

GETTING TO COMMITMENT:

How To Clear The Barriers To Genuine Commitment

In the course of working with approximately three thousand couples over the past twenty years, we have made several discoveries about commitment that made a profound difference in how we view the whole therapeutic enterprise.

Here's what we found

- Problems in relationship almost always contain hidden problems of commitment, and two problems in particular account for much of the distress.
- Although a relationship breakdown is almost always caused by a hidden commitment problem, the breakdown itself is the perfect opportunity to learn how commitment really works. If clarified, the breakdown can serve as a springboard to a new level of intimacy in the relationship.
- Therapists who understand and apply two concepts about commitment—both of which are exquisitely simple yet devilishly hard to implement—can eliminate a great deal of energy-draining work in the treatment of couples.

The Big Mistakes

There is little information available, and equally scant training, to help couples learn how commitment actually works. Correspondingly, we see the same commitment-mistakes being made over and over.

Two recurring mistakes are particularly troublesome:

1. People commit to *outcomes* (which cannot be controlled) rather than *processes* (which are always within our control.) In Epictetus' *Art of Living* (written two thousand years ago and considered humankind's first self-help book), his opening line says, "The secret of happiness is realizing that some things can be controlled and some cannot." Nowhere is this truth more apparent than in close relationships. To use a familiar example, a traditional wedding vow asks us to commit to "love, honor and obey" the other person "until death do us part." This is an outcome-commitment, and is doomed to failure from the start.

None of us has any control over whether we will wake up loving and honoring another person on a given morning. Feelings by their very nature are beyond our control. What's within our control is how we deal with our feelings once we discover them. We can choose to ignore them, pay attention to them, speak frankly about them, tighten our shoulders to hide them. Some of these options obviously make for better relationships than others.

2. The second mistake is really a lack of understanding of a profound truth about commitment: All of us, at all times and in every way, are getting exactly what we're committed to getting.

Here's why this discovery is so troubling but so potentially liberating: All of us have unconscious commitments—hidden from our own view and surrounded by a wall of defenses—which sabotage our conscious commitments. Early in our own marriage we discovered that there is only one quick and foolproof way to find out what we're really committed to, and that is to look at the results we're producing. For example, even if we think we're committed to spending more quality time together, a quick look at the results will tell us whether we're genuinely committed to it. If we're not spending more quality time together, we have to admit that we're not actually committed to it.

Come into a session with us so you can see how these principles work in the heat of action. As you watch this drama unfold, you may think that it is moving far more quickly and easily than work with troubled relationships often does. To present a clear example of the principles, we selected a transcript in which the work does indeed proceed relatively smoothly. As any experienced therapist knows, however, the snap-finger magic of rapid change is largely in the domain of late-night infomercials, not in the real world of normal office practice. That said, there are ways to speed up the process of change through a deep understanding of commitment. Therapists who train with us tell us that their ability to help clients move quickly takes a jump as they become more nimble with the art and science of commitment. In the following example, watch closely for those moments in which we directly ask for commitments of one sort or another. Based on our experience, we believe these moments to

be crucial to increasing the velocity at which couples make changes.

*Maria and Ed have made the journey from Chicago to Santa Barbara to work with us for two days. (*About ten years ago we shifted our practice from the one-session-per-week model to what we call an intensive-model. We work with people in the form of one-day or two-day intensives, in which we spend all day (and sometimes into the night) with the couple or individual. We've found that the intensive format allows us to accomplish in one or two days what used to take us many months of weekly sessions.)*

Their surface complaints with each other may have a familiar ring to them. From Ed's perspective, the problem is very simple: Maria is stingy with sex. Maria hears this with a snort of disgust. From her perspective the problem is emotional distance. Ed rolls his eyes—they've been there before.

"When we were first married we made love every day," he says. "Now I'm lucky if it's every other week. That doesn't work for me."

