

COUPLES



Commitment Complexities

Advanced Module

Dr. Jan Hoistad

Creator of the Big Picture Partnering Approach
to Long-Lasting Relationship

Commitment Complexities



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DJHPartners, Inc.
Minneapolis, Minnesota

ISBN 978-0-9979063-1-8

Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction: Discover the Depth of Your Commitment

When a partnership is thriving, commitment comes easily. During stressful times it may feel more challenging to be fully and consistently committed. Commitment may come easily for you. However, for some, commitment may be fraught with hurt, anger, confusion, even disappointment. Learning to work together as partners may initially feel like hard work. Continuing to put your fights aside and increase the positive (Module 2), developing a regular thread of communication (Module 3), and communicating from your Adult self (Module 4) will change how you feel about yourself and eventually, about one another.

This advanced module: **Discover the Depth of Your Commitment**, will teach you why it is important to be fully committed to yourself, one another, and your relationship at all times; and it will teach you the importance of protecting the relationship you value—even when you go through tough times.

When a couple is fully committed to one another and to their relationship, the commitment creates safety. Commitment allows you both to trust that your partner will not leave or abandon you when times are tough. It allows you to trust that your partner is doing 100 percent. Conscious commitment that is also stated

out loud—especially during tough or stressful times—reaffirms your commitment and reassures your partner that you are making the necessary changes together.

In this module you will:

- Read stories about couples navigating change through many phases of their relationships; you'll learn what threatened to tear them apart and what brought them closer together.
- Reflect on formal commitment and daily commitment.
- Investigate ways you may undermine commitment from within your relationship.
- Learn about ways to protect your relationship from outside pressures.

Part I: What Do We Mean by “Commitment”?

A commitment is a pledge, promise, oath, vow, or agreement given in trust. In a relationship, it is typically a promise of loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness, compassion, and companionship. Commitment to a relationship before marriage or without a ceremony is a private affirmation of the love, the harmony, the bond, the understanding, and the desire two people have to build a relationship together. When two people marry, the commitment becomes a public vow, a promise made in the presence of family and friends, sanctioned by God or the state, to create a life together “till death do us part.”

Formal Commitment

There are times to stop and make a formal commitment—or recommitment—to one another, to your relationship and to the Big Picture future you are building. In this module’s exercises, you will both have an opportunity to reflect on and make a conscious statement or reaffirmation of your commitment. You may have already done this through an engagement, marriage, or commitment ceremony, or a renewal of your vows. Even so, take the opportunity this week to make or reinforce that vow. It is a promise to you and to one another.

Daily Commitment

Another way of showing your commitment is through your daily interactions. Commitment is implied in every action, agreement, and communication as you build your Big Picture Partnering universe, where two whole individuals work to satisfy both individual and mutual needs, desires, and goals. You will become aware of how ongoing commitment is integral to everything you do. As you develop a strong consciousness of this step of the program, you will notice that your commitment is naturally reaffirmed through your everyday interactions and behaviors.

Challenges to Our Commitments

Long-lasting relationships require steady nurturance and attention, continuous affirmation and commitment. It is joyful to be committed during the honeymoon and the smooth periods of a relationship. However, in any long-term relationship our commitment is challenged at various times. It may be challenged by an event as disruptive and painful as an affair, by the pressures of children or two careers, or even by boredom. Factors such as financial stress, moving, poor health,

demanding schedules, or in-laws and extended family may also challenge your commitment.

One couple I've worked with on and off since they were dating has had a relationship filled with many joys and just as many stresses. Together for almost nine years and married for six years, Donna and David experienced the joys of falling passionately in love and sharing a strong sense of life purpose that includes being together and creating a thriving relationship and family. Together they have also built a successful business that allows Donna time with her young sons and David the excitement of training leaders throughout the continent. They have two beautiful preschool-aged sons. Their business venture takes them to many parts of the world where they meet interesting people. Each around age 40, both Donna and David share conscious aspirations to do good work and impact the world with their inspiring message, as well as through philanthropy and volunteering, as they grow older.

On the other hand, Donna and David have also navigated the murky waters of premarital infidelity and alcohol addiction. In the early stages of building their business they suffered bankruptcy, the consequences of which they still feel in minor ways. During this same time, Donna suffered the illness and subsequent

death of her sister from cancer. She also experienced post-partum depression following each of her son's births. David is high energy and demanding. He gets angry when Donna is not "at the top of her game" along with him. David's work is exciting but it takes him away from home nearly half of each month. At other times, Donna must pack up the family to accompany him on the adventures while their sons are still young and not in school.

