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COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

AFTER STUDYING THE TOPICS IN THIS CHAPTER, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO:

1 Identify factors that have influenced your choice of relational partners.

2 Use Knapp's model to describe the nature of communication in the various stages of a relationship.

3 Describe the dialectical tensions in a given relationship, how they influence communication, and the most effective strategies for managing them.

4 Explain how change and culture affect communication in interpersonal relationships.

5 Identify the content and relational dimensions of communication in a given transaction.

6 Describe how metacommunication can be used to improve the quality of a given relationship.

7 Describe the steps necessary to maintain, support, and repair interpersonal relationships.

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"We have a terrific relationship."

"I'm looking for a better relationship."

"Our relationship has changed a lot."

"We need to talk about our relationship."

*R*elationship is one of those words that people use all the time but have trouble defining. Take a moment to see if you can explain the term in your own words. It isn't as easy as it might seem. For instance, most would agree that it's important to form relationships with clients and customers—but, of course, those relationships are quite different from those with sweethearts or close friends. You have a relationship with your family members (after all, they're *related* to you)—but those relationships might be strained or even broken. And social media users know that it's a big deal to declare online that they're "in a relationship."

Rather than define (and therefore limit) the concept of "relationship," this chapter will look at relational dynamics and how communication operates as people form, manage, and sometimes end their relationships. You will see that relationships aren't static like a painting or photograph: They change over time like an ongoing dance or drama. Even the most stable and satisfying relationships wax and wane in a variety of ways as communication patterns change. By the time you finish reading this chapter, you will have a better sense of how communication both defines and reflects our important relationships.

WHY WE FORM RELATIONSHIPS

What makes us seek relationships with some people and not with others? Sometimes we don't have a choice. Children can't select their parents, and most workers aren't able to choose their bosses or colleagues. In many other cases, however, we seek out some people and actively avoid others. Social scientists have collected an impressive body of research on interpersonal attraction.[1] The following are some of the factors they have identified that influence our choice of relational partners.

Appearance

Most people claim that we should judge others on the basis of how they act, not how they look. However, as Chapter 7 explains, the reality is quite the opposite.[2] Appearance is especially important in the early stages of a relationship. In one study, a group of more than 700 men and women were matched as blind dates for a social event. After the party was over, they were asked whether they would like to date their partners again. The result? The more physically attractive the person (as judged in advance by independent raters), the more likely he or she was seen as desirable. Other factors—social skills and intelligence, for example—didn't seem to affect the decision.[3]

In a more contemporary example, physical appearance is the primary basis of attraction for speed daters.[4] Perhaps this is why online daters routinely enhance their photographs and information about their height and weight to appear more attractive to potential suitors.[5] Online profile owners are also rated more positively when they have pictures of physically attractive friends on their sites, suggesting that they're known—and found attractive—by the company they keep.[6] The opposite is also true: Attractive faces are seen as less attractive when in the middle of unattractive or average faces.[7]

Even if your appearance isn't beautiful by societal standards, consider the following encouraging facts. First, after initial impressions have passed, ordinary-looking people with kind and pleasant personalities are likely to be judged as attractive.[8] Second, physical factors become less important as a relationship progresses.[9] In fact, as romantic relationships develop, partners create "positive illusions," viewing one another as more attractive over time.[10] As one social scientist put it, "Attractive features may open doors, but apparently it takes more than physical beauty to keep them open."[11]

Similarity

A large body of research confirms the fact that we like people who are similar to us, at least in most cases.[12] For example, the more similar a married couple's personalities are, the more likely they are to report being happy and satisfied in their marriage.[13] Friends in middle school and high school report being similar to one another in many ways, including having mutual friends, enjoying the same sports, liking the same social activities, and using (or not using) alcohol and cigarettes to the same degree.[14] Friendships seem most likely to last decades when the friends are similar to one another.[15] For adults, similarity is more important to relational happiness than even communication ability. Friends who have equally low levels of communication skills are just as satisfied with their relationships as are friends who have high levels of communication skills.[16]

