9

Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

9.1 Recognize the various reasons for entering into interpersonal relationships.

9.2 Describe the stages and dialectical tensions typically experienced in interpersonal relationships.

9.3 Identify specific skills communicators can use to maintain and improve their interpersonal relationships.

FEATURES

CHAPTER OUTLINE

"I'm looking for a meaningful relationship."
"Our relationship has changed lately."
"The relationship is good for both of us."
"This relationship isn't working."

RELATIONSHIP is one of those terms people use all the time but have trouble defining. Even scholars who have devoted their careers to studying relationships don't agree on what the term means (Guerrero et al., 2014). Their definitions include words such as "closeness," "influence," "commitment," and "intimacy"—but coming up with a single definition can be (as the old adage goes) like nailing Jell-O to a wall.

In this chapter, we explore some of the general dynamics that characterize interpersonal relationships and the communication that occurs within them. After reading it, you will see that relationships aren't fixed or unchanging. Rather, they can, and often do, change over time. In other words, a relationship is less a *thing* than a *process*. We look at why we form relationships, the dynamics of those relationships, and how to manage them. In Chapter 10, the companion to this chapter, we extend our discussion by focusing on specific relational contexts: close relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners.

WHY WE FORM RELATIONSHIPS

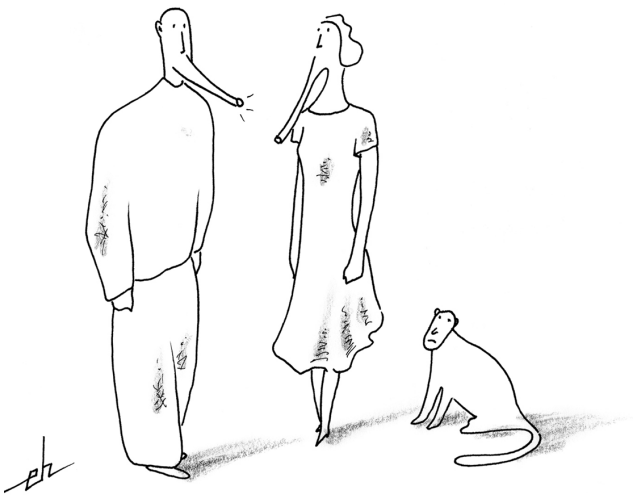
Why do we form relationships with some people and not with others? Sometimes we have no choice: Children can't select their parents, and most workers aren't able to choose their colleagues. In many other cases, however, we seek out some people and actively avoid others.

Social scientists have collected an impressive body of research on interpersonal attraction (e.g., Finkel & Baumeister, 2010; Graziano & Bruce, 2008). The following are some of the factors they have identified that influence our choice of relational partners.

APPEARANCE

Most people claim we should judge others on the basis of how they act, not how they look, but we often do the opposite (Swami & Furnham, 2008). For instance, physical appearance seems to be the primary basis for attraction for speed daters (Luo & Zhang, 2009). These first impressions can influence secondary ones. For example, when photos rated as attractive accompany online profiles, raters appraise the profile text more positively (Brand et al., 2012). Online profile owners are also rated as more attractive when they have pictures of physically attractive friends on their sites (Jaschinski & Kommers, 2012). The opposite is also true: Face images are rated as less attractive when they appear near those rated as unattractive or average (Rodway et al., 2013).

Even if your appearance isn't beautiful by societal standards, consider these facts. First, after initial impressions have passed, ordinary-looking people with pleasing personalities are likely to be judged as attractive (Lewandowski et al., 2007), and perceived beauty can be influenced by traits such as liking, respect, familiarity, and social interaction (Albada et al., 2002; Singh et al., 2009). Second, physical factors become less important as a relationship progresses. In fact, as romantic relationships develop, partners create "positive illusions," viewing one another as more physically attractive over time (Barelds et al., 2011).



"Before the Internet, I just assumed I was the only one, and kept more or less to myself."

SIMILARITY

According to what's known as the *similarity thesis*, perhaps the strongest determinant of relationship formation is similarity to another person (Montoya & Horton, 2013). For example, one study found that similar values about politics and religion are the best predictors of mate choice—significantly more than attraction to physical appearance or personality traits (Alford et al., 2011).

Similarity plays an important role in initial attraction. People are more likely to accept a Facebook friend request from a stranger who is perceived to be similar than from one perceived as different (Martin et al., 2013). The word "perceived" is important in the preceding sentence. Research shows that speed daters are more attracted to similarities they *believe* they have ("We *seem* to have a lot in common") than to actual similarities (Tidwell et al., 2013). This finding demonstrates that attraction based on similarities is a subjective process. In fact, research suggests that deciding you like someone often leads to perceptions of similarity rather than the other way around (Sprecher, 2014).

There are several reasons why similarity is a strong foundation for relationships. First, similarity can be validating. The fact that another person shares your beliefs, tastes, and values is a form of ego support. One study described the lengths to which "implicit egotism" may unconsciously affect perceptions of attractiveness (Jones et al., 2004). Results showed that people are disproportionately likely to marry others whose first or last names resemble their own, and they're also attracted to those with similar birthdays and even with the same sports jersey numbers (see also Simonsohn, 2011).

Second, similarity makes others more predictable and more likely to enjoy the same activities you do, such as going to particular restaurants or concerts. The ability to make confident predictions about others' behavior reduces uncertainty and anxiety (Montoya & Horton, 2013), which leads to greater emotional and relational stability (Cheng & Grühn, 2016).

For more than 50 years, TV and film episodes of *Star Trek* have followed the adventures of the emotional James Kirk and his hyperrational first mate, Spock, illustrating how complementary personalities can lead to rich, satisfying relationships. ***In what ways are any of your close relationships enriched by complementarity?***

There's a third explanation for the similarity thesis. When we learn that other people are similar to us, we may assume they'll probably like us, so we in turn like them. The self-fulfilling prophecy creeps into the picture again.

COMPLEMENTARITY

The old saying "opposites attract" seems to contradict the principle of similarity. 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 (Fisher, 2007). In addition, some studies show that couples are more likely to be attracted to each other when one partner is dominant and the other passive (Swami & Furnham, 2008). 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 take the lead in different ones ("I'll decide how we ought to decorate the place"). Disagreement over control issues, however, can cause strains. One study shows that "spendthrifts and tightwads" are often attracted to each other, but their differences in financial management lead to significant conflict over the course of a relationship (Rick et al., 2011).

Studies that have examined successful and unsuccessful couples over a 20-year period show the interaction between similarities and differences (Klohnen & Luo, 2003). When partners are radically different, the dissimilar qualities that at first appear intriguing later become cause for relational breakups (Amodio & Showers, 2005). Partners in successful marriages were similar enough to satisfy each other physically and mentally, but were 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 while adjusting to the changes that occur over the years (Shiota & Levenson, 2007).

REWARDS

Some relationships are based on an economic model called **social exchange theory** (Stafford, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This approach suggests that we seek out people who can give us rewards that are greater than or equal to the costs we encounter in dealing with the relationship. Social exchange theorists define rewards as any outcomes we desire. They 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 explanation for why we form and maintain relationships:

Rewards – Costs = Outcome

According to social exchange theorists, we use this formula (often unconsciously) to calculate whether a relationship is a "good deal" or "not worth the effort," based on whether the outcome is positive or negative (Frisby et al., 2015).

At its most blatant level, an exchange approach seems cold and calculating, but in some types of relationships it can be quite appropriate. A healthy business relationship is based on how well the parties help one another, and 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. However, when one partner feels "underbenefited," it often leads to relational disruption or termination (DeMaris, 2007).

