Intimate Relationships

What distinguishes intimate relationships from other relationships?

How do people communicate in their romantic relationships?

What communication issues do families commonly face?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

1 The Nature of Intimate Relationships
2 Communicating in Romantic Relationships
3 Communicating in Families
4 Improving Communication in Intimate Relationships
Ron and Meghan

Even though they had been dating for almost a year, Ron was uncomfortable when Meghan asked him to go with her to her family reunion. He didn’t want to go because he wouldn’t know many people and wasn’t sure exactly what Meghan had told her family about him. As the reunion approached, Ron felt conflicted about how to communicate his feelings to Meghan. He didn’t want to insult her family or make her think he was uncomfortable meeting her relatives. He also felt somewhat obligated to go, both because he was her boyfriend and because she had accompanied him to his class reunion two months earlier. Moreover, Meghan was very important to him, and he didn’t want to cause any problems in their relationship.

Eventually, Ron decided to keep his concerns to himself and attend the reunion with Meghan. Despite his hesitations, he enjoyed himself. More important, he saw how happy his decision to attend made Meghan. Seeing her happiness made him realize just how important she was to him.

It’s hard to overstate the importance of our intimate relationships. We may have many close friends, co-workers, and other acquaintances in our lives, but our relationships with romantic partners and family members are special. These are the people whose lives affect us the most and with whom we share our deepest sorrows and our greatest joys. We usually invest more in, and feel more committed to, these relationships than any others. The intimate relationships we develop with our families and romantic partners truly shape our lives in unique and important ways.

Families and romantic relationships also influence each other. Growing up in a family gives most of us our first exposure to the concept of personal relationships and our first examples of romantic unions. Moreover, the romantic relationships we form in adulthood often serve as the basis for starting new families. Thus, although romantic and familial relationships are different in some important respects, there is often an intimate connection between the two.

In this chapter:

1. We’ll begin by examining four features that distinguish these relationships and make them so important to us.
2. We will then look specifically at how we use communication to form, maintain, and dissolve romantic relationships.
3. Next, we'll examine the structure and the function of family relationships and discuss some communication issues that are common within families.
4. Finally, we’ll look at some ways to improve communication in our intimate relationships.
The Nature of Intimate Relationships

Many people think specifically of romantic relationships when they hear the word “intimate,” but intimacy is about more than romance. Several characteristics are common to intimate relationships. As we’ll see in this section, intimate relationships:

1. Require deep commitment
2. Foster interdependence
3. Require continuous investment
4. Spark dialectical tensions

Intimate Relationships Require Deep Commitment

Most of us are more committed to our intimate relationships than we are to our other relationships. For instance, we may be more willing to put aside minor differences and make compromises to preserve our intimate relationships. **Commitment** is our desire to stay in a relationship no matter what happens. When people are committed to each other, they assume they have a future together. That assumption is important because most intimate relationships—such as families and romantic relationships—go through periods of conflict and distress. What allows us to deal with those difficult times is the knowledge that our relationship will still be there after those periods have ended.

How do we commit ourselves to others? Intimate relationships usually include some level of emotional commitment, or a sense of responsibility for each other’s feelings and emotional well-being. For example, it’s your emotional commitment to your romantic partner that leads you to listen to his or her problems, even if they seem trivial to you. Your family’s emotional commitment to you has probably shaped your desire to do well in your education and your career. We also tend to feel a level of social commitment in our intimate relationships, which motivates us to spend time together, to compromise, to be generous with praise, and to avoid petty conflict. Ron really didn’t want to go to Meghan’s family reunion, for example, but he went anyway because of his commitment to her.

Finally, some intimate relationships are bound by legal and financial commitments, which are more formal expressions of people’s obligations to each other. Spouses, for instance, enter into a legally binding contract when they marry. Parents have a legal responsibility to provide housing, food, clothing, health care, and education for their minor children, and family members often take on financial obligations to care for relatives who are aging or who have specific physical or mental needs. No matter what forms it takes, commitment is one of the foundations of intimate relationships.

Although deep commitment is important for many relationships, people can take commitment too far. At an extreme level, commitment can turn into obsession, a topic explored in the “Dark Side” box on page 334.

Intimate Relationships Foster Interdependence

Another hallmark of intimate relationships is that they include high degrees of interdependence. In an interdependent relationship what happens to one person affects everyone else in the relationship. Because people in families or romantic relation-
The Dark Side of Interpersonal Communication
When Commitment Becomes Obsession

Although deep commitment is necessary in intimate relationships, excessive levels of commitment can turn into an unhealthy obsession with another person. According to communication scholars William Cupach and Brian Spitzberg, intimate relationships are healthy and satisfying only if both partners desire approximately the same level of connection and interaction with each other. When one partner expresses a substantially higher level of interest in the relationship than the other, the result can be what Cupach and Spitzberg call “obsessive relational intrusion” (ORI). In some cases ORI occurs between strangers, but it can also occur within the context of an established relationship in which one partner feels substantially more invested than the other.

The reason why ORI is so problematic is that it can lead someone to engage in upsetting or threatening behaviors aimed at increasing intimacy with the target of his or her affections. These behaviors can include spying on the target or invading his or her privacy, sending the target unwelcome expressions of attraction or love, and engaging in sexually harassing behaviors. They can also include demanding that the target curtail communication with others and commit to an exclusive relationship with the pursuer.

Although relational intrusion can occur in face-to-face contexts, it is also becoming increasingly common online. Using the Internet, e-mail, or other electronic devices to intrude on another person’s life is called cyberstalking. Intrusive behaviors can have several negative effects on their recipients, including physical and psychological stress, disruptions in everyday routines, loss of sleep or appetite, potential physical violence, and impairment in the ability to trust others.

Ask Yourself:
- What other communication behaviors, besides those mentioned, might constitute obsessive relational intrusion?
- Have you ever experienced obsessive relational intrusion? If so, what were the outcomes of that experience?

From Me to You:
- When they find themselves the target of obsessive relational intrusion, many people are inclined to initiate conversation with the pursuer to persuade him or her to stop the intrusive behaviors. Because this approach involves open and direct communication, it might seem to be an effective strategy for dealing with this problem. Experts warn, however, that the pursuer might interpret such communication as positive attention. In these cases it might actually encourage, rather than discourage, his or her pursuit. Often, a more effective strategy is to make yourself as inaccessible to the pursuer as possible, cutting off all communication with the person and asking your family and friends to help shield you from him or her. Many experts believe that, over time, this strategy is the most effective for eroding the pursuer’s interest.

Intimate Relationships Require Continuous Investment

Compared with other relationships, intimate relationships usually involve a higher degree of investment. We put more of ourselves and our resources into these relationships—particularly resources such as time, energy, and attention. We also expect to benefit from this investment—think of our expectations from financial investments, for instance—but know we cannot retrieve the resources we’ve dedicated to it if the relationship comes to an end. If we drift apart from our siblings during adulthood, for example, we may retain memories of our relationships, but we cannot retrieve the time, attention, and material resources we invested in them.

People in romantic relationships are often especially aware of how much—and how equally—they are each investing in the relationship. In the opening vignette, for instance, Ron was reluctant to attend Meghan’s family reunion, but he reminded himself that she had accompanied him to his class reunion only a couple of months before. Her attendance at his class reunion represented an investment of time and energy that Ron felt obligated to repay by going to Meghan’s family reunion.

Friendships generally are strongest when both people feel that each person is investing in the relationship to the same degree. Research shows that this same observation applies to romantic partners. If you think you’re putting more time or resources into your relationship than your partner is, it’s easy to feel resentful. Meghan, for instance, might have been upset or hurt if Ron hadn’t gone to her family reunion because he wasn’t repaying her investment of attending his class reunion. From the opposite perspective, if your partner is investing more than you are, then you might feel guilty. Ron would probably have felt guilty had he not accompanied Meghan to her family reunion, for example. The most satisfying intimate relationships, therefore, appear to be those in which all parties are investing equally.

Intimate Relationships Spark Dialectical Tensions

Have you ever felt as though you wanted to be closer to someone, but you also wanted to maintain your individuality? In your relationships, have you wanted to disclose more about yourself but still keep some thoughts private? Maybe you
enjoy novelty and surprise in your relationships but you also want those relationships to be stable and predictable. If you can relate to any of these situations, then you have already experienced what relationship researchers call dialectical tensions. Dialectic refers to conflicts between two important but opposing needs or desires. As the foregoing situations suggest, dialectical tensions are common in intimate relationships.²

Within families, romantic relationships, and even friendships, we often find three dialectical tensions, in particular. One is the tension between the desire for autonomy—being your own person—and the desire for connection—being close to others. People often experience this tension with their children. Particularly as children enter adolescence, it’s natural for them to desire greater autonomy. After all, adolescence is the period of life when people begin to develop independent identities and make decisions for themselves.³ Many adolescents, however, still want to be emotionally close to their parents. Even as they are learning to behave like adults, many teenagers still need and crave the security of family closeness. In fact, it’s not uncommon for parents and children to experience this dialectical tension for some time, even as the children grow into adults.

Consider, for example, the case of Raul. After attending his first year of college out of state, Raul moved back in with his parents for the summer. Because he had become accustomed to coming and going as he chose, he expected to be able to do the same at his parents’ house. His parents, however, expected him to follow their house rules, which included letting them know where he was going and when he would be home. This dialectic tension between Raul’s desire for autonomy from his parents and his connection to them was a source of conflict early in the summer. (Perhaps you’ve felt this way with your own parents from time to time.⁴) By discussing the issue, Raul and his parents were able to set aside their own expectations and agree on new rules that honored Raul’s autonomy and his connection to his parents.

A second common dialectical tension is the conflict between the desire for openness—disclosure and honesty—and the desire for closedness—keeping certain facts, thoughts, or ideas to yourself. Suppose your brother asks you how your new relationship is going. On one hand, you might want to confide in him as a way of reinforcing your closeness to him. On the other hand, you might feel it’s best to keep some of the details to yourself out of respect for your partner’s privacy. In this instance, part of you desires openness, and another part of you desires closedness.

Ron negotiated this dialectical tension when he had to decide whether to tell Meghan how he felt about going to her family reunion. He wanted to tell her about his
concerns. At the same time, he didn’t want to insult her or make her feel he didn’t care about her. You can probably think of many instances when you have experienced this tension in your own relationships.

