The Party

Nick and Elaine were running late, as usual. The party had started half an hour before, and while Nick paced the floor in irritation, fiddling with his car keys, Elaine was still putting the finishing touches on her makeup and holding up various earrings, trying to decide which ones she liked best. Nick got more and more agitated, finally walking into their bathroom, surveying Elaine, and saying sarcastically, “If you take any longer to get ready, there will be no point in our going at all—the party will be over!” Elaine flushed, put on the earrings that she had picked out originally, and grabbed her purse. “I’m ready,” she said.

They got into the car without speaking and silently wound their way out to the highway; they had to drive nearly all the way across town to the party. It was a quiet ride, far different from the old days, when their
twin girls were along and they were all going somewhere together. Then, the car was never quiet; there was fighting or giggling or both from the back seat. But now the kids were 17 and had destinations of their own, so family trips were few. And so Nick and Elaine’s trips, like their life together, seemed to get quieter—and emptier. Sometimes, the past seemed much more fun than the present, which often appeared to consist mostly of Nick’s increasingly successful career.

Elaine knew she should have gotten ready for the party earlier, but she just kept putting it off and finding other things to do. This was an important occasion for Nick; it was the first department party since he had been awarded his big grant, so it would be an opportunity for people to congratulate him and for him to bask in the sunshine of success. He had worked hard for it, Elaine knew. Oh, did she ever know!

As a biochemistry professor, he spent endless evenings and weekends in the lab, just continuing the crazy schedule he’d had as a graduate student, when Elaine had first met him. Back then, she thought his intense commitment to his work was attractive—even sexy. He seemed so intelligent and so serious. She just knew he was going to be a famous chemist some day. Elaine supported his single-minded commitment to his work as a central part of his personality. So when they got married, at first, she didn’t even mind the fact that he wasn’t home very much. She didn’t expect him to be. She had her own work as an occupational therapist to keep her busy, and much of her nonwork time was spent trying to create a pretty apartment that Nick would enjoy coming home to (when he finally did come home).

Then Elaine got pregnant with the twins and decided to quit her job. Nick found his first academic position, and they traded in their cozy apartment for a small house. Elaine was so busy taking care of the girls and trying to decorate the little house that she didn’t miss Nick during those long hours in the lab—at least, not too much. He was good with the girls when he was home, but he often seemed a little distracted, as though his mind was somewhere else. And there was always that barely concealed impatience to get back to the lab. Sometimes Elaine could break through that impatience—when they were making love, for instance, or sometimes when they took the twins to the park or to the beach. At those times, Nick would seem fully there.

Elaine tried once or twice to talk with Nick about his long hours at work, asking if he couldn’t spend more time at home. But he would resist, sometimes defensively and sometimes with unarguable logic about how he had to work that hard in order to get ahead. And he always withdrew from her for awhile after those talks. Elaine learned that a part-time husband was better than no husband at all, and she stopped asking him to be around more. She just built her life and the girls’ lives to include Nick when he was at home and to work just fine when he wasn’t around.

Nick drove purposefully and crisply, the way he did almost everything. He was irritated about being so late for the party, but that really wasn’t all of it. He was irritated with Elaine for dragging her feet about going to this party when she knew how much it
meant to him. Maybe it was only a department party to her, but to him, it was a chance for him to finally feel as though he belonged. He was a successful biochemistry professor, but it was only with the recent award of his big grant that he finally felt like one of the “in” group.

Nick wished his father could see him now—how successful he was. But then again, his father probably wouldn’t be that impressed. He never thought Nick would amount to anything. He couldn’t understand why Nick didn’t go into one of the construction trades, like all the other men in the family. He always thought that Nick’s endless education and fooling around in a laboratory with chemicals was kind of a “sissy thing.” Nick never felt that he could please his father.

That made it all the more important when he met Elaine. He was a graduate student in biochemistry, and she was an occupational therapy student. Right from the beginning, when they had just dated a couple of times, Nick felt Elaine’s support for what he was trying to do with his life, for his goals and ambitions. She seemed to understand how important it was for him to be the very best biochemist that he could be. She was always attentive when he talked about his work, and her intelligence, good looks, and supportive and caring personality all combined to make her the most special woman he had ever met. He couldn’t imagine life without her, so when he proposed marriage to her, he was elated that she accepted.

Then it became even more important for him to succeed because now he had someone to work for besides himself. And when the twins were born, he had even more responsibilities. He wanted to be the kind of father for them that he himself had never had—a father who would provide for them financially but, even more, who would believe in them and support them in what they did. He remembered how tiny they were when he and Elaine brought them home from the hospital; he felt such an overwhelming love for them and a commitment to take care of them. He promised himself that he would never let them down, and he tried to keep that promise over the years.

Becoming a successful biochemistry professor took a lot of time away from his family life with Elaine and the girls. But he felt he was doing it for them—at least in part. Along the way, it seemed as though Elaine and the twins got used to him being gone so much. They were always glad to have him home, but their lives somehow seemed to move on without him. Once in awhile, he felt guilty about his long hours, but then he would push the guilt aside and just keep on working.

It helped him feel less guilty when Elaine started getting into her artwork. Rather than seek employment as an occupational therapist when the girls got older, she took some painting classes and discovered that she had real talent. Her specialty was portrait painting, especially of children. Not surprisingly, her first subjects were the twins, but as soon as people saw those paintings, they overwhelmed Elaine with work. She had commissions booked for months ahead, and she was even going to have her first show at a local art gallery—a collection of portraits of twins and triplets. In fact, she was working on one
of those portraits earlier this evening, when she should have been getting ready for the party. Even though he was angry with her, Nick realized again how proud he was of Elaine. She was finding her talents and following her passions, just as he was.

