When Anne and Connor meet at a Sierra Club meeting, they discover they have much in common. They both have degrees in biology, love animals, and enjoy outdoor activities. Anne is a caretaker at the local zoo, and Connor teaches science at a middle school. For the first two months, their relationship goes smoothly. They text every day, spend considerable time together, and FaceTime almost every night if they haven’t seen each other during the day. They decide to make their relationship exclusive. Connor assumes Anne would want to spend Thanksgiving with him. When she says she’d rather be with her family, Connor feels hurt and becomes distant. After a week of silence, Connor calls Anne and apologizes. They resume their relationship, and a month later, Connor tells Anne he loves her and hopes to marry her someday. She responds that she feels the same way. Six months later, Anne suggests they move in together. Connor, however, hesitates. He worries that living together before marriage could cause them to take their relationship for granted. He also knows that his family would never approve. Their disagreement about living together leads to a big argument, after which Anne starts to realize her values and future plans are radically different from Connor’s. She wants him to put their connection first. He wants her to consider his family more. They gradually spend more and more time apart, texting and talking less, until eventually Connor meets someone new. Anne is hurt but also a little relieved—it had become increasingly clear to her that they were not as compatible as she once thought they were. It was probably better to end the relationship now.

The processes related to developing and ending relationships have interested communication researchers for decades. Researchers have tried to unlock the mysteries of how communication propels relationships toward more closeness yet also causes relationships to fall apart. In Anne and Connor’s case, getting to know one another was easy. Maintaining the relationship, however, was harder. Clearly, communication played a vital role in both the development and deterioration of their relationship. Various theories of communication help explain the trajectories that Anne and Connor’s relationship took. A trajectory describes the road or path that something takes. Relationship trajectories can be smooth or bumpy. People can move their relationships forward, backward, or sideways, or in many different directions at once. The only certainty is that each relationship has a unique trajectory that is more complex and nuanced than any one theory of communication can explain.
In this chapter, we describe some of the communication skills necessary to form and develop relationships. Then we discuss three different perspectives that help describe how relationships change over time: (1) the stage model approach, (2) the turning point approach, and (3) dialectics theory. Stage models describe various stages that relationships go through as people develop their relationships and then, in some cases, break up (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008). The turning point approach takes a different perspective by focusing on the major events that shape people’s relationships in positive and negative ways. Finally, dialectics theory suggests that rather than conceptualizing relationships in terms of stages, people should view relationships as constantly changing.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Relationships don’t just develop out of thin air. People must advance and nurture them. Some people are shy or worry about rejection, making it more difficult for them to establish new relationships. Other people are overzealous about forming new relationships, using excessive self-disclosure or being overly pushy—and, as a result, scaring potential new friends or romantic partners away. Given these complexities, there are essential communication skills and strategies that can help people form and develop new relationships. Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, and Reis (1988) identified five types of communication skills that help people build relationships with new friends and romantic partners: (1) relationship initiation, (2) self-disclosure, (3) emotional support, (4) negative assertion, and (5) conflict management skills. To see how skilled you are in these five areas, take the test in the Put Yourself to the Test box.

PUT YOURSELF TO THE TEST
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS RELATED TO FORMING AND DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

People have different ways of communicating. For the following items, rank how well you feel you can perform each type of communication, being as honest as possible. Answer the questions using the following scale: 1 = you are poor at the behavior described and would avoid doing it if possible and 5 = you are extremely good at the behavior and would be comfortable in that situation.

Higher scores mean that you possess more of a particular skill. The highest possible score for a given skill is 35; the lowest possible score is 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poor at this</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
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1. Asking or suggesting to someone new that you get together and do something.
2. Telling someone you don’t like a certain way he/she has been treating you.
3. Helping someone work through his/her thoughts and feelings about a major life decision.
<table>
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<th>Poor at this</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Being able to admit you might be wrong when a disagreement begins to build into a serious fight.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Confiding in a new friend and letting him/her see your softer, more sensitive side.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Being able to put resentful feelings aside during a fight.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Finding and suggesting things to do with new people you find interesting.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Turning down an unreasonable request.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Saying no when someone asks you to do something you don’t want to do.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. When having a conflict with someone, really listening to his/her complaints and not trying to “read” his/her mind.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Being an interesting and enjoyable person when first getting to know people.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Standing up for your rights when someone is neglecting you or being inconsiderate.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Letting a new companion get to know the “real you.”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Introducing yourself to someone you might like to get to know.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Letting down your protective outer shell and trusting others.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Being a good and sensitive listener for someone who is upset.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Refraining from saying things that might cause a disagreement to build into a big fight.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Telling others things that secretly make you feel anxious or afraid.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Being able to do and say things to support another person when she/he is feeling down.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Presenting a good first impression to people with whom you might like to become friends.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Telling someone that she/he has done something that hurt your feelings.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Being able to show empathy even when the other person’s concern is uninteresting to you.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. When angry, being able to accept that the other person has a valid point of view even if you don’t agree with that view.</td>
<td>1</td>
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Skill in Relationship Initiation

Skill in initiating relationships is crucial if people are going to get to know one another. People skilled in relationship initiation know how to approach others and make good first impressions. They feel comfortable introducing themselves and striking up conversations with new acquaintances. They are also effective in issuing invitations and making suggestions for things to do with new friends. The ability to initiate relationships is a vital skill for forming new friendships. Two studies that have looked at first-year students during the first few weeks of their college experience suggest even further benefits from having these skills (McEwan & Guerrero, 2010; Shaver, Furman, & Buhrmester, 1985). In these studies, the students who were more skilled at initiating relationships and issuing invitations reported being better adjusted to college life and building more rewarding social networks at their new university.

Skill in Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure involves revealing personal information about oneself to others. As discussed in more detail later in this chapter, people skilled at self-disclosure gradually increase the depth of their disclosure so it becomes more personal. They know how to self-disclose in appropriate ways that allow them to get to know others without scaring them off. For instance, if Connor had approached Anne when he first met her, immediately told her that he thought she was beautiful, and then launched into a rant about his frustrations

Add up the following items for your score on each skill.

- **Relationship initiation skills**: Items 1 + 7 + 11 + 14 + 20 = [sum]
- **Negative assertion skills**: Items 2 + 8 + 9 + 12 + 21 = [sum]
- **Self-disclosure skills**: Items 5 + 13 + 15 + 18 + 24 = [sum]
- **Emotional support skills**: Items 3 + 16 + 19 + 22 + 25 = [sum]
- **Conflict management skills**: Items 4 + 6 + 10 + 17 + 23 = [sum]

with the lack of progress on environmental issues, Anne might have viewed Connor’s self-disclosure as premature and inappropriate. Instead, Connor started out by introducing himself and sharing impersonal information. As they got to know one another, both Anne and Connor felt comfortable sharing more personal information with one another. People who possess self-disclosure skills tend to be well liked (Fehr, 2008). They also perceive themselves to have more friends with whom to hang out and socialize (McEwan & Guerrero, 2010), suggesting that they build stronger social networks than those who have less skill in self-disclosure.

**Skill in the Provision of Emotional Support**

Being able to provide others with emotional support is another key skill related to formation, as well as continuation, of close relationships (see Chapter 7). This skill involves being able to listen empathetically to people’s problems and concerns, as well as being able to offer advice that is well received by others. Effective emotional support also entails being warm and responsive to others rather than trying to tell people what to do. Indeed, Fehr (2008) described **responsiveness** as a major determinant of whether or not people form relationships. According to Fehr, responsiveness is a communication style that shows care, concern, and liking. People are attracted to others who have this type of warm, other-centered communication style. In addition to being perceived as more responsive, individuals who are skilled in emotional support tend to develop friendship networks that are rich in personal resources, such as having friends whom they trust and can turn to for help in times of trouble (McEwan & Guerrero, 2010). A study by Shelton, Trail, West, and Bergsieker (2010) confirmed that responsiveness is important in developing both interracial and intraracial friendships. In their study, self-disclosure was most effective in developing friendships when it was accompanied by responsiveness.

**Skill in Negative Assertion**

As relationships develop, people begin to reveal negative aspects of their personalities more often. Sometimes there is also a struggle for control or power within a relationship. Buhrmester and colleagues (1988) suggested that skill in negative assertion helps people to navigate these potentially problematic situations while “saving face.” Recall from Chapter 2 that one part of saving face involves being perceived as able to make one’s own decisions without being controlled by another person. Skill in negative assertion helps people accomplish this. Negative assertions include being able to say no to a friend’s request, standing up for one’s rights within a relationship, and telling a partner when one’s feelings are hurt. If negative assertions are stated in a constructive rather than a critical manner, they can help people avoid relationship problems. In McEwan and Guerrero’s (2010) study on first-year students forming new friendships, students who reported being skilled in negative assertion were more likely to have joined groups or clubs to make friends. Thus, skills in negative assertion may help people navigate group settings and form friendships.

**Skill in Conflict Management**

As discussed in detail in Chapter 11, skill in conflict management is vital in both established and developing relationships. During the initial stages of relationship development, people are usually on their best behavior and refrain from engaging in conflict.
However, as relationships get closer, people feel freer to disclose negative information and assert differing opinions, which makes conflict more likely. People who are skilled in conflict management are better able to listen to their partner, understand their partner’s perspective (even if they disagree with it), and refrain from communicating hostile feelings during conflicts (Buhrmester et al., 1988). As for skill in negative assertion, McEwan and Guerrero (2010) found that the students who reported being skilled in conflict management were more likely to have joined groups as a way of forming new friendships.

