

Relationships Are Scary! – Ken Patriquin

Ken has been a friend of Reconciliation Ministries and a valuable member of our leadership team for many years. He and his wife, Barb, are the directors of The Place, an eight-week program in Lapeer, Michigan for overcoming childhood wounds and strongholds.



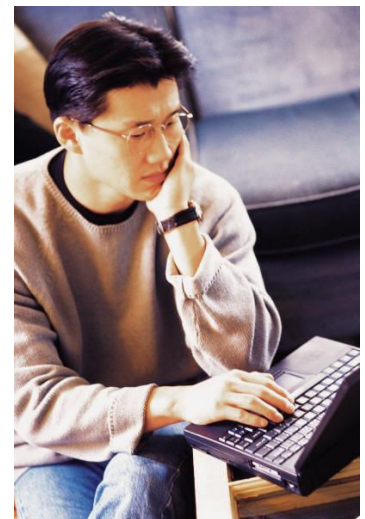
Developing healthy, godly relationships can be scary! However, God has told us many times through the Old and New Testaments that we need to connect with and be involved with the Body of Christ. In fact, having personal connections and involvements with other people are the most significant ways that God meets our emotional needs for love and self worth. He says that, “it’s not good for man to be alone”. He created us to need involvement with other people.

When a person has been through some soul searching (for instance, through attending one of the Reconciliation Ministries programs) s/he starts to understand just how broken s/he really is. And then the question comes up, “What do I do now? I am told that I need to be involved with the world around me. But that’s what made me feel my brokenness in the first place. My self-concept got all messed up during my childhood, and my experience in school taught me to hide my real self, and now my work life has been so painful I just stay to myself.”

Standing in Our True Self – At Living Waters and The Place Ministry, we emphasize getting help from mentors or accountability partners who can encourage and help us along the way as we learn to “stand upright in our True Self”. Standing in our true self means *believing* what God says about us and living out of the identity He gives us, as we connect intimately with Jesus Christ. It also means being able to be real before others and not feel that we have to hide our true feelings, or pretend to be someone we’re not. The big question is this: *How do we learn to live in our God-given identities even while we still have broken areas of our lives to work through?*

The Church and the Bible encourage us to love others and to do acts of service for others. Truly, learning to live in our true identities means that we have to start working on developing healthy relationships, *even while we’re still not feeling all that healthy or stable*. We have to *walk into* healthy relationships. In other words, we learn to have healthy relationships by experiencing them – by walking through them. Some of us, because of abuse or promiscuous involvements in our past, don’t really know how to engage in healthy, godly relationships. This is why we encourage you to first find a trustworthy mentor who is mature enough to help you learn about healthy relationships through how they relate to you.

Walking into New Relationships – If we are struggling with rejection and negative feelings about ourselves, we fear being rejected again. We don’t know if we want to make ourselves vulnerable by trying to develop new friendships. It’s easy to assume people aren’t interested in being friends with us. Feeling the emotional need for significance and love doesn’t feel comfortable. It feels safer just to stay away from people. The reality is that we may be hurt again by others as we get involved in other people’s lives. But, that’s where we need to take small steps of faith, believing that



God's grace is big enough to take care of us as we go out on a limb and connect with others. The Christian life is always lived out by acts of faith. ("And a righteous person will live by faith. Hebrews 10:38a) *We need to choose to put ourselves into situations where friendships can be developed and where we can learn to "walk out" of our relational immaturities and insecurities.*

In the *Living Waters* manual Andy Comisky writes:

"Jesus, who is present in the body [the Church], calls us out of illusory and immature ways of expressing our brokenness/sexuality....[this is] the redemptive role that the marvelously broken body of Christ plays in provoking old wounds and in healing them... Through the prevailing presence of Christ in his body, we will be set free together..." (p. 209)

What Andy is saying here is that we need the Church of Jesus Christ to express God's love and presence to us as we let them get to know us for who we really are. *As we gradually share our problems with safe and mature Christians*, these loving people help us break away from destructive patterns of immaturity and we become more and more free and whole.

Everyone, even the most healthy and stable people, have emotional needs for love and connection and to have significant others in their lives. The Bible clearly teaches us that we need healthy friendships with other believers, so that we build each other up in our faith and give each other the support and love that we all need. Hebrews 10:22-25 reads, "Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near."



Pushing Through – No, it is not easy for us to reach out to others and to seek to develop new friendships. Yes, there may be times when you feel like the odd ball and don't know what to say or do to fit in. But that's OK. We all feel that way at times, and it is likely that there are others with you who feel the exact same way you do. *But, if you push through those uncomfortable situations, you will gradually feel more and more comfortable with the people around you and more and more part of the lives of those you are with.* It takes time, effort and patience to develop healthy and meaningful relationships.

Nobody can lay out an exact plan for you to follow in your journey to connect with others. We are all unique individuals. God does have a plan for you, though, and He needs to reveal it to you, and walk through it with you. However, there are some common factors in how relationships are built and maintained.

Factors in How Relationships Are Built:

1. Friendships are based on mutual respect, trust, love and common interests.
2. There are many different types and levels of friendships. Each type/level is important to maintain.
3. Friendships take time and effort to cultivate and deepen.
4. Over time and experience relationships may, but not necessarily, move from one level of involvement to the next.
5. Healthy and mature intimacy and closeness are not instantaneous – infatuation is.