Nick felt himself soften. How could he be angry with Elaine for simply doing what made her happy? Without saying a word, he reached over for her hand, which was lying there on the car seat, resting lightly on her purse. She let his hand rest on hers, but she didn’t make any move to reciprocate. She really wasn’t surprised to feel his hand on hers. He would occasionally reach out in some way after they had a disagreement, even when it wasn’t his fault—like tonight. She knew that his irritation was justified, and she really wasn’t sure why she didn’t want to go to the party.

In truth, her negative attitude wasn’t really about the party at all. It was about them—Nick and Elaine—and what was missing for her in their relationship and their life together. And somehow, it was all symbolized by this party. Elaine didn’t know what she would do if she didn’t have her art. Her artwork fed her and sustained her. Some of her happiest times were when she was painting or when she was sharing her work with other people. She was excited about her upcoming show. And she knew Nick was proud of her, even though he hadn’t said very much about it to her.

Nick stopped the car; they were there. Lights were blazing in the brick colonial, and it looked like virtually everyone in the department had turned out for this annual event. Elaine and Nick got out and walked up to the front door, entered without knocking, and sought out the hosts. They saw people they knew holding glasses of wine and soft drinks, eating from the buffet table and making small talk. They finally located Bob, the host and the chair of the department, who welcomed them and congratulated Nick again on obtaining his big grant. “So predictable,” thought Elaine. “Finally,” thought Nick. They wandered into the kitchen, where the bar was set up on the kitchen table. Nick poured wine for both of them, and then Elaine told Nick to feel free to circulate and talk to people; she’d take care of herself. Elaine wandered out onto the patio, where some people were talking about the latest scandal at the university and others were discussing chemistry. Elaine saw a couple of women she had known for years and talked with them for awhile.

Then she moved off and just stood there silently, trying to decide what to do next, when she felt someone come up beside her and stand a little too close. She turned and there was Nick. “How are you doing?” he asked her. “Fine. I just spent some time talking with Mary and Anne about children’s summer camps, and I thought I’d take a breather and maybe get a little more wine. What about you?” “Oh, I talked with Bob about the grant and with Dale about the new book he’s writing, and I guess I thought I’d take a break too. The party is fine, but . . . (he lowered his voice) . . . it’s just the same old thing.” Nick put his arm around Elaine’s waist and gave her a squeeze. “How about developing a headache?” “What?” she said. Then she got it! “As a matter of fact, my head is really starting to throb,” she said. Nick leaned over and whispered in her ear, “You’re wonderful! I’ll tell Bob that I’m sorry, but you’re just not feeling well.”
They made their way back through the house, with Nick offering brief apologies to the host. Then suddenly they were out the door and walking toward their car through the balmy summer evening, holding hands and trying not to laugh until they were safely in the car. But as soon as they got in and closed the door, they burst into laughter. It had been a long time since they had laughed like that. And they couldn’t remember how long it had been since they’d done something even slightly impulsive, like leave a boring party. All of a sudden, they realized that they were starving, so they stopped at a little restaurant on the way home to get a sandwich. As they sat across the table from each other, Nick looked over at Elaine, who was reading her menu, and he blurted out, “You know, you’re really beautiful.” Elaine flushed with pleasure and smiled, looking him squarely in the eye. “I love you” she said. And with that came, perhaps, a new beginning in their relationship.

Questions to Consider in Reading This Chapter

- How did Nick’s childhood experiences with his father affect his choice of a relationship partner?
- Think about one negative nonverbal communication and one positive nonverbal communication between Elaine and Nick the night of the party.
- How could Elaine tell Nick that she wishes he would spend more time at home? If she did tell him, how do you think Nick would respond?
- What would happen if Nick told Elaine how proud he is of her?
- What could Elaine and Nick do to nurture their relationship on a daily basis?

What Do We Know about Communication and Relational Maintenance?

Elaine and Nick are not unusual. Their story is told and retold every day in relationships that start out with wonderful expectations of a future together and evolve over the years into spoken and unspoken disappointments and accusations. Questions of “Why did you?” and “Why didn’t you?” fill the conversations of many partners who once thought that simply being together would guarantee living happily ever after. What is different about Nick and Elaine’s story is that it has a happy ending—at least, for the evening in question.
This chapter looks at communication, both verbal and nonverbal, as well as other behaviors that maintain relationships and allow such happy endings to occur. General ideas about relationship maintenance will be addressed first, setting the stage for a discussion of communication, one of the most significant components of relationship initiation and maintenance.

Definitions of Relational Maintenance

It is not enough for human beings to connect with one another; they must also maintain that connection. What does it mean to maintain a relationship? Is maintenance a process of relationship partners performing certain activities, or is it the ongoing nature of the relationship itself?

The answer to both these questions appears to be yes, as relationship maintenance consists of several different things. Dindia (2000) has articulated in detail various definitions of relational maintenance. First, relational maintenance, or just maintenance, may refer simply to a relationship that continues. Its sheer existence defines it. Second, maintenance can refer to a relationship that not only continues but is stable. Third, maintenance can refer to continuity, stability, and satisfaction. Fourth, maintenance can involve all the above conditions being met plus the quality of being “in good working condition” (p. 288). Thus, maintenance at the first level may refer merely to a relationship’s existence, whereas at the fourth level it refers to behaviors undertaken actively to renew and repair a relationship.

Truly maintaining a relationship in healthy and satisfying condition requires ongoing relational work, since a variety of forces always affect relationships. Some of those forces, such as having shared hopes and goals, pull partners toward each other, whereas other forces, such as facing career demands, push partners away from each other. Duck (1994) refers to “relational maintenance as a shared meaning system” (p. 45), thereby emphasizing the importance of communication and also the human tendency to make sense of and create meaning in one’s world as a central aspect of relational maintenance. Relationship maintenance involves a number of processes and behaviors, discussed in some detail in the following section.