Finally, many intimate relationships experience conflict between the desire for predictability—consistency and stability—and the desire for novelty—fresh and new experiences. After nearly 20 years of marriage, for instance, Pauline and Victor were so settled into their routines that their relationship had become highly predictable. They made the same seven or eight dishes for almost every dinner, for example. They spent every New Year’s Eve with Victor’s parents, and they always gave each other artwork for their anniversary. Predictability such as this can be very comforting, and Victor and Pauline had grown to enjoy knowing what to expect from their relationship.

At times, however, too much predictability made their marriage feel stale, leaving them longing for new experiences. One year, instead of spending their holidays with Victor’s family, they discussed doing something different, such as volunteering at a homeless shelter or taking gifts to elderly patients in a local hospital. Although they were uncertain about trying something new, they were also excited at the possibility. In the end, they spent their holiday creating care packages for deployed military troops and their families. They found the novelty of doing something different to be a refreshing change from the predictability of their lives. They also recognized that predictability gave their lives a sense of order and certainty that they both appreciated.

Although dialectical tensions can present serious challenges, it is important to understand that they aren’t necessarily bad for relationships. Rather, researchers believe they are a normal part of any close, interdependent relationship, and they become a problem only when people fail to manage them properly. We’ll look at several strategies that relational partners use to manage dialectical tensions at the end of this chapter.

**Learn It:** What is commitment? What does it mean to be interdependent? How do relational partners invest in each other? What is a dialectical tension?

**Try It:** Write a letter to your romantic partner, one of your parents, or another person with whom you have a close relationship, and express why you feel so committed to that relationship. Even if you never give the letter to that person, putting your reasons for your commitment in words can help clarify the importance of that relationship for you.

**Reflect on It:** In which relationships do you feel you invest the most? When do you experience tensions between autonomy and connectedness, openness and closedness, or predictability and novelty?
Communicating in Romantic Relationships

The most intimate of intimate relationships is often the one we share with a romantic partner. Romantic relationships—particularly significant, long-term ones—engage people mentally, emotionally, physically, financially, even spiritually, and they often play a substantial role in people’s social experiences. As noted earlier, they are also often the foundation for the beginning of new families. In this section, we’ll explore:

- Several characteristics of romantic relationships
- The process by which we form them
- How we manage various communication issues within them
- The process by which we end them

Characteristics of Romantic Relationships

Forming romantic relationships is a nearly universal human experience. Some 95% of us, for instance, will get married at least once in our lifetimes, and many of those who don’t will have at least one significant, marriage-like romantic relationship.

These relationships aren’t just pervasive. They are also very important to our health and well-being. Multiple studies have shown, for instance, that married people live longer and healthier lives than people who never marry. One reason may be that healthy people are more likely than unhealthy people to get married and to stay married. Another possible reason is that being married reduces a person’s likelihood of engaging in risky health behaviors. Research demonstrates that, compared with unmarried people, married people drink less and are less likely to use illicit drugs such as marijuana. They are also less likely to suffer from mental illnesses such as depression. Other studies have shown that the health benefits of marriage
are greater for men than for women. Some women are healthier if married rather than single, particularly those who are unemployed and lack the social support and financial resources that employment provides.

People in every known society form romantic unions. Although many romantic relationships share certain characteristics, romantic relationships throughout the world also exhibit a great deal of diversity. In this section, we examine how romantic relationships vary in the extent to which they are:

- Exclusive
- Voluntary
- Based on love
- Composed of opposite-sex partners
- Permanent

Some romantic relationships are exclusive; others are not. One common expectation for romantic relationships is that they are exclusive. Usually, exclusivity takes the form of monogamy, which means being in only one romantic relationship at a time and avoiding romantic or sexual involvement with people outside the relationship. Exclusivity is an expression of commitment and faithfulness that romantic partners share with each other and trust each other to uphold. As a result, relational infidelity, which means having romantic or sexual interaction with someone outside your romantic relationship, is often an emotionally traumatic experience for the partner who is wronged.

Not all romantic partners expect their relationship to be exclusive, though. Instead, some couples choose to have “open” relationships in which romantic and/or sexual involvement with people outside the relationship is accepted. Although it’s difficult to know exactly how common open relationships are, research indicates that open relationships are observed between heterosexuals, bisexuals, gay men, and lesbians alike.

Not only are some romantic relationships not exclusive, but exclusivity isn’t always an expectation for marriage. In fact, many countries—primarily in Africa and southern Asia—allow the practice of polygamy, in which one person is married to two or more spouses at the same time. Some people in open or polygamous relationships report that they appreciate the closeness and intimacy they share with multiple partners. Others indicate that feelings of jealousy and resentment can lead to increased conflict in such relationships.

Some romantic relationships are voluntary; others are not. Another common expectation for romantic relationships is that they are voluntary. In voluntary relationships people get to choose for themselves whether to become romantically involved. Moreover, if they decide to, they get to choose their romantic partner. This expectation presumes that a strong, satisfying romantic relationship is one in which both partners have freely chosen to participate. One indicator of this expectation in the United States is the abundance of online and in-person dating services, which allow customers to browse the profiles of prospective partners and choose which ones they want to make contact with. In fact, one such service—Match.com—claims more than 15 million registered clients.

In much of the world, however, it is common for other people—usually the parents—to select a person’s romantic partner. According to the practice of arranged marriage (which is most common in the Middle East and other parts of Asia and Africa), people are expected to marry the partner their parents select for them. Some-
times, children can reject their parents’ selection of a spouse, in which case the parents look for someone else. In other cases, children may be pressured to marry the person their parents have chosen for them. In either situation, an arranged marriage is not entirely voluntary.

The fact that arranged marriages aren’t voluntary doesn’t necessarily mean that people whose marriages are arranged are dissatisfied with the relationship. Indeed, people who expect their marriages to be arranged might prefer this practice to the task of choosing a spouse on their own. For people who expect to choose their own romantic partner, however, the practice of arranged marriage would likely decrease their satisfaction with their relationships.

Some romantic relationships are based on love; others are not. In individualist societies such as the United States and other Western nations, people tend to believe not only that they should choose their romantic partner but also that their choice should be based on love and attraction. The typical American wedding ceremony (whether religious or civil) emphasizes the importance of love in the marital relationship, whereas the lack of love is frequently cited as a reason why relationships fail.

Would you marry someone you didn’t love? Many people in collectivistic societies would say yes. In countries such as China or India, for instance, the choice of a spouse has more to do with the wishes and preferences of family and social groups than it does with love, even if the marriage isn’t arranged. One study found that only half of the participants in India and Pakistan felt that love was necessary for marriage, whereas 96% of the U.S. American participants did. Sociologist Frances Hsu explained that, when considering marriage, “an American asks, ‘How does my heart feel?’ A Chinese asks, ‘What will other people say?’”

As family studies scholar Stephanie Coontz points out, the connection between love and marriage is a historically recent trend, even in Western cultures. She argues that although romantic love has existed throughout the ages, socie-
ties began thinking of love as a basis for marriage only within the last three centuries. Coontz explains that before that time, some societies believed that love should develop after marriage, and many others thought love had no place at all in marriage. Thinking of marriage primarily as a romantic relationship, therefore, is a recent development in human history.

Some romantic relationships involve opposite-sex partners; others do not. Both heterosexual and homosexual people form romantic relationships. Moreover, people often communicate similarly in same-sex and opposite-sex romantic relationships. People in both types of relationships value intimacy and equality between partners. They both experience conflict, and over similar topics. They both seek emotional support from family members and friends. Finally, they both negotiate how to accomplish instrumental needs, such as everyday household chores. In fact, research indicates that people in same-sex romantic relationships report the same levels of satisfaction with their relationships as opposite-sex couples.

Perhaps the greatest disparity between same-sex and opposite-sex romantic relationships in most parts of the world involves the legal recognition of the relationships. In the United States and abroad, the question of whether same-sex romantic partners should be allowed to marry has been socially and politically controversial for decades. People in many same-sex relationships live as domestic partners, often owning joint property and raising children together, so many have questioned why they should not be allowed to legally marry. Proponents of same-sex marriage argue that people should be allowed to marry whomever they love and that denying marriage rights to people based on their partner’s sex is an act of unfair discrimination. Opponents argue that marriage is inherently a reproductive relationship and that allowing same-sex couples to marry threatens the sanctity of marriage and the family. This issue is likely to remain controversial for some time.

Some romantic relationships are permanent; others are not. People often conceive of marriage and other long-term romantic relationships as permanent. This expectation is reflected in the fact that traditional wedding vows in many parts of the world emphasize the permanence of marriage. The vow “till death do us part” captures this sentiment by suggesting that once spouses are married, they will stay together for the rest of their lives. The results of a recent survey of 300 marriage license applicants illustrate this idea. Even though respondents correctly noted that a large percentage of new marriages end in divorce, every single respondent said the likelihood that his or her own marriage would end in divorce was zero!

Many marriages do last for many years, thanks in part to the large number of ways in which societies promote, protect, and reward marriages. In the
According to Professor Mark Knapp, people form relationships in five stages.

- **Initiating**: Communication between spouses is privileged, just like doctor-patient and attorney-client communication.
- **Experimenting**: Marriage gives spouses rights of visitation if one spouse is hospitalized or imprisoned.
- **Intensifying**: Stepparents have legal status with stepchildren only if they are legally married to the children’s parent.
- **Integrating**: Cohabitation on controlled properties. Marriage allows spouses to live together on military bases and other controlled properties.
- **Bonding**: Medical and burial decisions. Spouses have the ability to make medical decisions for each other and to make burial or cremation decisions when one of them dies.
- **Domestic violence protection**: If one spouse is abusive or violent, the other spouse can request domestic violence protection orders from a court.

Many marriages and romantic relationships don’t last, however. After a period of time together, romantic partners often find that they no longer share the same goals or feel the same level of attraction toward each other. They may also have developed romantic feelings for someone else and may choose to end their current relationship to develop a relationship with that person. No matter the cause, many romantic relationships come to an end. We discuss the process of dissolving romantic relationships later in this chapter.

As these characteristics help illustrate, romantic relationships—whatever their form—are among the most significant of all human relationships. To ascertain your own expectations for romantic relationships, take a look at the “Getting to Know You” box on the next page.

