Chapter 5:
Communication Processes

Interpersonal Conflict

Who do you have the most conflict with right now? Your answer to this question probably depends on the various contexts in your life. If you still live at home with a parent or parents, you may have daily conflicts with your family as you try to balance your autonomy, or desire for independence, with the practicalities of living under your family's roof. If you've recently moved away to go to college, you may be negotiating roommate conflicts as you adjust to living with someone you may not know at all. You probably also have experienced managing conflict in romantic relationships and in the workplace. So think back and ask yourself, "How well do I handle conflict?" As with all areas of communication, we can improve if we have the background knowledge to identify relevant communication phenomena and the motivation to reflect on and enhance our communication skills.

Interpersonal conflict occurs in interactions where there are real or perceived incompatible goals, scarce resources, or opposing viewpoints. Interpersonal conflict may be expressed verbally or nonverbally along a continuum ranging from a nearly imperceptible cold shoulder to a very obvious blowout. Interpersonal conflict is, however, distinct from interpersonal violence, which goes beyond communication to include abuse. Domestic violence is a serious issue and is discussed in the section "The Dark Side of Relationships."

Conflict is an inevitable part of close relationships and can take a negative emotional toll. It takes effort to ignore someone or be passive-aggressive, and the anger or guilt we may feel after blowing up at someone are valid negative feelings. However, conflict isn't always negative or unproductive. In fact, numerous research studies have shown that the quantity of conflict in a relationship is not as important as how the conflict is handled. Additionally, *when conflict is well managed, it has the potential to lead to more rewarding and satisfactory relationships*.

Improving your competence in dealing with conflict can yield positive effects in the real world. Since conflict is present in our personal and professional lives, the ability to manage conflict and negotiate desirable outcomes can help us be more successful at both. Whether you and your partner are trying to decide what brand of flat-screen television to buy or discussing the upcoming political election with your mother, the potential for conflict is

present. In professional settings, the ability to engage in conflict management, sometimes called conflict resolution, is a necessary and valued skill. However, many professionals do not receive training in conflict management even though they are expected to do it as part of their job. A lack of training and a lack of competence could be a recipe for disaster.

Many colleges and universities now offer undergraduate degrees, graduate degrees, or certificates in conflict resolution. Being able to manage conflict situations can make life more pleasant rather than letting a situation stagnate or escalate. The negative effects of poorly handled conflict could range from an awkward last few weeks of the semester with a college roommate to violence or divorce. However, there is no absolute right or wrong way to handle a conflict. Remember that being a competent communicator doesn't mean that you follow a set of absolute rules. Rather, a competent communicator assesses multiple contexts and applies or adapts communication tools and skills to fit the dynamic situation.

Conflict Management Styles

Would you describe yourself as someone who prefers to avoid conflict? Do you like to get your way? Are you good at working with someone to reach a solution that is mutually beneficial? Odds are that you have been in situations where you could answer yes to each of these questions, which underscores the important role context plays in conflict and conflict management styles in particular. The way we view and deal with conflict is learned and contextual. Is the way you handle conflicts similar to the way your parents handle conflict? If you're of a certain age, you are likely predisposed to answer this question with a certain "No!" It wasn't until my late twenties and early thirties that I began to see how similar I am to my parents, even though I, like many, spent years trying to distinguish myself from them. Research does show that there is an intergenerational transmission of traits related to conflict management. As children, we test out different conflict resolution styles we observe in our families with our parents and siblings. Later, as we enter adolescence and begin developing platonic and romantic relationships outside the family, we begin testing what we've learned from our parents in other settings. If a child has observed and used negative conflict management styles with siblings or parents, he or she is likely to exhibit those behaviors with non–family members.

There has been much research done on different types of conflict management styles, which are communication strategies that attempt to avoid, address, or resolve a conflict. Keep in mind that we don't always consciously choose a style. We may instead be caught up in emotion and become reactionary. The strategies for more effectively managing conflict that will be discussed later may allow you to slow down the reaction process, become more aware of it, and intervene in the process to improve your communication. A powerful tool to mitigate conflict is information exchange. Asking for more information before you react to a conflict-triggering event is a good way to add a buffer between the trigger and your reaction. Another key element is whether or not a communicator is oriented toward self-centered or other-centered goals. For example, if your goal is to "win" or make the other person "lose," you show a high concern for self and a low concern for others. If your goal is to facilitate a "win/win" resolution or outcome, you show a high concern for self and others. In general, strategies that facilitate information exchange and include concern for mutual goals will be more successful at managing conflict.

The five strategies for managing conflict we will discuss are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Each of these conflict styles accounts for the concern we place on self versus others.



Figure 1.1. Five Styles of Interpersonal Conflict Management

In order to better understand the elements of the five styles of conflict management, we will apply each to the following scenario:

Rosa and D'Shaun have been partners for seventeen years. Rosa is growing frustrated because D'Shaun continues to give money to their teenage daughter, Casey, even though they decided to keep the teen on a fixed allowance to try to teach her more responsibility.

While conflicts regarding money and child-rearing are very common, we will see the numerous ways that Rosa and D'Shaun could address this problem.

Competing

The competing style indicates a high concern for self and a low concern for others. When we compete, we are striving to "win" the conflict, potentially at the expense or "loss" of the other person. One way we may gauge our win is by being granted or taking concessions from the other person. For example, if D'Shaun gives Casey extra money behind Rosa's back, he is taking an indirect competitive route resulting in a "win" for him because he got his way. The competing style also involves the use of power, which can be noncoercive or coercive.

Noncoercive strategies include requesting and persuading. When requesting, we suggest the conflict partner change a behavior. Requesting doesn't require a high level of information exchange. When we persuade, however, we give our conflict partner reasons to support our request or suggestion, meaning there is more information exchange, which may make persuading more effective than requesting. Rosa could try to persuade D'Shaun to stop giving Casey extra allowance money by bringing up their fixed budget or reminding him that they are saving for a summer vacation. Coercive strategies violate standard guidelines for ethical communication and may include aggressive communication directed at rousing your partner's emotions through insults, profanity, and yelling, or through threats of punishment if you do not get your way. If Rosa is the primary income earner in the family, she could use that power to threaten to take D'Shaun's ATM card away if he continues giving Casey money. In all these scenarios, the "win" that could result is only short term and can lead to conflict escalation. Interpersonal conflict is rarely isolated, meaning there can be ripple effects that connect the current conflict to previous and future conflicts. D'Shaun's behind-the-scenes money giving or Rosa's confiscation of the ATM card could lead to built-up negative emotions that could further test their relationship.

Competing has been linked to aggression, although the two are not always paired. If assertiveness does not work, there is a chance it could escalate to hostility. There is a pattern of verbal escalation: requests, demands, complaints, angry statements, threats, harassment, and verbal abuse. Aggressive communication can become patterned, which can create a volatile and hostile environment. The reality television show "The Bad Girls Club" is a prime example of a chronically hostile and aggressive environment. If you do a Google video search for clips from the show, you will see yelling, screaming, verbal threats, and some examples of physical violence. The producers of the show choose houseguests who have histories of aggression, and when the "bad girls" are placed in a house together, they fall into typical patterns, which creates dramatic television moments. Obviously, living in this type of volatile environment would create stressors in any relationship, so it's important to monitor the use of competing as a conflict resolution strategy to ensure that it does not lapse into aggression.

