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When to DTR

We thoroughly enjoyed our dating relationship, but that's not to say it ran without a hitch. In fact, the first time I (Jeremy) called Jerusha was a pretty funny occasion. Now that I've been a part of the Redford family for quite some time, Jerusha and I can laugh about this, but in the heat of the moment, I didn't find the situation quite so amusing.

You see, I didn't know Jerusha well at all. We were both working with the high-school youth group, but the staff and volunteers didn't have much interaction with one another unless they worked with the same class of students. We didn't. I served the seniors at the time, and Jerusha ministered to the sophomores. More than fifty other leaders and five hundred students were around and between us.

Several staff members at the church had counseled (some would say harassed) me to ask Jerusha out. I did my homework and decided I did at least need to meet Jerusha. The next step seemed logical and simple enough: Get Jerusha's phone number and call her up with a date and a plan. Lucky for me (or so I thought), the Redfords were listed in the church directory, so no subterfuge or asking around was necessary.

When I dialed the ten digits, the phone rang a couple of times, and a male voice on the other end said, "Hello."

Now when you picture the ideal way to get in touch with a girl for the

first time, it's probably not with an out-of-the-blue phone call to her father. This immediately made me somewhat formal and even a little defensive. Little did I know that things would only get worse!

“Hi. Is Jerusha there?”

Instead of your standard “May I ask who’s calling?” or even the disappointing “She’s unavailable at the moment,” I got hit with...

“How did you get this number?”

What I didn't know was that the church directory listed only one of the two numbers for the Redford home. That number just happened to be the line Jerusha's dad had recently transferred for use in his home office. It was not supposed to be used for “personal calls” like this one.

This was not at all how I had planned the phone call to go. It seemed as if Jerusha's dad was asking for my intentions with her before I'd even talked to her! But therein lies the irony of the situation. It made me ask myself exactly what I was doing with Jerusha's number. Jerusha and I joke around that we had to have a DTR before most people do simply to make it safe for me to call the house. And that phone call probably happened so we could share the humor and the discomfort with you right now!

That was certainly a defining moment for our relationship, one that we still enjoy laughing about as a family. Lucky for me, Jerusha's dad decided to give me their home number and let Jerusha take things from there. This “problem” was easily resolved. But as we began to date, we reached many other points that caused us to consider our relationship and its progress. These defining moments led us to DTRs that helped shape our relationship and guide it through both the glitches and the still waters.

Defining Moments

After we had been talking and hanging out together for a couple of weeks, Jeramy came over to see me (Jerusha) at my house. I'd been asked

to speak at youth group the next night—sort of spur of the moment—and wanted to study, but I also wanted to see Jeramy. I asked if he wanted to come over so we could see each other for a few minutes in between my reading and writing.

This was another defining point in our relationship. When Jeramy showed up, I was in an intense, scholarly kind of mood. The tone was serious, and the house was dead quiet. It turned out to be an awkward, heavy hour. When Jeramy got up to go, I walked him to the door. We didn't know what to do, so we shook hands and said good-bye. It was weird and stiff.

No sooner had the door closed than my mom came up behind me and said, “You guys are way too wooden about all this. You need to relax.” We wanted to date the “right” way, but we were too uptight, totally unable to be ourselves.

Jeramy called a few minutes after he got home to ask if there was something wrong. I confessed that I thought he would be impressed if I seemed serious about studying God's Word. Jeramy was then able to admit that he was a bit overwhelmed by some of the things I said. My airs and collegiate vocabulary didn't fit with the get-to-know-you vibe of a date.

We were able to have a brief conversation to clear the air and, importantly, to define our relationship as one that wasn't going to be about impressing each other or even about figuring each other out. Saying what we were thinking helped the atmosphere and allowed us to move on.

Also near the beginning of our relationship, we used DTR to establish that we were interested in each other and on the same level. This took some of the pressure off our relationship because we weren't constantly wondering if every phone call “meant” something.

These initial stages were full of anticipation, excitement, and a healthy dose of uncertainty. After all, the DTRs that start a relationship don't set anything in stone. We had begun with some good communication,

but it takes more than one or two conversations to make a healthy relationship.

One Wednesday night after high-school ministry, we decided to talk for a while. At this point we'd gone on some great dates and spent quite a bit of time conversing on the phone and hanging out in different situations. We'd also had those initial DTRs, but this night provided the opportunity for us to discuss our relationship further and determine that we would date exclusively. We also talked through our physical and emotional standards of purity. Once again this open communication was a freeing thing, removing tension from our dates and conversations. All it took was a willingness to speak with honesty and sensitivity and a little effort toward that end.

