



Choose

Making Intentional Relationship Choices

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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

Introduction

The central dimension of the NERMEM is *Choose*. *Choose* refers to deliberate and conscious decisions that help to create and strengthen healthy relationships. A strong, healthy, long-lasting relationship does not just happen by chance. Healthy relationships are determined by the initial choices a person makes when entering into a new relationship as well as the ongoing choices made to be committed, intentional, proactive, and strengths-focused in sustaining a relationship. *Choose* conveys the importance of intentionality in establishing and nourishing healthy relationships and is inherent, expected, and necessary in all of the other dimensions that will be discussed in this guide. According to Doherty (2001), an intentional relationship is “one where the partners are conscious, deliberate, and planful about maintaining and building their commitment and connection over the years” (p. 18). Intentionally choosing to think, feel, and behave in ways that strengthen relationships is essential to healthy and stable unions.

Choose applies to singles who make decisions regarding whether or not to create relationships, as well as couples who are trying to maintain and strengthen their relationships. For singles, *choose* applies not only to choosing who to be with, but also choosing to protect one's self and family. It involves choosing when to take the relationship to deeper levels or the next milestone, such as inviting new partners to meet children and relatives. For those in committed relationships, *choose* involves deciding to stay in the relationship. It involves choosing to take action and making decisions that allow for relationship enhancement.

In many ways, beginning a relationship is like launching a raft into a river. The river does not know, or care, whether the couple wants to go upstream, downstream, or stay close to the dock. Natural currents will flow downstream. It does not matter how much couples care about each other, no matter how full of hope, promise, and good intentions they may be; if they stay on the raft without a good deal of paddling – infrequent or sporadic paddling is not enough – they will end up somewhere down river (Doherty, 2001).

In human relations, “paddling” is analogous to the attention and energy



that couples devote to their relationships. Research on successful relationships points to specific choices and actions that can help keep couples from unintentionally floating downstream (Oswald, 2002; Vangelisti, 2000). These choices are the foundation of safe, stable, and satisfying unions and each requires conscientious and intentional effort. They include: (1) making a sustained commitment to put effort into a relationship, (2) deciding to make the relationship a priority, and (3) envisioning a healthy relationship.

Make a Sustained Commitment to Effort in a Relationship

Increased satisfaction with a relationship often comes with increased personal commitment to that relationship (Givertz & Segrin, 2005; Goddard, 2007). There is research that suggests that the more committed couples are to their relationships, the more satisfied they are (Kamp Dush & Amato, 2005; Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2011; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). There is also research that suggests that, the more satisfied couples are with their relationships, the more committed they are to the relationship (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). Regardless of which comes first, satisfaction or commitment, it is safe to say that commitment appears to be a key characteristic of healthy relationships (Drigotas, Rusbolt & Verette, 1999).

Entering a Relationship

Before a commitment can be made, the individual must first decide if he or she wants to enter the relationship at all. Carefully thinking about the relationship's potential and making a decision of whether or not to start it is important. The decision should be based upon what creates a strong foundation for healthy relationships: shared values and interests, effective conflict management, and commitment. If each partner feels that they share the same morals and values, are interested in similar things, have similar or compatible goals for the future, and can work to manage conflict appropriately, they may decide that they are able to make a commitment to each other.

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 (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Think back to the illustration of the raft going down the river with no direction or goals. Planning a course and actively pursuing that course can help avoid catastrophe. Simply putting the raft in the river with no direction or decision of where to go is similar to "sliding" through the relationship. For example, a young mother may allow someone she met to stay over one night, then ask him to watch her child for an afternoon. Then it progresses into him coming over more often and eventually moving in without a discussion or an active decision by either person to be in a committed relationship. Not only is the relationship at risk with a scenario like this, but the child

Why Choose Matters to Parenting and Child Well-Being

- Promoting child safety and health 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.





is at a higher risk (Adler-Baeder, Shirer, & Bradford, 2007; Christensen, Antle, & Johnson, 2008). Especially when there are children involved, it is important for single parents to make smart and explicit choices about the relationships that they begin and how the relationship develops over time. 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

Commitment can manifest itself in various ways. For example, one indicator of commitment is *dedication*, which is seen within statements like: “My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life” and “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter” (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Overall, dedication infers loyalty to one’s partner; dedicated couples exhibit perseverance to ensure that they are doing what it takes to remain faithful toward one another. Individuals who show dedication within their relationships are also more likely to experience greater relationship satisfaction and less intense problems (Goddard, 2007; Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006; Wilcox & Nock, 2006).

