CHAPTER
10

Communication and the Process of Relationship Disengagement

Dear Dr. Knapp,

How do you know when a relationship is over? This seems like a very simple question, but I think I may be staying in a relationship that has already ended. I've been involved in this relationship for almost six years. It was great for the first five years. Sure, we had a few rough times, but we always seemed to work things out. The last six months have been terrible. I went to Europe to study for a semester and now that I've returned everything has changed. We seem unaware of each others' needs and feelings. It is like we are bored with each other. We have not had any big fights or anything. We just seem to be drifting apart. What happened?

Confused

There are many reasons why relationships come apart. In this case, it may have been a combination of the two people spending so much time away from each other, each pursuing different interests and growing in different directions during that time. In previous chapters, we've discussed how people get together. This chapter and the next focus on how relationships come apart and how people communicate the feelings and ideas associated with relationship disengagement.

It takes a couple seconds to say Hello, but takes forever to say Good-bye.

—Anonymous

The bonds that hold people in relationships can dissolve with abrupt suddenness; they can be eaten away over a period of years as if small but regular doses of poison were at work, or they can loosen as the people in the relationship drift apart. The end of a relationship may be intensely volatile and threatening; it may resemble long-simmering coals that never seem to get around to bursting into flames. Or as life-giving energies are increasingly withheld from the relationship, the participants may just grow weary of a dull and unrewarding co-presence.

Terminating Relationships

Obviously, messages that communicate distancing, disengagement, and de-escalation are not limited to the termination stage of a relationship. They can and do occur in all the other interaction stages as well.

There are instances when a relationship begins to deteriorate before it starts; that is, one person does not return the normal approaching features of the greeting ritual. A common example is found in the numerous distancing moves performed by urban shoppers when approached by a street person or beggar; the shoppers avoid eye contact and verbalizations, stiffen up, and try to physically move away from the greeter. The avoidance of a greeting from an acquaintance or friend is an especially severe step toward relationship de-escalation, providing the snub cannot be effectively explained as accidental—"Oh, Jeez, I didn't see you," or "Wow, I didn't even realize you were talking to me. My mind was a million miles away." The reason that the absence of a greeting to an acquaintance or friend can be so devastating is that, among other things, the greeting ritual acknowledges the other's humanity and existence, a courtesy expected by all but one's most detestable enemies.

People may move directly to the avoiding or terminating stages following a greeting ritual. Since neither party has much time and energy invested in the relationship at this point, one person will not notice if the other unilaterally arranges things so that future contact is avoided. In large gatherings when an individual is meeting many new people, it is not uncommon for both parties to agree effervescently to "try to get together sometime" without the least commitment to such a course of action. Often both parties will accurately send and receive the metamessage: "Nice to meet and be with you at this time, but we probably won't be together again. If we are, that's fine." Sometimes, of course, one party either misses the metamessage or sincerely wishes to extend the duration of the association.

Obviously, many things may occur during the initiating stage that make the development of the relationship slower or decay-prone—greeting a person with the wrong name, exhibiting inappropriate greeting behavior for the type of relationship established, or observing some stigmatizing feature that runs against expectations for a desirable person with whom to build a relationship (height, weight, disfigurement, race).

There may be similar complications for two individuals who find themselves at the experimenting stage. When small talk is in order and one or both persons either clam up, argue, jabber meaninglessly, or in some other way avoid fulfilling the interpersonal contract, relationship development is naturally put in greater jeopardy. Sometimes the two participants simply cannot find an integrating topic; or when integrating topics have been established, a simple phrase may serve to shatter and disintegrate—"Yes, my husband always says.... " uttered in a context in which at least one party expected the other to be unmarried. At other times, de-escalation from experimenting may not be intentional, but because of other commitments, other friends, living arrangements, or differing lifestyles, it may be difficult to arrange meetings and the couple may drift into the avoiding stage.

For most of us, the most vivid referent for a terminated relationship centers on a relationship that grew beyond the experimenting stage into intensifying, integrating, or bonding. Our involvement in these relationships is stronger and the withdrawal process is likely to be more dramatic. But even relationships that have been intimate manifest termination signals before the termination stage. Just as we are made aware of our eventual biological death prior to old age and as some conversational partners nervously look at their watch soon after a conversation begins, established intimate relationships also may provide some early signs of possible termination.

Reasons for Breaking Up

Virtually anything that creates relationship stress could be considered a source of relationship dissolution. Marriage therapists and clinical psychologists seem to agree, however, that a breakdown in communication is one of the major forces that pulls relationships apart. A 1979 survey of marriage counselors identified the following ten as the most common trouble areas for couples.[1] In order of frequency, these included (1) a breakdown in communication, (2) the loss of shared goals or interests, (3) sexual incompatibility, (4) infidelity, (5) the loss of the excitement or fun from the marriage, (6) money, (7) conflicts about children, (8) alcohol or drug abuse, (9) women's equality issues, and (10) in-laws. More recent studies have confirmed the perceived centrality of communication to healthy marital functioning.[2] For example, a national survey of adults in the United States indicated that people felt the most common cause of marital dissolution was a lack of effective communication.[3] In fact, individuals noted that ineffective communication was more likely to lead to relational demise than money problems, interference from relatives/in-laws, sexual problems, previous relationships, or children. Another investigation that followed couples over the first three years of

marriage revealed that satisfaction with communication was more often associated with overall marital satisfaction than were several other indices (e.g., satisfaction with finances, with ability to visit with friends and family, or sexual satisfaction).[4] In most of these studies, communication "problems" or "breakdowns" generally referred to the fact that couples didn't seem to talk to each other about matters that were central to the continuance of a close relationship—they didn't indicate what they felt or what they wanted from the relationship.

Research conducted by Gottman,[5] Markman,[6] Belsky,[7] and other scholars[8] suggests another communication pattern that is symptomatic of eventual relationship termination. Distressed couples tend to exchange and perceive a lot of negativity in their interactions. When compared with nondistressed couples, their communication includes more sarcasm, more negative feelings reciprocated, and more interpretations of the other's behavior as showing negativity. Distressed couples also engage in more "problem escalation," in which partners alternate between one presenting a problem and the other responding negatively to it.[9] Longitudinal studies show that couples become less happy and more likely to divorce when partners are more hostile toward each other,[10] when they invalidate each other's communication,[11] when they withdraw from each other,[12] when husbands reject their wives' influence, and when wives initiate problem solving with negative behavior.[13]

Of course, it would be a mistake to assume that communication is the only "cause" of relationship decay. Relationships usually come apart for a variety of reasons, including (1) dissatisfaction with one's *partner*—not receiving the expected rewards from the partner; (2) disillusionment with the *relationship*—the purposes for forming the relationship have been accomplished; (3) difficulties with *individual characteristics*—psychological or behavioral tendencies that interfere with the maintenance of rewarding relationships;[14] (4) problems with *others* who form the relationship network—in-laws, friends, former or current lovers;[15] (5) strains created by background variables—race, education;[16] and (6) inability to deal with stresses imposed by *circumstances*—relocation, unemployment.[17]

Two studies provide some particularly interesting information about why people end their relationships. One of these investigations focused on former spouses' reasons for divorcing.[18] The other examined former dating partners' reasons for breaking off the relationships.[19] Table 10.1 presents the reasons generated by both studies and the percentage of men and women who agreed that the termination of their relationship could be attributed to one or more of these reasons.