**Forming Romantic Relationships Is a Process**

Romantic relationships don’t form overnight. Like many important relationships, they evolve, and researchers have found that people follow some fairly consistent steps when they form romantic relationships with others. Communication scholar Mark Knapp, for instance, has suggested that relationship formation involves five stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding.36

According to Professor Mark Knapp, people form relationships in five stages.
As we explore these stages of relationship formation, bear in mind that this model, like most models of interpersonal communication, simplifies what is actually a complex, dynamic process. Indeed, the purpose of models is generally to simplify complex realities so that people can understand them. It's important, however, to remember that the process of developing relationships isn't necessarily the same for every relationship or in every culture. Nonetheless, research suggests that people experience distinct thoughts, feelings, and behaviors at each stage in the model.37

**Initiating.** The initiating stage occurs when people meet and interact for the first time. For instance, you may make eye contact with someone on the first day of class.
and then decide to introduce yourself, or strike up a conversation. “What’s your name?” and “Where are you from?” are among the questions people commonly ask each other at this initial stage.

Relationship initiation traditionally occurred in person. Today, however, it increasingly takes place online. The Internet provides many opportunities to meet new people. These include popular networking sites, such as Facebook.com and MySpace.com, as well as commercial dating sites, such as eHarmony.com and Chemistry.com. Anytime you’re interacting with someone for the first time, whether online or face-to-face, you’re at the initiating stage.

**Experimenting.** When you meet someone you’re initially interested in, you can move to the **experimenting stage** and have conversations to learn more about that person. At this stage, we may ask questions such as “What movies do you like?” and “What do you do for fun?” to gain some basic information about the other person, and we provide similar information about ourselves. This process, which we sometimes call “having small talk,” serves a very important function: It helps us decide if we have enough in common with the person to move the relationship forward. Often, we decide that we don’t. In such cases relationship development ends at this stage and we move on to other prospective partners. In fact, research indicates that most potential relationships end at the experimenting stage, whether they are initiated online or face-to-face. Occasionally, however, we decide we want to continue getting to know the other person. In these cases we progress to the intensifying stage.

**Intensifying.** During the **intensifying stage**, people move from being acquaintances to being close friends. They spend more time together and might begin to meet each other’s friends. They also start to share more intimate information, such as their fears, their goals for the future, and their secrets about the past. They often begin expressing affection for each other and may even develop nicknames or terms of endearment for each other. They increase their commitment to the relationship and may express their commitment verbally, through statements such as “You’re really important to me.”

The intensifying stage may also include formal dating. Sometimes, dating involves just the two people. At other times, it takes the form of “group dating,” wherein several individuals socialize at once, allowing potential romantic partners the opportunity to interact with each other while still being surrounded by other friends. According to current research, college students report that group dates are just as common as traditional two-person dates.

**Integrating.** The **integrating stage** occurs when the partners have formed a deep commitment and they share a strong sense that the relationship has its own identity. At this stage, the partners’ lives become integrated, and the two individuals begin to

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**Experimenting stage**
The stage of relationship development when partners have conversations to learn more about each other.

**Intensifying stage**
The stage of relationship development when people move from being acquaintances to being close friends.

**Integrating stage**
The stage of relationship development when a deep commitment has formed and there is a strong sense that the relationship has its own identity.
think of themselves as a pair—not just “you” and “me,” but “we.” Other people expect to see the two individuals together and begin referring to them as a couple.

The partners also take actions to demonstrate their relationship to other people, such as wearing matching rings, sending out joint holiday cards, or establishing a joint checking account. They may also begin to form friendships and socialize with other couples, as opposed to individuals. These types of behaviors symbolize the committed relationship the couple has developed.

**Bonding.** The final stage in Knapp’s model of relationship development is the bonding stage, in which the partners make a public announcement of their commitment to each other. For many couples, this announcement takes the form of engagement or marriage. For others, it can involve moving in together or having a commitment ceremony. However they choose to do it, people who reach this stage are ready to announce to their social networks that they are committed to each other and to their relationship. They do so both to express their commitment in a public way and also to gain the support and approval of the people in their social networks.

A brief summary of the five stages of relationship development appears in the “At a Glance” box below.

As explained earlier, not every couple goes through these stages in the same way. Some couples may stay at the experimenting stage for a long time before moving into the intensifying stage. Others may progress through the stages very quickly. Still others may go as far as the integrating stage but put off the bonding stage for various reasons. Another important point is that these stages are not exclusive to opposite-sex romantic couples. Researchers have found that same-sex romantic relationships develop according to the same kinds of steps.42

Finally, keep in mind that the process of relationship formation is not necessarily the same in all cultures. In countries that practice arranged marriage, for instance, the process of forming a marital relationship would look much different. For one thing, it would include negotiation and decision making by the parents and less input (if any) from the children. In countries where polygamy is common, the integration and bonding stages probably look different, too, because one person may be joining multiple spouses at once. As we saw in the preceding section, cultures vary in their expectations about romantic relationships. As their expectations differ, their ways of forming relationships most likely do, as well.

Going further, even if people follow the same basic path toward developing their romantic relationships, they won’t necessarily end up with the same type of relationship. Rather, research on marital relationships indicates that romantic couples embody distinct relational types. Communication researcher Mary Anne Fitzpatrick has spent many years studying patterns of marital communication. Her work suggests that people form and maintain marriages by relying on *marital schemata,* which represent their cognitive models for what marriage is and should be.43 Fitzpatrick’s research has found

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**At a Glance: Stages of Relationship Development**

According to Knapp’s model, relationship development proceeds along five stages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiating</td>
<td>Meeting and interacting with each other for the first time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimenting</td>
<td>Having conversations to learn more about the other person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensifying</td>
<td>Moving from being acquaintances to being close friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrating</td>
<td>Forming a deep commitment and developing a relationship with its own identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonding</td>
<td>Making a public announcement of commitment to each other</td>
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that three types of marriages are especially common: traditional, separate, and independent.44

- **Traditional couples** take a culturally conventional approach to marriage. They believe in gender-typical divisions of labor in which wives are in charge of housework and childrearing and husbands are responsible for home repair and auto maintenance. When conflict arises, spouses in traditional couples engage in it rather than avoid it.

- **Separate couples** are similar to couples in traditional marriages, except the spouses are autonomous rather than interdependent. They often have their own interests and their own social networks, and they think of themselves as separate individuals rather than as one couple. Because of their lack of interdependence, spouses in separate couples generally don’t engage in conflict. Even when they disagree, they tend to ignore conflict rather than dealing with it directly.

- **Independent couples** see themselves as being independent of social expectations for marriage. They don’t necessarily believe in conventional gender roles or divisions of labor, so the wife might support the family financially while the husband stays home with the children. Although these couples consider themselves to be independent of cultural norms, they are highly interdependent. As a result, they engage in conflict when it arises.

Fitzpatrick also found that in about half the couples she has studied, the husband and wife don’t agree as to whether their marriage is traditional, separate, or independent. She refers to couples in which the two spouses have differing beliefs about their marriage as **mixed couples**. The most common type of mixed couple is one in which the wife’s expectations match those of traditional couples and the husband’s expectations match those of separate couples. Communication patterns in mixed couples most likely reflect the particular expectations each spouse holds.

Romantic relationships are as individual as the people who comprise them, and several of the ways they differ are related to communication behaviors. In the next section, we’ll take a brief look at some of the different ways people communicate in their romantic relationships.

**Interpersonal Communication in Romantic Relationships**

We can learn a great deal about the quality of romantic relationships by looking at how the partners communicate with each other. Although couples engage in many forms of communication, four communication behaviors have particular influence on romantic partners’ satisfaction with their relationship. These are:
**Romantic relationships vary in how they handle conflict.** Conflict is a common characteristic of many romantic relationships. As we’ll see in the next chapter, very often the way couples handle conflict—rather than the amount of conflict they experience—influences the success of their relationships. Much of what we know about how romantic partners handle conflict comes from research on marriage. For instance, social psychologist and marital therapist John Gottman has spent many years studying how spouses communicate during conflict episodes. His work suggests marital couples can be classified into four groups, depending on how they handle conflict:

- **Validating couples** talk about their disagreements openly and cooperatively. In such couples, spouses communicate respect for each other’s opinions even when they disagree with them. They stay calm, even when discussing hotly contested topics. They also use humor and expressions of positive emotion to defuse the tension that conflict can create.

- **Volatile couples** also talk about their disagreements openly, but they do so in a way that is competitive rather than cooperative. That is, each spouse tries to persuade the other to adopt his or her point of view. Conflicts in such couples tend to be marked with expressions of negative emotion, rather than positive. These conflicts, however, are often followed by intense periods of affection and “making up.”

- **Conflict-avoiding couples** deal with their disagreements indirectly, rather than openly. To avoid the discomfort of engaging in conflict directly, these couples try to defuse negative emotion and focus on their similarities. They feel there is little to be gained by engaging in conflict directly, believing that most problems will resolve themselves. They often “agree to disagree,” which can side-step conflict but can also leave their points of disagreement unresolved.

- **Hostile couples** experience frequent and intense conflict. During conflict episodes, hostile couples use negative emotion displays, such as harsh tones of voice and facial expressions of anger or frustration. They also engage in personal attacks that include insults, sarcasm, name calling, blaming, and other forms of criticism.

Although Gottman developed his categories with reference to married couples, more recent work by researchers Thomas Holman and Mark Jarvis has indicated that the same categories also apply to unmarried heterosexual couples. Less research has been conducted on the conflict communication of lesbian and gay couples. Gottman’s studies have identified some differences in the conflict styles of homosexual and heterosexual couples, however. Specifically, his research has found that, compared with heterosexual couples, gay and lesbian couples:

- Use more humor and positive emotion during conflict conversations
- Are less likely to become hostile after a conflict
- Use fewer displays of dominance and power during a conflict episode
- Are less likely to take conflict personally
- Stay calmer emotionally and physiologically during conflict
It’s unclear why these differences exist, but they may suggest that partners in same-sex couples have an easier time understanding each other during conflict episodes, perhaps because they are of the same sex.

For many romantic relationships, conflict is an unpleasant but unavoidable fact of life. We will learn more about successful strategies for managing conflict later in this chapter, and especially in Chapter 10, “Interpersonal Conflict.”