When couples decide to marry, commitment to a lifelong marriage is important for a number of reasons. Research indicates that commitment is related to high marital quality, fewer relationship problems, and positive adjustment and expression. Individual commitment and shared commitment both contribute to marital quality (Drigotas, Rusbolt & Verette, 1999). Couples who share a strong sense of commitment are more likely to report

happiness in their marriages. For example, women who believe marriage is a lifelong commitment are happier with the affection and understanding they receive from their husbands than women who do not (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Shared commitment appears to foster mutual trust and higher levels of emotional investment on the part of husbands, which, in turn, promotes marital happiness among wives (Wilcox & Nock, 2006).

Commitment to the relationship can also be demonstrated through the act of forgiveness, a choice that partners can make in reaction to repair attempts (see *Manage*). Research shows that forgiveness contributes to successful relationships (Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, & Litzinger, 2009). For example, forgiveness can make reconciliations more possible (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Forgiving another person is not something a person earns, but is something freely granted by the individual who has been offended. Forgiveness can be a particularly powerful dynamic as it presents a transformation of motivation which minimizes the negative cycles of interaction (Braithwaite, Selby, & Fincham, 2011). For instance, when one partner says a demeaning comment to the other person, the offended person can either respond in a similar fashion with a demeaning comment of their own or, through forgiveness, acknowledge the wrongfulness of the comment by *choosing* to respond in a positive way toward their partner that is not retaliatory, withdrawing, or condemning.

Intentionally Grow the Relationship

Putting energy into the relationship can create a healthier relationship and create higher levels of satisfaction between partners (Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2011). A few examples of intentionality include planning dates, giving gifts, making plans for the future together, showing love and affection without being asked, dividing household tasks and chores, and meeting each other’s needs (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). Committing time and energy to working on a relationship does not always come naturally. Therefore, 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 (Goddard, 2007).

Intentionality also includes seeking out resources to improve the relationship. For example, attending a marriage retreat or a relationship seminar, participating in marriage and relationship education, reading books about relationships, reading informational pamphlets, or seeking out counseling if needed, are resources that help to improve and strengthen relationships (Higginbotham, Miller, & Niehuis, 2009). Many of these resources can provide ideas for how partners can incorporate strategies into their daily lives that allow each other to demonstrate commitment. Furthermore, suggesting the use of one of these resources, in and of itself, also shows commitment to the relationship.

Cultural Considerations

- Individuals have varying degrees of choice in choosing a partner or spouse, depending upon their culture. Although many individuals have a choice in choosing a partner or spouse, some couple relationships are arranged or highly influenced by extended family members (Ingoldsby, 1995; Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012). For example, Asian and Indian parents are often involved in choosing a spouse for their adult children.
- Low-resource couples often have barriers to accessing relationship and marriage education. Low-resource couples often struggle with issues of survival and are preoccupied with making sure they have food, shelter, and clothing (Skogrand & Shirer, 2007). As a result, they may not feel they have time in their lives for relationship and marriage education. In addition, accessing some relationship and marriage education may require financial resources such as fees for classes, gas, child care, and time to participate. Many low-resource couples do not have access to the Internet to learn about relationship and marriage education. These barriers need to be addressed in providing education to low-resource audiences.
- In some cultures the family is the priority rather than the couple relationship. Not all cultures view the couple relationship as the priority and the base for subsequent family relationships. For example, Latino couples view the family as more important than the marriage relationship (Faliiov, 1998; Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2008). Latino couples typically do not leave their children so they can spend time as a couple, but rather do most things as a family.