**RELATIONSHIP STAGES**

The skills that were previously discussed help explain how people use communication to form close relationships. Stage models help explain the process of developing relationships. One of the earliest and most important stage theories is Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration theory (see also Chapter 6). According to this theory, as partners get closer, they move through four stages of relationship development. The first stage, called *orientation*, involves superficial disclosure that allows people to get to know one another in a nonthreatening manner. The second stage, called *exploratory affective exchange*, focuses on broadening the range of topics that people talk about so they can determine what they have in common and decide whether or not to further develop a relationship. The third stage, called *affective exchange*, occurs when people start to disclose about more personal topics, such as emotions and vulnerabilities. Partners reach the final stage, *stable exchange*, when they feel free to disclose almost all of their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with one another. Social penetration theory also addresses how relationships de-escalate and end through the process of *social depenetration*. The social depenetration process is the mirror image of social penetration in that self-disclosure becomes less personal and less frequent.

The staircase model (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008) expanded social penetration theory by describing 10 specific stages relevant to relationship development and disengagement. Within the staircase model, there are five steps leading upward, called the “coming together stages,” with each of these steps representing increasing closeness. There are also five steps leading downward, called the “coming apart stages,” with each of these steps representing decreasing closeness (see Figure 5.1). The coming apart stages exemplify the *reversal hypothesis*, which suggests that people undo closeness by decreasing communication. Thus, the coming apart stages are seen as the “reverse” of the coming together stages. Notice, however, that the top four stages are circled in the model. This is because people in established relationships don’t always stay on one stage. Instead, they use communication that exemplifies the top stages in both the coming together and coming apart stages. Sometimes they communicate intimacy and closeness, but other times they want distance and autonomy.

Next, we use the 10 stages in Knapp and Vangelisti’s staircase model as a way to organize the research related to the various stages that couples (and, to a lesser extent, friends) go through as their relationships develop and deteriorate. The types of communication that people use to develop, maintain, and end relationships have changed over the years since this model was first introduced. The typical script for developing relationships used to be that two people would meet, exchange numbers, talk voice-to-voice on the phone, get to
know each other on a date, and then perhaps start “going steady” or dating exclusively. Now the sequence is more like this: Two people meet face-to-face or online, check each other out via social media, exchange phone numbers or Snapchat information (often by friending the person on social media and then requesting information through direct messaging), Snapchat and/or text the person for a while, hang out and do something casual (either alone or in a group), and maybe eventually date (Fox & Warber, 2013).

Breakups have changed as well. Because early relationships can be developed through Snapchatting and texting, it is easier to “ghost” someone to break up—which means that one person simply vanishes. They stop texting and Snapchatting and may even delete you from their social media. If former friends or romantic partners do not delete each other from social media, they might see images of each other on an almost daily basis, which can affect how fast a person heals and moves on following a breakup. Although the process of dating has changed, the basic stages proposed by Knapp still provide a good structure for describing how communication changes as people grow closer and farther apart.

**The “Coming Together” Stages**

**Initiating**

Most stage theories include an initial interaction or beginning stage that focuses on when people meet either in face-to-face contexts or online. Sometimes this stage lasts for two or three more encounters, particularly if each interaction is short in duration. This stage involves exchanging superficial information that allows strangers and new acquaintances to get to know each other a bit without making themselves vulnerable. In Knapp and Vangelisti’s (2008) staircase model, the initiating stage involves greeting each other and exchanging bits of information, such as one’s name, occupation, or major. The information exchanged during this stage is usually positive; participants try to make a good impression by following rules of social politeness.

A greeting or question followed by a reply is typical of this stage (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008), which often evolves into a back-and-forth exchange of superficial information.
that helps people reduce uncertainty about each other. For example, when Connor first met Anne he said, “Hi, I haven’t seen you at our meetings before. Is this your first time coming?” Anne responded, “Yeah. Have you been coming for long?” Connor said he’d been to a couple of other meetings but was also fairly new. Then they exchanged names and continued talking about rather superficial topics, such as what happens at the Sierra Club, until the meeting was called to order. At the end of meeting, Connor told Anne it was fun talking to her and asked to add her on his Snapchat. This short conversation helped Connor and Anne reduce uncertainty and set a foundation for future interactions. Sometimes people never progress beyond this stage. Think of people with whom you work or take classes. You may recognize some of these people but rarely talk to them in depth. When you see these casual acquaintances, you likely exchange a quick greeting and reply (“Hi, how are you?” “Fine, thanks”) but nothing more, which indicates that you have not moved past the initiating stage.

Initial interactions may play a key role in determining whether people like Anne and Connor develop their relationship further. Indeed, some researchers have argued that people determine their feelings for one another quickly during initial encounters (Berg & Clark, 1986). They then communicate differently based on whether they like the person or not. According to predicted outcome value theory, during initial encounters people make decisions about how rewarding they expect a relationship to be (see Chapter 4). These initial impressions can have lasting effects on how a relationship develops. In one study, undergraduate students were paired with a stranger of the same sex to talk for between 3 and 10 minutes on the first day of class (Sunnafrank & Ramirez, 2004). After this initial interaction, students recorded their perceptions of how rewarding it would be for them become involved in a relationship with the person they just met. The students were surveyed again later in the semester and were much more likely to report developing a relationship with someone they initially perceived to be rewarding. They were also more likely to have sat near them during class, communicated with them frequently, and felt high levels of social attraction and liking. This study demonstrated that the first few minutes of initial encounters have a big influence on if, and how, relationships develop.

**Experimenting**

Regardless of how people first meet, if their relationship is to progress, they need to move beyond the exchange of superficial information. Yet revealing personal information is risky and can make people feel vulnerable. One easy low-risk way to find out information is to check a person’s social media. In the early stages of relationships, people are particularly likely to scroll through someone’s pictures on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram as a way to learn more about that person (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). It is also an easy way to check someone’s relationship status (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013).

Small talk is another way to help determine whether or not to pursue a closer relationship with someone. This type of self-disclosure involves talking about a lot of different topics but not getting into much depth on any one topic (Altman & Taylor, 1973). In other words, people explore potential topics by increasing breadth (i.e., the number of topics they discuss) first and then only increasing depth (e.g., the intimacy level of the communication) if they feel comfortable with each other. Indeed, *small talk* is the primary mode of communication during the experimenting stage (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008).
Small talk allows people to fulfill a number of goals simultaneously, including discovering common interests, seeing if it would be worthwhile to pursue a closer relationship, reducing uncertainty in a safe manner that does not make them vulnerable, and allowing them to maintain a sense of connection with other people without putting themselves at much risk for hurt or rejection. In some relationships, however, common interests are not a prerequisite for getting closer. Sometimes differences between people are intriguing, leading people to seek out more information. Indeed, a study of intercultural friendship showed that both similarities and differences can prompt people to get to know one another better (Sias et al., 2008).

Among today’s teens and young adults, romantic relationships often start in a stage identified as “just talking,” which captures the essence of the experimenting stage. The just talking stage is marked by mutual romantic or sexual interest, with two people exploring potential without making any commitment to one another (Truscelli & Guerrero, 2019). The “just talking” stage usually includes flirting as a way of exploring romantic potential, but most conversations are still fairly superficial, especially at the beginning of this stage. Sometimes people progress from this stage into hanging out or dating, but other times they do not. This stage can be marked by uncertainty because of the lack of relationship definition.

In the “just talking” stage as well as during friendship development, young adults and teens often communicate primarily via texting and apps such as Snapchat. Indeed, using Snapchat has been likened to small talk. In a study of college students (Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2016), Snapchat was primarily seen as a way to send selfies and share small moments throughout one’s day. The researchers noted that many of the messages sent on Snapchat are comparable to the type of small talk that occurs between acquaintances. People use Snapchat to maintain close relationships with friends, romantic partners, and families, but they also use it as a testing ground for potential relationships. Sending Snapchats is a relatively low-risk way to see if someone is interested as well as to learn mundane information about that person. As a participant in a study on Snapchat stated, “Since the subjects of our Snapchats are not extraordinarily personal, it has become a much easier way to get to know someone” (Velten & Arif, 2016, pp. 25–26). People in this study also commented that it was easy to share funny and interesting moments through Snapchat, or to send a picture rather than an awkward text message when first getting to know someone. Of course, if someone does not respond to Snapchat, it is less embarrassing than being rejected in person. Snapchattting and texting also lay the groundwork for feeling more comfortable when you do meet in person. So, when Connor sent Anne a Snapchat a couple of days after they met, he was happy when she sent a selfie back. This allowed them to keep in contact, which eventually led to a bit of texting. By the time the next meeting came along, it seemed natural for them to find each other and sit together.

