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Profound Ideas on the Nature of Commitment

Presenter:

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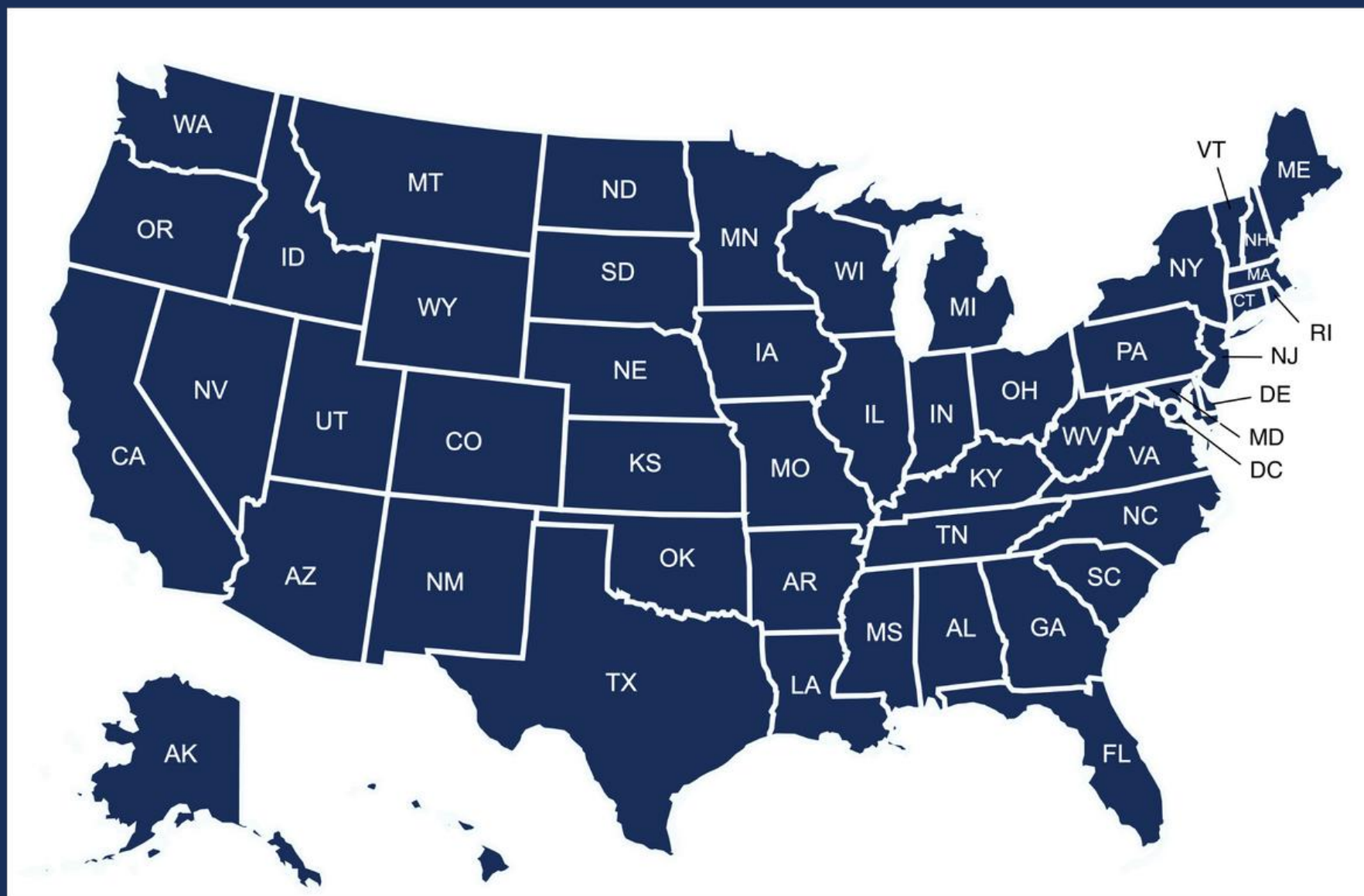
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Empowering youth and young adults with skills to build and sustain healthy interpersonal and romantic relationships.



We believe in research.



We believe in **stable, safe, and nurturing** families.



We believe that relationship education is for everyone.



Profound Ideas on the Nature of Commitment

Dibble Institute Webinar

January 14, 2026

Scott M. Stanley, Ph.D.

University of Denver & PREP, Inc.