Donna and David have been consciously committed to partnering since their dating years. Neither of them would rate their relationship as Traditional, Merged, or Roommate, except when they go through a transition —such as bankruptcy, or having children, or any of the other times described. With every challenge, however, this couple has sought to renew and revitalize their Big Picture Partnership. They would be the first to admit they are not perfect. But they want to get better. They also renew their commitment to one another and to their marriage on a daily basis. As Donna explains:

Whether we are together or apart, no matter where we are in the world on any given night, we always say we are committed to our marriage out loud to one another: "I choose to be married to you today." Sometimes this isn't easy because one or the other of us may feel angry or depressed, making one of

us ambivalent. But we reaffirm our desire to make this relationship work in spite of how difficult it is that day.

David adds:

Even when I am mad at her, I love Donna more than anything. I have this vision of how good it is sometimes and how good we can make it if we are both doing the work. We have an incredible life. We have so many blessings not shared by many others on the planet. Saying “I want to be married to you today. I choose to be married to you today” keeps me in the moment and working through the tough stuff, and it makes the good stuff even more fantastic.

A commitment is an agreement that we fully embrace, embody, and act on at all times. During stressful times, commitment may feel difficult or challenging to you. During these times ask yourself each morning: “Am I WILLING to be here today? Am I willing to do my part fully and generously even though I may not ‘feel’ like it?” Your WILL—like Will Power, willingness, conviction, yearning, wish—will allow you to act on your heart’s desire, even when you may not “feel like it” or want to.

To build a rock-solid and satisfying Big Picture partnership it means that you must commit—and sometimes recommit—to not only to one another, and to your relationship, but to the Big Picture: an evolving long-term relationship that the two of you create over the years.

Commitment Through the Many Phases of Relating

One of the delights of life is that people change. They grow and naturally evolve through the appropriate developmental stages of their teens, twenties, thirties, forties, and, for some, all the way through their nineties. Any enduring, intimate relationship needs to evolve over time to keep it vital and fresh. For all couples, each new phase can be like a new “relationship within a relationship”: the joys of courtship, the early stages of a relationship when we say “I think I want to be only with you,” the engagement and the marriage or ceremony, the first time you move in together, the honeymoon stage, the raising of young children, supporting one another’s budding careers or creative aspirations, the middle family years and work life, the empty nest, grandparenthood, retirement or a career change, the need to seek new forms of fulfillment and creativity at mid-life and beyond. These are all potential phases of any relationship. Each

choice or developmental phase poses a challenge to your commitment to each other and to your relationship.

The following sampling of couples across the lifespan represent changes you may experience as you move through many life stages together. Such transitions may be desired and exciting, but they are stressful nonetheless. Their commitment to each other and their relationship became an anchor for each of these couples during times of transition and change. It can become an anchor for you.

Jorge, twenty-three and married six months to Martina, is headed into law school this fall. As Jorge has taken on the commitments of marriage, partnering, and law school he's not as happy-go-lucky as he was during their courtship. Martina, his twenty-two-year-old bride, notes how much he is changing, almost overnight:

He's given up going out and drinking with the boys on weekends. He's much more concerned about getting our new house and finances in order so he can study this fall. He's even treating me differently—mainly for the better. I like the changes, but my head is spinning. He's not the light-hearted guy I met two years ago. He's talking to me like a real adult all of a sudden—sharing

his plans and dreams about school and his future. He keeps asking me how I feel about everything, and what I need while he's studying so hard. I guess I'd better start figuring this out so we can work together on it, instead of just feeling nervous, or left out.

Retirement is another big change. Beth is concerned about her fifty-nine-year-old husband, Marvin to whom she's been married for nearly thirty years:

Marvin's getting near retirement, and his company may even offer him early severance just to ease their work force. I think he's afraid and doesn't know what he's going to do. He's become quiet and withdrawn these last six months. We try to talk about it, but it's difficult. One hopeful thing—he said he was thinking of taking some carpentry classes at the vocational school nearby starting in a month. He's always been a great carpenter, and we both know plenty of people who need handyman services. He deserves to slow down and do something he'd really enjoy. And, I'd love for us to get an RV to go on road trips around the country!

Liz and Herbert represent another life stage. Liz, widowed for twelve years, is a sparkly seventy-nine-year-old with lovely white hair. She loves to ballroom dance and has become deeply involved with Herbert, eight years her junior and also widowed. Right now they have no issues, no history or baggage. They play and learned about partnering to keep it that way. They talked about marriage, and Liz is considering the changes she'll be facing if she accepts:

You know, when I was younger I would have been much more cautious. But one never knows how much time they've got left. My attraction to Herbert is very different than with my husband. But then, we raised a family, grew a business, and made a full life, until Sam died of a heart attack at sixty-eight—so young. It took me almost five years to get my life reoriented, and now I have. Dancing has been great exercise, a social outlet, and then there is Herbert! So many men my age are “old,” and I'm not! He's able to keep up with me. I think he's a keeper!

