

RELATIONAL LOVE

Healthy romantic relationships proceed through predictable stages, which are pretty predictable and almost unavoidable. I hear many clients say, “I love my partner, but I’m not in love,” and they assume something must be wrong with the relationship. Quite the contrary is true.

The first stage of a relationship is infatuation, based on all-or-none thinking. You tend to see almost only the good; whatever is bad is laughed off as unimportant, cute, or an aberration. You can’t believe your good fortune that this person was still available. You have great times together. You are compatible in so many ways. Sex is fun, spontaneous, and frequent. This is why 18 year olds probably shouldn’t get married.

At some point you confront the reality of your partner’s idiosyncrasies and their real world importance. His hot wired, spontaneous, flexible, and passionate attitude becomes irresponsible, poorly planned, and sexually obsessed. Or his cold wired, stable, responsible, and organized approach becomes boring, inflexible, and not enough fun.

Thus, you proceed into the second stage where your all-or-none pendulum swings to the dark side and you may tend to see your partner as all bad, focusing on the things that drive you nuts. His cute idiosyncrasies take on deal-breaking qualities. You become acutely aware of why he was still available in the first place. Healthy, lasting love moves through this stage to the final one.

Choice. I choose to make a life with this one. I understand the good, the bad, and the wealth of in-between. The good wins out. He is absolutely good enough. He can be spontaneous but irresponsible. He can be organized but inflexible. He can be self- absorbed but loving. He can be ambitious but not pay enough attention to me. We share family and friends and context and history. We’ve loved and fought and cried and made up. At times I wonder if he was born or hatched. But we are good enough and I love him. If you believe that you’re not in love anymore, it may simply mean that unrealistic, distorted infatuation has ended. A healthy transition for all relationships.