

COMMITMENT



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Why has the Definition of Commitment Changed?

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Over the last 30 years the American culture has had a loss of faith in the value of “legally” married couples. As record levels of divorce impacted every level of our society, many couples have shied away from the traditional concept of marriage and moved into a less formal and more casual type of “living together”. Young adults in the 80’s that attempted to maintain the family taught values of male and female roles in “matrimony” did not do well. Marriages were short lived – why?

Unfortunately our culture has tried to continue a 1940’s tradition of male privileged households whereby women were limited to support roles as homemakers. Two world wars, a shift in American productivity from labor to intellectual markets, and implementation of federal anti-discrimination laws resulted in millions of women entering traditionally male professions. Women can now make as much money as their husbands because they are Computer Systems Analysts, Doctors, and Lawyers. Women in the 21st century are increasingly achieving professional success and status while their husbands are learning “how” to

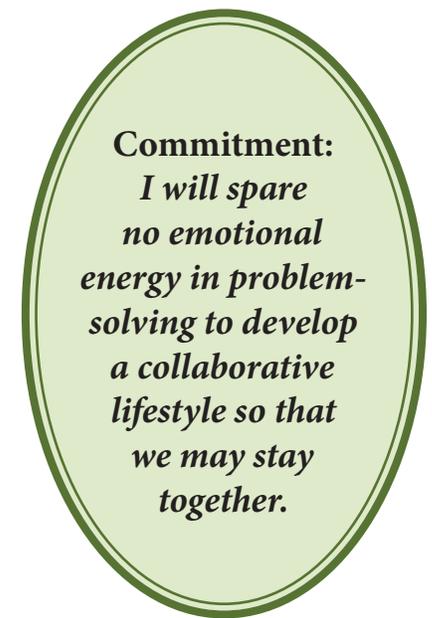
do household chores, raise the children, and collaborate with their partner in meeting their own professional demands.

These “new age” responsibilities place tremendous pressure on couples to abandon traditional views of 1940’s style relationships, whereby a division of labor/responsibilities kept husbands/wives somewhat separate and isolated from each other. Dual income households have become more the norm than the oddity. A couple in a love relationship can no longer maintain separate and distinct roles and responsibilities, but rather, must find ways to merge into a composite relationship which is an expression of multi-tasking unity.

You see, it is this essential unity that makes the redefining of commitment in a love relationship so necessary. In the old days, “...’til death do us part” exemplified a school of thought that “through sickness and health” we would “stick it out”. Unfortunately too many couples resorted to blind obedience instead of investing time and energy into understanding each other. They did not grow in the quality of their relationships (communications, quality

time, etc...) and if differences could not be ironed out, then “not talking about it” became a habit. Over time, these rigid couples moved further apart emotionally and dramatically reduced or forfeited any ability to be emotionally intimate.

Today, couples have to find and embrace a “new” definition of *commitment*—one that best prepares both parties for the realities of dual incomes, merged family responsibilities, and gender role diversity. This new definition has to include



a realization that “problem solving” is the most critical portion of a marital relationship, and recognize that we must “work together” (co-labor) in finding solutions that “keep us together”. Couples must be genuinely willing to change in

ways that are mutually beneficial; and also accept that a “love” relationship is about the merging of two lifestyles into one that is neither territorial nor selfish. Yes, it is sobering to face a couple, look them in the eyes and ask “are you willing to spare no emotional energy to bring harmony, happiness, and prosperity into this relationship?” Whew, let us think about what that means.

If I ask you to spare no emotional energy, I am asking you to own up to your humanity. I want you to recognize that you may have baggage or stuff from your family of origin, or from your own relational history, and THAT STUFF can negatively impact your potential for growth. You are not a bad person, a weak person, or a flawed person ... but you may have been limited in your growth potential or development and might not be as capable or ready for the challenges of merging your life with that of another. What I am asking of you is to do your share of work. If there comes a point when you find yourself feeling uncomfortable in an area -- ask questions, seek help or find some source of information to

Commitment

Of the 9 Characteristics of a Love Relationship, commitment is the most important; without it there cannot be a Love Relationship.

give you a better understanding of what is going on. Then, when you are ready, disclose to your partner what you have discovered and be open to new ideas that might bring a remedy to the situation. You see, a *Love* relationship is the highest, most noble of all relationships, and at a minimum, it requires two people to be absolute in their efforts to stay together.

