



Making Relationships a Priority

Introduction

Healthy relationships require deliberate actions (i.e., choices) by both people to promote the well-being of the relationship. Healthy relationships start when two people make an intentional decision to be together. By proactively and intentionally making decisions about a relationship, individuals can improve it and protect themselves from the negative consequences that can occur from being passive and unintentional. For example, individuals can find ways to strengthen and grow the relationship and make a conscious effort to take those actions. The importance of “choosing” and being intentional within a relationship involves making a sustained commitment to put effort into a relationship, making the relationship a priority, and envisioning a healthy relationship.



Make a Sustained Commitment to Effort in a Relationship

Commitment is an essential ingredient for developing and maintaining healthy relationships. Higher levels of commitment are associated with many positive relationship outcomes, including greater trust between partners, positive responses to a partner’s negative behaviors, and relationship satisfaction and quality. It involves a determination to put effort into making intentional choices to grow the relationship. Commitment to effort in a relationship can be demonstrated in a variety of ways:

- **Entering a Relationship.** Before a relationship even starts, individuals must carefully consider a relationship’s potential when making the decision to begin one. The decision should be based upon what creates a strong foundation for healthy relationships, such as shared values and interests, similar or compatible goals for the future, and an ability to manage conflict appropriately.
- **Decide, Don’t Slide.** Having a vision for a healthy relationship includes actively deciding where the relationship is going, what steps are next in the relationship, and setting goals for the future together. When an individual does not make intentional decisions, the relationship will “slide” with no direction or progress. Especially when there are children involved, it is

What “Choose” Looks Like

- Being intentional: Deciding, not sliding
- Committing effort to the relationship
- Focusing on each other’s strengths
- Avoiding hurtful thoughts and behaviors
- Finding ways to strengthen and grow the relationship
- Envisioning a healthy relationship and future together

important for single parents to make smart and explicit choices about the relationships that they begin. Deciding to be in a healthy relationship rather than sliding into a bad one haphazardly can make a huge difference in the life of a child.

- **Commitment to the Relationship.** Dedication is an important indicator of commitment that shows loyalty and faithfulness to one's partner. Individuals who show dedication experience greater relationship satisfaction. Forgiveness and choosing to respond positively toward one's partner also shows commitment, and can help break negative cycles of interaction.
- **Intentionally Grow the Relationship.** Taking an active role in directing the relationship requires time and energy. It is important for both partners to make a conscious effort to take time each day to demonstrate commitment toward the relationship and each other. Intentionality also includes seeking out resources (e.g., educational workshops, books, counseling) to improve the relationship. Many of these resources can provide ideas for how partners can incorporate strategies into their daily lives that allow each other to demonstrate commitment.



Decide to Make the Relationship a Priority

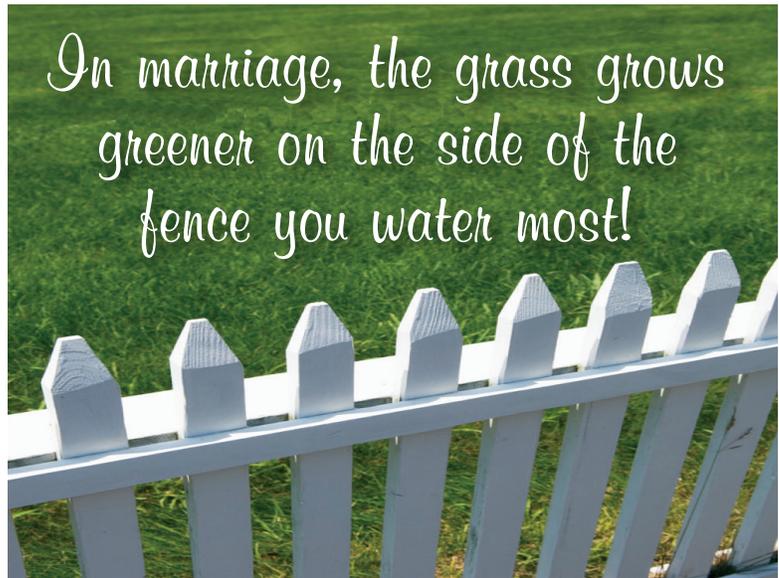
Healthy relationships require adequate amounts of time and energy to be devoted to them. Prioritizing a relationship requires intentionality and following through with one's stated intentions. Relationship prioritizing can be reflected in a few ways:

- **Make Time for the Relationship.** Even small moments make a difference. When individuals in a relationship believe that enough time is being spent together and that they are valued and appreciated, they are better able to manage disagreements and feel satisfied with their relationship. The more time partners spend together, the more they enjoy that time and value the relationship.