A degree of caution should be exercised in comparing the two studies because they were conducted by different researchers, at different times, using different methods. With this said, we can make a few careful observations. First, there are a number of similarities between the reasons former spouses gave for their divorces and the reasons dating partners gave for their breakups. For instance, both groups frequently noted that incompatibility ("Incompatible" and "Differences in interests") was a reason for ending their relationships. In addition to similarities such as this one, there also are notable differences. Some of the reasons given for ending a marriage

TABLE 10.1   Reasons for Divorce

Reason	Women's Reports	Men's Reports
Infidelity	25.2%	15.6%
Incompatible	19.1	19.5
Drinking or drug use	13.7	5.2
Grew apart	9.9	9.1
Personality problems	8.4	10.4
Lack of communication	6.1	13.0
Physical or mental abuse	9.2	0.0
Loss of love	3.1	6.5
Not meeting family obligations	4.6	1.3
Employment problems	3.8	2.6
Don't know	0.0	9.1
Unhappy in marriage	3.1	2.6
Financial problems	3.1	1.3
Physical or mental illness	1.5	3.8
Personal growth	2.3	2.6
Interference from family	1.5	2.6
Immature	1.5	2.6
Other	2.3	6.5

Source: Based on "People's Reasons for Divorcing Gender, Social Class, the Life Course, and Adjustment" *Journal of Family Issues* 24 (2003): 602-628.

Reasons for the Termination of Dating Relationships

Reason	Women's Reports	Men's Reports
Becoming bored with the relationship	76.7%	76.7%
Differences in interests	72.8	61.1
Woman's desire to be independent	73.7	50.0
Man's desire to be independent	46.8	61.1
Differences in backgrounds	44.2	46.8
Conflicting sexual attitudes	48.1	42.9
Conflicting marriage ideas	43.4	28.9
Woman's interest in someone else	40.3	31.2
Living too far apart	28.2	41.0
Man's interest in someone else	18.2	28.6
Pressure from woman's parents	18.2	13.0
Differences in intelligence	19.5	10.4
Pressure from man's parents	10.4	9.1

Source: From Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (Winter, 1976) "Breakups Before Marriage: The End of Affairs" *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 31(1) pp 156-157. (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)

(e.g., "Drinking or drug use" and "Not meeting family obligations") were not noted by former dating partners and some of the reasons given for ending a dating relationship (e.g., "Living too far apart") were not provided by former spouses. Differences such as these may reflect distinctions in the criteria that people use to evaluate marital and dating relationships.

Second, the percentage differences in Table 10.1 between men and women also remind us that there are two, sometimes very different, sides to every breakup. In both of these studies, women were more likely to initiate the end of the relationship. The finding that women were credited with initiating more breakups than men does not necessarily mean that they are less tolerant of relationship problems. It may indicate that women are more cognizant of problems in their relationships. In fact, some research suggests that "men appear to be less aware of and/or less willing to accept responsibility in the dissolution process."[20] It also is possible that women are simply more direct in their expression of a need to end a relationship. Some men who say their partner initiated the breakup may be dissatisfied with the relationship, but instead of overtly initiating a breakup, they engage in behavior that eventually drives the woman to do the job. Thus, it isn't always the least involved partner who officially seeks the termination. The more involved partner can be influenced by the less involved partner's frustrating and unrewarding behavior.[21] In such cases, the broken-up-with can take the position, "I wanted to stay together, but she [he] wanted to end it." The "blame," then, falls on the partner—not the self.

Breakups also affect people's post-relationship feelings in different ways. Sometimes the behavior of one person will reflect the opposite of the other—the extent that one person feels relief in the breakup, the other feels regret. Some individuals cope with the loss by relating to others more, whereas others become more reserved.[22] In the dating couples previously discussed, men seemed to have had a more difficult time reconciling themselves to the fact that the relationship was over and that they were no longer loved by their partner than did women. When men initiated the breakup, though, the couple was more likely to maintain a relationship at a lower level of intimacy—that of friends. Many of the differences we see in post-relationship feelings are attributable to people's perceptions of their relationship and their ability to deal with loss. Researchers have found that people who were more satisfied with their relationship were more likely to remain friends after they broke up than those who were less satisfied.[23] At the same time, individuals who were more committed to their relationship (e.g., those who perceived their relationships to be closer, who had more lengthy relationships, and who perceived they had fewer relationship alternatives) tended to be more distressed following a breakup.[24] Studies also have demonstrated that people who were insecure and anxious about close relationships experienced more physical and emotional distress after their romantic relationship ended.[25] In contrast, individuals who had more resources to cope with their breakup (e.g., those who felt they had more social support, who perceived the breakup was controllable, and who had higher self-esteem) were likely to be less distressed and to feel that they recovered from the breakup.[26] Regardless of how each person initially responds to the dissolution of a relationship, it

is important to remember that these initial responses, feelings, needs, and attributions tend to change over time.[27]

A study of gay and lesbian couples further reveals that the reasons partners give for disengagement do not seem to be affected by couples' sexual orientation.[28] In this study, gays and lesbians who had recently experienced a separation from their partners were asked to provide the major reason why their relationship ended and to rate the distress they felt about the separation. The data provided by these couples then were compared to similar data collected from heterosexual couples. The study's findings show that those in gay or lesbian relationships did not differ from heterosexual couples in reasons for their separation or in the level of distress they experienced. Although gay and lesbian couples face some different social and relational challenges than heterosexual couples do, the reasons people in these relationships give for breaking up and the distress they feel about losing their relationship appear to be quite similar.

Although there seems to be a fairly consistent set of reasons for breakups, there are many differences in the way relationships come apart.[29] Some relationships take years to end. For a number of reasons, the partners may be ambivalent about whether they want to leave one another and may attempt several reconciliations. Other relationships die quickly. Dissolution is wrought in a deliberate, unambiguous manner. Davis distinguishes between those relationships that simply "pass away" and those that seem to manifest a "sudden death."[30]

Passing Away

Relationships, says Davis, may slowly lose their vitality for innumerable reasons, but the following three seem to be especially crucial—and typical. For people bent on maintaining a relationship, these three reasons represent especially difficult forces for the relationship to withstand. The presence of any of the following situations, however, should not connote a feeling of inevitable termination. It may be that a knowledge of these potential problems and motivation to develop skills for dealing with them is the best insurance against these factors leading to a breakup.

1. A new intimate may enter the relationship scene. If the standing relationship is made up of a same-sexed pair, and the new friend is of that same sex, one person may face the problem of integrating a threesome in which two are compatible with him or her but neither of these two is compatible with each other. If a new intimate of the opposite sex enters an established heterosexual relationship, he or she may pose dilemmas for the original pair such as deciding with whom to spend how much time and energy; trying to communicate with the old intimate in the same way, yet still developing a set of activities with the new intimate that cannot be freely communicated to the old intimate; making decisions regarding the type and frequency of favors for each intimate; and realizing that the process of integrating with the new intimate will eventually cause oneself to become a new person. Keep in mind that we are talking about a situation in which people feel the same sense of commitment to the new

relationship as they did to the old. In situations in which commitment to the new relationship is low or commitment to the old relationship is waning, social psychologists note that individuals' responses to dilemmas such as these will depend on (a) how satisfied they were with the old relationship before the new person emerged, (b) the amount of resources they have invested in the old relationship, and (c) the quality of the best available alternative(s) to the old relationship.[31]

The entrance of a new intimate or "rival" into the life of an established relationship may cause jealousy. Jealousy is a reaction to a perceived loss or threat to a relationship. The cause of this threat or loss may be actual or imagined—jealous feelings do not depend on whether the threat or loss actually exists but whether a partner *perceives* a loss or a threat to the relationship.

