

Dating & finding a mate that fits you

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., LP
Wednesday, 03 August 2011 11:47

Years ago, there was a song by Smokey Robinson entitled: “*You’d Better Shop Around.*” The lyrics of the song tell the story of a mother who is preparing her son to take his time in order to find true love. The mother says to her son:

“Just as sure as the winds gonna blow, there is one thing I want you to know, women come and women go—before you tell em that you love em so...my momma told me, you’d better shop around.”

So naturally today when I work with individuals and couples around relationship issues, I often recall the lyrics of the song. In fact, I think of dating as being very similar to the process of shopping.

While grocery shopping is rarely exciting, I do get excited when its time to shop for shoes. In fact, I love shopping for shoes and there is this great shoe store called DSW, which houses what appears to be thousands of pairs of shoes. This virtual “world of shoes” is populated by shoes of every quality, shape, color and size! I realized that it is “okay” for me to try on several pairs of high quality shoes--- I just don’t invest in them all or take them home with me! The problem is that many of us sisters (and brothers for that matter) have been shopping at “Pay Less” expecting high qualityand end up wondering why things fall apart quickly.

When it comes to finding a mate in life, it may be useful to know that relationships, similar to shopping, have phases. In fact, I use a model that suggests that relationships go through seven stages/phases. The first stage of a relationship is called **Initiation**. The **Initiation Stage** begins with the initial meeting and ends with the decision to start relating. So, if you use my shopping analogy, this is the phase when you walk down the aisle and “

Oh la-la

” there is an attractive pair of shoes that catches your eye. You feel a rush of adrenaline as you see that this type of shoe usually costs \$225 and now it is on sale for only \$50. You know immediately that you’ve just ‘got to’ have them. In relationships, some call this the

Eros Phase

(named after the god Cupid, or Eros) because there is some initial attraction that seems compelling enough to encourage another meeting. Partners become profoundly “stricken” by the potential of getting closer to each other. One study suggested that during this phase, people even perceive that their partners’ breath is sweeter!

The second stage is called the **Exploration Stage**. During the Exploration Stage, there are initial attempts to determine if there is a basis on which a relationship can be built. This is the stage in shopping during which you look at the boxes underneath the “model shoe” to see if the shoe is available in your size. Sometimes, we may get a pair of shoes that is not quite our size. For example, you know that you usually wear a size 8 ½ or a 9, but this shoe is only available in an 8. You may even try the shoes on and attempt to walk around in them to see how they fit under the pressure and weight of movement. When it comes to relationships, couples experience this process as they attempt to give and get an expanded view of who they are as

Dating & finding a mate that fits you

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., LP
Wednesday, 03 August 2011 11:47

individuals. This phase is a highly active phase in which couples engage in doing lots of activities together and exchange thoughts, feelings and information. This phase allows for the deepening of a relationship or provides the first critical juncture at which the relationship can terminate.

The third stage is called **Establishment**. The Establishment Stage is characterized by the decision of the two people to call themselves a “couple.” There is a clear decision to begin to have a durable relationship that can be mutually rewarding. During this phase issues of power and control, intimacy and communication begin to arise. In the shopping world, this is when you decide to buy the shoe and take it home with you.

The next phase is called the **Discovery** Stage. The Discovery Stage is characterized by experiences that tend to bring out the more basic, underlying and stable aspects of the partners. If we continue to use our analogy of shoes, this is the stage when you realize that those beautiful shoes match perfectly with four of your favorite outfits. You also discover that you can only wear those beautiful new shoes about 30 minutes before they start to hurt your feet. You notice that your toes cramp, blisters form and your feet began to swell the longer you have them on. In the Discovery stage of love relationships, each partner begins to discover more about themselves and their partner, and often discover aspects about themselves that they may not have been previously aware of (or not aware of in the same way). The needs of each partner changes as their relationship matures and as new aspects of each other’s personality emerge to present new challenges to the relationship. Basically, this phase of a relationship is the uncovering of each partner’s needs, beliefs, fears, and hopes... Suddenly, one may actually notice that her partner has had bad breath all along!