As shown in Figure 5.2, teens still talk face-to-face to show attraction and romantic interest to one another, but the majority of ways they show such interest involve using their phones or social media. The graphic also shows that there are differences between teens with and without dating experience. Teens who have dated have used all of the strategies shown more than those who have not dated. Although some teens without dating experience may not have been interested enough in anyone to use these strategies, this finding may also reflect that those who are willing to put themselves out there and communicate their interest to their “crushes” tend to be more successful in getting the other person’s attention and developing a relationship.
Close Encounters

Of course, whether you are in the experimenting stage with a potential romantic partner or a friend, sometimes that is as close as you ever get to the person. In some cases, people in this stage decide they have little in common or do not find each other very interesting, leading them to either remain casual friends or terminate the relationship. Anne may have Snapchatted Connor back a couple of times to be polite but then stopped. Or Connor might have decided that even though they had a lot in common, there was not enough of a spark there after all. Indeed, most of people’s interpersonal relationships probably stay at this stage—or do not venture far beyond it. Think about all the acquaintances and casual friends you have. Chances are that your conversations with them are composed mainly of small talk rather than more intimate disclosures.

Intensifying

With a select few individuals, people emerge from the experimenting stage believing there is potential for a close relationship. They move from wanting to get to know the person better to wanting the relationship with that person to be closer. How close is sometimes unclear at the beginning of this stage, but there is a sense that something good could develop so people invest more time and energy getting to know each other on a deeper level. So how do people move relationships from casual to closer? According to social penetration theory, people increase the depth of their self-disclosure and start exchanging information on an emotional level (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The beginning of this stage is often marked by longer, more in-depth conversations as partners start to reveal more personal information and trust each other. If communicating via Snapchat, potential romantic partners increase the number of “flirtatious, fun, simple selfies” they exchange (Velten & Arif, 2016, p. 25).

As relationships intensify, people also communicate via more channels of mediated communication, such as those shown in Figure 5.2 on how teens communicate romantic

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FIGURE 5.2 ▬ Ways Teens Communicate Attraction and Romantic Interest

- Flirt or talk in person
- Follow on social media
- Like/comment on posts
- Share something funny/interesting online
- Send flirtatious messages
- Make a music playlist for them
- Send sexy or flirting pictures or videos
- Make a video for them

Note: Data in this chart are based on research by Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith (2015).
interest. As potential romantic partners move into the intensifying stage, they are more likely to “favorite” or comment on their partner’s pictures or timeline posts (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). These activities are more public and indicate moving beyond simply talking. So, Anne might go to Connor’s Instagram page and like a few of his pictures and then comment on the most recent one. Use of computer-mediated communication also tends to change so that the two people have a routine. Romantic couples report using more forms of computer-mediated communication as their relationships intensify (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). For example, they might start out sending Snapchats but then add texting and eventually FaceTiming. They also report routines, such as sending a good-morning Snapchat or texting most nights before they go to sleep.

Investing time in developing a relationship and defining the relationship are key ways people move from the experimenting to intensifying stage. Early work by Tolhuizen (1989) revealed that the two most common strategies people used to intensify their relationships are increased contact (spending more time talking and spending time together), and relationship negotiation (which involves talking about the relationship and your feelings for each other). Nearly 40% of the people Tolhuizen surveyed described increased contact as an important intensification strategy, while 29% mentioned relationship negotiation.

These findings underscore two common-sense notions about relationships. First, if someone wants to develop a deep and meaningful relationship with you, that person will want to spend time talking and interacting with you. Many potential relationships fade and never progress beyond the “just talking” stage because one or both individuals do not put the enough time and effort into communicating for the relationship to progress. Second, at some point, potential partners need to define the relationship and express their feelings. The popular press is full of advice on how to get to the point where you “DTR” (“define the relationship”; J. Swann, 2018). Although some people assume the relationship is going somewhere, unless you confirm this, you might be setting yourself up for disappointment if the other individual is not interested in a committed relationship with you. As such, defining the relationship is a turning point that creates less ambiguity about the state of the relationship and allows people to move forward together more confidently. The timing of the DTR is different in every relationship, but many people worry that asking about the state of the relationship prematurely could cause a potential partner to back away. Of course, if you have been spending time with someone regularly and asking about the state of the relationship leads to a negative reaction, it may be better to find out their intentions then rather than investing more time in something that has little chance of developing any further.

Indeed, people sometimes start to intensify relationships but stop. This happens with friends and potential romantic partners. For example, you can probably recall a time when you got close to a friend for a couple of weeks or so, but then you both got busy with other things and the friendship never developed beyond that. For potential dating partners, the intensifying stage can be confusing. Most people have had “almost relationships” where everything seemed to be intensifying but then fizzled out. The two people might be texting and Snapchatting, and even spending some time together, but then one or both people cuts things off before a truly close relationship develops. College and high school students sometimes say they have a “thing” but are not officially dating. Eventually some of these relationships become official whereas other do not. When a relationship becomes official or a friendship stabilizes to the point that others recognize it, the two people have moved into the integrating stage.
Other indicators that two people have moved into the intensifying stage include displaying affectionate nonverbal communication to each other (see Chapter 7); using nicknames or forms of endearment; saying “we” instead of “I” (“We should go down to Mexico sometime”); and making statements that reflect positive regard and commitment, such as saying “I love you” or “You are my very best friend.” Notice that all of these behaviors also help people define their relationships and understand how they feel about each other. Declarations such as these usually first occur at the end of the intensifying stage and then continue into the next two stages as couples integrate and bond.

**Integrating**

By the time two people reach the integrating stage in romantic relationships, they have already become close and are ready to show that closeness to others by presenting themselves as a “dyad” or “couple.” This type of presentation is not limited to romantic couples; friends often present themselves as unified as well. The key here is that two people have developed a relational identity; they see themselves as part of a dyad with some aspects of their personalities and experiences overlapping (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008).

Another key is that they have gone public. For romantic couples this can be accomplished in several ways, including calling one another “boyfriend,” “girlfriend,” or “significant other”; putting a link to your partner on your Twitter page, posting the date you became “official” on your Instagram profile page, or using “relfies” (relationship pictures) as profile pictures or banners on your social media. For some couples, especially older Millennials, Facebook official is seen as a milestone because it signifies that they are exclusive and committed and want others to respect that. For younger Millennials and Gen Zers, posting couple pictures and mentioning the significant other on their profile pages are more common ways of accomplishing the same goal. According to Fox et al. (2013), most couples discuss the state of their relationship before declaring it on social media; thus, it signifies a conscious process of escalating the relationship to something serious.

When dating relationships become exclusive, people are also more likely to integrate into their partner’s social media, including “friending” the partner’s friends and family on Facebook and following them on Instagram or Twitter (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). Once this “coupling” has occurred, people outside the relationship see them as a couple. It is easy to see when this has taken place. For example, imagine that Connor attends a party alone and several people stop and ask him, “Where’s Anne?” This indicates that people in Connor’s social network regard Anne and Connor as a couple; they expect to see the two of them together. Connor and Anne may also start to receive joint invitations to parties or combined Christmas gifts, and their mutual friends have a presence on their social media, which shows that other people see them as a committed couple.

Although self-disclosure is likely to be very high in both the intensifying and integrating stages, it may fall short of complete disclosure. As noted previously, in social penetration theory, the final stage of relationship development is the stable exchange stage in which people disclose openly about *almost* everything. However, achieving a true state of stable exchange is very difficult. Even in our closest relationships we tend to keep some secrets from our partner (Vangelisti, 1994a). Baxter and Wilmot (1984) found that 91% of the partners in romantic couples they surveyed said that there was at least one topic that they never discussed with their relational partner. Common taboo topics included the state of the
relationship, past relationships, and sexual experiences. Thus, although stable exchange may seem like a worthy goal, it is probably an unrealistic one. Close friends, family members, and romantic partners exchange information on a regular basis, but very few actually share 100% of their thoughts and feelings.

In any case, complete self-disclosure is probably not the best prescription for a happy relationship. In Chapter 6, we emphasize that many people have strong needs for privacy and autonomy. As Hatfield (1984) suggested, too much self-disclosure may rob us of our sense of privacy and make us feel overly dependent on others. In addition, it can be nice to keep some mystery in our relationships. This is not to say that people should purposely hide important information from their close relational partners. They should, however, feel that they have the right to control private information and to keep certain innermost thoughts and feelings undisclosed (Petronio, 2002). This helps explain why a stable rate of exchange is difficult to achieve—even in relationships that are exceptionally close.

**Bonding**

In the final stage of the “coming together” side of the staircase model, partners find a way to declare their commitment publicly to each other, usually through the formalization of the relationship. Making future plans and promises, and taking vows, are also part of the bonding stage (Avtgis, West, & Anderson, 1998). Perhaps the most obvious way of institutionalizing a romantic relationship is through marriage. Getting married shows commitment and also makes it harder to leave the relationship. Most people cannot simply walk away from a marriage. There are possessions to divide, perhaps children to provide for, and a socially shared history that is hard to leave behind. Marriage can also be thought of a social ritual in that two people come together before family and friends to declare their love for each other. Such a public declaration cements their bond even further. Importantly, before same-sex marriage was allowed in all states, many same-sex couples still had public commitment ceremonies uniting them as life partners in front of friends and family. These ceremonies underscore how important public commitment is to most couples.

