

“The Growth Spiral of Love: Relationships”

“I don’t love him/her anymore!” “It’s like we’re two strangers living in the same house!” “Is this what a marriage is suppose to be like?” “It’s gone too far, it’s too late, and I think the relationship is over.” Words spoken from a broken heart seldom carry happiness. We start out with good intentions, hopes rise high like lofty peaks caressing the dream clouds of our lives. But somehow those cuddly clouds turn into thunderheads, and the clash of two troubled lives rolls over our hearts like an endless summer storm.

Trying to mend torn relationships is very difficult. We seek new beginnings, but old memories lurk in our minds stealing away the trust we desire, robbing us of the hope for a rekindled love. Certainly we have learned from God that forgiveness is a key to this process, but when the forgiving has allowed a second chance what comes next?

Perhaps the answer can be found by searching for the way love grows within relationships. Whether we think of friendship, puppy love, or marriage there are some common factors present. By understanding the growth Spiral of love we may be better equipped to build the relationships which are so important to us, and possibly rebuild those which have been broken.

What is the first thing love requires between two people who are receptive to each other? That’s right, time! It takes time to build a positive relationship of any kind. If that relationship is to be centered in a love with great depth then much time is required: quality time, not just a large quantity of time.



(Quality Time)

If we waited on a street corner every morning for the bus to take us to work, and another person waited with us every day yet we did not speak to one another, how well would we know that person? But, if while we were waiting we told each other about our families, work, hopes, and heartaches, then a bond of friendship could begin to grow.

Quality time is not just sitting together watching television. We can work with a person and not have much quality time. We can even live in the same house with another person, raise a family together, and still lack sufficient quality time to sustain our relationship.

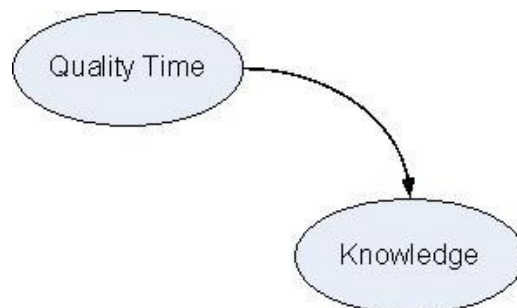
What must happen between two people in order for them to share quality time together is meaningful communication. This is where we express ourselves and allow the other person to discover who we are. Granted, a special touch, an outreaching act of love, can carry a strong message, but the sharing of thoughts by word or symbol provides the basis for the understanding of that message.

One problem which may exist is the lack of a proper role model to teach us how to communicate intimately. Let's think about the family relationship. How often did our families sit down and talk together about what was happening to one another or about our love for one another? For many families any conversation that takes place happens only at the dinner table, and that occurs in between "pass me the salt" and "see you later."

How often did we hear mom and dad tell each other that they loved one another or see them sit down and really talk about their feelings? How often did they sit down and ask us about our feelings? Often times what children see are the arguments that overflow private conversations, and what they hear are commands rather than deep interest in their lives. Even those of us who learned communication skills sometimes fail to use them effectively.

Without role models we are left to struggle through the intricacies of relational communication, and often the result is a surface sharing of ourselves with one another. Even a small amount of quality time each day can have far reaching results in building relationships.

The second thing needed for growth of love is knowledge. This is the result of quality time. By sharing with one another in meaningful communication we get to know one another. Through consistent sharing we can keep in touch with the changes which will occur as we pass through life's experiences from day to day.



(Knowledge)

How we listen to one another makes a big difference in what we hear. We each have a type of listening filter made up of our understanding of the words that we use, what they mean to us, as well as the tones and body language that layers them with additional intent.

Most of the time people apply this personalized meaning of words to what others say, and form assumptions about the other person, and what their words mean that are subjective in nature. These assumptions underlie how we listen and what we hear from a person, thus they serve to further strengthen our initial assumptions or “opinion” about that person.

We differ in our willingness and ability to challenge our assumptions and change them once they are held within our mind and emotions. Sometimes in relationships we make assumptions about one another that are incorrect because we have not taken the time to know the other person well enough to prevent such misunderstandings.

It might be helpful to remind us that active-listening can be an excellent way of ensuring that others interpret our meaning accurately, and to assist us in clearly understanding others. Simply asking someone if we can say back to them what we heard them say can work wonders. Also, we might ask the person listening to us if they will help us out by sharing with us what they thought we meant.

