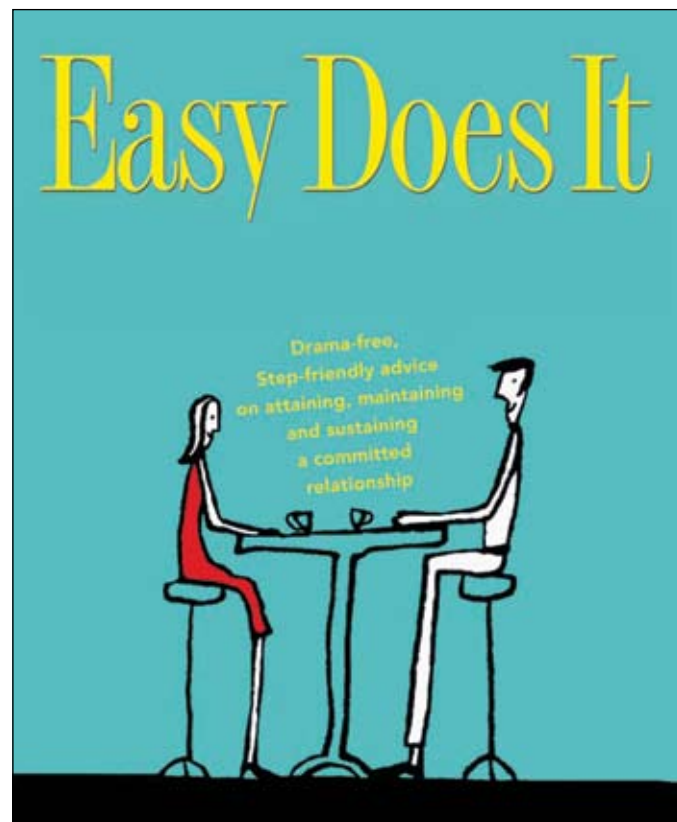


Recovering Relationships

Besides the day-to-day changes, relationships go through developmental stages as well. This can cause concern when couples realize the ground is shifting but do not know that the changes are healthy and normal — even transforming.



by Mary Faulkner, M.A.

Do recovering people have more trouble in their romantic partnerships than their non-addicted friends or does it just seem that way? Partnerships are built on commitment and intimacy. For many recovering people this represents uncharted territory or landscapes filled with hurtful experiences. Addiction is a family disease and most recovering people come from homes where healthy relationships were not modeled. Healing has to happen and new skills have to be learned. When addiction enters the picture, personal development comes to a screeching halt, which leaves many recovering people a little behind the curve. Getting life back on track takes time and considerable work. Yet a committed loving relationship with another person is one of life's great pleasures and one that many want to experience. Most will agree that it is worth the extra effort. A little help and a game plan are needed.

Commitment as discussed here is an agreement to show up physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually in a partner's life, and work through life's challenges together. Intimacy, the other component in personal relationships, describes emotional awareness — the honest sharing of hopes dreams and expectations as well as fears and anxieties. Intimacy depends on feelings, having the ability to identify them, and the willingness to share them with another person. Recovery offers an opportunity to heal from the past and presents the possibility to build healthy happy partnerships despite the individual's previous track record.

Five Stages of Relationship

Relationships are dynamic. They are living, breathing, human interactions and full of surprises. Besides the day-to-day changes, relationships go through developmental stages as well. This can cause concern when couples realize the ground is shifting but do not know that the changes are healthy and normal — even transforming. Here are the five stages most relationships pass through over time.

Honeymoon or Pink Cloud

The honeymoon stage is like the pink cloud of early recovery. It is an ideal time when life seems filled with possibilities. Often this is a time relatively free from worry or concern — the person is in love with life itself. In a relationship this ideal time can last as long as several years or be as brief as the dash from the altar to the limousine waiting outside the church. One thing is certain, sooner or later the honeymoon ends and the next stage sets in — the power struggle.

Power Struggle

A healthy relationship is a mixture of individuality and togetherness. The power struggle follows the intense bonding stage of the honeymoon or pink cloud as the need for individuality reasserts itself. This struggle can last a brief time while a balance point between "self and other" are found or get caught up in it for the rest of the relationship. Growing past the power struggle depends on personal maturity, the abilities brought into the partnership, and a willingness to learn new skills.

Resolution

The power struggle is like two mules pulling in opposite directions each trying to get to a bale of hay that is right in front of their noses — partners cannot get what they need or want. If childhood trauma is involved, resolution can require the help of a therapist. This is often the case when addiction is part of the family history. When the struggle is resolved, couples are free to be about the business building a life together as well as pursuing personal hopes and dreams. With resolution comes the gift of serenity.

Serenity

Serenity takes us deeper into ourselves and enriches the relationship. Conflicts continue to arise throughout life, but couples have trust

and skills to deal with them creatively. Partners have come to know each other's deepest fears, greatest shortcomings, as well as each other's qualities, and have accepted the whole of one another. They begin to experience unconditional love.