Other types of relationships also reach the bonding stage, although the formalization of these relationships is more difficult. Friends and family members, however, can make public, enduring commitments to one another in many different ways. For instance, if you get married, the people you choose to stand up as your bridesmaids or groomsmen will be an important part of this critical life event, and they will hold that place in your memory forever. By choosing them, you are telling your social network that these people have a special place in your life. Similarly, if you have a child and choose godparents, these individuals will be part of a very important social ritual that publicly lets others know you value and trust them. Some friendship rituals, such as becoming blood brothers or getting matching tattoos, may also be ways to show a permanent bond.
The “Coming Apart” Stages

Differentiating

This stage occurs when people begin to behave as individuals rather than as a couple and emphasize differences at the expense of similarities. Partners may start doing things separately, and they may also argue about their differences and start noticing more incompatibilities (Avtgis et al., 1998). For example, after Anne discovered she and Connor had different opinions regarding cohabitation, she started to realize they had radically divergent attitudes about other issues as well. During the differentiating stage, people also report feeling lonely, confused, and inadequate (Avtgis et al., 1998). Rather than validating one another’s positions and feelings, partners are questioning one another.

Of course, many relational partners go through the differentiating phase without proceeding toward relational termination. Sometimes people simply need to assert their individuality and autonomy. Indeed, Avtgis and colleagues (1998) found that people in this stage sometimes reported compromising to try to balance their needs for autonomy and closeness. Notice that in Figure 5.1, the differentiating stage is on the “coming apart” side of the staircase, but it is also considered part of maintaining a relationship. Too much closeness all the time can be suffocating and stunt your growth as an individual who has needs and interests separate from your partner. Having a healthy amount of space in a relationship can be a positive force that helps maintenance relationships by balancing one’s relationship with one’s individual needs.

Extended differentiation, however, can lead couples to feel disconnected, especially when differences are perceived to outweigh similarities (Welch & Rubin, 2002). In many ways, the differentiating stage is the reversal of the integrating stage; instead of wanting to be seen as a unit, partners want to be seen as individuals. Thus, just as coupling behavior helps define the integrating stage, uncoupling behavior helps define the differentiating stage (Welch & Rubin, 2002).

Circumscribing

This stage occurs when communication becomes constricted in both depth and breadth. Talk tends to revolve around mundane, everyday issues instead (Avtgis et al., 1998). In some ways, the superficial communication that takes place during this stage is similar to small talk, except that the communicators are using talk (and avoidance of talk) to distance themselves from each other instead of to learn more about each other. Communication can be constricted at any stage of a relationship and does not necessarily mean that a relationship is in trouble. Again, look at the staircase model (Figure 5.1). Like differentiating, some circumscribing is a normal part of healthy relationships and can therefore be seen as part of maintaining a relationship. Why is this? Once we get close to someone, there is no need to continually disclose. The close people in our lives already know a lot about us. We also get caught up in the routine of our lives. The Gottman Institute, which takes a research-based approach to relationships, put it this way when describing how romantic relationships change in terms of type of talk:
Ah, relationship beginnings. The stream of non-stop texting, the late-night conversations that will make you starry-eyed even into the next morning. Then time passes, you get married, life gets crazy, and you fall into the rut of talking about who’s picking up the dry cleaning or what you’re having for dinner tonight. Your daily conversations went from loving talk to logistical talk. (Chlipala, 2018).

Is this a problem? Maybe, maybe not. There are times in all close relationships, not just marriages, when you are both busy with your lives and it is functional to check in with each other rather than have a lot of deep conversations. The key according to the Gottman Institute is to balance the logistical talk with some real dialogue that helps you feel close and connected. It is not the quantity of conversation that matters as much as the quality, with quality conversation characterized by asking and answering open-ended questions, being fully present when talking, and letting yourself be vulnerable (Chlipala, 2018).

However, when logistical talk is the dominant form of communication in a relationship most of the time, partners begin to feel they have nothing deep to talk about. This could be a sign that the relationship is declining. In friendships and dating relationships, the type of communication people engage in can also shift to media that are less suited for in-depth conversation during this stage. FaceTime might be replaced by texting, and texting might be replaced with a quick Snapchat. Tolstedt and Stokes (1984) found that during breakups self-disclosure decreased in terms of the topics partners discussed, and the content of self-disclosure became more negative, which is consistent with the description of this stage. However, contrary to the reversal hypothesis, depth of disclosure actually increased. This may be because some couples have intense arguments and discussions as they move toward relational termination. In general, then, circumscribing is not necessary an indicator that a relationship is in trouble unless it is the dominant pattern. When it is the dominant pattern, it tends to breed stagnation.

Stagnating

During the third stage, the relationship seems to be at a standstill. Communication becomes tense and awkward, and the relationship is itself virtually a taboo subject. Avtgis and colleagues (1998) found that couples in this stage tend to give short answers to questions, see discussion about their relationship as “reruns” of past conversations, and perceive relationship talk as futile. At this point, people often feel that they already know what their partner will say or that the outcome of interaction will always be negative. Therefore, communication is seen as unproductive and unpleasant. For example, Anne and Connor reached a standstill about whether to live together or not. Anne felt that their relationship would not progress if they couldn’t take this step, whereas Connor felt that it would be the wrong move for multiple reasons. They tried to agree to disagree, but communication started to become strained on other issues as well because they just didn’t seem to be as compatible as they once thought they were.

Communication on social media can also reflect that a relationship is stagnating. Because the couple is not communicating as much with each other, they may be reaching out to others more often. A study examining pre- and post-breakup communication patterns on Twitter (Garimella, Weber, & Dal Cin, 2014) showed that the number of tweets directed toward the partner decreased prior to a breakup, whereas the number of tweets directed toward others increased. Partners are also less likely to retweet each
other’s tweets or like one another’s photos and comments on various social media during the stagnating stage. Their social network might notice that they are posting less (or no) photos of each other on social media and their Snapchat stories.

The stagnating stage is also characterized by a group of distinct and somewhat contradictory emotions, such as feeling unwanted, sentimental, and bored (Avtgis et al., 1998). Couples are sometimes sentimental about their “old” relationship even though they are bored in the “current” relationship. This is why some couples and friends stay in the stagnating stage for a while. You might think, “I don’t get it. Why don’t they just break up?” but they might still be holding onto the positive aspects of the relationship and hoping things will change. If they do not, it is likely that they will eventually cease physical contact and affection (Avtgis et al., 1998), which will propel them into the next stage—avoiding. Nonetheless, some couples who reach this stage eventually find a way to revive their relationship. They decide the relationship is worth saving and start putting more effort into communicating. Others, like Anne and Connor, give up hope and, quickly or gradually, move to the avoiding stage.

**Avoiding**

This stage is best defined in terms of physical separation. Communication becomes even less frequent; statements such as “I don’t know” and “I don’t care” characterize this stage (Avtgis et al., 1998). People also report feeling annoyed, nervous, and helpless in this stage (Avtgis et al., 1998). If possible, relational partners move into separate physical environments and try not to encounter each other, or they just start spending less time with each other, like Anne and Connor did. Friends and romantic partners who do not live together often avoid attending the same gatherings, which can cause strain on the social network if they have common friends.

If physical separation is not possible, the partners simply ignore each other. For example, spouses who have young children and cannot afford to live apart might move into separate bedrooms until a more permanent solution can be reached. According to Avtgis and colleagues (1998), people in this stage stay busy with separate activities and, if living together, engage in everyday activities such as eating or getting ready for work alone or in silence. In any case, the goal in the avoidance stage is to achieve as much physical and psychological distance as possible.

This avoidance extends to social media. As during the stagnating stage, there is likely a decrease in the number of posts and tweets directed toward or mentioning the partner during this time. Both friends and romantic partners do things like end Snapchat streaks and leaving each other “on read.” In some cases, a “stonewalling” effect is present on Twitter, with one partner mentioning the other a lot more than vice versa (Garimella et al., 2014). This could indicate that one partner is trying to save the relationship, while the other is avoiding. During this stage, one or both of the partners may also use more depressed words or phrases in their tweets (Garimella et al., 2014). For example, Anne might tweet, “What’s the point anymore?” hoping that her friends will ask her what is wrong and offer her support. Connor might similarly tweet “Ugh” as a way to vent frustration. One or both partners may also change their relationship status to “It’s complicated” if they are on Facebook or delete a tag to their partner on their Twitter or Instagram page. They might also delete some or all couple pictures and replace couple profile pictures with a selfie or a photo with friends. These actions can signal that a relationship is moving toward termination.
Terminating

In this final stage, relational partners end contact, often after discussing what went wrong and talking about the details of the breakup. In some cases, partners also negotiate what their post-breakup relationship will look like. For example, romantic partners may decide whether or not they can still be friends, and spouses may discuss what their relationship will be in terms of raising their children after they divorce. In Garimella et al.’s (2014) study, when people broke up there was also an exodus of their ex-partner’s friends and family on their Twitter accounts.

This can go both ways: When Anne and Connor break up, Anne might stop following Connor’s family and friends, and they may also unfollow her. Sometimes people also use the mute function on Twitter so that they do not have to see an ex’s (or an ex’s social network’s) tweets even though they are still shown as following them. And, of course, people can take more extreme action by blocking an ex from their social media accounts.

Figure 5.3 shows that pruning and blocking an ex from one’s social media and cell phone are fairly common actions that high school students take as ways to terminate relationships, which points to future trends. Teenage boys and girls are equally likely to remove an ex from their cell phones or block them from texting them. Teenage girls, however, are more likely to remove couple pictures and block their exes on social media (Lenhart et al., 2015). Teens report taking these actions for many reasons. Among the most common are two very different motives—to prevent additional hurt for themselves or to hurt their ex. Some people want to move on. “Pruning” or blocking their ex on their phones and social media helps them to do so since they are not exposed to hurtful posts showing their exes having fun without them, nor are they exposed to any attempts by their ex to try and get back together. Others remove their exes to try and hurt them by saying, in essence, “I want you completely out of my life.” Chapter 15 includes more information about specific ways people communicate during and after breakups.