The competing style of conflict management is not the same thing as having a competitive personality. Competition in relationships isn't always negative, and people who enjoy engaging in competition may not always do so at the expense of another person's goals. In fact, research has shown that some couples engage in competitive shared activities like sports or games to maintain and enrich their relationship. And although we may think that competitiveness is gendered, research has often shown that women are just as competitive as men.

Avoiding

The avoiding style of conflict management often indicates a low concern for self and a low concern for others, and no direct communication about the conflict takes place. However, as we will discuss later, in some cultures that emphasize group harmony over individual interests, and even in some situations in the United States, avoiding conflict can indicate a high level of concern for the other. In general, avoiding doesn't mean that there is no communication about the conflict. *Remember, you cannot not communicate*. Even when we try to avoid conflict, we may intentionally or unintentionally give our feelings away through our verbal and nonverbal communication. Rosa's sarcastic tone as she tells D'Shaun that he's "Soooo good with money!" and his subsequent eye-roll both bring the conflict to the surface

without specifically addressing it. The avoiding style is either passive or indirect, meaning there is little information exchange, which may make this strategy less effective than others. We may decide to avoid conflict for many different reasons, some of which are better than others. If you view the conflict as having little importance to you, it may be better to ignore it. If the person you're having a conflict with will only be working in your office for a week, you may perceive a conflict to be temporary and choose to avoid it and hope that it will solve itself. If you are not emotionally invested in the conflict, you may be able to reframe your perspective and see the situation in a different way, therefore resolving the issue. In all these cases, avoiding doesn't really require an investment of time, emotion, or communication skills, so there is not much at stake to lose.

Avoidance is not always an easy conflict management choice, because sometimes the person we have a conflict with isn't a temp in our office or a weekend houseguest. While it may be easy to tolerate a problem when you're not personally invested in it or view it as temporary, when faced with a situation like Rosa and D'Shaun's, avoidance would just make the problem worse. For example, avoidance could first manifest as changing the subject, then progress from avoiding the issue to avoiding the person altogether, to even ending the relationship.

Indirect strategies of hinting and joking also fall under the avoiding style. While these indirect avoidance strategies may lead to a buildup of frustration or even anger, they allow us to vent a little of our built-up steam and may make a conflict situation more bearable. When we hint, we drop clues that we hope our partner will find and piece together to see the problem and hopefully change, thereby solving the problem without any direct communication. In almost all the cases of hinting that I have experienced or heard about, the person dropping the hints overestimates their partner's detective abilities. For example, when Rosa leaves the bank statement on the kitchen table in hopes that D'Shaun will realize how much extra money he is giving Casey, D'Shaun may simply ignore it or even get irritated with Rosa for not putting the statement with all the other mail. We also overestimate our partner's ability to decode the jokes we make about a conflict situation. It is more likely that the receiver of the jokes will think you're genuinely trying to be funny or feel provoked or insulted than realize the conflict situation that you are referencing. So more frustration may develop when the hints and

jokes are not decoded, which often leads to a more extreme form of hinting/joking: passive-aggressive behavior.

Passive-aggressive behavior is a way of dealing with conflict in which one person indirectly communicates their negative thoughts or feelings through nonverbal behaviors, such as not completing a task. For example, Rosa may wait a few days to deposit money into the bank so D'Shaun can't withdraw it to give to Casey, or D'Shaun may cancel plans for a romantic dinner because he feels like Rosa is questioning his responsibility with money. Although passive-aggressive behavior can feel rewarding at the moment, it is one of the most unproductive ways to deal with conflict. These behaviors may create additional conflicts and may lead to a cycle of passive-aggressiveness in which the other partner begins to exhibit these behaviors as well, while never actually addressing the conflict that originated the behavior. In most avoidance situations, both parties lose. However, as noted above, avoidance can be the most appropriate strategy in some situations—for example, when the conflict is temporary, when the stakes are low or there is little personal investment, or when there is the potential for violence or retaliation.

Accommodating

The accommodating conflict management style indicates a low concern for self and a high concern for others and is often viewed as passive or submissive, in that someone complies with or obliges another without providing personal input. The context for and motivation behind accommodating play an important role in whether or not it is an appropriate strategy. Generally, we accommodate because we are being generous, we are obeying, or we are yielding.

If we are being generous, we accommodate because we genuinely want to; if we are obeying, we don't have a choice but to accommodate (perhaps due to the potential for negative consequences or punishment); and if we yield, we may have our own views or goals but give up on them due to fatigue, time constraints, or because a better solution has been offered. Accommodating can be appropriate when there is little chance that our own goals can be achieved, when we don't have much to lose by accommodating, when we feel we are wrong, or when advocating for our own needs could negatively affect the relationship.

The occasional accommodation can be useful in maintaining a relationship—remember earlier we discussed putting another's needs before your own as a way to achieve relational goals. For example, Rosa may say, "It's OK that you gave Casey some extra money; she did have to spend more on gas this week since the prices went up." However, being a team player can slip into being a pushover, which people generally do not appreciate. If Rosa keeps telling D'Shaun, "It's OK this time," they may find themselves short on spending money at the end of the month. At that point, Rosa and D'Shaun's conflict may escalate as they question each other's motives, or the conflict may spread if they direct their frustration at Casey and blame it on her irresponsibility.

Research has shown that the accommodating style is more likely to occur when there are time restraints and less likely to occur when someone does not want to appear weak. If you're standing outside the movie theater and two movies are starting, you may say, "Let's just have it your way," so you don't miss the beginning. If you're a new manager at an electronics store and an employee wants to take Sunday off to watch a football game, you may say no to set an example for the other employees. As with avoiding, there are certain cultural influences we will discuss later that make accommodating a more effective strategy.

Compromising

The compromising style shows a moderate concern for self and others and may indicate that there is a low investment in the conflict and/or the relationship. Even though we often hear that the best way to handle a conflict is to compromise, the compromising style isn't a win/win solution; it is a partial win/lose. In essence, when we compromise, we give up some or most of what we want. It's true that the conflict gets resolved temporarily, but lingering thoughts of what you gave up could lead to a future conflict. Compromising may be a good strategy when there are time limitations or when prolonging a conflict may lead to relationship deterioration. Compromise may also be good when both parties have equal power or when other resolution strategies have not worked.

A negative of compromising is that it may be used as an easy way out of a conflict. The compromising style is most effective when both parties find the

solution agreeable. Rosa and D'Shaun could decide that Casey's allowance does need to be increased and could each give ten more dollars a week by committing to taking their lunch to work twice a week instead of eating out. They are both giving up something, and if neither of them has a problem with taking their lunch to work, then the compromise was equitable. If the couple agrees that the twenty extra dollars a week should come out of D'Shaun's golf budget, the compromise isn't as equitable, and D'Shaun, although he agreed to the compromise, may end up with feelings of resentment. Wouldn't it be better to both win?