What does research tell us about what makes men and women most jealous in heterosexual relationships? The answer to this question still is open to debate. Studies repeatedly have found that men report being more jealous of a partner's sexual infidelity, whereas women report being more jealous of a partner's emotional infidelity. There are several explanations for this pattern of findings. One of these has been offered by psychologists who use evolutionary theories to account for human behavior. This explanation suggests that men are more likely to be jealous of a partner's sexual infidelity because they are concerned with establishing the paternity of their offspring and that women are more likely to be jealous of a partner's emotional infidelity because they are concerned with losing their mate's resources.[32] A second explanation involves what researchers have called the *double-shot hypothesis*.[33] The double-shot hypothesis suggests that men will be more distressed by their female partner's sexual infidelity because they believe that women who are sexually unfaithful probably will also be emotionally unfaithful. By contrast, women will be more distressed by their male partner's emotional infidelity because they believe that when men are emotionally unfaithful, they probably also will be sexually unfaithful. Yet a third explanation for this pattern of gender differences in jealousy is that the amount of jealousy people feel depends, in part, on the extent to which they perceive the new intimate has characteristics that are important to the way they define themselves as a relational partner. Women may define themselves more in terms of their ability to provide emotional support, whereas men may define themselves more in terms of their sexual prowess. In addition to studies supporting these three explanations, some research suggests that, in fact, this pattern of gender differences in jealousy may not exist. Scholars adopting this stance argue that the methods many researchers have used to collect their data have biased their findings. To support their argument, these scholars have conducted studies demonstrating that when men and women are asked to choose whether sexual or emotional infidelity will make them more jealous, men choose sexual infidelity and women choose emotional infidelity. But if you allow men and women to rate their feelings of jealousy in both situations (e.g., on a seven-point scale) or if you observe people's physiological reactions, both women and men are more distressed by sexual infidelity than emotional infidelity.[34] These researchers also have found that men's and women's ratings of how jealous they would feel about sexual and emotional

infidelity vary depending on the age of respondents, the characteristics of the rival, the contextual information given to respondents, and whether the infidelity was face-to-face or online.[35]

Of course, people get jealous about issues other than the perceived sexual and emotional alliances of their partners. The jealousy brought about by the perception of a new intimate may encompass several types:

- **Time Jealousy**—The feeling that one does not have enough time with the partner.
- **Person Jealousy**—One partner may be threatened (or irritated) by a specific person the other has chosen to relate to but not be threatened by others.
- **Opportunity/Situation Jealousy**—One person may have unique opportunities/experiences that exclude the partner, who then feels cheated, or one person may be invited to participate in experiences with people at times or in places that exclude the partner. [36]

Some degree of jealousy may benefit a relationship by showing care and concern, but jealousy and the other emotions that come with it also may lead to unhealthy responses—for example, wallowing in self-pity, planning revenge, or even threatening violence.[37] Equating jealousy to love, therefore, is a dangerous thing to do.[38] Jealousy, like love, involves a physiological reaction, which, when labeled, calls forth a learned script for appropriate behavior. It is important to note, however, the way people define "appropriate behavior" depends on a number of factors including their immediate goals and how secure they feel about their relationship.[39] The degree to which individuals *experience* jealousy is not always clearly reflected by the way they *express* jealousy.[40] For instance, people who feel jealous during the initial stages of relationship development may pretend not to be jealous because they are worried about how their partner will react to their feelings. In contrast, those who have progressed beyond the initial stages may feel more confident about openly expressing jealousy to their partner.

Ordinarily those who are most dependent and insecure and subscribe strongly to a value system supporting possessiveness of private property and total togetherness in relationships are most likely to experience jealousy.[41] But researchers also have found that the sort of relationships people are in affects the degree to which they feel jealous. For example, one survey of nearly 25,000 people revealed that those who had been divorced or separated felt more jealous in their relationships than those who were married or widowed. In addition, individuals who were cohabiting with their partners tended to be more jealous than those who were married. One explanation for these findings is that the people who felt more jealousy also felt less commitment in their relationships than they would like.[42] Another explanation is that those who were more jealous believed they had less control and predictability in their relationships.[43] As a result of feeling more uncertain, these individuals may have begun to perceive their relationships in different (i.e., more threatening, more negative, even more fearful) ways.

How do people cope with jealous feelings? Men are more likely to work on repairing their damaged self-esteem, whereas women seem to concentrate on repairing the damaged relationship. Jealousy, though, is rarely an individual's problem—it typically involves a *relationship*—and the most effective method of coping is an exchange of expectations, assumptions, and feelings relating to the behavior in question. This allows both partners to work on adjustments if both are committed to preserving the relationship.

2. Interaction distance (availability for interaction) may expand and, over time, will cause a relationship to fade. For many relationships, in which at least one party would like to maintain the intimacy level, the following pattern is understandable and predictable: (a) An intense siege of messages about the relationship precedes the act of increasing distance between the participants (anticipating, no doubt, the possible effects of the separation on the relationship). (b) An initial spurt of communication activity (daily letter writing and telephoning), which is designed to maintain the previous intimacy level, follows the separation. (c) Gradually, over time, the intimacy level previously known attenuates. Some of the strong debilitating forces brought about by expanded interaction distance include decreased physical and psychological stimulation, awkward and infrequent receiving and giving of favors, curtailed or indirect information exchange on all topics (especially the relationship), and experiences and activities performed without the intimate that can eventually cause misalignment of previously synchronized attitudes and behaviors. Research suggests that the restricted communication experienced by long-distance dating partners is often accompanied by a tendency to idealize the relationship.[44] It is possible that this idealization is part of what helps some people to maintain long-distance relationships for a time. But viewing the relationship in an idealized, unrealistic way also may make for a difficult transition period if and when the partners decrease the distance between them. Obviously, all this does not suggest that the relationship cannot be maintained at a different stage; it simply points to the difficulty of maintaining (for a length of time) a fairly intimate relationship without proximity.[45]

3. The normal processes of individual psychological and physical development over the course of the relationship may sap strength from the relationship. The more narrowly focused and rigidly defined a relationship is, the more vulnerable change makes it. People may grow at different rates and in different directions. What may have attracted them to each other at one point in their lives may become a point of difference should, say, one person's values change in a certain area. Over time, a quality that initially seemed "exciting and different" may become "unpredictable and weird."[46] Things happen. Physical beauty changes. One person learns and constantly observes the most irritating and unpleasant aspects of the other person along with the desirable behaviors. Events such as the entrance of a child into the relationship, a sickness or an accident, a promotion or a demotion, a new job, or a new location occur and may profoundly alter the congruence of attitudes, interests, and habits. It seems that as a relationship deteriorates, the balance of attractions and level of involvement for the two parties become

unequal, whereas during the process of becoming more intimate the attractions and involvement seem to be more balanced.

It has been observed that intimate communications will sometimes decrease (and acquaintance messages increase) in an aging intimate relationship because one or both partners do not expend the energy necessary to maintain the intimacy level: "He doesn't show affection for me like he used to." If the absence of messages consonant with an intimate relationship violates expectations for the relationship, difficulties are surely on the horizon. For various reasons, however, some people who have previously held an intimate relationship are satisfied with a relationship maintained at the acquaintance level. Love, as the preceding chapters said, takes many forms, and companionship is, for some, a viable form.