FIGURE 5.3 Pruning and Blocking Strategies During and After Breakups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>% of Teenage Girls Using Each Strategy</th>
<th>% of Teenage Boys Using Each Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Removed ex from cell phone address book</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocked ex on cell phone</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untagged or removed couple photos from social media</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfriended or blocked ex on social media</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data in this chart are based on research by Lenhart, Anderson, and Smith (2015).
Pruning or blocking one’s ex from their social media, either temporarily or permanently, is just one way that people give themselves space to heal after a breakup. Terminating a long-term relationship can be tough (see Chapter 15). Although partners may quickly be able to separate from each other physically, it might take longer to separate psychologically and gain the closure needed to move on. Individuals develop their own self-interests and social networks as a way of distancing themselves from their past relationship and moving on with their lives. If communication does occur at this stage, it is usually tense, awkward, and hesitant until both partners have closure and are able to move on.

The Ordering and Timing of Stages

Before leaving our discussion of the staircase model, it is important to note that people do not always move through these stages in an orderly manner. Knapp has argued that his 10 stages outline the typical pattern of relational development and decline for many couples but that variations frequently take place (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2008). Couples, or friends, might go through the stages in a different order, or they might skip some stages entirely. For example, some romantic couples meet, fall in love at first sight, and quickly get married. Other couples move in together after only a few dates.

However, a pattern of rapid escalation is atypical, and when people skip stages or move too quickly through them, they might later go back and engage in communication appropriate for earlier stages. Take a couple who meets and soon gets married as a case in point. Their friends and family might be surprised at the news of their marriage, and the newlyweds may need to work on merging their social networks and gaining acceptance as a couple. In this case, some of the processes that typically occur during the integrating stage would be occurring after the bonding stage.

Another common occurrence that affects the trajectory of a relationship is ghosting, or disappearing from a relationship without explanation. Ghosting can occur at any time, but a common pattern is that somewhere in the beginning or middle of the intensifying stage, one person suddenly breaks things off by moving straight into the avoiding or terminating stage. Ghosting has become more common because it is fairly easy (although not particularly kind) to disappear from a person’s social media and stop texting if the relationship had not yet become official. Other studies have shown that on-again off-again relationships, which involve repeatedly getting together and breaking up, are fairly common (Dailey, Hampel, & Roberts, 2010; on-again off-again relationships are discussed in more detail in Chapter 14). As these examples show, relationships can follow many different trajectories.

TURNING POINTS

Another way to think about how relationships develop and change is to consider turning points. A turning point is “any event or occurrence that is associated with change in a relationship” (Baxter & Bullis, 1986, p. 469). Turning points can also be thought of as major relational events. Most of the scenes in romantic movies and novels consist of significant relational events or turning points. This is probably because turning points help tell the story of relational change. Rather than focusing on the more mundane events that occur on a day-to-day basis, the turning point approach emphasizes those events that stand out in people’s minds as having the strongest impact on their relationships. Couples tell
stories about turning points to their social networks (such as “how we met”), and turning points are often remembered through celebrations and mementos, such as anniversaries and pictures (Baxter & Pittman, 2001).

This is not to say that mundane events are unimportant. Indeed, mundane events help shape the way people see their relationships even if such events sometimes go unnoticed and unappreciated. Everyday mundane events can be thought of as part of the regular road on which a relationship travels. Turning points, by contrast, are the detours relationships sometimes take.

The turning point approach is quite different from stage approaches to relationship development and disengagement even though turning points can mark entry into new stages. Social penetration theory, for example, suggests that relationships develop fairly smoothly and gradually as people’s communication becomes more intimate and personal. By contrast, according to the turning point approach, relationships can follow a choppier path, with both positive and negative events affecting their course. To determine the path that relationships take, scholars interested in turning points ask people to identify the events that changed their relationships. They can then create a graph, which is referred to as a turning point analysis (Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Bullis, Clark, & Sline, 1993). As shown in Figure 5.4, these graphs do not usually depict a smooth, gradual increase in commitment or closeness. Instead, this approach reveals a rockier road that includes all of the important ups and downs that influence the growth and, in some cases, the demise of close relationships.

Research suggests that both the turning point approach and stage approaches have merit; some relationships follow a linear, gradual pattern of developing intimacy, whereas other relationships are characterized by periods of extreme growth or decline or by a random pattern of highs and lows. For example, A. J. Johnson and her colleagues examined how friendships develop and deteriorate (A. J. Johnson et al., 2004; A. J. Johnson, Wittenberg, Villagran, Mazur, & Villagran, 2003). They found that between 40% and 50% of friendships fit the linear pattern—closeness increased gradually as friends developed their relationships, and closeness decreased gradually in friendships that ended. The other 50% to 60% of friendships developed and deteriorated in a nonlinear manner. Various types of turning points are related to closeness and commitment in romantic relationships, family
relationships, and friendships (Baxter, 1986; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Bullis et al., 1993; Golish, 2000; A. J. Johnson et al., 2003, 2004). Next, we discuss some of the most common turning points that have been identified in the literature.

**Communication-Based Turning Points**

Although most turning points include some level of communication, the act of communication itself constitutes a turning point in many cases (Bullis et al., 1993). Events such as the first time you talk to someone, ask someone out on a date, engage in an especially deep conversation, and have the talk to “define the relationship” can all be important parts of the story of a relationship. For instance, people often ask how a couple met. Connor might reply that “we met at a Sierra Club meeting and hit it off right away.” Anne might tell people, “I knew we had something special on our first date when we sat under the stars together under a blanket and talked for hours.” Communication can also be turning a point in family relationships. In a study of adult children and their parents, communicative events such as finally talking about something important or feeling listened to were identified as turning points that increased closeness (Golish, 2000). Friends also identify self-disclosure about feelings and discovery of positive personality traits as turning points that help develop closeness (A. J. Johnson et al., 2004).

**Activities and Special Occasions**

Other turning points involve engaging in activity and spending quality time with others. For romantic partners, occasions such as meeting the family and going on trips together are common turning points (Bullis et al., 1993). For family members, turning points can include vacations, holiday rituals, and special occasions such as graduations. A study on blended families showed that quality time together is strongly related to bonding (Baxter et al., 1999). Blended families occur when two previously separate families merge together into one family, as is often the case when divorced or widowed parents remarry. Turning points related to holidays, special events, and going on vacation together often made people feel like the blended family was “more of a family.” Sharing activity is also the most common turning point identified in friendships (A. J. Johnson et al., 2003).

**Events Related to Passion and Romance**

Some turning points mark particular junctures in the development of one’s relationship based on the level of passion or romance that is present. Passionate events include the first kiss, the first time a couple exchanges the words “I love you,” the first sexual encounter, and other passionate phenomena such as falling in love at first sight (Bullis et al., 1993). The order that these types of passionate events occur can affect relationship development; for example, people are more likely to escalate their relationships and feel positively about one another when saying “I love you” precedes having sex (Metts, 2004). Passionate events can also mark transitions in relationships (Mongeau et al., 2006), such as when a friendship turns romantic or people move from just talking to having a thing or becoming a couple.

**Events Related to Commitment and Exclusivity**

Although some passionate events, such as saying “I love you,” are a huge turning point, implying some level of commitment, other turning points more directly reflect
how committed two people are to each other and their relationship. Exclusivity occurs when people decide to date only each other and drop all other rivals. Somewhat related to exclusivity (or the lack thereof) is the turning point of external competition, which occurs when a person feels threatened by a third party or an activity that is taking up a lot of the partner’s time. Sometimes an ex reemerges; other times, a new rival starts to compete for the partner’s affections; and still other times, responsibilities related to work, school, or childcare, or time spent with friends interfere with the relationship. External competition can reinforce or threaten partners’ levels of commitment toward one another. Finally, romantic couples can show serious commitment by events such as moving in together or getting married.

**Changes in Families and Social Networks**

While marriage can change the structure of a couple’s relationship, other turning points often involve changes in a family’s structure. A new baby changes the dynamics of the family network in myriad ways. For example, a father and son may feel more emotionally connected when the son has his first baby and the father, as a consequence, has his first grandchild (Golish, 2000). Other times, sibling rivalry or jealousy may occur when a new baby becomes part of the family. For blended families, changes in the household configuration are often a turning point (Baxter et al., 1999). Children may have to deal with a new stepparent, parents with new stepchildren, and children with new stepsiblings. In friendships, the addition of a new romantic partner in the social network can sometimes cause conflict and decreased closeness between friends (A. J. Johnson et al., 2004). As a case in point, imagine that Anne’s best friend starts to feel increasingly left out and neglected as Anne spends more and more time with Connor.