Some time later we were established as a couple in the eyes of others, including our families and friends. We started being invited to and attending social events together. During the wedding reception of some mutual friends, I (Jerusha) was shocked to see Jeremy break dancing in the middle of a circle of clapping guests. Though we had defined our relationship well, there were still plenty of natural and fun surprises in our interactions.

We also attended family celebrations together, including a housewarming party for Jerusha's sister and her husband. This night proved to be another defining moment for us as a couple. One of the guys Jerusha had been interested in during college was still friends with her sister and had been invited to the party. Jerusha mentioned this casually to Jeremy, and it raised a few questions in his mind: *Why would she bring up someone from her past? Did this negate anything we had determined or discussed?*

We had a great time at the party, and this guy never made an appearance. But the possibility precipitated a good talk about how serious we were about each other. It provided us an opportunity to redefine our relationship and strengthen it further.

As we discovered more about each other, issues came up that needed explanation. The longer you talk to someone, the more you need of that person's story to determine if you'll move forward with the relationship. That's part of the natural progression of two people getting to know each other, and learning more about each other triggered further defining moments in our relationship.

Ultimately, there came a time when the proverbial handwriting was on the wall. The defining moments that began and shaped our relationship had led to a crossroads for the ultimate decision—marry or break up.

Our families both supported our relationship. In fact, a funny defining moment for Jeramy occurred when Jerusha's then eleven-year-old brother lured him to the computer desk, presumably to show him his new game.

It was one of those design-your-own maze and message programs, and Ian had created an intricate series of planes flying into balloons, popping them to reveal one letter at a time. After a minute the message was clear: "Marry Rusha," the computer screen proclaimed.

The process of dating and relating had narrowed our options to two: marry or break up. There was little need now for DTR-type conversations to reveal what we thought about each other.

But a couple of additional defining moments nevertheless shaped our future. One of the most significant came through Doug, a mentor and fellow minister of Jeramy's. Jeramy was sitting with Doug in a diner when Doug challenged him, "So what are you waiting for?" Jeramy decided that the answer was "Nothing." He left planning the proposal.

Jeramy arranged for one more DTR the day he proposed to Jerusha. While looking out over the Catalina harbor, he told Jerusha how he defined love. He confessed that he wanted to spend the rest of his life loving her, and then he got down on one knee to see if she felt the same. She did—and then some!

A chronicle of defining moments ended for us in engagement. As we paused during the different stages of our relationship to define what was happening and where things were headed, we enjoyed the freedom and peace the discussions brought to our courtship.

When to DTR will be slightly different for each couple. Yet in the natural progression of a relationship, defining moments will provide you the opportunity to assess, evaluate, and guide your interaction with each other.

Precipitating Factors

In later chapters we'll look at different stages of a relationship and the various times within each stage that you may wonder what prompts a DTR and when and how to make it happen. In this chapter we want to provide you with some *general* guidelines for when to DTR.

As you can see from our own story, defining moments arise that provide for and sometimes *require* DTRs. Precipitating factors will often nudge a couple in the direction of a DTR—and occasionally plunge them headlong into one! Though we cannot create an exhaustive list of every possible “defining moment,” we’ve come up with some common ones. As you progress through your relationship, keep in mind that the following nine situations are good times for a DTR.

1. You Need Boundaries

Setting physical and emotional limits for your relationship protects you from becoming too intimate too quickly. If you've been in a relationship for any length of time and not yet discussed these important issues, you'd benefit from having a DTR to establish your standards as a couple. We will have much more to say about this topic later in the book, but for now know that if guidelines have not been set, it's time to DTR.

2. Something Is New

It's often easiest for people (especially sensitive ones) to bring things up in a sideways or backdoor way. Instead of initiating a conversation about where a relationship might be headed, for instance, someone might hint that his lease will be up in three months and he needs to decide how long to renew it for. Or a woman might mention casually that she's gotten back in touch with a former boyfriend, leaving her current boyfriend to question whether she is pulling back from the relationship or may be unsure of *his* feelings. If you notice that the person you're dating is hinting at or mentioning things that you haven't discussed together, this is a good time for a DTR.