More often than not, the changes just discussed are slow and subtle, with many ups and downs. Each person will be gathering data—"If you really loved me, you'd ... "; but the magnitude of the changes may not be recognized or admitted for some time. Once the differences are highlighted, it may be even longer before one or both persons arrive at a satisfactory answer to the question of whether the changes can be "lived with" or whether there are grounds for moving the relationship to another stage or to termination. After people answer this question, their dependence on their partner, commitment to the relationship, desire to avoid conflict, concern for their partner, or fear of being alone may extend the process of coming apart even further.[47]

Sudden Death

If the preceding factors are analogous to a relationship slowly bleeding to death, the following is like an unexpected decapitation. Certainly the *actual* death of one partner would be an example of a relationship suddenly dissolving, but Davis provides several other instances in which relationships experience sudden death.

1. In some instances, the partners to a relationship have lost feelings of intimacy, but continue to act out their roles because certain ties make it difficult to sever the relationship. Once these ties are loosened through the efforts of both persons, the relationship is quickly over, sometimes to the shock of people who knew them. Perhaps the constraining bond is the fact that both persons work in the same office and must cooperate in order to accomplish business goals; perhaps it is the feeling that "we need to stay together for the sake of the children." Interpersonal unpleasantries are repressed and sometimes cause such inner turmoil that the hostility leaks out for others to see anyway. In any case, once the work environment can be changed or the children have become self-sufficient, the relationship may terminate suddenly.

When the researchers who conducted the previously discussed study of dating couples asked their 103 students to identify the time at which the breakup occurred, the data revealed that the school calendar may act as a relationship tie that delays or facilitates breakups. Most of the 400 breakups reported occurred at the end of the school year (May/June), the beginning of the school year (September), and during

the winter break in December/January. When breakups were initiated by the less involved partner, they usually occurred at the end of the school year, over the summer, or at the beginning of the school year; when the more involved partner initiated the breakup, it usually occurred during the school year. The authors comment on their findings by saying:

This pattern of breakups suggests that factors external to a relationship (leaving for vacations, arriving at school, graduation, etc.) may interact with internal factors (such as conflicting values or goals) to cause relationships to end at particular times. For example, changes in living arrangements and schedules at the beginning or end of a semester may make it easier to meet new dating partners (e.g., in a new class) or make it more difficult to maintain previous ties (e.g., when schedules conflict or one moves away). Such changes may raise issues concerning the future of a relationship: Should we get an apartment together? Should we spend our vacation apart? Should I accept a job out of state? Should we get together after vacation? If one has already been considering terminating a relationship, such changes may make it easier to call the relationship off. For example, it is probably easier to say, "While we're apart we ought to date others" than to say, "I've grown tired of you and would rather not date you any more." If one is to attribute the impending breakup to external circumstances, one may be able to avoid some of the ambivalence, embarrassment, and guilt that may be associated with calling a relationship off.[48]

2. Sometimes one person wants to terminate the relationship and the other does not. If the unwilling partner is skillful enough, he or she can keep the relationship in a state of limbo almost indefinitely—by promising "I'll change" at critical junctures or instituting various rejuvenation techniques such as a weekend at a resort. As a result of the unevenness inherent to such a relationship and the knowledge that it is not working for oneself, the dissatisfied partner often decides to act unilaterally and swiftly, trying to avoid any prolongation attempts by the other. Such action is not taken without the possibility of real stress for the terminator. For instance, the terminator must often try to accomplish this maneuver while at the same time avoiding extreme hostility from the other and pangs of guilt for oneself. Hence, rather than take the initiative, the terminator sometimes will try to increase the costs for the unwilling partner sufficiently so that termination will soon become a bilateral decision.

Almost anything is easier to get into than out of.

Mrs. Frederick Lewis Allen

---

3. A variation on the preceding situation concerns relationships in which expectations for the rate of relationship development differ, which again prompts one person to lay the relationship to rest. If one person feels the development is too fast, he or she

may request a slowdown, trying to keep the relationship at its current level while waiting to "see how things develop." If the other person does not provide the necessary slowdown mechanisms, a rapid, injudicious decision, often rejection, may be forced. Equally injudicious, of course, is a reluctant acceptance to advance the relationship when one's motivation is feeling guilty rather than feeling intimacy. Relationship escalation based primarily on the need gratification of one person (as in this case) may not have much staying power. The whole episode described here is dangerously similar to the coping strategy of some children—"If you don't play my way, I'll take my bat and go home." When the pace of a relationship's development is too slow, the antithesis of sudden death may appear—the agonizingly slow process in which one or both parties moves toward termination out of boredom or disgust.

Since it isn't always crystal clear for people in a relationship when one of them is ready to advance the relationship, and since pushing advancement at the wrong time can be destructive, escalation efforts often have escape valves. That is, after having suggested an escalation, one can, if necessary, indicate "I didn't think you really meant it *that* way" or "You didn't think I was serious, did you?" or upon rejection, "Who cares? I wasn't really into him/her anyway."

4. Another instance of sudden death may occur when neither party wants to end the relationship, but due to some unforeseen event, a quick termination is precipitated. It may be an argument that gets out of hand when things are said that cut deeply and cannot be forgotten easily. Or it may be that a smooth-running relationship acquires a deadly amount of friction when two people begin competing in the same job environment or for the same award.

5. As was mentioned in previous chapters, intimates develop formal and informal covenants or rules of conduct between themselves; some of these are trivial and easily changeable; some are considered more sacred and inviolable.[49] The latter covenants are usually closely linked to one's core beliefs or expectations and form the foundation and linkages for other dimensions of the relationship. If one of these sacred covenants is broken, it dramatically increases the chances of a sudden termination of the relationship.[50] One reason for this is that there are generally few, if any, adequate excuses ("I was drunk") or methods of correction ("I'll never do it again") that can satisfactorily offset the damage brought about by the violation.

Although we have given examples of how communication changes during the process of relationship disengagement, it is important to acknowledge that there are situations when communication changes very little, if at all. In some cases, partners may care about each other a great deal or they may be very good at disguising their dissatisfaction. In either of these two situations, couples may maintain positive patterns of communication right up to the point at which their relationship ends and even through the dissolution process. In other cases, partners may have entered their relationship with relatively negative communic

may request a slowdown, trying to keep the relationship at its current level while wait-ing to "see how things develop." If the other person does not provide the necessary slowdown mechanisms, a rapid, injudicious decision, often rejection, may be forced. Equally injudicious, of course, is a reluctant acceptance to advance the relationship when one's motivation is feeling guilty rather than feeling intimacy. Relationship esca-lation based primarily on the need gratification of one person (as in this case) may not have much staying power. The whole episode described here is dangerously similar to the coping strategy of some children—"If you don't play my way, I'll take my bat and go home." When the pace of a relationship's development is too slow, the antithesis of sudden death may appear—the agonizingly slow process in which one or both parties moves toward termination out of boredom or disgust.

Since it isn't always crystal clear for people in a relationship when one of them is ready to advance the relationship, and since pushing advancement at the wrong time can be destructive, escalation efforts often have escape valves. That is, after having sug-gested an escalation, one can, if necessary, indicate "I didn't think you really meant it *that* way" or "You didn't think I was serious, did you?" or upon rejection, "Who cares? I wasn't really into him/her anyway."

4.   Another instance of sudden death may occur when neither party wants to end the relationship, but due to some unforeseen event, a quick termination is precipitated. It may be an argument that gets out of hand when things are said that cut deeply and cannot be forgotten easily. Or it may be that a smooth-running relationship acquires a deadly amount of friction when two people begin competing in the same job environ-ment or for the same award.