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Decide to Make the Relationship a Priority

Make Time for the Relationship

Couples who prioritize their relationships spend quality time together and make a point to do so on a regular basis. Simply spending time together is a key predictor of marital satisfaction. When individuals in a relationship believe that enough time is being spent together and that they are valued and appreciated, they report higher marital satisfaction, particularly after becoming parents for the first time (Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Russell-Chapin, Chapin & Sattler, 2001). This might mean that each individual must choose to spend time with their partner over other activities or events outside of the relationship. Spending time together on a daily basis is ideal. (see *Share*). Researchers have observed that wives rate marriages more positively if the couple spends time together on a daily basis; for husbands, the total amount of time spent together appears to more strongly influence their perceptions of marital quality (Szinovacz, 1996; Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002). Time spent together can be as simple as having coffee together every morning or spending 10 minutes talking about each other's day before going to bed. Establishing consistent 'date nights' can also be very beneficial by ensuring spouses spend regular time alone with each other. Spouses with greater amounts of such "couple time" report higher marital happiness, lower divorce proneness, and satisfaction with couple communication (Wilcox & Dew, 2012). For both husbands and wives, there is a clear relationship between time spent engaging with one another and marital happiness – the more time partners spend together, the more they enjoy that time and value the relationship (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Zuo, 1992).

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. Sacrifice has been defined as "foregoing one's own immediate self-interest to promote the well-being of the partner or relationship" (Etchevery & Le, 2005, p. 104). A willingness to sacrifice demonstrates commitment and appreciation. Relationships can be strengthened when partners choose to defer their own preferences for the good of the relationship. This can be as simple as staying home on a Saturday morning to work around the house instead of going out with friends. It may be as difficult as turning down a promotion that would require extended trips away from home. People come to trust their partners when they see them making pro-relationship choices and not worrying as much about their own self-interests (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). When an individual makes a choice not to sacrifice for the good of the relationship, his/her partner may be left feeling unappreciated, which can lead to conflict. Not surprisingly, research has indicated that a willingness to sacrifice and the perception of sacrifice are associated with strong

commitment and high relationship satisfaction (Van Lange et al., 1997; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007) because it promotes a sense of closeness and relational interdependence (Etcheverry & Le, 2005). Separate activities and interests are healthy, too, but only if they are balanced with couple time.

Partners should understand that sacrifice is good for the relationship when it is voluntary and when it is viewed positively by both partners (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). Sacrifice does NOT imply that individuals should accept domestic violence or allow themselves to be controlled emotionally, psychologically, socially, financially, or physically by their partners. A relationship is unhealthy when the sacrifice is unbalanced, sacrifice is demanded, or where guilt-inducing statements like "If you really loved me you would..." are used in order to get one's way.

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 behavior can put an individual at risk and can also harm that person's partner and family (Leonard, 2002). Harmful behaviors include, but are not limited to, doing drugs, alcohol abuse, gambling, and other activities that could cause emotional, physical, or financial harm. As is described further in *Care for Self*, making sure that individuals are healthy and happy first enables them to be well enough to turn their attention to others. Making a relationship a priority starts with making individual health and well-being a priority.

Similar to the way drug and alcohol abuse can cause problems for individuals and their relationships, harmful thoughts and communication patterns can also wreak havoc in relationships. Research shows that healthy communication patterns, like sharing positive affect and showing physical affection, can strengthen a relationship (Gottman, Gottman, & Declaire, 2006; Johnson et al., 2005); see *Care* for more information. Unhealthy communication patterns, such as being overly critical, defensive, or withdrawing from one's partner altogether can be extremely harmful to a relationship (Gottman, Gottman, & Declaire, 2006; Hanzal & Segrin, 2009). Couples should consider how they want to interact with one another and make the choice to establish positive interaction patterns right from the start. Having a concrete idea in mind for the



"right" way to interact can help couples follow through and engage in interaction patterns that promote well-being in the relationship (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). Decades of research focused on how couples interact with one another has shown that couples who use more negative interaction patterns (e.g., anger, dominance, contempt, stonewalling) are more prone to unhappiness and divorce (Gottman, 1994; Graber, Laurenceau, Miga, Chango, & Coan, 2011). Creating healthy guidelines for communication and interactions can be beneficial for both partners and may prevent problems and harm (Vangelisti, 2000).