Unconditional Love

Couples often talk of falling in love all over again as a result of having learned to work together navigating life's challenges. Just as recovery teaches, unconditional love is only possible when we know and accept ourselves.

Ending the Power Struggle

The power struggle is a natural part of a healthy relationship — part of the human condition. It neither has to be destructive, nor last forever. Here are five helpful suggestions on how to navigate the stormy years without jumping ship or sinking the boat.

Upgrading Skills

Even the most intense disagreements can be settled with a few simple conflict resolution techniques. Sometimes the solution is to agree to disagree for the time being, yet serenity can be experienced in the meantime. Conflict resolution materials can be found at the library, bookstore, or online. You can improve communication, become more adept at recognizing and sharing emotions, even learn how to fight fair. Disagreeing is natural and healthy but should not lead to destructive behaviors such as name-calling, withholding affection, ridicule, shame, violence or threats of violence. If any of these behaviors become part of your relationship, you are probably caught in your family of origin dynamics.

Completing the Family Business

The most serious disagreements are usually about the past, not the present — meaning past relations with family of origin, not current relations with a partner. A healthy, satisfying relationship requires taking care of family business by resolving the old conflicts. This can be accomplished by working appropriate 12-Step programs such as Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) program, Codependency Anonymous (CoDA), Al-Anon, Recovering Couples Anonymous (RCA) or with a therapist. It is difficult to heal family stuff alone. Similar to a sponsor in addiction recovery, a relationship sponsor can help clarify a partnership issue. A relationship sponsor is not a marriage counselor, but helps identify what is happening in the relationship.

If the individual does not resolve the family business, the childhood experiences will continue to define adult relationships. The individual will either act out the old patterns learned growing up, or strive to not act them out. In either case, the person will not be living in the present moment, not living truth. Current disagreements can be resolved if disagreements from the past have been resolved. Resolving these differences may take considerable negotiation, but they do not carry the anger, pain, and resentment of family of origin material.

Creating New Rituals

Rituals bind us together. The power of ritual explains why going home for Thanksgiving dinner with your family can be traumatic yet you show up despite the negative consequences. Going against the established tradition feels like betrayal. At the same time, creating new rituals is part of updating your system — it gets you into your present life and into your present relationship. Recovering therapist and family expert John Bradshaw reminds us that in healthy families we are allowed to grow up and leave home.

Couples might enjoy designing holidays together in ways that work for both partners — taking what they liked from their childhood experiences and leaving the rest. Not wanting the chaos from childhood is a starting point, but they should clearly define what they want. For example: "I want a simple Thanksgiving meal with a few friends, and to go to my regular evening meeting." Approaching a holiday with different expectations is not a problem when the expectations are discussed in advance. It gets easier as the trust between the two builds.

Going for a walk, attending a meeting, or simply by sharing a meal together can all become rituals when they are made a regular part of the relationship. It is important to commit to a time and place and a few ground rules such as keeping time together positive rather than always trouble-shooting. Rituals need consistency, and also breathing space. To keep them from becoming command performances include enough flexibility to accommodate each person's needs.

A Vision for the Couple

The founders of A.A. had a vision. When recovering addicts read the vision in the *Big Book*, they feel a sense of unity and purpose. Creating a vision for a partnership sets intention and guides decisions. Coming up with a vision statement is a process of blending each partner's deepest longings and greatest desires. A vision statement is always inclusive, never exclusive. One recovering couple whose hopes and dreams seemed very different eventually came up with this statement: "This is a family in which everyone's needs can be met." They agreed they would handle challenges on a case-by-case basis. Their recipe for success includes prayer, applying program principles, and improving their conflict resolution skills. The vision statement should be concise. A lot can be packed in it, but it should be brief and to the point.

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Principle Before Personalities

The Steps and Traditions of 12-Step recovery provide guidance for handling all life's challenges. They are particularly valuable in those inevitable personality-clashing moments. Principles can hold disagreements to a minimum, and help avoid destructive fighting. Like a good sponsor, they teach by drawing the best out of the person.

Life continues to present new challenges — life on life's terms, as the saying goes. It is difficult to know what the future holds, but living by principles connects the wisdom of the ages and offers what is needed to resolve conflicts along the way. Situations change from generation to generation, but principles endure. ▼

Mary Faulkner earned a master's degree in Religious Education through a joint program at Scarritt Graduate School and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. She is an author, therapist, public speaker, and offers retreats and workshops. Her most recent books are *The Easy Does It Dating Guide for People in Recovery* (Hazelden, 2004), *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Catholicism* (Alpha, 2006), and *The Easy Does It Relationship Guide for People in Recovery* (Hazelden, 2007). Faulkner is a counselor in the Family Program at Cumberland Heights in Nashville Tennessee — an alcohol and drug treatment center offering out patient and residential services for individuals and families. She can be reached by email Mary_Faulkner@cumberlandheights.org or by calling (615) 383-4449.