3. You're Concerned

You're not happy with the way things are going. Something may have happened, or the tensions and pressures of day-to-day relating may simply have worn down the relationship. Maybe you've had a big fight or something's bugging you. In any case, it's time for a "refreshment DTR," a conversation to determine whether the health and joy of your relationship can be reestablished. At this time you may need to discuss further emotional and physical boundaries or set guidelines for other aspects of your relationship. Whatever the unique situation, if you find yourself dissatisfied with how things are going, it's time to assess and evaluate using the DTR tool.

4. Things Have Changed

In other words, things aren't "normal" anymore. You may not exactly be displeased with the direction the relationship is headed, but something seems different. You can sense that things have changed, and you're not certain why or how. It could be that the other person is dissatisfied. It may be that you don't get the regular phone call you've come to expect. Or per-

haps you've begun to question where you stand because the dynamic of your relationship has changed. Maybe *nothing* is amiss. For instance, if a guy is silent, it may not *mean* anything. (Perhaps his silence simply proves what Jerry Seinfeld joked, "Do you want to know what men are thinkin'?... Nothin'!") Yet when you begin to sense that things aren't as they have been or as they "should" be, chances are good it's time for a DTR.

5. *An Awkward Moment*

As we mentioned, at certain times, particularly at the front end of our relationship, things just didn't flow smoothly. Clarifying things after a confusing interaction doesn't require a huge, drawn-out, "But how do you *feel*?" kind of DTR. Yet a brief conversation to acknowledge the awkwardness and move beyond it can do much for the health of a relationship. Besides, if you allow too many uncomfortable times to go unchecked, you may find your relationship weighed down unnecessarily.

6. *A Key Event*

This may sound silly, but what happens when you go to a wedding and the girl you're dating catches the bouquet? Well, nothing technically, but you may feel put on the spot. And what about when she graduates or he is offered a new job and questions about the future loom? Can a special Valentine's Day date or anniversary define your relationship without you knowing it? Absolutely. Certain events carry an inherent weight for relationships. In order to stay in touch with where the other person is and what he is thinking, you need to observe the person you're dating as well as remain in touch with where you are.

7. *Someone Moves*

This key event is worth mentioning specifically because, while some events do not require a DTR, a move *always* necessitates a defining or

redefining conversation. A DTR at this juncture includes questions such as, Will we continue to date? If so, how seriously and how exclusively? Will we be able to see each other? How often? Will we be able to afford telephone calls and gas/mileage for visits? A move is a huge defining moment for any relationship, and a DTR should address the practical aspects of the transition.

8. Others Make Comments

How often we've watched couples squirm under the eagle eyes and crafty commentary of well-meaning friends and family! It can be incredibly difficult to stay on the same page with someone when others are making remarks like "Well, I guess you'll be the next one down the aisle" or asking questions such as "You've been together *how* long?" No matter where you are in life, you will run into people who will cause you to doubt how you've defined your relationship. Be as aware as you can of what's being said to the person you're with. If the questions or comments seem to be affecting one or both of you, suggest a DTR before things get out of hand.

9. You Cross Physical Boundaries

If you have stepped over the line as a couple, you most likely need to have a conversation to reestablish your commitment to purity. Confess your failings to God (in other words, agree with Him that what you did was wrong) and then to each other. Pray as a couple the words David prayed in Psalm 51: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.... Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (verses 10,12). Also use this DTR to plan how you might avoid compromising your standards again.



This list of defining moments is not exhaustive, but it includes moments that may help you shape your relationship. Simply being aware of these precipitating factors can help you know when to DTR.

Fundamentals

Now we want to offer some additional, pragmatic how-tos, which we hope will help you successfully determine when to DTR.

First, you must **set aside a time**. This may sound obvious, but too often people try to squeeze a DTR in between things—on the way to the movies, just as they're saying good-night after a date, or when they have to be at church in five minutes. Maybe they're having dinner with another couple at seven, and at quarter of seven they decide they're going to try to talk about their feelings and needs *right then*. Yeah, right!

DTRs often take longer than you anticipate, and most likely you'll find yourself rushing to finish if you've planned things too closely together. You need to plan a time and give yourself plenty of wiggle room.

Remember, DTR equals communication. And “communication is a process that allows two...people in a relationship to express their hearts to each other. It not only entails expression, but also a commitment to listening and understanding.... To do this effectively we need to...plan a time and setting for it to take place.”¹ Don't simply go with the flow. Set aside a time. Communicating, listening, and understanding will take more than five minutes.