Collaborating

The collaborating style involves a high degree of concern for self and others and usually indicates investment in the conflict situation and the relationship. Although the collaborating style takes the most work in terms of communication competence, it ultimately leads to a win/win situation in which neither party has to make concessions because a mutually beneficial solution is discovered or created. The obvious advantage is that both parties are satisfied, which could lead to positive problem-solving in the future and strengthen the overall relationship. For example, Rosa and D'Shaun may agree that Casey's allowance needs to be increased and may decide to give her twenty more dollars a week in exchange for her babysitting her little brother one night a week. In this case, they didn't make the conflict personal but focused on the situation and came up with a solution that may end up saving them money. The disadvantage is that this style is often time-consuming, and only one person may be willing to use this approach while the other person is eager to compete to meet their goals or willing to accommodate.

Here are some tips for collaborating and achieving a win/win outcome:

- Do not view the conflict as a contest you are trying to win.
- Remain flexible and realize there are solutions yet to be discovered.
- Distinguish the people from the problem (don't make it personal).
- Determine what the underlying needs are that are driving the other person's demands (needs can still be met through different demands).
- Identify areas of common ground or shared interests that you can work from to develop solutions.

- Ask questions to allow them to clarify and to help you understand their perspective.
- Listen carefully and provide verbal and nonverbal feedback.

Culture and Conflict

Culture is an important context to consider when studying conflict, and recent research has called into question some of the assumptions of the five conflict management styles discussed so far, which were formulated with a Western bias. For example, while the avoiding style of conflict has been cast as negative, with a low concern for self and other or as a lose/lose outcome, this research found that participants in the United States, Germany, China, and Japan all viewed avoiding strategies as demonstrating a concern for the other. While there are some generalizations we can make about culture and conflict, it is better to look at more specific patterns of how interpersonal communication and conflict management are related. We can better understand some of the cultural differences in conflict management by further examining the concept of face.

What does it mean to "*save face*?" This saying generally refers to preventing embarrassment or preserving our reputation or image, which is similar to the concept of face in interpersonal and intercultural communication. Our face is the projected self we desire to put into the world, and facework refers to the communicative strategies we employ to project, maintain, or repair our face or maintain, repair, or challenge another's face. Face negotiation theory argues that people in all cultures negotiate face through communication encounters, and that cultural factors influence how we engage in facework, especially in conflict situations. These cultural factors influence whether we are more concerned with self-face or other-face and what types of conflict management strategies we may use. One key cultural influence on face negotiation is the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

The distinction between *individualistic* and *collectivistic* cultures is an important dimension across which all cultures vary. Individualistic cultures like the United States and most of Europe emphasize individual identity over group identity and encourage competition and self-reliance. Collectivistic cultures like Taiwan, Colombia, China, Japan, Vietnam, and Peru value in-

group identity over individual identity and value conformity to social norms of the in-group. However, within the larger cultures, individuals will vary in the degree to which they view themselves as part of a group or as a separate individual, which is called self-construal. Independent self-construal indicates a perception of the self as an individual with unique feelings, thoughts, and motivations. Interdependent self-construal indicates a perception of the self as interrelated with others. Not surprisingly, people from individualistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of independent self-construal, and people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to have higher levels of interdependent self-construal. Self-construal and individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientations affect how people engage in facework and the conflict management styles they employ.

Self-construal alone does not have a direct effect on conflict style, but it does affect face concerns, with independent self-construal favoring self-face concerns and interdependent self-construal favoring other-face concerns. There are specific facework strategies for different conflict management styles, and these strategies correspond to self-face concerns or other-face concerns.

- Accommodating. Giving in (self-face concern).
- Avoiding. Pretending conflict does not exist (other-face concern).
- Competing. Defending your position, persuading (self-face concern).
- Collaborating. Apologizing, having a private discussion, remaining calm (other-face concern).

Research done on college students in Germany, Japan, China, and the United States found that those with independent self-construal were more likely to engage in competing, and those with interdependent self-construal were more likely to engage in avoiding or collaborating. And in general, this research found that members of collectivistic cultures were more likely to use the avoiding style of conflict management and less likely to use the integrating or competing styles of conflict management than were members of individualistic cultures. The following examples bring together facework strategies, cultural orientations, and conflict management style: Someone from an individualistic culture may be more likely to engage in competing as a conflict management strategy if they are directly confronted, which may be an attempt to defend their reputation (self-face concern). Someone in a

collectivistic culture may be more likely to engage in avoiding or accommodating in order not to embarrass or anger the person confronting them (other-face concern) or out of concern that their reaction could reflect negatively on their family or cultural group (other-face concern). While these distinctions are useful for categorizing large-scale cultural patterns, it is important not to essentialize or arbitrarily group countries together, because there are measurable differences within cultures. For example, expressing one's emotions was seen as demonstrating a low concern for other-face in Japan, but this was not so in China, which shows there is a variety between similarly collectivistic cultures. Culture always adds layers of complexity to any communication phenomenon, but experiencing and learning from other cultures also enriches our lives and makes us more competent communicators.

Handling Conflict Better

Conflict is inevitable and it is not inherently negative. A key part of developing interpersonal communication competence involves being able to effectively manage the conflict you will encounter in all your relationships. One key part of handling conflict better is to notice patterns of conflict in specific relationships and to generally have an idea of what causes you to react negatively and what your reactions usually are.

Much of the research on conflict patterns has been done on couples in romantic relationships, but the concepts and findings are applicable to other relationships. *Four common triggers for conflict are criticism, demand, cumulative annoyance, and rejection*. We all know from experience that *criticism*, or comments that evaluate another person's personality, behavior, appearance, or life choices, may lead to conflict. Comments do not have to be meant as criticism to be perceived as such. If Gary comes home from college for the weekend and his mom says, "Looks like you put on a few pounds," she may view this as a statement of fact based on observation. Gary, however, may take the comment personally and respond negatively back to his mom, starting a conflict that will last for the rest of his visit. A simple but useful strategy to manage the trigger of criticism is to follow the old adage "Think before you speak." In many cases, there are alternative ways to phrase things that may be taken less personally, or we may determine that our comment doesn't need to be spoken at all. I've learned

that a majority of the thoughts that we have about another person's physical appearance, whether positive or negative, do not need to be verbalized. Ask yourself, "What is my motivation for making this comment?" and "Do I have anything to lose by not making this comment?" If your underlying reasons for asking are valid, perhaps there is another way to phrase your observation. If Gary's mom is worried about his eating habits and health, she could wait until they're eating dinner and ask him how he likes the food choices at school and what he usually eats.

Demands also frequently trigger conflict, especially if the demand is viewed as unfair or irrelevant. It's important to note that demands rephrased as questions may still be or be perceived as demands. The tone of voice and context are important factors here. When you were younger, you may have asked a parent, teacher, or elder for something and heard back "Ask nicely." As with criticism, thinking before you speak and before you respond can help manage demands and minimize conflict episodes. As we discussed earlier, demands are sometimes met with withdrawal rather than a verbal response. If you are doing the demanding, remember a higher level of information exchange may make your demand clearer or more reasonable to the other person. If you are being demanded of, responding calmly and expressing your thoughts and feelings are likely more effective than withdrawing, which may escalate the conflict.

