

Theories of romantic relationships:

Duck's phase model of relationship breakdown: intra-psychic, dyadic, social and grave dressing phases

This phase model of relationship breakdown is an explanation of the stages people go through when their relationship is not working. Once one partner is dissatisfied, there are 4 phases in the process each with a different focus.

Duck's (1982) phase model suggests that the breakdown of a relationship is not a single event, but rather a system of stages or phases which a couple progress through which incorporate the end of the relationship.

Intra-Psychic Phase

In this phase, one of the partners begins to have doubts about the relationship. They spend time thinking about the pros and cons of the relationship and possible alternatives, including being alone. They may either internalise these feelings or confide in a trusted friend.

Dyadic Phase

The partners discuss their feelings about the relationship; this usually leads to hostility and may take place over a number of days or weeks. Over this period the discussions will often focus on the equity in the relationship and will either culminate in a renewed resolution to invest in the relationship, or the realisation that the relationship has broken down.

Social Phase

Other people are involved in the process; friends are encouraged to choose a side, and may urge for reconciliation with their partner, or may encourage the breakdown, through expression of opinion. Each partner may seek approval from their friends at the expense of their previous romantic partner. At this point, the relationship is unlikely to be repaired as each partner has invested in the breakdown to their friends, and any retreat from this may be met with disapproval.

Grave-Dressing Phase

When the relationship has completely ended, each partner will seek to create a favourable narrative of the events, justifying to themselves and others why the relationship breakdown was not their fault, thus retaining their social value and not lowering their chances of future relationships. Their internal narrative will focus more on processing the events of the relationship, perhaps reframing memories in the context of new discoveries about the partner.

Duck (1982) claimed that each phase is marked by one partner (or both) reaching a point at which their perception of the relationship changes, usually for the worst. Individuals can move through the different phases at separate times, and in some cases their partner maybe unaware of their progress through the model.

Intra-Psychic Phase

The focus of this phase is on cognitive processing, in the thoughts and beliefs the dissatisfied partner experiences. They worry about the reasons for their dissatisfaction and focus on their partners shortcomings. They will often ruminate their thoughts privately but may share them with a trusted friend. Here they weigh up the pros and cons of the relationship and evaluate these against the alternatives, such as being single.

Dyadic Phase

The focus of this phase it is on interpersonal processing between the two partners. This means there comes a point when they cannot avoid talking about their relationship any longer. There may be a series of confrontations, but they are likely to express anxiety, hostility and resentment over the relationship. At this point there are two possible outcomes; to have a motivation and determination to continue breaking up the relationship or to have a renewed desire to repair it. Many individuals express feelings of dissatisfaction in this phase which means that self-disclosure is increased. For example, they may be more willing to talk about the reasons why they feel such dissatisfaction at this point.

Social Phase

In this phase the focus is now on wider processes involving the couple's social networks. The relationship breakdown now becomes public knowledge, and partners will seek support and try to form alliances with family and friends. Mutual friends find that they are expected to choose a side and gossip is traded and encouraged. Some friends provide reinforcement and reassurance; others place blame on one partner or the other. This is usually the point of no return.

Grave Dressing Phase

In this final phase the relationship is over, and individuals seek to bury it in the past. Couples will often try and spin a favourable story about the breakdown for public consumption, but it also involves creating a personal story that they can learn to live with. In most cases the dissatisfied partner reaches the conclusion, that the relationship was negative and they need to move on.

Hatfield et al (1984) supported the existence of the intra-psychic phase. They found that when people feel dissatisfied with their relationship, they are likely to report increased social withdrawal while they decide what to do. This shows that people need personal time to work out how they are going to navigate the next step.

However, the model is based on research into relationships from individualistic cultures, especially the USA. Moghaddam et al (1993) suggest that relationships in collectivist cultures are much more difficult to end.

The model is also criticised for the lack of supporting evidence for the early phases, as most studies investigate relationship breakdown after the event has taken place. There is also no time scale that best fits the model, as each individual relationship will define the time scale.

Duck and Rollie (2006) added a fifth phase after grave dressing; the resurrection phase. This focuses on personal growth where individuals consider what they learned from the failed relationship, as well as building a stronger self-identity and start preparing for the future.