5.   As was mentioned in previous chapters, intimates develop formal and informal covenants or rules of conduct between themselves; some of these are trivial and easily changeable; some are considered more sacred and inviolable.[49] The latter covenants are usually closely linked to one's core beliefs or expectations and form the foundation and linkages for other dimensions of the relationship. If one of these sacred covenants is broken, it dramatically increases the chances of a sudden termination of the rela-tionship.[50] One reason for this is that there are generally few, if any, adequate excuses ("I was drunk") or methods of correction ("I'll never do it again") that can satisfacto-rily offset the damage brought about by the violation.

Although we have given examples of how communication changes during the pro-cess of relationship disengagement, it is important to acknowledge that there are situa-tions when communication changes very little, if at all. In some cases, partners may care about each other a great deal or they may be very good at disguising their dissatisfaction. In either of these two situations, couples may maintain positive patterns of communica-tion right up to the point at which their relationship ends and even through the dissolu-tion process. In other cases, partners may have entered their relationship with relatively negative communication patterns. When this happens, the negative patterns that partners brought to the relationship may be enough to erode any positive feelings that initially
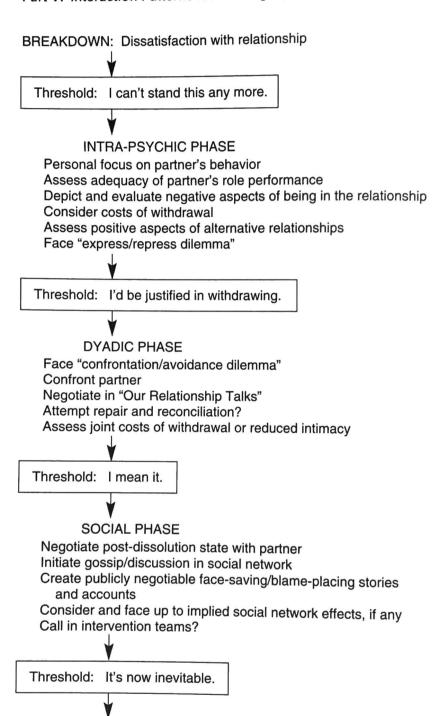
brought them together. If partners' communication patterns are relatively unchanging, the dissolution of their relationship may come as a surprise to one or both of them (e.g., "But things are the same as they always have been").

Duck has suggested four phases leading to the dissolution of relationships (see Figure 10.1).[51] While these phases may be more appropriate for some relationships than others, they do point out important issues that relationship partners often have to deal with. In the *intra-psychic phase*, the major activity is the assessment of the other person's behavior and evaluating the extent to which that behavior provides a justification for terminating the relationship. In the *dyadic phase*, the partners discuss the perceived problems associated with the relationship. The major question underlying this interaction is, "Should the relationship be repaired, redefined, or dissolved?" In the *social phase*, the participants concern themselves with the public acknowledgement to the social networks associated with the relationship that the relationship is being dissolved. In the *grave-dressing phase*, the major activities are focused on physically, psychologically, and socially ending the relationship. One common concern during this phase is to reconceptualize the relationship so that what happened "makes sense" to each participant.

Making sense of the prior relationship and its dissolution is important for both partners. Much of this sense making occurs when participants develop an account or story about what caused the breakup.[52] Explaining why the breakup happened helps partners "work through" the changes brought on by relational dissolution and deal with any threats they may feel to their identity. Research suggests that the accounts partners develop often differ depending on whether the person formulating the account was the "dumper" (the one who ended the relationship) or the "dumpee" (the one who was left by his or her partner).[53] Dumpers tend to dismiss the notion that the breakup involved conflict, externalize responsibility for the breakup, and depict themselves as empathetic. Dumpees also tend to externalize responsibility for the breakup, but they emphasize their agency or active role, point out positive changes in themselves, and deny being injured.

Harvey, Orbuch, and Weber argued that those who fail to create an account of their breakup tend to have more difficulty coping with the losses they experience.[54] During the social and grave-dressing phases, when participants disclose their breakup account to others, they begin to bridge the gap that often exists between their private thoughts about the relationship and their social world. By explaining what went wrong, they are able to hear themselves think aloud, confide their feelings in others, deal with new information, and maintain relationships with their social network.[55]

The fact that a relationship has passed away slowly or has experienced a sudden demise does not necessarily finalize one's association with it. Sometimes post-parting problems can linger long after the relationship has formally disengaged. Partners may get mental or emotional flashes of the past relationship when they encounter shared places or activities. A word or phrase spoken by another person may resemble something the departed one used to say. Perhaps old memories return when one partner is confronted with a task he or she had previously cooperated on or the other person used

BREAKDOWN: Dissatisfaction with relationship

↓

> Threshold: I can't stand this any more.

↓

INTRA-PSYCHIC PHASE
Personal focus on partner's behavior
Assess adequacy of partner's role performance
Depict and evaluate negative aspects of being in the relationship
Consider costs of withdrawal
Assess positive aspects of alternative relationships
Face "express/repress dilemma"

↓

> Threshold: I'd be justified in withdrawing.

↓

DYADIC PHASE
Face "confrontation/avoidance dilemma"
Confront partner
Negotiate in "Our Relationship Talks"
Attempt repair and reconciliation?
Assess joint costs of withdrawal or reduced intimacy

↓

> Threshold: I mean it.

↓

SOCIAL PHASE
Negotiate post-dissolution state with partner
Initiate gossip/discussion in social network
Create publicly negotiable face-saving/blame-placing stories
    and accounts
Consider and face up to implied social network effects, if any
Call in intervention teams?

↓

> Threshold: It's now inevitable.

↓

GRAVE-DRESSING PHASE
"Getting over" activity
Retrospection; reformulative postmortem attribution
Public distribution of own version of breakup story

FIGURE 10.1   Phases of Dissolving Personal Relationships
Source: Reprinted with permission from Steve Duck, "A Topography of Relationship Disengagement and Dissolution." In S. Duck, ed., *Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), p. 16. Copyright: Academic Press Inc. [London] Ltd.

to perform alone. In addition to this *pentimento*,[56] partners may find post-relationship blues in the process of trying to disengage the social circles and relatives without experiencing more interpersonal trauma. Then, there are the dilemmas of building new relationships by trying to unlearn the subtleties of the private language (and modes of thinking) developed and used with one's previous partner. These relationship remnants are bound to characterize relationship termination. It is important to review and reflect on one's own needs and communication patterns for application to future relationships. There is a point, however, where work on new relationships will heavily blot out the old; if not, the reruns may become pathological.

Communication During Relationship Decay: Return of the Stranger

In an effort to find out what specific types of strategies people use when they want to break off a relationship, Cody asked students to recall a heterosexual relationship in which they had taken the initiative in breaking off.[57] Students were asked to write down what they said and/or did to accomplish that task. The students used relationships that had been going on for as long as two years, but the average length was about six months. Although this study was conducted with students, the range of strategies reported would appear to apply to other populations. The statements listed in Table 10.2 provide a sense of the kinds of things respondents said. The statements formed five groupings: (1) positive tone, (2) negative identity management, (3) justification, (4) behavioral de-escalation, and (5) de-escalation.

The strategies for terminating a relationship listed in Table 10.2 were then used by Cody to further investigate relationship decay. He found, for instance, that people in more intimate relationships were more likely to justify their intentions and employ de-escalation and positive-tone strategies than those disengaging from less intimate relationships. In these less intimate relationships, behavioral de-escalation was more likely to be employed. Cody also believed that the causes for the breakups would affect the strategies used, so he asked students to identify the causes of their breakup and correlated the causes selected with the strategies selected.