Similarity plays an important role in initial attraction. People are more likely to accept a Facebook friend request from a stranger whom they perceive to be similar.[17] Perception is important here. Research shows that we are more attracted to similarities we *believe* exist ("We *seem* to have a lot in common") than to actual similarities.[18] In fact, perceived similarities often *create* attraction. Deciding you like someone often leads to perceptions of similarity rather than the other way around.[19]

One theory for why we are attracted to similar others is that it provides a measure of ego support. If we judge those who are like us to be attractive, then we must be attractive too (or so goes the theory). One study described the lengths to which this *implicit egotism* can affect perceptions of attractiveness.[20] Results showed that people are disproportionately likely to marry others whose first or last names resemble their own, and they are also attracted to those with similar birthdays or even sports jersey numbers. We're also attracted to those whose language style matches our own.[21] On a more substantive level, similar values about politics and religion were found, in one study, to be the best predictors of mate choice—significantly more than attraction to physical appearance or personality traits.[22]

Attraction is greatest when we are similar to others in a high percentage of important areas. For example, two people who support each other's career goals, enjoy the same friends, and have similar beliefs about human rights can tolerate trivial disagreements about the merits of sushi or rap music. With enough similarity in key areas, they can even survive disputes about more important subjects such as how much time to spend with their families or whether separate vacations are acceptable. But if the number and content of disagreements become too great, then the relationship may be threatened.

Similarity turns from attraction to dislike when we encounter people who are like us in many ways but who behave in a strange or socially offensive manner.[23] For instance, you have probably disliked people others have said were "just like you" but who talked too much, were complainers, or had some other unappealing characteristic. In fact, there is a tendency to have stronger dislike for similar but offensive people than for those who are offensive but different. One likely reason is that such people threaten our self-esteem, causing us to fear that we may be as unappealing as they are. In such circumstances, the reaction is often to put as much distance as possible between ourselves and this threat to our ideal self-image.

Complementarity

The familiar saying that "opposites attract" seems to contradict the principle of similarity we just described. In truth, though, both are valid. Differences strengthen a relationship when they are *complementary*—when each partner's characteristics satisfy the other's needs.

Research suggests that attraction to partners who have complementary temperaments might be rooted in biology.[24] Individuals, for instance, are often likely to be attracted to each other when one partner is dominant and the other passive.[25] Relationships also work well when the partners agree that one will exercise control in certain areas ("You make the final decisions about money") and the other will exercise control in different areas ("I'll decide how we ought to decorate the place"). Strains occur when control issues are disputed. One study shows that "spendthrifts and tightwads" are often attracted to each other, but their differences in financial management often lead to significant conflict over the course of a relationship.[26]

When successful and unsuccessful couples are compared over a twenty-year period, it becomes clear that partners in successful marriages are similar enough to satisfy each other physically and mentally but different enough to meet each other's needs and keep the relationship interesting. Successful couples find ways to keep a balance between their similarities and differences, adjusting to the changes that occur over the years. We'll have more to say about balancing similarities and differences later in this chapter.

Reciprocal Attraction

We like people who like us—usually.[27] The power of reciprocal attraction is especially strong in the early stages of a relationship. At that time we are attracted to people who we believe are attracted to us. Conversely, we will probably not care for people who either attack or seem indifferent toward us.

It's no mystery why reciprocal liking builds attractiveness: People who approve of us bolster our feelings of self-esteem. This approval is rewarding in its own right, and it can also confirm a presenting self-concept that says, "I'm a likable person."

You can probably think of cases where you haven't liked people who seemed to like you. For example, you might think the other person's supposed liking is counterfeit—an insincere device to get something from you. At other times the liking may not fit with your own self-concept. When someone says you're good-looking, intelligent, and kind, but you believe you're ugly, stupid, and mean, you may choose to disregard the flattering information and remain in your familiar state of unhappiness. Groucho Marx summarized this attitude when he said he would never join any club that would consider having him as a member.

