

Love and Libido Ep5 DrSusanCampbell FC2

All these five stages have to do with the capacity growing, the capacity of the couple is growing. So by the time you get to the commitment stage, you actually find it more easy to truly empathize with the other person's reality and almost feel like a we system. If you're in a long-term relationship, chances are you can look back and identify when the relationship shifted from the bliss of the honeymoon phase to the reality of everyday life together.

You can probably think of times when you've struggled to balance each other's needs versus times when you've dreamt of shared future goals. Did you know that there are actually five distinct stages in every relationship and that couples can cycle in and out of each stage multiple times? Knowing what stage you're in can help avoid breakups and help you more easily navigate typical relationship challenges. That's what I'm discussing with my guest today, Dr. Susan Campbell.

Psychologist Susan Campbell has worked as a corporate trainer and relationship coach for 55 years, a former professor at the University of Massachusetts and frequent guest lecturer at Harvard, Stanford, and UCLA. She is the author of 12 books on the topic of relationships and human communication. Her work has been featured in a variety of national media outlets.

Susan trains coaches and therapists throughout the United States and Europe. Let's get started. All right, we are going to dive right in.

Susan, thank you so much, first and foremost, for joining me today. I'm so happy to be here, Emily. Yeah.

So I posted a TikTok maybe a month or so ago on your five relationship stages and it went viral. It had over 2 million views. There were so many questions in the comments and I thought, I have to have Dr. Susan Campbell on to talk about this a little bit more because there was such a public interest.

So can you first begin by just describing the five relationship stages and giving people a little outline of each one? Yes. First of all, this is based on research where I interviewed 50 couples and surveyed another hundred couples about how your relationship changed over time from when you first met to now. So based on that research, here's what I came up with.

Five relationship stages. Romance starts with romance. Then what I call the power struggle stage.

Stability is next. So there is something after the power struggle. Then commitment.

Most people think commitment comes earlier, but I'll tell you later why real commitment

takes a while to achieve. And then finally co-creation. So romance, power struggle, stability, commitment, co-creation.

Got it. Okay. So let's go through each of the five stages and talk a little bit more in depth about each one.

I think everyone, probably most people at least have experienced the romance stage. This is the honeymoon period of relationships. It's the infatuation stage as you describe it.

The rose colored glasses are on. Everything is good in the world. And with this new partner, you have so many chemicals surging through your bloodstream.

It's almost as if you're high on cocaine and you think you have met the love of your life. Did I summarize that accurately? Yeah. What else would you add to that? There's the good news and the bad news about the romance stage because the good news of having those endorphins more active there in the early stage is that you naturally accommodate a little bit to please each other.

That's both the good news and the bad news. Okay. Break that down for me.

Why is that good and bad? And so the good news is you see what the potential is for harmony and shared fun, shared creativity. You see what the potential is. So there's really something valuable in kind of putting some of your own selfish needs aside a little bit.

But the fall is we tend to do that too much in the romance stage because we don't want to wreck the romance. We don't want to bring up things that might have us lose this good feeling. So we accommodate too much.

Just for an example, something that came across my world the other day is first or second date, the guy says, I'm poly. Our listeners know what that means, right? Yeah. Polyamorous.

Yeah. I enjoy multiple sex partners, but being honest about that. So that the man says that the woman says, well, I'm open to poly.

Okay. So we'll go along in the romance stage and he thinks she's open to poly. But as you get farther down the road, she realizes, you know, that's not her truth.

She just didn't want to lose the guy, that sort of thing. And this stuff happens all the time. So even though Emily, you painted this rosy picture of romance, there's a lot of fear and insecurity in the romance stage too, which sometimes causes us not to be our authentic selves.

Yeah. I think that's such a good point. And I totally see what you're saying that on the

one hand, there is something nice about putting your selfish needs aside.

And I think a lot of people in that stage will, you know, do anything to keep their partner. But that oftentimes comes at a cost of maybe sacrificing something that is within your value system or, you know, putting on a front that really isn't true and authentic for you. And let me say one more important thing about the romance stage.