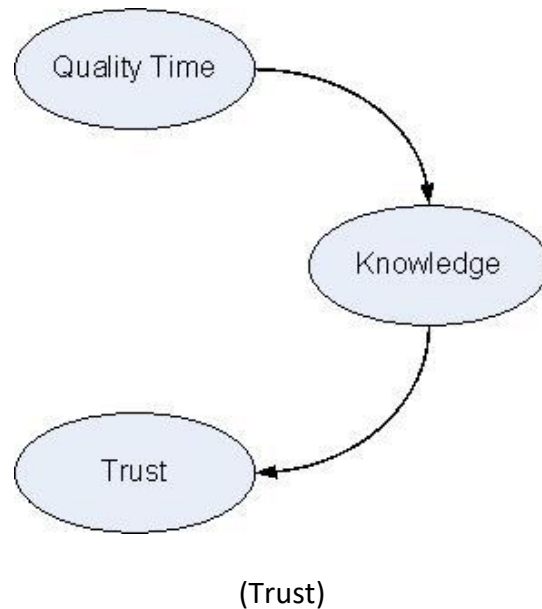
This takes some additional effort and time, but can make all the difference in communicating effectively. Without quality communication we simply fail to grow with one another!

Each person in any relationship usually has their own work environment and daily routine with its accompanying set of friends, acquaintances and problems, which we may not share together. Without good communication, the various facets of our lives can allow two people to grow apart, slowly becoming strangers.

It may be assumptions about one another that contribute to the growing inner distance, or it may simply be the fact that we don't know what is happening in one another's life any more. Regardless, in the void created by not communicating in depth with one another, we privately create inaccurate assumptions that contribute to our inability to hear one another correctly.

Old school companions who meet at ten-year reunions have experienced such feelings. As we visit with one another we may discover that the person we once knew has disappeared with the passage of time.

What a tragedy when close friends, a husband and wife or other family members suffer such a fate. Quality time together helps to avoid this and aids us in knowing each other, which allows the next part of the Spiral to develop: trust.



It is likely that we cannot deeply love someone within an intimate relationship more than we are willing to trust them. The limits of our trust of another person often determines the degree we are willing to open up our hearts to them for fear that they will take advantage of us.

Only on the basis of trust are most people able to freely share their deep needs with another person. Without this freedom our ability to love and be loved will be limited accordingly.

Unfortunately, what occurs in many marriage relationships is a breakdown of the trust that was extended to another person. Our good faith in them was once the basis for our relationship with them from the beginning.

Couples have often told me about the time in their “dating days” when they talked the night away. Nearly every subject was covered during those conversations, and they felt a closeness unlike anything they have experienced since. The problem is those conversations did not continue to happen, so their extended faith was not under girded with knowledge that sustained a trust-based relationship.

What does happen is the usual turmoil of daily activities encountered by two people trying to live in a fast paced society. They don’t have or take time for each other. Thus, they do not share an intimate level of knowledge with one another. This, in turn, contributes to painful experiences within the relationship; arguments or hurtful actions that break down trust.

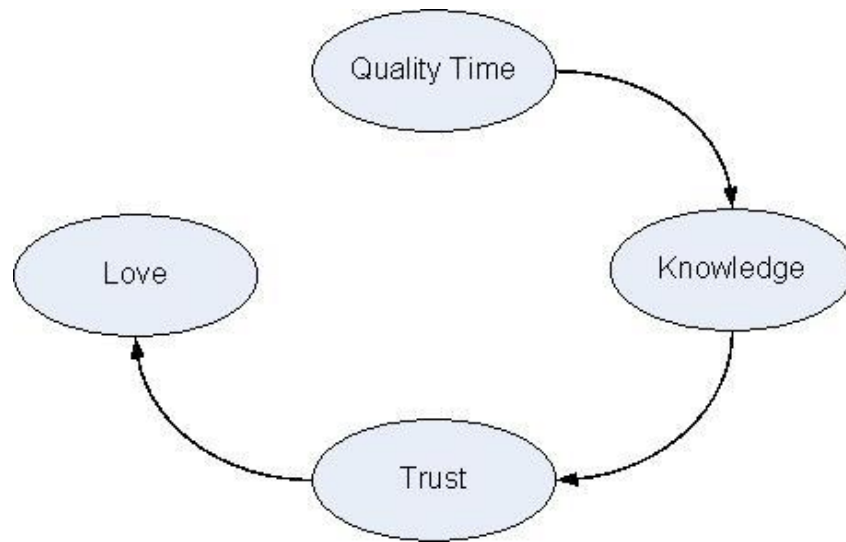
For some people the stress of life brings out the least mature elements of their personality and that results in behavior that can be destructive. It seems that we humans are never finished with the task of “growing-up”, and the child within can be a real problem at times for everyone.