Re-read the definition above and take note of the three components of commitment: *problem solving*, *collaborative lifestyle*, and *staying together*. These three components combined result in what we believe a Love Commitment entails. They are like three interlocking links of a chain; and the chain is only as strong as the weakest link. Yet many of the troubled couples we work with do not have this understanding. Most believe *commitment* is about *staying together* and give little value to the other two qualities. However, a couple that does not *problem solve* cannot survive the

negative stress which eventually builds into anger and/or hostility. A couple that fails to develop a *collaborative lifestyle* will become two independent partners living around each other (and not with each other).

Unfortunately, many of the couples that enter our office do not share in this understanding of commitment. They tell us of their *passion* (when they are together) or their emptiness (when they are apart). Consequently, they believe the intensity of their feelings is evidence of “love”. We have also experienced a number of couples that got into casual relationships only to find they began using the word “love” because it felt so comfortable. Both of these are examples of couples who focused on their “feelings” and did not consider that *Commitment* in a genuine *love* relationship is more than just “staying together.” It must include problem solving and a collaborative lifestyle!

When we first meet someone who catches our interest, we find ways to investigate the relationship. At first we make plans to do something together. If that works out, we invest more time and energy. This is the first stage of a *Friendship*. The idea of commitment is evident in the way we schedule and set time aside to see each other and do things. As months pass we gain more information about each other and increase our understanding. The friendship is faced with day-to-day challenges associated with working together to do things (collaboration), and ultimately problems develop. When the *friendship* endeavors to “solve” problems in such ways that allow us to share time and enjoy life, the *friendship* grows and prospers. Most *friendships* stay at this level and never venture into sharing personal and private space as a *roommate* relationship does.

Whereas the *Commitment of Friends* ends after the *event* that they shared together, *Roommates* continue their shared responsibilities into the privacy of a shared residence. Roommates must meet a new standard of behavior that

allows them to comfortably reside in the same space. The couple must make decisions about day-to-day activities, which not only allows them to comfortably share living space, but also amicably combine their possessions (i.e. furniture, food, rent, utilities, household chores, etc.) They divide responsibilities and maintain their living arrangement in order to provide a workable framework to live comfortably together. Yet usually maintain enough emotional and physical space that will allow for individuality. Their Commitment is to support each other in meeting short term personal goals and allow for safety, security, and predictability. This sometimes requires *Roommates* to modify their habits and change patterns to make a better fit with their partners and thus maintain relational harmony.

When a harmonious *Roommate* relationship begins meeting the emotional needs of each other, they are ready to move into a “Companion” level relationship. Companions strive to understand their partner “emotionally” and will ask questions to clarify their interpretation of feelings; focusing

in on the emotional component of the relationship. They have cultivated an appreciation for the unique personality of their partner, and have developed a willingness to be there for them whenever needed. Companions dedicate themselves to having a “quality” relationship, and make every effort to improve how “we” get along and live together. They are always willing to go the extra mile when needed, and “walk-the-walk” with their companion whenever life takes a turn for the worse. Companion level couples commit themselves to self-reflection and learning more about each other so as to improve their relationship and attain higher levels of acceptance and caring for one another. When Companions are ready to make changes in themselves, so that they can better fit and blend together as a “couple”, they are ready for a “Love” level relationship.

A Love relationship is the highest level of the relational pyramid. Couples that have progressed through the companion level have thus far learned everything that there is to know about their partner, and have made reasonable efforts to improve how they

Qualities of Commitment

live as a couple. However, in a Love level relationship each partner has agreed that the relationship is about blending and joining the lifestyle of each into a singular reflection of “them” as a collective unit. The Love couple spares no emotional energy in problem solving in order to develop a lifestyle that is the reflection of “their” unified partnership. They agree to share every facet of their understanding of themselves (individually and as a partnership) so as to protect, nurture, and promote their prosperity as a couple. Their emotional commitment is emphasized as they assertively learn about themselves individually, and as a couple, so that they can better fit each other. The key difference between Companion and Lovers is this – Companions are committed to learning about themselves and finding ways to get along better, whereas in Love level relationships the couple not only uncover and discover who they are, but make changes to themselves so that they can better fit as a “Love” couple.

How can we recognize a commitment that supports a healthy, satisfying relationship? Listed here are the qualities that promote and nurture Commitment in *Love* (level) relationships.