And by the way, to our listeners, we're describing these stages so that you can kind of realize which stage you're at and whether you're in danger of falling into some of these pitfalls or also whether you are consciously doing the work of that stage. So the work of the romance stage is two pieces of important relationship work. One is building a trust bond.

So you need to be able to spend some unstructured time together. So it's not always on a text. Right.

No, I mean real body to body time and not too busy. So you have to carve out time and space for a relationship. So that's one of the tasks.

You have to value it. And the other is seeing if you're on the same page with regard to your life path, your vision in life, and even what's a relationship for. Because for some people, it's for having kids and building a home and kind of a shared lifestyle.

For others, it's much more, let's be adventuresome, let's not have kids. And so some kind of a common vision that's forged in the romance stage. If you get too far down the line and you realize you're not going in the same direction, well, that's heartbreaking.

Yeah, definitely. We're going to get to this a little bit later on, but we'll talk some about how people can cycle through the stages multiple times in their relationship. And so what I'm already hearing is that a little bit of that maybe shared vision co-creation stage, which is really the last of your five stages, might sneak in a little bit in the romance stage.

If you go into the romance stage, hopefully with eyes wide open and your rose colored glasses maybe aren't too dark. And also if you know that there's other stages like co-creation as part of a relationship, maybe it'll help you have a more intelligent and informed vision or an intelligent conversation about what the possibilities are for us. And I think it's interesting too, Susan, to talk a little bit about what the science says about why we bond so intensely in the early stages of meeting someone.

Can you talk about pair bonding just briefly? Yeah, sure. Well, one of the big things is most of us have childhood unfinished business and we're looking for a safe place to just be ourselves and humans grow up. And yet we've got this sort of inner child that wants unconditional love and that sort of thing.

So there's a natural instinct to find another human being where it's almost like this time I'll feel safe. But also in just the biology of humans, there is a drive to pair. The pair bonding, that's just biological and sex drive comes out of that and so forth.

So that again is a positive force, but it's also a force to be reckoned with. Yeah. And I think that's all combined what makes this stage so powerful because there is the psychological and emotional drive to connect with other people.

And then there's the biological drive. If we're looking at this through a pure evolutionary lens, assuming maybe you're having sex a lot in the beginning, we're pair bonded to one another so that you can work as partners to potentially raise a child. So I think that that is part of the reason why everything about that stage feels so intoxicating.

Yeah. Got a lot of biology behind you here. Okay.

So the romance stage is wonderful. It's blissful. All is good in the world, but that inevitably, if you stick together leads to the power struggle stage or the love hangover stage.

So talk about that a little bit more. So most people, when they think of the word power struggle, they think of really getting into fights and arguments. It's not like that for everyone.

There are more fights in the power struggle stage. It's like, wow, I thought you loved our motorcycle rides in the country. You always did before.

Now you're telling me that you don't want to do that anymore. Right. More truth about each other comes out during the power struggle stage.

Like that. Hey, wait a second stage. Yeah.

It's like, okay, think of an iceberg and I call this the tip of the iceberg theory. You saw the tip of the iceberg during romance. Now all the stuff that's a little bit buried and unseen.

It's under the dark water here. That starts to bubble up to be included because the growth urge, because this couple's journey model, this five stages model is really about the natural growth and development of any relationship. This could be a friend relationship or a relationship with your work too.

It goes through slightly similar stages. So what's underneath the water, the things that I didn't even realize. I didn't even realize I didn't like motorcycling or I didn't realize how much I needed a partner.

So I start to be maybe more dependent than I ever thought I was and needy. And, oh no, I've got to hide that, you know, but during the power struggle stage, it's just this stuff. You can't hide it anymore.

It's come up. It's not that you were intentionally hiding. Most of the time it's not about intent during the romance stage. It just doesn't seem to come up. I mean, I will share a personal example because of what you're describing. It's just this example keeps like flashing in my mind.

And it's when my now husband and I first started dating, he would cook me these like gourmet meals all the time. I mean, things I, I'm a pretty adventurous eater, but you know, he would get creative. Like I remember one time he did this coffee crusted tuna and like all kinds of creative meals and he would plate them so beautifully.

And I thought I had like struck a pot of gold. This guy is incredible. Fast forward.