**Romantic relationships vary in how they handle privacy.** People in every romantic relationship must choose for themselves how to manage information they consider to be private. When Kali and her husband, Neal, were having difficulty conceiving a child, for instance, they carefully considered whom they were going to tell. Neal felt the information was no one’s business but theirs and therefore preferred to keep it private. By contrast, Kali wanted to tell her family and close friends because she needed their emotional support. Their problems conceiving were causing enough stress in their marriage already; disagreeing on whether to keep them private was only making matters more stressful.

Communication scientist Sandra Petronio believes we all experience tensions between disclosing certain information and keeping it private. She developed **communication privacy management (CPM) theory** to explain how individuals and couples manage those tensions. CPM theory maintains that Kali and Neal jointly own the information about their problems. Because the information belongs to them, they must decide whether to keep it to themselves or share it with others. CPM theory further suggests that Kali and Neal have a theoretical privacy boundary around all the information they jointly own. If they decide to tell Kali’s mother, for instance, about their difficulties conceiving a child, they expand the privacy boundary around that piece information to include her. Once she is included within the privacy boundary, Kali’s mother becomes a co-owner of the information. Petronio’s theory also explains that people within a privacy boundary are subject to rules regarding the maintenance of privacy. Some rules are explicit. For instance, Kali may say to her mother, “Please don’t tell anyone else in the family about this.” Other rules are implicit. If Kali tells her brother about her problems conceiving, for example, she may assume he recognizes that the information is to be kept private even though she doesn’t say that directly.

According to CPM theory, relationships become distressed when implicit or explicit privacy rules are violated. If Kali learns that her brother shared her information with others, for instance, she will likely feel that he violated her trust, particularly if he disclosed the information willingly. In such an instance, Kali and Neal may decide not to share private information with her brother in the future.

Individuals and couples vary in their approach to privacy. Some appear to be “open books” who are uninhibited about disclosing private information to others. By contrast, some are much more discreet, sharing private information only with a very select few. Perhaps you can
think of people who fit both descriptions, as well as others who are in the middle. Research indicates that some of us are simply more prone than others to disclosing private information. In most cases, however, our decisions about sharing information are influenced by the people we are disclosing to, how much we trust them, and how disclose they have been with us.51 No matter what our reasons for disclosing to others, we should always be cognizant of information that a romantic partner expects us to keep private.

**Romantic relationships vary in how they handle emotional communication.** Emotional communication is an important part of most romantic relationships. Research indicates that the ways in which romantic partners express emotion to each other can tell us a great deal about the quality of their relationship.52 Specifically, they indicate how satisfied the partners are with each other, as we’ll see in this section.53

To illustrate the significance of emotional communication, let’s consider two married couples who live across the street from each other. The first couple, Anita and Jonah, have been married for 8 years. They own a home together where they run a small pottery studio and raise Jonah’s twin girls from his previous marriage. Like any couple, Anita and Jonah experience challenges in their marriage. Overall, however, they are both highly satisfied with their relationship. The second couple, Min-su and his wife, Jae-hwa, have been married for almost 10 years but have separated twice in that time. Their most recent separation lasted seven months and would have ended in divorce had Min-su’s family not pressured the couple to work out their difficulties. Both spouses would describe their relationship as very unsatisfying.

According to research, one of the most noticeable differences in the communication patterns of these two couples will be in their expression of emotion. Over the course of several studies, social psychologists John Gottman and Robert Levenson have identified two patterns of emotional communication that differentiate happy from unhappy couples.

First, happy partners such as Anita and Jonah communicate more positive emotion and less negative emotion with each other than do unhappy partners such as Min-su and Jae-hwa.54 In particular, people in satisfying relationships express more affection, use more humor, and communicate more assurances or verbal expressions of their commitment to the relationship. People in dissatisfying relationships tend to display the opposite pattern: They express more negative emotion in the form of anger, contempt, sadness, and hostility.55

You might already have guessed that happy couples communicate more positively than unhappy couples. Gottman and Levenson’s research, however, has identified exactly how much more. According to several studies, people in satisfying couples maintain a ratio of approximately five positive behaviors for every one negative behavior.56 Thus, for every instance when Anita speaks harshly to Jonah, she makes up for it with five positive behaviors, such as expressions of humor or affection. Significantly, Anita probably doesn’t do this consciously. Rather, these behaviors are an intrinsic feature of their relationship. People in unsatisfying couples, by contrast, maintain a
ratio closer to one positive behavior for every one negative behavior. Therefore, the number of times Min-su acts positively toward Jae-hwa would roughly equal the number of times he acts negatively toward her.

The second pattern of emotional communication Gottman and Levenson identified is that unhappy couples are more likely than happy couples to reciprocate expressions of negative emotion. When Jae-hwa criticizes or expresses anger toward Min-su, for example, he often reciprocates her behavior by expressing criticism or anger back at her. Notice this pattern in the following exchange about the couple’s finances:

**Jae-hwa:** Have you seen our credit card statement this month? Look at all these charges for golfing and dinners out! Are you trying to impress your hot-shot friends? I hope you know your kids are home eating macaroni and cheese while you’re out throwing money around!

**Min-su:** Those are important business clients I’m taking out. You’re the one who’s always wasting money! Maybe if you stopped taking the car through that twelve-dollar car wash every other day, the kids would have something better to eat. Besides, I’m the one making the money in this family!

When Min-su reciprocates Jae-hwa’s negativity in this manner, Jae-hwa usually becomes even more agitated. This type of response escalates the negativity in their conversation. As a result, they often find it difficult to address the issues underlying their conflict because they are so focused on the negative emotions they’re communicating.

By comparison, happy couples are more likely to respond to negative expressions with positive or neutral ones. When Jonah gets frustrated and speaks harshly to Anita, for instance, Anita tries not to get angry herself. Instead, she attempts to reply in a calm way that acknowledges Jonah’s feelings and keeps the focus on the issue they’re discussing. Let’s look at part of the conversation that ensued when Anita missed their children’s dance recital at school:

**Jonah:** The kids were crushed that you weren’t there! They danced their little hearts out and you couldn’t even bother to show up! You know, these aren’t just my children—they’re our children. Maybe you’d understand that if you weren’t so self-absorbed.

**Anita:** I know you’re mad, and I’m really sorry I made you and the kids feel like you weren’t a priority. I felt I needed to be with my sister last night; she’s going through a hard time right now with her divorce. I’m sorry that came across as being self-absorbed. Maybe we should take the kids to the beach this weekend and spend some good time together as a family.

Notice how Anita begins by acknowledging Jonah’s negative emotion and accepting responsibility for her part in causing it. This helps to de-escalate the negativity in the conversation. Then, instead of expressing negative emotion back to Jonah, the way Min-su does with Jae-hwa, Anita focuses on the problem (Jonah and the children feeling neglected) and offers a way of responding to it (spending the weekend at the beach). According to Gottman’s research, failing to reciprocate negative emotion in this way is characteristic of a stable, happy couple.

**Romantic relationships vary in how they handle instrumental communication.** People in most romantic relationships communicate with each other about many mundane,
instrumental topics, such as who’s making dinner and who’s taking the children to piano lessons or soccer practice. Addressing such topics may not seem as significant as engaging in conflict, negotiating privacy boundaries, or managing emotional communication. Nevertheless, instrumental communication addresses the necessary day-to-day tasks couples face, which helps explain why it is one of the most common forms of communication between romantic partners.

Although instrumental communication involves seemingly “minor” concerns, it can be one of the most contentious issues couples face, because romantic partners often disagree on how to divide responsibility for everyday tasks. The ways in which partners negotiate the division of instrumental tasks can have a major impact on their relationship, for at least two reasons. First, day-to-day tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for children need to be completed, so most couples cannot leave decisions about who will do them to chance.

Second, how partners divide mundane, everyday tasks often reflects the balance of power within their relationship. If one partner assumes greater power and control than the other, then that partner is in a greater position to dictate how tasks will be divided. In contrast, if the two partners see themselves as equally powerful, then the division of instrumental tasks can be more equitable.

Romantic relationships vary greatly in how the partners communicate about the division of day-to-day tasks. Among married couples, spouses who believe in traditional gender-role behaviors will often divide instrumental tasks along stereotypical gender lines. Thus, men perform tasks such as yard maintenance and auto repair, whereas women take responsibility for childcare and preparing meals. In such marriages, there may be little discussion or debate over how to divide such tasks. Rather, both partners simply may assume that each spouse will perform his or her gender-specific tasks. Spouses in traditional marriages often report high satisfaction with this division of domestic responsibilities.

By contrast, spouses who do not necessarily adopt traditional gender-role behaviors frequently engage in conflict over how to divide instrumental tasks. Specifically, women often wish their husbands would take greater responsibility for household tasks and childcare than they actually do. Women are more likely than men to feel that the division of instrumental tasks is unfair. Significantly, these feelings often reduce women’s satisfaction with the relationship. Women are also more likely than men to express anger about the distribution of household responsibilities and to initiate discussion about dividing the tasks more equally.

Although partners in opposite-sex relationships often divide instrumental tasks according to stereotypical sex roles, this method is not an option for partners in same-sex relationships. Recent research has speculated, therefore, that same-sex partners may divide tasks more equitably than opposite-sex partners, with each partner sharing in both stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine responsibilities. In a survey of more than 100 same-sex romantic couples from around the United States, communication researcher Justin Boren discovered that this pattern was common, particularly among couples who were highly satisfied with their relationships.

Ending Romantic Relationships Is a Process

Just as romantic relationships develop over time, they also come apart over time. Communication researcher Mark Knapp, who identified the five stages of relationship for-
mation we discussed earlier in this chapter, has similarly described five stages that relationships go through if they end: differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.70

We’ll look briefly at each of these five stages of relationship dissolution in this section.

**Differentiating stage.** Partners in a romantic relationship are similar to each other in some ways and different in other ways. In happy, stable relationships, partners see their differences as complementary. Perhaps your romantic partner is more outgoing, adventurous, and impulsive than you are, for instance. You might perceive these qualities as a good fit for your more introverted and reserved personality.

At the differentiating stage, however, partners begin to see their differences as undesirable or annoying. Whereas you may have valued your partner’s impulsive, spontaneous ways when you first met, you might now find them to be impractical and irresponsible. This is how Miranda felt about her husband, Daniel, in Mrs. Doubtfire, which we discussed in Chapter 8. Many relationships experience differentiation from time to time, particularly during periods of stress. Differentiation becomes problematic, however, when it leads to later stages of relationship dissolution.