**Proximity and Distance**

Another set of turning points deals with physical separation and reunion. These turning points can occur due to vacations, business trips, and school breaks (Bullis et al., 1993). Reunions occur when the period of physical separation is over and the couple is together again. Adult children also report that physical distance is an important turning point in their relationship with their parents (Golish, 2000). When children move out of the house, they sometimes feel their relationship with their parents improves because the parents now perceive them as an adult. Friends also identify turning points related to proximity and distance. For example, friends often recall that becoming roommates was a significant turning point in their relationship that led to either increased or decreased closeness. Friends who ended their relationship often indicate that turning points such as not living together anymore and an increase in distance were markers of relationship decline (A. J. Johnson et al., 2004).

**Crisis and Conflict**

The challenges people face in their relationships are often significant turning points. These include a couple’s first big fight, attempts to de-escalate or withdraw from the relationship, and actual relational breakups (Bullis et al., 1993). Friends also report conflict as a fairly common turning point in their relationships (A. J. Johnson et al., 2004).
Times of crisis, such as illnesses, death, accidents, and major financial problems can be transition points in family, friend, and romantic relationships (Baxter et al., 1999; Golish, 2000; A. J. Johnson et al., 2004). In Baxter and colleagues’ study of blended families, 72% of people reported that crisis-related turning points such as these brought the family closer together. All these challenges can change the course of a relationship in either positive or negative ways. For example, a couple dealing with infertility might blame each other and grow apart, or they might support one another in ways that strengthen their bond. An intense argument may lead to a breakup or a make-up session, and sometimes arguing is viewed as more significant than making up or vice versa (Baxter & Bullis, 1986).

**Perceptual Changes**

Sometimes people report that a turning point does not have a specific cause. Instead, they simply say their attitudes toward the partner changed, even though they cannot pinpoint exactly why. Perceptual changes can be negative or positive. For example, when you ask your friend why she broke up with her significant other, she might say, “I lost feelings” without being able to explain why. In this case, your friend experienced a negative perceptual change. On the other hand, another friend might tell you, “I never saw her as girlfriend material until I ran into her at a party one night, and I don’t know why, but then suddenly I saw her in a totally different light.” This friend experienced a positive perceptual change. Such changes, especially when in a negative direction, can be frustrating. People like to understand what went wrong and why, but with perceptual changes the causes of such shifts are not readily identifiable.

**RELATIONAL DIALECTICS**

Like the turning point approach, relational dialectics theory provides an alternative to the view of relationships as a series of linear stages; relationships are instead seen as constantly changing with change as a positive force that keeps a relationship vibrant and spontaneous. Some work taking a dialectical perspective has focused on how people’s needs and desires can be in opposition. In our opening scenario, Anne and Connor experienced tension about whether to move in together. Anne believed his refusal to move in together meant he was not making their connection his priority. Connor, on the other hand, felt moving in together was premature and could cause problems within their relationship and with his family. Where is this tension coming from? Some researchers would say Anne has a stronger need for connection than Connor, or that Connor values family approval as much or more than connection. In this view, tensions such as these are situated within individuals. However, according to the latest version of Baxter’s (2011) theory, called relational dialectics 2.0, tensions are situated in a broader discursive struggle of competing meaning.

What exactly does that mean? Baxter (2011) explains that “a *discourse* is a system of meaning” (p. 2). She uses an apple as an example. When you think of an apple, there are competing meanings—what color is the apple? What type of apple it is? Is it in the grocery store, growing on a tree, or in a basket on your kitchen counter? Maybe it is sliced or maybe it is baked into an apple pie with lots of other apples. The idea here is that there are a lot of different meanings attached to apples, and what an apple means to a person at a given...
moment in time is based on the interplay of all of these opposing meanings as well as the communication that occurred before and after thinking about the apple. The different meanings are also in opposition to the extent that a single apple cannot be all of these things.

In relationships, discourses can be quite complex. Again, think about Anne and Connor. What discourses are there about living together? When you hear two people are moving in together, what meanings do you and others attach to that event? The idea of living together has many meanings, ranging from being a way to show relational intimacy, a stepping stone to marriage, a substitute for marriage, and even a sin. Some of these discourses endorse living together as a positive step in relationship development, whereas others denounce it as a bad idea. These competing discourses frame how Anne and Connor see cohabitation and help them make sense of the tension in their relationship on this issue.

Some discourses are more central, giving them more influence. Others are marginalized (Baxter, 2011). In the U.S. culture, for instance, discourses that revolve around cohabitation as a positive event showing commitment are much more central than discourses casting living together before marriage as a sin, although 100 years ago that was not the case. According to relational dialectics theory, central and more marginalized discourses compete against each other in a centripetal-centrifugal struggle (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2011). Centripetal discourses are those that are more commonly accepted, whereas centrifugal discourses are those that are less commonly accepted. Of course, sometimes no one discourse is central, with discourses competing for that position. When discourses are in dialectical opposition to one another, there is a discursive struggle between systems of meaning.

This thinking leads to a core idea in relational dialectic theory 2.0—that “meaning making is a process that emerges from the struggle of different, often competing, discourses” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 65). This means that meaning is embedded in competing discourses rather than individuals. Most people think of communication as occurring in a relationship between two people, but relational dialectics theory 2.0 is based on the idea that relationships occur inside the larger context of communication and all the competing discourses that give that communication meaning. Think back to Connor and Anne. From the perspective of relational dialectics theory 2.0, the reason they experienced tension about whether to move in together is that competing discourses about what it means to live together came into play, causing a discourse struggle.

However, discursive struggles do not necessarily impact relationships negatively. On the contrary, they can provide opportunities for growth and change, and they can keep relationships fresh and exciting (Baxter, 2011). They can also produce creativity, spontaneity, continuity, and deeper levels of connection. Dealing with discursive struggles takes work, but if partners put in the effort, their relationship is likely to change and grow in positive ways. As such, discursive struggles are part of the fabric of relationships. They can be at the root of core problems that couples fail to solve, or they can propel couples toward greater understanding and closeness.

Dialectical Oppositions

Most of the research on the original relational dialectics theory, as well as relational dialectics theory 2.0, has focused on identifying the types of tensions, or dialectical oppositions, that occur in relationships. The tensions stem from seemingly opposing or contradictory meanings, such as those inherent in the discourses about living together
before marriage. The key here is that the two discourses appear to be contradictory or competing. For example, if similarity breeds attraction, can opposites also attract? Since “all of communication is rife with the tension-filled struggle of competing discourses,” there are numerous dialectical tensions, many of which have yet to be identified (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 352). Some of the many tensions that have been identified include the discourses of similarity and dissimilarity (Baxter & West, 2003), old and new family structures in stepfamilies (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998), fortune and misfortune (Krusiewicz & Woods, 2001), public versus private communication (Rawlins, 1992), and acceptance versus judgment (Rawlins, 1992). For instance, friends are supposed to validate and accept one another, but they should also be able to tell each other if they are doing something wrong or making mistakes.

Of the many oppositional dialectics that exist in various relationships, Baxter (2006) identified the dialectics of integration, certainty, and expression as “the big three” (p. 137). These dialectical oppositions can be situated in discourses about how people relate to one another, called internal tensions, or discourses about how people relate as a couple to others, called external tensions, as shown in Figure 5.5.

### The Dialectic of Integration

The dialectic of integration refers to the tension between social integration and social division. That is, there are discourses valuing connection with relational partners and social groups, but also discourses about being self-sufficient and doing things on one’s own. For instance, is it good or bad to spend most of your time with your significant other? According to some discourses, doing so shows you are a good relational partner who puts effort into your relationship. It is a sign of closeness; you have the type of relationship other people wish they had. But according to other discourses, this is unhealthy and suffocating. Are individuals who put their significant other first all the time “whipped,” or they showing an appropriate level of respect to their partners? Each conclusion is plausible within the discourses about integration.

The integration dialectic plays out both internally and externally. The internal dialectic under integration is connection-autonomy (Baxter, 1993). This tension, which is the most
fundamental relational dialectic, is grounded in discourses about what it means to be close to someone and what it means to be independent. People communicate in ways that reflect this discursive struggle. Connor, for example, might have told Anne, “I’m glad you want to move in together. I love being with you. But I think we both need time on our own before getting married someday.” Such a statement includes elements of both autonomy (Connor expresses his need for “time on my own”) and closeness (he says he loves being with Anne). How will Anne interpret and respond to Connor’s communication? The competing discourses about connection and autonomy in relationships will give meaning to his statement, as will any communication about connection and autonomy that occurred before this statement. There are also opposing discourses, for example, about what kinds of cell phone communication show the “right” amounts of autonomy versus connection in relationships. The Tech Talk box presents some of the complaints people have about cell phone communication in their relationships. What discourses about cell phone use do you think shape these tensions?

**TECH TALK**

**AUTONOMY-CONNECTION TENSION IN CELL PHONE COMMUNICATION**

In a study by Duran, Kelly, and Rotaru (2011), the autonomy-connection dialectic was cast as relevant to cell phone communication. They noted that cell phones provide people with perpetual contact (J. Katz & Aakhus, 2002), which means that partners can contact each other anytime they want. Although this accessibility may increase social connection, it also threatens autonomy because people have less control over when others can contact them. As Duran and colleagues (2011) stated, mobile phones may tie people “too tightly to their romantic partners” or people may “enjoy the potential for constant connection” that cell phones provide (p. 21). As dialectics theory suggests, this tension is evident in communication when people say things like, “You don’t need to call me so much” or “Why did it take so long for you to text me back?”