Liz and Herbert look at each other fondly—then Herbert speaks up:

I think she's a keeper, too. We have such a good time together. We could just both go on living alone and doing our separate lives, but we think it

might be more fun to do the next phase together! I think her kids and mine are having an eye-opening experience as they see us so happy, but they are becoming quite supportive.

Like people, relationships need to change. Both internal factors and external circumstances cause changes in an individual or relationship. Often relationships change because of things a couple is trying to accomplish during a particular stage of their lives. Ellen, thirty-four, is less concerned about her deeply engaging career these days. She and Mike, married five years, are trying to get pregnant. They'd like to have two children before she turns forty. Here's what Mike is thinking about now:

Now that my career is finally stabilized and I'm making a good income, we figure we'd better get going on the baby thing or it may be too late. I had a hard time thinking about it until I landed this good job and finally felt successful—like all men are supposed to feel. I know it's kind of stupid in this liberal day and age, but feeling successful as a man is still important. We both enjoy our careers, but Ellen feels she can always re-enter the work force full time later on. Women in their forties and fifties—and even sixties—are having blossoming careers in this day and age! Especially now that everyone is living so long.

Ellen adds,

And men are more likely to want to work in the garden or play with the grandchildren when they get older. I'm actually looking forward to that time.

But first, I guess we have to have the babies!

Some change is thrust upon us. Peg and Jim, married fourteen years, in their early to mid-forties with two preadolescent, sports-minded sons, suddenly are taking care of two generations: their children and Peg's parents, who are in their eighties and struggling.

Dad's Alzheimer's has become so much worse that Mom can't care for him anymore. She's getting tired, so we have recently found a home that will accommodate both their needs—Dad's in the apartment with twenty-four-hour care, and Mom's in her own apartment nearby. We are trying to take turns visiting at least three to four times a week. It's a handful with the boys' baseball, hockey, and other activities.

Expressing the Big Picture Partnering they value, Jim adds:

Yeah, sometimes we feel a bit squeezed in the middle, but I don't think we'd choose to do it any other way. We just have to make sure we have time for one another, or our relationship will suffer.

Sometimes change is exciting, and sometimes it is scary because of the unknown. Either way, without change, we grow bored. A strong commitment to one another and to your relationship—and a conscious recommitment whenever you are going through a major change—will help the two of you trust one another and the rock-solid stability of your partnering. Commitment prepares and equips you for the dreams and fun things you can create, as well as for the challenges that life is sure to bring.

Ongoing and conscious commitment prepares you for action and invests your relationship with power and strength—because you are facing the change together. You can count on one another and your partnering no matter what happens.

Love Is a Work in Progress

In the classic book *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck writes about enduring love. Peck speaks of the mature discipline and quiet care required to make a long-term commitment thrive. In this view, love becomes an action verb. And active loving can involve the simplest of things—the I’ll-make-your-bed-for-you, let-me-give-you-a-hug-when-you-are-down, and let’s-make-love-even-with-our-wrinkles moments. Long-term love is an action—not just physical chemistry or a short-term feeling of falling. It can be romantic and passionate, but it is so much more than that. It is a work in progress, much like a beautiful work of art that takes months or even years to create. When a painter is laying colors on the canvas day after day, mixing her palette, scratching and rubbing the surface, and adding more layers, sometimes the canvas looks downright awful—maybe even like a mistake. But if she perseveres, the hidden tones start to shine through, the richness and depth impact the surface, the beauty and complexity evolve.

Part II: Are You Undermining Your Commitment?

Commitment is a major and complex undertaking. It requires awareness of our motivations, needs, desires, and capabilities. In essence, it requires great maturity. Some people are able to embrace their relationship and all its commitments wholeheartedly. They never look back or question their personal choice. Their commitment is solid, a given.

For others, the requirements of commitment to another person and to a long-term relationship are less conscious or steadfast. Some people may not have considered all the ramifications of making such a choice, yet they find themselves in love and having made a commitment. Some people want to give up when times are tough. Others threaten to walk out to get their partner's attention. Some have worked hard to create a good relationship but get no cooperation from their partner; only at that point do they decide it is time to leave.

There are five basic behaviors that frequently undermine commitment. These are:

- Making a commitment too soon in the relationship
- Abandoning oneself and consequently resenting one's partner

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- Not living in alignment with your values, goals and priorities
 - “Crying wolf” by threatening to leave or divorce
 - Wanting to give up before you’ve tried everything possible to make the relationship successful

Let’s take a look at each of these behaviors to see how it can chip away your commitment to your partner.

Commitment Too Soon Creates a Weak Relationship

We have all heard stories of people who fall madly in love and decide to make a commitment to one another—to become engaged or get married—not long after their first date. In a number of these situations, the outcome is a long and happy relationship. Usually the two people are mature, know what they want in a mate, and are realistic about what it will take to create a relationship once they are committed.