Costs and rewards don't exist in isolation; we define them by comparing a certain situation with alternatives. For example, consider a hypothetical woman, Gloria, who is struggling to decide whether to remain in a relationship with Raymond, her longtime romantic partner. Raymond loves Gloria, but he's not perfect: He has a hair-trigger temper, and he has become verbally abusive from time to time. Also, Gloria knows that Raymond was unfaithful to her at least once. In deciding whether to stay with Raymond, Gloria will use two standards.

The first standard is her **comparison level (CL)**—her minimum standard of what behavior is acceptable. If Gloria believes that relational partners have an obligation to be faithful and treat one another respectfully at all times, then Raymond's behavior will fall below her comparison level. This will be especially true if Gloria has had positive romantic relationships in the past (Merolla et al., 2004). On the other hand, if Gloria adopts a "nobody's perfect" standard, she is more likely to view Raymond's behavior as meeting or exceeding her comparison level.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Anguish of Abusive Relationships

It would be nice if all our relationships were happy, healthy, and mutually reinforcing. The unfortunate truth, however, is that some relationships become abusive. Abuse can be mental, emotional, verbal, sexual, or physical, and it can leave scars that remain long after the relationship is over.

Many abusive relationships don't end when they should. Why do people stay in them? Social exchange theory offers an explanation (Kreager et al., 2013). Abused partners often believe that a bad relationship is better than no relationship at all. They may also have trouble seeing viable relational alternatives. Perspective gets lost and rationalizations get made—and the pain goes on. Research has shown that people in abusive dating relationships underestimate how unhappy they really are and overestimate how unhappy they would be if the relationship were to end (Arriaga et al., 2013).

Professional help is vital for pulling free from an abusive relationship (*www.healthyplace.com/abuse* offers information and resources). Experts recommend the following:

- *Don't keep abuse a secret.* At the very least, tell a trusted friend or family member what's happening to you—and then ask that person to help you get help.
- *Watch for patterns.* Abuse often happens in cycles. If you're in the upside of a cycle and all is calm, it can be easy to ignore or overlook a previous violation. But if the abuse returns, it probably won't be the last time.
- *Resist self-blame.* Abused people often believe they are at fault for what happened to them, and that somehow they "had it coming." Remember—*no one deserves abuse.*

Gloria also will rate Raymond according to her **comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})**. This standard refers to a comparison between the rewards she receives in her present situation and those she could expect to receive in others (Overall & Sibley, 2008). If, for example, Gloria doesn't want to be alone and she thinks, "If I don't have Raymond I won't have anyone," then her CL_{alt} would be lower than her present situation; but if she is confident that she could find a kinder partner, her CL_{alt} would be higher than the status quo. Research suggests that when a sense of connection is lacking in a romantic relationship, the draw of intimacy from romantic alternatives becomes particularly strong (Spielmann et al., 2012).

Social exchange theorists suggest that communicators unconsciously use this calculus to decide whether to form and stay in relationships. At first this information seems to offer little comfort to those who are in unsatisfying relationships, such as when the partner's behavior is below the CL and there are no foreseeable or preferable alternatives (CL_{alt}). But there are choices other than being stuck in situations where the costs outweigh the rewards. First, you might make sure that you are judging your present relationship against a realistic CL. Expecting a situation to be perfect can be a recipe for unhappiness and relational dissatisfaction (Mikkelson et al., 2016). If you decide that your present situation truly falls below your CL, you might explore whether there are other alternatives you haven't considered. And finally, the skills introduced throughout this book may help you negotiate a better relationship with the other person (assuming the relationship isn't abusive—see the Dark Side box on page 263).

COMPETENCY

We like to be around talented people, probably because we hope their skills and abilities will rub off on us. On the other hand, we are uncomfortable around those who are too competent—perhaps because we look bad by comparison. And we're attracted most to competence in others when it's accompanied by a warm rather than cool personality (Fiske et al., 2007).

Elliot Aronson and his associates (2008) demonstrated how competence and imperfection combine to affect attraction. The researchers asked subjects to evaluate recordings of two candidates for a quiz program. One candidate seemed perfect: He answered almost all the questions correctly and modestly admitted that he was an honor student, accomplished athlete, and college yearbook editor. The other candidate was average: He answered fewer questions correctly, had lower grades, was a less successful athlete, and was a lower level member of the yearbook staff. Toward the end of half the recordings, the candidates committed a blunder, spilling coffee all over themselves. The remaining half of the recordings contained no such blunder. These, then, were the four experimental conditions: (1) a person with superior ability who blundered, (2) a person with superior ability who did not blunder, (3) an average person who blundered, and (4) an average person who did not blunder. The ratings of the candidates in these four conditions revealed an interesting and important principle of interpersonal attraction. The person rated as most attractive was the

superior candidate who blundered. Aronson's conclusion was that we like competence—but we also like people who are somewhat flawed because they remind us of ourselves.

PROXIMITY

As common sense suggests, we are likely to develop relationships with people with whom we interact frequently (Flora, 2005). In many cases, proximity leads to liking. For instance, we're more likely to develop friendships with close neighbors—whether near where we live or in adjacent seats in our classrooms (Back et al., 2008)—than with distant ones. Chances are also good that we'll choose a mate with whom we cross paths often. Proximity even has a role in social media, where messaging or chatting can create virtual proximity (Baker, 2008). As one researcher notes, when it comes to social networking sites, cultural proximity outweighs geographic proximity (Rohn, 2014). 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—for example, if we live in the same neighborhood, odds are we have the same socioeconomic status.

DISCLOSURE

In Chapter 3, we describe how telling others important information about yourself can help build liking, both in person (Dindia, 2002; Sprecher et al., 2013) and through social media (Ledbetter et al., 2011). Sometimes the basis of this attraction comes from learning about ways we are similar, either in experiences ("I broke off an engagement myself") or in attitudes ("I feel nervous with strangers, too"). Self-disclosure also increases liking because it indicates regard. Sharing private information is a form of respect and trust—a kind of liking that we've already seen increases attractiveness.

Not all disclosure leads to liking. Research shows that the key to satisfying self-disclosure is reciprocity: getting back an

Media Clip

The Power and Peril of Disclosure: *Homeland*

Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes) is in the espionage business. Her job is to protect homeland security by uncovering enemy spies and their plots. It's a scary way to make a living, but Carrie gets a thrill out of living on the edge.

Espionage operatives often use threats or violence to gain intel, but Carrie uses different tactics. She befriends those from whom she wants information, slowly forming relationships with them. She self-discloses and becomes vulnerable, and they lower their defenses and let her into their lives. While this allows Carrie to gain their confidence and learn their secrets, it often leaves her in relational predicaments—because the enemy has become her friend, or even her lover.

Carrie's approach creates ethical dilemmas, but she clearly understands relational basics: Disclosure begets disclosure, trust leads to trust, and both help create interpersonal bonds.

amount and kind of information equivalent to what you reveal (Dindia, 2000a). 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. This is particularly true on social media: Disclosures made privately are perceived as more appropriate and intimate than those made publicly; also, disclosures made publicly reduce liking for the discloser (Bazarova, 2012). Finally, for the sake of self-protection, it's important to reveal personal information only when you are sure the other person is trustworthy (Shirley et al., 2007).