Maria doesn't sympathize at all with Ed's sexual frustration. "I need more connection with you if I'm going to get turned on. You can't go around emotionally detached all day Saturday then suddenly get physical with me at bedtime. When we were first together you seemed interested in me as a person, not just a body."

As therapists, our first task is to find out if they are both committed to solving the problem. Although they've come a long way and paid a considerable fee, we need to hear a clear "yes" before we can get anything meaningful done. People come to couples-counseling for many reasons other than to make breakthrough discoveries about themselves that will open the flow of more love. Some have hidden agendas such as proving that the marriage is really hopeless, getting professional confirmation that the mate really is a jerk, and so on. Our way of flushing out those hidden agendas is to ask them blunt questions.

Our first question is designed to help us find out if they are genuinely committed to solving the problem: "Are you willing to do whatever it takes to resolve these issues so you can feel more love flowing between you?"

They stare and blink.

Ed finally breaks the silence: "We're here, aren't we?" he says, a trace of irritation in his voice.

"We hear your irritation," we say, "but please note that you didn't say "Yes."

"I don't get it," he says.

Ed's a realtor, so we use a real estate metaphor: "If you asked a couple if they wanted to buy a house they liked, what would happen if they said, 'We're here, aren't we?' Would you consider that the same commitment as a "Yes" or a signature?"

He gets the point. Maria's a sharp cookie—she already got the point. Still, she can't resist tossing a barb in Ed's direction.

"That's the Ed I call Mr. Smart-Ass."

Noting the clenching of his jaw, we invite them to take a few deep breaths, then ask them our original question again.

This time they both say "Yes." That's all we need. It doesn't matter if they have a dozen murky agendas—practically everybody does. It doesn't matter if they have a ton of resistance and two tons of transference. All that matters is that they go on record with a clear "Yes." With a clear commitment to do everything possible to solve the problem, everyone has a firm place to stand on.

Our second blunt question: "Would you like to resolve it quickly or slowly?"

They quickly say, "Quickly."

Our third and final blunt question: "From past experience, we've found that there's one quick way to solve problems like this. It's very powerful. May we coach you with our most powerful concepts and techniques?"

Again they say "Yes."

Now we have commitments from them—they want to resolve the problem, they want to resolve it quickly, and they want us to use all our powers.

There's a change in the energy in the room. Although we're talking about heavy issues, the energy is lighter, more charged. Commitment has that effect—it puts a kind of benign electricity in the air.

"All right then," we say. "Let's do it."

We ask them to face each other, with about three feet of distance between them.

We ask them to make the briefest possible statement about the problem, and to direct the statement to each other, not to us.

"I'm not getting enough sex," Ed says.

"I'm not getting enough emotional connection with you," Maria says.

"Okay," we say, "Now we're going to use our most powerful technique to help you solve this problem. Still want us to do that?"

They say "Yes."

Then we say, "The best way to find out what you're really committed to is to observe the results you're producing. Like, if an alcoholic says he's committed to being sober, the best way to find out if he's really committed to it is to find out if he's had a drink recently. If he said he was committed to being sober, but you found out he was still drinking, what would that make him?"

"A hypocrite," Maria says. Ed nods.

"Maybe," we say, "but for sure it would make him a person who was more committed to drinking than to being sober."

They nod.

"So, Ed," we say, "Look Maria in the eye and say 'I'm committed to not getting enough sex.'"

"WHAT?"

We explain: "You're not getting enough sex, and the results always tell you what you're committed to, so tell her, 'Maria, I'm committed to not getting enough sex.'"

He whips his head from side to side. "No, no, no—I'm telling you I'm committed to having plenty of sex. How could I be committed to not getting enough sex?"

We say, "That's a good question. Let's come back to that. In the meantime, notice that you're avoiding looking Maria in the eye. You're avoiding saying, 'Maria, I'm committed to not having enough sex.'"

"Even if I don't believe it?" he asked.

We nod. "Just say it. Accent the word "not.""

