



Commitment is not a very “sexy” word or concept but it probably has more to do with making marriages work than anything save common values. It’s not just about saying marriage vows or having a piece of paper that says “marriage license.” Commitment is important because we act differently when we know that our futures are tied together. You may avoid a prickly conversation if you know the other person will not be around forever. You may move on to another love if your current one has a debilitating accident or simply starts to rub you the wrong way. Commitment means you’ve promised to stay and work it through, not just today but forever.

Commitment is a choice to give up choices. Although this might at first sound limiting, it actually brings great freedom and depth. No longer does the committed person need to weigh which person or way of life will bring more happiness. Once committed, all one’s energy goes into making this commitment work. No longer are other possibilities a distraction. The two major stages of commitment are making the initial commitment and keeping the commitment.

### **1. Making the initial commitment**

Much of the research on how commitment impacts marital happiness has centered on making the initial commitment. Usually social scientists have compared couples who cohabit before marriage with those who have not. The presumption is that cohabiting couples have not yet made a firm and final commitment to be with this partner “till death do us part” or else they would indeed be married. This tentative or partial commitment makes all the difference to their future marriage.

According to marriage researcher Dr. Scott Stanley, those who cohabit prior to engagement score worse after marriage on virtually everything measured than those who wait until marriage or wait until after engagement. This includes:

- Psychological aggression
- Negative interaction (conflict)
- Confidence in their relationship
- Marital satisfaction
- Dedication to each other

This risk might be partly explained by the lack of clarity and mutuality of commitment at the time cohabitation begins. The nature of cohabitation presumes the possibility of the relationship not working out (and thus the commitment not being permanent). If the couple later marries, it can be more of a “sliding into marriage” than a “deciding to marry.” As a decision to marry becomes less distinct but more of a gradual slide toward marriage, it blurs the clarity of the commitment.

Stanley hypothesizes that regardless of income, race, and culture, sliding will be associated with more risk than deciding. Deciding will be universally associated with lower risk because of the mutual clarity and resulting follow through. In addition, the research shows that women are at a greater disadvantage if they move from a cohabiting relationship to marriage. With these couples, husbands have less dedication to their wives than the wives have to their husbands. (Kline, Stanley, and Markman, in press).

## **2. Keeping the commitment**

“Till death do us part” can sound so romantic – but it can also sound deadly. Regardless of whether one marries in a secular or religious ceremony most couples still believe that they are making a permanent commitment. Of course we all know that the divorce rate is between 40 – 50%, but most couples who marry don’t think it will happen to them.

What happens between the solemn pronouncement of wedding vows and the decision to divorce? This is not a “one size fits all” situation. Certainly some couples made the decision to marry too young, too impetuously, too naively.

Others were not psychologically mature enough to “forsake all others” or had other character flaws that were overlooked or not evident during courtship. Still others just got bored or tired of trying to make it work. Still others earnestly worked and gave their all to the marriage but their partner decided he or she wanted out. One can’t be married to an absent spouse.

Some spouses have no choice but to leave for their own safety or because their spouse won’t work on the marriage. But research (Waite and Gallagher, 2000) shows that many marriages could be revived if the commitment is strong. Waite and Gallagher surveyed a large national sample of unhappily married couples and found that after five years, three fifths of the formerly unhappy couples reported that they were very happy or quite happy. Sometimes it is simply the commitment to each other that carries a couple through the harder times, along with generous doses of time, counseling, effort, luck, and faith.

Love is a decision. It reminds couples that as wonderful as the feeling of love is, it is not sufficient for a marriage. At some point (actually many points) husband and wife need to decide to love – even when they don’t feel like it. Acting on this decision by doing loving things for your spouse, speaking kindly and respectfully, and deciding over and over to pay attention to the relationship makes love rekindle.

Couples who understand the essence of making a permanent commitment realize that it's much more than just a decision not to divorce. It's a commitment to do the daily work of keeping the commitment alive. It may mean turning off the TV or taking a nightly walk in order to listen to each other's concerns. These simple actions, and many more, are the stuff of commitment. They are the actions that keep a marriage vibrant, interesting, and exciting so that temptations to make another choice don't erupt. Although marriage as a permanent commitment is not restricted to people of faith, Christians might reflect on the scripture to, "take up your cross every day and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Every day we recommit to follow our beloved and vice-versa.