

Exploring Relationships

What are Relationships?

A relationship is simply how two or more people relate to each other.

At its most casual level, the relationship is that of a “stranger” that we haven’t met and don’t know.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the friends and lovers in whom we share the most intimate details of our hearts, souls and minds.

Between the two extremes are a wide variety of possible relationships that you may or may not have in your life.

Different people want or need different kinds of relationships, and in different combinations.

Relationship “Boxes”

Most people use what I call the “Boxes” system for classifying the relationships in their lives. By this, I mean that when they form a relationship, they apply a particular label to it and put it in its appropriately labeled mental box.

For example, the most common boxes are:

<i>Stranger</i>	<i>Friend</i>	<i>Coworker</i>
<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Best Friend</i>
<i>Lover (emotionally)</i>	<i>Lover (physically)</i>	<i>Sexual Partner</i>
<i>Boss</i>	<i>Subordinate</i>	<i>Parent</i>
<i>Child</i>	<i>Brother</i>	<i>Sister</i>
<i>Mentor</i>	<i>Guide</i>	<i>Clergy (Spiritual Advisor)</i>
<i>Rival</i>	<i>Enemy</i>	<i>Nuisance</i>
<i>Acquaintance</i>	<i>Partner</i>	<i>Spouse</i>
<i>Ex-Friend</i>	_____	_____

Note that while many of these types of relationships are similar in various ways, they are all distinctly different. In each type of relationship you have different expectations, different responsibilities and different levels of personal importance to you. Different people place different values on different kinds of relationships, making each person unique in what they look for themselves and try to provide for other in their relationships.

Filling in the Boxes

Go to the chart above and start filling in names of people who are in those roles in your life. You may put the same name in multiple boxes if desired. If there is a type of relationship that is important to you that's not on the chart, add it in the bottom boxes or change a description to something that works better for you.

Don't worry if all the boxes aren't filled in, or you tend to have clusters of people in some boxes and none in others.

Who, What, Where

Everyone will fill in the boxes differently. Some people will have one or more names in every box. Some people may only have names in a few boxes and the rest are blank. Some people may have the same names in many boxes.

Identify which box you usually put people. See what boxes you want more people in, or what boxes you'd rather not have anyone in.

There are no right or wrong answers here. Each person's needs and desires are different. How they try to fulfill those needs and desires are different, and their success in fulfilling them also varies. This is simply a guide to help you look at things from a slightly different perspective.

The Problem With Boxes

A common problem with the "Boxes" system is that we frequently find ourselves with relationships that don't like to stay in their neat tidy little container. We may have friends that as we spend time with become lovers. We may have lovers that become simply friends. We may have coworkers that become teachers.

Relationships can exist in any combination of "boxes" and frequently move from one box to another, or overflow their original box and take on new roles in our lives.

Relationships ebb and flow like tides, where what may be an ideal relationship last year may be no longer needed or wanted as one or both of you have changed and grown. This is not a bad thing to be resisted, but should be looked at honestly to decide if you are trying to hold on to something that is no longer there.

Putting our relationships in boxes is so popular because it is easy.

Once people have put everyone in their boxes, they normally stop looking objectively at the relationships and checking to see if they actually have them in the right places.

Unfortunately, relationships rarely stay where you put them, and rarely stay what you want them to be. They are dynamic and change and fade and grow just as you do. If you do not regularly re-evaluate the relationships in your life, you can miss important opportunities.

If you never look at the possibility of a friend turning into a lover, you could miss out on a great experience. If you never examine your relationship with your spouse, you might not realize that you are arguing because you are no longer lovers, but only friends. The tension in a relationship caused by people failing to realize what *their relationship actually is*, as opposed to *what box it is in*, can make an okay situation bad, and a bad situation horrible.

Variations on a Theme

The “boxes” system fails even more dramatically when you add in the various other forms of relationships that may exist such as:

Polyamorous Relationships: Loving relationships with multiple people simultaneously.

Bisexual Relationships: Relationships with different genders, either simultaneously or serially.

“Friend with Benefits”: Cross between “friend” and “sexual partner” relationships. Not quite love, not quite friends.

