

4 STEPS TO LASTING LOVE

"Davis and I had been dating for three months and we were crazy about each other," recalls Erika Vaughan, a 36-year-old flight attendant from Seattle. "But one night, he told me there was something about me that really bothered him. He felt he could never finish a sentence without me interrupting him. And then he said those four words you hate to hear in a new relationship: 'I need some space.'" Certain this was the end, Erika went home with a box of Kleenex and sobbed through *Sex and the City*. The next day, her phone rang—it was Davis. "Hi! Can I come over? I miss you." "Turns out his need for space was a 12-hour break...not a break-up," says Erika, who's now been married to Davis for five years.

What Erika didn't realize was that her bump in the romance road was exactly what a *healthy* relationship is all about: progressing, one step at a time, from that passionate bed of roses to the real live thorny stuff of life. Here's how to recognize the four stages of true intimacy—and how to make each stage work for you.

Stage 1: Getting to Know You—Not

What it looks like: From dinners to movies to meeting friends and family, you're going through the motions of a relationship. "In this protective stage, you are likely *telling* about yourself, but not *showing* who you really are," explains Dr. Frank Lawlis, Dr. Phil's friend and mentor. You might, for instance, disclose that your brother died when you were 7, or your parents divorced when you were in college. But chances are you're not revealing true emotions—like talking about the anger you had toward your father, or how your brother's death resulted in a childhood depression. Erika recalls having that guard up early on with Davis, a drop-dead gorgeous pilot. "I was distant and standoffish for quite a while because, as a flight attendant, I know what a bad reputation pilots have. I didn't want to get hurt." (Erika's and Davis's names have been changed because the airline for which they fly prohibits relationships between employees.)

The pros: Safety and privacy. If you're not sharing, you can't get bruised.

The pitfalls: Safety and privacy and not getting bruised means you're not creating intimacy, either. "Intimacy is a huge effort," Lawlis explains. "Some people even get married without ever really knowing each other, and that's unfortunate."

Stage 2: The Honeymoon

What it looks like: The angels are singing, your heart is thumping, and that perfect new partner of yours can do no wrong. Erika and Davis, who often flew together on the airline, hit this paradise pit stop early on. "Most people have dinner together, but we were

LOVE

Strong relationships start here By Hillary Quinn

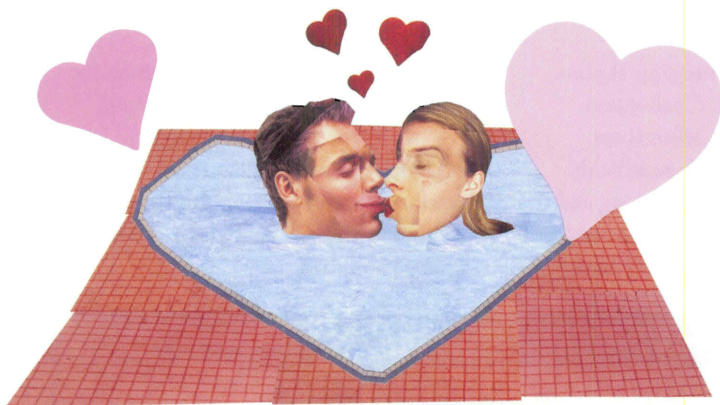


lying on the beaches of Puerto Vallarta, sipping cocktails in Cabo," recalls Erika. "I was madly in love." This time is often referred to as the "we" stage: "*We* adored that movie. *We* always work out at night. *We* love Italian food."

The pros: In this idyllic time, you and your partner are loving, tolerant, unselfish, forgiving, patient—and telling each other how wonderful you are 24/7. And because both of you are showing only your good sides, the relationship moves along at a steady clip;

not surprisingly, most marriages take place here.

The pitfalls: As blissful as this infatuation can be, it makes for a shallow relationship. (Come on, do you honestly believe he will always clean the bathroom with a smile, and that she never helps herself to seconds?) What's more, being so constantly coupled makes it hard to maintain a separate identity, so you become dependent on your partner for your happiness. This is why the



first fight hits so hard—as it did for Erika. To keep from losing the “I” in the bliss of “we,” try to escape the love bubble once in a while by spending solo time with friends and family, or doing activities that nurture and contribute to your authentic self.

Stage 3: Reality Check

What it looks like: “Consciously or unconsciously, a fatigue factor goes to work and you realize you can’t be wonderful all the time,” says Lawlis. You get lazy about hiding your bad habits (Davis felt Erika had an interrupting problem; Erika worried that Davis—who rarely tidied up around the house—was an unmotivated slob) and, in the process, begin to show your authentic self. This feeling of “now that I’ve got you, I don’t have to be good anymore” is one reason the first year of marriage can be so shaky.

The pros: Ugly as it may be, there’s something thrilling about revealing that kind of raw, intimate side most people never get to



see. Remember, too, that nobody’s perfect—you included!—and that as long as your partner’s quirks aren’t abusive or destructive, you can probably learn to live with them.

The pitfalls: Getting a good-old dose of criticism—or seeing your partner’s less-than-perfect side—may make you feel the relationship is in peril. In fact, because the honeymoon stage is so addictive, some people bail the minute things get real—mistakenly believing Relationship Myth #2, that the honeymoon is true love and that imperfect reality is failure. When you feel the urge to flee, focus instead on Personal Relationship Values such as accepting your partner and being up-front and forthright about your feelings. You may find that the wild passion gets traded for a richer, deeper love, the kind that sticks around long after the fireworks show is over.

Stage 4: Interdependence—Your Reward

What it looks like: You’ve weathered the storm and come together as two healthy wholes (instead of dependent halves), sharing a deep intimacy that transcends petty grievances and allows you to be your authentic self. Your core of consciousness—values, talents, strengths, and wisdom—is intact and appreciated by your partner. “I used to worry that Davis’s lack of motivation around the house was a reflection of his motivation in life,” recalls Erika, a self-professed neat freak. Erika—who now subscribes to the philosophy of “if I want it super-clean, I have to do it myself”—finally realized that Davis’s pet peeve wasn’t *cleaning*, but being told what to do. “It’s taken some practice, but I’ve learned how to ask for things without sounding like I’m demanding them,” she

“The head-over-heels stage never lasts—and that’s a good thing.”

—Dr. Phil

explains. She’s also learned to let him finish his sentences. For his part, Davis makes a point to call frequently when he’s on a trip. “Because of the business he’s in, it’s easy for me to be insecure,” says Erika. “But Davis always makes an effort to check in, in the spirit of maintaining trust.”

The pros: It’s all about the pros, folks. The love, intimacy, and acceptance a couple shares here is as deep as it gets.

The pitfalls: Don’t think you can rest on your laurels once you land here—you need to keep doing the work, and realize that your relationship, no matter how fabulous, isn’t going to be smooth sailing all the time. You *will* fight. From time to time, you will think your partner is a pain in the butt. But if you get into the game and keep making the effort to connect, day after day, you’ll reap the rewards for a lifetime. ■