MODELS OF RELATIONAL DYNAMICS

Even the most stable relationships vary from day to day and over longer periods of time. Communication scholars have attempted to describe and explain how communication creates and reflects the changing dynamics of relationships. In this section, we discuss two different characterizations of relational development and interaction.

STAGES OF RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

One of the best known models of relational stages was developed by Mark Knapp (Knapp et al., 2014; see also Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009; Mongeau & Henningsen, 2008), who broke the waxing and waning of relationships into 10 steps that involve coming together and coming apart. Other researchers have suggested that any model of relational communication ought to contain a third area—**relational maintenance**—aimed at keeping relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily (we'll discuss relational maintenance in more detail later in this chapter). Figure 9.1 shows how Knapp's 10 stages fit into this three-part view of relational communication. We now explore each stage in detail.

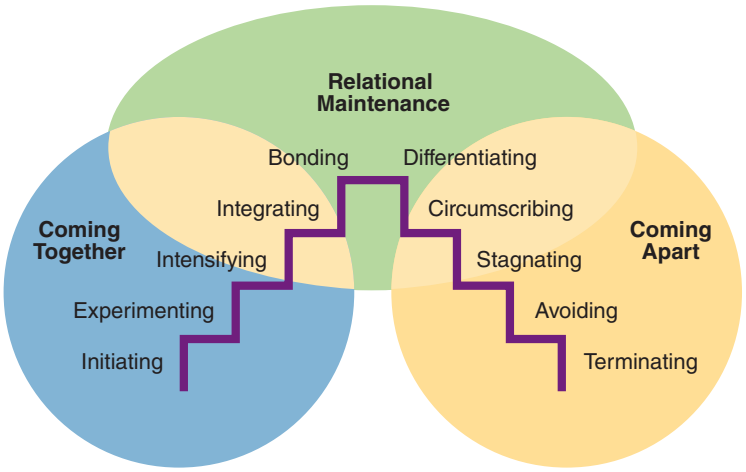


FIGURE 9.1 Stages of Relationship Development

Adapted from Knapp, M. L., Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (2014). *Interpersonal communication in human relationships* (7th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.

Initiating

The goals in the **initiating** stage are to show that you are interested in making contact and to demonstrate that you are a person worth talking to (Sprecher et al., 2008). Communication during this stage is usually brief, and it generally follows conventional formulas: handshakes, remarks about innocuous subjects such as the weather, and friendly expressions. Such behavior may seem superficial and meaningless, but it is a way of signaling that you're interested in building some kind of relationship with the other person. It allows 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. Social media can make it easier for reticent people to strike up a relationship (Baker & Oswald, 2010). Not only is online initiating easier for some, but it can result in successful relationships. In one survey, more than a third of 19,000 married respondents said their relationship began online (Cacioppo et al., 2013). When compared with marital relationships that began in person, those that started online had slightly higher satisfaction rates and slightly lower incidences of breakups.

Keep in mind that initiating is the opening stage of *all* relationships, not just romantic ones. Friendships start here (Johnson et al., 2004), and so do business partnerships. In fact, some have compared employment interviews to first dates because they have similar properties (Half, 2016). 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 making contact with an interesting new person, we generally begin a phase known as **experimenting**, the search for common ground. We usually start with the basics: "Where are you from? What's your major?" From there we look for other similarities: "You're a runner, too? How many miles do you run a week?"

The hallmark of experimenting is small talk. 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.

Scholars have noted, and your experience probably confirms, the importance of social media during the experimenting stage. As Katrina Shonbeck (2011) points out, some basic information gathering is often done quickly online:

> By perusing someone's social networking profile, I can, more often than not, learn many of the same things I'd learn from them during the first couple of dates without the other person being present. From what they disclose on the general information page, I can learn their relationship statuses, political preferences, favorite hobbies, music, books, and movies. By looking through their pictures and their wall, I can get a pretty good sense of the kinds of people they like to hang out with, what they like to do on weekends, their personal styles. (p. 398)

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Communicating About Relational Baggage

Carrying "relational baggage" can be tough, and disclosing it to a relational partner even tougher. A research team led by communication scholar Brandi Frisby investigated this delicate subject.

Relational baggage is broadly defined as "negative attributes and situations" that people bring with them into subsequent relationships. This includes, but isn't limited to, previous partners (the crazy ex), social networks (the flaky friend), personality characteristics (abnormally jealous), and relational goals (commit or quit). The researchers asked several hundred undergraduates about their experiences with relational baggage.

Most participants readily acknowledged that relational baggage was a source of anxiety in their romantic relationships. Hearing about baggage overtly—through direct disclosure or questions—was generally related to relational satisfaction. On the other hand, learning of it from third-party sources (e.g., a mutual friend or a former partner) had negative effects on relationships.

The researchers aren't suggesting that you blurt out personal details from your past, especially not right away. However, as a relationship progresses through the stages described in these pages, you may decide to disclose your relational baggage before others do so. Of course, some issues may never be shared. But in general, when partners begin forming bonds, "even negative information such as baggage may not be harmful."

Frisby, B. N., Sidelinger, R. J., & Booth-Butterfield, M. (2015). No harm, no foul: A social exchange perspective on individual and relational outcomes associated with relational baggage. *Western Journal of Communication, 79,* 555–572.

College students in one study said this stage in romantic relationships often involves a social media request or invite (Fox et al., 2013). Once access is given, communicators can look over each other's site, learning important information about the other person at a glance. Photos and mutual friends are important factors in deciding whether to continue developing a relationship. And of course, gathering this information online is less face-threatening and involves no stammering, blushing, or awkward pauses.

Of course, not all relational experiments are successful. You can probably think of times when you knew within an hour of meeting up with a potential new friend that things were going nowhere. The same can happen when online daters take the plunge and meet in person. The relationship that seemed promising in virtual reality may become less so when interacting face to face. Communication researchers call this shift in communication channels *modality switching* and have found that it comes with a variety of challenges (Ramirez et al., 2015). In general, the longer online couples hold off on meeting in person, the more awkward it will be when they attempt to transition to face-to-face communication.

Intensifying

When a relationship begins **intensifying**, communicators increase their amount of contact and the breadth and depth of their self-disclosure. In friendships, intensifying often includes spending more time together,

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participating in shared activities, hanging out with mutual friends, or taking trips together (Johnson et al., 2004). Dating couples use a wide range of strategies to communicate that their relationship is intensifying (Levine et al., 2006). About a quarter of the time they express their feelings directly to discuss the state of the relationship, such as saying "I love you" (Brantley et al., 2002). More often they use less direct methods of communication, perhaps as a way to protect their face: 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 attractive.

The intensifying stage is usually a time of relational excitement and even euphoria. In friendships, it's about enthusiasm for having a new "BFF." 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 (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). 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, and friends begin to discover one another's flaws. Although it's possible that the relationship isn't as good as it seems, it's equally likely that it has simply moved on to a different stage—such as integrating.

Integrating

As the relationship strengthens, the individuals enter an **integrating** stage; they begin to take on an identity as a social unit. Invitations begin to come addressed to a couple. Social circles merge. The partners share each other's commitments: "Sure, we'll spend Thanksgiving with your family." They may begin to designate common property—our apartment, our car, our song (Baxter, 1987). Partners create their own personal idioms (Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009) and forms of play (Baxter, 1992). They develop routines and rituals that reinforce their identity as a couple—jogging together, eating at a favorite restaurant, expressing physical affection, and worshipping together (Afifi & Johnson, 1999; Bosson et al., 2006). As these examples illustrate, the stage of integrating is a time when we give up some characteristics of our former selves and become enmeshed with another person (Slotter & Gardner, 2009).