We move in together and suddenly it dawns on me, huh? not only has he not really cooked for me in a while. I don't even think he's going to the grocery store anymore. And I was like, wait a second.

And so that led to this whole conversation about, you know, gender roles and expectations and all of that, that I found to be really important, but it was definitely tense for a little while as we were navigating that. Yeah. So then you're going to be dealing with some disappointments a lot of times. I thought we were this and whoops, or I thought it was easy. And now I realize it's kind of more hard because your differences. So this is really what the power struggle stage is.

And it's an important valid stage. You have to come to terms with your differences, but first you're just shocked by them. Like, oh, you know, oh my God.

Right. It's just that he's not the gourmet cook that I thought he was. Sometimes we attribute meaning to that difference.

Exactly. He's not really into that many acts of service. And that was my love language.

And I told him that. And now, oh, he seems to need space, a lot of space from me. See, a lot of these things that didn't emerge before in the other person come up. And then the differences create insecurities and they even trigger one another. Definitely. And yeah, I think that's exactly what I described.

It triggered this fear of falling into these gender role traps that as a feminist and a sex therapist, I'm like, that's not going to happen to me. And so, yeah, that's something we definitely had to work through. But yeah, I could see the meaning.

Like what you just said. No, here I am a feminist, but I'm not practicing what I preach. So we have to look at the meaning we give to our differences. Differences are just differences. But what causes the struggle is the emotional meaning. And that's what causes the triggering.

And when we say triggering, that means emotional reactivity like anger or upset or disappointment. Today's episode is sponsored by BetterHelp. My inbox is flooded with DMs on a daily basis with people just like you who want help with their sex and relationship issues.

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I'm so glad you talked about that because I think that's where a lot of couples could then have a conversation about what meaning they are attributing to some of the differences or power struggle that they're noticing. And I don't know that a lot of couples do that. Instead, they just get triggered and they become emotional and maybe break up.

What are some ways couples can avoid breaking up through the power struggle stage? Well, my latest book, which you don't know about, is called *From Triggered to Tranquil*. Oh, perfect. That's got all the answers to how couples can start with the reaction that they each had, because sometimes you both react at once and then you really can't have a kind, gentle conversation because you're finger pointing or you're interpreting the other person's motives as somehow against you.

So then couples need to learn how to do trigger work, which means owning, oh, that's my own insecurity that just got triggered when I learned that you don't want to take motorcycle rides with me anymore. My fear of rejection is what's coming up. It's like, I

thought you loved me enough to just want to be with me anywhere.

And now you don't seem to love me as much. So it triggers that. And then we have to learn how to work with those tender, most of them come from childhood wounds, but those tender feelings that need to have some light shown on them.

So a couple relationship is the perfect place to have a light shown on your childhood unfinished business and what still needs healing. And so that's actually the underlying purpose of the power struggle stage is to stir things up so that you look at your unconscious unfinished business and your unconscious needs. Then you can make your needs more conscious and explicit and ask for them in a good way.

Rather than blaming the other person for not doing something, you get vulnerable and learn to ask for what you want. Yeah. And I think what's coming to mind for me right now too, is like the triple P effect from, I think it's in Mago therapy where we either pick perceive or provoke. I'll say that again, pick, perceive, or provoke characteristics in our romantic partner. That might be reminiscent of some unresolved issues we had with our own caretakers growing up. And I think that's always such a powerful question.

I encourage my clients to ask themselves, have you picked someone who is a narcissist the way your father was? Are you perceiving that they're this way when in fact they are not, but that's the lens you're looking through, or are you doing something to provoke narcissistic behavior because you think that that will give you the power to change them and thereby heal your own wounds. And so I can see that coming up a lot through this stage as well. Yes, indeed.

If you're insecure about whether you're lovable, you'll be watching. This is the provoke P. You'll be watching for evidence that this person doesn't love me. And then you'll pick a fight.

That's exactly, exactly. Wait a minute. You didn't come in when you said you were going to come in from doing the yard work.

I guess you don't love me anymore. Things get really exaggerated. Oh yeah.

During the power struggle stage. Right. And I think without self-awareness and insight and the ability to communicate effectively that that's probably when a lot of relationships end, but for those relationships that don't end couples then find themselves finally in the stability stage.