Cumulative annoyance is a building of frustration or anger that occurs over time, eventually resulting in a conflict interaction. For example, your friend shows up late to drive you to class three times in a row. You didn't say anything the previous times, but on the third time, you say, "You're late again! If you can't get here on time, I'll find another way to get to class." Cumulative annoyance can build up like a pressure cooker, and as it builds up, the intensity of the conflict also builds. Criticism and demands can also play into cumulative annoyance. We have all probably let critical or demanding comments slide, but if they continue, it becomes difficult to hold back, and most of us have a breaking point. The problem here is that all the other incidents come back to your mind as you confront the other person, which usually intensifies the conflict. You've likely been surprised when someone has blown up at you due to cumulative annoyance or surprised when someone you have blown up at didn't know there was a problem building. A good strategy for managing cumulative annoyance is to monitor

your level of annoyance and occasionally let some steam out of the pressure cooker by processing through your frustration with a third party or directly addressing what is bothering you with the source.

No one likes the feeling of rejection. *Rejection* can lead to conflict when one person's comments or behaviors are perceived as ignoring or invalidating the other person. Vulnerability is a component of any close relationship. When we care about someone, we verbally or nonverbally communicate. We may tell our best friend that we miss them, or plan a home-cooked meal for our partner who is working late. The vulnerability that underlies these actions comes from the possibility that our relational partner will not notice or appreciate them. When someone feels exposed or rejected, they often respond with anger to mask their hurt, which ignites a conflict. Managing feelings of rejection are difficult because it is so personal, but controlling the impulse to assume that your relational partner is rejecting you, and engaging in communication rather than reflexive reaction, can help put things in perspective. If your partner doesn't get excited about the meal you planned and cooked, it could be because he or she is physically or mentally tired after a long day. Concepts discussed in our unit on perception can be useful here, as perception checking, taking inventory of your attributions, and engaging in information exchange to help determine how each person is punctuating the conflict are useful ways of managing all four of the triggers discussed.

Interpersonal conflict may take the form of *serial arguing*, which is a repeated pattern of disagreement over an issue. Serial arguments do not necessarily indicate negative or troubled relationships, but any kind of patterned conflict is worth paying attention to. There are three patterns that occur with serial arguing: repeating, mutual hostility, and arguing with assurances. The first pattern is repeating, which means reminding the other person of your complaint (what you want them to start/stop doing). The pattern may continue if the other person repeats their response to your reminder. For example, if Marita reminds Kate that she doesn't appreciate her sarcastic tone, and Kate responds, "I'm soooo sorry, I forgot how perfect you are," then the reminder has failed to effect the desired change. A predictable pattern of complaint like this leads participants to view the conflict as irresolvable. The second pattern within serial arguments is mutual hostility, which occurs when the frustration of repeated conflict leads to negative emotions and increases the likelihood of verbal aggression. Again, a predictable pattern of

hostility makes the conflict seem irresolvable and may lead to relationship deterioration. Whereas the first two patterns entail an increase in pressure on the participants in the conflict, the third pattern offers some relief. If people in an interpersonal conflict offer verbal assurances of their commitment to the relationship, then the problems associated with the other two patterns of serial arguing may be ameliorated. Even though the conflict may not be solved in the interaction, the verbal assurances of commitment imply that there is a willingness to work on solving the conflict in the future, which provides a sense of stability that can benefit the relationship. Although serial arguing is not inherently bad within a relationship, if the pattern becomes more of a vicious cycle, it can lead to alienation, polarization, and an overall toxic climate, and the problem may seem so irresolvable that people feel trapped and terminate the relationship. There are some negative, but common, conflict reactions we can monitor and try to avoid, which may also help prevent serial arguing.

Two common conflict pitfalls are *one-upping* and *mindreading*. *One-upping* is a quick reaction to communication from another person that escalates the conflict. If Sam comes home late from work and Nicki says, "I wish you would call when you're going to be late" and Sam responds, "I wish you would get off my back," the reaction has escalated the conflict. *Mindreading* is communication in which one person attributes something to the other using generalizations. If Sam says, "You don't care whether I come home at all or not!" she is presuming to know Nicki's thoughts and feelings. Nicki is likely to respond defensively, perhaps saying, "You don't know how I'm feeling!" One-upping and mindreading are often reactions that are more reflexive than deliberate. Remember concepts like attribution and punctuation in these moments. Nicki may have received bad news and was eager to get support from Sam when she arrived home. Although Sam perceives Nicki's comment as criticism and justifies her comments as a reaction to Nicki's behavior, Nicki's comment could actually be a sign of their closeness, in that Nicki appreciates Sam's emotional support. Sam could have said, "I know, I'm sorry, I was on my cell phone for the past hour with a client who had a lot of problems to work out." Taking a moment to respond mindfully rather than react with a knee-jerk reflex can lead to information exchange, which could deescalate the conflict.

Validating the person with whom you are in conflict can be an effective way to deescalate conflict. While avoiding or retreating may seem like the best option at the moment, one of the key negative traits found in research on married couples' conflicts was withdrawal, which as we learned before may result in a demand-withdrawal pattern of conflict. Often validation can be as simple as demonstrating good listening skills discussed earlier in this book by making eye contact and giving verbal and nonverbal back-channel cues like saying "mmm-hmm" or nodding your head. This doesn't mean that you have to give up your own side in a conflict or that you agree with what the other person is saying; rather, you are hearing the other person out, which validates them and may also give you some more information about the conflict that could minimize the likelihood of a reaction rather than a response.

As with all the aspects of communication competence we have discussed so far, *you cannot expect that everyone you interact with will have the same knowledge of communication that you have*. But it often only takes one person with conflict management skills to make an interaction more effective. Remember that it's not the quantity of conflict that determines a relationship's success; it's how the conflict is managed, and one person's competent response can de-escalate a conflict. Now we turn to a discussion of negotiation steps and skills as a more structured way to manage conflict

Emotions and Communication

Have you ever been to a movie and let out a bellowing laugh and snort only to realize no one else is laughing? Have you ever become uncomfortable when someone cries in class or in a public place? Emotions are clearly personal, as they often project what we're feeling on the inside to those around us whether we want it to show or not. Emotions are also interpersonal in that another person's show of emotion usually triggers a reaction from us—perhaps support if the person is a close friend or awkwardness if the person is a stranger. Emotions are central to any relationship, and it's important to know what causes and influences emotions so we can better understand our own emotions and better respond to others when they display emotions.

Emotions are physiological, behavioral, and/or communicative reactions to stimuli that are cognitively processed and experienced as emotional. This definition includes several important dimensions of emotions. First, emotions

are often internally experienced through physiological changes such as increased heart rate, a tense stomach, or a cold chill. These physiological reactions may not be noticeable by others and are therefore intrapersonal unless we exhibit some change in behavior that clues others into our internal state or we verbally or nonverbally communicate our internal state. Sometimes our behavior is voluntary—we ignore someone, which may indicate we are angry with them—or involuntary—we fidget or avoid eye contact while talking because we are nervous. When we communicate our emotions, we call attention to ourselves and provide information to others that may inform how they should react. For example, when someone we care about displays behaviors associated with sadness, we are likely to know that we need to provide support. We learn, through socialization, how to read and display emotions, although some people are undoubtedly better at reading emotions than others. However, as with most aspects of communication, we can all learn to become more competent with increased knowledge and effort.

Primary emotions are innate emotions that are experienced for short periods of time and appear rapidly, usually as a reaction to an outside stimulus, and are experienced similarly across cultures. The primary emotions are joy, distress, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Members of a remote tribe in New Guinea, who had never been exposed to Westerners, were able to identify these basic emotions when shown photographs of US Americans making corresponding facial expressions.

