

Interpersonal Relationship Development

Emily Worthy

School of Christian Studies and Arts, Mississippi College

Communication Department, Mississippi College

Abstract

Every love story is different. Sometimes it takes meeting the wrong person to meet the right one, sometimes it's hard to communicate, a lot of times it can be confusing, and this love story is all of that and more. Emily met Eric through work, and Emily got to know him through a previous boyfriend. Their story goes through some ups and downs just like any other, but the highs well outnumber the lows. Their relationship goes through six stages and Eric and Emily's connection is constantly strengthening through communication. Emily applies the various ideas that she studies to their relationship and tries her best to pass on her knowledge to Eric as they venture into the unknown territory that is their future together. As the couple learns, it takes dedication, good communication, and true love to navigate these waters and come out stronger. Eric and Emily's story is a prime example of young adults figuring out a relationship, while agreeing to never give up, and applying various ideas learned through their background and schooling to help in their journey.

Interpersonal Relationship Development

Interpersonal relationship development is important to understand, and looking back on relationships can be crucial for knowing how they develop. No relationship is the same, and so no development process is the same either. There are many factors to this such as the stages of development, conflict styles, and conflict management styles.

Stages of a Developmental Relationship

Adler et. al., 2022 states that there are ten stages of relational development as demonstrated in Knapp's relational development model (p.293). Eric and Emily's relationship has gone through the first six stages of Knapp's model: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, bonding, differentiating, and circumscribing.

Initiating

Initiating is the first stage of a relationship. In essence, the initiating stage is two people showing each other that they are interested in talking and they are worth talking to (Alder, et. al., 2022, p. 294). Eric and Emily met each other in April of 2023 at a locally owned donut shop. He was a manager of one of the locations of Divine Donuts, and she had just begun working there. At the time, Emily only had a slight physical attraction to Eric. Eric on the other hand was in a relationship, and when asked his initial thoughts about Emily, he responded with "I thought you were cute, but I couldn't say anything because I was in a relationship" (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024). The two had quick conversations at the beginning, only speaking in the short time that Emily arrived at work while Eric was finishing his last few tasks before leaving.

Experimenting and Uncertainty Reduction

After a relationship passes the Initiating stage, it goes into the Experimenting stage. Experimenting consists of more small talk and getting to know things about the other person (Adler et. al., 2022, p. 294). Emily began dating Eric's brother Norris in July 2023, and while

they were dating, they would go and do things with Norris's siblings. Because of this, Emily got to know the family, and specifically more about Eric. One particular time after going to Party Safari the group went to eat and Emily learned that she and Eric were both fans of a particular game series. This is an example of what is called uncertainty reduction, which is a key part of the experimenting stage of relational development. Uncertainty reduction is the process of which two people make small talk with the goal to find common ground and get to know each other better (Alder et. al., 2022, p. 294). Their shared love of motorcycles is another example of uncertainty reduction. Eric and Emily learned more about each other throughout that time using the uncertainty reduction method.

In October, 2023, Emily and Norris broke up. The next time she saw Eric, they talked about it. Eric wanted to help her and offered to talk to his brother, but it was to no avail. Emily on the other hand saw this an opportunity to get closer to Eric as he had gotten out of his relationship months prior. She lent him some of the games from the series they both enjoyed as a way of thanking him.

Intensifying

The Intensifying stage comes after Experimenting. One thing that happens in this stage is that the two individuals will try to spend more time with each other (Adler et. al., 2022 p. 295). Eric would text Emily when he finished a section, or needed help on a particular part. This allowed them to talk about their favorite and least favorite parts of the games and spend more time together. They also began to spend more time with each other face-to-face. In early to mid-November, Emily asked Eric to start going to the gym with her. She had wanted to go for a while but not by herself. Eric agreed and they started going every day after she got off of work.

Another part of the Intensifying stage is hinting and flirting (Alder et. al., 2022, p. 295). As they spent more time together, Eric began to make up nicknames for Emily. However, Emily was not sure if she was reading the situation right. On December 1, 2023, Emily made a plan to

find out if Eric liked her. The previous night, the two went back and forth texting questions to get to know each other. One of the questions Eric asked Emily if there was anything he might not know about her. At the time, Emily couldn't come up with an answer, but the next day she remembered that she had been learning how to speak Spanish. When Eric was asked to recall the conversation he says,

I remember you saying that you were learning Spanish. So, I asked you to say something and it basically translated to I was just a friend. I texted something back about being friend zoned and from there we kind of just realized that we liked each other and started dating (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024).