**Circumscribing stage.** When romantic partners enter the circumscribing stage, the quality and the quantity of their communication with each other begin to decrease. This change occurs because the couple is trying to avoid dealing with conflicts in the relationship.71 At the circumscribing stage, partners start spending more time apart from each other.72 When they’re together, they usually don’t talk about problems, disagreements, or sensitive issues in their relationship. Rather, their conversations focus on “safe” topics and issues about which they agree. Couples in the circumscribing stage don’t avoid each other completely, but they communicate less often and less effectively, especially about important issues.

**Stagnating stage.** If circumscribing progresses to the point where the partners are barely speaking to each other, the relationship enters the stagnating stage. This is the stage at which the relationship stops growing and partners feel they are merely “going through the motions” of their relationship. Partners avoid communicating about anything important because they fear it will only lead to conflict. Many relationships stay stagnant for long periods of time. Sometimes, this occurs because partners feel trapped, unsure of how to fix their relational problems. At other times, it’s because the thought of leaving the relationship makes them too uncomfortable, so they conclude that even a stagnant relationship is better than no relationship at all.
Avoiding stage. If partners decide they are no longer willing to live in a stagnant relationship, they enter the avoiding stage. At this stage, partners create physical and emotional distance from each other. Some partners take a direct route to creating distance, such as by moving out of the house or saying “I can’t be around you right now.” Others create distance indirectly. For example, they make up excuses for being apart (“I have company in town all next week, so I won’t be able to see you”), or they curtail their availability to their partner by screening their phone calls or not responding to instant messages.

Clearly, a relationship that enters the avoiding stage is experiencing serious problems. Keep in mind, however, that avoidance does not, in itself, constitute the end of the relationship. In fact, even though many spouses separate for a period of time if they are contemplating divorce, not all couples who separate ultimately get divorced. Just the opposite, in some cases physical and emotional avoidance helps partners gain needed perspective on their relationship and increases or reinforces their commitment to each other. In other cases it helps the partners realize that their relationship is ending. In these cases the partners progress to the final stage of dissolution, known as terminating.

Terminating Stage. The last stage in Knapp’s model of relationship dissolution is the terminating stage, at which point the relationship is officially deemed to be over. When nonmarital partners who have shared a residence terminate the relationship, one or both partners moves out. They also divide their property, announce to friends and family that the relationship has been terminated, and negotiate the rules of any future contact between them. At the end of a relationship, some partners choose to go their separate ways and never speak to each other again. Others elect to maintain a cordial relationship or even to remain friends after the breakup.73

For partners who are legally married, relational termination involves getting a divorce, which is the legal discontinuation of the marriage. In the United States today, approximately 40% of all marriages end in divorce.74 In fact, the U.S. divorce rate has been increasing fairly steadily since the end of the 19th century.

Researchers have uncovered several reasons for the increasing divorce rate.75 One reason is that divorce is more socially acceptable now than it used to be. Put differently, being divorced doesn’t seem to carry the stigma that it once did. In addition, obtaining a legal divorce is much easier today than in the past. States used to require spouses to show a specific harm (such as abuse or adultery) before granting a divorce. Today, however, nearly all U.S. states have a “no-fault divorce” law that allows spouses to divorce if they simply believe their marriage has failed, regardless of why it failed. A third reason why divorce may be on the rise is that women are increasingly less dependent on men economically, so they may find it easier to leave unsatisfying marriages.

The decision to divorce clearly is a significant one. The process of terminating a marriage often requires a substantial reorganization of the family, and it can take an enormous mental and emotional toll, particularly on children. Most former spouses struggle to adjust to life after divorce, and many children of divorced parents experience difficulties in their relationships with siblings, teachers, and peers.76 Research shows that children, in particular, can be negatively affected by divorce well into their adulthood.77
Despite those problems, divorce doesn’t always produce negative effects. When the marriage is highly conflicted, neglectful, or abusive, for instance, children and their parents are often better off after the divorce has occurred.\textsuperscript{78} Regardless of its outcomes, divorce is one of the most significant events that a marriage and family can experience.\textsuperscript{79}

A brief summary of the five stages of relationship dissolution appears in the “At a Glance” box.

**Learn It:** What is relational infidelity? What are the stages of relationship development? How are validating, volatile, and conflict-avoiding couples different? What are the stages of relationship dissolution?

**Try It:** Pick a couple who has been together for at least 10 years, and ask the partners (together or separately) how their communication patterns have changed in the time they’ve been together. Ask them what advice they would give to others about communicating successfully in their relationship.

**Reflect on It:** To what extent do you expect your own romantic relationships to be permanent, or monogamous, or based on love? Has your privacy ever been violated by a romantic partner? If so, how did you feel? If not, how do you imagine you would respond?

### Communicating in Families

As with romantic relationships, it’s hard to overestimate the importance of families in our lives. For most of us, the first relationships we have in our lives are with our family members. Familial relationships can provide us with a sense of belonging, a sense of our own history, and a measure of unconditional love and support that we can’t find anywhere else. As we discussed, growing up in a family also introduces us to the concept of relationships and can help us form mental models for how to engage in friendships and romantic relationships in adolescence and adulthood. Families can also be a source of great frustration and heartache—and many family relationships experience both peace and conflict. The depth of our engagement with
families, and the fact that they can be both so positive and so negative, make families one of our most important intimate relationships. In this section, we’ll discuss:

- What makes a family a family, and what characteristics familial relationships often share
- What types of family structures exist
- How we can understand the family as a system
- What communication issues are common in families

### What Makes a Family a Family?

If you were asked to draw a picture of your family, whom would you include? This question isn’t as easy to answer as you might think. Some people might be obvious options, such as your parents, your spouse, your siblings, and your children. How about your grandparents, however? your nieces and nephews? your in-laws? What about your stepsiblings or your second cousins twice removed? Maybe there are close friends or longtime neighbors whom you think of as family: Would you include them as well?

If it’s any consolation, even researchers have difficulty agreeing on exactly what makes a family a family. Many scholars agree, however, that most family relationships exhibit one or more of three fundamental elements: genetic ties, legal obligations, and role behaviors. Let’s briefly examine each of these.

#### Genetic ties

Many family members are related “by blood,” meaning they share a specified proportion of their genetic material. For instance, you share about 50% of your genes with your biological mother, your biological father, and each of your full biological siblings (or 100% if you’re an identical twin or triplet). With your grandparents, aunts and uncles, and any half-siblings, you share about 25% of your genes; with cousins, it’s about 12.5%.

Although most families include some genetic ties, many family relationships do not. For example, we typically share 0% of our genes with our spouses, steprelatives, and adopted relatives, yet we still consider them to be family. In addition, although
sharing a genetic tie makes two people biological relatives, it does not necessarily mean they share a social or an emotional relationship. People who were adopted as infants, for example, may not even know their genetic parents. Rather, they may consider their adoptive parents to be their family. Clearly, then, a genetic tie is not the only element that defines family relationships. Rather, families share other characteristics as well.

**Legal obligations.** A second characteristic of many family relationships is that they involve legal bonds. Parents have many legal obligations toward their minor children, for instance, and neglecting their responsibilities to house, feed, educate, and care for their children is a crime in the United States and many other countries. In fact, marriage is the most heavily regulated family relationship from a legal perspective. In the United States, for example, well over a thousand federal laws govern various aspects of marriage. Adoptive relationships and domestic partnerships are also regulated by law, and even stepfamily relationships are affected by the laws regulating the stepparents’ marriages.

Significantly, family members often believe they have responsibilities to one another even when there are no laws specifying those responsibilities. Laws formalize those responsibilities, however, and help to ensure that they are met.

**Role behaviors.** Regardless of whether a relationship is bound by genetic or legal ties, many believe the most important characteristic that defines it as familial is that the people in it act like family. According to this idea, there are certain behaviors or roles that family members are expected to enact. These roles can include living together, taking care of one another, loving one another, and representing themselves as a family to outsiders. According to this definition, people who do these things and who think of themselves as family are, in fact, family.

This definition provides you with flexibility in deciding who is—and isn’t—part of your family, for two reasons. First, it allows you to include people with whom you have no genetic or legal ties, such as long-term friends or neighbors whom you have come to think of as “family.” Perhaps you grew up calling your mother's best friend “Aunt Emma” or your next-door neighbor “Uncle Alan” even though those people weren't blood relatives.

Second, as we just saw, it confirms that sharing a genetic or a legal tie with someone doesn’t necessarily make a relationship familial. If you were adopted, for instance, you may not think of your biological father as a part of your family, even though you’re genetically related to him. The role element of family relationships focuses on how people feel and act toward one another rather than on legal or genetic bonds.

These elements—genetic, legal, and role—are not mutually exclusive, and some relationships include all three. How family scholars define family is important because it determines, in part, which relationships they choose to study. How you define family is also important, because it will influence whom you invite to participate in significant occasions in your life, whom you share resources with, and whom you will entrust with secrets or sensitive information.

**Types of Families**

As we’ve seen, different elements play a part in defining family relationships. In turn, these elements give rise to a diverse set of family types. Indeed, one of the reasons that talking about families can be problematic is that families come in so many forms. In this section, we’ll discuss some of the diversity of family types.

We begin this discussion by distinguishing between what researchers label your family of origin and your family of procreation. Your family of origin is the family you grew up in: It typically consists of your parents or stepparents and any siblings you
have. Your family of procreation is the family you start as an adult: It consists of your spouse or romantic partner and/or any children you raise as your own. Most adults would assert that they belong to both a family of origin and a family of procreation. Others, however, may identify with only one type of family, such as young adults who have not had children of their own. Some may even identify with neither type.

Families of origin and families of procreation both develop in many forms. Perhaps the most traditional form consists of a married woman and man and their biological children. Researchers often call this family form a “nuclear family.” Even though the nuclear family is the traditional family form in the United States, it is no longer the most common form. (See the “Fact or Fiction?” box on this page.) An alternative family type that is becoming increasingly common is the “blended family,” which consists of two adult partners—who may be married or living together unmarried and of the same or opposite sex—raising children who are not the biological offspring of both partners. The children may be adopted, or they may be the biological offspring of one of the parents and the stepchildren of the other.

