



What Is Commitment in Relationships?

By David Steele

The question of when a relationship is committed is a source of much confusion and debate. We live in a time when the marriage rate is going down, the co-habitation rate is going up, and the majority of first-born children are now born to unmarried parents.

In this article I hope to shed some light on this question to facilitate your work with couples and individuals challenged by different perceptions of the status of their relationships.

COMMITMENT VS. PROMISE

I recently had a conversation with a woman who told me she had just broken off a "committed" relationship. A few questions later I learned that she had been dating this person for a year, they were not living together, and the reason she broke it off is that he "cheated."

We talked about pre-committed vs. committed relationships, and she agreed that it was a pre-committed relationship, but insisted that they had made a "commitment" to each other.

OK, things are getting clearer. On the one hand is the status of the relationship- pre-committed vs. committed, and on the other hand are commitments made within the relationship. Macro vs. micro. Two different things, right?

In our conversation, it occurred to me to make a distinction between a "Commitment" vs. a "Promise." They made a promise to each other within the context of a relationship that was not committed. That distinction seemed to help her make more sense of things.

When I asked the RCI coaches for feedback on the "commitment vs. promise" distinction, most felt that it was just semantics and there is not much of a difference. The general consensus was that when you make a promise you are making a commitment.

Well, I agree that it is a question of semantics, and here is my definition of terms:

PROMISE: Verbally stated future intention to perform a specific act.

- I promise to pick up your dry cleaning and not forget this time - I promise to be exclusive in our relationship

COMMITMENT: Both a FACT demonstrated by behavior, and an ATTITUDE consisting of thoughts and beliefs.

- I am committed to keeping my promises - I am committed to our relationship

In short, a promise is something you say, and a commitment is something you do. A promise is situation-specific. A commitment is contextual.

A promise is a small commitment. If a potential partner doesn't keep promises, I would question their ability to keep commitments, as they are definitely related.

CONFUSION ABOUT COMMITMENT

Whether or not you agree with my semantics, the distinction I made between a commitment and a promise was helpful for the above conversation.

The larger picture though, is that I see a lot of confusion about the status of today's relationships. Some years ago when I coined the term "pre-commitment" to describe couples that were exclusive but not yet committed, it was a helpful distinction, but the question remains- "What is commitment?"

When you are married, it is clear you are in a committed relationship. Your commitment is a legal contract and a publicly witnessed FACT. However, it is common for couples in trouble for one or both partners to have an uncommitted ATTITUDE.

I have talked with many unmarried people, as the woman above, who have described themselves in "committed relationships." They clearly have the attitude, but often have nothing but verbal promises (and sometimes not even that!) to demonstrate that the relationship is committed.

IN MY OPINION, YOU ARE -NOT- IN A COMMITTED RELATIONSHIP IF:

1. Your partner is not aware your relationship is committed
2. You are wondering if this relationship is committed
3. You and your partner have differences of opinion about the status of your relationship
4. Your family and friends have different perceptions about the status of your relationship
5. You and your partner have not acted to explicitly formalize your commitment in some way
6. You are relying on verbal promises without a significant track record of them being kept

A commitment is explicit and unambiguous. A commitment is a formal event of some kind between two people. A commitment is something you DO over time. A real commitment is usually legally enforceable and there are consequences for breaking it.

And, for a relationship to be truly committed, there are no exits- mentally, emotionally, or physically. When the going gets rough, you make it work.

CONTINUUM OF COMMITMENT

Commitment is not a light switch that goes from "off" to "on." When building a relationship with someone, the level of commitment gradually increases.

Then you have all the shades of gray. living together, dating exclusively for more than a year, even engaged to be married, that might look and feel like commitment, but is it really?

FACT VS. ATTITUDE

Commitment in a relationship is complicated in that it takes two people, and it requires an alignment of FACT (events, actions) and ATTITUDE (thoughts, beliefs) for both of them.

It is common to be committed in fact (e.g. "married") but not in attitude (e.g. "I'm not sure this is the right relationship for me").

It is also common to be pre-committed in fact (e.g. dating exclusively) and committed in attitude (e.g. "This is 'The One!' ").

In my work with couples I have found that the most important variable determining their future success is their level of commitment to the relationship.

In my experience, when couples are committed in fact, but not in attitude, their prognosis is poor.

Then, there are the pre-committed couples that generally fall into two categories-

UNCONSCIOUS- typically following the "mini-marriage" model of trying the relationship out, acting committed without actually making the commitment. A disconnect of fact and attitude.

CONSCIOUS- aware that they are not yet committed, usually have commitment as a goal, asking themselves "Is this the right relationship for me? Should I make a commitment?" An alignment of fact and attitude.

CONCLUSION

So, when is a relationship committed?

-- When there is an alignment of fact and attitude.

What creates the "fact" of commitment?

I propose these three criterion:

CRITERIA #1: Promises made to each other about the permanent nature of the relationship that are kept

CRITERIA #2: Explicit, formal, public declaration

CRITERIA #3: Unambiguous to partners and others

In today's world, if all three of the above are met, I would say it is a committed relationship, whether legally married or not.

I sincerely hope this article helps address the common questions about commitment that arise in relationship coaching. There are no pat answers or prescriptions, but it is my hope that these ideas and concepts will help you have productive conversations with your clients that are caught in the gray areas to support them to make effective relationship choices.

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