In Duran and others’ (2011) study, 61% of the college students they surveyed reported having conflict in their romantic relationships about cell phone communication that revolved around issues of autonomy or connection. The most common conflict issues related to autonomy and connection were as follows:

- My partner doesn’t answer calls or texts (23%).
- My partner doesn’t call or text enough (19%).
- My partner calls or texts too much (11%).
- My partner doesn’t return calls or texts (10%).
- My partner monitors my calls or texts to check for communication with potential rivals (9%).
- My partner calls/texts others while with me (8%).

Of these, not answering calls or texts, not calling or texting enough, and monitoring a partner’s calls and texts were related to higher levels of tension over autonomy-connection in a relationship.

The external manifestation of the integration dialectic is inclusion-seclusion. Some discourses stress the importance of couples (or any dyad, for that matter) spending time with other people, whereas other discourses tout the importance of having “couple time.” A study of lesbian couples provides a useful example of how this tension might play out in a relationship (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). One couple explained that although...
they usually celebrate their anniversary alone (seclusion), they invited friends and family to help them celebrate their 10th anniversary (inclusion) because they considered it to be an especially important milestone in their relationship. Other times the tensions inherent in this dialectic are more challenging to manage. Many people have experienced a situation where friends or family are upset because they are spending most of their time with a new significant other. Is it right for them to be upset? Are you being disloyal and inconsiderate to them, or are they being selfish by making you feel bad for fully exploring a new relationship that is making you happy? There are discourses supporting both perspectives.

The Dialectic of Certainty

This dialectic reflects the tension between the forces of certainty, stability, and routine, and the forces of surprise, change, and newness. When these discourses play out internally, the dialectic has been labeled predictability-novelty. On the one hand, there are discourses about predictability being comfortable and fostering security in relationships. People like to know “where they stand” in relationships. But on the other hand, there are discourses about wanting excitement and spontaneity in relationships. In our classes, we hear echoes of this dialectic when students talk about their ideal partner. Many of the women say things like “I want a guy who is fun and flirtatious, but not a player” or someone who is “stable and reliable, but not boring,” suggesting that the discourses about these traits make them seem almost mutually exclusive.

When the dialectic of uncertainty plays out externally, the tension is called conventionality-uniqueness. In this case, there is dialectical opposition between discourses that value a couple adhering to rules and conventions that make them like other couples, and discourses that celebrate a couple being unique. A wedding is an example of a time when these dialectical oppositions can come to the surface. Imagine a young couple deciding to have a sustainable wedding. They send invitations out electronically, use all compostable and recyclable materials, and ask that any gifts either be unwrapped or wrapped in recyclable material such as newspaper. How might guests respond to these choices? Some guests might comment that the wedding was extra special because it reflected them personally as a couple, whereas others might think the wedding was strange or did not seem authentic because it was different than most of the weddings they had attended previously.

The Dialectic of Expression

This dialectic reflects “the interplay of discourses of openness, disclosure, and candor with the competing discourses of discretion, privacy, and secrecy” (Baxter, 2006, p. 136). There are discourses built around the ideology of openness. In fact, some discourses place openness and honesty up on a pedestal as a goal for all relationships. Think of the popular saying, “Honesty is the best policy.” There are also strong discourses about privacy and the right to control what information about yourself you share with others as well as the ideology that “Sometimes things are better left unsaid.” When these oppositional tensions play out internally, the dialectic has been labeled openness-closedness. Does your partner have to know everything about you? Will your partner be hurt if she or he finds out something about you that you tried to keep private? These are key questions that depend on what discourses are brought to bear on the communication within a relationship.
When the dialectic of expression plays out externally, it is referred to as revelation-concealment. This tension stems from discourses that promote keeping information within a dyad competing with discourses that promote sharing information with others. In Suter and colleagues’ (2006) study, many lesbian couples expressed this tension. One couple discussed how they felt closeted but also wanted to share their relationship with others. Is it healthier to keep your relationship private or to tell other people what is going on between you and your partner? Social media makes this question more relevant than ever in many ways. Subtle and not-so-subtle information about relationships is shared on social media all the time. Sometimes the information reflects positively on your relationship, such as posting a picture with the date that you become “official” under it or posting the gifts you got from your significant other on Finsta. Other times it can be reflect negatively on your relationship, such as taking all the pictures of someone off your Instagram and then putting them back up again, or venting your frustration with your partner in a subtweet. Notice that in each of these cases a person is choosing to favor a behavior that is in line with one discourse and not the other.

Managing Contradictions

A central idea in relational dialectics theory 2.0 is that dialectical oppositions are a natural part of the communication process. As noted earlier, becoming aware of some of these tensions in your relationship is not a harbinger of doom, but rather an opportunity for growth and change. Thus, according to the theory, the trajectory of a relationship will be partially determined by the dialectical oppositions reflected in people’s communication as well as how they manage those tensions. Instead of trying to eliminate the tension caused by competing discourses, people in healthy relationships embrace such tension as an opportunity to grow both as individuals and as partners. Some ways of managing oppositional dialectics accomplish this better than others.

Early work on relational dialectics theory identified four general ways of dealing with dialectical tensions: (1) selection, (2) neutralization, (3) separation, and (4) reframing (Baxter, 1990). Of these, selection and neutralization are the least likely to produce growth and change, whereas reframing is the most likely to do so. Later work picked up on these four themes, but instead of discussing reframing, relational dialectics theory 2.0 focuses on the related concepts of hybrids and aesthetic moments. These concepts are discussed next.

Selection

Selection involves managing the tension in a way that values one side of the dialectic over the other. In this case, people usually buy into one discourse (often the more central one) more than any others. In relational dialectics theory terms, one discourse has become authoritative (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2011). The research on cell phone communication summarized in the Tech Talk box showed that people employed the selection strategy more often than any other strategy (Duran et al., 2011). A common selection strategy was to emphasize one part of the dialectic by calling or answering more often or by deciding not to pick up when a partner repeatedly called or texted. Notice that in each of these cases a person is choosing to favor a behavior that is in line with one discourse and not the other. If you decide to call and answer more, you are favoring discourse that casts consistent cell phone communication as a normative and perhaps even necessary part of an intimate relationship that reflects closeness. If, instead, you ignore your partner’s repeated attempts...
to contact you, you may be interpreting your partner’s behavior in line with a discourse that perceives such behaviors as annoying or clingy. Your refusal to answer is likely your way of discouraging such behaviors in your relationship.

In either case, selection would do little to help the couple grow or communicate better. If partners select different discourses, tensions will intensify. This would be the case if one partner aligned more with the ideology that keeping in constant contact throughout the day is essential in good relationships, but the other partner aligned with the ideology that separate time is important. Even when a couple jointly chooses one discourse over another, they make the mistake of muting competing discourses (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008), which stifles creative thinking and spontaneity. Moreover, the competing discourses do not go away. They are always under the surface. For instance, even if a couple decides to text each other every day throughout the day, they may sometimes question whether this gives them too much connection compared to autonomy.

Neutralization

Similarly, neutralization is usually not a particularly helpful way to manage dialectical tensions. Neutralization occurs when couples avoid fully embracing any of the opposing discourses. When people do this, they “construct ambiguous or equivocal meanings” that skirt rather than embrace the discourse struggle at hand (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). There are two strategies for accomplishing neutralization. The first is called moderation. This involves trying to reach a midpoint somewhere between the discourses. In the cell phone study, moderation occurred when people decided to be open about who they were communicating with so their partner would not need to monitor their calls and texts (Duran et al., 2011). In this way, people found a midpoint between keeping everything private versus having one person “stalk” the other. Another example would be that if you feel you are spending too much time Snapchatting with a certain friend, you might leave the friend on read a few times to increase autonomy, but keep your Snapstreak going to still maintain some connection.

The other type of neutralization is disqualification, which involves being ambiguous so neither side of the dialectic is engaged. This includes tactics such as changing the topic, avoiding an issue, or not responding to something your partner says that is related to an oppositional discourse. An example would be if you were unhappy that your partner left you on read once in a while, but you did not say anything because you were worried about appearing clingy or seeming to need reassurance. As you may have guessed, the problem with this strategy is that by not engaging fully in either of the opposing discourses around the autonomy-connection dialectic, you are not allowing yourself to experience either in meaningful ways.

Separation

Separation occurs when people’s communication reflects that they favor one discourse over another at different times. There are two ways to accomplish this. First, couples can cycle by alternating between discourses. These types of cycles usually occur naturally—when we hit the “edge” of one side of a dialectic we go back toward the oppositional side. When we feel we are getting too close, we pull a bit away for a while, and when we feel we have had enough space, we pull back in toward each other. With cell phone communication, you might naturally give each other some space after your messages flew back and forth nonstop for a couple of days.
The other form of separation is **topical segmentation**, which involves emphasizing different sides of the dialectic depending on the topic or context. In the cell phone study, *separation* strategies involved making rules such as not calling or texting at certain times (Duran et al., 2011). Another way to engage in segmentation would be to reserve Saturday night for “date night” and Friday night for your friends. Such strategies can be somewhat effective because they at least acknowledge the importance of meanings inherent in competing discourses. However, instead of integrating competing discourses to create new meaning, couples who cycle or use segmentation go back and forth in terms of which discourses they center and which they marginalize at different times. As we shall see next, the best ways of dealing with dialectical oppositions involve the creation of new meaning.