Major Influences

- Michael P. Johnson
- Galena Rhoades
- Thibaut and Kelley
- Howard Markman
- Caryl Rusbult

Contrasts

- Dedication vs. Constraint
- Involvement vs. Commitment
- Satisfaction vs. Commitment
- Attachment vs. Commitment

Dedication vs. Constraint

- Constraint
 - Costs of leaving
 - Resources
 - Investment in stuff
 - Beliefs about divorce
 - Children
 - Social pressure
 - Alternative quality
- Dedication
 - Decision for a future
 - Couple identity
 - Priority of the relationship
 - Willingness to sacrifice
 - Reduced attention to alternatives

Involvement vs. Commitment

- Paper clip vs Staple (Christine Johnson OK State U)

Paper Clip



Removable & Reusable

Staple



Fixed & Secure

Contrasts

- Satisfaction vs. Commitment
 - Satisfaction is more of an outcome. Does not suggest behavior.
 - Commitment suggests behaviors one can choose to do.

Attachment vs. Commitment

- Romantic attachment:
e.g., Jane Austen
- Attachment styles/orientations:
 - psychological, based on biology & childhood:
 - emotional security; security of having needs met; emotional bond. “Am I safe?”

Bowlby Ainsworth Shaver Hazan

- Commitment:
 - persistence and stability, ideally based on conscious choice, pledge; decisional

*Commitment is what
secures the attachment.*

Jane Austen understood

Sense and Sensibility: Elinor does not see what her mother does in Willoughby and Marianne

Mrs. Dashwood: But you really do admit the justice of what I have said in his defence?--I am happy--and he is acquitted.

Elinor: Not entirely. It may be proper to conceal their engagement (if they ARE engaged) from Mrs. Smith. . . But this is no excuse for their concealing it from us.

Mrs. Dashwood: Concealing it from us! . . . This is strange indeed, when your eyes have been reproaching them every day for incautiousness.

Elinor: I want no proof of their affection...but of their engagement I do.

Mrs. Dashwood: . . . My Elinor, is it possible to doubt their engagement? How could such a thought occur to you?

Elinor: I confess, . . . that every circumstance except ONE is in favour of their engagement; but that ONE is the total silence of both on the subject, and with me it almost outweighs every other.

Give me a lever!



Thoughts, Questions?

Alternatives

- Alternative quality is the province of constraint

Thibaut & Kelley M. Johnson Rusbult

- Alternative monitoring is in the dynamics of dedication

Leik & Leik D. Johnson & Rusbult Stanley

We define interpersonal commitment as an unwillingness to consider any exchange partner other than that (those) of the current relationship...if commitment is present, monitoring of alternatives has ceased. (Leik & Leik, 1977, pp. 301-302)

Ritchie, Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman (2020)

Thoughts, Questions?

Choice, Freewill, & Constraint

Choice and Free Will

- Commitment is enhanced by the perception of free will—choice.
- Strongly formed commitments are founded in one choosing to be constrained.

Commitment is making the choice to give up other choices.

Stanley

Paradoxical Stuff

Choice as a factor in marital commitment involves the perception each partner has that he/she freely chose to enter the relationship and could choose to terminate it if he/she desired. Unless this perception of choice exists, one feels more obligated or entrapped than committed. Marital commitment is enhanced by the perception of free choice. (Clodfelter, 1977, p. 40)

Timing is Everything

Rhoades and Stanley & Stanley and Rhoades

- Ways commitment can develop:
 - Attachment leads to decisions small and large.
 - Sliding through transitions: INERTIA
- Either path will have growing constraints.
 - On one path, constraints were chosen by you.
 - On the other, they are experienced as happening to you.

The Problem of Inertia: Interpretive dead zones

- When a relationship is less locked down, much more is free to vary.
- Linda Molm wrote about how contexts with more uncertainty make it easier to develop trust.
- Less structured contexts make it easier for partners to infer the motivations of the other.

“Are you with me because you want to be with me or because it got hard to leave?”

“Am I with you because I chose to be or because I got swept up in this?”

Thibaut and Kelley

The transformation of motivation

Google Gemini chat on theory

We trade the 'chaos' of not knowing if they'll stay for the 'silence' of not knowing why they do."

Inertia doesn't just make it harder to leave; it makes it harder to be known.

Signals: What is a Valid Signal?

- The behavior is related to something about commitment.
- The behavior is under the control of the one doing it—whatever it is.
- Small sacrifices can be good signals of commitment.

Blog article [Give me a sign: What Signals Commitment?](#)

Thoughts, Questions?

Links

- [SlidingvsDeciding.com](#)
- [Scott's page at Institute for Family Studies](#)
- [PREPinc.com](#)
- [Scott's page at GoogleScholar](#)

Relevant Citations

- Clodfelter, J. L. (1977). Marital commitment: Definition and evaluation. (Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio University, 1977). Dissertation Abstracts International, ~, 4577A-4578A.
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- Wieselquist, J., Rusbult, C. E., Foster, C. A., & Agnew, C. R. (1999). Commitment, pro-relationship behavior, and trust in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 77, 942-966.
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Second Wednesday

Webinar
February 11, 2026



Navigating Risk When Risk is Everywhere

Melanie Herman

Non-Profit Risk Management