Many other times, the outcome is not so positive. Sometimes this is because a couple is young. Jennifer and Jim are a case in point. Jennifer came to counseling

while their divorce was being finalized. She wanted to avoid the pitfalls she and Jim had experienced in their young and short marriage. As Jennifer explained:

Jim and I were just too young. We had no idea what marriage would require. All we knew was that we were head over heels for each other. At seventeen, you may think you are grown up, but there is so much to learn about life. Sadly to say, the marriage only lasted a year and a half. My parents were good about not saying “I told you so.”

As we spoke, Jennifer assessed that she and Jim held a combination of Traditional and Merged styles when they got together. Over time, she wanted to develop her individual interests by going to school and working. This was threatening to Jim who liked her being at home for him. He criticized her every action. At the time, Jennifer did not know quite what was wrong, but when she heard about Big Picture Partnering, she decided that this is the relationship style she will seek in her future. In the meantime, she’s finishing her education and developing her personal interests so when the time is right she will choose a mate more carefully.

Other times, a hasty commitment comes out of neediness. Carla remarks:

I was on the rebound. I thought I had healed from my first marriage, which ended in a fairly amicable divorce after four years and no kids; however, I should have taken more time to soul search. I just blamed Matt for our divorce and never stopped to look at my own shortcomings. As a result, I was pretty needy for affection and someone to lean on. These qualities didn't help either of my two marriages.

Very often people fall in love with a terrific person, but forget they are taking on an entire package of life experiences and extended family. Sometimes they may not understand the challenges that come with addictions or a history of dysfunction of any sort. Says Dan:

I thought she was the perfect person for me. She was gorgeous, fun loving, and ready to party. I'd never been married and was waiting for "Mrs. Right" to knock my socks off. Well, she did, all right. I just had no idea that everything about her past, as well as her behavior with me, should have been a red flag. She was a great gal, but she had troubles with alcohol, two kids from two different fathers, and was rarely employed for more than six

months. She always wanted to go to the casino for entertainment and lost a lot of money—what was I thinking! I guess it was chemistry and a certain kind of love—but not the marrying kind of love!

Not all relationships can succeed. Sometimes the stressors are too great and the couple too ill-equipped. It takes solid maturity, an awareness of the long-term requirements of a relationship, education about the characteristics of a good mate, and a willingness to continuously work together to create a relationship and make it last.

Abandoning Your Self Breeds Resentment

Internal abandonment is when your body is present, but your heart or mind is not fully involved in the moment—or in the relationship. Abandonment is when you are going through the motions, and so you say “yes” to things without really thinking or being committed to your choices.

Sometimes people abandon themselves and their partners for short periods of time. We all experience times like these when we are overly tired, distracted, or stressed by another area of life.

Harriet and Kammi are in their mid-forties and have been in a committed relationship for thirteen years. Sometimes Kammi “goes away” internally. As Harriet says:

I can always tell when Kammi is going through a stressful time at work. She comes home and she's like a robot. She'll come around after a few days, and then we talk about what's happening at work. Only then do I feel like I have her full attention once again.

Some people have a protective pattern they developed in childhood to shield themselves from getting hurt. This can cause one partner to go away internally. Gordon reports that his wife of thirty-two years would periodically go away internally, sometimes for weeks or even months. His wife went through the motions of daily life and had conversations with Gordon, yet she was not fully engaged in their relationship or in life:

Then one day, she'd just be “back.” It was the most perplexing thing. We'd both know it. Later we learned that when someone or something shamed her, she withdrew. Shame was a constant part of her childhood and she had developed a protective mechanism to avoid the deep hurt it caused her.

Learning about the Big Picture Partnering approach and the essentials help her stay more present and talk out the hurt instead of withdrawing. It taught me how to be a better listener, and we now work through the issues together.

Some people don't take care of their physical or spiritual health. They may not exercise, or they may lack the vitality to have sex or engage in social pursuits. This physical withdrawal is another form of abandonment that impacts the individual as well as the partnership. Kim and Lee have been in a committed relationship for nineteen years, and recently Lee has exhibited this sort of physical distance. As Kim explains:

Lee and I had always enjoyed making love—and frequently. These days he's put on weight and seems vulnerable about getting older. I still find him attractive and loveable, but he's distracted and withdrawn. He's not even interested in going out for dinner or movies as often. We're still affectionate, but sex is very infrequent.

When you practice staying fully committed, you learn to be more present in your relationship by taking time for yourself (to read, take a nap, go for a walk, see

your friends, have a massage,) so that you can feel refreshed. The two of you also learn to come together and go apart without having to internally withdraw, because you enjoy your individual activities and can count on regular times enjoying one another's company.