Bonding is a formalized statement of relational commitment. ***What messages have been exchanged in bonding rituals you have experienced? In what ways did those messages seem to affect the way the relationship unfolded?***

Integrating may include going "Facebook Official" (FBO) by declaring publicly that a couple is "in a relationship" (Lane et al., 2016). Of course, problems arise when one partner wants to be FBO and the other doesn't (Papp et al., 2012). 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 (Fox & Warber, 2013). As a result, women may connect FBO status with the rights and restrictions normally associated with bonding—a stage we look at now.

Bonding

During the **bonding** stage, partners make symbolic public gestures to show the world that their relationship exists and that a commitment has been made (Foster, 2008). 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.

Relationships don't have to be romantic to achieve bonding. Consider, for instance, authors contracting to write a book together or a student being initiated into a sorority. As Lillian Rubin (1985) notes, in some cultures there are rituals for friends to mark their bonded status through a public commitment:

> 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*.

Bonding usually marks an important turning point in relationships. Up to now the relationship may have developed at a steady pace: Experimenting gradually moved into intensifying and then into integrating. Now, however, there is a surge of commitment. The public display and declaration of exclusivity make this a critical period in the relationship.

Differentiating

So far, we have been looking at the growth of relationships. Although some reach a plateau of development, going on successfully for as long as a lifetime, others pass through several stages of decline and dissolution. Even in the most committed relationships, partners often find themselves needing to reestablish their individual identities in a stage Knapp

calls **differentiating**. This transition often shows up in a couple's pronoun usage. Instead of talking about "our" weekend plans, differentiating conversations focus on what "I" want to do. Relational issues that were once agreed on (such as "You'll be the breadwinner and I'll manage the home") 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.

Differentiation also can be positive, considering that people need to be individuals as well as part of a relationship. Think, for instance, of young adults who want to forge their own unique lives and identities, even while maintaining their relationships with their families of origin (Skowron et al., 2009). The same can hold true for international couples who want to stay connected to their individual cultural values as well to each other (Kim et al., 2012a). As Figure 9.1 on page 266 shows, differentiating is often a part of normal relational maintenance in which partners manage the inevitable challenges that come their way. The key to successful differentiation is maintaining commitment to a relationship while also creating the space for being individuals (we describe this later in the chapter as the *connection-autonomy dialectic*).

Circumscribing

In the **circumscribing** stage, partners reduce the scope of their contact with each other. 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." Such distinctions can be markers of a healthy balance between individual and relational identity. They become a problem, however, when there are clearly more areas of separation than integration in a relationship, or when the areas of separation seriously limit interaction, such as taking a personal vacation expressly to put space between you and your partner.

Stagnating

If circumscribing continues, the relationship begins to stagnate. Members behave toward each other in old, familiar ways without much feeling. No growth occurs; relational boredom sets in (Harasymchuk & Fehr, 2013). The **stagnating** relationship is a 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, people in a relationship begin to create distance between each other by **avoiding**. Sometimes they do it under the guise of excuses ("I've been sick lately and can't see you") and sometimes directly ("Please don't call me; I don't want to see you now").

Not all relationships last forever. With skill and goodwill, ending a relationship doesn't have to be combative. ***How would you describe the communication surrounding termination of your past relationships? Could you have done anything differently to make the end more amicable?***

In either case, by this point the handwriting is on the wall about the relationship's future.

Some relationships stall out at this stage. Friends, lovers, or family members simply drift apart, rarely if ever to interact again. While sometimes that's a natural parting of ways, other times it leaves important things unsaid. A need for some degree of relationship closure (Dailey et al., 2013) often leads to a final stage: terminating.

Terminating

Not all relationships end. Partnerships, friendships, and marriages can last for a lifetime once they're established. But many do deteriorate and reach the final stage, **terminating**, which has its own distinguishable pattern (Conlan, 2008). 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, a text, or a legal document stating the dissolution. Depending on each person's feelings, this terminating stage can be quite short and amicable, or it may be bitterly drawn out over time.

Scholars have begun to investigate the role technology can play in relational termination. One survey of 1,000 people found that 45 percent had used their mobile device to end a relationship, usually by text (Mychalcewycz, 2009). Obviously, breaking up this way runs the risk of wounding and infuriating the person being dumped ("She 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 a mediated channel tended to have high levels of attachment anxiety—which might explain why their partners didn't want to deliver the news in person (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013).

Once a relationship is over, it may be wise to take a break from social media connections with that person (LeFebvre et al., 2015). Checking up on a former partner may reduce some uncertainty (Tong, 2013), but surveillance of an ex's Facebook page is associated with greater distress over the breakup, more negative feelings, and decreased personal growth (Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015). And in general, communicating with former partners can have negative consequences on one's current relationship (Rodriquez et al., 2016).

Terminating a relationship is, for many people, a learning experience. Researchers (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) asked college students who

recently had a relationship breakup to describe the positive lessons from it that might help them in future relationships. Responses fell into four categories: "person positives," such as gaining self-confidence and recognizing that it's all right to cry; "other positives," such as learning more about what is desired in a partner; "relational positives," such as how to communicate better and how not to jump into a relationship too quickly; and "environment positives," such as learning to rely more on friends and how to better balance relationships and school work. And scholars note that although gaining *closure* might be an ideal for relational termination, finding *meaning* might be a more attainable and healthy goal (Frost et al., 2016).

DIALECTICAL TENSIONS

Not all theorists agree that relational stages are the best way to explain relational dynamics. Some maintain that it's possible for a relationship to have attributes of both "coming together" and "coming apart" at the same time. Maintaining relationships, then, is about managing these competing goals. Scholars call these struggles **dialectical tensions**: conflicts that arise when two opposing or incompatible desires exist simultaneously in a relationship.

Communication scholars including Leslie Baxter (2011; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008) and William Rawlins (1992) have identified several dialectical forces that make successful communication challenging. Table 9.1 summarizes three that we experience both *internally*—within the relationship—and *externally*—as we and our relational partners face the world. Although descriptors such as "struggles" and "conflicts" can make dialectical tensions sound negative, it's best to see them as normal and manageable factors in maintaining healthy relationships.

Integration Versus Separation

Recognizing that no one is an island, 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 connection and independence are embodied in the **integration–separation**

TABLE 9.1 Dialectical Tensions

	Integration–Separation	Stability–Change	Expression–Privacy
Internal Dialectic	Connection–Autonomy	Predictability–Novelty	Openness–Closedness
External Dialectic	Inclusion–Seclusion	Conventionality–Uniqueness	Revelation–Concealment

From Baxter, L. A. (1994). A dialogic approach to relationship maintenance. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (p. 240). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Even in the closest relationships, we seek autonomy as well as connection. ***How successfully have you juggled the opposing needs for integration and separation? How could you manage these tensions more successfully?***

dialectic. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1986) captures this dialectic nicely by evoking the image of two porcupines trying to get through a cold winter:

> They huddle together for warmth, but their sharp quills prick each other, so they pull away. But then they get cold. They have to keep adjusting their closeness and distance to keep from freezing and from getting pricked by their fellow porcupines—the source of both comfort and pain.
>
> We need to get close to each other to have a sense of community, to feel we're not alone in the world. But we need to keep our distance from each other to preserve our independence, so others don't impose on or engulf us. This duality reflects the human condition. We are individual and social creatures. We need other people to survive, but we want to survive as individuals.

