

Being married can be like climbing a mountain. Some days the climb is exhilarating and the views are breathtaking. Other days, it's all a husband and wife can do to hang on and keep from falling to their death. Either way, to make it to the top, couples have got to keep their eyes on the next peak and keep climbing.

Wouldn't it be nice if there was a map that illustrated the common obstacles couples can encounter while scaling that mountain? What follows is a guided tour of the eight major stages couples go through on their ascent of "Marriage Mountain." Check your gear, and start climbing!

STAGE 1

The Honeymoon Stage

As couples begin their climb they have all the energy in the world. It's a good thing too, because the work begins with the first foot they set on Marriage Mountain.

There are two major goals of the Honeymoon Stage. First, the couple must foster intimacy and fidelity by giving the marriage priority over parents, siblings, friends, work and other commitments. "The hardest thing for me," says Joseph about the first year of his marriage to Sherry, "was giving Sherry pride-of-place in my life. I had a hard time not making her compete for attention with my work and friends, and, of course, my mother."

Everybody believes fidelity means "not sleeping around." But the promise to "forsake all others" actually includes all those relationships that seek to overwhelm the privileged place marriage holds because of its sacramental nature.

Just as important is the second goal of this stage: reconciling the

realities of marriage with romantic ideals. "I had a very romanticized vision of what marriage was going to be like," says Marion. "Al and I had to come to the point where we didn't expect each other to be 'on' all the time. We make sure we do special things for each other, but mostly we've learned to find love in the little acts of everyday service."

STAGE 2

Conflict and Negotiation

The key to successful mountain climbing is packing light. Unfortunately, at this stage of marriage, many couples become aware of some baggage they didn't know about.

Hot on the heels of newly-wedded bliss is the "I didn't know that about you!" stage. Here, couples can engage in passionate arguments about almost anything. "I was stunned at his stupidity," says Elizabeth of her husband Mike. "I thought everybody ran their life the way I did, and he had some very different ideas. I had to learn that his ways weren't stupid, they were just

different. We both had to change to come up with a unique set of rules that would work for our relationship."

Working patiently and lovingly through this stage helps a couple establish guidelines for everything from running the house to maintaining the romance. Likewise, it builds a foundation of trust and safety for future problem-solving.

STAGE 3

The New Pattern Stage

Couples who reach the first plateau feel relieved, but a little drained from the effort. Looking up at the next part of the climb, they decide to camp here for a bit and rest up.

Couples don't usually make it to this stage until somewhere between the third and fifth year of marriage, after more conflict and negotiation than they would have liked. In the New Pattern Stage, the wise couple takes some time to catch their breath and let the rules they worked out become second nature. As one young woman explained, "There were a lot of things we wanted to take on. We were eager to start our family, and I wanted to open my own business. But we decided to take just a couple months to make sure our marriage was in order before attacking any new challenges."

Couples must work to avoid two temptations of this stage. The first is to rush through it since nothing exciting seems to be happening. This is the marital equivalent of starting to build a house while the foundation is still setting up. The second temptation is to stay put and never take on new adventures because the couple has found a comfortable spot to rest. Neither option is too healthy and could have long-range consequences for the relationship.

STAGE 4

The Creative Stage

On this part of Marriage Mountain, the path narrows and becomes considerably steeper. Partners should consider tying a line between them so they don't lose each other.

One of the most interesting times in marriage, the Creative Stage can also be one of the most challenging. As the couple begins building a family and finding their places in the community, there is an increased risk of growing apart. Jack, married to Pat for 11 years, had this to say about the Creative Stage: "I thought things were going really well. My CPA firm was starting to take off and we just had our second child. One day, I came home and Pat said that she wasn't sure she loved me anymore. I'd never been so scared in my whole life. We started counseling and discovered that in our pursuit of family and social success, we forgot to take care of our marriage. Fortunately, we caught it before it was too late."

One popular counselor says that to maintain rapport, husbands and wives need about 15 cumulative hours a week of one-on-one time to function at their best and not lose each other.

STAGE 5 The Homecoming Stage

Spouses who may have slipped a couple of times on the last part of the climb, look back, breathe a sigh of relief and even laugh about it at this stage. While resting, they may notice that their pack has gotten heavy and decide to get rid of some things that were once thought important.

In the Homecoming Stage, couples continue to pursue all the projects they started in the last phase, but now they have less to prove. Eric, a real estate broker, found himself pulling out of less important activities at work to focus on his home life. "I used to make it my business to be into everything at work. But I've come to realize that while some things at the office can run just fine without me, my family can't. I'm making more of an effort to reconnect with my wife and kids."

It is essential that spouses reconnect with their mates at this time, because the next stage brings with it the second most difficult challenge of married life after the Creative Phase.

STAGES 6 & 7 The Launching Phase and the Second Honeymoon Stage

Marriage can be like scaling a perpendicular wall of rock with footholds as wide as a bootlace. Depending on one's sense of adventure, this is either the thrill of a lifetime or the dumbest thing ever attempted. Many times, there's nowhere left to go but up.

This is the stage where the kids are leaving home. Depending upon how attentive they have been to their marriage through the years, this will either lead to one of the best times in a marriage, where partners take on new challenges they couldn't pursue while their kids were still home, or it will turn into a living nightmare where one mate stares across an empty room at the other and wonders, "Now what?"

"It took some getting used to," is how Larry described life after the last of his four children left home. "Rebecca and I hadn't spent a lot of time thinking about marriage A.K. (after kids). We had to reinvent our relationship. A Retrouvaille weekend our pastor told us about helped us regain our focus. I wish we had been more attentive to each other along the way, but with some serious effort on both of our parts, we made it through. In many ways, things are better now than they ever have been."

Not every couple is as lucky as Larry and Rebecca, but by refusing to panic and, instead, redefining the purpose of their relationship, any couple can rediscover the gift that God intended their mate to be.

STAGE 8 Happily Ever After?

This is the summit, and looking around many couples realize it is what they have been working for all along. A congratulatory hug, kiss and shout of "We made it" are in order.

Assuming that a couple have successfully negotiated all the earlier stages, they arrive at the place in life one psychologist has called "Ego Integrity"; in other words, wisdom and inner peace. Spouses realize that

they have become the person they are because of their mate, and they are grateful to God in ways they never imagined possible.

There are still challenges to face; most notably the fear and sense of hopelessness that can sometimes accompany illness. But those couples who have been faithfully attending to God and to each other all along realize that they are approaching the fulfillment of their shared life's purpose. ♦

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STAGES OF MARRIED LIFE

HONEYMOON STAGE
Wedding day to 6 months

CONFLICT AND NEGOTIATION STAGE
6 months to 3-5 years

NEW PATTERN STAGE
4 - 8 years

CREATIVE STAGE
7-15+ years

HOMECOMING STAGE
14-25+ years

LAUNCHING STAGE
20-30+ years

SECOND HONEYMOON STAGE
30-45+ years

HAPPILY EVER AFTER STAGE
45+ years

(All time frames are approximate. Actual beginnings and endings of stages vary from couple to couple.)