Lacking Values and Priorities Undermines Your Relationship

While our society offers a myriad of exciting and wonderful options, many outside forces pose challenges to our personal relationships. In the modern world, we receive mixed messages about what to consider a priority, and we are faced with many temptations that guide us away from the family life. While the reality of temptation and opportunities to stray is an issue that should be addressed in any intimate partnership, what I am referring to is the Spend money on bigger houses, cars, toys, vacations, or travel, and not pay attention to financial limits or future goals—because the economic system allows it.

- Eat, drink, or exercise excessively.
- Work excessively without considering the impact on your relationship and family, in order to impress the boss and other colleagues.
- Avoid too much involvement with your children, because you fear you might

appear less professional to your colleagues or because you are not sure your children really want your involvement.

- Prioritize house chores or home maintenance, rather than talking with or making love to your partner, because society leads us to believe that these things are more important.
- Put friends or extended family above your partner.

All these socially acceptable, culturally approved behaviors tend to keep us from placing a priority on our relationship with our partner and our family. It is important to align your values and priorities, so that you can focus your energy on a committed partnership. Without this commitment couples flounder.

Cheryl's situation provides an example of how we create distractions that keep us from what's truly important. Thirty-four, a businesswoman and mother who has been married nine years, Cheryl had a habit of over-spending that greatly interfered with her relationship. She admitted that she had a shopping addiction, that she would spend money to fill emotional needs. She would buy toys for her young daughters when they did not need them, when she was lonely or bored. Her closet was filled with clothing that still had price tags on because she had too much to wear. She had purchased the items when she felt a little down or anxious. She had many ways of rationalizing her purchases and convinced herself that she

and the kids deserved them, but she had lost the trust of her husband and felt ashamed. She overspent at the department store each month, racking up credit card debt.

Cheryl had started counseling and had attended Spender's Anonymous meetings a few times but had not followed through on her commitment. When she and her husband, Jim, agreed to save for a bigger home for themselves and their two small children, Cheryl finally faced her priorities head on. Through individual counseling and then learning Big Picture skills with Jim, she reassessed her values and priorities and fully committed to her relationship and the goals she and Jim desired. This meant learning to not overspend. While resolving her spending addiction was very challenging for her, Cheryl sought ways to find internal happiness rather than distracting herself with external objects. She replaced time shopping after work with going to the gym with her friends while Jim picked the girls up from daycare. She reconnected with her mother and talked about the origins of some of her anxieties and these lessened. She and Jim talked about her loneliness and need to reconnect with him and scheduled a date night at least once each week. They revitalized their affectionate behavior toward one another. Jim and Cheryl's mutual agreement about their financial priorities, and Cheryl's decision to face her internal priorities, helped her change her behavior—from spending to saving—

so that it was aligned with the couple's desire for a new home. Today they have their new home, healthy preteen daughters, and a strong, committed Big Picture Partnership.

His work environment challenged Martin's relationship commitment. Married for thirty-seven years, he was a highly successful attorney, ran in a professional circle, and worked in an office where men turned a blind eye to their colleagues' affairs. Family life was undermined by expensive business trips, working late at the office, or having dinner with casual female friends. Alcohol was always a part of these gatherings.

Martin's wife, Mary, was committed to him and their two young children, yet he rationalized his extracurricular activities by pointing to the changes that marriage presented him. When they met, Mary had been athletic and active, but over the years she had developed a chronic case of asthma that sometimes limited her activities. This did not fit Martin's expectations of their relationship. He had not accepted or adjusted to fatherhood nor had he relinquished his bachelor way of life. He also worried that his professional life might suffer if he avoided the established carousing culture within his company. When he came to see me Martin was terribly unhappy and filled with anxieties he hid from his wife. He knew

something was awry about his entire life and he feared losing both his family and his job if he did not take stock of what he truly wanted. He had no idea of how to do this on his own.

Martin faced some initial hard work individually in order to align his life with his core values. To feel more grounded at home, he stopped fighting with Mary and started the Big Picture Partnering Steps 1 and 2 by increasing the positives and talking regularly. Then he reevaluated his life and privately renewed his commitment to their relationship while he sorted out his confusion. This committed helped him refocus his life at home and at work. After much soul searching, Martin decided to reorganize his work life to reflect values he thought he wanted to follow at this stage of his life. He realized that he had spent enough years having the freedom and fun of a bachelor. He had chosen to marry, have children, and enter into family life. Now he wanted to learn how to fully participate in and enjoy this choice. He was already very successful in his career. Enlisting the support of his businessman father, his wife, and a few close friends, Martin sought feedback on how to make the change he needed within his current company. He went over his boss's head and was able to work under a new supervisor with more stable values. As Martin and Mary continued to talk and strengthen their partnering commitment, Martin discovered other things to do with his free time and recommitted time to his

family. While he had always been a man with seemingly inexhaustible energy, once he aligned his values with his day-to-day life, Martin found that the lack of anxiety and guilt resulted in even more energy. He channeled this into the things he wanted now and in his future. He grew to appreciate more deeply what he had built in his life, and he found healthier ways of letting off steam and playing. He and Mary partnered on creating a new relationship, one that supported their individual needs and also reflected their more mature relationship.