Internally (within a relationship), the struggle shows up in the **connection–autonomy dialectic**: We want to be close to others, but at the same time we seek independence (Frost & Forrester, 2013). The ability to manage the conflicting needs for connection and autonomy is basic to relational success (Erbert, 2000; Sahlstein & Dun, 2008). Some of the most common reasons for relational breakups involve failure of partners to satisfy one another's needs for connection: "We barely spent any time together"; "My partner wasn't committed to the relationship." But other relational complaints involve excessive demands for connection: "I was feeling trapped"; "I needed freedom" (Hui et al., 2013). Perhaps not surprisingly, research suggests that in heterosexual romantic relationships, men often want more autonomy and women typically want more connection and commitment (Buunk, 2005; Feeney, 1999).

Mobile devices can create a connection–autonomy dilemma (Duran et al., 2011). Frequent interaction during the day via cell phone can be a means for building intimacy in a romantic relationship (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2016). However, receiving too many texts and calls can feel imposing or even smothering. This is a source of conflict for many couples and may require some negotiation of "rules" (Miller-Ott et al., 2012), such as "Please don't text me during job hours" or "I'll respond when the concert's over." The Focus on Research sidebar in this section further considers how mobile devices can be part of such dialectical tensions. These tensions occur in nonromantic relationships too. You can probably think of friends and family members who expect you to be always responsive via cell phone, yet you need some space from them (Hall & Baym, 2012; Eden & Veksler, 2016).

This serves as a reminder that dialectical tensions exist in most close relationships. In fact, Chapter 10 will look at how connection–autonomy is a central dialectic in managing family communication.

The tension between integration and separation also operates externally. In the **inclusion–seclusion dialectic**, a relational pair must reconcile a desire for both involvement with others outside the relationship and time together within the relationship. For example, at the end of a busy week, does a couple accept the invitation to a party (and sacrifice the chance to spend quality time with each other), or do they decline the invitation (and risk losing contact with valued friends)? Does a close-knit nuclear family choose to take a vacation together (instead of visiting relatives), or do they attend a family reunion (losing precious time to enjoy each other without any distractions)? How does a just-married couple negotiate time demands with in-laws when inclusion–seclusion tensions typically run high (Prentice, 2009)? These are questions that need to be answered in all close relationships.

Stability Versus Change

The **stability–change dialectic** acknowledges that stability is an important need in relationships, but that too much of it can lead to feelings of staleness. The **predictability–novelty dialectic** describes how this operates within a relationship. Although nobody wants a completely unpredictable

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

The Dialectical Tensions of Cell Phone Use

When spending time with a romantic partner, should you focus exclusively on each other—or is it okay to keep up with your social networks via cell phone? Do you have a say in each other's phone habits—or are you free to check your devices as you please?

Such dialectical tensions are normal, according to researchers Aimee Miller-Ott and Lynne Kelly. They ran focus groups with college students in dating relationships. The participants talked about using mobile devices in the presence of dating partners. Two sets of dialectical tensions emerged from the data.

The researchers titled the first struggle *Community vs. Romance* (similar to the inclusion–exclusion dialectic). On one hand, partners said they want to stay in touch with their social networks while dating ("You shouldn't just stop talking to your friends just because you're out with someone"). At the same time, putting away one's phone is a loving act toward a partner because "you're trying to convey to that person that you mean a lot to me and I wanna give you my time."

A second tension is *Control vs. Freedom* (similar to the connection–autonomy dialectic). Participants said they want to take charge of both their own and their partner's habitual phone use, which often feels out of control. But doing so can infringe on autonomy: "I don't want to be told what I can and can't do."

The participants said these tensions were a source of conflict in their dating relationships. There's no easy solution, but some relational metacommunication (as described on p. 279) about cell phone expectations might help you negotiate ways to manage conflicting desires.

Miller-Ott, A. E., & Kelly, L. (2016). Competing discourses and meaning making about romantic partners' cell-phone contact with non-present others. *Communication Studies, 67*, 58–76.

Media Clip

Finding Connection: *Trainwreck*

At an early age, Amy Townsend (Amy Schumer) is taught to repeat these words by her father: "Monogamy is impossible." It's a lesson she lives out in her (many) romantic encounters. Amy is good at her job and great at her nightlife, but she's a disaster at maintaining intimate relationships.

In spite of herself, Amy eventually falls in love with Aaron Conners (Bill Hader), a nice-guy surgeon. It's a predictable romantic comedy with one twist of stereotyping: It is she, not he, who struggles to commit. In terms of relational dialectics, Amy learns to balance autonomy with connection and novelty with predictability—and in so doing keeps their relational train from wrecking.

relational partner ("You're not the person I married!"), humorist Dave Barry (1990) exaggerates only slightly when he talks about the boredom that can come when partners know each other too well:

> After a decade or so of marriage, you know *everything* about your spouse, every habit and opinion and twitch and tic and minor skin growth. You could write a seventeen-pound book solely about the way your spouse eats. This kind of intimate knowledge can be very handy in certain situations—such as when you're on a TV quiz show where the object is to identify your spouse from the sound of his or her chewing—but it tends to lower the passion level of a relationship. (p. 47)

At an external level, the **conventionality–uniqueness dialectic** captures the challenges that people in a relationship face when trying to meet others' expectations while being true to themselves. On one hand, stable patterns of behavior do emerge that enable others to make useful judgments such as "happy family" or "dependable organization." But those blanket characterizations can stifle people in relationships who may sometimes want to break away from the expectations others hold of them. For example, playing the conventional role of "happy family" or "perfect couple" during a time of conflict can be a burden when the couple feels the need to behave in less stereotypical ways.

Expression Versus Privacy

Disclosure is one characteristic of interpersonal relationships. Yet, along with the drive for intimacy, we have an equally important need to maintain some space between ourselves and others. These sometimes conflicting drives create the **expression–privacy dialectic**.

The internal struggle between expression and privacy shows up in the **openness–closedness dialectic**. What do you do in an intimate relationship when a person you care about asks an important question that you don't want to answer? "Do you think I'm attractive?" "Are you having a good time?" "What's my problem?" Your commitment to the relationship may compel you toward honesty, but your concern for the other person's feelings and a desire for privacy may lead you to be less than completely

honest. Many people claim, "There are no secrets between my best friend and me," or "I tell my sweetheart everything," but that's likely an overstatement. Wise communicators make choices about what they will and won't share with loved ones—sometimes (but not always) for the other person's sake (Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013).

The same conflicts between openness and privacy operate externally in the **revelation–concealment dialectic**. If you and a longtime fellow worker haven't been getting along, do you answer the boss's question, "How's it going?" honestly, or do you keep your disagreement to yourselves? If your family has had a run of bad (or good) financial luck and a friend asks to borrow (or lend) money, do you share your situation or keep quiet? If you're part of a same-sex couple, but you're not sure your relationship will be endorsed by others, when and how do you go "public" with that information (Suter et al., 2006, 2008)? All of these questions speak to tensions related to concealing versus revealing. These challenges have increased as social media make privacy boundaries more difficult to manage (Debatin et al., 2009). We take a closer look at privacy management in Chapter 10.

Strategies for Managing Dialectical Tensions

Managing dialectical tensions can be challenging (Duran et al., 2011; Prentice & Kramer, 2006). Yet researchers have identified a number of communication strategies for dealing with them—most of which are unconscious (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006b). As you read on, think about which ones you use and how effective they are.