Integrating "Choose" into Child Welfare Services

- Consider asking clients to identify barriers or obstacles that prevent them from establishing or maintaining healthy relationships. How can they make a conscious effort to overcome those obstacles?
- When clients are in a committed relationship, ask them to generate ideas for how to make the relationship a priority. Have them identify actions that can be done individually or together as a couple to prioritize the relationship.
- Ask clients how they show dedication and commitment to their partners. If they can't think of any specific examples, have them think about a couple they admire and describe how they show commitment to one another.
- Ask individuals to share their dreams for themselves and their relationships. Have them identify concrete steps they can take to reach those goals and make plans to start taking those steps.

- **Find a Balance Between Individual Interests and the Relationship.** In every relationship, it is sometimes necessary for each individual to make sacrifices in order to make the relationship a priority. Partners should understand that sacrifice is good for the relationship when it is voluntary and when it is viewed positively by both partners.¹ Setting limits and “making the choice to give up other choices”² promotes closeness and interdependence. Separate activities and interests are healthy, too, but only if they are balanced with couple time.



- **Avoid Harmful Thoughts and Behaviors.** Deciding to make one’s relationship a priority also involves making the decision not to partake in harmful thoughts or behaviors. Harmful behaviors include, but are not limited to, doing drugs, alcohol abuse, gambling, and other activities that could cause emotional, physical, or financial harm. Setting limits on negative communication patterns (e.g., criticism, defensiveness, withdrawal) and inappropriate relationships with others also demonstrates commitment to the relationship.

Why “Choose” Matters to Child Welfare Services

- Promoting child safety and reunification with primary caregivers is often facilitated by empowering parents to assume responsibility and control over their actions. As they *choose* to avoid actions that put their child at harm and *choose* to engage in behaviors that positively promote their child’s well-being, it is important that they also consider how their relationship choices may also impact their own and their children’s lives.
- Parents serve as role models for children’s interpersonal relationships. Children whose parents engage in frequent conflict and have poor coping techniques may never have the chance to see what healthy relationships look like. If children are unable to envision a healthy relationship, they may have greater difficulty navigating relationships in the future.
- When parents are in unhealthy relationships, they can make a conscious choice to end the relationship or make change within it. When violence is present, the choice may require seeking help and counsel from a trusted person or professional. It is vital for children to understand that they have the power to be intentional with their actions so they can proactively pave the way for happiness and health. When parents are intentional in their actions, they can make decisions that ultimately benefit their children and teach children how to make good choices themselves.

1 Unbalanced, forceful, or coercive sacrifice that leads to or perpetuates emotional, physical, or psychological harm should not be tolerated and is not a component of healthy relationships.

2 Quote attributed to marital researcher Scott Stanley (The Heart of Commitment, 2005).

Envision a Healthy Relationship

Couples who remain together for a long time have a tendency to talk regularly about their hopes, dreams, and future together. Developing a shared vision for the future leads to a healthier relationship, and fosters security and trust within the relationship.



- **Focus on Strengths.** All individuals have strengths as well as areas for improvement. Partners can make a conscious effort to choose whether they will focus on the strengths or weaknesses of each other and the relationship. When partners have a tendency to focus on the good and maintain positive perceptions of one another and the relationship, they are more likely to be happy and satisfied with the relationship. Individuals in committed relationships who choose to express positive sentiments, like acceptance or validation, toward their partners end up forming more positive images of their partners because they bring out the best in each other.
- **Assure a Healthy Future Together.** Part of being committed is making one another feel safe in the relationship. This includes providing assurances about each other's desire to remain together. Assurances are statements or behaviors that imply that the relationship has a future, such as signing both names to a lease agreement or talking about future plans. Consistently making statements and doing things to assure that the relationship has a future helps both people to envision what that future might look like.

Summary

The choices that individuals make regarding relationships set the path for the relationship. When individuals fail to be intentional and act on impulsive or passive choices ("slide"), they can easily be carried along by those unintentional choices and end up in an undesirable, unhealthy relationship. However, couples can choose to deliberately think, feel, and act in ways that encourage long-lasting, healthy relationships. By applying actions inherent to "Choose," individuals: (1) evaluate and demonstrate their level of commitment to a relationship, (2) avoid passively sliding through relationship transitions, (3) devote attention to working on and protecting the relationship, and (4) make a concentrated effort to look for ways to strengthen a relationship. All couples experience challenges, but what makes the difference are the choices each partner in the relationship makes when faced with difficulties. Choosing in a relationship provides the boundaries and energy for intimacy and fosters a connection among couples that enables them to grow.

Adapted from: Higginbotham, B., Santiago, A., & Barton, A. W. (2013). Choose: Making Intentional Relationship Choices. P. In T.G. Futris & F. Adler-Baeder (Eds), *The National Extension Relationship and Marriage Education Model: Core Teaching Concepts for Relationship and Marriage Enrichment Programming*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Available at <http://www.nermen.org/NERMEM.php>



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