In both of these situations, a number of options presented themselves, and various paths could have been taken. While making skillful choices can be confusing, when we reflect on our priorities and realign our life choices to reflect our core commitments we embrace, we can make decisions that create inner peace and are in sync with our Big Picture Partnership.

While extended family, friends, bosses, and coworkers may challenge your decisions—because it may mean less time at the golf course, the shopping mall, the office, family events, or social functions—those who truly care about you will respect, even admire and support, that you are striving to reflect your mutual values and strengthen your relationship. And if they truly care about you, they will work to find ways to be with you that align with your time and availability.

Threatening To Leave Or Divorce is Harmful

Another way of abandoning a relationship is to create instability by threatening to leave or divorce. Even when separation or divorce is not truly intended, such threats are ominous and loom over a relationship. They typically contain an element of the partner's thoughts, even when he claims it was "just a joke." Usually such threats are meant to get a rise out of the partner and come from the Critical Parent or Wounded Child state. (Refresh your understanding of the Parent-Adult-Child States in Module 4: Adulthood 101.)

Unless you stay very adult, it is easy to slip into a childlike demand for attention or parental criticism. For example, "Well! I guess you don't really love me or you'd stay home and we'd go out tonight!" may come from your Wounded Child if you are feeling neglected. Or a Critical Parent might lash out and say, "This is never going to work! You simply don't ever listen to my needs, even the little ones like keeping the house clean. I've had it!"

We know that children will seek attention through negative behaviors if attention is not freely given when they are behaving positively. Even as adults we are prone to do the same when we are not in our solid Adult Self. When faced

with lack of attention, perceived lack of attention, or when you have other unmet needs, you can present your unhappiness in a way that will be more effective; in a way that will not threaten your partner or your entire relationship.

A basic rule of commitment is: Never threaten to leave, never threaten divorce, unless you truly mean it. Then presenting your need should be done in an adult way— seriously, respectfully, with care for your partner’s potentially angry, defensive, or sad response.

Here are examples of individuals who threatened their spouses in order to get their attention and to provoke a change of behavior or, failing that, a fight that might indicate their spouse’s love. Instead, their tactic backfired and got them just what they did not want. Their partners became more withdrawn.

Anna and John have been married for six years. She is in her early thirties and he is pushing forty. Anna wanted a bigger home and to start a family. John appeared content with their very busy life of work and socializing with a group of friends. He is a strong, silent type; Anna craves more verbal and emotional connection. She’s discontent with their Roommate style and explains:

After awhile I just didn't know how to reach John. He'd simply mumble or put me off when I wanted to talk about a new house or trying to get pregnant. He is a master at avoiding. Instead of creating conflict, he tried to humor me. But I was getting furious and started to say things like, "Maybe you never wanted kids and I do. Maybe this marriage won't work after all. You lied to me about having a family." I started to yell at him frequently, and he withdrew. I really didn't want to end our marriage. His silence still bugs me, but I love so many other things about him. I just want him to talk to me. I learned through Big Picture partnering how damaging these threats can be. We finally got help and learned to talk more openly. And I discovered through our talks how afraid he was that I would really leave.

Another example of “crying wolf” threatening their relationship is Henry and Sarah. Henry is an active guy. Becoming a father with family obligations was challenging for him. He felt Sarah didn't divide her time well between him and their one-year-old. Henry described that instead of talking to her, he'd tell Sarah:

Maybe I'm just not cut out for parenthood. We never go out anymore. You seem totally content with whatever Danny needs—and I get frustrated. Maybe we're not meant to be together.

Sarah ended up sad and frustrated with Henry's summation of their marriage. To protect herself she withdrew even further and gave even more attention to their child. In her mind she began to prepare for the possibility that Henry might leave someday. As a result, Henry became more frustrated with her withdrawal and passivity in the relationship until it all came to a head and the truth about their feelings came out in an initial session in my office. As Henry related:

Here I thought I was trying to tell her I wanted more time with her—not to take away from our child, whom I love—but to let her know I loved lots of the things we used to do, and the joy she brings me when we are doing more things together. I guess I chose a pretty lousy way of expressing it. Sarah finally told me she was even thinking about where she and Danny could live, how she'd manage financially, while at the same time she was hoping I'd wake up to what a good thing we had going. That's when we finally got some help to communicate better. I could have lost Sarah and Danny if I had kept saying those threatening things—when all I wanted was to be closer again.