"Maria, I'm committed to not having enough sex."

Although his face still looks puzzled and doubtful, we note that his breathing shifts to become deeper and easier.

"Maria, look Ed in the eye and say, 'Ed, I'm committed to not having an emotional connection with you anymore.'"

It's clear that enlightenment has already dawned on Maria.

She nods as she says, "Ed, I'm committed to not having an emotional connection with you anymore."

"Why?" he asks plaintively. Suddenly there's a younger tone in his voice, a kind of innocence he's been covering over with hostility.

We say, "Let's wonder about that together. Ed, where would you have gotten the idea that you were supposed to live in a marriage where you didn't make love as often as you wanted? Maria, where would you have gotten the idea that you were supposed to be emotionally distance from your husband?"

Maria has already figured it out; Ed's shaking his head in puzzlement.

We give him a prompt. "Does that remind you of any relationships you saw around you growing up? Were there any people you saw frequently who complained about sexual frustration?"

He barks a sharp, bitter laugh.

"My parents fought about that constantly. I probably heard my old man bitch about his crappy sex life about five hundred times a year."

Maria chimes in with a similar observation. "My father and my brothers are all so cool and distant. Good providers, but like there's nobody home inside."

"So," we reflect back, "You learned by osmosis that marriage is supposed to be full of sexual frustration and emotional distance."

"Looks like it, doesn't it," Ed says.

"Want to make a commitment to changing that?" we ask.

They say "yes."

Maria jumps in. "I make a commitment to having a lot of emotional connection in our relationship."

"Whoa," we say, "Slow down a little."

We tell them that it's important to make commitments to things they have absolute control over. Nobody can control, predict or manage the amount of emotional connection. However, we do have control over whether we open our mouths and speak about an emotion, or whether we listen generously to our partners when they are speaking about feelings.

To bring this point to life, we invite Ed to speak a simple sentence to Maria about something he's scared or angry or hurt about.

He searches...and searches...and searches for about thirty seconds.

Finally he says, "When you won't make love to me, I feel rejected."

Maria doesn't respond.

We invite him to communicate from a deeper place inside.

"Point to where you feel rejected," we say.

He points to his chest.

"That's where most people feel sadness," we say. "Does that feel like an accurate description of what you're feeling?"

He nods.

"Tell her," we suggest.

"I feel sad when you don't want to have sex with me."

"But you always get angry," Maria says.

"A lot of men do that," we say. "Men are often not very skilled at talking about tender feelings like that, so they often hide them under anger. But they can learn."

"Ed, tell her again, and this time, Maria, just listen and resonate with what he's saying."

"I feel sad when you don't want to have sex with me."

She nods and breathes easier. Her eyes moisten slightly.

"It looks like you feel sad, too," we say.

"Yeah, that's the Ed I've been missing."

Ed and Maria made this initial shift fairly quickly. Not everyone does, of course, and even an easy first breakthrough doesn't guarantee that the second or third will be easy. In fact, subsequent work with Ed and Maria had more than a few one-step-forward-two-steps-back incidents.

On many occasions we've seen it take several hours of focused work before people softened their resistance and took responsibility for the negative results they were creating. On one memorable occasion, a deeply-entrenched couple held onto their steadfast zeal to blame the other until well into the second day of the two-day intensive. In the bigger picture, about three out of every five couples we work with experience a substantial enhancement of their relationship, with the other two muddling along slowly or dropping out entirely. Remember, too, that the couples we work with often come a long way and make a substantial monetary investment in the process. Earlier in our

work, when we were using these same principles in a one-session-per-week format, we found that the velocity of change was considerably slower.

The Larger Issues

Unsettling philosophical questions are raised by this example and the techniques we employ. These questions go to the heart of how intentionality works and what drives us as human beings.

For example:

Does this mean that, due to past conditioning, all of us have powerful unconscious commitments which require our partners to be and do the very things we complain about most bitterly?