Second, you should weigh **day versus night**. For some reason, feelings and emotions get heightened the later at night it gets, and we're often freer with our words and feelings as our bodies wind down. While there's no hard and fast rule that DTRs should happen during daylight hours, we *do* recommend that you plan to talk earlier rather than later in the day if at all possible. If that won't work for your schedule, think about the

difference between seven in the evening and two o'clock in the morning. If you are already setting aside a time to DTR, it shouldn't be too difficult to plan it at time when you'll be less likely to fall into extreme emotionality.

You should also think about whether to **DTR in public versus in private**. Do you remember our friend Andrea from chapter 2? On her college campus it was an unspoken rule that DTRs happen in semiprivate public places. She explained that a couple is much less likely to get into a knock-down-drag-out fight in a public place or to cry too dramatically if others are close by. People are also less prone to end up making out after getting so excited about what they determine about their relationship. We'd call this commonsense wisdom. You need to have enough privacy to talk openly and intimately, but you should also protect yourself from the pitfalls of too private a time and locale.

In addition, it's best to **DTR after seeking counsel**. We always recommend that each partner in a couple be mentored by someone older in the Christian faith, and when you're considering a DTR, it's important to take a minute to solicit that mentor's godly counsel. This *doesn't* mean asking every single one of your friends for advice, and it certainly doesn't encourage you to gossip. It simply calls you to use a trusted and godly person as a sounding board for the thoughts and feelings you plan to express in a DTR. Proverbs 15:22 declares, "Plans fail for lack of counsel." Seeking outside assistance will help a DTR succeed.

Even more important, you should DTR only **after you talk it over with God**. Prayer is not an afterthought to a DTR. Colossians 4:2 calls believers to "devote yourselves to prayer." That command means committing each step of your relationship to prayer with fervor and consistency. But you should also set aside a *specific* time for prayer before a DTR—a time to ask the Lord for wisdom, guidance, peace, balance... You name it, you may need it! Prayer before a DTR will guard your mind in Christ

Jesus and help keep your focus on eternity rather than only on the moment at hand (see Philippians 4:7).

Now just as there are times when you *should* DTR, there are also times when you should *not*. Let us give you these three “nots” to round out our list.

1. Not After a Romantic Date

After a great date together, might you be too caught up in emotions to communicate effectively? Sure. Anybody would be. But, you may ask, couldn't a romantic date be a “defining moment” or a “key event” like the ones described earlier? Definitely. But *immediately* after you spend this time together is *not* the moment to launch into a DTR. Give yourself some space—a day, some hours at the very least. Let yourself come down to a more objective place. Think of it this way: You *still* need to set aside a time, receive counsel, and pray! That'll cool you down enough to think levelheadedly in preparation for your DTR.

2. Not After a Big Fight

Everything looks worse after a huge blowup. The frustrations caused by a fight or even by simple annoyances can drastically affect the nature and course of a DTR. Once again, you need to cool down and come to a more realistic and balanced state of mind. People don't call for an appraisal of their home after a hurricane or fire. They wait for things to get back to “normal” before estimating what their house is worth. Give yourself some space after a big fight. Your feelings may or may not change, but your ability to speak with kindness and patience will change significantly.

3. Not Before It's Time

This is by far the most difficult concept for people to grab hold of. But keep in mind that it's very easy to talk or worry a relationship to death. A

preemptive strike might even destroy a friendship that could develop into a dating relationship given appropriate time and space. For instance, driving home from that awkward scholarly time at Jerusha's, I (Jeremy) began jumping to conclusions about our chemistry. This could have led me to a serious DTR before it was time, and now I can see that a premature DTR would have been a big mistake. Jerusha and I needed to discuss what happened that evening, but it was too soon to discuss the overall direction of our relationship. The conversation would have come out of fear and insecurity rather than wisdom and patience.

It takes balance and restraint to know when it *is* time for a DTR. We all want to know where we stand with people. We long to have things clearly defined at every moment. But DTRs cannot eliminate all the messiness of relationships. A DTR is a tool that can help you avoid some of the pitfalls and mysteries of relating to the opposite sex, but like any other tool, it has limitations. This is why judgment and discernment are crucial. Learn to decide when and when *not* to DTR by seeking the Lord, who gives wisdom and understanding. As God declares in Proverbs 3, "Preserve sound judgment and discernment, do not let them out of your sight; they will be life for you, an ornament to grace your neck. Then you will go on your way in safety, and your foot will not stumble.... For the LORD will be your confidence" (verses 21-23,26). Pray for the Lord's discernment and you will know when and when not to DTR.