Competence

We like to be around talented people, probably because we hope their skills and abilities will rub off on us. We are uncomfortable around those who are *too* competent, however, probably because we look bad by comparison. Given these contrasting attitudes, it's no surprise that people are generally attracted to those who are talented but who have visible flaws that show that they are human, just like us.[28] Moreover, we're attracted to people whose competence is paired with interpersonal warmth. "Competent but cool" is generally not seen as an attractive mix.[29]

Disclosure

As noted in Chapter 3, revealing important information about yourself can help build liking.[30] Sometimes the basis of this liking comes from learning about how we are similar, either in experiences ("I broke off an engagement myself") or in attitudes ("I feel nervous with strangers, too"). Self-disclosure also builds liking because it is a sign of regard. When people share private information with you, it suggests that they respect and trust you—a kind of liking that we've already seen increases attractiveness. Disclosure plays an even more important role as relationships develop beyond their earliest stages. This is the case in both online and face-to-face communication and relationships.[31]

Not all disclosure leads to liking. Research shows that the key to satisfying self-disclosure is *reciprocity*: getting back an amount and kind of information equivalent to that which you reveal.[32] A second important ingredient in successful self-disclosure is *timing*. It's probably unwise to talk about your sexual insecurities with a new acquaintance or express your pet peeves to a friend at your birthday party. Finally, for the sake of self-protection, it's important to reveal personal information only when you are sure the other person is trustworthy.[33]

Proximity

As common sense suggests, we are likely to develop relationships with people we interact with frequently.[34] In many cases, proximity leads to liking. For instance, we're more likely to develop friendships with close neighbors than with distant ones, and chances are good that we'll choose a mate with whom we cross paths often. Facts like these are understandable when we consider that proximity allows us to get more information about other people and benefit from a relationship with them. Also, people in close proximity may be more similar to us than those who are not close; for example, if we live in the same neighborhood, odds are we share the same socioeconomic status. The Internet provides a new means for creating closeness, as users are able to experience "virtual proximity" in cyberspace.[35]
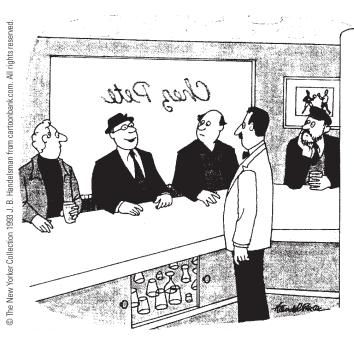
Rewards

Some social scientists believe that all relationships—both impersonal and personal—are based on a semi-economic model called *social exchange theory*.[36] This model suggests that we often seek out people who can give us rewards that are greater than or equal to the costs we encounter in dealing with them. According to social exchange theory, relationships suffer when one partner feels "underbenefited."[37]

Rewards may be tangible (a nice place to live, a high-paying job) or intangible (prestige, emotional support, companionship). Costs are undesirable outcomes (unpleasant work, emotional pain, and so on). A simple formula captures the social exchange theory of why we form and maintain relationships:

$$\text{Rewards} - \text{Costs} = \text{Outcome}$$

According to social exchange theorists, we use this formula (often unconsciously) to decide whether dealing with another person is a "good deal" or "not worth the effort," based on whether the outcome is positive or negative.

At its most blatant level, an exchange approach seems cold and calculating, but in some types of relationships it seems quite appropriate. A healthy business relationship is based on how well the parties help one another. Some friendships are based on an informal kind of barter: "I don't mind listening to the ups and downs of your love life because you rescue me when the house needs repairs." Even close relationships have an element of exchange. Friends and lovers often tolerate each other's quirks because the comfort and enjoyment they get make the less-than-pleasant times worth accepting. In more serious cases, social exchange explains why some people stay in abusive relationships. Sadly, these people often report that they would rather be in a bad relationship than have no relationship at all.

"I'd like to buy everyone a drink. All I ask in return is that you listen patiently to my shallow and simplistic views on a broad range of social and political issues."