Secondary emotions are not as innate as primary emotions, and they do not have a corresponding facial expression that makes them universally recognizable. Secondary emotions are processed by a different part of the brain that requires higher-order thinking; therefore, they are not reflexive. Secondary emotions are love, guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride, envy, and jealousy. These emotions develop over time, take longer to fade away, and are interpersonal because they are most often experienced in relation to real or imagined others. You can be fearful of the dark but feel guilty about an unkind comment made to your mother or embarrassed at the thought of doing poorly on a presentation in front of an audience. Since these emotions require more processing, they are more easily influenced by thoughts and can be managed, which means we can become more competent communicators by becoming more aware of how we experience

and express secondary emotions. Although there is more cultural variation in the meaning and expression of secondary emotions, they are still universal in that they are experienced by all cultures. It's hard to imagine what our lives would be like without emotions, and in fact, many scientists believe we wouldn't be here without them.

Perspectives on Emotion

How did you learn to express your emotions? Like many aspects of communication and interaction, you likely never received any formal instruction on expressing emotions. Instead, we learn through observation, trial, and error, and through occasional explicit guidance (e.g., "boys don't cry" or "smile when you meet someone"). To better understand how and why we express our emotions, we'll discuss the evolutionary function of emotions and how they are affected by social and cultural norms.

Evolution and Emotions

Human beings grouping together and creating communication bonds was a key element in the continuation and success of our species, and the ability to express emotions played a role in this success. For example, unlike other species, most of us are able to control our anger, and we have the capacity for empathy. Emotional regulation can help manage conflict, and empathy allows us to share the emotional state of someone else, which increases a communication bond. These capacities were important as early human society grew increasingly complex and people needed to deal with living with more people.

Attachment theory ties into the evolutionary perspective, because researchers claim that it is in our nature, as newborns, to create social bonds with our primary caretaker. This drive for attachment became innate through the process of evolution as early humans who were more successful at attachment were more likely to survive and reproduce—repeating the cycle. Attachment theory proposes that people develop one of the following three attachment styles as a result of interactions with early caretakers: secure, avoidant, or anxious attachment. It is worth noting that much of the research on attachment theory has been based on some social norms that are shifting. For example, although women for much of human history have played the

primary caregiver role, men are increasingly taking on more caregiver responsibilities. Additionally, although the following examples presume that a newborn's primary caregivers are his or her parents, extended family, foster parents, or others may also play that role.

Individuals with a *secure attachment style* report that their relationship with their parents is warm and that their parents also have a positive and caring relationship with each other. People with this attachment style are generally comfortable with intimacy, feel like they can depend on others when needed, and have few self-doubts. As a result, they are generally more effective at managing their emotions, and they are less likely to experience intense negative emotions in response to a negative stimulus like breaking up with a romantic partner.

People with the *avoidant attachment style* report discomfort with closeness and a reluctance to depend on others. They quickly develop feelings of love for others, but those feelings lose intensity just as fast. As a result, people with this attachment style do not view love as long-lasting or enduring and have a general fear of intimacy because of this. This attachment style might develop due to a lack of bonding with a primary caregiver.

People with the *anxious attachment style* report a desire for closeness but anxieties about being abandoned. They regularly experience self-doubts and may blame their lack of love on others' unwillingness to commit rather than their own anxiety about being left. They are emotionally volatile and more likely to experience intense negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. This attachment style might develop because primary caregivers were not dependable or were inconsistent—alternating between caring or nurturing and neglecting or harming.

This process of attachment leads us to experience some of our first intense emotions, such as love, trust, joy, anxiety, or anger, and we learn to associate those emotions with closely bonded relationships. For example, the child who develops a secure attachment style and associates feelings of love and trust with forming communication bonds will likely experience similar emotions as an adult entering into a romantic partnership. Conversely, a child who develops an anxious attachment style and associates feelings of anxiety and mistrust with forming communication bonds will likely

experience similar emotions in romantic relationships later in life. In short, whether we form loving and secure bonds or unpredictable and insecure bonds influences our emotional tendencies throughout our lives, which inevitably affects our relationships. Of course, later in life, we have more control over and conscious thoughts about this process. Although it seems obvious that developing a secure attachment style is the ideal scenario, it is also inevitable that not every child will have the same opportunity to do so. But while we do not have control over the style we develop as babies, we can exercise more control over our emotions and relationships as adults if we take the time to develop self-awareness and communication competence—both things this book will help you do if you put what you learn into practice.

Culture and Emotions

While our shared evolutionary past dictates some universal similarities in emotions, triggers for emotions and norms for displaying emotions vary widely. Certain emotional scripts that we follow are socially, culturally, and historically situated. Take the example of "falling in love." Westerners may be tempted to critique the practice of arranged marriages in other cultures and question a relationship that isn't based on falling in love. However, arranged marriages have been a part of Western history, and the emotional narrative of falling in love has only recently become a part of our culture. Even though we know that compatible values and shared social networks are more likely to predict the success of a long-term romantic relationship than "passion," Western norms privilege the emotional role of falling in love in our courtship narratives and practices. While this example shows how emotions tie into larger social and cultural narratives, rules, and norms for displaying emotions affect our day-to-day interactions.

Display rules are sociocultural norms that influence emotional expression. Display rules influence who can express emotions, which emotions can be expressed, and how intense the expressions can be. In individualistic cultures, where personal experience and self-determination are values built into cultural practices and communication, expressing emotions is viewed as a personal right. In fact, the outward expression of our inner states may be exaggerated, since getting attention from those around you is accepted and even expected in individualistic cultures like the United States. In collectivistic cultures, emotions are viewed as more interactional and less

individual, which ties them into social context rather than into an individual right to free expression. An expression of emotion reflects on the family and cultural group rather than only on the individual. Therefore, emotional displays are more controlled, because maintaining group harmony and relationships is a primary cultural value, which is very different from the more individualistic notion of having the right to get something off your chest.

There are also cultural norms regarding which *types of emotions* can be expressed. In individualistic cultures, especially in the United States, there is a cultural expectation that people will exhibit positive emotions. Recent research has documented the culture of cheerfulness in the United States. People seek out happy situations and communicate positive emotions even when they do not necessarily feel positive emotions. Being positive implicitly communicates that you have achieved your personal goals, have a comfortable life, and have a healthy inner self. In a culture of cheerfulness, failure to express positive emotions could lead others to view you as a failure or to recommend psychological help or therapy. The cultural predisposition to express positive emotions is not universal. The people who live on the Pacific islands of Ifaluk do not encourage the expression of happiness, because they believe it will lead people to neglect their duties. Similarly, collectivistic cultures may view expressions of positive emotion negatively because someone is bringing undue attention to himself or herself, which could upset group harmony and potentially elicit jealous reactions from others.

Emotional expressions of grief also vary among cultures and are often tied to religious or social expectations. Thai and Filipino funeral services often include wailing, a more intense and loud form of crying, which shows respect for the deceased. The intensity of the wailing varies based on the importance of the individual who died and the closeness of the relationship between the mourner and the deceased. Therefore, close relatives like spouses, children, or parents would be expected to wail louder than distant relatives or friends. In Filipino culture, wailers may even be hired by the family to symbolize the importance of the person who died. In some Latino cultures, influenced by the concept of machismo or manliness, men are not expected or allowed to cry. Even in the United States, there are gendered

expectations regarding grieving behaviors that lead some men to withhold emotional displays such as crying even at funerals.