Some of these findings include the following: (1) Students who perceived the relationship problems as the fault of their partner chose justification strategies and avoided positive tone and de-escalation. In such instances, the disengager would be expected not to employ strategies that would increase the likelihood of future contacts. (2) When the relationship problem was perceived as a partner's inability or lack of interest in compromising (taking the other for granted; didn't contribute enough to the relationship), the disengager was more likely to use justification and de-escalation strategies and less likely to use positive-tone strategies. (3) It was only when the breakup was initiated by feelings of constraint or lack of freedom that the negative-identity strategy was used along with de-escalation, positive tone, and justification.

TABLE 10.2 Disengagement Strategies

Positive tone:

1. I said I was very sorry.
2. I said I still cared for him very much.
3. I tried to avoid us leaving on bad terms.
4. I assured her that I really didn't want to hurt his/her feelings.
5. I tried to end things on a positive note.

Negative identity management:

6. I suggested that he would probably want to date others and be happy.
7. I told her that a better person for her was out there ready to be found.
8. I told him that we should both probably play the field a bit before deciding on a forever person.
9. I said that when the time was right, we'd both find the right person.
10. I told her that this would be an opportunity to check out other people.

Justification:

11. I said that the relationship was just not making me happy anymore.
12. I explained that I wasn't getting what I needed from the relationship anymore.
13. I said that I was changing and the relationship no longer fit with what I wanted.
14. I told him that if relational partners are not happy, then it's best not to keep dating.
15. I said that I just thought it was time for us to go in different directions.

Behavioral de-escalation:

16. I never really told her. I just started avoiding her until she got the idea.
17. I just kind of stopped agreeing to meet up with him so I never really had to officially break it off.
18. We never discussed breaking up. I just stopped calling her back.

De-escalation:

19. I said that I just felt more distance than I should so we should take a break and see what happens.
20. I told him that we needed to slow things down for a while, that we've always been honest with each other and we needed to take some time before seeing if we wanted to go further with the relationship.
21. I said that we should take a break from each other for a while and if we stayed honest and respectful with each other we might end up together in the end.
22. I told her that maintaining the relationship had gotten too stressful for now and that maybe someday the timing will be better for us to make a go of it.
23. I told him that I thought the relationship had become kind of bad for us, and we needed to take some time apart to figure out if we could become strong enough on our own to be good for each other.

Two studies conducted after Cody's investigation extended his findings. One, by Banks, Altendorf, Greene, and Cody, found that the quality of relational partners' networks influenced strategy choice. Partners who reported high levels of overlap in their social networks were more likely to employ positive tone, de-escalation, and justification strategies.[58] Like intimacy, being involved in one another's social network seems to encourage consideration for the other's feelings and accountability for one's own behavior during a breakup. The other study, conducted by Sprecher, Zimmerman, and Abrahams, found that individuals who felt more compassion, caring, and empathy for their partner were more likely to select compassionate strategies (like positive tone) than were those who did not feel as much of those emotions. Sprecher and her colleagues also found that the reason for the breakup affected the strategies people thought they would use. Individuals who were told to imagine the reason they were breaking up with a partner involved a *partner-locus problem* (cheating) were less likely to use compassionate strategies than were those who were told to imagine the reason they were breaking up involved an *external problem* (moving) or a *dyad-locus problem* (different values).[59]

Although the preceding studies validate the notion that disengagement strategies are recalled by individuals who experience a breakup, the actual process of disengagement is probably much less conscious and much more complex than the strategies suggest. Recalled strategies probably do not accurately reflect all of the subtleties of the breakup process.[60]

In Chapter 1, eight general characteristics of communication were outlined. These characteristics would most likely be found in the early stages of communicating with an unknown quantity—a stranger. As relationships decay, partners to the relationship seem to design messages in such a way that interaction patterns gradually take on the same "stranger" characteristics—messages that are narrow, stylized, difficult, rigid, awkward, public, and hesitant and that suspend judgments. Some of these message qualities may evidence signs of distance before others. For example, some couples may quit talking about their goals for the future or their sexual desires before they begin to suspend judgments. Others may continue to discuss their sexual desires but may withhold their judgments and opinions on a variety of issues to gain a sense of power or superiority over each other.[61] Boiling this down, it seems that people communicate de-escalation of a relationship by producing messages that communicate (1) an increasing physical and psychological distance and (2) an increasing disassociation with the other person. These messages can be direct and unambiguous, or they can be indirect and subtle. When emotional confrontations about relationship termination are not desired, the initiator may try to avoid the partner (e.g., stop frequenting familiar places, stop asking about the partner)[62] or may use strategies that take some of the blame for the dissolution (e.g., apologizing, expressing regret).[63] Confrontations also can be avoided by using distance and disassociation signals to "hint" at the need for relationship disengagement. These more indirect approaches may represent a perceived need to protect oneself, a desire to protect one's partner, or a feeling of doubt that the termination is really desired. And, while indirect approaches typically extend the time it takes to accomplish a breakup, indirectness was a common strategy reported

by students in terminating friendships— although the students felt it would be less likely with very close friendships.[64] In most cases, the process probably shows fluctuations between indirect and direct strategies.

Distance

Distance may be communicated by various withdrawal strategies or by the erection of barriers to symbolize withdrawal. We would expect, for instance, to see actual physical distance between the interacting communicators increase. We also would predict an increase in the time between interactions as well as a shorter duration for each encounter (less total communication). Perhaps early stages of decay may manifest lengthy interactions, but if they remain unrewarding, less time will be devoted to such discussions. In this same regard, the participants may make it harder to contact one another by sending nonspecific messages about where and when contact can be made—"Where can I reach you?" "Don't bother, I'll call you" or "When will you be coming over to pick up your stuff?" "Whenever I feel like it."

Distance also may be communicated by the communication content, or, in Mehrabian's terms, *nonimmediacy* (not liking). We would expect less variety in the topics discussed and probably less information volunteered about one's personal activities and self. For the participants in a disintegrating relationship, a rationale will be increasingly perceived for *not* exchanging the same amount of information as when the relationship's future looked bright and secure. After all, how much are you willing to invest in a stock that seems on the verge of bankruptcy? As a reflection of this communicative closure, a lot more statements like "Don't worry about that. It doesn't concern you" or "I can't talk to you about anything anymore without you getting ugly" will be transmitted. If the relationship was well advanced, the amount of talk about the relationship might be fairly high initially, but again, if such talk continues to produce sour results, its frequency will taper off quickly. Our guess is that the same general usage level of superlatives and absolute statements that the pair exhibited in the growth process will be found at this stage—but now the statements are heavily laden with negativity. For instance, instead of, "You're the *only* one for me—the *greatest*" we might hear, "You *never* think of my needs—*never* have—you're the *most* self-centered person I've *ever* known." Speaking of needs, it should be a natural part of this process to see fewer favors exchanged. Not only is the motivation for favor giving decreasing, but many times unsolicited favors by the other are discouraged. They may simply activate the psychological forces behind the norm of reciprocity, which can produce a feeling of indebtedness at a time when one is trying to clear the books.

Finally, distance can be communicated through nonverbal behaviors. Some of the more obvious nonverbal manifestations might include (1) less direct body orientation; (2) less total eye contact; (3) eye contact for shorter durations, except in those instances where it is used to intimidate or threaten during verbal communication or preceding physical combat; (4) less touching; (5) a colder vocal tone; and (6) silences filled with discomfort, embarrassment, and disaffection rather than warmth.