Often when a partner threatens to walk out of a relationship, or to divorce, they are “crying wolf,” they have thought about ending the relationship in passing,

perhaps, but their intention in airing this thought is to get closer to their partner, or simply to elicit a reaction or attention from their mate. On the other hand, it could mean that they have seriously thought about ending the relationship. No matter your intention, telling your partner that you want to leave the relationship damages trust. Even if intellectually they know you don't really mean it, it will set up a negative pattern between you—getting you exactly what you don't want.

Wanting To Give Up Before You've Tried Everything Possible

When couples claim that they want to break up, I ask them to first reconsider. They need to think about any regrets they might have if they do not try to sort out the problems in their relationship. Breaking up and divorce have long-lasting consequences for both the adults and the children involved.

Seeking help at this point means attending relationship therapy, education, or counseling. It means learning new skills, looking at the issues, and arriving at potential new solutions. This is important for two reasons. As we get older we cannot help but accumulate more regrets. Regrets and feelings of failure are hard on the heart. For the sake of your heart and your future well-being, make sure you

know for certain that you have done all you can to make the relationship work.

The second reason to get help for your relationship is for your children's sake. As adults, you and your partner will survive and rebuild your lives. Your children, no matter what their ages, will always be affected by the fact that you threatened their stability and broke up their home. They will always live with the psychological and emotional ramifications of their parents breaking apart. They are also likely to experience the inconsistency, instability, and negative economics of divorce, no matter how well they are parented by one or both of you.

One Day at a Time

One study shows that when married couples are unhappy but stay together even though they don't get outside help, 86 percent report greatly increased happiness and satisfaction five years later. The experts speculate that much of a couple's dissatisfaction may be due to circumstances—such as job stress, child rearing, health problems, care of elderly parents, disability, etc. If they stay together, such circumstances pass with time. When couples survive difficult times and additionally seek support and learn to partner during those times, they can thrive.

I always advise couples going through stressful situations to commit to working on their relationship on a daily basis—one day at a time. Every morning, acknowledge your commitment by saying to yourself, “I am willing to do my part in partnering today.” When your circumstances are difficult, in order to weather the daily ups and downs, use your sense of willingness to help you build the emotional muscles and stamina to stay in the relationship and keep moving forward. Of course, you should seek support and help. And, if you need a break, take a few hours off just for yourself. Offer your partner time off as well.

If You Are Considering Leaving Your Partner

Sometimes breakups and divorce are unavoidable. If a couple must break up or divorce, it is important that they try to separate without threats or anger. Since this can be extremely difficult in some cases, many couples seek professional help to get through this difficult process. Again, I always advise couples who are on the brink of separation to make absolutely certain that this is what they want to do. If they discuss their potential breakup with a psychologist, marriage counselor, or mediator and still decide to end their relationship, at least they will have a better understanding of “why” and less opportunity for regrets and bitterness down the road.

There are many challenges, circumstances, and phases in a long-term relationship. Some are more difficult and some more joyful than others. If we love our partners in the active way that M. Scott Peck describes, if in our calmer moments we truly want to be in a relationship, if we are mature enough to know that the day-to-day is not always easy, then commitment to the relationship—along with perseverance, creativity, and humor—can see us through the challenging times.

Children and Divorce

It is not uncommon in stressful marriages for the kids to weigh-in on whether parents should stay together or divorce. **DO NOT** give your children this power. Keep them out of the middle. This is your adult relationship and you need to deal with it, whether you stay together or separate. It is harmful to children when they take sides. It is harmful to children to see the two of you act in ways they cannot look up to—you are their role models—even if they see you disagree and even divorce. If they see you acting as adults and treating one another, and them, respectfully you will all be better off.

You are the adults and they need to be children. What is important is learning to communicate appropriately with your children about times of stress that

may feel threatening to them. It is best if you can partner on how and what to communicate to your kids. If you cannot partner, then you be the stable, healthy, appropriate adult parent in your communications. These communications include the following:

- Reassure your children that you love them and will always take care of them.
- **NEVER** confide in your children. This is a burden they are too young to manage. Talk to your healthy friends and a therapist.
- Let them know that adults do have problems and telling them the truth about what you are doing. For example: “Yes, your daddy and I are having problems. He’s very mad at me and sometimes I don’t speak kindly to him. Even adults need to practice healthy communication. Even adults need to learn better ways of talking to one another so they don’t hurt one another.”
- Then tell them more truth. “ We are going to counseling to learn how to treat each other better.” Or “We are going to live in two separate houses for a while to see if we can learn to be nicer to one another.” Either way say, “This is our adult problem. We still love you and your job is to be the kid. We will always love you and always take care of you.”
- Never mention divorce unless you have finalized that decision. Kids know it is a possibility. What they don’t know is if you are working on your relationship. Unless you tell them they will jump to conclusions.

