

# **Commitment in Healthy Relationships**

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## **Abstract**

Commitment to the relationship is related to the quality of the relationship. It makes sense that people who commit themselves to a relationship are more likely to find rewards than those who invest sporadically or half-heartedly. This article reviews the various dimensions of commitment in intimate relationships, including commitment as an attraction, commitment as moral obligation, and commitment as constraint. Because commitment has multiple dimensions, it functions differently in different relationships. Strategies for cultivating commitment are presented.

## **Introduction**

Every partner in a healthy relationship must invest intentional effort, including skill-building. Commitment may be considered a relationship skill because the abilities necessary to make and keep commitments must be learned, practiced, and refined just like those for effective couple communication or any other relationship skill.

Professionals will have to work to build an understanding among adult learners that relationship work is like other work: it requires resolve, understanding, acceptance, and a willingness to be creative. Glass and Staeheli (2003) even suggest that a marriage can survive an affair with the right combination of commitment and cooperation. (It should be said from the outset that commitment does not entail remaining in an abusive or dangerous relationship; any form of abuse should not be ignored.) Gottman and Silver (1999) note that most happy couples occasionally experience distress. For those relationships that are in the normal range of functioning, it seems clear that sensible commitment can sustain or improve a relationship (Brickman 1987; Johnson 1999).

## **Commitment forms a foundation for a healthy relationship**

According to research, commitment to the relationship is related to the quality of the relationship. (See Clements and Swensen 2000.) David and Vera Mace (1991), pioneers in the Marriage Movement, ranked commitment as fundamental to relationships. It makes sense that people who commit themselves to a relationship are more likely to find rewards than those who invest sporadically or half-heartedly. Investing in a relationship may be much like building a bank balance. Couples will never build a substantial bank balance unless they are committed to making regular deposits. Commitment is about making choices to invest in a relationship.

The idea of commitment is straightforward. It means that we pledge, promise, or obligate ourselves to something or someone. Some people have suggested that America's high rates of divorce are related to our low levels of commitment. Rather than being committed to a cause or person, we may be increasingly committed to ourselves (Baumeister 1991; Bellah et al. 1985; Cherlin 2002). According to Fowers (2000), the flimsy base of emotions is not enough to sustain relationships through the inevitable challenges; a solid foundation of values such as loyalty forms a more sure footing.

One of the pre-requisites of a healthy relationship is that it is usually necessary to make a commitment in order to reap benefits. A farmer does not get a good harvest unless he or she has cared for crops through bad weather, pests, and droughts. A student will not get a college degree without making a commitment to learn and study in spite of sickness, poor teachers, and difficult assignments. A marriage is not likely to last unless partners have enough commitment to sustain it through difficult times.

### **Dimensions of commitment**

One of the challenges in strengthening commitment is that people may be committed to a relationship for very different reasons. Each person has a different combination of reasons for commitment – or lack of commitment – to a relationship. According to Adams and Jones (1999), commitment in intimate relationships is said to have three dimensions:

1. *Commitment as an attraction*. This is also called the “want to” dimension because a person is drawn toward the partner. Some people are committed to a relationship because of the rewards and satisfactions of the

relationship. Such people may experience not only satisfaction in their relationship but also be held to the relationship by love and closeness.

2. *Commitment as moral obligation.* This is also referred to as the “ought to” kind of commitment. Some people stay in a relationship even when it is unhappy because they see it as a vow, an obligation, or a duty. For many people, commitment to marriage is a part of their religious or family values.
3. *Commitment as a constraint.* This is also called the “have to” kind of commitment. Some people stay in a relationship because of the children, because of social consequences of divorce, or because of financial limitations. Some stay in a relationship simply because getting out seems too risky.

Since commitment has multiple dimensions, it functions differently in different relationships. Some people stay in a relationship because of the many rewards. Some stay out of obligation. Some stay because of the costs associated with ending the relationship. Many who are committed to a relationship stay for some combination of these reasons.

### **Cultivating commitment?**

Beyond understanding commitment is the practical matter of sustaining or encouraging commitment in relationships. What can people do to maintain commitment in marriage? Goddard and Olsen (2004) have described three commitment practices that make a relationship more likely to endure.