Power Exchange: Relationships about giving up and taking control of yourself or others. This is a *consensual* relationship where the participants willingly choose their roles and discuss the related issues honestly before going into it and may stop or change the relationship at any time. Examples of power exchanges include Domination/submission, Sadist/Masochist, Bondage/Discipline, Master/Slave and other relationships based on *consensual* elements of control and surrender.

Open Relationships: Where exclusivity and monogamy are not requirements of maintaining a relationship. These relationships often feature a “primary relationship” with various other forms of secondary relationships involving elements of emotional, spiritual, mental and physical interaction.

Abusive Relationships: Some relationships are just not good for the people involved. These frequently involve physical, mental, emotional, spiritual or sexual abuse. It is often difficult for the person being abused to get an accurate assessment of their position because they are constantly told what to think and punished for deviating from their instructions. This form of relationship is significantly different from a power-exchange relationship in that *it is not consensual*. There is no ability for the abused person to simply decide that they wish it to stop and have that request honored.

Obsolete Relationships: This is a relationship that was good for both parties at one point, but has become obsolete and no longer needed by one or both parties. This frequently happens when people are brought together to help learn a life lesson. Once that lesson has been learned, there is no longer a need to maintain the relationship and it should be allowed to fade away. This often happens between couples where as one or both of them grows and changes they are no longer best for each other. This concept is the reason for the concept of the “year and a day handfasting” where after each “year and a day” the couple takes a look at where they are in life and decides if it is better to continue on together or to go their separate ways in good faith.

These kinds of relationships are often difficult to fit neatly into boxes, as they combine a variety of elements of friend, lover, trust, control and a variety of other issues.

Relationship Reviews

Take some time every few months or so and see if any of your relationships have changed. See if people have moved into a different box without you noticing it, or if someone is filling multiple roles in your life.

Allow yourself to enjoy your relationships as they are, and give them the freedom to change and evolve or even fade away.

“The One” May Be “Many”

Contrary to popular opinion, you do not have to find *one single individual* to provide you with love, security, humor, personal challenges, financial security, spirituality, religion, politics, sports, poetry, opera, gossip, witty banter, innuendo, sexual excitement, mystery, passion, quiet composure, romance, exuberance, thrill seeking, humility, confidence, vulnerability, fine cuisine and everything else you seek in a romantic relationship.

It is quite unlikely that a single person would bring to you everything you desire. But even better, there is not a need to find it all in a single person. You can assemble your own team of quality relationships that each provide a portion of what you seek.

Just as you don't expect your auto mechanic to do your income taxes, and you wouldn't hire a painter to defend you in court, realize that everybody has their specializations in life. Some play music, some make you laugh, some teach you things about yourself and others, some love you, some you have sex with.

Learn what people are good at and allow them to bring these things into your life. By looking objectively at what your various relationships have to offer you, and working with others in openness and honesty you can find a way to “have it all” without overburdening any single person with your needs.

Progression of Relationships

Take the following types of relationships and place them in the order you would expect them to go:

Sexual Partner	Stranger	Lover	Acquaintance	Partner / Spouse	Friend

Now that you've put them in order, you see the progression that you expect to have in a relationship. The problem is that relationships don't all progress in the same ways, if at all. You may meet someone for the first time and feel “love at first sight”. Where does that fall into your progression?

Some people in your life may be an acquaintance, and never anything more. That's okay. Even the best movie has “extras” that just sort of stand in the background and help move the plot along.

While others may drift from one category to another over time, or span multiple areas at the same time.

“Friend” is a complete relationship. It does not have to change into something else. It may fade or grow stronger, but remain only a friendship.

Now, cross out the relationships, one at a time, in the order you'd choose to give them up if you had to, until there is only one left. This is that type of relationship that is most important to you. Is it what you expected? Is it what you would have chosen if asked “what is the most important relationship to you” as a stand-alone question?

In Conclusion

The whole point of this project is to get you thinking about your relationships, how you look at them, and how you might benefit from looking at them from a fresh perspective and seeing if you might be able to get some more out of them. Hopefully this has helped.

Blessed Be,

- Brian Gallagher