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- Tell your children you are going to take five minutes every other day to talk with them about how they are feeling. Do this with each child individually, giving each child an opportunity to open up and have you just listen. You can reassure and clarify what is going on if you hear their fear or their misunderstanding.

Good luck. Make sure to get the help you need, especially if you have children and you are separating or headed for divorce. You and your mate will need partnering skills for many years to come since they are always your children.

Exercises: Affirming Your Commitment

This week, use the following affirmations to deepen your commitment. Say them out loud to yourself each day:

- I am willing to continuously choose our relationship. I'm willing to work at our relationship, even when I am tired or the going gets tough.
- I choose to be creative in our relationship. I choose to learn new ways of doing things if the old ways are not working.
- I am committed to our relationship because I value it. I know that we can make it more and more solid and exciting if we do it together.
- I am willing to protect our relationship through my words and actions. I will work to surround our relationship with healthy people and participate in healthy activities.

How do these affirmations resonate inside you? If you like, rewrite them in your own words. You might also add other affirmations as well.

Write them out and put them on the bathroom mirror or on your dashboard to remind you of your commitment to your relationship.

As you begin to say these affirmations every day, notice any changes in your

behavior, attitudes, willingness, or feelings of being present or engaged in your relationship.

Are You Undermining Your Commitment to Your Relationship?

Take some time to reflect on what you learned in this chapter about the subtle ways you may inadvertently or indirectly abandon your relationship. Abandonment, even subtle, can potentially undermine your commitment. Ask yourself the following questions to clarify any of the ways you may be indirectly abandoning your partner. You may think of other examples. Write in your journal.

- In what ways do I keep one foot in and, at the same time, keep one foot out?
- Am I putting other activities (chores, time with my friends, hobbies) before time with my partner?
- Do I tend to tune out and not really listen when I come home from a long day?
- Does my commitment to work overshadow my commitment to my partner and family?
- When I am tired, excited, or frustrated, do I overspend, drink too much, or stay out later than I promised?
- Am I telling my partner what I really think, or avoiding the truth because I'm

afraid of hurt or angry feelings, or am I stuffing it under the rug because I feel a little lazy and hope my concerns will go away?

- If I'm not talking about a concern I have in our relationship, am I gradually withdrawing affection? Am I too tired for sex, or disinterested in time together?
- Am I hanging out with people who undermine long-term relationships and commitment?

Spend some time with these questions. They are tough. They are about the ways we erode confidence in and commitment to our relationships.

Abandoning ourselves—by not taking care of ourselves—is another way we commonly abandon our partnerships. We get worn out, stressed out. We come home too tired, too harried, too distracted to have anything to offer our most important relationships. Consider the following statement:

If I don't fully take care of me, I have abandoned me.

In what ways does this statement apply to you? How has it affected your life, your partner, and your relationship?

Protection from Outside Pressures

Ask yourself if your relationship is experiencing any outside distractions or pressures. Make a list of even small pressures or distractions you or your partner might be feeling. What would be the consequences of removing these distractions and pressures? Bring these reflections to your conversation with your partner.

Sharing with Your Partner

When the two of you are ready, later this week, come together and share what you are noticing about your commitment. Take turns listening to one another.

MEET DR. JAN HOISTAD



The mindset, skills and tools of the Big Picture Partnering approach to long-lasting relationship, developed by Dr. Jan Hoistad, is all about coming together around values and vision, making decisions together and staying connected—partnering towards the same end goals and life vision together. And having more fun in the process!

Dr. Jan's insights and tools for establishing and maintaining a long-lasting relationship are especially helpful for today's fast-paced and busy life experienced by professional couples with two careers, entrepreneurial couples with one or two businesses or the couple with one overseeing the household organization while the other works in the business.

Passionate about helping people develop the skills necessary to achieve success and fulfillment in their entire lives, Dr. Jan Hoistad has advised countless couples

who are also CEO's, executives, entrepreneurs, business partners, emerging leaders and other professionals through stages of business growth and career development—making sure it is fully aligned with their life development and vision of a happy, fulfilling future.

Bringing expertise in human development, family and couple dynamics, entrepreneurship, business growth, partnering, communication and creativity, her clients become catalysts for change in their businesses, careers and lives.

Dr. Hoistad is an LP, with an MA and PhD from CSPP along with extensive post-doctoral training in leadership and systems development, collaboration, mediation, as well as negotiation from Harvard Law School's Project on Negotiation.

For more information and resources, please visit:

<http://www.drjanhoistadpartners.com/working-couple>

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