Here is where forgiveness can heal. Through forgiveness we may be able to lay aside our destructive memories and hope that they gather enough dust to be forgotten. The Essence of Our Faith may be helpful where forgiveness is explored more completely.

In one way, what happens during an argument is destructive conversation resulting from our failure to communicate in a positive manner before confrontation seemed necessary due to our accumulated pain. Once conflict reaches the point of confrontation forgiveness becomes necessary for healing. Our skill in managing the confrontation can directly impact how much forgiving might be necessary.

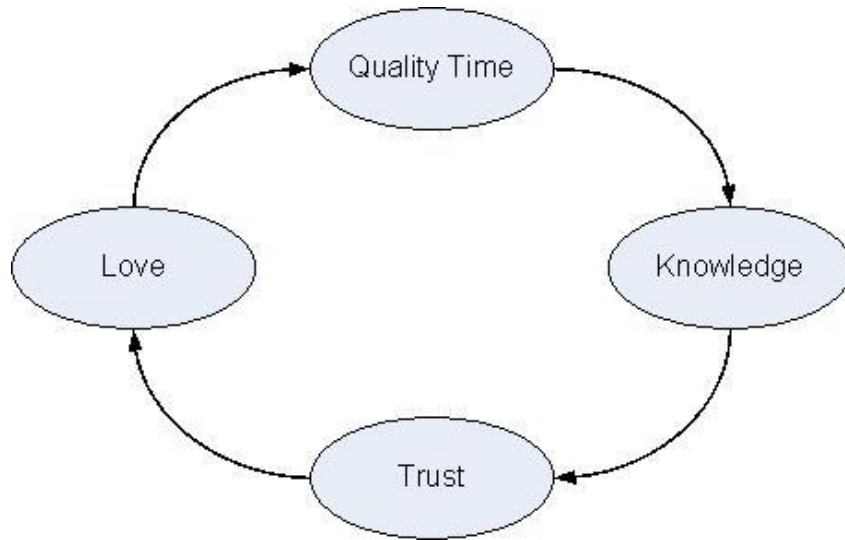
By spending quality time together, tension causing elements in a relationship can be worked out before confrontation is necessary. This is all a part of getting to know each other. The experience of sharing life's frustrations, as well as life's joys, in a positive manner builds trust.

If a lack of trust prevents this, or time does not allow for quality communication then our ability to love one another is hindered, because our knowledge of each other's needs is limited. The better we know someone, the more we know how to trust them. Thus, we will be able to love them more deeply within an intimate relationship, and the more we will be able to be loved by them.



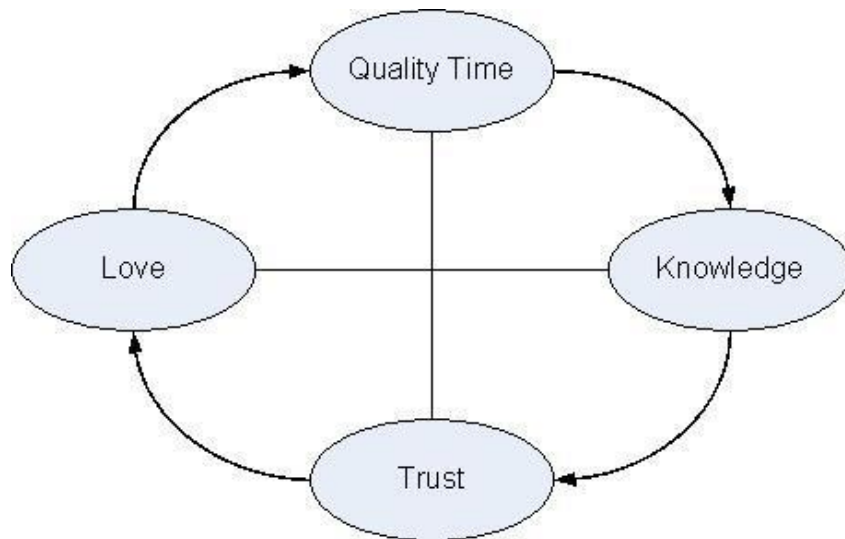
(Love)

Growth in love brings about the final part of this Spiral, because increasing love causes us to want to spend more time together. When two people love one another freely they can both reap the rewards of such freedom within their love centered relationship.



