8 Steps to Achieving Love and Commitment

Written for "Daughters of Divorce" by Terry Gaspard MSW, LICSW

In order to have successful and happy relationships, it's essential for you to learn from your parents' failed relationships and your own, and to create new ones that are healthy and lasting. With courage and determination, you can restore your faith in love.

The following guidelines will help you attain the level of love and commitment you desire:

• **Identify specific ways you might be avoiding commitment**. You might be fearful of relationship failure so you pick the wrong partners, stay with self-feating relationships too long; or fall for partners who are unavailable. **Action Step**: Evaluate your choice of partners in romantic relationships – past and present. Examine how much you invest or pull back when partners attempt to move to a deeper level of intimacy.

• **Evaluate your relationship patterns.** By confronting qualities that partners have in common, for instance, you will gain self-awareness. You might find you have a tendency to pick unavailable partners because deep down, you know it won't last. By choosing a flawed relationship, you may believe you won't get hurt. **Action Step**: Create a list of at least three romantic relationships (past and present) and qualities they may have shared. Also examine the impact the relationships had on your self-esteem and life choices.

• **Identify the qualities that are crucial to you in a romantic relationship**. Assess whether your previous or present partners possess these qualities. **Action Step**: Highlight three qualities that are a priority for you. Set a goal to become more deeply invested in a relationship (with a current or new partner) when they possess these qualities.

• **Avoid making a commitment prior to the age of twenty-six**. Your chances of finding lasting love are enhanced by waiting until you know yourself and have given yourself the benefit of truly healing from your parents' divorce and establishing your own identity. **Action Step**: Go slowly and allow your relationship to develop over time. Pay attention to red flags that might signal incompatibility or serious communication problems in the future – keep your eyes wide open!

• **Attempt to pick a partner with a similar background and interests**. Having different backgrounds (religious, political, economic) increases your risk for divorce. Couples who have similar backgrounds and interests tend to feel more satisfied with their relationships. **Action Step**: Increase your awareness of how differences in your background or interests might cause tension. Attempt to increase your tolerance towards differences if you are already married. If you are dating or engaged, decide whether these differences are deal breakers.

• **If you decide to cohabitate with a partner before marriage, discuss why you want to live together and what it will mean.** Although many people believe that cohabitating may prevent divorce, most research suggests that it can put them more at risk. This is called the cohabitation effect and it has baffled the experts. For the most part, researchers believe it may have something to do with the fact that many couples slide into living together and don't always have the same objectives. **Action Step**: Avoid living with someone unless you feel confident that you want the same things out of the relationship.

• **Stick with a committed relationship for at least ten years (unless it is abusive).** Most divorces occur in the first ten years of marriage. All relationships go through rough patches and working through communication breakdowns will pay off in the long run. **Action Step**: Discuss this goal with your partner and make an agreement to seek counseling or coaching if either one of you is considering separation or divorce. This is especially important if your partner is also an

adult child of divorce. Research shows that when ACOD's marry each other, they greatly increase their risk of divorce.

• **Take on the attitude that your marriage or committed relationship is worth saving**. Keep in mind that daughters of divorce are more likely to consider divorce as an option, and this makes you more prone to divorce. **Action Step**: Adopt a problem-solving attitude when conflicts arise and model your communication after couples you admire. Get into a habit of reading books and visiting websites by experts that focus on preventing divorce. Keep in mind that you can't have closeness without vulnerability. Honestly address your feelings and don't be afraid to reveal issues such as trust that impact you on a daily basis and can put your relationship in jeopardy. Try not to blow small issues out of proportion. In a committed relationship, truth always needs to be a priority, because it helps to foster healthy communication.

As a daughter of divorce, you can learn much about love from making a commitment to love consciously and fully – to not be restrained by the legacy of your parents' divorce. This means committing yourself to being intimate with others and revealing your authentic self. Once you decide to take this path, and take responsibility for the quality of your relationships, the future is yours to create. Personal growth means shaping and reshaping your thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs. Real learning occurs when you grow through your disappointments and losses. It is very likely that as an adult daughter of divorce, things haven't worked out as you hoped they would. But it is never too late to restore your faith in yourself and in love. Faith means having a hopeful attitude toward life – one that will help you get out of those stuck places and move into profound healing. Only then can you build relationships based on love, trust, and intimacy.

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