



# 10 REASONS TO STAY MARRIED...EVEN AFTER AN AFFAIR



**Marriage**Helper



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## INTRODUCTION

He began to weep. Not simply moist eyes or mild tears; he openly sobbed. When I asked what I said that had hurt him so badly, he replied, “I just realized I’m not a fool.”

“What do you mean?”

“All my family and every one of my friends scolded me for staying with her and trying to fix the marriage. They tell me I’m a fool. She cheated. With my best friend, she cheated. Lied, sneaked around, treated me like dirt.

“I wondered if I am a fool to come to this marriage intensive, but in the last few minutes I realized I’m not a fool.”

Again, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“As you explained various reasons to be committed to a relationship, I realized that I have some very important reasons to make this work. Strong reasons. I’m not a fool.”

That was over a decade ago. They made it work and are happily married today.

So what was it that made him realize he was not a fool to try to save his marriage?



## THE REAL DEFINITION OF COMMITMENT

The commitment section of our [marriage program](#) that the young man reacted to is based on research by Michael P. Johnson, PhD, from Penn State. Years ago, I read one of his scholarly articles and contacted him to ask his permission to use it as I worked with marriages. Since then, I read everything I can find that he writes on commitment. Though several approaches to commitment exist in the social science world, I like Mike's best.

Johnson describes commitment as doing whatever it takes to keep a relationship alive.

He believes that commitment falls into three major categories; personal, moral, and structural. He explains those three mean "I want to," or "I ought to," or "I have to" stay in this relationship. Under those, he lists ten dimensions, each of which may keep a person committed to a relationship.

I like to think of each of the ten as a lifesaving rope. My friend Jeff King owns a company that changes light bulbs on towers. When he is personally on a tower and bad weather pops up, he says that he ties himself off with every harness available to keep from being blown to his death. These commitment ropes do the same for a relationship. Sometimes storms come that may separate us from the relationship we have. When that happens, every rope is a lifeline that may keep the relationship alive.

The young man mentioned at the beginning of this article realized he had several strong ropes that could and should keep his marriage alive, and that each had tremendous value in his life.

Think about which are important to you.



## PERSONAL COMMITMENT— “I Want to Be in This Relationship”

Personal commitment is when one wants to continue a relationship. That desire may come from one or more of these areas:

1. The person feels a positive attitude toward the relationship; he enjoys or feels good about the relationship.
2. The person feels a positive attitude about the partner; she feels love, affection, or affinity with the partner.
3. The person feels a relational identity with the partner. Relational identity is the extent to which one's involvement in a relationship is incorporated into one's self-concept. It is when a person thinks more of “we” than “I”, and feels a part of a team or closely bonded with the other.



## MORAL COMMITMENT—“I Ought to Stay in This Relationship”

Moral commitment involves a sense of self-constraint. It is doing what one feels is right, which may or may not be what one wants to do at the moment. It is the internal value system of the person, not an external value system that may be placed on him by the society in which he operates.

Moral commitment is the feeling that one ought to continue a relationship. This sense of obligation may come from one or more of these areas:

4. The person believes in the value of consistency. That is the inherent human desire to continue a task or effort until it is completed. For example, if one makes a vow to be married until “death do you part,” that person may have a strong sense of personal obligation to fulfill that vow.
5. The person values the stability of the particular type of relationship she has. The more important the relationship is viewed by a person, the stronger she feels she ought to stay in it. Therefore, a person who values marriage will find it much more difficult to end a marriage than other relationships.
6. The person feels a partner-specific obligation. Partner-specific obligation involves a sense of obligation to the particular person with whom one is involved in a relationship. The moral constraint is a sense of personal contractual obligation. If a husband, for example, worries that his wife and children may not do well financially or emotionally if he leaves them, that sense of obligation will lead him to stay even if he wishes to leave the relationship.



## STRUCTURAL COMMITMENT—“I Have to Stay in This Relationship”

Structural commitment is the feeling that one must continue a relationship, but not because of her own internal values. The factors are external and most often considered constraining. This type commitment may come from one or more of these areas:

7. The person has made irretrievable investments into the relationship. Those are those things that a person has given to the relationship that will be lost if the relationship were to end—things like time, energy, and other resources. If the investment is considerable enough and the person feels there may be a chance of receiving the return he wanted from the relationship, the person feels he has to stay until the investment is recovered. For example, if he dropped out of college to work so that his wife could finish medical school and become a world-famous surgeon, he may feel he has to stay married to her to get his share of the monetary and social status he earned by supporting her.
8. The person is concerned about the social reaction of ending the relationship. Social reaction is a consideration of the feelings that a person's social group will likely have about the morality of the dissolution of the relationship. If she feels her family, church, or friends will diminish their relationship with her if she divorces, she may choose to stay married.
9. The person faces difficulty in ending the relationship. Definitive endings of committed relationships usually require some form of action. The more complex and serious the relationship, the more complex and costly the effort to end it. If he lacks the emotional strength, the financial resources, or a viable course of action, he likely will not go through the pain of ending the relationship.
10. The person fears there may not be a viable alternative. Availability of acceptable alternatives means the availability of “replacements” for the current relationship. That is more than the consideration of a new person to replace the old. It also includes such considerations as the likely economic situation that will exist at the end of the current relationship, the likely impact on the structure of the person's social life, and so on.