Strategies for Maintaining Relationships

There are likely as many strategies for maintaining relationships as there are persons in relationships, but one organized system or typology of strategies was developed by Stafford and Canary (1991). These authors considered how maintenance strategies might vary according to whether a relationship involved dating, serious dating, being engaged,
or being married, and they used several methods to collect information. With that information, Stafford and Canary developed five relational maintenance strategies that have become widely used in research on maintenance: assurances (expressing commitment, faithfulness, love); network (involvement with social networks); openness (disclosure and other communication); positivity (being upbeat and cheerful); and tasks (sharing household chores). Research by Canary, Stafford, and Semic (2002) has affirmed the importance of ongoing use of these maintenance strategies for relationship well-being. For example, “One cannot rely on a chore done last month to have a positive impact on one’s partner” (p. 403).

Based on Stafford and Canary’s (1991) strategies, it would seem that more emotional strategies, such as having open communication and expressing love, would be the most powerful maintenance strategies. Dainton and Stafford (1993), however, found that sharing tasks (a very everyday sort of behavior) was the maintenance behavior most frequently mentioned by participants. As Duck (1994) commented, “Relational maintenance contains two elements, not one; the first is strategic planning for the continuance of the relationship; and the second is the breezy allowance of the relationship to continue by means of the everyday interactions and conversations that make the relationship what it is” (p. 46). A dozen roses given by a husband to his wife on her birthday may be a dramatic assurances maintenance behavior, but working together every evening to clean up after the family’s dinner may actually be a much more powerful, if less glamorous, tasks maintenance behavior. In the Relationship Story, Elaine and Nick did some fairly dramatic assurances and openness behaviors during and after the party because they had been neglecting some of the more routine but perhaps even more important behaviors, such as task sharing.

Relationship maintenance may operate somewhat differently for different types of couples. For example, Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999), using Fitzpatrick’s (e.g., 1987) couples typology, found that couples who were classified as traditional (traditional gender roles, sharing, dependence on each other) and as independent (more equal gender roles, flexibility of the relationship) used more and varied maintenance behaviors than couples classified as separate (value individual freedom, less oriented toward sharing). And the use of particular maintenance behaviors was related differently to partners’ perceptions of the quality of their relationship for the different types of couples. In other words, different maintenance strategies worked for different couple types. Each relationship, or shared meaning system, is unique.

The personality characteristics of the individual partners are also influential in relationship maintenance. Bradbury and Fincham (1988) observed that immediate relational experiences, as well as more stable circumstances such as partners’ personality traits, can affect a relationship. Personality characteristics such as being outgoing have been associated with positive relationship functioning (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995), whereas characteristics such as being neurotic have been associated with negative relationship functioning (e.g., Sanderson & Kurdek, 1993). Thus, relational maintenance is affected by what the partners bring to the relationship, such as personality characteristics and
previous life experiences, as well as current and immediate partner behaviors, such as communication.

Minding is another approach to the issue of relational maintenance. The process of “minding the relationship” has been articulated most completely by Harvey and Omarzu (1997), who characterize minding as “a package of mutual self-disclosure, other forms of goal-oriented behavior aimed at facilitating the relationship, and attributions about self’s and other’s motivations, intentions, and effort in the relationship” (p. 224). Self-disclosure and related forms of communication are a central part of this concept, yet in Harvey and Omarzu’s view, minding is about much more than disclosure/communication. Minding involves a high level of caretaking, staying close to, renewing attachment with, and, in general, attending to one’s partner. At its best, minding is also a relationship behavior, one that requires both partners to be involved actively with one another. Trust, for example, is not the same thing as minding, but it is built in a relationship through the minding process. Minding may be love in action. Nick and Elaine had not been minding their relationship, and it showed! Minding may be one of the constructs that best illustrates the idea that a relationship and all that goes into it is a process, rather than an event. A successful relationship is built over time, through many behaviors and interactions.

Also related to the minding concept is the process of relationship awareness, defined by Acitelli (1993) as “a person’s thinking about interaction patterns, comparisons, or contrasts between himself or herself and the other partner in the relationship” (p. 151). It involves both thinking a lot about the relationship itself and also tending to think in relationship terms, such as “we” and “us,” rather than individual terms, such as “I” and “you.”

Communication

Communication, both verbal and nonverbal, forms the bedrock of close, personal relationships, including romantic relationships. Thus, it follows that theory and research on communication have provided much of the basis for the study of close relationships (e.g., Andersen & Guerrero, 1998). Since research on relational communication is too vast to be detailed here, selected findings on communication and relationships will be presented.

Burleson, Metts, and Kirch (2000) propose that interpersonal communication, examined very broadly, can be divided into the strategic/functional and the consequential/cultural approaches. The strategic approach assumes that communication is goal oriented and to some degree intentional. This approach is characterized by words such as goals, intentions, strategies, tactics, and plans. Elaine and Nick may have had good communication as a goal or intention for their marriage, but they had few actual strategies for attaining that goal. The consequential approach emphasizes that communication, whether intentional or unintentional, creates a context within which a relationship can thrive or wither. Words characterizing the consequential approach are codes, rituals,
roles, and rules. For Nick and Elaine, their unintentional rituals and roles had become increasingly either negative or disconnected as far as their communication was concerned. Their context or atmosphere was allowing their marriage to wither.

The strategic/functional and consequential/cultural approaches are made up of various components. For example, the strategic perspective emphasizes the relationship tasks accomplished by communication, including instrumental, relationship maintenance, and interaction management tasks (Burleson et al., 2000). Instrumental tasks focus interactions and include such things as requesting or offering information and providing social support. Relationship maintenance tasks include defining rules for the relationship and handling conflict. Finally, interaction management addresses the “how-to” tasks involved in developing adequate conversation between relationship partners.