A third family form that is becoming more common is the “single-parent family,” which consists of one adult raising one or more children. As in blended families, the children may be the parent’s biological offspring, or they may be adopted or stepchildren. There are more than 12 million single-parent families in the United States, and 10 million of these are headed by a single mother. The final family form, “extended families,” includes relatives such as grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles.
and other individuals whom you consider to be part of your family. We may or may not interact with our extended families on a regular basis, but research shows these relationships can be a significant part of our family experience.84

**The Family as a System**

Families come in many forms, and every family is different. Despite this diversity, all families share certain characteristics that influence how they communicate and interact. Researchers often define families as systems to emphasize that they consist of individual people and relationships that interact to form a complex whole. A system is any set of interdependent parts that work together to form an integrated whole. A piano, for example, consists of individual keys, metal strings, felt-padded hammers, gears, pedals, and a wood casing. None of these parts gives us music by itself. When these components of a piano work together as a system, however, they are capable of producing beautiful sounds.

Similarly, no person constitutes a family by herself or himself. Rather, families comprise people who interact in interdependent ways. As systems, families tend to have several attributes in common.85 To begin with, they are influenced by their environment, which means that communication outside the family affects interaction within the family. In addition, family members are interdependent, so each person’s communication affects everyone else. Also, because families constitute more than the sum of their parts, each family has a collective personality and identity. Finally, family systems include smaller subsystems, each of which may communicate in distinct ways. Let’s look at each of these attributes in greater detail.

**Families are influenced by their environments.** The family is an example of what researchers call an open system. An open system is one that both affects and is affected by events that occur outside as well as inside the system. Spouses may be especially happy after receiving a large tax return, for example, so they decide to take their children on a much-desired vacation. The argument an unemployed mother has with her public assistance caseworker can make her so angry that she needlessly yells at her children when she gets home.

Likewise, events that occur within the family can affect how you communicate with other people. After staying up late hanging out with siblings you haven’t seen in a long time, for instance, you may find it difficult to pay attention in class the next morning. Similarly, a man’s conversation with his ailing grandmother may leave him so emotionally shaken that he becomes short-tempered with his co-workers. All these examples illustrate how family communication influences, and is influenced by, the environments in which families exist.

**Family members are interdependent.** As we discussed earlier in this chapter, interdependence means that each person in a relationship affects, and is affected by, every other person in that relationship. This characteristic is certainly true of families. Anything that happens to one person in the family has the potential to affect the entire family system.

Let’s say, for example, that a father decides to go back to school to finish his degree. That decision can affect his family system in several ways. First, he’s probably not home as often, which means he has fewer opportunities to interact with his
spouse and children. Second, because of the pressures of school, he may be feeling greater stress than usual, which could cause him to become more impatient with his family members. Third, there may be less money available because of his tuition bills, which could increase conflict over financial decisions. Fourth, once the father graduates, his new education may enable him to get a better job. Changing jobs could improve not only his professional satisfaction and sense of purpose but his family’s quality of life as well. These are all examples of how, in an interdependent system such as a family, one person’s actions have implications for everyone else in the system.

Families are more than the sum of their parts. Maybe you’ve noticed that each class you’re in has its own “personality.” Some classes are lively and talkative, others are more serious and subdued, but no two classes are exactly alike even if they have the same professor. That’s because a class is more than just the identities of the individual people in it; it also has its own group identity. Families are the same way. We can’t understand how a family communicates simply by looking at the spouses or the siblings, because a family is more than just the sum of its parts. To understand a family, we must see it as a system with its own collective identity.

Family systems include smaller subsystems. Many systems, including families, can be divided into smaller units called “subsystems.” These units consist of specific relationships within the family, and many families are made up of several subsystems. For instance, the spousal subsystem consists of a relationship between romantic partners, and it is often the first subsystem to develop in a new family. The spousal subsystem may consist of a married husband and wife, but it can also involve an opposite-sex or same-sex couple who are cohabiting, or living together without being legally married.

The parental subsystem includes relationships between parents and children. It is created with the addition of the first child into the family, whether by birth, adoption, or other means. It isn’t necessary to have a spousal subsystem in place before a parental subsystem is created; single adults who have or adopt children belong to a parental subsystem even though they aren’t romantically partnered.

The addition of the second child into the family creates a sibling subsystem, made up of the relationships between and among brothers and sisters. The sibling subsystem is usually a child’s first peer group. For that reason, sibling relationships provide a context for learning important social skills. In some cases, such as the birth of twins or the adoption of two siblings, the parental subsystem and the sibling subsystem are created simultaneously.

Communication Issues in Families

As in all significant relationships, communication plays a big part in making or breaking family relationships. In this section, we’ll examine four communication issues that families commonly deal with: roles, rituals, stories, and secrets.
Family roles. Family roles embody the functions you serve in the family system. One person may be the problem solver, for instance, whereas another is the family joker or the family peacemaker. One sibling may be the troublemaker, whereas another is the caregiver or the helpless victim. Notice that roles are different from family positions, so we wouldn’t talk about the role of the father, for instance, or the role of the daughter. Positions such as father or daughter are based on the structure of your relationships with others, whereas roles are based on the social and emotional functions your behavior serves within your family.

Family roles often become particularly relevant when the family is in conflict. Expert family therapist Virginia Satir has suggested that four roles become especially common during conflict episodes. The first role is the “blamer,” that is, the individual who holds others responsible for whatever goes wrong but accepts no responsibility for his or her own behaviors. A second role is the “placater,” the peacemaker who will go to any lengths to reduce conflict. This person may simply agree with whatever anyone says to keep others from getting angry. A third role is the “computer,” who attempts to use logic and reason (rather than emotion) to defuse the situation. Finally, there’s the “distracter,” who makes random, irrelevant comments to shift the family’s attention away from the conflict situation. Can you identify which roles your family members and you tend to adopt during conflict situations?

Significantly, each of these roles leads people to communicate in different ways. Some role behaviors, such as computing or placating, can be useful for resolving conflict or at least for preventing it from escalating. The behavior of blamers and distracters, in contrast, can intensify conflict by shifting attention away from the topic of the conflict, thereby making it less likely that the conflict will be addressed and resolved.

Family rituals. Many families have their own important traditions. One family’s tradition might be to spend every Thanksgiving serving turkey dinners at a residence for injured homeless veterans. Another’s might be to attend drag races every summer or to have dinner with the neighbors once a month. We call these traditions family rituals, or repetitive behaviors that have special meaning for a family. Can you think of any rituals that are important in your family?

Rituals serve a variety of functions in family interactions, such as reinforcing a family’s values and providing a sense of belonging. A family ritual such as an annual road trip isn’t just about the trip but also about spending time together, creating memories, and emphasizing how important family relationships are.

According to communication scholars Dawn Braithwaite, Leslie Baxter, and Anne lie Harper, rituals can be especially important in blended families that consist of stepparents and stepchildren. Their research found that people often “import” rituals from their original family into their blended family. Sometimes, the blended family retains or adapts these rituals; sometimes it does not.

For instance, Braithwaite and her colleagues described one family in which a widowed mother and her children would have a pizza “picnic” in the living room on
a regular basis. The children would cuddle with the mother on the couch, eat pizza, and talk. Every family member considered this ritual to be a special time. When the mother remarried and acquired stepchildren, however, the ritual stopped, perhaps because the stepchildren would have been uncomfortable taking part.

In their research, Braithwaite and colleagues also found that it’s important for blended families to develop their own unique rituals. In one family, for instance, a young man described how his new stepfather instituted a ritual of watching the Super Bowl with his brother and him. According to this young man, this ritual served as a means of promoting communication with his stepfather: “It gave us something in common and we could talk about sports. It gave us a link. We both understood things, so we could eventually talk about other things more freely. . . . I almost started thinking of him as my dad.”

**Family stories.** Many of us can think of particular stories we’ve heard over and over again from family members. Maybe your grandparents were fond of describing how they overcame hardships when they were first married. Perhaps your uncle enjoyed telling the story of how your parents first met, or your parents have a favorite story about your childhood antics. Even events that were stressful or unpleasant at the time but turned out well, such as fixing a flat tire while on vacation or finding a child after becoming separated in a department store, can serve a reassuring or cautionary function when they become part of the family lore and are talked about again and again.

Stories are common in families, and communication scholar Elizabeth Stone suggests that they do more than just provide entertainment. They also give families a sense of their history, express what family members expect of one another, and reinforce connections between and among different generations.

Family stories are as varied as families are, but they all tend to share at least two characteristics. First, they’re told and retold, often over long periods of time. In this way, they become part of a family’s collective knowledge: Eventually almost everyone in the family has heard each story over and over. Second, family stories convey an underlying message about the family, such as “We are proud,” “We overcome adversity,” or “We stick together no matter what.”

**Family secrets.** Many families have secrets they intentionally keep hidden from others. These secrets often contain information the family considers private and not appropriate for sharing with outsiders, such as religious practices, health or legal issues, family conflicts, and financial information. When you were growing up, for instance, you may remember your parents telling you not to talk about issues like these with people outside your family. Keeping family secrets doesn’t just protect private family information, though. It also reinforces the family’s identity and exclusivity, because only family members are allowed to know the secrets.

Secrets can also be kept within families. For instance, Marco may not want his parents to know he has moved in with his girlfriend, so he swears his sister to secrecy. Erin and Tammy may not want their young children to know that Tammy has breast cancer, so they agree to keep it secret. Parents may decide not to tell their children they were adopted, at least until they have reached a certain age. People choose to keep secrets from other family members for many reasons, such as avoiding embarrassment or conflict, protecting another person’s feelings, or maintaining a sense of autonomy and privacy.
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Learn It: How do genetic ties, legal obligations, and role behaviors matter to the definition of families? What is the difference between a family of origin and a family of procreation? How do families function as a system? What are family roles, and how may they affect communication within families?

Try It: Take a minute to recall a family ritual that you remember from growing up. Consider what that ritual reflected about your family’s rules, values, and beliefs. How did it reinforce the strength of your family relationships?

Reflect on It: If you had to come up with a definition of the family, what would it be? What family stories do you remember hearing as a child?

Improving Communication in Intimate Relationships

As we’ve seen in this chapter, romantic and familial relationships can be highly rewarding or extremely challenging—and many are both. They are always important to us, though. Therefore, it’s in our best interests to communicate as competently as we can within them. In this section, we’ll look at four strategies for improving communication within our intimate relationships: emphasizing excitement and positivity, handling conflict constructively, having realistic expectations, and managing dialectical tensions.