In the face of conflicting desires, some relational partners choose *denial*—pretending to themselves and one another that the conflicts don't exist. For example, a couple caught between the conflicting desires for stability and novelty might avoid the challenge by following predictable, if unexciting patterns of relating to one another. It's easy to see that this approach isn't likely to be satisfactory. *Compromising* is another unsatisfying approach. For example, the couple caught between the conflicting desires for predictability and novelty might settle for a lifestyle that is neither as predictable as one wants nor as surprise filled as the other seeks—not an ideal outcome.

Other strategies try—often unconsciously—to defuse tensions. Communicators might *alternate*, choosing one end of the dialectical spectrum at some times and the other end on different occasions. Friends, for example, might manage the connection–autonomy dialectic by alternating between spending a large amount of time together and living independent lives. Or they might *compartmentalize* different areas of their relationship. For example, a couple might manage the openness–closedness dialectic by sharing almost all their feelings about mutual friends but keeping certain parts of their past romantic histories private.

A more rewarding approach is to *accept*, and even embrace opposing desires. Barbara Montgomery (1993) describes a couple who accept both the needs for predictability and novelty by devising a "predictably novel" approach: Once a week they would do something together that

Watch and Discuss

Look up and watch "Couples Swap Phones and Go Through Each Other's History."

1) Consider the role of *relational dialectics* (particularly *openness–closedness*) in this exercise.
2) Discuss the ethics of privacy management in an interpersonal relationship.

they had never done before. Similarly, Dawn Braithwaite and her colleagues (1998) found that stepfamilies often manage the tension between the "old family" and the "new family" by adapting and blending their family rituals.

Another constructive way to manage opposing desires is by *reframing* them. Consider how a couple who felt hurt by one another's unwillingness to share parts of their past might redefine the issue as an attractive aura of mystery. Rather than thinking "We're keeping secrets about our past," the partners might think, "Those secrets make things a little mysterious and exciting." The desire for privacy would still remain, but it would no longer compete with a need for openness about every aspect of the past.

Finally, it can be wise to *reaffirm* the fact that dialectical tensions will never disappear. Instead of trying to make them go away, reaffirming communicators accept—or even embrace—the challenges they present. The metaphorical view of relational life as a kind of rollercoaster reflects this orientation, and communicators who use reaffirmation view dialectical tensions as part of the ride.

COMMUNICATING ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

By now it is clear that relationships are complex, dynamic, and important. In this section, we look at ways to improve relational communication. We start by revisiting an important principle of interpersonal communication discussed in Chapter 1: Every message has a *content* and a *relational* dimension.

CONTENT AND RELATIONAL MESSAGES

The most obvious component of most messages is their content—the subject being discussed. The content of statements such as "It's your turn to do the dishes" or "I'm busy Saturday night" is obvious. In addition, however, every message—both verbal and nonverbal—also has a second, relational dimension, which makes statements about how the communicators feel toward one another (Knobloch & Solomon, 2003; Watzlawick et al., 1967). These relational messages deal with one or more social needs: intimacy, affinity, respect, and control. Consider the examples we just mentioned:

- Imagine two ways of saying "It's your turn to do the dishes"—one that is demanding and another that is matter-of-fact. Notice how the different nonverbal messages make statements about how the sender views control in this part of the relationship. The demanding tone says, in effect, "I have a right to tell you what to do around the house"; whereas the matter-of-fact one suggests, "I'm just reminding you of something you might have overlooked."
- You can easily imagine two ways to deliver the statement "I'm busy Saturday night," one with little affection and the other with much liking.

Most of the time we are unaware of the relational messages that bombard us every day. Sometimes these messages don't capture our awareness because they match our belief about the amount of control, liking, or intimacy that is appropriate in a relationship. For example, you probably won't be offended if your boss tells you to drop everything and tackle a certain job because you agree that supervisors have the right to direct employees. However, if your boss delivered the order in a condescending, sarcastic, or abusive tone of voice, you would probably be offended. Your complaint wouldn't be with the order itself but with the way it was delivered. "I may work for this company," you might think, "but I'm not a slave or an idiot. I deserve to be treated like a human being."

Exactly how are relational messages communicated? As the boss–employee example suggests, they are usually expressed nonverbally, often through tone of voice. To test this fact for yourself, imagine how you could act while saying "Can you help me for a minute?" in a way that communicates each of the following relationships:

superiority	aloofness
helplessness	sexual desire
friendliness	irritation

Although nonverbal behaviors are a good source of relational messages, remember that they are ambiguous. The sharp tone you take as a personal insult might be due to fatigue, and the interruption you take as an attempt to ignore your ideas might be a sign of pressure that has nothing to do with you. Before you jump to conclusions about relational clues, it is a good idea to verify the accuracy of your interpretation with the other person: "When you cut me off, it seemed like you were angry with me. Were you?"

Not all relational messages are nonverbal. Social scientists use the term **metacommunication** to describe messages that refer to other messages (Craig, 2005; Weder, 2008). In other words, metacommunication is communication about communication. Whenever we discuss a relationship with others, we are metacommunicating: "I wish we could stop arguing so much," or "I appreciate how honest you've been with me."

Despite its importance, overt metacommunication isn't a common feature of many relationships. In fact, there seems to be an aversion to it, even among many intimates (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Zhang & Stafford, 2008). When 90 people were asked to identify the taboo subjects in their personal relationships, the most frequent topics involved metacommunication (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985). For example, people were reluctant to discuss the state of their current relationships and the norms ("rules") that governed their lives together. Nevertheless, there are times when it becomes necessary to talk about what is going on between

"She's texting me, but I think she's also subtexting me."

you and the other person. And research shows that metacommunication can play a vital role in relational maintenance and repair (Becker et al., 2008).

A related concept is what scholars call *relational work* (Jensen & Rauer, 2014, 2016). This kind of metacommunication focuses specifically on relationship problems. For romantic couples, this can involve discussions about finances, in-laws, or the way relational decisions are made. Sometimes partners talk about these issues directly with each other. Other times, they air their problems to friends. It's no surprise that discussing relational troubles with others—to the exclusion of doing so with one's partner—is harmful to relationships. But the good news is that couples who engage in relational work together report happier and longer relationships. And the principle extends beyond romantic partners: Negotiating interpersonal challenges can lead to improved relations with friends, family, and colleagues. Chapter 11 will have more to say about communication and conflict management.

MAINTAINING AND SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIPS

Just as gardens need tending, cars need tune-ups, and bodies need exercise, relationships need ongoing maintenance to keep them successful and satisfying (Lydon & Quinn, 2013). And when the chips are down, we count on our interpersonal relationships to offer the support we need (Lakey, 2013).

Relational Maintenance

As noted earlier, relational maintenance can be defined as communication that keeps relationships running smoothly and satisfactorily. What kinds of communication help maintain relationships? Researchers have identified several strategies that couples use to keep their interaction satisfying (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013):

- *Positivity*. Keeping the relational climate polite and upbeat and also avoiding criticism.
- *Openness*. Talking directly about the nature of the relationship and disclosing your personal needs and concerns. This includes metacommunication and relational work, as discussed in the preceding section.
- *Assurances*. Letting the other person know—both verbally and nonverbally—that he or she matters to you and that you are committed to the relationship.
- *Social networks*. Being invested in each other's friends and family.
- *Sharing tasks*. Helping one another take care of life's chores and obligations.

These maintenance strategies aren't just for romantic relationships. One study analyzed college students' email to see which maintenance approaches they used (Johnson et al., 2008). With family and friends, two strategies were used most: openness ("Things have been a little crazy for me lately") and social networks ("How are you and Sam? Hopefully good"). With romantic partners, however, assurances ("This is just a little email to say I love you") were the most-used maintenance devices.