(Completes the Spiral)

To share in such a relationship is a beautiful experience, and the fullness of life that we share causes us to long for more. If we yield to this desire, our expanded quality time will increase our knowledge of one another, which will increase our trust as we exercise forgiveness during our times of tension and conflict. This brings forth growth in love as the Spiral goes on and on. Also, once love is established at this depth the process becomes interactive and growth can come more quickly. Stop this Spiral and the reverse will be experienced.



(Interactive and Iterative Growth)

Very much the same is true concerning our relationship with God, in Christ. Some differences are that God is with us constantly through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. He knows us better than we know ourselves, and He loves us more than we are able to understand. Another major

difference is that we will never have a reason to need to forgive God. The more that we learn about God the more we will trust Him.

“And after he had sent the multitudes away, He went up to the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.” (Matthew 14:23) Jesus set the example of spending time with His Father. He was in constant communion with the Father. If the Son of God had need of quiet time alone with God then how much more must we need the same.

Many of us will work hard at building our relationships with other people, but we seem to act as though our relationship with God does not require such effort. Perhaps it is because we think the things of God to be beyond our earthly contributions, that our “Christian” goals are unattainable, or that our efforts will not make a significant difference. What we must realize is that our first purpose in life is to love God, and that every other aspect of our lives is to be relative to that relationship.

Try looking at our life like a wagon wheel. At the center is our relationship with God. From that center flows every other facet of our life, like the spokes of the wheel. If we try to live some part of our life on our own rather than letting it be a result of our love-centered relationship in Christ, then that spoke will not be connected to the hub and the whole wheel becomes weak.

Now, the rim is the connected results of our life in Christ being lived out within the world. Since all that we do flows from our love of God in Christ, then the results will be interconnected because they are the product of God’s presence within us.

What this means is that no part of our life should be lived as though it is separate from Christ. If we reach our full potential as a person in Christ then the way to be the best mother, father, friend, employee, or whatever our role is in life, is to seek God first and His will for our life first and foremost.

Many of us set our priorities differently. Our family, work or something else comes first because we believe that this is required in order for us to do the best we can. This is a lie.

By putting God first we will be able to be a better wife or husband, employee or friend than we ever could be by placing Him second, and the same is true for every other aspect of our life.

Now, if we want to keep God as the center of our lives then we must love Him first and foremost, and that love is going to require a lot of our time. The result of this quality time spent with God will be a better knowledge of Him. Knowledge of God goes hand in hand with our growth in our relationship with Him.

In 1 John 2:12-13, we find some interesting words about growth and knowledge of God. John refers to the “children” who know the Father because their sins have been forgiven. Then he refers to the “fathers” who know Him (God) who was from the beginning.

The “children” know God by virtue of the fact of their salvation in Christ, and the forgiveness of their sins. Still they are “children”, what Paul would call “babes” in Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). The “fathers”, in comparison, are those who truly know God; the Alpha and the Omega; He who was from the beginning. Their knowledge of God has grown into maturity. This kind of knowledge comes by sharing every aspect of our lives with God. He knows us, but we must get to know Him.

Some of the best ways to know God are through prayer, Bible study, personal witness resulting from daily walking with God through Christ, and the witness of God’s work in the lives of others. As we get to know God better we shall know His will better. This will help us with difficult issues in life, but more importantly it will allow our love for Him to grow and grow.

As we grow in our knowledge of God through a daily walk with Him we will learn to trust Him more. Part of our problem as followers of Jesus is our failure to trust God enough to act on that trust, which is faith. Jesus said, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.” (Matthew 6:33) If we really believed this, would we allow any aspect of our lives to take priority over seeking God?

How many times have we trusted God for something in accordance with His will and He has failed to be there when we needed Him? It has never happened to me, and it never will. We might seek something that is against His will and be disappointed, but He will always be there in every way we need Him if we are surrendered to His leadership! Trust and obey.

This assurance of God’s never ending faithfulness to us in love enables a trust which is unlike any trust we can have for another human being. The reason is because people are prone to failure, but God never fails us. The beautiful thing is that through Christ, God has forgiven our failures of the past, present, and future. So, when He points out our weaknesses it is to help us become stronger, and not to make us feel guilty, as is often the case between people.

This unique trust that we can have in God brings forth a unique love. That love is centered in Jesus, reaching down and meeting our needs according to His will for us, as we obey His will. He makes His will known to us through the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Because of His love and the fullness of life we experience within it, we will want to spend more time with God, and so the Spiral continues...

What kind of change will take place within us as we grow in this love-centered relationship with God? How will this change take place? These are questions we will seek to answer in the next chapter. But before we go on, write down your answer to this question: “What is truth?”