Emphasize Excitement and Positivity

You may have heard the saying “The family that plays together, stays together.” It turns out this bit of folk wisdom has some truth to it. Research by social psychologist Art Aron and his colleagues has shown that spouses who engage in exciting forms of play together—such as rollerblading, riding a roller coaster, or going to a suspenseful movie—actually increase their level of relationship satisfaction.92 Importantly, though, Aron’s findings indicate that the play has to be something exciting or exhilarating. (See “How Do We Know?” on page 363.) Activities such as playing cards and going out to dinner, even if they are pleasant, don’t have the same effect.

Why is this the case? Aron suggests that when partners engage in activities that elevate their physical arousal—the way riding a roller coaster or watching a suspenseful movie can—they may attribute their elevated arousal to one another instead of to the activity. Subconsciously, that is, people may notice that they feel physically aroused and may believe it’s their partner, rather than the activity, that’s causing their arousal. Sharing exhilarating play activities, therefore, can help partners maintain a level of positivity and freshness in their relationship that might otherwise fade with time. This isn’t the only strategy for improving an intimate relationship, but research suggests it can be effective.

There are other ways to emphasize positivity in family relationships, as well. One important strategy is to use confirming messages, or behaviors that indicate how much we value another person. Sometimes, these are verbal statements, such as parents telling their children how special they are and how much they love them.
Confiming messages can be nonverbal, too, such as focusing your attention on another person and really listening to what he or she is saying.93

Research shows that confirming messages are particularly important in marital relationships. Psychologist John Gottman has spent much of his career looking at why marriages succeed or fail. As we discussed earlier in this chapter, he has found that stable, satisfied couples have a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative communication. In other words, spouses who are happy with their marriages enact at least five positive behaviors (such as confirming messages) for every one negative behavior. Gottman has found that couples with lower positive-to-negative ratios have an elevated risk of divorce.94

How Do We Know?

Sharing Exciting Activities Increases Relationship Satisfaction

In this chapter, you learned that one way to improve communication in intimate relationships is to engage in exciting and arousing activities with your partner. How do we know that this works?

In one study, social psychologists Art Aron, Christina Norman, Elaine Aron, and Colin McKenna invited 28 married and dating couples to their laboratory and asked them to provide self-reports of their relationship satisfaction and quality. They then assigned half of the couples to take part in a novel, arousing activity. These couples were bound to each other on one side at the wrist and ankle with Velcro straps and were then instructed to move on their hands and knees through a makeshift obstacle course laid out on gymnasium mats while carrying a pillow between them. The other half of the couples took part in a mundane activity that involved rolling a ball to the center of the room.

After the activities, the couples reported again on their relationship quality and satisfaction. The researchers found that these scores increased for couples who took part in the arousing activity but not for those who did the mundane activity. Subsequent studies involving exciting or mundane activities that participants performed on their own, outside the laboratory, yielded the same pattern of results.

Ask Yourself:

• Why do you suppose that sharing exciting activities makes people feel more satisfied with the quality of their relationships?

How might you use this information to improve your own relationships?

From Me to You:

• It may be difficult to see how rolling around on a gym mat while bound to your romantic partner could improve your relationship satisfaction. The activity itself isn’t causing the improvement, however. Rather, it’s the novel and physically arousing nature of the activity that produces the benefit. You can easily use this knowledge to improve your own relationships. With your romantic partner, your family members, or even your friends, make opportunities to share exciting and novel experiences. You may find that your relationships become closer as a result.

Handle Conflict Constructively

Even the happiest, most stable relationships experience conflict from time to time. Dealing with conflict is rarely fun, but as you’ll learn in Chapter 10, conflict itself isn’t necessarily bad for relationships. What matters to most relationships isn’t the frequency or even the intensity of conflict—it’s how the individuals involved handle the conflict.

Conflict arises when people in an interdependent relationship have competing goals. It’s easy to imagine such a situation in a marriage or a family. People in these relationships often experience conflict over topics such as money, power and decision making, intimacy, and other issues that are easy to disagree about.95

When conflicts arise in intimate relationships, many people find it easiest to ignore them, minimize them, or pretend they don’t exist. Avoiding conflict in these ways can serve important functions. For instance, it can help people calm down and gain composure so they can later address the topic of their conflict without becoming emotionally aroused. Avoidance can also help people keep small, inconsequential disagreements from escalating into large, unmanageable fights. In the opening vignette, for example, Ron kept his concerns about attending Meghan’s family reunion to himself. In so doing, he prevented his concerns—which were unfounded—from turning into a conflict that may have hurt Meghan’s feelings and produced stress within their relationship.

Research shows, however, that dealing with conflicts in an open and constructive manner is often better for intimate relationships in the long run. In Chapter 10, we will look at several specific ways to handle conflict positively. Suppose your spouse
and you are in conflict over whether to let your mother-in-law move in with you. Let’s say your spouse is in favor of this but you are not. As we’ll learn in Chapter 10, one constructive strategy for dealing with this conflict is to accommodate, or acquiesce to the other person’s wishes. Even if you’re not keen on living with your mother-in-law, you may agree to it to please your spouse and keep harmony in your relationship. Another constructive strategy is to compromise, in which both parties give up something they want in order to arrive at a mutually acceptable solution. You and your spouse may decide, for instance, to provide a home for your mother-in-law for half of the year and to ask your spouse’s brother to host her for the other half. We will learn much more about these and other strategies for dealing with relationship conflict in Chapter 10.

Have Realistic Expectations

Another way to improve communication in our intimate relationships is to make certain our expectations for those relationships are realistic. When our expectations are unrealistic, we are certain to find that our relationships fail to meet them, causing us to feel disappointed, hurt, or betrayed. It isn’t enough that our expectations seem realistic to us, however. What matters is that they are realistic for everyone in the relationship. Only through open communication can we learn what everyone’s expectations are and agree on how realistic they are.

Six months after marrying Carla, for instance, Gregory stopped spending time with his parents, his brother, and even his close friends. He wanted to spend all his time with Carla, and he began feeling anxious whenever they were apart. Eventually, Carla started to feel smothered, and she explained to Gregory that they both needed other people in their lives besides each other. She encouraged him to reconnect with his family and friends. Gregory, in turn, explained that spending time with Carla helped him feel secure about the status of their relationship. Eventually, they agreed on a new expectation for spending time together that seemed more reasonable to both of them. By communicating about their different expectations for their marriage and coming to agreement on what they both considered realistic, Carla and Gregory were able to strengthen their feelings of satisfaction with each other.

It’s not uncommon for romantic partners to want to spend a great deal of time together, but it’s important to be realistic about what we expect from each of our relationships. No one person—not even your spouse—can meet all your social and emotional needs. Expecting someone to do so places an unfair burden on that person and will eventually leave you disappointed.

A better approach is to appreciate each relationship individually and to remember that the important people in your life are all important to you, for different reasons. Maybe your mom is a great listener when you have a problem, but you go to your grandfather when you need to kick back and relax. You might talk to your romantic partner about most issues but feel more comfortable discussing your worries about your dad’s health or your daughter’s financial difficulties with your brother or sister. Keep in mind, too, that just as no single person can meet all your needs, neither can you meet someone else’s every need. Being realistic about our expectations helps us appreciate the most positive aspects of each of our relationships.

Manage Dialectical Tensions

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, people in romantic and familial relationships often experience dialectic tensions, or conflicts between two opposing needs. Spouses may want predictability in their relationship, for example, but they may also
long for novelty. Like conflict, dialectical tensions aren’t necessarily bad for relationships. One way to improve communication in your intimate relationships, however, is to learn how to manage dialectical tensions when you experience them.

Researchers have identified eight strategies that people in intimate relationships use to manage dialectical tensions. None of these strategies is inherently positive or negative. Rather, their effectiveness depends on your goals for the relationship and the context in which you are using them.

To illustrate these strategies, let’s suppose Moira has become engaged to marry Albee and she is experiencing the tension between autonomy and connection. She strongly desires to merge with Albee and be connected to him, yet she also strongly desires to retain her individuality and autonomy. Let’s look at some strategies she might use to manage this tension:

- **Denial.** This strategy involves responding to only one side of the tension and ignoring the other. Were Moira to adopt this strategy, for instance, she might deny her desire for autonomy and focus all her attention on being connected with Albee.

- **Disorientation.** This strategy involves escaping the tension entirely by ending the relationship. Moira may feel so disoriented by the tension between her desires for autonomy and those for connection, for example, that she calls off her engagement.

- **Alternation.** Alternation means going back and forth between the two sides of a tension. On some days, for example, Moira might act in ways that enhance her autonomy and individuality, such as spending time alone. On other days, she might act in ways that enhance her connection to Albee, such as sharing activities they both enjoy.

- **Segmentation.** This strategy involves dealing with one side of a tension in some aspects, or segments, of your relationship and the other side of the tension in other segments. Were Moira to select this strategy, she might emphasize her connection to Albee by sharing intimate disclosures, but she might emphasize her autonomy by keeping her finances separate or retaining her own last name when they marry. Rather than going back and forth between the two sides of the tension, as in alternation, she is addressing one side of the tension in some segments of her relationship and the other side in other segments.

- **Balance.** People who use balance as a strategy try to compromise, or find a middle ground between the two opposing forces of a tension. For instance, Moira might disclose most of her feelings to Albee but keep some of her feelings to herself. This strategy might not make her feel as autonomous as she wants or as connected as she wants, but she might feel she is satisfying each desire to some degree.
• **Integration.** In this strategy, people try to develop behaviors that will satisfy both sides of a tension simultaneously. Moira feels connected to Albee when they spend their evenings together, but she also likes to choose how she spends her time. To integrate these needs, she often will read or do crossword puzzles while Albee watches television in the same room. This arrangement enables her to feel autonomous and connected at the same time. Unlike the balance strategy, which focuses on compromising each desire, integration focuses on finding ways to satisfy both desires without compromising either one.

• **Recalibration.** Adopting this strategy means “reframing” a tension so that the contradiction between opposing needs disappears. Instead of feeling conflicted by their competing needs for autonomy and connection, Moira and Albee could agree, through discussion, to treat autonomy and connection as equally desirable. As a result, they might come to see autonomy and connection as complementary needs rather than opposing ones.