As noted in Chapter 2, Hess suggests that most of the distancing behaviors we describe here fall into three general categories.[65] The first category is *avoidance*. Avoidant behaviors include those that prevent an interaction or reduce interaction time. The second is *disengagement*. Behaviors that fall into this category include hiding information about oneself, using nonimmediacy, or treating the other person as a stranger. The third and final category is *cognitive dissociation*. Disregarding the other's message, derogating the other person, and emotionally detaching oneself from the other are behaviors that reflect people's efforts to cognitively dissociate themselves from a relationship partner.

The following reports illustrate a wife's need to achieve nonverbal distance during a time when she was contemplating divorce. They also show how the husband's account of the same behavior was very different. He either failed to recognize the wife's marital dissatisfaction, recognized it and didn't want to face it, or didn't see the connection between cuddling and the decreasing intimacy in the marriage. The wife said,

> Steve always put his arm around me to cuddle before we went to sleep. I wasn't in the mood for it and for the first time I told him so. I can't stand being on the verge of divorce and still cuddling every night. He just turned over and went to sleep.

Her husband described the same event as follows:

> Joanne and I have always held each other before going to sleep, so I put my arm around her as usual. She said, "I'm not in the mood," so I thought, "OK" and went to sleep.[66]

Disassociation

Disassociation is usually reflected in an increasing concern for oneself, and a resulting decrease in concern for the relationship. This focus on self results in communicative behaviors that flow naturally from such an orientation. For instance, if your main concern was preserving the self (to the exclusion or minimization of the process of preserving the relationship), you would be inclined toward less compromise in disagreements, adopting the illusory "I win, you lose" stance, with its corollary that there is only one view of reality which is "right." The reason we use the word *illusory* is that so many times the strategies used to "win" only produce tremendous costs to the self-proclaimed "victor." As these costs for communicating orally mount, movement toward the stagnating stage can be expected.

Disassociation also is reflected in an increase in individual experiences and fewer activities jointly performed by the partners to the relationship. In the same manner, language that ties the pair into a single unit will be increasingly abandoned—more "I," "me," "my," and "mine" expressions replace the "we," "our," and "us." When the pair terms are used, it is likely to be in the context of pointing out how "we are different in the following ways" leading to the oft-spoken and ironic conclusion that "I guess I never really knew you." Since the prognosis for the relationship's future is tenuous at

best, the past tense is used most often in communicating in an attempt to rewrite the relationship's history so that current actions make sense. The only necessary future-tense discussions concern what kind, if any, of relationship the future holds.

The attempt to emphasize differences and accentuate individuality may take many forms—buying clothes that illustrate differences, showing preferences for food or art work that obviously deviate from known preferences of the other, pursuing contrary interests; or widespread verbalization of certain inharmonious attitudinal positions. Individuality also can be reflected in speech patterns. Word choice, accent, rate of speaking, or even the amount of talk may show increasing divergence when at least one partner attempts to disassociate himself or herself from the other person.[67] As noted earlier in this chapter, communication during relationship decay tends to move increasingly toward the type of communication used with strangers. As one person disassociates himself or herself from a particular other communication takes on more interpersonal etiquette, more formal names and titles, and the avoidance of endearment terms. (See Figure 10.2.)

A note on the complexity of the foregoing behaviors seems to be in order. Identifying a relationship on the decline through observation of its communication patterns is difficult. This is because the observers need, but often don't have, a baseline measure of typical communication against which current patterns can be compared. Suppose observers see, for instance, that a couple exhibits several distancing and disassociation features in their communication behavior. Perhaps this simply reflects a form of adaptation made by this particular couple and not a signal of relationship decay. Or, observers might see a certain amount of distancing and disassociation maneuvers when the observed people are trying to move a relationship back (perhaps from intensifying to experimenting) but are not trying to terminate it. In order to communicate this desired change in the relationship ("Can't we just be friends instead of lovers?"), the couple finds it necessary to turn down their proximity and integration sensors—just as it is necessary in the termination process. It's a matter of degree. In another instance, observers may see distancing or disassociation behavior, but the relational partners themselves may not even be aware that they are sending distancing or disassociation messages. Ironically, one partner may accuse the other of such behavior only to increase the chances of such behavior appearing, whether it was extant in the first place or not.

Every exit is an entry somewhere else.

—Tom Stoppard

Similarly, it is sometimes nearly impossible to sort out cause–effect relationships. When a wife began going skiing alone, was this in itself an act of disassociation, or was an enjoyable activity for the wife the start of many new activities, which eventually turned a simple hobby into a divisive force in the relationship?

A final qualification concerns the fact that in every relationship, even the most intimate one, there will be some messages that communicate distance and disassociation. The

critical question is, "When are these de-escalation messages of sufficient strength or quantity to indicate that a relationship has taken a downward spiral?" Until research supplies more specific answers, the answer will probably continue to emanate from the feelings of each individual. Our guess is that if we listen to our feelings (rather than what we or others think we should feel), those feelings will signal warnings, maybe not to the degree of danger or to the cause of the danger but to the need for some scrutiny of the relationship.

The Farewell Address

Unlike other speeches called farewell addresses, the relationship farewell address is not restricted to a certain time frame. It may extend over a period of hours, days, or months. It does, however, have some features that are common to other farewell speeches and to the goodbye ritual we perform so many times everyday. Probably the most important commonality is the belief by the participants and others that the act of leave-taking is not a separate, isolated unit of discourse. The farewell address will reflect facets of the total relationship history, although those facets are often magnified to the point at which the participants may very well see their exhibited behavior as a distortion or misrepresentation of their "normal" style. For example, a leave-taking may be characterized by a lot of yelling and nastiness, which the pair feels are atypical of their relationship, but which was more typical than they wish to admit.

In a study of everyday leave-taking in human transactions, three functions of leave-taking behaviors were identified: (1) summarizing the substance of the discourse, (2) signaling the impending decreased access between the communicators, and (3) signaling supportiveness.[68] Although this study focused on specific conversations, the three functions form a useful paradigm for analysis even when the situation observed changes from a conversation to an ongoing relationship. For instance, the termination of some conversations calls for the recapitulation or summarizing of salient points—as in the case of a professor counseling a student on how to study more effectively for his or her exams. Similarly, some relationship farewells require a historical summary, usually emphasizing the unpleasant aspects of the relationship to provide a rationale for the imminent action.

The final moments of a conversation also show the second function of conversational leave-taking—verbal and nonverbal efforts to communicate the impending decrease in communicative access. Put another way, we let people know we are going to be absent from them for awhile. The latter phases of a relationship also communicate this decreased access. As we've noted, there are many ways of showing decreased access by increasing psychological and physical distance. A farewell address may, however, be more explicit—"After July 1, we will have to see each other only once a month. Oh, maybe we'll run into each other accidentally someplace, but I'm not going out with you again." Perhaps the strongest act that communicates the certainty of decreased access for disengaging married couples is that of deciding how to divide household objects and/or time spent with children.