At first glance, the social exchange approach seems to present a view of relationships that is very different from one based on the need to seek intimacy. In fact, the two approaches aren't incompatible. Seeking intimacy of any type—whether emotional, physical, or even intellectual—has its costs, and our decision about whether to "pay" those costs is, in great measure, made by considering the likely rewards. If the costs of seeking and maintaining an intimate relationship are too great or the payoffs are not worth the effort, we may decide to withdraw.

MODELS OF RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

Your own experience demonstrates that relational beginnings are a unique time. How does communication change as we spend time with others and get to know them? Communication scholars have different perspectives on this question. We'll look at two approaches—developmental and dialectical—in this section.

A Developmental Perspective

One of the best-known models of relational stages was developed by communication researcher Mark Knapp. It breaks the rise and fall of relationships into ten stages, contained in the two broad phases of "coming together" and "coming apart."[38] Other researchers have suggested that any model of relational communication ought to contain a third phase of *relational maintenance*—communication aimed at keeping relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily (we'll discuss relational maintenance in detail later in this chapter). Figure 9.1 shows how Knapp's ten stages fit into this three-phase view of relational communication.

This model seems most appropriate for describing communication between romantic partners, but in many respects it works well for other types of close
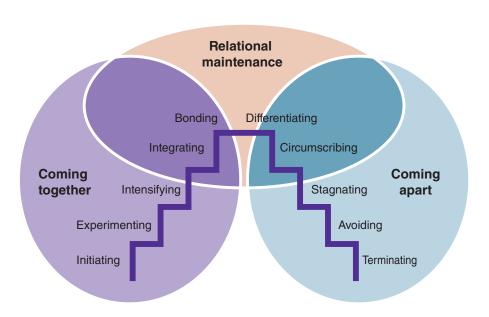

◀ FIGURE 9.1
Stages of Relational Development

Looking at DIVERSITY

Photo by Rakhi Singh

Rakhi Singh and Rajesh Punn: A Modern Arranged Marriage

My husband Raj and I are married because our parents thought we might be right for one another.

The term "arranged marriage" has different meaning for Indians today than it did in previous generations. My grandparents in a rural village were matched by their parents, and married at ages 12 and 13. They had little or no say in the matter. Their children—my parents—were also matched, but not until they were in college. After being introduced, they had a 3-hour meeting before deciding whether to go ahead with their engagement.

It was very different for Raj and me. Our parents back in India published profiles of each of us, and after reviewing possible candidates, they decided together that we might be a good match. They put us in touch, and from there it was up to us to decide whether we were right for one another.

Because we lived in the USA, we were a little resistant to this sort of matchmaking, but we were still willing to give it a try. Thankfully, our parents chose well: We hit it off, and after 18 months we married. Thirteen years and three kids later, we are very happy.

The notion of parents choosing prospective spouses may seem odd at first, but there are some reasons why the approach works as well as it does. Parents match people from similar backgrounds—cultural values, education, and age, for example. That can help insure a good fit. Also, knowing that the family approves takes away a big area of potential stress and conflict.

In some ways, parental matchmaking resembles computer dating. The searchers plug in the qualities they're seeking, and out comes a list of people who fit the profile. I think the key variable is whether the parents are willing to limit their role to finding prospective partners, and to let their children make the final call.

relationships.[39] As you read the following section, consider how the stages could describe a long-term friendship, a couple in love, or even business partners.

Initiating   The goals in the first stage of a relationship are to show that you are interested in making contact and that you are the kind of person worth talking to. Communication during this **initiating** stage is usually brief, and it generally follows conventional formulas: handshakes, remarks about innocuous subjects like the weather, and friendly expressions. These kinds of behavior may seem superficial and meaningless, but they are a way of signaling that we're interested in building some kind of relationship with the other person. They allow us to say without saying, "I'm a friendly person, and I'd like to get to know you."