After Eric and Emily realized that they liked each other, they agreed to start dating.

Since then, Eric and Emily's relationship has grown stronger. They began spending time with each other after the gym, in the parking lot, before heading home. They would talk to and hold each other, "Everything seemed great. I knew instantly that you were the one," Eric says (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024).

Integrating

Integrating is the fourth stage of relational development. During this stage, individuals begin to push away old habits and take on a shared identity. In fact, couples are likely to be invited to things as one unit (Alder et. al., 2022, p. 295). Once Eric got comfortable with Emily's family, he began to join them at Christian Motorcyclists Association (CMA) events. The two were attached at the hip no matter what, and soon others began to notice that if there was one, then the other wasn't far behind. Additionally, those that saw their relationship started to invite them as one. On the topic, Eric noted that "If someone invited me to something, they would assume that you were coming too" (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024). Though Eric and Emily hadn't been dating long, they entered the Integrating stage quickly and hardly left each other's side.

Likewise, the couple began to share habits, “I wasn’t openly affectionate and you didn’t joke a whole lot. Once we got together, I adopted your affectionate nature and you took on my humorous behavior,” Eric claimed (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024).

This exemplifies pushing away their old habits and creating a shared identity.

Bonding

Bonding is the next stage, and consists of publicly officializing the relationship (Adler et. al., 2022, p. 296). Eric and Emily have not done what most would consider the “usual” act of publicly officializing their relationship, such as moving in together or getting engaged. However, they have made symbolic gestures by public displays of affection and sharing clothes. As Eric commented, “We’re not old enough to get married or move in together, but we’ve made a public gesture big enough to have people say that we’re practically married.” Another way that they have made a public gesture was by changing their Facebook status to “in a relationship.”

Differentiating

Differentiating comes after Bonding. In this stage, the individuals shy away from doing everything together, and begin to do more things on their own (Adler et. al., 2022, p. 296). Eric and Emily entered this stage in the fall of 2024, when Emily moved away for college. Though they are not far away from each other, the distance has caused Eric and Emily to do more things without one another. Additionally, they do not take every opportunity to be with each other as they used to. A prime example of that would be going to the gym. Emily has grown weary of the gym, but Eric still thoroughly enjoys it. Correspondingly, Emily enjoys relaxing in her room, drawing, and writing.

Circumscribing

Circumscribing is the sixth stage and the last stage that Eric and Emily have experienced. During the Circumscribing stage, the individuals begin to talk less often, and may choose to withdraw themselves when a disagreement starts. Eric and Emily have entered this stage as recently as

mid-September. Eric states that

We don't talk all day like we used to, and it's not because we don't love each other

anymore. This is just something that happens. Part of it is probably because you're in college and we have less time together. Another part of it is that I have made other friends since you left (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024).

Furthermore, Eric and Emily do not talk as openly as they once did. With disagreements becoming more frequent, one or both individuals tend to opt out or withdraw from the conversation either by not talking or asking to change the subject.

Present Day

Like any relationship, Eric and Emily go back and forth between stages. As they learn and grow together, their relational development will continue to fluctuate. There are two main factors of this, conflict styles and conflict management.

Conflict Style

Understanding relational conflict styles is important to bettering relationships. Alder et. al., 2022 presents three relational conflict styles: volatile, avoidant, and validating (p. 351). After reading over the three types of conflict styles, Eric and Emily concluded that they fall under the first category, volatile. When they argue, they tend to be passionate, even over small things. Eric's responded to this realization, "I know we're the first one, but what do we need to do to get to the third type?" (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024). The answer to Eric's question is a six-step process by Marshall 2024: consider that both sides are right, look deeper into the problem, do not run away from the conflict, be vulnerable, find similarities, find a solution (para. 9-14). Though they have not yet done these steps, they have communicated similarly, and they agreed that this style of conflict resolution is most beneficial. Another thing that the couple has deemed as helpful is emotional regulation. Ramsey 2023 claims that mindfulness and effective communication are key to emotional regulation (para. 13). Emily tends

to become too emotional in high stress situations, and thus practicing emotional regulation can cause her to be calmer during conflict. Eric as well can practice this as he tends to cause Emily more emotional distress during conflict, which he has recognized.