These communication skills all require motivation, skill, and both verbal and nonverbal action. Although it might seem that motivation, skill, and action would be related to greater relationship positives, such as satisfaction, the outcomes are not that simple. Burleson and Denton (1997) found that in happy marriages, the wives’ communication skills were positively related to the husbands’ marital satisfaction, whereas in unhappy marriages, some of the wives’ skills were negatively associated with the husbands’ satisfaction. This double-edged sword of communication is evident to any therapist who has counseled a couple in which one partner was especially good with words. For example, lawyers are trained to do battle with words, to use words as weapons. In their relationships, lawyers can be either eloquent, using their skills to communicate clearly and lovingly with their partner, or argumentative, putting their partner on the witness stand in front of the judge or therapist while they act as the prosecuting attorney.

The consequential/cultural approach acknowledges that communication essentially defines a relationship (Wood, 2000). All relationships of a certain type—for example, engaged partners—share particular characteristics, yet each individual relationship also has its own individual feel and style. Partners construct relationship stories about such events as how they fell in love; share their own relationship language with special nicknames and words for activities such as sex; enjoy interaction routines such as having morning coffee together; and establish rituals such as spending every anniversary having dinner at a certain restaurant. Partners also develop relationship norms, which refer to things as they are, and relationship rules, which refer to how things should be (Burleson et al., 2000). For instance, a couple might set the rule that they will use direct communication to solve problems, while the couple’s norm, or typical behavior, might be that they tend to communicate indirectly, trying to avoid conflict.

Whether one views communication through the strategic/functional lens or the consequential/cultural lens, communication provides the meaning system for an intimate relationship. As detailed in earlier chapters, communication is a central feature of how people define friendship (Cole & Bradac, 1996), is one of the factors by which people determine that a friendship is truly close (Parks & Floyd, 1996), and is embedded in how relationship partners (Pasch et al., 1997) and others (Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1987) provide social support. One central aspect of communication is self-disclosure.
Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure is only one aspect of the general communicational meaning system, but it is a very significant aspect. Self-disclosure can refer, in general, to telling someone else about oneself—one’s feelings, attitudes, experiences, and so on. But in the context of a close relationship (and in the current chapter), self-disclosure concerns intimate, even risky information that we share with another. To tell about ourselves means that we simply offer facts—age, gender, place of birth, and so on. To disclose about ourselves means that we drop our social mask, cease the careful editing of our words, and share some of our innermost thoughts and feelings with another person. Telling merely requires that two people literally speak the same language, whereas disclosing requires that two people figuratively speak the same language. One goal of self-disclosure may be to tell the other person who we really are, another may be to elicit personal disclosures from the other person and thus deepen the intimacy of our relationship, and another may be just to unload a secret that has become too heavy for us to bear alone. Whatever our reasons for disclosing, this behavior can be immensely powerful.

One of the first social scientists to study disclosure was Sidney Jourard (1964), who believed that holding and hiding our innermost thoughts and feelings led to a major disconnection within ourselves and between us and others. He felt that withholding disclosure could have serious negative emotional and physical consequences for individuals and for their relationships and that offering disclosure was healing. In many ways, he has been proven right, as we will discuss in the section on wellness.

Theoretical Approaches

One important theoretical perspective on disclosure was developed by Altman and Taylor (1973) within the larger theory of social penetration. Social penetration theory (discussed in Chapter 2) is a comprehensive theory of relationship development that involves verbal and nonverbal communication as well as aspects of interpersonal perceptions and the physical environment. The theory views progressive involvement in a relationship as beginning with the general breadth of such things as self-disclosure and continuing to a greater depth of disclosure as the relationship progresses. This notion of progression in one direction was revised to allow more attention to how disclosure and other relationship aspects occur in cycles (e.g., Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981). The dialectical nature of disclosure—that is, that a pull toward openness and away from closedness/privacy is followed by a pull toward privacy and away from openness/enmeshment—has offered one useful lens through which to view self-disclosure (e.g., Altman et al., 1981). Thus, it is now believed that self-disclosure provides different functions in different situations, that it ebbs and flows both within and across relationships and over time. In the Relationship Story, Elaine and Nick apparently disclosed a great deal to each other early in their relationship but then moved too far in the opposite
direction and appeared to stop disclosing much, if anything, about how each of them felt.

Dindia (1997) notes that self-disclosure “is a life-long/relationship-long process, a process that changes as individuals and relationships change” (p. 411; italics in original). Although she acknowledges that self-disclosure has been studied typically as a personality characteristic of an individual or as a behavior enacted by relationship partners, she proposes that disclosure be thought of as a transactional process. This means that the very process of self-disclosure requires a person who discloses, a person to whom the disclosure is offered, and the transaction/interaction between them. And every transaction/interaction modifies to a greater or lesser degree both the individual persons involved and the relationship between them. The idea that self-disclosure and relationships are “mutually transformative” has also been espoused at length by Derlega et al. (1993).

This perspective underlines the developmental, as opposed to the strictly situational or so-called snapshot, nature of relationships. The developmental perspective is like a continuous video of a relationship over time, whereas the snapshot or action view of disclosure (Dindia, 1997) is like a series of single pictures. Most of the research methods currently used in social science may only capture a relationship at one point in time; even so, the ultimate vision of the relationship process should not be constrained by method, since relationships are dynamic, evolving entities, always in process (Duck & Sants, 1983).

Self-disclosure can consist of information offered about oneself—“I think . . . ,” “I feel . . . ,” “I have experienced . . . ,”—in relation to the outside world or to the relationship itself. There is an immediacy to disclosures that relate to the partner and relationship, especially to the present moment. Such relational self-disclosures provide information to the partner and are also a metaphor for the closeness of the relationship. “Thus, superficial SD [self-disclosure] communicates the relational message, ‘we are strangers’; intimate SD communicates the relational message, ‘we are friends’” (Dindia, 1997, p. 417).