Our experience says "Yes." (For example, an introverted husband we worked with complained about his wife's extroverted nature, only to discover through therapy that he required an extroverted mate in order to help him excavate and bring forth the long-hidden extroverted part of himself.)

Do all of us enter our intimate relationships with unconscious intentions which eventually override the noble intentions with which we began?

Our experience says "Yes."

Does this mean that human beings are responsible for creating all the bad things that happen to them?

Our answer is a resounding "No."

We use an operational definition of responsibility: Responsibility is an action you take, not a quality that can be assigned. A judge and jury can assign responsibility to a criminal, but that criminal's life will not begin to change until the person makes a conscious choice to take responsibility. Meaningful responsibility can never be assigned from outside. If a drunken father comes home and beats up his 8-year-old, it's ridiculous to speculate about whether the 8-year-old is in some way responsible. However, if that same child comes to therapy twenty years later, complaining of a pattern of troubled interactions with male authority figures, he or she can solve the problem quicker by taking full responsibility for perpetuating

those situations in his or her life. Similarly, if a person gets a sore throat or a stomach-ache a couple of times a year, it's probably not worthwhile for him or her to spend much energy wondering if the illnesses are psychosomatic. However, if that same person sees a pattern—perhaps the sore throat or stomach-ache tends to occur on mornings when a speech is to be given later that day—then it would definitely be worthwhile for the person to take responsibility for creating it.

Speaking from practical experience as well as from philosophical inclination, we always advocate that each person in a given situation takes 100% responsibility for creating the situation. There is a possibility of meaningful resolution only when everyone does rigorous self-inquiry into how and why he or she might have created the situation. The moment one person or the other retreats even to 99% responsibility, a power struggle is underway. If one person identifies him/herself as the victim, the other person immediately does so, too. From this place of victimhood, the other person always looks like the perpetrator. We've seen these "I'm-a-bigger-victim-than-you-are" power struggles go on for decades.

As therapists, let us not fall into the trap of seeing a world made up of victims and perpetrators. There is already a booming profession battenning on the tendency of people to think of themselves as victims. These professionals can be found under "Attorneys" in the phone book, and America has a rich supply of them (more than any other country, by a long shot.) The bad guy in the film "Fifteen Minutes" is a recent immigrant from Russia, here to ply his criminal trade in the fertile soil of the New World. He crows that even if he's caught he'll get away with his crime, because "Here in America nobody's responsible for anything!"

Let's leave proving victimhood to the lawyers. As therapists, we have a different charter, one which has a genuinely empowering possibility. We can choose to see a world of people who are seeking, often desperately, to take full responsibility for their lives. We are in a unique position to help them do so, if we can help them understand that in every moment of life, they are committed to getting exactly what they're getting. Then, from

this place of re-claimed power, they can choose conscious new commitments, which are unfettered by the past and free to act powerfully on the present.

In closing we would like to emphasize this point: Ultimately it is the act of re-committing, which has as much to do with the healing process as the original conscious commitment. For example, Ed and Maria committed to speaking clearly about their emotions and listening generously to each other when they spoke. Making that conscious commitment initiated a process of change, but it certainly didn't guarantee it. In fact, they violated this fresh new commitment within twenty minutes of making it. She began to talk about something she was sad about, and Ed's Mr. Smart-Ass persona took over with a sarcastic comment. So, we asked them to pause, take a few breaths and re-commit.

"Would you re-commit to speaking about your emotions and listening generously when the other's speaking?"

Ed sighed and looked defeated. "This is going to be hard work," he said.

"Indeed," we said, "Hardly anything worthwhile comes easy. But," we said, serving up another real estate metaphor, "do you plan to sell the house you live in?"

"What?" he asked.

"Are you planning to sell your own house anytime soon?"

"No," he said.

"Well, if you don't plan to sell your house, wouldn't it be better to improve it a little each day rather than chip away at the tile or spit on the floor? Even if it took a little work?"

He got the point.

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