Initiating relationships—especially romantic ones—can be particularly difficult for people who are shy. Making contact via social media can be helpful in cases like this. One study of an online dating service found that participants who identified themselves as shy expressed a greater appreciation for the system's anonymous, nonthreatening environment than did more outgoing users.[40] The researchers found that many shy users employed the online service specifically to help overcome their inhibitions about initiating relationships in

face-to-face settings. This helps explain why many young adults—shy or not—use social media sites such as Facebook to initiate relationships.[41]

Keep in mind that initiating is the opening stage of *all* relationships, not just romantic ones. Friendships start here,[42] and so do business partnerships. In fact, some have compared employment interviews to first dates because they have similar properties.[43] As you read about the stages that follow, consider how the communication involved could be true of landing a job, connecting with a roommate, or joining an organization—as well as forming a romantic relationship.

Experimenting   After we have made contact with a new person, the next stage is to decide whether we are interested in pursuing the relationship further. This involves *uncertainty reduction*—the process of getting to know others by gaining more information about them.[44] A usual part of uncertainty reduction is the search for common ground, and it involves the conversational basics such as "Where are you from?" or "What's your major?" From there we look for other similarities: "You're a runner, too? How many miles do you do a week?"

The hallmark of the **experimenting** stage is small talk. Even though we may dislike it, we tolerate the ordeal of small talk because it serves several functions. First, it is a useful way to find out what interests we share with the other person. It also provides a way to audition the other person—to help us decide whether a relationship is worth pursuing. In addition, small talk is a safe way to ease into a relationship. You haven't risked much as you decide whether to proceed further.

For communicators who are interested in one another, the move from initiating to experimenting seems to occur even more rapidly online than in person. One study found that people who develop relationships via email begin asking questions about attitudes, opinions, and preferences more quickly than those engaged in face-to-face contact.[45] It probably helps that emailers can't see each other's nonverbal reactions; they don't have to worry about blushing, stammering, or looking away if they realize that they asked for too much information too quickly.

Social networking sites may change the nature of this stage of relational development. College students in one study said that experimenting in romantic relationships used to involve securing a person's phone number; now it often involves a Facebook friend request.[46] Once access is given, communicators can look over each other's site, allowing them to "chug" rather than "sip" information about the other person. Photos and mutual friends are also important factors in deciding whether to continue developing a relationship. And of course, gathering this information online is less face-threatening (for both parties) than doing so in person.

Intensifying   In the **intensifying** stage, the kind of truly interpersonal relationship defined in Chapter 1 begins to develop. Several changes in communication patterns occur during intensifying. The expression of feelings toward the other becomes more common. Dating couples use a wide range of communication strategies to describe their feelings of attraction.[47] About one-quarter of the time they express their feelings directly, openly discussing the state of the relationship. More often they use less direct methods of communication:

∧ This remake of the 1986 rom com *About Last Night* traces the rise and decline of the relationship between Danny (Michael Ealy) and Debbie (Joy Bryant). The story illustrates the developmental model from initial attraction through emotional and physical intensifying into integration, and ultimately to the stages of coming apart. How closely have your relationships followed the stages in Knapp's model?

spending an increasing amount of time together, asking for support from one another, doing favors for the partner, giving tokens of affection, hinting and flirting, expressing feelings nonverbally, getting to know the partner's friends and family, and trying to look more physically attractive. In developing friendships, intensifying can include participating in shared activities, hanging out with mutual friends, or taking trips together.[48]

The intensifying stage is usually a time of relational excitement and even euphoria. For romantic partners, it's often filled with starstruck gazes, goosebumps, and daydreaming. As a result, it's a stage that's regularly depicted in movies and romance novels—after all, we love to watch lovers in love.[49] The problem, of course, is that the stage doesn't last forever. Sometimes romantic partners who stop feeling goosebumps begin to question whether they're still in love. Although it's possible that they're not, it's also possible that they've simply moved on to a different, less emotional stage in their relationship—integrating.