The first key to cultivating commitment is *making the relationship primary*. With many demands on our time, sometimes our marriages only get small fragments of leftover time and energy. This is likely to leave the relationship starved and empty. In contrast, when decisions must be made about how we use our time and energy, the effect on the relationship should be considered. John Gottman (Gottman and Silver 1999) has observed that it is not as much the trips to Hawaii that assure the strength of a relationship as much as the common, shared, regular activities. Some couples work in the yard together. Some cook together. Bill Doherty (1997) describes taking time every day with his wife Leah to just talk for fifteen minutes. Usually right after dinner they would send the children to play while they shared with each other. They did not use the time to solve relationship problems or to deal with conflicts. They used it to connect.

A second key to cultivating commitment is *setting limits on intrusions*. For commitment to thrive, a couple must be willing to set some boundaries. For example, a couple might decide that they will not invite a member of the extended family to come live with them unless they have discussed it together and have come to agreement. Some couples agree not to talk with anyone outside the relationship about their marriage problems unless that person is a friend of the relationship – that is, someone who wants to help them succeed as a couple. Some couples decide that both partners will avoid going out to dinner or spending time alone with someone who could be a threat to the relationship. Some couples agree to carefully monitor their feelings of attraction to others outside the relationship so that they won't allow outside attractions to grow.

A third key to commitment is *building rituals of connection*. Each couple can design rituals of connection that will sustain relationship commitment. Some couples worship together or take classes together and share their discoveries with each other. Some couples take time for hugging, walking, running, or other exercising. Any activity that helps a couple to feel close can strengthen and support commitment. For many couples it takes years to find the right activities that both partners enjoy.

### **Repairing commitment**

The activities listed above are primarily preventive – they are intended to keep commitment from eroding. But there are also ways of supporting commitment for those who are uncertain of the future of their relationship. In those cases where a person wants to strengthen a non-abusive relationship and wants suggestions for doing that, wise recommendations should be customized to the dimensions of commitment that are most important to the couple.

If commitment is primarily about attraction for the couple, a helper such as a family life educator might invite them to think about the best times in their relationship. If commitment is largely based on moral obligation, a helper might invite them to think about the promises they have made. If their commitment is based on constraint, a helper might invite them to think about the effects of relationship failure on their family and friends. Or the helper could invite them to think about the challenges they would face if they divorce – and maybe even reflect on difficulties faced by friends who have divorced. Of course there are

some destructive relationships that need to end. But most relationships probably need a tune-up rather than a trade-in.

When it comes to deciding whether one's relationship should end, there are no easy answers. While it is clear that any relationship that is destroying either partner should end, in other situations it is less clear. Some people argue that any relationship that does not meet both partners' needs should end. That is a hard principle to apply to relationships since even the very best relationships entail some compromise and sacrifice. For any couple that is seriously considering parting, the best counsel is probably to consult a wise and respected counselor who shares the couple's values.

Scott Stanley (Stanley, Markman, and Whitton 2002) has suggested that "practitioners might help couples by teaching them to battle the unrealistic idealizations" (673) in their relationship. When we have a mindset that we are always in the market for a partner, the new people whom we see only at their best may seem more attractive than the partner with whom we have shared life's difficulties for years. When we compare our partners at their worst with acquaintances at their best, the marriage is likely to suffer. Instead we can choose to see our partner, as John Gottman (Gottman and Silver 1999) suggests, through rose-colored glasses – we can look for and celebrate the good times and good qualities we enjoy with our partner.

### **Changing the way we think about commitment**

The mindset that people take to commitment is important. Some may see further efforts at a relationship to be throwing good money after bad. Other may see it as the only way to maintain love. Andy Cherlin (2002), a leading scholar in marriage, suggests that the institution of marriage is suffering because of excessive individualism:

People's attention to their own personal satisfaction, to the growth and development of their psychological selves, has reached such extreme proportions that their capacity to make commitments to others has atrophied. (517)

Commitment to all organizations outside the self may be at risk. Bill Doherty (2001) has compared marriage to living in a place with cold winters:

I think of long-term marriage like I think about living in Minnesota. You move into marriage in the springtime of hope, but eventually arrive at the Minnesota winter with its cold and darkness. Many of us are tempted to give up and move south at this point. We go . . . for help. Some [friends or helpers] don't know how to help us cope with winter, and we get frostbite in their care. Other [friends] tell us that we are being personally victimized by winter, that we deserve better, that winter will never end, and that if we are true to ourselves we will leave our marriage and head south. The problem of course is that our next marriage will enter its own winter at some point. Do we just keep moving on, or do we make our stand now—with this person, in this season? That's the . . . question. A good [helper], a brave [friend], will help us to cling together as a couple, warming each other against the cold of winter, and to seek out whatever sunlight is still available while we wrestle with our pain and disillusionment. A good [helper], a brave [friend] will be the last one in the room to give up on our marriage, not the first one, knowing that the next springtime in Minnesota is all the more glorious for the winter that we endured together. (105)

Linda Waite (Waite et al. 2002) and colleagues found that “two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce or separation ended up happily married five years later” (21) Waite (2001) reasoned that

... one reason divorce is relatively high in our society is because now either person can leave, and we are more willing to leave than we used to be if we hit a bad patch. We're less likely to work it through. But there's evidence that dramatic turnarounds are commonplace. They're the typical experience. ( 21)

The advice to make decisions in daylight rather than darkness probably makes sense for marriage. If we decide whether we want a relationship to continue at a time when we are tired and the relationship is stressed, we are almost certain to end the relationship. If we choose instead to make our decisions when we are feeling safe and peaceful, we are more likely to make a decision that will serve us well over time.

### **Commitment is a choice**

Commitment in a relationship does not have to be left to chance. It can be a choice. John Gottman, one of the world's leaders in marriage research, has suggested things couples can do to strengthen their relationship (Gottman and

Silver 1999). Anything that partners do to keep themselves mindful of the relationship's best moments can strengthen the commitment. Partners can keep a list – or scrapbook – of great moments in the relationship. Each partner can work to stay aware of qualities and strengths in the person he or she loves. When there are problems, rather than conclude that the relationship is a sinking ship, they can see the trouble as a passing storm.

Stanley and his colleagues (1999) have described ways to cultivate commitment:

Most people seem to want a lifelong best friend in a mate. While for many couples this may come easily, the message for most couples is that it takes some work to nurture such a union. Constraint can lend stability, but it is dedication that can fuel a bonded, lifelong friendship. The good news is that the factors that underlie dedication are things about which people have choices. People can choose how they will handle the allure of alternatives. People can choose the priority they will place on their relationships. People can choose to nurture a positive, long-term vision for their relationship. And people can choose to think of commitment either as loss or gain. (391)

One of the difficulties in commitment is that relationship partners often try very hard but experience no improvement in their relationships. This can be discouraging. The problem may be that effective commitment includes working hard *and* working smart. When partners are doing the wrong things, working harder at them won't help. Sometimes partners must learn new ways of thinking and acting in the relationship. One of the best ways to build commitment and strengthen a relationship is to fill it with positives. Gottman (1994) suggests that five positives for each negative is the magic ratio for sustaining a strong relationship. This preponderance of positives is the most important key to a healthy relationship. Gottman (1994) even provides a list of ways to put more positives in a relationship, including showing interest, being affectionate, showing that you care, being appreciative, showing your concern, being empathic, being accepting, joking around, and sharing your joy.

Commitment can be more than a white-knuckled resolve to hold on through tough times. It includes the willingness and goodness to strengthen the relationship with positives. It entails wisdom as well as effort.

**Using commitment in couples' education**

Everything reviewed here about commitment may be helpful to an educator's personal individual relationships. This information may also be useful to the extent that educators select, design, or teach couples' programs. In reviewing any curriculum, it is worthwhile to consider whether the principle of commitment is taught in practical, engaging, and sensible ways. As educators work with couples in informal, educational, or clinical settings, commitment might be an appropriate fundamental consideration.

## **Conclusion**

Those who are committed to investing in their marriage are likely to enjoy a relationship that gets better and better over time. While there are clearly relationships where two people are destroying each other and the relationship should end, most relationships would probably benefit from more or wiser commitment. When couple relationships are framed not merely as a personal good but also as a societal good and a growth arena, many couples may survive the normal challenges that beset all relationships.