6. Jumping over stages of development, from the casual to emotional or sexual intimacy is destructive and often ends in a painful mess.
7. The best way to make friends is to be one. It's your move.

Types and Stages of Friendships – There are different types of relationships with different levels of intimacy and involvement. As relationships grow the intimacy level becomes more and more intense and personal. Many people touch our lives on the surface, but few actually become intimate friends. It is important for healthy relationships to develop over time, following the five stages of development.



Stage One – Very Casual Acquaintances. These people in your life are ones you may see frequently but have no significant relationship with. These would be gas station attendants, store cashiers, other coworkers you see but do not communicate much with. [There is no reason for you to feel that there is any commitment to that person.]

Stage Two – People for Activities. This is the stage where you know people because of the common activities you do together, for example: members of the bowling team, work projects, or church activity. [In this stage you learn a bit more about the other person but are still not in a *trusting relationship*. The relationship is based on the shared activity.]

Stage Three – Friends. In this stage you are doing things with these people, but now there is a minor commitment to each other. It might be where you ask your neighbor to use one of his tools, or ask a person on your bowling team to help you work on your car problems. [There still will be some struggles with fully trusting that person and, though closeness may be developing, you do not have the full trust needed to feel particularly loved or to share personal problems with them.]



Stage Four – Close Friends. In this is the stage you have developed a trusting relationship where you feel it's safe to share problems and hardships with that person, knowing they will accept you and care about you. You now have people in your life who have some commitment to you. They know you, what makes you sad/happy, and know basically what's going on in a lot of areas of your life. You have weathered a lot of life together over the years. They would defend you before others if you needed it, and you would defend them. You turn to them for support when you need it, and you try to be there for them when they need it.

Stage Five – Most Intimate Relationships. Usually a person only has a couple of people who they consider intimate friends. These are the ones with whom you share your deepest secrets and who know all about each other's personal struggles and heart issues. You trust their unconditional love for you and you know that your failures won't cause them to reject you. They are your confidants, your "kindred spirits". You overlook one another's faults and feel completely loyal to each other.

Healthy Intimacies – Healthy intimacies are built on commitment and mutual respect and trust that comes from the safety of gradually opening up your life in honest disclosure of who you are. The commitment of unconditional love is paramount. If you are married to someone, you should not go

outside of that relationship to an opposite sex friend to fulfill your intimacy needs. (This is especially risky if you or your friend have struggled with unholy or unhealthy relationships in the past) Learning to have close friendships and meaningful relationships are best learned from same sex friendships. Such relationships can help you to relate better with the opposite sex as you learn about healthy, godly intimacy. At the center of healthy intimate relationships is the intimacy each person has with the Savior, from whom we all draw our sense of being and worth. The most stable marriages have Jesus Christ at the center, where the couple knows that *they each* must find their true identity through a vital connection with the Savior.

One expression that is heard a lot these days is “friends with benefits”. Those of us who are older used to call it “casual sex”. What happens in these relationships exemplifies the problems that occur when you do not go step-by-step into healthy relationships. Usually the “casual sex” relationship is considered safe by the people engaging in the behavior – until things go badly. However, as we look at the various stages of relationship development, it becomes clear that we are mixing two levels of relationships – the *Very Casual Acquaintances stage (Casual)* & the *Most Intimate Relationships stage (Sex)*. I have noticed that those who engage in these relationships end up eventually being emotionally damaged because they have skipped some stages and have not established a strong commitment to each other that will withstand the hard times in life. They have not developed a healthy emotional connection that is based on the foundation of mutual respect, trust, love and common interests. Instead, their relationship is based on a physical and sexual experience that cannot truly meet their emotional needs over time.

Final Comments – As I shared this diagram in Living Waters my friend, Aaron, said that he felt that Jesus modeled this type of relationship/friendship process. I have used his explanation as part of my teaching ever since that day. Here is what Aaron shared with me:

Stage 1 – *Very Casual Acquaintances*: The World of People

Stage 2 – *People for Activities*: The Disciples

Stage 3 – *Friends*: The 12 Apostles

Stage 4 – *Close Friends*: The Three Closest to Jesus; Peter, James, and John

Stage 5 – *Most Intimate Relationships*: The Beloved Disciple - John

Now it is time for you to consider where your relationships are. You may have been damaged from relationships that have gone bad (“fallen out the bottom”). In the past we have just exited relationships or chosen not to have any relationships because of the pain and struggles we have experienced. However, the Lord calls us to “...not neglect our meeting together...” He has made us relational and if we do not have healthy relationships then we end up craving anything that can substitute for that – usually whatever we are addicted to that helps us to deal with pain. So my challenge to all of you reading this article is to step out, trust God and try to develop these relationships. As I consider this in my own life I find that God has truly provided people in many of these stages, I just have not paid attention to who is in what stage. Also, as we crave and try to develop healthy relationships we need to remember to not “rush” the relationship. If God wants to have you move from one stage to another in a relationship, He will make that clear to you. The greatest guide for the development of your relationships will be the One who walked through these stages Himself when He was in a human body – Jesus Christ. I have found that as I have developed relationships “God’s way” He has provided some very positive and enjoyable times as I relax about “me” and just let Him do the work.