**Discursive Mixtures**

Rather than choosing to select, ignore, or go back and forth between different discursive meanings, couples can instead combine discourses to create new meaning. When this happens, a **discursive mixture** emerges that changes the meanings of discourses within a relationship. In early research on dialectics theory, *reframing* was cast as the most sophisticated strategy for managing dialectical tensions (Baxter, 1990). When people reframe, they are able to see oppositional discourses in ways that make them seem complementary rather than contradictory. For example, if your partner goes a day without contacting you and later apologizes and says, “Sorry I was so busy,” you might respond by saying something like, “That’s okay. I knew when we finally talked we would have an especially good conversation.” In this case, autonomy and connection are reframed so that they no longer in opposition—having a little autonomy is seen as fostering more connection rather than diminishing it.

In relational dialectics 2.0, two types of discursive mixtures are discussed. The first is called a **hybrid** (Bakhtin, 1981). Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) used the analogy of mixing oil and vinegar to illustrate how hybrids work. Oil and vinegar are very different, but if you put them together, they create something new—salad dressing. The oil and vinegar still separate, but they are working together as much as pulling apart. The same can happen when the meanings from competing discourses are combined. Eventually a dating couple might compromise in how they negotiate their cell phone communication in relation to discourses about autonomy and connection. They may decide that they are close enough that they do not need to talk continually and instead focus on having more quality communication over FaceTime on the nights they are not together. In this case, they are combining the discourse of autonomy (by not continually talking) and the discourse of connection (by incorporating more quality communication into their routine).

Another example of a hybrid was given in a study about how college students perceive their relationships with a sibling after they leave home (Halliwell, 2016). Some of the students in this study used hybrid discourse to describe about how they survived the separation from their sibling and are still close. In this case, two forces that might have seemed to be in opposition (being close to someone and being separated from someone) were reconceptualized as being able to coexist. The key with hybrids is that discourses that were once seen as in opposition are now seen as functioning together, whether it be autonomy versus connection in cell phone communication or separation and closeness within sibling relationships after one moves away to attend college.

An **aesthetic moment** takes the process of integrating oppositional discourses even further. These moments are transformative because they profoundly change the meanings...
associated with discourses (Bakhtin, 1990). Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) used the analogy of the chemical reaction between a molecule of oxygen and two molecules of hydrogen that creates H\textsubscript{2}O. Unlike the oil and vinegar mixture that separates, oxygen and hydrogen are now a completely new substance—water. To continue our cell phone communication example, if a couple recognized that are more excited to FaceTime or see each other in person if they haven’t been in constant contact all day, this would be an aesthetic moment. They see autonomy and connection working together in a seamless fashion that gives how they communicate new meaning.

Although aesthetic moments can occur during the course of our everyday communication, they may be especially likely to happen during transitions and rituals. For example, in the study on college students’ perceptions of their sibling relationship after leaving home, a theme called “Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder” emerged (Halliwell, 2016). During this transition, many of the college students described how moving away actually made them closer to their sibling. They stopped taking each other for granted and valued their time together more because it was limited. And they were actually excited to see each other, which never really happened when they lived together. Two other studies examined dialectical tensions in marriage renewal ceremonies (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2002; Braithwaite & Baxter, 1995). A common aesthetic moment in these ceremonies is when couples celebrate the consistency and change that has occurred in their relationship over the years. They celebrate that some things, such as their love and commitment for each other, have not wavered since they first exchanged marriage vows. But they also celebrate that they have changed and evolved into a different couple now than they were at the beginning of their marriage. When these two discourses about continuity and change come together in a seamless fashion, it transforms the meaning associated with both discourses in the relationship.

As these examples illustrate, discursive mixtures allow people to negotiate new meanings within their relationships. These mixtures promote growth, change, and creativity. Couples communicate in new ways that change the way they think about discourses that were previously viewed as in opposition. These changes occur throughout relationships rather than in a linear fashion.

**SUMMARY AND APPLICATION**

This chapter focused on three different perspectives about the paths, or trajectories, relationships take. The *relationship stage approach* suggests that relationships typically follow a linear pattern; people become increasingly close as their relationships develop and increasingly distant as their relationships deteriorate. In contrast, the *turning point approach* suggests that relationships are characterized by a more nonlinear path; both positive and negative events influence the level of satisfaction and commitment that people experience in their relationships. Rather than being seen as a staircase that moves toward or away from intimate communication, relationships are viewed as a series of ups and downs; intimate communication waxes and wanes at different points in the relationship. Finally, *relational dialectics theory* suggests that instead of being composed of neat and tidy stages, relationships are fluid and ever-changing; communication helps partners better understand and manage the competing discourses (such as autonomy and connection) that create meaning within their relationships. Of course, these perspectives do overlap. Within the staircase model, the stages of integrating, bonding, differentiating, and circumscribing
are all at the top of the staircase—with couples in stable relationships moving among these stages as they negotiate meanings of discourses related to autonomy—connection and openness—closedness. Similarly, turning points such as saying “I love you,” getting married, and moving away from someone may mark movement into different stages.

At this point, it is important to recognize that every relationship follows a unique trajectory. Some relationships develop linearly; others do not. Similarly, some breakups are forecast by decreasing levels of intimate communication, whereas others are connected to an especially negative turning point. In many cases, stages do not define a relationship, communication does. Communication helps couples make sense of the competing discourses that give meaning to their relationship.

Connor and Anne’s relationship provides a good example of how these various theories might work together to explain the trajectory of a relationship. Their relationship develops smoothly and in a linear fashion for the first two months. Then they have their first big fight followed by a period of withdrawal and then making up. When they resume their relationship, they follow a fairly linear path toward increasing closeness for a while. Then a new turning point occurs when Anne raises the issue of cohabitation. This issue uncovers areas of major disagreement from which the relationship cannot recover. Perhaps more importantly, tensions stemming from the discursive struggle between privileging their own connection versus their connections with their families, are not managed in productive ways. The connection Anne wants, both in terms of living together and in terms of sharing common goals, seems to disappear along with the relationship. This issue uncovers areas of major disagreement from which the relationship cannot recover. Perhaps more importantly, tensions stemming from the discursive struggle between privileging their own connection versus their connections with their families, are not managed in productive ways. The connection Anne wants, both in terms of living together and in terms of sharing common goals, seems to disappear along with the relationship.

As relational dialectics theory reminds us, it is important to understand that partners may attach different meanings to communication. Two people can be in different stages or can interpret the same interaction or set of interactions differently. One person may be trying to reach the intensifying stage of Knapp’s model, while the other is content to stay at the experimenting stage. Similarly, two people might map the turning points in their relationship differently. Anne might see the night they spent talking under the stars as the beginning of their romantic relationship, whereas Connor might regard their first kiss as the start of their romance. Anne might have started the process of differentiating before Connor, and she might have moved through the coming apart stages faster even though he was the one who found someone new. They may also have viewed the tensions in their relationship differently. Anne’s reaction to their conflict about living together may have been rooted in an ideology of connection that valued cohabitation as an important step in the development of a relationship, whereas Connor’s reaction may have been rooted in an ideology that stresses family approval as essential for maintaining a long-term bond with someone. Unfortunately, rather than finding a way to mix these discourses or perceive them as complementary, this tension became a major issue in their relationship.

Perhaps Anne and Connor could have saved their relationship had they communicated more effectively. Or perhaps they were better off going their separate ways. Either way, the path that their fictional relationship took probably sounds somewhat familiar to you—although the details are unique. This illustrates that relationship trajectories follow somewhat predictable paths, although no two relationships are exactly the same. Theories that focus on relationship stages provide a useful blueprint of how close relationships typically unfold over time. Yet every relationship follows its own path. Turning points help us understand the twists and turns in the path, whereas dialectical tensions help us understand that the path is always changing. The uniqueness of each path is what makes the journey worthwhile.
KEY TERMS

- aesthetic moment (p. 155)
- centripetal-centrifugal struggle (p. 151)
- connection-autonomy (p. 152)
- conventionality-uniqueness (p. 154)
- dialectical oppositions (p. 151)
- discourse (p. 150)
- discursive mixture (p. 157)
- discursive struggle (p. 151)
- disqualification (p. 156)
- hybrid (p. 155)
- inclusion-seclusion (p. 153)
- logistical talk (p. 143)
- moderation (p. 156)
- neutralization (p. 155)
- openness-closedness (p. 154)
- predictability-novelty (p. 154)
- reframing (p. 155)
- relational dialectics theory (p. 150)
- responsiveness (p. 133)
- revelation-concealment (p. 155)
- selection (p. 155)
- separation (p. 155)
- topical segmentation (p. 157)
- turning point analysis (p. 147)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Texting, Snapchat, and social media have all influenced how relationships develop and end. Based on your experiences, how do these forms of communication change as your romantic relationships and friendship get closer or fall apart? How do you use these forms of communication differently to communicate to friends versus romantic partners?

2. Which dialectical tensions are most common in your relationships? Have you experienced any tensions that are not mentioned in this chapter? How do you prefer to manage those tensions?

3. This chapter discusses three different perspectives for describing relationship trajectories. The perspectives differ in terms of how linear versus nonlinear they are, as well as the extent to which closeness or intimacy is perceived to be a stable characteristic of relationships. How does each perspective differ on these issues? Which perspective do you think best explains the trajectory that most relationships take, and why?

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