Mutuality

While a monumental change began in Stage Three, it was still a time when old problems and fears reemerged, especially in stressful times. But as love grows, couples eventually enter a new stage of feeling one with each other, where each feels a secure sense of belonging. Just when couples are wondering if they will ever escape old, unhealthy patterns, they discover a new reality and are surprised by the joy of mutual intimacy.

#### Stage Five: Co-Creativity

In Stage Four, the intimacy each couple yearns for and struggles to achieve becomes an experienced reality. But as partners become older, retire and face the end of life together they develop a more pronounced energy of co-creativity. The rhythm of intimacy comes to a new and final flourish. Love overflows. Secure themselves and in their love couples have an abundant flow of energy for action in the world at large. This profound and peaceful period of love transcends all previous stages and results in a stronger and deeper love than any other. In co-creativity couples realize that they are not just made for each other, they are also called to a ministry of love to everyone and everything. Thus the co-creative couple develops a web of meaningful inter-relationships that support the marriage and deepen its joys. In this final stage, partners are able to say, "We have put a lot of miles on this marriage. It has been exasperating, elating, horrible, wonderful, shackling, freeing. It has been our single, most intimate source of conflict and of joy." As we process through these stages love changes but becomes no less intimate, important or meaningful. For in the measure that young passion recedes, the vacancy is replaced with a deeper, more abiding sense of intimacy, care and co-creativity. As the flame fades, deep, richly glowing coals emerge.