• **Reaffirmation.** Finally, reaffirmation means simply embracing dialectical tensions as a normal part of life. Moira might come to realize that she will always feel torn between her needs for autonomy and connection. Instead of fighting the tension or struggling to resolve it, she simply accepts it as a normal feature of her relationship. Whereas reframing means eliminating the tension by seeing the opposing needs as complementary, reaffirmation means accepting the tension as normal.

It’s not uncommon for people in families and romantic relationships to try several of these strategies. They may find some of these strategies to be more effective for them than others. Improving your communication in intimate relationships doesn’t require you to adopt specific strategies and ignore others. Rather, if you’re aware of the different options for managing dialectical tensions, then you can choose the ones that work best for you.

**Learn It:** What’s an example of a confirming message? When is avoidance a useful strategy for managing conflict? Why are unrealistic expectations problematic for a relationship? How is alternation different from segmentation as a strategy for managing dialectical tensions?

**Try It:** Identify a dialectical tension you are currently experiencing in a romantic or familial relationship. Think about the two sides of the tension, and write a short paragraph describing how these two needs conflict with each other. Then, write a second paragraph describing how these two needs complement each other. That is, how do they work together to create a better relational experience than either need would on its own? Use this exercise to recalibrate the dialectical tension within the relationship. Finally, keep your new perception of the tension in mind as you communicate in your relationship.

**Reflect on It:** What role do excitement and positivity play in your intimate relationships? When do you have unrealistic expectations about your relationships?
Section 1} The Nature of Intimate Relationships (p. 333)

I. The Nature of Intimate Relationships
   A. Intimate relationships require deep commitment
      • Relational commitment involves emotional, social, legal, and financial responsibilities for another’s well-being.
   B. Intimate relationships foster interdependence
      • Intimate relationships usually involve high degrees of interdependence.
   C. Intimate relationships require continuous investment
      • Intimate relationships also involve high degrees of investment.
   D. Intimate relationships spark dialectical tensions
      • Many dialectical tensions, including the tensions of autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, and predictability-novelty, are common in intimate relationships.

Section 2} Communicating in Romantic Relationships (p. 338)

II. Communicating in Romantic Relationships
   A. Characteristics of romantic relationships
      1. Some romantic relationships are exclusive; others are not
      2. Some romantic relationships are voluntary; others are not
      3. Some romantic relationships are based on love; others are not
      4. Some romantic relationships involve opposite-sex partners; others do not
      5. Some romantic relationships are permanent; others are not
      • Many romantic relationships are exclusive, voluntary, based on love, composed of opposite-sex partners, and permanent, but many others do not share these characteristics.
   B. Forming romantic relationship is a process
      1. Initiating
      2. Experimenting
      3. Intensifying
      4. Integrating
      5. Bonding
      • Forming a relationship is a process that involves at least five stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding.
   C. Interpersonal communication in romantic relationships
      1. Romantic relationships vary in how they handle conflict
      2. Romantic relationships vary in how they handle privacy
      3. Romantic relationships vary in how they handle emotional communication
      4. Romantic relationships vary in how they handle instrumental communication
      • Romantic relationships vary in how they handle communication issues such as conflict, privacy, emotional communication, and instrumental communication.
D. Ending romantic relationships is a process
   1. Differentiating
   2. Circumscribing
   3. Stagnating
   4. Avoiding
   5. Terminating

Section 3) Communicating in Families (p. 354)

III. Communicating in Families
   A. What makes a family a family?
      1. Genetic ties
      2. Legal obligations
      3. Role behaviors
   B. Types of families
   C. The family as a system
      1. Families are influenced by their environments
      2. Family members are interdependent
      3. Families are more than the sum of their parts
      4. Family systems include smaller subsystems

D. Communication issues in families
   1. Family roles
   2. Family rituals
   3. Family stories
   4. Family secrets

Section 4) Improving Communication in Intimate Relationships (p. 362)

IV. Improving Communication in Intimate Relationships
   A. Emphasize excitement and positivity
   B. Handle conflict constructively
   C. Have realistic expectations
   D. Manage dialectical tensions

   - Ending a relationship is a process that involves at least five stages: differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating.

   - Genetic ties, legal obligations, and role behaviors all influence whether a given relationship is considered to be familial.

   - Families come in multiple forms, including natural families, blended families, single-parent families, and extended families.

   - Families have several characteristics of systems.

   - Several communication issues, including family roles, rituals, stories, and secrets, are important aspects of how families communicate.

   - Sending confirming messages is an important way of emphasizing positivity.

   - Conflict isn't necessarily bad in intimate relationships, but it's important to handle conflict constructively.

   - Partners in good intimate relationships have realistic expectations about their relationships.

   - Dialectic tensions are common in relationships, and people have several strategies for managing them.
CHAPTER 9 INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

Key Terms
Avoiding stage
Bonding stage
Circumscribing stage
Commitment
Communication privacy management (CPM) theory
Confirming messages
Dialectical tensions
differentiating stage
Divorce
Experimenting stage
Family of origin
Family of procreation
Infidelity
Initiating stage
Integrating stage
Intensifying stage
Interdependence
Investment
Monogamy
Polygamy
Rituals
Stagnating stage
Systems
Terminating stage

Discussion Questions
1. What are some of the ways you invest in your intimate relationships? In what ways do investments in romantic relationships differ from those in familial relationships?
2. When do you notice autonomy-connection, openness-closedness, and novelty-predictability tensions in your relationships? How do you see these tensions manifest themselves in your communication behaviors?
3. The chapter discussed five social expectations for romantic relationships. How much do you share those expectations? Which ones do you not share? Why?
4. What is your theory about why the divorce rate is higher in the United States than in the rest of the world?
5. How do you differentiate people in your family from people who are not in your family? How important are genetic ties, legal bonds, and role behaviors?
6. What roles did you play in your family while you were growing up? What roles would you say that you still play in your family?
7. Why do you think positivity is so important for stable, satisfying relationships?
8. What strategies do you tend to use to manage dialectical tensions in your own relationships?

Practice Quiz
Multiple Choice
1. The idea that our actions influence other people’s lives as much as they influence our own is known as:
   a. independence
   b. dependence
   c. interdependence
   d. autonomy
2. Johann and his partner, Cris, go out to dinner and see a movie every Friday night. This routine is beginning to bore Johann but provides stability that Cris values. Which dialectical tension are Johann and Cris experiencing?
   a. openness-closedness
   b. connectedness-autonomy
   c. presence-absence
   d. predictability-novelty
3. The dialectical tension that captures the desire for disclosure and honesty as well as the desire for privacy is known as:
   a. openness-closedness
   b. connectedness-autonomy
   c. presence-absence
   d. predictability-novelty
4. The idea that romantic relationships occur between individuals who choose to be together is best described by which of the following characteristics?
   a. exclusivity
   b. voluntariness
   c. permanence
   d. love
5. Most potential relationships tend to end at which stage of Knapp's Relational Stage Model?
   a. initiating
   b. intensifying
   c. differentiating
   d. experimenting
6. According to Fitzpatrick’s research, in which type of couple do spouses take a culturally conventional approach to marriage but are relatively autonomous?
   a. traditionals
   b. separates
   c. independents
   d. interdependents
7. According to Fitzpatrick’s research, which type of couple is most likely to avoid conflict?
   a. traditionals
   b. separates
   c. independents
   d. interdependents
8. According to Gottman’s research, which type of couple is characterized by engaging in frequent conflict episodes that include personal attacks and criticism?
   a. validating
   b. volatile
   c. conflict-avoiding
   d. hostile
9. Individuals in a satisfying romantic relationship maintain what ratio of positive to negative behaviors, according to Gottman?
10. Repetitive behaviors that have special meaning for a family are known as:
   a. roles
   b. rituals
   c. responsibilities
   d. systems

True/False
11. Obsessive relational intrusion (ORI) most often occurs in relationships in which the two partners are equally invested in each other.

12. Romantic relationships typically are characterized by lower interdependence than friendships.

13. Monogamy means being romantically or sexually involved with only one person at a time.

14. All marriages are based on love when they begin.

15. The circumscribing stage is characterized by a decrease in the quality and the quantity of communication in a romantic relationship.

Fill in the Blank
16. Novelty is in dialectical tension with _______.

17. Cognitive models of what a marriage is and should be are called marital _______.

18. According to Gottman, couples who talk openly about disagreements and stay calm throughout conflict episodes are called _______ couples.

19. According to _______ Theory, in a romantic relationship, partners jointly own information about their problems.

20. A romantic relationship is _______ when the partners are “going through the motions” of a relationship that is no longer satisfying.

Research Library

Movies
She's the One (Drama; 1999; R)
This story focuses on how two adult brothers manage their relationships with their father, their wives, and a woman they both loved. Multiple family subsystems are portrayed in the film, including sibling relationships, parent-child relationships, and marital relationships. The story illustrates how rituals (such as the brothers’ fishing trips with their father) can be important in families, and also how families enforce rules that can become problematic when they are violated.

Stepmom (Drama; 1998; PG-13)
In this film, two children experience the dissolution of their parents’ marriage and the introduction of a new woman in their father’s life, who becomes a stepmother to the children. Although the stepmother is committed to the children, she is also committed to her work. This fact draws criticism from the children’s mother (who was a full-time mother), and tension between the two women mounts. The tension is complicated by the mother’s cancer diagnosis. The movie illustrates the dissolution of one marital relationship and the formation of a new one. It also exemplifies how important family roles can be and how roles can be renegotiated.

When Harry Met Sally (Comedy; 1989; R)
This movie follows the process of relational development for Harry and Sally, casual acquaintances who move to New York at the same time and spend the majority of the movie as friends. Over the years, each one marries and divorces another person. Eventually, they realize their mutual attraction and they marry each other. The story portrays Harry and Sally at various stages of relational development, some in which they feel close to each other and some in which they feel separated. Their process of coming together illustrates the point that relationships don’t always develop in a sequential, step-by-step manner.

Books

Journal Articles

Web Sites
www.gottman.com
This is the Web site of the Gottman Institute, where psychologist and marital therapist John Gottman uses his research to help romantic couples and families improve their communication.

www.families.com
This site hosts blogs and forums on multiple issues related to families. It is not an academic site, but it provides one example of how people communicate about family issues and how they publicly portray their family relationships.