So talk about that stage a little bit. So the stability stage is where you're really doing the work of owning your trigger reactions as your own and learning to deal with those very sensitively within yourself. So the stability stage involves a lot of self-work, self-awareness, owning your part in that last fight, and then being able to value the difference.

See the difference wants to drive you apart, but you realize, here's an example from my life, the saver versus the spender is one of the things that. Okay. So I'm married to this man who's quite a spender and I was more of the breadwinner than he was. I mean, it wasn't totally one sided, but here's my hard earned money going into him buying a sports car and a gold watch and stuff. And sometimes without really talking to me about it. So we were young.

Yeah. As a boo-boo. Power struggle.

Yep. You got to not make big expenditures without talking. But in this case, it was a valuable difference that we came to because I realized that I'm kind of stingy with myself.

The reason I'm being so stingy with him, we really do have plenty of money, but I've always been so used to being so stingy with myself. And he's the spender who's more generous with himself. And there was deeper issues like, he gets to value himself and I don't get to value myself.

And so when I look deeper in, I realized that I have a deficit there and I was drawn to this man who's more generous with himself so some of that would actually rub off on me. So I learned that I actually liked the sports car, for example, and I liked the fancy vacations, which I wouldn't have done if I hadn't had been with him. So lots of things like that happen during the stability stage. If you can get the idea that there's some important learning and healing going on here, you're making yourself a more whole human being by kind of being with your opposite type and learning something about their way. That makes so much sense to me.

I'm thinking about how Esther Perel talks a lot about splitting the paradox. How oftentimes we have both of what seems to be opposites within us, but we split them. Suddenly, I'm the spender.

He's the saver or vice versa. And it's not until we develop that insight, self-awareness, and we're able to realize, you know, actually, maybe we both have a little bit of both, but there was something that maybe he had more of. It's not that you didn't have, maybe you just didn't see it as much that was attractive to you.

And so when you can start balancing that both internally and within the relationship, you can find a lot of stability. Yeah. And after the couple's journey, the five stages book, I wrote a book called Beyond the Power Struggle, which talks exactly about how, what one person's overlearned, the other person's underlearned and how you sometimes when you're in the power struggle, the preoccupied pursuer person gets more preoccupied, you know, because they want a lot of face-to-face time and the avoidant personality type, avoidant attachment style gets more into isolating and withdrawing when really both people need space and both people need togetherness.

It's what you're saying that Esther talks about, but I got a whole book about that. Yeah. I name all the different ways that people tend to have conflict and then how those look when they're being resolved.

But it's basically, you recognize there's great value in how this other person is for what that can teach me about my flat side, my underdeveloped side. I like the way you say that some sides of us are overdeveloped and some are underdeveloped. I think that makes a lot of sense to me.

So then moving beyond the stability stage, we enter into the commitment stage, which I think a lot of people means you get married. And while maybe more relationships do have a formal commitment during that time, it doesn't always mean that. So talk a little bit about that stage.

Yeah. Basically all these five stages have to do with the capacity growing. The capacity of the couple is growing and developing.

So by the time you get to the commitment stage, you actually find it more easy, not all the time easy, but more easy to truly empathize with the other person's reality and almost feel like a we system. I want my insecure partner to feel secure rather than, geez, you're always ragging on me with your insecurities. I had a jealous husband.

I've had a few husbands. Not the same one that was the spender. I had a jealous one.

I learned all the things that I've learned. And they were all great human beings. So my jealous husband, at first I would criticize him and not take it seriously.

The fact that he would get really upset and insecure if I didn't come home from work right at the time when he expected me and a lot of things like that. If other people gave me too much attention. So during the power struggle stage, I'm criticizing him. But when we get to commitment, I'm driving home and I remember, wait, my partner gets insecure if I don't get home on the dot at 6 p.m. I'm going to give him a call. Just things like that. I mean, it sounds like, well, you ought to do that anyway.

But there's an attitude shift that's generous rather than, oh, I've got to do that so I can avoid conflict with him. It's no longer about avoiding conflict or kissing somebody's ass. It's really about loving this person enough to want them to feel secure in the relationship.

