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BUT I THOUGHT YOU SAID
YOU LOVED ME

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*Understanding the Difference Between
Love and Commitment*

I had known Sherry for two years when she came to my office last autumn. We met when she enrolled in my course in interpersonal communication. Sherry discovered a subject that fascinated her, so she changed her major to communication and she asked me to be her adviser.

Over the two years that followed, Sherry and I became friendly enough to share parts of our personal lives with each other. I tell her about the mischief my kitten Sadie regularly gets into, and she tells me how her mother is recovering following back surgery. She knows I worry about my 15-year-old nephew's infatuation with what I consider morbid stories and films, and I know that she's debating whether to apply to graduate school or look for a job after graduation.

When Sherry came into my office that autumn day she was visibly upset. It didn't take long to discover why: Her boyfriend, Jason, had just broken up with her.

"I just don't understand," she told me, shaking her head. "He said he loved me, and I believed him."

"Maybe he did love you. Maybe he does," I said.

“If he loved me, he wouldn’t have broken up.”

“Not necessarily. We can love people with whom we don’t want to spend our lives.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense. If you love someone, you *do* want it to be forever. That’s totally what love is,” she insisted. “Jason just lied to me about loving me.”

“Maybe; maybe not. What led you to think he wanted to be with you forever?” I asked.

“Because he said how much fun I was, and he was always talking about how much he enjoyed being with me.”

“Did he say anything else — anything else about how he felt about you and the relationship?”

Sherry thought for a moment before answering. “Well, he said he liked to talk with me because I helped him sort out his ideas.” She reviewed the relationship, then added, “And he said he felt really close to me.”

“Did he ever say he planned to be with you next year? Did he ever talk about the two of you long-term?”

“Well, not exactly, but I assumed that he felt we were long term,” she said. “After all, he said he loved me.”

“Love and commitment to a future don’t necessarily go hand in hand,” I said gently.

“That’s pretty much what Jason said. He said he did love me, but that didn’t mean he wanted to settle down now,” Sherry said. “He said he never tried to mislead me into thinking that we were long term.”

“Perhaps he didn’t.”

“But he said he loved me,” Sherry returned to her refrain. “And now he says he feels terrible that I’m hurt and that I feel like he betrayed me.”

“Loving someone doesn’t necessarily mean you want to spend your life with the person.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

An hour later when Sherry left my office, she had a better understanding of Jason and their relationship, even if she didn’t have the relationship she wanted and had assumed existed between them. Like many people, Sherry assumed love and commitment go together or are even the same thing. Not so.

In this chapter, we discuss differences between love and commitment. As we’ll see, the two aren’t equivalent. They mean distinct things. Even more important, they imply distinct futures for a relationship. When

people don’t understand the difference between love and commitment, they may be in for some unpleasant surprises.

Understanding the Misunderstanding

Sherry’s misunderstanding of Jason’s feelings is not uncommon. That’s because intimacy can involve a range of different features, not all of which are linked to endurance. Academics in a variety of fields have conducted considerable research that helps us figure out just what is involved in intimate relationships. It seems that intimacy can involve any or all of three distinct qualities: passion, love, and commitment.

Passion

When many people think about intimacy, passion is what first comes to mind. Passion is an intensely positive feeling. It’s why we feel butterflies in our stomach and like we’re falling head over heels. It’s why we feel we can’t get enough of another person. Passion can be fast and furious; it can be exciting and exhausting.

Passion often involves powerful physical attraction. With a romantic interest we may want to kiss and be kissed, look into each other’s eyes, to hold hands or link arms, or to engage in sexual activities. With a friend, we may want to hug and touch and share confidences. Although passion frequently includes strong erotic, sensual, or sexual feelings, physical arousal isn’t the only way we experience passion.

Intensity is the crux of passion, and intensity may be emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, or a combination of these. Two people may feel passion when they engage in vigorous discussion of social issues or politics. We may feel deeply attracted to a person with whom we share central spiritual values. We may feel passion for a friend or sibling who has been with us through pivotal life experiences. Passionate feelings can also be aroused when we are with someone we find physically attractive and exciting. Passion is all these things. In our lives, we may be drawn intensely to others in many different ways.

Love

Love is feelings of closeness and comfort in the present moment. We feel comfortable with someone; we feel warm when we are together. Like

Jason, when we love someone we may say “I have so much fun with you,” “I really like talking with you,” and “I love you.” And we may mean each of those statements, just as Jason may have.

Beverly Fehr is a psychologist who teaches and conducts research at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. Over the years, she and her colleagues have conducted a series of studies to clarify what love is. They report that for most Westerners, the core of love is feelings of contented companionship. In six separate studies, Fehr and her associates found that people who are asked what love is say it involves trust, caring, friendship, and respect. Fehr’s respondents placed priority on being comfortable with an intimate and feeling close.

Far less central in people’s descriptions of love is passion. Fehr and her colleagues report that many people do mention passion as part of love, but it is more peripheral than close, comfortable companionship. Most people seem to regard the intensity and yearning that characterize passion as desirable, but distinct from love. When they describe love and loving, they talk about feeling safe, contented, valued, and warm in a relationship.