The third function of conversational leave-taking is to signal a form of supportiveness for what has transpired ("Thanks for your time; I think you really helped me"). It

also offsets inaccessibility signals by suggesting future contact ("OK, let's do this again sometime") and communicates the idea that the conversation is terminated, but not the relationship. Have you ever noticed how many future plans people make that never come about—but it doesn't matter? All that really matters between friends is that they continue to talk about a future. When the farewell address is designed to communicate the fact that there will be no future relationship, this function obviously cannot be achieved. However, many farewell addresses leave open the possibility for some kind of future relationship—even if it is something slightly more than stranger status.[69] As a result, signs of supportiveness may be evident in the farewell rhetoric of decaying relationships. The parties may agree to be friendly and helpful to each other when occasional future contact is made; they may reflect on the decaying process supportively—"It could have been a lot worse if you hadn't ... and I want you to know I appreciate it." The parties may express welfare concern—"Yeah, well ... take care of yourself." Once separation has formally occurred, it is not at all unusual to hear reminiscences such as: "Sure we had some bad scenes, but ... " In fact, supportiveness may be just as critical for relationship termination as it is for conversation termination—which may help to explain why nonsupportive terminations so often take a high psychological toll.

A comparison between conversational and relational leave-taking is worthy of note. In conversations there are two very common methods of verbally explaining why one is leaving. One of these is called an *internal legitimizer*, because the leaver takes sole responsibility for the act of leaving—"Well, I think that is all I have to say." The other pattern is called an *external legitimizer*, because the justification for leaving is derived from forces external to the leaver—"I can see other people are waiting to see you, so I'll be going." Leaving a relationship also can be expressed or justified from internal or external perspectives. Some people will reflect on personal behaviors and attitudes that may have contributed to the deterioration of the relationship; others are more inclined to focus their reflection on people and events external to themselves. Although research suggests that dissatisfied couples tend to give internal, stable explanations for the negative events in their relationship (e.g., "because she is insensitive to my needs"),[70] it is very possible that once partners terminate the relationship, their explanations will change (e.g., "because we were both hurting"). The notion that people often focus on internal or external causes for relational dissolution does not suggest that combination of the two perspectives is unheard of; in reality, most relationships are abandoned because of a combination of internal and external forces. The perspective emphasized will probably depend on relational factors such as the duration of the association, the relationship stage, and the degree to which the partner feels invested in the relationship. Individual factors such as the partner's personality, mood (e.g., sad or guilty),[71] and mental state (e.g., depressed or lonely)[72] also should affect the explanation he or she formulates.

Finally, let's examine the familiar farewell, or goodbye, itself. Although the term *goodbye* is possibly our most common referent for leave-taking expressions, it is not really common in daily exchanges. It probably has a greater frequency in children's leave-taking than in adults; and some form of it is probably used more to terminate telephone

conversations than face-to-face encounters. The feature most relevant to our current analysis, however, is the hypothesized finality communicated by the term *goodbye* in face-to-face transactions. Goffman believes we now use *goodbye* primarily in situations in which the interactants will be apart for an extended period of time.[73] Further, we would expect *goodbye* to be found in more formal situations than informal situations. Thus, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the farewell address is more likely to contain *goodbyes* that simultaneously communicate formality, finality, and extended absence.

A hypothetical goodbye rant created by Davis includes formality ("You'll be hearing from my lawyer"), finality ("We're through"), extended absence ("I never want to see you again"), rules for future engagement ("Don't call me. Don't ask me for anything"), and the division of co-owned aspects of the relationship ("You can have the house; I'm taking the baby").[74]

SUMMARY

Our goal in this chapter has been to elaborate on those processes enacted when relationships come apart. We briefly outlined how relationship termination may occur in less intimate associations, but the major emphasis of the chapter was terminations of more intimate relationships. These relationships may pass away or, because of special circumstances, experience a sudden death. After the relationships have been officially terminated, the participants may continue to experience relationship flashbacks, which should gradually attenuate over time.

The second part of this chapter identified the general nature of communication during relationship decay as an increasing psychological and physical distance and continued disassociation from the other person. In short, communication behavior in decaying relationships will increasingly reflect patterns associated with strangers rather than those associated with intimates. Specifically, as a relationship moves toward termination, we would expect to find, among other characteristics, the following:

- Increasing physical distance between the interactants
- Increasing time between interactions
- Shorter encounters
- Less personal information exchanged
- Less relationship talk
- Fewer favors given and/or asked for
- Less verbal immediacy
- Superlatives and absolutistic statements couched in negative rather than positive evaluations
- Less nonverbal immediacy—less touching, colder vocal tone, less eye contact
- An increasing concern for self rather than for the relationship or the other person
- Less compromising because of an increasing win–lose orientation
- More individual rather than mutual activities

- Decreasing use of endearment terms and private language—a return to a less particularized set of etiquette norms
- Differences accentuated in clothes, food, and other preferences.

Although we might agree that the preceding list of behaviors seems to occur in disintegrating relationships, this does not suggest we won't find some evidence of the same behaviors in relationships that are growing or moving back to earlier stages. These behaviors, however, will not be common in intimate relationships. The question of whether these behaviors are associated with a dying relationship or with one that has a temporary virus can be answered by looking at the frequency with which a given behavior occurs and seeing whether other behaviors seem to be communicating the same distancing and disassociation messages. We might find, for instance, relational partners who have infrequent verbal interactions but send many nonverbal messages of affection. Hence, for this couple, one behavior that might communicate distance is offset by others that communicate closeness.

To further illustrate the similarities between communication in encounters and relationships, we looked at relationship farewells through the lens of research data on saying goodbye in conversations. Parallels were suggested along functional lines—in both conversations and relationships evidence of the need to summarize, to clarify the impending decreased access, and to show supportiveness during the goodbye ritual was found.

SELECTED READINGS

Relationship Termination

Baxter, L. A. "Strategies for Ending Relationships: Two Studies." *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 46 (1982): 223–241.

Baxter, L. A., and Philpott, J. "Attribution-Based Strategies for Initiating and Terminating Friendships." *Communication Quarterly* 30 (1982): 217–224.

Burnett, R., McGhee, P., and Clarke, D. D. *Accounting for Relationships: Explanation, Representation, and Knowledge.* London: Methuen, 1987.

Cody, M. J. "A Typology of Disengagement Strategies and an Examination of the Role Intimacy Reactions to Inequity and Relational Problems Play in Strategy Selection." *Communication Monographs* 49 (1982): 148–170.

Cupach, W. R., and Metts, S. "Accounts of Relational Dissolution: A Comparison of Marital and Nonmarital Relationships." *Communication Monographs* 53 (1986): 311–334.

Davis, M. S. *Intimate Relations*, pp. 245–283. New York: Free Press, 1973.

Doering, J. "Face, Accounts, and Schemes in the Context of Relationship Breakups."

Symbolic Interaction 33 (2010): 71–95.

Duck, S. "A Topography of Relationship Disengagement and Dissolution." In S. Duck, ed., *Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships*, pp. 1–30. New York: Academic Press, 1982.

Duck, S., ed. *Personal Relationships 4: Dissolving Personal Relationships.* New York: Academic Press, 1982.

Emmers, T. M., and Hart, R. D. "Romantic Relationship Disengagement and Coping Rituals." *Communication Research* 13 (1996): 8–18.

Hill, C. T., Rubin, Z., and Peplau, L. A. "Breakups Before Marriage: The End of 103 Affairs." *Journal of Social Issues* 32 (1976): 147–168.

Kurdek, L. A. "The Nature and Correlates of Deterrents to Leaving a Relationship." *Personal Relationships* 13 (2006): 521–535.

Lannutti, P. J., and Cameron, K. A. "Beyond the Breakup: Heterosexual and Homosexual Post-Dissolutional Relationships." *Communication Quarterly* 50 (2002): 153–170.

Lee, L. "Sequences in Separation: A Framework for Investigating Endings of the Personal