Yeah, like getting out of that stance and finding a dance with your partner. Again, it's that peace. It's that harmony.

It's that care and consideration that is so necessary to cultivate loving long-term relationships. Yeah, I call it becoming a we system because in a system, if people understand systems theory, all the parts are interdependent. And if one part is

dysfunctional, it affects the whole.

And so we're now taking care of our relationship in this commitment stage to make it a much more powerful force for actually making good decisions together, like buying a house or having a kid or should the kid go to preschool? Working as a team. Exactly. If you haven't gotten to that stage in an inner emotional way, you're going to have a very unhappy time dealing with your differences your whole life.

So it's just really important to see your interdependence and to behave as a system. Yeah. And I'm thinking about how, of course, in the romance stage, there's a sense of two become one and egos are blended.

And then through that power struggle stage, that's when egos separate again. But then in the stability and commitment stage, there is a renewed sense of we-ness, I think. And it's that whole shift from intensity to true, meaningful intimacy.

Right. So then we find ourselves in the bliss and co-creation stage, which sounds wonderful. So what does that stage entail? Well, besides the need for love and companionship and all that juicy stuff, humans need to make a contribution to the world.

And that doesn't mean you need a big, important job, but humans have a creative drive, too. So this last stage is called the co-creative stage, because in that stage, you've gone beyond being a we system with each other and you begin to feel your kinship with all it is, with the universe, with the world, with society, with your community, or at least with your community of friends. So in a way, there's some kind of service or it's not always a product at all.

I mean, maybe the product is a consciously conceived child, but also maybe it's just you guys have a wonderful way of being together and you invite people into your home and it has everyone feeling happy and warm about being alive. I mean, that could be your co-creation. Or two people could have slightly different careers, let's say, or ways of self-expression and they support one another in their creativity.

So there is life beyond the couple that begins to take more of the foreground, takes more time. And the pitfall of that is you begin to be so committed to your projects sometimes that you forget about your intimacy needs and your face-to-face needs. Yeah.

Just got to keep that balance. Totally. I'm thinking of my own marriage, how my husband and I were very conscious about our decision whether or not to have children because we were having a lot of fun together as a couple, traveling and having the flexibility and everything.

And he was always very clear that he wanted children and I was pretty sure I wanted kids too. But I said, my motivation for having a baby with you is, I love you so much. I want to have something that is an extension of that love.

It's almost this kind of self-actualized, I'm thinking of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, extension of that. And I think that was the first co-creation that we shared together. And then fast forward, we're taking our children to this park and we keep going to this park and we love it.

And we start having conversations about, should we join the Herman Park Conservancy Board? You know, because it became meaningful to us. It was this whole thing. I see very clearly how couples then start moving outside of the relationship itself and think about ways to either give back to the community.

And of course, he and I have both supported each other on our own personal goals. When I came to him and said, I have a dream of writing a book, he said, what can I do to support you? And there were some changes we had to make, but he's done that for me and I've supported him in his projects. And I think that's what makes relationships so meaningful is that you, especially when you have a secure attachment with your partner, you feel free enough to take those risks because you know that they're going to have your back.

Yeah. That's a wonderful example, you and your partner. Well, there is so much more we could discuss about the five relationship stages, but you have a book about all of it.

And it sounds like you actually have a lot of books. So talk for just a second about where listeners can find you and buy your books, if anyone's interested in learning more. So the couple's journey is the title of the book and the subtitle is intimacy as a path to wholeness, because it really looks at relationship as an inner path of psychological healing and spiritual development.

So you can get that on Kindle. It's an ebook. My website is SusanCampbell.com. And the book is out of print now because it was done in the eighties, but it's still relevant.

People are still quoting it. I hear about that. They're quoting it all over the place.

So you can get it from SusanCampbell.com and I have some print copies or the electronic, or you can get it on Kindle. Awesome. Well, thank you so much.

I already know I'm going to want to have you back. So until next time. Thanks for being such a good interviewer.

Sure. No problem. That was fun.

Thanks again for listening to Love and Libido with me, your host, Dr. Emily Jamea. If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to subscribe and drop me a five-star review. Share with a friend who might find it interesting.

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