Another important feature of love is that it is oriented to the present. Love is a feeling that is fueled by rewards and gratifications we receive from a relationship. Jason’s love was kindled by the fun he had with Sherry and the value he got from talking with her. These were rewards that sparked his feelings of love. Yet all these feelings are confined to the present moment. Jason didn’t say he wanted to have fun with Sherry for the rest of his life. He didn’t say he wanted to talk with her in the years ahead. Because it is present oriented, love alone isn’t a guarantee that a relationship will continue.

Commitment

As enjoyable as passion and love can be, they aren’t the cornerstone of long-lasting relationships. The real cement is commitment, which is an intention to remain with a relationship. It is the decision or intention to continue a relationship. It is the assumption that there will be a future, regardless of problems and hard times.

An important study conducted in 1985 sheds light on the difference between love and commitment. Mary Lund’s experience as a family therapist in southern California led her to suspect that there is something beyond passion and love, something that is a key to whether a relationship endures or wanes over time. To find out whether her hunch was correct,

Lund found 129 people who were at periods in their lives when geographical moves were likely. She asked the people to respond to written surveys at two times—once before the life change occurred and once after it occurred. The surveys measured what Lund’s respondents thought and felt about their current romantic relationships. In addition, Lund asked her respondents what they gave to and got from the relationship.

Lund’s findings are clear and important. Two of her results merit special attention. First, she reports that commitment is far better than passionate love in predicting the continuation of a relationship. In other words, the intention to stay together is a more powerful bond than strongly positive feelings alone. Recalling what Jason said to Sherry, we can see that he didn’t make statements of commitment. Nothing in how he described his feelings reflected an orientation toward the future.

Lund’s second important finding is that investments generate commitment. Investments are what we put into a relationship that we could not get back if the relationship ended. We invest material things such as time, money, and gifts. We also invest emotionally when we give another person our trust, share our fears and hopes, and make efforts to understand and support him or her. In short, we invest ourselves. According to Lund, when we do that, our intention to remain in a relationship escalates.

<i>Passion is</i>	<i>Love is</i>	<i>Commitment is</i>
Intense feeling or attraction	Feeling safe and comfortable with another person	A decision to stay with someone for the foreseeable future
Something that happens to us	Something that happens to us	An act of will; a decision
Driven by needs and desires	Stoked by rewards provided by relationship	Cultivated by investments in a relationship
Tied to present	Present oriented	Linked to future
Unstable; subject to mercurial change	Subject to fading if disappointments, costs, or hard times come	Sturdy enough to weather bad times, periods of apathy, and boredom

We may be fortunate enough to have passion, love, and commitment in our intimate relationships—at least some of the time. Chances are good, however, that most of us will experience times in perfectly healthy relationships when we don't feel passionate and when we don't feel loving or loved. There are moments in any relationship, even the best of them, when partners don't feel strong passion or love for each other. They may be preoccupied with individual concerns. They may have serious financial, health, or family problems that stifle feelings of affection and attraction. They may be intensely involved with personal projects at work or in the community. They may just be bored temporarily with themselves, each other, or the relationship. Such moments are to be expected in any serious, sustained union. If love and passion are the only reasons people are together, they are likely to come apart when love and passion fluctuate. But if commitment is the cement of the relationship, many couples endure the normal periods of languor and disappointment.

In reflecting on years of relationship counseling, psychiatrist Aaron Beck remarked that passion usually ebbs, at least temporarily, over the course of a long-term relationship. When it does, he said, partners' dedication to each other and the relationship is what holds a relationship together. Agreeing with Beck, psychologist Sharon Brehm says commitment is the bottom line of enduring relationships.

Are love and commitment entirely unrelated? Not necessarily. Ideally, love and commitment go together. As Lund pointed out, "Although love usually accompanied commitment, commitment and investments alone told more about the likelihood of a relationship lasting over time" (pp. 17–18). Surely, most of us hope for an enduring romantic relationship that is enlivened by love and passion. We want the security of constancy and the zing of passion—yet it doesn't always work out that way.

Half a Loaf

In many relationships, either love or commitment is not present. In some cases there is love, and perhaps passion as well, but commitment doesn't exist for any number of reasons. My friend Elaine was deeply in love with Bob, a man she had dated for two years. He wanted to get married—he was committed to a future. Elaine, however, couldn't commit to a life with Bob because he was Christian and she was Jewish. Although Bob was willing to have an interfaith marriage, that wasn't acceptable to Elaine. She could imagine a life only with a Jewish partner. Another friend said

Keeping Up



This is such a dumb time, Jack, to start talking about whether or not something is written in stone.

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he loved his partner "as much as I think I'm capable of ever loving anyone," but he didn't feel ready to settle down. The timing was not right for commitment.