The next stage is called the **Redefinition** Stage. The Redefinition Stage brings an attempt to act on new discoveries in a way that would enhance the value of the relationship and strengthen the bond between both partners. In our shoe analogy, this phase is comparable to redefining the conditions under which you would wear your new shoes. Maybe you would decide that the shoes can be worn only after you take them to a store and get them stretched. Or maybe you will decide that you will only wear them to church or to a drop-in reception. Redefinition is an ongoing aspect of any relationship and is critical to its survival in a way that is beneficial to both partners. This is a stormy time because partners don’t usually show an equal desire to redefine the relationship. Usually one partner feels he or she is asked to give more than his or her fair share. For a couple to survive this phase there must be a willingness to risk self-disclosure. *Healthy relationships are actively involved in discovery and redefinition. Thus, couples are constantly challenged to adjust and readjust.*

If they do not redefine their relationships, their relationship goes to the next phase called Discouragement.

Dating & finding a mate that fits you

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., LP
Wednesday, 03 August 2011 11:47

The **Discouragement Stage** is the point in a relationship when one or both partners feel that their needs are not being met in the relationship as it is. One or both partners may feel that they have three options. They can choose to settle for the relationship the way it is, allow discouragement to inspire an effort to redefine the relationship, or they can allow discouragement to lead to emotional withdrawal and detachment. Most relationships enter the discouragement phase at some point. Yet, it is the manner in which their discouragement gets resolved that determines whether a couple breaks up or stays together. In our shoe analogy, during this phase, you notice that when you wear the shoes, although you look nice, you are severely hampered in your ability to network at church or at drop-in social events. At this point, you may be asking yourself if it is worth keeping these shoes versus giving them away. In relationships, if couples do not adequately work through the Discouragement Stage, they inevitably reach the final relationship stage called Rejection.

One person finally calling it quits characterizes the **Rejection Phase**. In our shoe analogy, this is when you say to yourself: “I don’t care how good looking these shoes are, I’m never going to wear them again and I can’t stand the pain.” In romantic relationships, the person who initiates the ending of the relationship has withdrawn the emotional investment from the relationship and has probably been privately working on withdrawing for some time (unconsciously at first). During this time, affectionate feelings may or may not have developed toward someone else. Depending on the degree to which both partners managed redefinition and discouragement, the couple can openly discuss dissolving the relationship. If the discouragement and redefinition attempts have not been discussed prior to this phase, the partner receiving the news may experience emotional jarring and may relate that he or she was unaware that a problem existed in the relationship. During this phase, the person who initiates the break-up may decide to end the relationship because he or she previously felt rejected, discounted, or ignored earlier by the partner and no longer feels hopeful that a resolution may ensue. The Rejection phase is not a necessary part of the life of a relationship. It only occurs when “Redefinition” is no longer possible and one partner is unable or unwilling to invest in what is perceived as a painful relationship.

I’d like to close with these final points in my advice about shopping for shoes and love relationships. *First, don’t force love--- and realize that love should not hurt.* When I was younger, I used to “force shoes to fit”—no matter how much they hurt. It was kind of like some of us do in our current relationships; I’d force them to fit me because I simply wanted to have those particular shoes.

Secondly, all shoes are not for you and were not designed to fit your feet!

As I got older, I soon discovered that had I simply put them back on the shelf and moved on (because those shoes were not for me), I would have quickly discovered that two aisles over there was a pair of shoes, equally beautiful, that fit me like a glove—and on sale!

Finally, Let go-- the Universe will provide the mate you are looking for as you follow your path.

Dating & finding a mate that fits you

Written by BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., LP
Wednesday, 03 August 2011 11:47

One day, I saw a shoe that was absolutely beautiful, but I couldn't find the mate. I had the store clerk looking and she could not find it either. I became so discouraged because it seemed that no matter how hard I looked, I would not be able to find this "perfect shoe." I decided to let it go and move on to checking out. There were three check-out lanes, and as things go, I happened to be called to check-out at Lane Two. As I stood there with my other purchases, there right in front of me was the missing shoe!

BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, Ph.D., L.P. is a Clinical Psychologist in private practice, serves as President of Brakins Consulting and Psychological Services, and is the Executive Director of the African American Child Wellness Institute. The mission of the African American Child Wellness Institute is to promote the psychological and spiritual liberation of children of African Descent by providing culturally specific mental health services and by developing culture-based, holistic wellness resources, research and practices. Dr. Garrett-Akinsanya warns that this column should in no way be construed as constituting a therapeutic relationship through counseling or advice. To forward a comment about this article or to make an appointment, please contact Dr. Garrett-Akinsanya by email @ bravadaakinsanya@hotmail.com or by telephone at 612-302-3140 or 763-522-0100.