Though one might think that the structural commitments (the “have to” dimensions) are not good reasons to stay in a relationship, they very much are. They may hold a couple together long enough to repair the relationship and make it good again.

If the personal commitment “I want to” is strong enough, the “ought to” and “have to” areas are relatively unimportant. However, during those times when the “I want to” is lacking, these other areas are crucial to a maintenance of the relationship.

The young man mentioned at the beginning found that there were several dimensions in both the “ought to” and “have to” areas that had great value to him. He saw, for example, that because of his “partner-specific” obligation to his children, it would be worth saving the marriage so that his children would live with both Mom and Dad.

If you are contemplating ending a committed relationship such as a marriage, it could be very important for your future to consider all the reasons to make this relationship work. From Michael Johnson’s work, I developed a survey that you may use to investigate what areas are important to you in either the “want to,” “ought to,” or “have to.” Before walking away, be willing honestly to evaluate all those.





## Commitment Assessment

**Rate each of the following statements using the following scale.**

1 = definitely disagree

2 = mostly disagree

3 = somewhat disagree

4 = mixed

5 = somewhat agree

6 = mostly agree

7 = definitely agree

**Write your ratings in the corresponding blanks**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Being married to my spouse has been good for me.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Salvaging my marriage is the right thing to do.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ If we end this marriage, people in a group that I am part of and care about (examples: church, synagogue, temple, mosque, organization, business, social group, etc.) will be hurt, disappointed, and possibly reject me as an important part of their group.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ I still think of my spouse and me as "us."
5. \_\_\_\_\_ (*put NA if you do not believe in God or a higher power*) God wants us to repair our marriage and stay married.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ I do not have a plan for my future after divorce.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ I like my spouse as a person. (character, personality, and the like)
8. \_\_\_\_\_ If we divorce, my spouse probably could not earn enough money to support him- herself and any people s/he would be responsible for. (ex: children, parents)



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9. \_\_\_\_\_ I dread going through the financial, emotional, and other stresses of ending my marriage.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ My spouse and I really understand each other.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ If this marriage ends, I will feel that I have failed as a spouse and/or parent.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ If we divorce, I will lose much of what I have worked for and invested myself in during the years of our marriage.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ I feel that my spouse and I have been a team and could be again.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ (*put NA if you do not have children*) RATE ONE (1) of the following two statements: Choose the one that you think is most likely to reflect where your children will live if you divorce.
  - If we divorce my spouse probably will not be able to handle our children on his/her own (physical needs, school help, transportation, emotional support, etc.)
  - If I get the children, my spouse likely will not be able emotionally to handle living apart from our children.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ If we divorce, I'm not sure that I can earn enough money to support myself and any other people I am responsible for. (children, alimony, parents, new spouse, etc.)
16. \_\_\_\_\_ I want to save this marriage.
17. \_\_\_\_\_ It bothers me that if we divorce it likely will cause emotional or other harm to people I care about. (children, parents, spouse, the other's person's spouse or family, etc.)
18. \_\_\_\_\_ I fear that if we end this marriage I may have difficulty finding another spouse that would fulfill my needs and desires.
19. \_\_\_\_\_ I believe that my spouse loves me in spite of all that has happened.
20. \_\_\_\_\_ If we divorce, my spouse's relatives likely cannot or will not provide enough emotional, physical, or financial help to him/her.



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21. \_\_\_\_\_ (*put NA if you do not have children*) RATE ONE (1) of the following two statements: Choose the one that you think is most likely to reflect where your children will live if you divorce.
- If we divorce, I'm not sure that I will be able to handle our children on my own (physical needs, school help, transportation, emotional support, etc.)
  - If my spouse gets the children, I'm not sure that I can cope well living apart from our children.
22. \_\_\_\_\_ I will miss my spouse if this marriage ends.
23. \_\_\_\_\_ If we divorce, my spouse probably will not be able to handle living apart from me. (emotionally, financially, physically, mentally)
24. \_\_\_\_\_ If we divorce, my relatives probably cannot or will not give me as much help or support that I will need emotionally, physically, or financially.
25. \_\_\_\_\_ Deep down, I do love my spouse.
26. \_\_\_\_\_ (*put NA if you do not have children*) Our children want us to fix our marriage and stay together.
27. \_\_\_\_\_ If we end our marriage, our mutual friends that are important to me likely will be uncomfortable around me or avoid me.
28. \_\_\_\_\_ I like being married.
29. \_\_\_\_\_ It will violate my own beliefs and values if I divorce.
30. \_\_\_\_\_ I fear that if we end this marriage my life will be more difficult than it is now.

Circle every statement that you rated a 6 or 7.

These are the areas of commitment you already have in your marriage.

Remember that each of the ten areas of commitment are good and give you time to build your weaker areas of commitment.