Research on Self-Disclosure

Research on self-disclosure has been organized around three basic areas, including (1) individual differences in self-disclosure, (2) self-disclosure in close relationships, and (3) self-disclosure and illness/wellness (Berg & Derlega, 1987).

Women and men have been reputed to differ in self-disclosure, with women disclosing more, and indeed, women tend to disclose more intimately to women friends than men disclose to men friends (Derlega et al., 1993). However, Dindia and Allen (1992), in their meta-analysis of disclosure and gender, found only modest gender differences in self-disclosure.

Consistent with these findings is research by Burleson and his colleagues (Burleson, Kunkel, Samter, & Werking, 1996), who assessed women’s and men’s ratings
of the relative importance of affective, emotion-based communication skills versus instrumental, task-oriented communication skills in both friendships and romantic relationships. Although men and women differed slightly, in that women rated affective skills more highly than men rated them and men rated instrumental skills more highly than women rated them, overall, both women and men rated “affectively oriented skills as more important than instrumental skills” (p. 201). So, how a conversation feels may at times be more important than whether a specific problem gets solved.

Reciprocity of self-disclosure has to do with the matching, giving and receiving, of self-disclosure between partners, both in terms of intimacy level and positivity/negativity. Reciprocity is important because it is related to attraction, although Erber and Erber (2001) suggest that attraction follows from, rather than precedes, matching of self-disclosure. Reciprocity seems to be more important in acquaintanceships than in friendships and long-term romantic relationships, where self-disclosure is more variable and flexible (Derlega et al., 1993; Morton, 1978).

Disclosure between long-term partners, such as spouses, is driven by much more than a perceived need to reciprocate. Disclosure may decrease over the lifetime of a relationship (e.g., S. S. Hendrick, 1981), but the rate of decrease may slow after the couple’s early years together, much as it does for sexual frequency (i.e., declining sharply at first but much more gradually after that). This is likely part of what happened to Nick and Elaine, who communicated much more early in their relationship than they did after many years of marriage. Self-disclosure is typically a positive factor in relationships, contributing to relationship satisfaction (Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998) and relationship continuation (Sprecher, 1987).

Prager’s (2000) model of relational intimacy (discussed in Chapter 4) includes self-disclosure as one of three central components. The other two components are positive affect or emotion and listening/understanding by the partner. In this view, self-disclosure is an indispensable aspect of intimacy but not the whole of intimacy. In research that deepens current understanding of the role of self-disclosure in intimacy, Prager and Buhrmester (1998) examined the role of self-disclosure, positive affect, and partner listening/understanding in contributing to need fulfillment (or having one’s personal needs met for such things as acceptance, validation, and belongingness). Several interesting findings emerged. First, the researchers found that overall, the intimacy components of self-disclosure, positive affect, and listening/understanding were, indeed, related to need fulfillment for both women and men, but they also found “that intimacy’s contribution to need fulfillment is greater than the sum of the contributions of its component parts” (p. 455). In other words, needs are more fulfilled when all three intimacy components are present. Self-disclosure, however, was a relational positive even when the other components, such as positive affect, were not present. Self-disclosure appeared to mediate or actually soften negative interactions, so that if couples having negative interactions do more, rather than less, self-disclosing, they will do better. The authors also found that frequency of communication between partners may be less important than the intimacy of the communication.
It is important to remember, however, that there are individual preferences for disclosure, and these preferences become apparent in relationships. For example, Fitzpatrick (1987) points out that different couple types may prefer different self-disclosure styles. Fitzpatrick has identified three couple types, mentioned earlier in this chapter in connection with maintenance strategies: *Traditionals* tend to have high self-disclosure, primarily about positive things; *independents* have high willingness to disclose both positives and negatives; and *separates* have little self-disclosure about anything. These couple types also vary on other relational dimensions besides self-disclosure, as noted earlier.

Self-disclosure has also been linked to actual physical well-being. Jourard (1964) believed that nondisclosure led to estrangement from others as well as to actual physical illness. He understood that secrets have a way of “growing” in the dark of silence and becoming larger and larger barriers to good health. Research has proven Jourard to be correct. In studying the relationship between self-disclosure and traumatic or stressful life events, Pennebaker (1990) found that “excessive holding back of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can place people at high risk for both major and minor diseases” (p. 14). In an extensive program of collaborative research, Pennebaker found that the disclosure of traumatic life events—whether through writing in a journal, talking with a friend or romantic partner, or through a form of religious confession—contributed to an increase in immune system functioning and a decrease in visits to health care providers. So, selective disclosure can positively influence health.

Pennebaker (1990) did not, however, advocate indiscriminate disclosure. On the contrary, he urged care and wisdom in how one confides/discloses, since disclosure of trauma may also reveal some stigma about the discloser (e.g., she was the victim of incest; he is HIV positive) (see also Dindia, 1997). Some self-disclosures can change the nature of the relationship between the discloser and listener or can even come back to haunt the discloser. Thus, self-disclosing must be done carefully in order to ensure that so far as possible, its effects are positive and not negative for the discloser or the listener.

The awareness of the risks of disclosure points the way toward consideration of the dialectical nature of the disclosure process.

**The Dialectical Aspects of Self-Disclosure**

As observed earlier, there is a dialectical aspect to self-disclosure in that as relationship partners move from autonomy toward closeness and then move from closeness toward autonomy, their disclosures follow suit. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) have detailed the many research findings concerning the usefulness of self-disclosure and the importance of being open to others, yet they also point out the value of *less* or even *no* disclosure. For example, (1) surface talk, as contrasted to deep disclosure, is the substance of everyday interaction, (2) surface talk helps maintain an acquaintanceship network, (3) withholding disclosure can be a form of discretion, and (4) withholding disclosure allows needed privacy in relationships. These authors underscore the validity of both those who promote self-disclosure and those who promote privacy, noting that neither perspective fully
characterizes all relationships; both perspectives characterize different relationships and
even the same relationship at different points in time. The back and forth, yin and yang,
dialectical nature of disclosure is shown in everyday close relationships.

