



Pre-commitment and Cohabitation

By David Steele

Today's couples seem confused, and today's relationship professionals seem confused about today's couples.

Let me explain this statement.

In August, the National Marriage Project published their annual "The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America, 2005." Below are a few of the findings:

- Between 1960 and 2004 the number of unmarried couples in America increased by nearly 1200 percent
- The marriage rate continues to decline
- The cohabitation rate continues to increase, with a higher failure rate than marriage
- The divorce rate continues to be around 50 percent, though has declined a bit, most likely due to fewer marriages and more cohabitation
- An increasing percentage of teenagers state that they want to get married and that having a good marriage and family is important to them

This research is disturbing because the trend is against having successful relationships. Our problems are getting worse, not better.

There is a widening gulf between:

- what people want (a successful committed relationship)...
- what they do (cohabit)...
- and the results they get (relationship failure)

The confusion of couples seems pretty clear. They want a committed relationship but fear failure, so they live together as a first step to minimize risk. However, living together actually increases risk because (in my opinion) they are acting committed without having made a real

commitment. Current research seems to indicate pretty strongly that commitment is what makes long-term relationships succeed.

OK, that seems pretty easy. Now for the challenging part.

The Confused Professionals

In my opinion, many relationship professionals seem confused about how to handle the growing number of “not yet committed” (“pre-committed”) couples that seek their help. Most seem to approach these couples the same as committed couples, as I did some years ago.

But these couples are not the same as committed couples. They don’t have the “fact” of commitment, and more importantly, they don’t have the “attitude” of commitment. In my 20+ years of practice I have learned that when couples don’t have an alignment of “fact” and “attitude” their prognosis is extremely poor.

This year I conducted five one-day CEU workshops on Relationship Coaching for licensed mental health professionals. It was pretty cool to do these workshops live and in-person after so many years conducting trainings over the telephone. Participants of these workshops universally appreciated learning the distinction between “committed” and “pre-committed” (as distinct from “pre-marital,” which is a couple that have a committed mindset) and “fact” versus “attitude.” Once the differences were pointed out, they immediately “got it” and the challenges they have been experiencing with these couples started to make sense.

What Are They Thinking?

All over the U.S. and other parts of the world, singles become couples by dating and then moving in together as the next step in their relationship. What are they thinking?

- “Let’s see how this goes”
- “We should ‘test’ this relationship before considering marriage”
- “I’m (we’re) not ready for a committed relationship, so let’s just live together”

The above attitudes reflect ignorance of how relationships really work, and are self-sabotaging if their goal is a successful life partnership.

Three Levels of Consciousness

In my way of thinking, we have three primary levels of consciousness:

1. Unconscious (awake but unaware)
2. Semi-conscious (aware of what’s in front of you)
3. Conscious (aware of the big picture)

The unconscious pre-committed couple moves in together thinking “Let’s see how this goes” with the unexamined assumption that it is the logical next step.

The semi-conscious pre-committed couple moves in together believing “We should ‘test’ this relationship before considering marriage.” They really believe they are making a wise choice, but are misinformed and setting themselves up for failure.

The conscious pre-committed couple is asking themselves "Is this 'The One?' Should I make a commitment to this relationship?" They want to be successful and are not sure how, but at least they're asking helpful questions rather than assuming they have the answers.

The Round Peg and Square Hole Relationship

Should we help all couples "make" their relationship work? If a pre-committed couple makes a less-than-conscious relationship choice and has an unsolvable problem related to an unmet requirement (e.g. one wants children and the other doesn't), then in my opinion there is not enough of a fit for long-term success, no matter how much they "love" each other and are attached to the relationship working. Our job needs to be to help them explore the reality of "what is" and make a conscious choice in alignment with who they are and what they want for their life and relationship.

Please note that I'm referring to pre-committed couples here. In my opinion, this is the time to evaluate your relationship choice. Once you're committed, the task is to make the entire package work.

I wish to clarify that I'm not "anti-cohabitation" or a zealot about marriage. I believe that in today's world we have many choices available to us and we should follow our own path. My goal is to help people find fulfillment in their life and relationships and I'm very pragmatic about how. My motto is "functioning first;" good choices are the ones that work, and poor choices are the ones that don't work.

What Can We Do?

As relationship professionals, what can we do to help pre-committed couples that seek our support when they are living together and experiencing problems?

Here are some thoughts:

1. Ask the status of their relationship to assess "fact" and "attitude." Don't just assume they are committed and help them "make" their relationship work.
2. Educate them about some of the research mentioned above and have a conversation about "commitment" vs. "pre-commitment."
3. Educate them about "requirements" and "solvable vs. unsolvable" problems
4. Once "informed" and more conscious, ask them to clearly articulate their agenda and goals for working with you. Don't assume it is to "make" their relationship work.
5. Use a structured approach to help them explore their individual and shared vision, requirements, needs, and wants, and make a conscious long-term relationship choice in alignment with who they are and what they want. It's for this purpose that I designed our "Partners in Life" program for these couples and provide workbooks, manuals, and training on helping these couples in our "Level One" couples coaching training at Relationship Coaching Institute.

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David Steele, MA, LMFT is founder of Relationship Coaching Institute and author of the ground-breaking new book for singles *Conscious Dating: Finding the Love of Your Life in Today's World*. <http://www.ConsciousDating.com>. Visit <http://www.consciousrelationshipresources.com> for free audio programs, e-programs, downloads, and more for singles and couples who want to find and have a successful conscious relationship.

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