Mutuality

Mutuality in *Love* relationships means that you must work with your partner to keep the relational path on the straight and even. We frequently hear that relationships are about 50/50. This is not the case in a love relationship. At times you might work a little harder or a little less, but it is always with conscious awareness that it is the combined efforts of both of you that give vitality and pleasure to your *Love*. *Mutuality* is about responsibly sharing in the creation of a positive *Love* energy that recognizes that “*Love* is not a destination, but a process.” It is here that we must celebrate and rejoice in the nuances of our lives; calling attention to detail, expressing and sharing the delicate meanings of romance, passion, and joy.

When a couple practices *mutuality* it is with the ever so gentle encouragement of coordinated efforts to invest in bringing our lives together so that they are an expression of our union. We each dedicate our individual energies to work together (co – labor) in giving attention and focus to figuring out ways to problem solve so that we can remain on track, and continue in the right direction. *Mutuality* in *Love* relationships enhances and grows over time, so that after a while each partner has developed an almost intuitive



feeling that accurately predicts the expressions, experiences, and desires of their *Love* mate. They go forth with awareness that maintaining a true path is a delicate balance of energies that meet, match, and flow in the harmony and expression of a *Love* Commitment.

Collaborative

In love relationships, we learn to be collaborative. That is, we learn to work together, to co-labor, in order to blend and modify our individual lives into a single, more full life.

When our family recently flew to Denver for a ski trip, the pilot and co-pilot were going through their check lists in preparation of take off. Later when the plane landed, the pilot made an announcement that the co-pilot had flown that leg of the trip in order to get “checked-out.” These two men worked together not only to safely operate the plane, but also to share duties so that each were able to fulfill their parts in that portion of the flight.

Love partners have responsibilities and duties that are no less challenging. As you look at the other 8 characteristics of a *Love* relationship, you will find that some of them cannot be accomplished if one person is distant, removed, and non-disclosing. In fact, given the complexity of life, it has become increasingly more difficult for relationships to get off the ground at all unless they have some modest amount of “co-operation”.

The metaphor of two people flying a plane, yet changing duties to meet the changing responsibilities of the flight, is a perfect depiction of how *Love* relationships must meet the challenges ahead. You can only imagine what would have happened to that flight if the command pilot had the yoke ripped from his hands by the co-pilot as they argued and fought over who should be flying the plane! One needing training for qualification, and one is more experienced. We have seen many times when couples in *Love* relationships have had to do similar tasks. A case that comes to mind is when the primary bread winner with an established occupation had to resign his job so that the family could relocate to a city that offered better opportunities for his wife’s professional growth.

Collaboration with a *Love* partner is seldom easy and always challenging. It is sometimes illogical for the person with the most success and experience to take a back seat so that the other partner can practice their skills at tackling the challenges of life. I myself can tell you that many of the decisions I make today are not

necessarily in my best interests. However, in the big picture, considering what is best for my son, my wife, and the harmony of our home – the decisions are determined with an appreciation for collaborating with those I love.

Validating

One of the most satisfying and pleasing experiences a person can have is to be shown appreciation and acceptance by another. Trophies, awards, and recognition for accomplishments are ways that our society *validates* us.

When a couple enters a marriage ceremony, they invite *friends* and family to rejoice and experience the marriage ritual. Those that come to the ceremony are people they believe will recognize them as a couple and show validation for the meaning of their union.

Couples in a *Love* relationship must continue to strive for validation from the community to which they belong. They must endeavor to embrace society and display the finer characteristics of a family grounded in values and beliefs that promote and enhance the community in which they live.

Healthy couples must reach out to the world around them and impose their unique talents to promote, inspire, and assist those around them. The contributions they make by working to maintain a social fabric that attracts the greater good is a tremendously powerful source of growth. Each couple must work to better themselves as a family, while diligently applying themselves to assist those around them in responsible, meaningful ways. It is impossible for a Love relationship not to benefit from the energy they express to the world around them because whatever they give outwardly will return in kind.

Positive

We have had people cut us off before either of us could speak when they saw “positive” listed as a bullet on a briefing slide. “Of course *Love* relationships should be positive! What idiot wouldn’t know that?”, they say. We can only say that at least one third of our clients are not positive, and in fact, display such a degree of gloom and doom that often we can’t figure out how they got as far as they have in life without realizing what they were doing.