Some research (Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000) indicates that disclosure and non-
disclosure are both important for relationship satisfaction and that each is important
under different conditions. Although a general personal tendency to disclose (disposi-
tional disclosure) was not related to relationship satisfaction for married persons, more
specific disclosures of thoughts and feelings to one’s partner based on a specific context
were positively related to satisfaction. In the Relationship Story, neither Elaine nor Nick
seemed to operate as high dispositional disclosers, but when Nick told Elaine that she
was beautiful and Elaine in reply told Nick that she loved him, those contextual disclo-
sures were timely and meaningful. Nondisclosure can also be useful. Finkenauer and
Hazam (2000) found that people’s selective nondisclosure or avoidance of difficult is-
ssues in the relationship was positively related to satisfaction. However, beliefs that one’s
partner was actually keeping secrets was strongly and negatively related to disclosure.

Self-disclosure is an important part of communication, as noted earlier, but it is
typically considered to be within the verbal arena of communication. Also important is
the nonverbal arena.

Nonverbal Communication

Although much of the communication that occurs in relationships is verbal—what part-
ners do and don’t say to each other—the day-in and day-out time spent in relationships is
as much occupied with nonverbal communication, or what partners actually do. Keeley
and Hart (1994) have organized nonverbal behaviors into sets of rules, messages, and be-
aviors called codes, and these codes are in turn divided into dynamic (changing) and
static (unchanging) nonverbal codes. Dynamic codes can and do change during dyadic
interaction and include body language (posture, body orientation, eye contact), touching
behavior, and space or interaction distance (known as proxemics). Static nonverbal codes
include such things as physical appearance. Although both types of codes influence rela-
tionships, the dynamic codes are particularly powerful. “If there is a discrepancy be-
tween verbal and nonverbal channels, nonverbal channels are focused on more often and
believed” (p. 141). Nonverbal behaviors both influence positivity and intimacy in a rela-
tionship and indicate how much positivity and negative there is, and they are likewise
linked to control issues (Montgomery, 1988).

How one uses his or her body in a relationship may be more informative about pos-
tivity and intimacy than what he or she says. If a wife reaches out to touch her husband
lovingly and he pulls away, that message is worth a thousand words. When Nick put his
hand over Elaine’s in the car and she did not respond, that was an ambiguous message;
she neither reciprocated the affectionate gesture nor pulled away. Later, in the restaurant,
when Nick told Elaine she was beautiful, she flushed and also smiled. This combination of nonverbal was not ambiguous; it indicated pleasure.

Facial expressions are also highly communicative. Ekman, Friesen, and Tomkins (1971) suggest that six facial expressions display basic emotions and serve as the basis for most other expressions: surprise, happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger.

Eye contact is another powerful form of body language. Norms for gaze and eye contact vary across cultures and across types of relationships. Various theoretical approaches address questions of how eye contact is balanced between intimacy and distance. For example, Argyle and Dean (1965) propose an equilibrium model of intimacy, in which a comfortable balance exists between eye contact and interaction distance. If one partner increases his or her eye contact, the other partner might well increase his or her interaction distance (move farther back) in order to maintain balance or equilibrium. On the other hand, if one partner increases eye contact and the other partner wants to increase the intimacy level of the relationship, he or she may maintain or even decrease interaction distance.

Because nonverbal behaviors are essential ways of expressing emotion, they can be used positively, in the service of building relational intimacy and trust, or negatively, to reinforce control and dominance (Keeley & Hart, 1994). Ironically, the behaviors that can express the greatest caring, such as caressing during lovemaking, can also express the greatest violence, such as hitting and other physical abuse.

The negative aspects of nonverbal behavior will be discussed again in other chapters in the contexts of conflict, abuse, and breakup. At this point, it is important to remember that “nonverbal behaviors are indicative of quality communication. Research indicates that people pay close attention to nonverbal behaviors as indicators of the health of their relationships” (Keeley & Hart, 1994, p. 161).

Communication has been discussed from a number of directions, including metaperspectives (strategic/functional and consequential/cultural), self-disclosure’s powerful role in communication, and the importance of nonverbal communication. The discussion will now look more practically at how communication functions on a day-to-day basis in relationships and how it corresponds with relationship satisfaction.

## Day-to-Day Communication

The shared meaning systems referred to by Duck (1994) are created, in large measure, by partners’ sharing of their similarities and dissimilarities (Monsour, 1994). Research is relatively consistent in showing that similarities foster attraction and other positive characteristics of relationships, yet no two partners are ever similar in every way. The ways in which partners handle dissimilarities is thus very significant. Partners’ recognition of their similarities, whether actual or simply perceived, leads to further communication and assumptions of further commonalities (Monsour, 1994). Yet inevitably, communication
reveals dissimilarities as well as similarities. And “accurate understanding of the similarities and differences between oneself and a relational partner lays the groundwork for building intimacy in a relationship” (p. 128).

One communication approach to handling couples’ differences is the demand/withdraw communication pattern (e.g., Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). In this situation, one partner attempts to engage the other in communication typically intended to bring about some change in the relationship, and the partner on the receiving end withdraws or avoids the communication interaction, also avoiding conflict and possible relationship change. This pattern has been described as gendered in the sense that in heterosexual couples, women are more likely to do the demanding/seeking change, whereas men are more likely to do the withdrawing/resisting change.