Setting limits on other harmful behavior is equally important. In light of the prevalence and painful ramifications of infidelity (Green & Sabini, 2006; Miller & Maner, 2008), individuals should be careful about how close, physically and emotionally, they allow themselves to become with friends and co-workers, as well as online contacts (Cravens, Leckie & Whiting, 2013; Wysocki & Childers, 2011). Choosing one's partner over others, even other family members, and taking a partner's side when conflict outside of the relationship occurs can also strengthen the marital relationship (Chaney, 2010; Christensen & Miller, 2006). This demonstrates their level of commitment to the relationship. Romantic partners demonstrate commitment by choosing to be content with the relationship rather than looking for "greener pastures." When individuals commit themselves to and feel invested in their relationships, they become less attentive to potential alternatives. On the other hand, people who report going out with friends without telling their partners, those who are willing to have an affair, and those who flirt with people without mentioning their partners do, in fact, spend more

time considering alternatives (Hackathorn, Mattingly, Clark, & Mattingly, 2011). Consideration of alternatives makes it difficult to truly commit to a relationship. Consequently, attention to alternatives decreases current relationship satisfaction and adjustment (Miller, 1997). Individuals have the ability to choose to ignore relationship alternatives, although this may happen naturally as a byproduct when people simply choose to focus on strengthening their current relationship. In other words, “even if the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, happy gardeners will be less likely to notice” (Miller, 1997, p. 758).

Internet Disconnection

With an increase of technology in the home, boundaries between work and family are easily blurred. The amount of technology and other media use, especially when one’s partner is present, plays a role in marital satisfaction (Chesley, 2005). Therefore, media usage at home should be limited, especially during quality time with one’s partner. One example is limiting Internet usage. This is important for several reasons. It can interfere with quality couple and family interactions, and it can introduce a possible threat to relationship quality and fidelity. It has been estimated that up to one-third of Internet users utilize the web for sexual purposes (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000). Relationship problems, ranging from mild to severe, are often the result of such use (Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O’Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). For example, in one study of individuals who had attended therapy as a result of a spouse’s cybersex behavior, half of cybersex users and one-third of partners had lost interest in sex with each other (Schneider, 2000). In another study, compulsive Internet users experienced lower commitment and higher conflict in their marital relationships (Kerkhof, Finkenauer, & Muusses, 2011). Another example is the use of cell phones when spending time with each other. In today’s technology-dependent society, it can be extremely easy to keep phones within reach, spend time online, text, or even take calls when trying to spend time with a partner. Making the decision to be present during couple time and taking that time to focus only on the relationship demonstrates a commitment to spending quality time together.



Envision a Healthy Relationship

Focus on Strengths

Everybody has both strengths and weaknesses. Even the most perfect of partners will have unique ways of doing things and quirks in their personalities. When the honeymoon is over and challenges and differences become more apparent, couples have a choice to make – partners can either begin to criticize one another for their weaknesses and differences, or they can focus on each other’s strengths. The research on happy marriages strongly supports the latter choice when trying to strengthen relationships. For example, in a study of new parents, the husband’s expression of fondness toward his wife predicted marital satisfaction (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). In contrast, as noted earlier, partners who criticize one another are more likely to be unhappy in their relationships and may end up divorced (Gottman, 1994; Lavner & Bradbury, 2012; Smith & Peterson, 2008). 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 (Gordon & Baucom, 2009; Gottman, Gottman, & Declaire, 2006; Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003).

Thinking about a partner’s strengths is believed to foster positive relationship development because of the emphasis and attention given to virtues and the minimization and inattention given to faults (see *Care*). Satisfied individuals choose to find redeeming features in their partners’ faults and construct “yes, but” interpretations that diminish specific weaknesses (e.g., “Yes, he may have been short with me, but I know that he’s in a hurry to get

to work for a big meeting today”) (Murray & Holmes, 1999). Happily married couples choose to engage in a self-perpetuating cycle of positive perceptions that encourage positive interactions, which, in turn, foster more positive perceptions (Fowers, Lyons, & Montel, 1996; Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001). Couples in more satisfying marriages also tend to describe their partners’ positive traits in more global terms, with negative traits being described in more specific, narrow terms (Neff & Karney, 2002). Not surprisingly, and regardless of self-esteem and depression levels, individuals are more satisfied when their partners view them positively and are less satisfied when their partners view them negatively (Sacco & Phares, 2001).