There are a lot of negative influences in our lives. Bad news sells. If you were to do nothing but listen to the news on television and/or radio, you would certainly not feel safe living in our society. Yet, many people really don’t understand the tremendous influence this continual bombardment of “bad” news has on our psyche. Kids grow to adults and experience suspiciousness, distrust, and pessimism. Later, when they enter into the world of intimate relationships, they seem to always have this feeling of impending doom. Have you ever heard the expression, “Is the glass half full or half empty?” The notion is, of course, that the glass contains a set amount of water, and in the eyes of the perceiver, it is going to either appear to be more full or more empty.

Love relations emit positive energy to the world around them in anticipation of good outcomes. Couples believe there is good in all things and there is a purpose in it all. They do not experience a good outcome to every request, but they certainly increase their odds for success by being ready and available to receive it. They

find ways to keep their eyes, ears and energies open in order to experience positive outcomes. Pessimism and negativism have no place in a love relationship.

Tenacious

Tenacious means “stick-to-it-tive-ness”.

It is a word we use to convey to others that they must have personal strength and fortitude in their relationships. *Love* relationships show determination in getting through the challenges of life. When two people commit to building a lifestyle that is a combining of their separate and distinct personalities, they must accept that at times the challenges are deeply personal and emotionally charged. As they work to combine and formulate this unique essence or quality, every facet of their home and family will benefit. When couples stay together and make it through the challenges of health, finances, and personal disappointment, they are exercising their strength in developing a sort of armor that defends and protects.

Problem solving is the greatest challenge and strongest characteristic of a

Love relationship. It is the one most important characteristic that must be developed and enhanced. A couple must believe that there is NO PROBLEM they cannot face together. They must have a deep seated knowledge that they are so tenacious that they will commit themselves totally and unconditionally to each other even in the face of insurmountable odds.

Now that is tenacious!



6 Types of Distorted Commitment

Any discussion about healthy relationships certainly would benefit from some explanation of the most common forms of erroneous commitment. Here are the ones we most typically encounter.

Co-Dependent Commitment:

I will spare no emotional energy to solve problems caused by your irresponsibility; and labor endlessly until I have lost myself and everything I own for you.

Unfortunately there are those personalities that become so involved in the target of their affection that they lose themselves. That is, they become so immersed in satisfying the desires of their partner that they eliminate any of their own needs. It does not start out this way, but over time, the codependent person keeps increasing the time and energy spent satisfying the other person's lifestyle issues that they can become hypnotically entranced with their

vision of the partner rather than themselves. When this co-dependent person comes into my office and I ask them what is going on, they begin a seemingly endless story about their partner; usually in such rambling detail that they lose themselves in their own story and tangentially go off in directions that are irrelevant to the point they were initially intending to make. They lose a grasp of time and place, misperceiving that others are interested in the story of their partner. When all is said, they have totally forgotten what started the conversation and have provided very little information concerning what they need or want from the relationship.

Moral Commitment:

God has directed me to spare no emotional energy to remain married; I will be happy even if I am not; I will persevere; "we" will stay together because only sinners divorce or break up.

I firmly believe that relationships that have a foundation in religious beliefs tend to be stronger and more prosperous. They are more

durable, and at times, are impervious to the negative pressures of life. But unfortunately I have encountered clients that have superimposed their personal interpretation of moral teachings on their relationship and have redefined “commitment”— *I will spare no emotional energy to remain married. I will be happy even if I am not. I will persevere and “we” will stay together.* They painfully endure miserable relationships with a distant, removed and emotionless partner, leading anything other than a satisfying family life. They produce children that are raised in a family environment filled with unclear, conflicting, and suppressed feelings of love, anger, and frustration. As adults, their unskilled children “attempt” to have their own families only to learn they have no idea how to “collaborate” let alone “problem solve” – and are often lost in their own emotional turmoil. Seldom do they realize that many of their current partner/relational issues are seeded in the subliminal teachings of their own parents.

Pedestal or Addictive

Commitment:

I cherish and admire you so totally that all my emotional energy is directed to problem solving so that I may be able to participate in your lifestyle and can be near you.

All meaningful relationships should contain a healthy amount of admiration for the person who is loved. We want to underscore that a degree of reverence for the finer virtues of one’s partner is a positive quality. Admiring someone for their greater attributes when it enhances your appreciation for the persona of the one you love is genuine and encouraged.

However, when a person is “infatuated” with the perceived but inaccurate interpretation of another; and manifests a strong desire to align themselves in a “committed” relationship with that person, they can create an incredible internalized attraction that overwhelms their own personal feelings of self-worth. In some cases, their insatiable desire to satisfy and please the other person skews their own sense of reality. And they do outlandish things to please, show appreciation, or comfort their “love” partner.