The issue is less directly about gender than it is about desired change, however. In recent research, when married couples were asked “to discuss an issue about which the husband wanted the wife to change and an issue about which the wife wanted the husband to change . . . wives demanded and husbands withdrew during discussions of her issue, whereas husbands demanded and wives withdrew during discussions of his issue” (Klinetob & Smith, 1996, p. 945). In other words, when he wanted change, he pushed and she backed away. When she wanted change, she pushed and he backed away.

What is communicated, how it is communicated, and how it is received and responded to are all important aspects of ongoing communication processes. Reis and Shaver (1988) emphasize the reciprocal, or back-and-forth, nature of communication in the intimacy process. They provide a model in which, using our Relationship Story as an example, Nick’s goals, motives, and fears are disclosed or expressed emotionally (i.e., communicated) to Elaine, who has her own goals, motives, and fears. She then understands Nick’s communication through her own interpretive filter and responds to Nick. Nick understands Elaine’s response through his own interpretive filter, and the process continues. It is very interactive and can be improved or derailed at any point. “Intimacy is a dynamic process whose operation is best observed in the pattern of communication and reaction between two people” (p. 383). This interactional view of intimacy is very consistent with the interactional view of disclosure, discussed earlier.

One reason that communication patterns and styles are of such intense interest to relationship scholars is that communication is important for relational quality and satisfaction. First of all, there are communication variables that positively influence satisfaction. For example, in an exploration of communication, conflict, and love, Meeks et al. (1998) found that people’s perceptions of their partner’s ability to take their perspective (an aspect of empathy that is conveyed through communication) was positively related to both satisfaction and love. Game-playing love and hostile conflict tactics were negatively related to satisfaction.

Still other research has shown that communication skills training, which can be taught in a number of settings—from premarital education to marital enrichment to marital therapy—has a positive impact on relationships (Cole & Cole, 1999). Other research has questioned the value of specific aspects of communication (e.g., active listening) in
situations of marital conflict (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Interestingly, however, this very research found that other communicational behaviors—such as a softened, rather than harsh, escalation of conflict by a wife and a husband’s willingness to accept influence from his wife—were both linked with marital happiness and stability. And still other research has linked active listening skills to improvement of the relational environment (Cole & Cole, 1999).

Communication tactics can function very differently for couples, not only depending on the couple, as noted earlier, but also depending on the context. For instance, it has been taken for granted that interrupting someone is impolite. Daigen and Holmes (2000) have assessed the function that communication interruptions performed in particular interactions for 78 married or cohabiting couples. Although there were several functions expressed by interruptions, the bottom-line finding relevant to relationship satisfaction was that interruptions used to indicate agreement were positively related both to how the partners reacted emotionally to their conversation and to their current satisfaction. But interruptions employed to indicate disagreement were negatively related to affect and satisfaction. All interruptions are obviously not created equal.

Negative interruptions—and more generally, negative communications—have the potential to hurt partners and impair relationship functioning. Vangelisti and Young (2000) have sought to answer questions regarding hurtful communication messages and if such messages have the same impact on people whether the messages are perceived to be intentional or unintentional. When people believed that someone had been intentionally hurtful to them during an interaction, they were less satisfied with their relationship with that person, felt less close to that person, and in general experienced a “distancing effect” (p. 393) from that person. When people had a hurtful interaction they thought was not intentional, they didn’t experience these negative relational effects. Vangelisti and Young’s research underlines the importance of context in assessing how communication behavior impacts a relationship. Whether the behavior is positive or negative, whether it seems intentional or unintentional, whether it is directed at the partner or someone else—all these factors are related to the behavior’s impact on the relationship. For some suggestions on effective communication, see the Up Close box on page 132.

It is apparent that aspects of communication are related to satisfaction with a relationship and that communication in all its forms is an essential building block of maintaining a relationship. Before concluding this discussion of the various methods of relationship maintenance, however, it is important to consider briefly the issue of relationship satisfaction itself.

**Relationship Satisfaction**

*Relationship satisfaction* is a relatively new concept and recent phenomenon, since historically, marriages were either arranged by families or based on convenience, with limited alternatives (Levinger, 1997). However, “amid today’s greatly increased alternatives,
decreased social constraints, and heightened pair instability ... it matters far more how well two partners are pleased with the quality of their relationship” (p. 3).

So, what is relationship satisfaction? This term is typically used to refer to people’s subjective feelings about their relationship. This is in contrast to relationship adjustment, which has been viewed as comprising the more objective characteristics and behaviors in a relationship (S. S. Hendrick, 1995). Fletcher, Simpson, and Thomas (2000) propose that satisfaction is only one of six relationship quality components that are different and rather specific indicators of overall relational quality but can be combined into an overall construct called relationship quality. The additional components are commitment, intimacy, love, passion, and trust, all of which are discussed in this volume.

Taking a somewhat different perspective, Karney and Bradbury (1995) have developed a model of relationship quality and stability, in which satisfaction also plays an important role. They propose that a truly comprehensive approach to predicting quality requires the analysis of multiple, interrelated influences on quality. These influences or predictors include enduring vulnerabilities, such as personality characteristics; stressful events; and adaptive processes, which refer to various coping strategies and skills used by the relationship partners. From this viewpoint, relationship quality is clearly a multidimensional construct.