Assure a Healthy Future Together

Part of being committed is making one another feel safe in the relationship. This includes having a shared vision for a healthy relationship and reassuring each other of a future together. Husbands and wives who use assurances report positive relationship outcomes (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). Assurances are statements or behaviors that imply that the relationship has a future. Purchasing a washer and dryer together, or signing both names to a lease agreement are assurances, as is saying, “Next summer, I want to take you on a vacation to the beach.” In one study of over two thousand individuals in romantic relationships, one of the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction was the extent to which a partner’s usage of assurances exceeded one’s expectations (Dainton, 2000). 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.

Working with Youth

- For adolescents it is important to stress that they need time to learn about who they are *before* they make a serious commitment to another person. A committed relationship or marriage is a serious decision. Such a decision should not be made without first considering who you are, your life goals, and the type of partner you need to maximize your quality of life. Adolescents can benefit from learning about what a healthy, committed mature relationship looks like through role models and instructional lessons (Gardner & Boellaard, 2007; Kerpelman, Pittman, Adler-Baeder, Eryigit, & Paulk, 2009).
- During the teen years, adolescents should be encouraged to explore the kinds of choices that might fit best for them. This means dating a range of different people, developing their own interests, and spending time with a broad group of friends.
- Activities employed with youth should help them to focus on self-knowledge and the development of their personal strengths. Through self-knowledge youth become prepared to find others with whom they fit and can develop lasting, satisfying relationships.
- Developing a future vision during adolescence also is important for the later choices that will be made. Part of this vision is the development of “possible selves.” Possible selves are who one hopes or expects to be in the future, as well as who one fears becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As adolescents consider the possible selves they do and do not desire, they also consider their strategies for attaining desired possible selves and avoiding undesired possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Such strategies include the kinds of people they need to have in their lives to facilitate optimal outcomes.
- Emphasize with adolescents the idea of “deciding” rather than “sliding.” Developmentally, adolescents are more impulsive than adults and sometimes need assistance through education and mentoring to consider the consequences of their actions (Kerpelman, 2007). This guidance particularly is important when it comes to decisions within romantic relationships, where impulsive choices can lead to undesired and sometimes traumatic emotional and physical costs.
- Often youth think they are in love when they feel the excitement of attraction and infatuation. It is important to help them understand the difference between these initial strong feelings and the slower development of love and commitment in a relationship. Addressing the nature of commitment also is key when working with adolescents.
- Helping youth detect the warning signs of unhealthy or potentially abusive relationships also is a key part of *choose*. Often adolescents may disregard these signs since they may be more focused on acceptance, popularity, or fitting in rather than making good choices for themselves. Also, they may have witnessed unhealthy models in their homes and may not have a knowledge of what healthy, committed relationships look like.

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Implications for Practice



- Consider asking individuals 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?
- With couples in committed relationships, 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 how people 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 and goals 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.

Conclusion

The concept of *choosing* to think, feel, and act in an intentional way has profound implications for the quality and well-being of couple relationships. Couples can choose to deliberately think, feel, and act in ways that encourage long-lasting, healthy relationships, such as giving attention to the direction of the relationship, intentionally planning activities and taking time for each other, showing love and respect, and being conscientious of the other's strengths and positive aspects of relationships. Couples who engage in a variety of intentional ways to strengthen their relationships often have happier, more satisfying relationships (Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002). It has been said that "in marriage, the grass grows greener on the side of the fence *you water most*" (Marshal & Goddard, 2007). Like a nice lawn, marriages

need to be consistently and conscientiously nourished. That is not to say there will never be weeds or problems – all couples experience challenges; what makes the difference are the choices each partner in the relationship makes when faced with challenges. Consistent and conscientious choices to strengthen, prioritize, and protect a relationship will help couples weather the inevitable storms and droughts while promoting healthy, stable, and satisfying unions.



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