Expressing Emotions

Emotion sharing involves communicating the circumstances, thoughts, and feelings surrounding an emotional event. *Emotion sharing* usually starts immediately following an emotional episode. The intensity of the emotional event corresponds with the frequency and length of the sharing, with high-intensity events being told more often and over a longer period of time. Research shows that people communicate with others after almost any emotional event, positive or negative, and that emotion sharing offers intrapersonal and communication benefits, as individuals feel inner satisfaction and relief after sharing, and social bonds are strengthened through the interaction.

Our social bonds are enhanced through emotion sharing because the support we receive from our relational partners increases our sense of closeness and interdependence. We should also be aware that our expressions of emotion are infectious due to emotional contagion, or the spreading of emotion from one person to another. Think about a time when someone around you got the giggles and you couldn't help but laugh along with them, even if you didn't know what was funny. While those experiences can be uplifting, the other side of emotional contagion can be unpleasant.

In order to verbally express our emotions, it is important that we develop an *emotional vocabulary*. The more specific we can be when we are verbally communicating our emotions, the less ambiguous they will be for the person decoding our message. As we expand our emotional vocabulary, we are able to convey the intensity of the emotion we're feeling whether it is mild, moderate, or intense. For example, happy is mild, delighted is moderate, and ecstatic is intense, and ignored is mild, rejected is moderate, and abandoned is intense. Aside from conveying the intensity of your emotions, you can also verbally frame your emotions in a way that allows you to have more control over them.

We can communicate ownership of our emotions through the use of *"I" language*. This may allow us to feel more in control, but it may also facilitate

emotion sharing by not making our conversational partner feel at fault or defensive. For example, instead of saying "You're making me crazy!" you could say, "I'm starting to feel really anxious because we can't make a decision." However, there may be times when face-to-face communication isn't possible or desired, which can complicate how we express emotions.

In a time when so much of our communication is electronically mediated, it is likely that we will communicate emotions through the written word in an e-mail, text, or instant message. We may also still resort to pen and paper when sending someone a thank-you note, a birthday card, or a sympathy card. Communicating emotions through the written (or typed) word can have advantages such as time to compose your thoughts and convey the details of what you're feeling. There are also disadvantages, in that important context and nonverbal communication can't be included. Things like facial expressions and tone of voice offers much insight into emotions that may not be expressed verbally. There is also a lack of immediate feedback. Sometimes people respond immediately to a text or e-mail but think about how frustrating it is when you text someone and they don't get back to you right away. If you're in need of emotional support or want validation of an emotional message you just sent, waiting for a response could end up negatively affecting your emotional state and your relationship.

Managing and Responding to Emotions

The notion of *emotional intelligence* emerged in the early 1990s and has received much attention in academic scholarship, business and education, and the popular press. Emotional intelligence "involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action." As was noted earlier, improving our emotional vocabulary and considering how and when to verbally express our emotions can help us better distinguish between and monitor our emotions. However, as the definition of emotional intelligence states, we must then use the results of that cognitive process to guide our thoughts and actions.

Just as we are likely to engage in emotion sharing following an emotional event, we are likely to be on the receiving end of that sharing. Another part of emotional intelligence is being able to appraise others' expressions of

emotions and communicatively adapt. A key aspect of this process is empathy, which is the ability to comprehend the emotions of others and to elicit those feelings in ourselves. Being empathetic has important social and physical implications. By expressing empathy, we will be more likely to attract and maintain supportive social networks, which has positive physiological effects like lower stress and less anxiety and psychological effects such as overall life satisfaction and optimism.

When people share emotions, they may expect a variety of results such as support, validation, or advice. If someone is venting, they may just want your attention. When people share positive emotions, they may want recognition or shared celebration. Remember too that you are likely to co-experience some of the emotion with the person sharing it and that the intensity of their share may dictate your verbal and nonverbal reaction. Research has shown that responses to low-intensity episodes are mostly verbal. For example, if someone describes a situation where they were frustrated with their car shopping experience, you may validate their emotion by saying, "Car shopping can be really annoying. What happened?" Conversely, more intense episodes involve nonverbal reactions such as touching, body contact (scooting close together), or embracing. These reactions may or may not accompany verbal communication. You may have been in a situation where someone shared an intense emotion, such as learning of the death of a close family member, and the only thing you could think to do was hug them. Although being on the receiving end of emotional sharing can be challenging, your efforts will likely result in positive gains in your communication competence and increased relational bonds.

Foundations of Relationships

We can begin to classify key relationships we have by distinguishing between our personal and our social relationships. *Personal relationships* meet emotional, relational, and instrumental needs, as they are intimate, close, and interdependent relationships such as those we have with best friends, partners, or immediate family. *Social relationships* are relationships that occasionally meet our needs and lack the closeness and interdependence of personal relationships. Examples of social relationships include coworkers, distant relatives, and acquaintances. Another distinction useful for categorizing relationships is whether or not they are voluntary. For example,

some personal relationships are *voluntary*, like those with romantic partners, and some are involuntary, like those with close siblings. Likewise, some social relationships are voluntary, like those with acquaintances, and some are *involuntary*, like those with neighbors or distant relatives. You can see how various relationships fall into each of these dimensions in Figure 1.1 "Types of Relationships". Now that we have a better understanding of how we define relationships, we'll examine the stages that most of our relationships go through as they move from formation to termination.