Integrating   As a relationship strengthens, the parties begin to take on an identity as a social unit. In romantic relationships, invitations begin to come addressed to the couple. Social circles merge. The partners begin to take on each other's commitments: "Sure, we'll spend Thanksgiving with your family." Common property may begin to be designated—our apartment, our car, our song.[50] Partners develop unique, ritualistic ways of behaving.[51] Close friends may even begin to speak alike, using personal idioms and sentence patterns.[52] In this sense, the **integrating** stage is a time when individuals give up some characteristics of their old selves and develop shared identities.

In contemporary relationships, integrating may include going "Facebook Official" (FBO) by declaring publically that the couple is "in a relationship."[53] Of course, problems can arise when one partner wants to be "FBO" and the other partner doesn't.[54] And the meaning of FBO can be different for each partner. One study found that in heterosexual relationships, women tend to perceive FBO declarations as involving more intensity and commitment than men do.[55] As a result, women may connect FBO status with the rights and restrictions normally associated with bonding—a stage we'll look at now.

Bonding   During the **bonding** stage, the parties make symbolic public gestures to show the world that their relationship exists. What constitutes a bonded, committed relationship isn't always easy to define.[56] Terms such as *common-law*, *cohabitation*, and *life partners* have been used to describe relationships that don't have the full support of custom and law but still involve an implicit or explicit bond. Nonetheless, given the importance of bonding in validating relationships and taking them to another level, it's not surprising that the gay and lesbian communities have fought hard to have legally sanctioned and recognized marriages.

For our purposes here, we'll define bonded relationships as those involving a significant measure of public commitment. These can include engagement or marriage, sharing a residence, a public ceremony, or a written or verbal pledge. The key is that bonding is the culmination of a developed relationship—the "officializing" of a couple's integration. We'll talk more about the role of commitment in relationships in Chapter 10.

Bonding marks a turning point in a relationship. Up until now the relationship may have developed at a steady pace. Experimenting gradually moved into intensifying and then into integrating. Now, however, there is a spurt of commitment. The public display and declaration of exclusivity make this a distinct stage in the relationship.

Relationships don't have to be romantic to achieve bonding. Consider, for example, the contracts that formalize a business partnership or the initiation ceremony in a fraternity or sorority. As one author notes, even friendships can achieve bonding with acts that "officialize" the relationship:

> Some Western cultures have rituals to mark the progress of a friendship and to give it public legitimacy and form. In Germany, for example, there's a small ceremony called *Duzen*, the name itself signifying the transformation in the relationship. The ritual calls for the two friends, each holding a glass of wine or beer, to entwine arms, thus bringing each other physically close, and to drink up after making a promise of eternal brotherhood with the word *Bruderschaft*. When it's over, the friends will have passed from a relationship that requires the formal *Sie* mode of address to the familiar *du*.[57]

Differentiating Bonding is the peak of what Knapp calls the "coming together" phase of relational development, but people in even the most committed relationships need to assert their individual identities. This **differentiating** stage is the point where the "we" orientation that has developed shifts, and more "me" messages begin to occur. Instead of talking about "our" weekend plans, differentiating conversations focus on what "I" want to do. Relational issues that were once agreed upon (such as "You'll be the breadwinner and I'll manage the home") may now become points of contention ("Why am *I* stuck at home when I have better career potential than *you*?"). The root of the term *differentiating* is the word *different*, suggesting that change plays an important role in this stage.

Differentiating is likely to occur when a relationship begins to experience the first, inevitable feelings of stress. This need for autonomy and change needn't be a negative experience, however. People need to be individuals as well as parts of a relationship, and differentiation is a necessary step toward autonomy. Think, for instance, of young adults who want to forge their own unique lives and identity, even while maintaining their relationships with their parents.[58] As Figure 9.1 illustrates, differentiating is often a part of normal relational maintenance, in which partners manage the inevitable changes that come their way. The key to successful differentiating is maintaining a commitment to the relationship while creating the space for being an individual as well. (This is a challenge that we will describe in more detail later in this chapter when we discuss dialectical tensions in relationships.)