The love partner, or object of affection, often times becomes disenchanted. They may demand the partner do more, as their expectations of life are not being met, or they become repulsed by the endless gifts, generosity, and favors. Either way, they become intolerant to their suitor. The “Giver” tries harder to find ways to stay in this person’s life, and many eventually burn out and then experience intense emotional pain when they realize that they are not able to meet this person’s demands.

For the Kids:

In order to save the Kids, I will spare no emotional energy to endure the problems my partner and I can not solve, at great personal sacrifice, so that I can be near the kids.

I am not sure when the term “sexually liberated” was coined, but I believe it was in part by recognition that people were involved in sexual activities outside of the traditions of Love Relationships. It amazes me at the number of people that “marry” because “she got pregnant”; and it is more startling at the number of men and women that are unprepared, if not amazed at their intense emotional connection

to the child produced from a premature, or unhealthy relationship. In a twist of logic, and at great personal dissatisfaction, these parental partners stay together “for the kids” under the illusion that they can benefit the child by continuing to play the role of loving “father” or “mother”. Ironically, they demonstrate the role of “husband” or “wife” as distant and removed. You see, they don’t recognize, or give value to the impact of their role in having a pleasing, loving, and amiable “collaborative” relationship that emphasizes problem solving and positive “love”. They mistakenly believe they can do best by their children by “sticking-it out” and avoid addressing the interpersonal issues between themselves.

They fail to realize that they are establishing, role precursors that their own children will seek out when it is time for them to leave home, pick a mate and raise a family. “For the Kids” parents pass on to their children a dysfunctional style that the children role model later in their adult relationships. In a mistaken and inadvertent twist of life, the cold, tolerating, removed parents teach

their children to live and be comfortable in cold, tolerating and emotionless relationships.

Phase of Life

Commitment:

I am getting too old to be alone, and have decided that it is time to spare no emotional energy in problem solving to develop a collaborative lifestyle so that I have a partner.

My mom told me one time, “when you are young you give it away, and when you are old you buy it back.” She was humorously referring to our own lack of appreciation for life when we are young. In our youth, we have not yet acquired the wisdom to know that the decision made today cannot be re-done. Many times we put off long term relationships in favor of education and career establishment.

Mate selection is difficult for a person aspiring to find “the right” partner. Throw into that the challenges of working, education, and the endless maintenance chores of home, health, and comfort and it is quite possible not to notice that 10 years have passed. For some reason numbers tend to strike

home with an awareness of time, and we have experienced the subtle inner, yet tender voice gently saying...

“Honey, you’re almost 30 and single, just think about it.”

...this, at some point changes to a raging alarm screaming...

“OH MY GOD! YOU ARE 30, YOU’RE NOT MARRIED – DO SOMETHING QUICK!!!”

I can’t generalize about the merits or demerits of this type of relational commitment. To be honest, the motivation to “be married” does not always reflect the motivation to “stay married”. There are as many successes as there are failures. Just know that the motivation to do something rashly, does not speak for the underlying qualities that either person may have, nor is their any single predictor that can be wrung out to vote one way or the other about success.

Commitment of

Convenience:

You make me so comfortable that I usually spend very little emotional energy in problem solving because my lifestyle benefits from your lifestyle.

This type of relationship is so evident that movie comedies have been written about it.

“How to Marry a Millionaire” is one that we recollect. There is the ongoing perception by many that money and prosperity equal harmony and happiness (M+P=HH). I would think that children raised in economically challenged households are raised without many of the pleasures of life. I say this because of the large number of Commitment of Convenience relationships I experience through my personal practice. These clients reflectively elaborate about how difficult life was and how impoverished their prior existence was “before I fell in love with XYZ”. These people frequently become so immersed in the glut of material possessions, that they lose their sense of direction. They begin to realize that there is a difference between being “a part” of a grander scheme versus being “apart” (separated) from their inner desire for having a healthy, loving, and emotionally intimate relationship.

A person can only live so long using “things” to give them status. They too begin to feel unimportant and valueless. Money and possessions cannot satisfy your God given desire for meaning. Ornaments do

not make a Christmas tree, but a Christmas tree can look pretty darn good without a lot of ornaments. Living a life of abundance does not require material excesses. In general, people who do manage to manifest an abundance of sound emotional connect-edness (Love), tend to have an abundance of material wealth as well. They are respectful of that which has meaning and they maximize their investment in the tree versus the ornaments.





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