Guidelines for Effective Communication

The following strategies are suggested for effective communication in a romantic relationship:

- Assure your partner of your affection.
- Be open about your feelings.
- Be positive and cheerful.
- Pay attention to your partner; mind the relationship.
- Think in relational terms, such as “we,” instead of individual terms, or “you” and “me.”
- Balance self-disclosure with privacy.
- Make it a rule not to keep secrets.
- Keep your nonverbals positive (e.g., don’t frown or roll your eyes).
- If you want more intimacy, increase your eye contact.
- Take your partner’s perspective.
- Only interrupt your partner to agree with him or her.
- Be a good listener.
A more global view of relationship quality is that proposed by Fincham, Beach, and Kemp-Fincham (1997), who suggest that relationship quality is essentially two-dimensional, with both positive and negative relationship quality being important to a couple. Partners can either be high or low on positive quality or negative quality. Thus, partners with high positive quality and low negative quality would be happy; those with high positive quality and high negative quality would be ambivalent; those with high negative quality and low positive quality would be distressed; and those with low positive and low negative quality would be indifferent.

What most people are interested in, however, is not definitions or complex models but rather the utility and meaning of satisfaction. What makes satisfaction important is that it can be linked with whether relationships actually continue or end. For example, in one study of dating couples, couples lower in satisfaction and other specific qualities were more likely to break up (S. S. Hendrick et al., 1988). Satisfaction can be considered a sort of “barometer” of a relationship’s well-being—not the only barometer, of course, but an important one (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

The research on gender differences in relationship satisfaction provides mixed results. Looking at marriage specifically, we can ask, “Are wives happier than husbands, or are husbands happier than wives?” Surveys have shown that men seem to profit more from marriage than do women, at least in terms of such dimensions as physical health and well-being (Cutrona, 1996), and some time ago, sociologist Jesse Bernard (1972) referred to “his marriage” and “her marriage” as different experiences of the same marriage, based on gender and gender roles. Most research indicates, however, that women and men experience similar levels of satisfaction in relationships (e.g., Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997), although the factors contributing to satisfaction may sometimes differ slightly between women and men. For same-sex couples, predictors of satisfaction as well as satisfaction levels are very similar to those for heterosexual couples (Peplau & Spaulding, 2000).

It is not surprising that satisfaction is related to many, if not all, of the emotions and behaviors that operate in partnered relationships. For example, the presence of passionate love and the absence of game-playing love are positively related to satisfaction (S. S. Hendrick et al., 1988), as are perceived perspective-taking ability of a partner and the avoidance of hostile and aggressive forms of conflict (Meeks et al., 1998). Satisfaction is also related to partners’ attachment styles (secure styles for both partners is optimal) (Feeney et al., 2000) and to such things as relationship commitment. In fact, Rusbult (e.g., Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) proposes that commitment is more important than satisfaction in terms of relational outcome. A number of approaches to measuring satisfaction exist, with short and easy-to-administer measures being the most useful for routine clinical situations. One such measure is Hendrick’s (S. S. Hendrick, 1988; S. S. Hendrick, Dicke, & C. Hendrick, 1998) Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS), displayed in a modified form in the following Up Close box (see page 134). As an interesting exercise, take the RAS once in regard to your current or most recent romantic relationship and again for your ideal relationship. Compare your results to see how closely your current relationship fits your ideal one.
Summary and Conclusions

Relational maintenance refers to a wide variety of behaviors that facilitate a relationship’s success and survival. Having the same view of the relationship, or a shared meaning system, is related to maintenance. Five strategies for maintaining relationships include assurances, network involvement, openness, positivity, and sharing tasks. Minding and relationship awareness are two additional maintenance strategies that involve cognitive and affective focus on the partner and the relationship.

Communication is central to relationship maintenance and can be divided into strategic/functional and consequential/cultural approaches. The former concentrates on

Relationship Assessment Scale

For each question, circle the answer that best describes your current romantic relationship. After you have answered all the questions, add up your score. The higher your score, the more satisfied you are. (Note that the maximum possible is 35 and the lowest is 7.)

1. How well does your partner meet your needs?
   1 = Poorly  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Extremely well

2. In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?
   1 = Unsatisfied  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Extremely satisfied

3. How good is your relationship compared to most?
   1 = Poor  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Excellent

4. How often do you wish you hadn’t gotten in this relationship?
   1 = Very often  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Never

5. To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?
   1 = Hardly at all  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Completely

6. How much do you love your partner?
   1 = Not much  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Very much

7. How many problems are there in your relationship?
   1 = Very many  2  3 = Average  4  5 = Very few

Total Score _____
intentional behaviors, whereas the latter is more concerned with the culture of the relationship. Different types of couples may rely on different maintenance and communication strategies in expressing their relational cultures.

Self-disclosure is an important form of communication and refers to honestly telling someone else about one’s intimate feelings and experiences. Self-disclosure may be broader and more general at the beginning of a relationship but gradually becomes deeper as a relationship continues, according to social penetration theory. Relational partners have many opposing or dialectical needs, such as the needs for openness/disclosure and closedness/privacy. Disclosure, like other relational phenomena, changes over the course of a relationship; it is a process. Men and women differ only moderately in disclosure. Along with positive affect and listening/understanding by a partner, self-disclosure has been viewed as one of three components of intimacy. Finally, the disclosure of traumatic events, though risky, may be a pathway toward greater physical and mental health. Both communication and intimacy are interactive processes in relationships.

Nonverbal communication is very powerful, and if verbal and nonverbal messages differ, it is the nonverbal message that is likely to be believed. Body language, facial expressions, and eye contact are all key aspects of nonverbal communication.

Partners’ handling of both similarities and dissimilarities has implications for relationship success. When partners want relational change, they tend to push for it, and when they want things to remain as they are, they tend to back off. This sequence of behaviors is called demand/withdraw. Although interrupting a partner can be viewed as negative, interruptions that show agreement are positively related to partners’ emotion and current satisfaction. Hurtful communications are less problematic when they are seen as unintentional, as opposed to intentional.

Maintenance, including communication, is important for relationship satisfaction, which typically refers to people’s subjective feelings about their relationship. Relationship satisfaction, quality, and commitment are all related to relationship health.

**Suggested Reading**


Chapter 6  ■  Communication and Relational Maintenance

