[A Developmental Model for Healthy Couples](https://www.couplesinstitute.com/a-developmental-model-for-healthy-couples/) by Ellyn Bader – adapted by [Vivian Baruch M. Couns](https://vivianbaruch.com/)

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| Throughout my experience as a couples therapist, I’ve observed that couples relationships typically progress through 5 normal and predictable stages. In healthy relationships, a couple’s development closely parallels the stages of early childhood development originally conceptualized by Drs. Margaret Mahler and Fred Pine.In what ways are these developmental processes similar? And how does understanding the Developmental Model increase your effectiveness in working together as a couple?**The Beginning: Symbiosis**Mahler describes a brief period of time in early childhood development during which a newborn becomes acclimated to being alive. Similarly, couples need to become acclimated to the “new life” of their relationship.The symbiotic stage of early childhood is characterized by bonding and connecting between parent and child. Parents learn to attune to the child, for example, by learning to recognize different types of cries. This stage is where strong attachment develops.When couples meet, they are two different people. They have their own likes, dislikes, fantasies, and dreams. When two people fall in love, there is a symbiotic process of merging boundaries. This is a healthy blurring of boundaries that allows the couple to put a boundary around both of them and decide to become a couple.In this stage, there is a period of “I love you, and you love me,” which I often refer to as a “temporary psychosis,” because there is so much focus and energy on the other person and on similarities.Over time, however, people begin to realize that they are not as alike as they originally thought they were. Maybe their dreams and fantasies are not as similar as they once thought.When partners in a committed relationship begin to realize these differences, they start to experience anxiety. They may wonder if these differences are going to drive them apart, or even if they are meant to be together.**Separation and Individuation Stage**In Mahler’s work, separation and individuation occurs through four sub-phases:**1. Differentiation**Differentiation in early childhood is defined as the stage where a child begins to recognize a boundary between “who am I” and “who you are.”For couples, the differentiation stage is, by far, the most difficult. This is the stage in which partners begin to express their own thoughts, feelings, wishes, and desires, and listen to the other’s thoughts, feelings, wishes, and desires without attacking, blaming, or trying to overpower them. When differentiation is occurring smoothly and well, you’ll see partners who are able to manage their discomfort while grappling with their differences.**2.Practicing or Individuation**In early childhood, the practicing stage was described by Phyllis Greenacre as the child “having a love affair with the world.”  Here, children begin developing the ability to propel themselves away from attachment figures and into the world.As couples mature, this stage is where the “we” becomes smaller, and one or both partners becomes more focused on their individual development. They focus on what brings them self-esteem apart from the relationship itself. This can bring its own set of issues depending on how the previous stages have gone. Partners who successfully navigate this stage, or have a therapist to help them, emerge as two people with self-esteem that is not dependent on the relationship itself.**3.Reconnecting or Rapprochement**Rapprochement means “back-and-forth” or “coming and going.” In this stage we see children going back and forth between the love for independence and the desire to regress, be nurtured, and cared for.As couples develop in their relationship, we begin to see the independence of each person as well as a rebuilding of the “we.” Partners may look to deepen their connection through participating in [couples intensive retreats](https://vivianbaruch.com/couples-intensive-retreats/), working on their sexual connection, or creating something together. They also notice that they place a deeper value on the “we” without overshadowing the “I.”**4.Synergy or Mutual Interdependence**According to Pine, the last of the childhood sub-phases is libidinal object constancy. In this phase the child starts to see their parents as separate from themselves, and from each other. The child learns to hold on to the image of being cared for, even when the parents are not in the room. The child who has this image is able to use it to self-soothe and to maintain connection and attachment through the frustration, disappointment, and disillusionment.In healthy couples, this is where we see that the “we” is very big. You can often feel the energy in the relationship when they are together. They usually have something that they share together. This is where 1 + 1 is truly greater than 2.**The Symbiotic Bind**Over time many partners create symbiotic binds for each other. These binds arise out of unresolved issues from each partner’s early development, beliefs about what makes a perfect relationship and experiences within the relationship. Couples lose sight of their strengths and talents, and they focus on each other’s flaws. They don’t have the ability to build upon these strengths, so they become regressed and pull the relationship down instead of building it up.Many of the couples who come to therapy have gotten stuck at a particular developmental stage.Learning how to spot the developmental stages can eliminate lots of messy trial and error. When you know the stage you’re in, and can identify the symbiotic binds, you’ll be able to learn the skills that are needed in that moment. Learning to manage these stages of differentiation helps us lead more aware, balanced and happy lives. If you’re interested in getting help in learning the necessary relationship skills, call 0421 961 687 or [email me](http://vivianbaruch.com/contact/) to schedule an appointment. **International callers should call +61 2 8005 1742**.You deserve the best trained relationship coaches if you’re planning to invest time and money in your relationship. If you’re not ready to book an appointment, call us on 0421 961 687 to book a FREE 15 minute phone consultation to discuss how we may be able to assist you. |
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