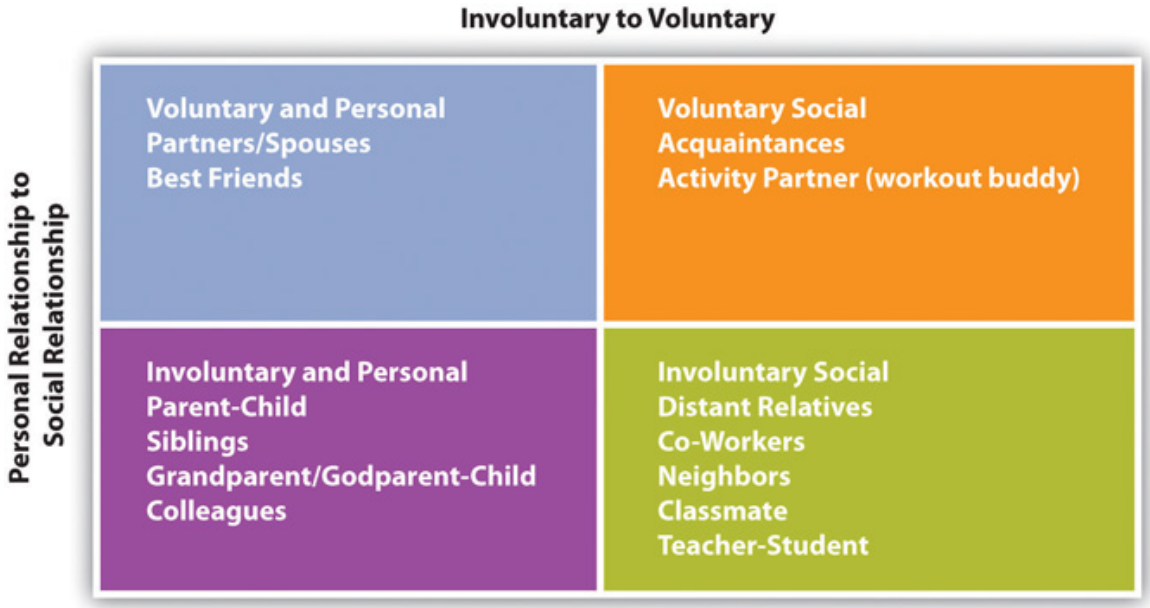


Figure 1.1. Types of Relationships

Stages of Relational Interaction

Communication is at the heart of forming our relationships. We reach the achievement of relating through the everyday conversations and otherwise trivial interactions that form the fabric of our relationships. It is through our communication that we adapt to the dynamic nature of our relational worlds, given that relational partners do not enter each encounter or relationship with compatible expectations. Communication allows us to test and be tested by our potential and current relational partners. It is also through communication that we respond when someone violates or fails to meet those expectations.

There are ten established stages of interaction that can help us understand how relationships come together and come apart. We will discuss each stage in more detail, but in Table 1.2 “Relationship Stages” and Figure 1.3 "Knapp's Staircase Model," you will find a list of the communication stages. We should keep the following things in mind about this model of relationship development: relational partners do not always go through the stages sequentially, some relationships do not experience all the stages, we do not always consciously move between stages, and coming together and coming apart are not inherently good or bad. As we have already discussed, relationships are always changing—they are dynamic. Although this model has been applied most often to romantic relationships, most relationships follow a similar pattern that may be adapted to a particular context.

Process	Stage	Representative Communication
Coming Together	Initiating	“My name’s Rich. It’s nice to meet you.”
	Experimenting	“I like to cook and refinish furniture in my spare time. What about you?”
	Intensifying	“I feel like we’ve gotten a lot closer over the past couple of months.”
	Integrating	(To friend) “We just opened a joint bank account.”
	Bonding	“I can’t wait to tell my parents that we decided to get married!”
Coming Apart	Differentiating	“I’d really like to be able to hang out with my friends sometimes.”
	Circumscribing	“Don’t worry about the problems I’m having at work. I can deal with it.”
	Stagnating	(To self) “I don’t know why I even asked him to go out to dinner. He never wants to go out and have a good time.”
	Avoiding	“I have a lot going on right now, so I probably won’t be home as much.”
	Terminating	“It’s important for us both to have some time apart. I know you’ll be fine.”

Table 1.2. Relationship Stages

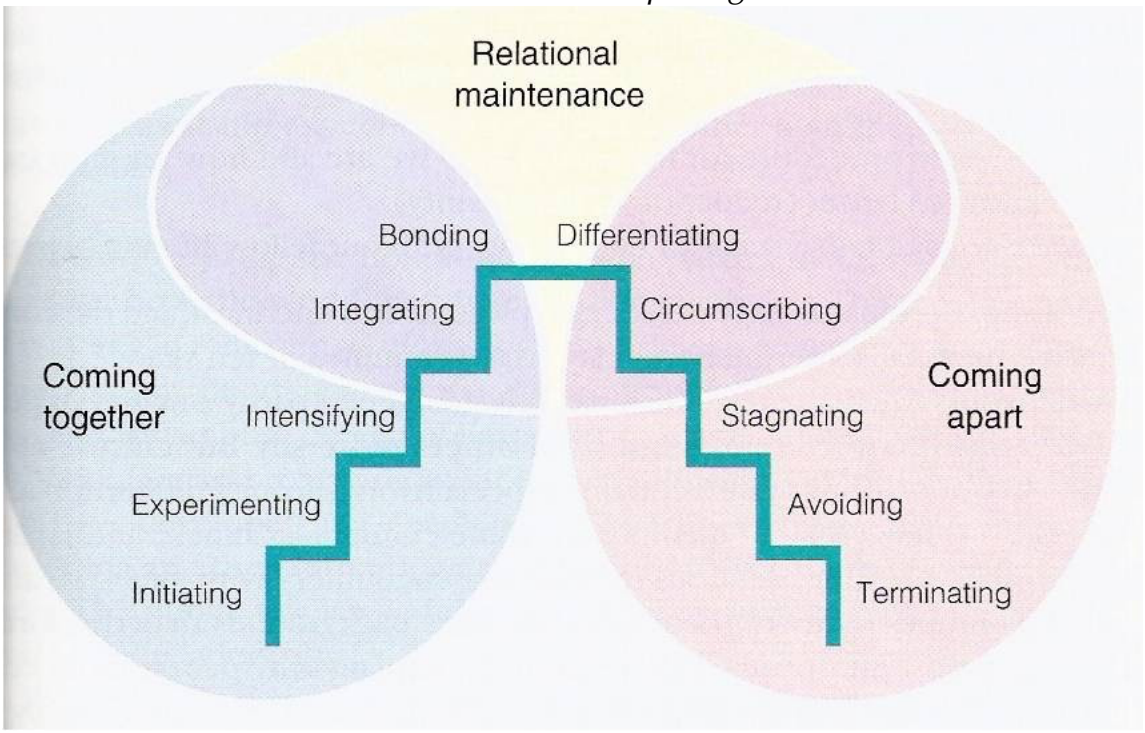


Figure 1.3. Knapp's Staircase Model

Initiating

In the initiating stage, people size each other up and try to present themselves favorably. Whether you run into someone in the hallway at school or in the produce section at the grocery store, you scan the person and consider any previous knowledge you have of them, expectations for the situation, and so on. Initiating is influenced by several factors.

If you encounter a stranger, you may say, “Hi, my name’s Rich.” If you encounter a person you already know, you’ve already gone through this before, so you may just say, “What’s up?” Time constraints also affect initiation. A quick passing calls for a quick hello, while a scheduled meeting may entail a more formal start. If you already know the person, the length of time that’s passed since your last encounter will affect your initiation. For example, if you see a friend from high school while home for winter break, you may set aside a long block of time to catch up; however, if you see someone at work that you just spoke to ten minutes earlier, you may skip initiating communication. The setting also affects how we initiate

conversations, as we communicate differently at a crowded bar than we do on an airplane. Even with all this variation, people typically follow typical social scripts for interaction at this stage.

Experimenting

The scholars who developed these relational stages have likened the experimenting stage, where people exchange information and often move from strangers to acquaintances, to the "sniffing ritual" of animals. A basic exchange of information is typical as the experimenting stage begins. For example, on the first day of class, you may chat with the person sitting beside you and take turns sharing your year in school, hometown, residence hall, and major. Then you may branch out and see if there are any common interests that emerge. Finding out you're both St. Louis Cardinals fans could then lead to more conversation about baseball and other hobbies or interests; however, sometimes the experiment may fail. If your attempts at information exchange with another person during the experimenting stage are met with silence or hesitation, you may interpret their lack of communication as a sign that you shouldn't pursue future interaction.