When I was an undergraduate my roommate Laura fell passionately in love with Lloyd whom she dated throughout her college years. Everyone who knew Laura and Lloyd assumed they would marry. But they didn't. They were incompatible for the very reasons they were drawn to each other. They were both inclined to emotional extremes. When they were both ebullient, they were wonderful together. But when they were in negative, dark moods, they were terrible to and for each other. Their relationship was an emotional rollercoaster, which took a toll on both of them. Laura said she couldn't live a life of those extremes. Later she married a man whose calm, steady disposition provided the emotional anchor she needed.

It is also possible to have commitment without love. The most obvious example of such relationships is arranged marriages, a practice that was once widespread and is still followed in some societies. Early in a child's life (and sometimes even before birth), the child's parents make an agreement with another set of parents that their children will wed. The boy and girl may or may not meet prior to the wedding day. Arranged marriages don't assume love is necessary for a successful union. The marriages are used to link families together, not to provide love to the individual children. Arranged marriages generally endure, primarily because they take place within cultures that do not allow divorce and that value collective interests above individual pleasure. And love may develop in marriages that are arranged without respect for the partners' feelings.

In other relationships, both love and passion were present at one point but they have subsided or even stopped. Commitment remains, perhaps "because of the children" or religious principles that forbid divorce or because neither person has found a new partner. And in many cases people stay together for reasons of convenience and practical considerations. A couple may have a nice home, savings, and a comfortable lifestyle that neither could sustain alone. One or both partners' careers might be jeopardized by divorce, so they maintain their marriage, although love and passion are no longer part of it.

The assumption that love is the basis of marriage is not universal, nor is the assumption that love and commitment always go together. What we assume marriage or family is and includes varies from culture to culture and over time across any single culture.

Improving Communication

Because intimate relationships affect us deeply, we want to be careful in how we build them and in what we assume about them. We also want to make sure that we and those we care about share understandings about feelings and the future of relationships.

Distinguish Among Passion, Love, and Commitment

One way to increase shared understanding about relationships is to recognize distinctions among passion, love, and commitment. Even if we hope

that all three will grace our intimate relationships, it's wise to understand differences among them. Had Sherry grasped the distinction, she might not have assumed something that Jason never promised. She might also have considered carefully whether Jason was making investments equal to hers in their relationship. Because investments build and sustain commitment, they are a good gauge of whether someone envisions a future.

There are also actions Jason might have taken to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding. Had he understood the distinction between love and commitment, he might have more clearly explained what he did—and did not—feel for Sherry and what he did—and did not—assume about their future. He might also have noticed how much Sherry was investing in the relationship and realized that she was more committed than he was and more committed than was justified, given his feelings. We should understand that love doesn't necessarily equal commitment and commitment doesn't necessarily require love.

Communicate Openly About Relationships

A second guideline for diminishing misunderstandings about relationships is to communicate clearly. Open, honest communication is critical to mutual understanding of what a relationship is and where it is, is not, and may be heading. Understand the difference. If Jason had read this chapter and if he had wanted to be honest with Sherry, he might have said to her, "I have a great time with you, and I love you, but I'm not sure I see a long-term future for us or for me and anybody at this point in my life." Had Sherry and I had our conversation earlier, she might have asked Jason, "What do you mean when you say you love me? Does it mean you want us to stay together or that you are enjoying the relationship right now?"

It's not easy to engage in candid discussions of a relationship, especially if you aren't sure whether you and the other person feel the same way about it. To ask what another person means when she or he says "I love you" can be awkward and difficult. Such uncomfortable conversations are less painful, however, than discovering, as Sherry did, that a future you assumed would come about is not to be. Difficult dialogue is also less upsetting than learning, as Jason did, that a person you care about feels you betrayed and misled her or him.

Communication won't resolve all the differences between intimate partners. It is, however, one important cornerstone for understanding and healthy relationships.

Key Words

- commitment
- companionship
- future
- intimacy
- investments
- love
- passion
- rewards

Reflecting on This Chapter

1. Have you ever been in a relationship in which only one person was committed? How could you tell the commitment wasn't mutual? What were the signs before the breakup?
2. Think about a relationship to which you and another person were strongly committed. It could be a friendship or a romantic relationship. Can you identify specific investments (not rewards) each of you made in the relationship? Can you evaluate their importance in sustaining the relationship?
3. Have you ever loved someone to whom you didn't feel committed (didn't envision a definite future)? Compare your feelings in that relationship with your feelings in a relationship to which you were committed. What are the differences?
4. Can you remember a relationship in which you moved into commitment? How would you describe the transition from not feeling committed to feeling committed? How did the change affect interaction, security, and other facets of the relationship?
5. In the United States, if commitment occurs, it tends to follow love. Do you think the reverse order is possible—that love can follow commitment? Consider arranged marriages that still take place in some societies. Can two people who don't know each other when they marry grow to love each other?
6. How important is love for marriage or enduring commitments? Can relationships be healthy without love? Do you know of any enduring relationships in which commitment exists but love does not seem present? If so, how would you describe the relationships and the partners' reasons for staying in them?
7. Think about a current or past relationship to which you are or were committed (not just in love). What did you invest? What did your partner invest? What would you (or did you) lose if the relationship ended?

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