Conflict Management

Aside from the aforementioned conflict resolution method, Alder et. al., 2022 suggests that there are five conflict management styles, and not every style will solve every problem (p. 400). These styles are called competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising.

Competing: My Way

First, Competing is a win-lose management style. Competing is when the conflict comes out with a winner or loser, and it is defined as one person having power over the other Alder et. al., 2022, p. 404). In Eric and Emily's relationship, Eric has taken the reins in this management style the majority of the time. "When you know you have stuff you need to do, I tell you to get it done or we're not hanging out" (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024). As Eric mentioned, he feels a sense of power in conflicts when he knows that holding something over Emily can help the situation. Though it sounds bad, holding something over someone else is not always a bad thing. Hampson notes that ultimatums such as Eric's can be healthy as long as the intent is good (Jackson, as cited in Hampson, 2023, para. 27). Eric has not abused this power over Emily: thus, he is using this conflict management style appropriately.

Collaborating: Our Way

Collaborating is another style of conflict management, win-win. Instead of one person giving up or losing, when using this style, the members involved choose an outcome that will please everyone (Adler, et. al., 2022, p. 406.) Eric and Emily have used this type of conflict style on multiple occasions; usually, it is used when deciding what vehicle to take to events. Emily does not like riding her motorcycle long distances for multiple days, and Eric despises driving in a car or truck unless he absolutely has to. The conflict that this causes is that while they want to spend

time together and talk on the way to events, they cannot agree on whether to take an enclosed vehicle or their motorcycles. The Collaborating resolution is for Emily to take her car, Eric to take his bike, and for the two of them to stay connected through a phone call. The couple has done this on several occasions.

Avoiding: No Way

Next, Avoiding is a lose-lose conflict management style which Alder et. al., 2022 describes as ignoring the conflict (p. 401). Avoiding is the most prominent management style exhibited in Emily and Eric's relationship. Eric remarks, "I'm tired after work, and I've been in relationships where conflict never gets resolved even when we argue. So, I tend to stay away from conflict a lot of times" (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024). Emily's introverted personality and Eric's extroverted personality clashing is the best example of this. Many times, when out with friends, Eric will think that Emily is not enjoying herself because she is by herself. Meanwhile, Emily feels left behind because Eric is talking to so many other people. Eric and Emily usually tend to avoid this conflict by using the Avoiding conflict management style, as they do not seem to come to any conclusions when discussing the issue.

Accommodating: Your Way

Accommodating is the next conflict management style. According to Alder et. al., 2022, this management style is a lose-win style. Opposite of Competing, in Accommodating, one individual will make a sacrifice for the other (p. 402). When it comes to Eric and Emily's relationship, whenever this management style is used, it is usually Emily sacrificing. "You do sacrifice a lot for me, especially going and doing stuff that you know I want to do, even if you don't," Eric acknowledges (E. Jones, personal communication, September 28, 2024). Emily often feels like she has to accommodate to keep the conflict from lasting. She also does this because she is unsure how to deal with conflict when it does arise.

Compromising: Half Way

Finally, Compromising is a form of lose-lose conflict management where the two individuals get part of what they want (Adler, et. al., 2022, p. 405). Eric and Emily have only used this style once. In early July of 2024, Emily's father had a should-have-been-fatal motorcycle wreck. He survived, but the event caused stress and tension on everyone involved, specifically Eric and Emily's relationship. Emily was afraid to see her father in such a state and didn't want to go see him in the hospital as a result. On the other hand, Eric wanted to be there as long as he could, as much as he could. This disagreement caused heavy tension between the two and began to strain their relationship. Eventually, they came up with a compromise: they would go to the hospital, but only stay for an hour or two. This allowed Eric to be with Emily's dad, and Emily had time away to grieve and calm her nerves.

Conclusion

All in all, Eric and Emily's relationship is unique in more ways than one. They have reached six of the stages in Knapp's relational development stage, and they use all types of conflict management styles to try to achieve what they see as a better conflict style.

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