Experimenting continues in established relationships. Small talk, a hallmark of the experimenting stage, is common among young adults catching up with their parents when they return home for a visit or committed couples when they recount their day while preparing dinner. Small talk can be annoying sometimes, especially if you feel like you have to do it out of politeness. I have found, for example, that strangers sometimes feel the need to talk to me at the gym (even when I have earbuds in). Although I'd rather skip the small talk and just work out, I follow social norms of cheerfulness and politeness and engage in small talk. Small talk serves important functions, such as creating a communicative entry point that can lead people to uncover topics of conversation that go beyond the surface level, helping us audition someone to see if we'd like to talk to them further, and generally creating a sense of ease and community with others. And even though small talk isn't viewed as very substantive, the authors of this model of relationships indicate that most of our relationships do not progress far beyond this point.

Intensifying

As we enter the intensifying stage, we indicate that we would like or are open to more intimacy, and then we wait for a signal of acceptance before we attempt more intimacy. This incremental intensification of intimacy can occur over a period of weeks, months, or years and may involve inviting a new friend to join you at a party, then to your place for dinner, then to go on vacation with you. It would be seen as odd, even if the experimenting stage went well, to invite a person who you're still getting to know on vacation with you without engaging in some less intimate interaction beforehand. In order to save face and avoid making ourselves overly vulnerable, steady progression is key in this stage. Aside from sharing more intense personal time, requests for and granting favors may also play into an intensification of a relationship. For example, one friend helping the other prepare for a big party on their birthday can increase closeness. However, if one person asks for too many favors or fails to reciprocate favors granted, then the relationship can become unbalanced, which could result in a transition to another stage, such as differentiating.

Other signs of the intensifying stage include the creation of nicknames, inside jokes, and personal idioms; increased use of we and our; increased communication about each other's identities (e.g., "My friends all think you are really laid back and easy to get along with"); and a loosening of typical restrictions on possessions and personal space (e.g., you have a key to your best friend's apartment and can hang out there if your roommate is getting on your nerves). Navigating the changing boundaries between individuals in this stage can be tricky, which can lead to conflict or uncertainty about the relationship's future as new expectations for relationships develop. Successfully managing this increasing closeness can lead to relational integration.

Integrating

In the integrating stage, two people's identities and personalities merge, and a sense of interdependence develops. Even though this stage is most evident in romantic relationships, there are elements that appear in other relationship forms. Some verbal and nonverbal signals of the integrating stage are when the social networks of two people merge; those outside the relationship begin

to refer to or treat the relational partners as if they were one person (e.g., always referring to them together—"Let's invite Olaf and Bettina"); or the relational partners present themselves as one unit (e.g., both signing and sending one holiday card or opening a joint bank account). Even as two people integrate, they likely maintain some sense of self by spending time with friends and family separately, which helps balance their needs for independence and connection.

Bonding

The bonding stage includes a public ritual that announces formal commitment. These types of rituals include weddings, commitment ceremonies, and civil unions. Obviously, this stage is almost exclusively applicable to romantic couples. In some ways, the bonding ritual is arbitrary, in that it can occur at any stage in a relationship. In fact, bonding rituals are often later annulled or reversed because a relationship doesn't work out, perhaps because there wasn't sufficient time spent in the experimenting or integrating phases. However, bonding warrants its own stage because the symbolic act of bonding can have very real effects on how two people communicate about and perceive their relationship. For example, the formality of the bond may lead the couple and those in their social network to more diligently maintain the relationship if conflict or stress threatens it.

Differentiating

Individual differences can present a challenge at any given stage in the relational interaction model; however, in the differentiating stage, communicating these differences becomes a primary focus. Differentiating is the reverse of integrating, as we and our reverts back to I and my. People may try to re-boundary some of their life prior to the integrating of the current relationship, including other relationships or possessions. For example, Carrie may reclaim friends who became "shared" as she got closer to her roommate Julie and their social networks merged by saying, "I'm having my friends over to the apartment and would like to have privacy for the evening." Differentiating may onset in a relationship that bonded before the individuals knew each other in enough depth and breadth. Even in relationships where the bonding stage is less likely to be experienced, such as a friendship, unpleasant discoveries about the other person's past, personality, or values

during the integrating or experimenting stage could lead a person to begin differentiating.

Circumscribing

To circumscribe means to draw a line around something or put a boundary around it. So in the circumscribing stage, communication decreases and certain areas or subjects become restricted as individuals verbally close themselves off from each other. They may say things like "I don't want to talk about that anymore" or "You mind your business and I'll mind mine." If one person was more interested in differentiating in the previous stage, or the desire to end the relationship is one-sided, verbal expressions of commitment may go unechoed—for example, when one person's statement, "I know we've had some problems lately, but I still like being with you," is met with silence. Once the increase in boundaries and decrease in communication becomes a pattern, the relationship further deteriorates toward stagnation.

Stagnating

During the stagnating stage, the relationship may come to a standstill, as individuals basically wait for the relationship to end. Outward communication may be avoided, but internal communication may be frequent. The relational conflict flaw of mindreading takes place as a person's internal thoughts lead them to avoid communication. For example, a person may think, "There's no need to bring this up again because I know exactly how he'll react!" This stage can be prolonged in some relationships. Parents and children who are estranged, couples who are separated and awaiting a divorce, or friends who want to end a relationship but don't know how to do it may have extended periods of stagnation. Short periods of stagnation may occur right after a failed exchange in the experimental stage, where you may be in a situation that's not easy to get out of, but the person is still there. Although most people don't like to linger in this unpleasant stage, some may do so to avoid potential pain from termination, some may still hope to rekindle the spark that started the relationship, or some may enjoy leading their relational partner on.

Avoiding

Moving to the avoiding stage may be a way to end the awkwardness that comes with stagnation, as people signal that they want to close down the lines of communication. Communication in the avoiding stage can be very direct—"I don't want to talk to you anymore"—or more indirect—"I have to meet someone in a little while, so I can't talk long." While physical avoidance such as leaving a room or requesting a schedule change at work may help clearly communicate the desire to terminate the relationship, we don't always have that option. In a parent-child relationship, where the child is still dependent on the parent, or in a roommate situation, where a lease agreement prevents leaving, people may engage in cognitive dissociation, which means they mentally shut down and ignore the other person even though they are still physically present.

Terminating

The terminating stage of a relationship can occur shortly after initiation or after a ten- or twenty-year relational history has been established. Termination can result from outside circumstances such as geographic separation or internal factors such as changing values or personalities that lead to a weakening of the bond. Termination exchanges involve some typical communicative elements and may begin with a summary message that recaps the relationship and provides a reason for the termination (e.g., "We've had some ups and downs over our three years together, but I'm getting ready to go to college, and I either want to be with someone who is willing to support me, or I want to be free to explore who I am."). The summary message may be followed by a distance message that further communicates the relational drift that has occurred (e.g., "We've really grown apart over the past year"), which may be followed by a disassociation message that prepares people to be apart by projecting what happens after the relationship ends (e.g., "I know you'll do fine without me. You can use this time to explore your options and figure out if you want to go to college too or not."). Finally, there is often a message regarding the possibility of future communication in the relationship (e.g., "I think it would be best if we don't see each other for the first few months, but text me if you want to."). These ten stages of relational development provide insight into the

complicated processes that affect relational formation and deterioration. We also make decisions about our relationships by weighing costs and rewards.