Social media can play an important role in maintaining relationships (Ledbetter & Keating, 2015). Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram give communicators the chance to keep up with each other through status updates (Craig & Wright, 2012; Dainton, 2013). Of course, there's the risk that constant updates will leave little to talk about in person, as the cartoon on this page wryly suggests. Emails can help too, though calling is particularly valuable for more intimate topics (Utz, 2007). Even a streak of daily Snapchat exchanges can help maintain a relationship (Stein, 2017). One study found that women use social media for relational maintenance more often than men do, regardless of the type of relationship (Houser et al., 2012). This finding is consistent with research showing that women expect and receive more maintenance communication with their female friends than men do with male friends (Hall et al., 2011).

Social media can be especially useful for meeting the challenges of long-distance relationships. These relationships are increasingly common, and they can be as stable as, or even more so than, geographically close relationships (Merolla, 2010). This is true not only for romantic and family relationships, but also for friendships (Johnson, Becker, et al., 2009). The key is a

commitment to relational maintenance. In one study, female college students said that openness and mutual problem solving are vital maintenance strategies in long-distance dating relationships (McGuire & Kinnery, 2010). In another study, both men and women reported that openness (self-disclosure) was the most important factor for maintaining their long-distance friendships (Johnson, Haigh, et al., 2009). They conceded that sharing tasks and practical help may be less viable options in long-distance relationships ("I'd help if I could, but I'm a thousand miles away"). We talk more about relational maintenance strategies for close relationships in Chapter 10.

ASSESSING YOUR COMMUNICATION

Relational Maintenance

With a particular relationship partner in mind, read each of the following 14 questions, and consider the extent to which you agree or disagree with each. Use a 7-point scale, with 1 = "completely disagree," 7 = "completely agree," and 2 through 6 representing levels of agreement between these endpoints.

_____ **1.** Acts positively toward me.

_____ **2.** Is understanding.

_____ **3.** Talks about his/her feelings.

_____ **4.** Discusses the quality of our relationship.

_____ **5.** Talks about our plans for the future.

_____ **6.** Includes our friends in our activities.

_____ **7.** Shares in joint responsibilities that face us.

_____ **8.** Is upbeat when we are together.

_____ **9.** Is forgiving of me.

_____ **10.** Is open about his/her feelings.

_____ **11.** Tells me how she/he feels about the relationship.

_____ **12.** Tells me how much I mean to him/her.

_____ **13.** Does things with our friends.

_____ **14.** Helps with the tasks that need to be done.

Adapted from Stafford, L. (2011). Measuring relationship maintenance behaviors: Critique and development of the Revised Relationship Maintenance Behavior Scale. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 28,* 278–303; and Stafford, L. (2016). Marital sanctity, relationship maintenance, and marital quality. *Journal of Family Issues, 37,* 119–131.

For scoring information, see page 289 at the end of the chapter.

Social Support

Whereas relational maintenance is about keeping a relationship thriving, **social support** is about helping others during challenging times by providing emotional, informational, or instrumental resources (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Social support has been consistently linked to mental and physical health (Lakey, 2013) and can be offered in a variety of ways:

- *Emotional support*: Few things are more helpful during times of stress, hurt, or grief than a loved one who listens with empathy and responds in caring ways (Reis & Clark, 2013). Chapter 7 (pages 215–217) describes what supporting does and doesn't sound like when responding to others' emotional needs. It's important to keep your message *person centered* (High & Solomon, 2016)—that is, focused on the emotions of the speaker ("this must be so difficult for you") rather than minimizing those feelings ("it's not the end of the world") or diverting attention ("tomorrow is a new day").
- *Informational support*: The people in our lives can be helpful information sources. They can give us recommendations for shopping, advice about relationships, or observations about our blind spots. Of course, keep in mind that advice is most likely to be regarded as supportive when it's wanted and requested by the person in need.
- *Instrumental support*: Sometimes support is best given by rolling up your sleeves and doing a task or favor to show that you care (Semmer et al., 2008). This can be as simple as a ride to the airport or as involved as caregiving during illness. We count on loved ones to offer assistance in times of need, and instrumental support is a primary marker of a meaningful friendship ("a friend in need is a friend indeed").

Sometimes just being available for interaction can provide social support. One study found that patients who texted with friends after getting out of surgery required less pain medication that those who didn't (Guillory et al., 2015). It wasn't just a matter of distraction, because playing video games didn't have the same analgesic effect for the patients. The researchers maintain that interpersonal interaction—even via texting—offers social support and a measure of pain relief. This serves as a reminder that the simple act of communicating with others when they're hurting is an act of kindness that can help.

Social support can also be found online (Cole et al., 2017), often from people whom you may never meet in person (Rains et al., 2015). In fact, approximately 20 percent of internet users go online to find others with similar health problems (Fox, 2011). A common reason is that they feel more comfortable talking with like-minded people with whom they have few formal ties—particularly when the health issues are embarrassing or stigma laden. As an example, there are blogs that offer social support for people who are morbidly obese (Sanford, 2010). These sites become interactive communities where people with similar conditions share their struggles and offer each other affirming feedback. One blogger put it this way: "When I have a bad week on the scale, all I have to do is write up an entry and post it on the blog. My readers are always full of good advice, comments and support" (Sanford, 2010, p. 577).

REPAIRING DAMAGED RELATIONSHIPS

Sooner or later, even the most satisfying and stable relationships hit a bumpy patch. Some problems arise from outside forces: work, finances, competing relationships, and so on. At other times, problems arise from differences and disagreements within the relationship. In Chapter 11, we offer guidelines for dealing with these sorts of challenges. A third type of relational problem comes from **relational transgressions**, when one partner violates the explicit or implicit terms of the relationship, letting the other one down in some important way.

Types of Relational Transgressions

Table 9.2 lists some types of relational transgressions. Violations such as these fall into different categories (Guerrero & Bachman. 2008), which we now describe.

Minor Versus Significant Some of the items listed in Table 9.2 aren't inherently transgressions, and in small doses they can actually aid relationships. For instance, a *little* distance can make the heart grow fonder, a *little* jealousy can be a sign of affection, and a *little* anger can start the process of resolving a gripe. In large and regular doses, however, these acts become

@work Relational Repair on the Job

When workers make mistakes that affect others, there's often a need for relational repair. Stanford University's Emma Seppala (2015) maintains that compassion trumps toughness when responding to employee and coworker mistakes.

Seppala cites studies showing that lashing out when things go wrong erodes workplace loyalty. And when employees work in a climate of fear and anxiety, they're not as creative or productive. By contrast, showing compassion builds interpersonal and professional bonds. This isn't to suggest that mistakes should be overlooked; rather, there are better and worse ways to call them out and repair the damage.

Here are Seppala's suggestions for addressing professional infractions. Although they're geared for managers, the principles are helpful for any workplace relationships:

1. *Take a moment.* Rash reactions to mistakes will likely leave relational scars. By stepping back and taking time to reflect, you'll allow for a more thoughtful response.
2. *Put yourself in the other's shoes.* Keep in mind what it's like when you've made a mistake on the job, and try to have empathy for the offender's plight. This is especially important for company veterans working with newcomers.
3. *Forgive.* It's in everyone's best interest to treat transgressors with grace. One supervisor described it this way: "It's not that I let them off the hook, but by choosing a compassionate response when they know they have made a mistake, they are not destroyed, they have learned a lesson, and they want to improve for you because you've been kind to them."