Circumscribing In the **circumscribing** stage, communication between members decreases in quantity and quality. Restrictions and restraints characterize this stage. Rather than discuss a disagreement (which requires energy on both sides), members opt for withdrawal—either mental (silence or daydreaming and fantasizing) or physical (people spend less time together). Circumscribing doesn't involve total avoidance, which may come later. Rather, it involves a shrinking of interest and commitment—the opposite of what occurred in the integrating stage.

The word *circumscribe* comes from the Latin meaning "to draw circles around." Distinctions that emerged in the differentiating stage become more clearly marked and labeled: "my friends" and "your friends"; "my bank account" and "your bank account"; "my room" and "your room." As you'll soon read, such distinctions can be markers of a healthy balance between individual and relational identity—between autonomy and connection. They become a problem when there are clearly more areas of separation than integration in a relationship, or when the areas of separation seriously limit interaction, such as "my vacation" and "your vacation."

Stagnating If circumscribing continues, the relationship enters the **stagnating** stage. The excitement of the intensifying stage is long gone, and the partners behave toward each other in old, familiar ways without much feeling. No growth occurs; relational boredom sets in.[59] The relationship is a hollow shell of its former self. We see stagnation in many workers who have lost enthusiasm for their job, yet continue to go through the motions for years. The same sad event occurs for some couples who unenthusiastically have the same conversations, see the same people, and follow the same routines without any sense of joy or novelty.

Avoiding When stagnation becomes too unpleasant, parties in a relationship begin to create physical distance between each other. This is the **avoiding** stage. Sometimes they do it indirectly under the guise of excuses ("I've been sick lately and can't see you"); sometimes they do it directly ("Please don't call me; I don't want to see you now"). In either case, by this point the relationship's future is in doubt.

The deterioration of a relationship from bonding through circumscribing, stagnating, and avoiding isn't inevitable. One of the key differences between marriages that end in separation and those that are restored to their former intimacy is the communication that occurs when the partners are unsatisfied.[60] Unsuccessful couples deal with their problems by avoidance, indirectness, and less involvement with each other. By contrast, couples who repair their relationship communicate much more directly. They confront each other with their concerns (sometimes with the assistance of a counselor) and spend time and effort negotiating solutions to their problems.

Terminating Not all relationships end. Many career partnerships, friendships, and marriages last for a lifetime once they've been established. But many do deteriorate and reach the final stage of **terminating**. Characteristics of this stage include summary dialogues of where the relationship has gone and the desire to dissociate. The relationship may end with a cordial dinner,

a note left on the kitchen table, a phone call, or a legal document. Depending on each person's feelings, this stage can be quite short, or it may be drawn out over time.

Relationships don't always move toward termination in a straight line. Rather, they take a back-and-forth pattern, where the trend is toward dissolution.[61] Regardless of how long it takes, termination doesn't have to be totally negative. Understanding each other's investments in the relationship and needs for personal growth may dilute the hard feelings. In fact, many relationships aren't so much terminated as redefined. A divorced couple, for example, may find new, less intimate ways to relate to each other.

In romantic relationships, the best predictor of whether the parties will be friends after reaching the terminating stage is whether they were friends before their emotional involvement.[62] The way the couple splits up also makes a difference. It's no surprise to find that friendships are most possible when communication during the breakup is positive (expressions that there are no regrets for time spent together, other attempts to minimize hard feelings). When communication during termination is negative (being manipulative, complaining to third parties), friendships are less likely.

After termination, couples often engage in "grave-dressing"—retrospective attempts to explain why the relationship failed.[63] The narrative each partner creates about "what went wrong" has an impact on how the couple will get along after their breakup (imagine the difference between saying and hearing "We just weren't right for each other" versus "He was too selfish and immature for a committed relationship").[64]

Scholars have begun to investigate the role technology can play in relational termination. Thousands of respondents in one survey admitted they had broken up with someone via text message (men were far more likely than women to use this method).[65] Obviously, breaking up this way runs the risk of wounding and infuriating the person being dumped ("He didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face") and lessens the likelihood of post-relationship goodwill. A different study found that those on the receiving end of a breakup via technology tended to have high levels of attachment anxiety—which might explain why their partners didn't want to deliver the news in person.[66]