TABLE 9.2 Some Types of Relational Transgressions

Category	Examples
Lack of Commitment	Failure to honor important obligations (e.g., financial, emotional, task related) Self-serving dishonesty Unfaithfulness
Distance	Physical separation (beyond what is necessary) Psychological separation (avoidance, ignoring)
Disrespect	Criticism (especially in front of third parties)
Problematic Emotions	Jealousy Unjustified suspicion Rage
Aggression	Verbal hostility Physical violence

serious transgressions that can damage personal relationships. When transgression severity is perceived as high, and the perceiver's communication competence is low, rumination increases and relational closeness decreases (Robbins & Merrill, 2014).

Social Versus Relational Some transgressions violate *social rules* shared by society at large. For example, almost everyone would agree that ridiculing or humiliating a friend or family member in public is a violation of a fundamental social rule regarding saving others' face. Other rules are *relational* in nature—unique norms constructed by the people involved. For instance, some families have a rule stating, "If I'm going to be more than a little bit late, I'll let you know so that you don't worry." Once such a rule exists, failure to honor it feels like a violation, even though outsiders might not view it as such.

Deliberate Versus Unintentional Some transgressions are unintentional. You might reveal something about a friend's past without realizing that this disclosure would be embarrassing. Other violations, though, are intentional. In a fit of anger, you might purposely lash out with a cruel comment, knowing that it will hurt the other person's feelings.

One-time Versus Incremental The most obvious transgressions occur in a single episode: an act of betrayal, a verbal assault, or walking out in anger. But more subtle transgressions can occur over time. Consider emotional withdrawal: Sometimes people retreat into themselves, and we usually give one another the space to do just that. But if the withdrawal slowly becomes pervasive, it becomes a violation of the fundamental rule in most relationships that partners should be available to one another.

Strategies for Relational Repair

Research confirms the commonsense notion that a first step to repairing a transgression is to talk about the violation (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). Chapter 5 offers tips for sending clear, assertive "I-messages" when you believe you've been wronged ("I was really embarrassed when you yelled at me in front of everybody last night"), whether describing the outcomes of the transgression or asking for an apology (Peyton & Goei, 2013).

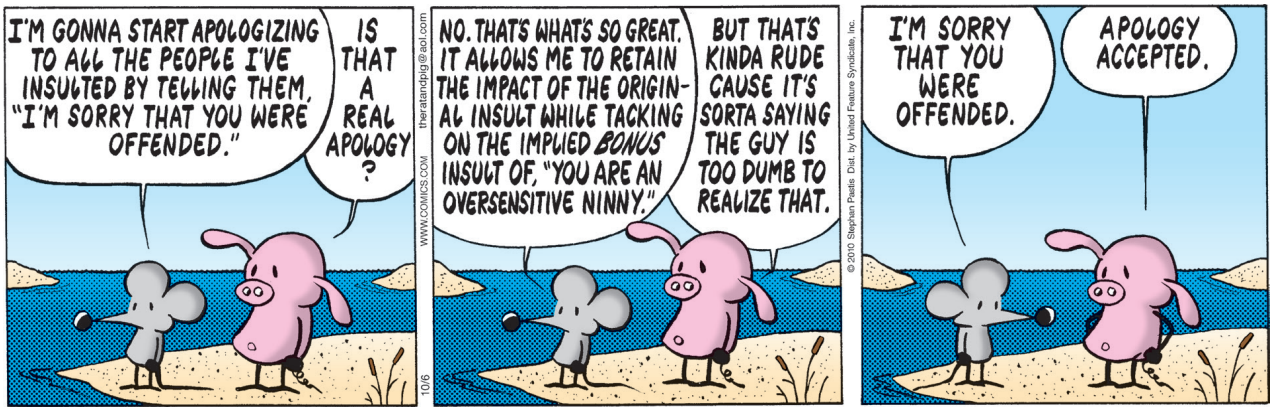
In other cases, you might be responsible for the transgression and want to raise it for discussion: "What did I do that you found so hurtful?" "Why was my behavior a problem for you?" Asking questions such as these—and listening nondefensively to the answers—can be an enormous challenge. In Chapter 7, we offer guidelines for listening; in Chapter 11, we provide tips about how to manage criticism.

Not surprisingly, some transgressions are harder to repair than others. One study of dating partners found that sexual infidelity and breaking up with the partner were the two least forgivable offenses (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006). The seriousness of the transgression and the relative strength of the relationship prior to the offense are the two most significant factors in whether forgiveness will be granted (Guerrero & Bachman, 2010).

For the best chance of repairing a seriously damaged relationship, an apology needs to be offered. *The Last Lecture* author Randy Pausch (2008) notes, "If you have done something wrong in your dealings with another person, it's as if there's an infection in your relationship. A good apology is like an antibiotic, a bad apology is like rubbing salt in the wound" (p. 161). As the cartoon on this page illustrates, some apologies are less than sincere. Here are the top three things people look for in an apology, in order of importance (Lewicki et al., 2016):

1. Acknowledgment of responsibility: "It was my fault; I acted like a selfish jerk."
2. Offer of repair: "I'll fix what I did and make things right."
3. Expression of regret: "I'm really sorry. I feel awful for letting you down."

Even if you offer an ideal apology, it may be unrealistic to expect immediate forgiveness. Sometimes, especially with severe transgressions, expressions of regret and promises of new behavior will only be accepted



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conditionally, with a need for them to be demonstrated over time before the aggrieved party regards them as genuine (Merolla, 2008).

Given the challenges and possible humiliation involved in apologizing, is it worth the effort? Research suggests yes. Participants in one study consistently reported that they had more remorse over apologies they *didn't* offer than about those they did (Exline et al., 2007). If you need to make things right with someone you've offended, better to do so now than to regret that you didn't.

Forgiving Transgressions

You might think that forgiveness is a topic for theologians and philosophers. However, social scientists have found that forgiving others has both personal and relational benefits (Antonuccio & Jackson, 2009). On a personal level, forgiveness has been shown to reduce emotional distress and aggression (Eaton & Struthers, 2006; Orcutt, 2006) and improve cardiovascular functioning (Hannon et al., 2012). Interpersonally, extending forgiveness to lovers, friends, and family can often help restore damaged relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2013). Moreover, most research shows that transgressors who have been forgiven are usually less likely to repeat their offenses than those who have not received forgiveness (Whited et al., 2010).

Even when a sincere apology is offered, forgiving others can be difficult. Research shows that one way to improve your ability to forgive is to recall times when you have mistreated or hurt others in the past—in other words, to remember that you, too, have wronged others and needed their forgiveness (Exline et al., 2008). Given that it's in our own best interest to be forgiving, we would do well to remember these words from Richard Walters (1984), who saw forgiveness as a choice requiring courage and continuous acts of will: "When we have been hurt we have two alternatives: be destroyed by resentment, or forgive. Resentment is death; forgiving leads to healing and life" (p. 366).

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 9.1 Recognize the various reasons for entering into interpersonal relationships.

Explanations for forming relationships with certain people include appearance (physical attractiveness), similarity, complementarity, rewards, competency, proximity, and disclosure.

Q: Which of the factors listed in this chapter best describe the bases of your most important interpersonal relationships?

Objective 9.2 Describe the stages and dialectical tensions typically experienced in interpersonal relationships.

Some theorists argue that interpersonal relationships may go through as many as 10 stages of growth and deterioration: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, bonding, differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.

Other models describe the dynamics of interpersonal communication in terms of dialectical