Once a romantic relationship is over, it may be wise to take a break from being Facebook friends with an ex-partner. Checking up on your former sweetheart

may reduce some uncertainty,[67] but surveillance of an ex's Facebook page is associated with greater distress over the breakup, more negative feelings, and lower personal growth.[68]

Limitations of the Developmental Perspective While Knapp's model offers insights into relational stages, it doesn't describe the ebb and flow of communication in every relationship. For instance, Knapp suggests that movement among stages is generally sequential, so that relationships typically progress from one stage to another in a predictable manner as they develop and deteriorate. One study found that many terminated friendships did follow a pattern similar to the one described by Knapp.[69] However, several other patterns of development and deterioration were also identified.

PAUSE *and* REFLECT

Your Relational Stage

MindTap® **REFLECT …** on your relational stages by answering the following questions, either here or online.

You can gain a clearer appreciation of the accuracy and value of relational stages by answering the following questions:

1. If you are in a relationship, describe its present stage and the behaviors that characterize your communication in this stage. Give specific examples to support your assessment.

2. Discuss the trend of the communication in terms of the stages described in this section. Are you likely to remain in the present stage, or do you anticipate movement to another stage? Which one? Explain your answer.

3. Describe your level of satisfaction with the answer to question 2. If you are satisfied, describe what you can do to increase the likelihood that the relationship will operate at the stage you described. If you are not satisfied, discuss what you can do to move the relationship toward a more satisfying stage.

4. Because both parties define a relationship, define your partner's perspective. Would she or he say that the relationship is in the same stage as you described? If not, explain how your partner would describe it. What does your partner do to determine the stage at which your relationship operates? (Give specific examples.) How would you like your partner to behave in order to move the relationship to or maintain it at the stage you desire? What can you do to encourage your partner to behave in the way you desire?

5. Now consider a relationship (friendship or romance) you have been in that has terminated. How well does the Knapp model describe the development and decline of that relationship? If the model doesn't match, develop a new model to illustrate your relationship's pattern.

In other words, not all relationships begin, progress, decline, and end in the same linear fashion.

Finally, Knapp's model suggests that a relationship exhibits only the most dominant traits of just one of the ten stages at any given time, but elements of other stages are usually present. For example, two lovers deep in the throes of integrating may still do their share of experimenting ("Wow, I never knew that about you!") and have differentiating disagreements ("Nothing personal, but I need a weekend to myself"). Likewise, family members who spend most of their energy avoiding each other may have an occasional good spell in which their former closeness briefly intensifies. The notion that relationships can experience features of both "coming together" and "coming apart" at the same time is explored in the following section on relational dialectics.

A Dialectical Perspective

Not all theorists agree that stage-related models like the one just described are the best way to explain interaction in relationships. Some suggest that communicators grapple with the same kinds of challenges whether a relationship is brand new or decades old. They argue that communicators seek important but inherently incompatible goals throughout virtually all of their relationships. The struggle to achieve these goals creates **dialectical tensions**: conflicts that arise when two opposing or incompatible forces exist simultaneously. Communication scholars have identified several dialectical forces that make successful communication challenging.[70] They suggest that the struggle to manage these dialectical tensions creates the most powerful dynamics in relational communication. Now, we will discuss three powerful dialectical tensions.

Connection versus Autonomy No one is an island. Recognizing this fact, we seek out involvement with others. But, at the same time, we are unwilling to sacrifice our entire identity to even the most satisfying relationship. The conflicting desires for both dependence and independence are embodied in the **connection-autonomy dialectic**.

Research on relational breakups demonstrates the consequences for relational partners who can't find a way to manage this dialectical tension.[71] Some of the most common reasons for relational breakups involve failure of partners to satisfy each other's needs for connection: "We barely spent any time together," "She wasn't committed to the relationship," "We had different needs." But other relational complaints involve excessive demands for connection: "I was feeling trapped," "I needed more freedom."[72] Perhaps not surprisingly, some research suggests that men value

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