Getting Serious

by Susan Piver

Before you take things to the next level, consider whether you can keep these three basic promises

So you've been going out with this guy for several months. He really likes you. You really like him. Then comes the inevitable moment, perhaps over dinner, while making love, or returning from a weekend away together: You look at each other and know it's time to take the next step.

ARE YOU READY? *Decide what you're committing to before you move forward.*

Oddly, it's at this point that couples may suddenly start measuring each other against some fictional standard of their ideal mate. Fantasies and fears assert themselves; old wounds and long-held beliefs about serious relationships resurface. As a result, the openness and curiosity you felt about this person gradually coalesce into one concern: *Does he fit my fantasy of the perfect relationship?*

When my husband asked me to marry him, my second thought (right after "I can't believe how much I love this guy!") was one of doubt: Sure I loved him, but didn't all my now-divorced friends once love their partners, too? Didn't they have every intention of making it work? If they couldn't stay together, why would we be any different? Given that feelings change and desire is unpredictable, what promises could we possibly hope to keep?

photo by Deborah Jaffe, GettyImages

So before we became engaged, I came up with three vows I knew I could make—and would have a good shot at sticking to. That was nine years ago. Love and desire have ebbed and flowed, but these promises continue to keep our relationship passionate, surprising, and life-changing.

As you think about moving from casual dating to a relationship, from living alone to living together, or from the single life to marriage, consider whether you can commit to them, too. They'll serve you well and support a healthy relationship, come what may.

1. I promise to be openhearted

It would be great if we could pledge "to be loving all the time." But alas, moods shift, tensions rise, and life happens—all of which compromise our ability to act tenderly and affectionately 24/7. What we can commit to is sincerity and generosity of spirit even in the wake of ever-shifting waves of emotion (which is precisely what "openhearted" means).

Sometimes my husband and I find each other's shortcomings adorable; other times they're a giant pain. Sometimes living together feels sweet and secure; other times it's totally suffocating. What I've found, though, is that a willingness to embrace the shifting tides of emotion makes for a richer relationship than one-note love. And the quest to remain openhearted, no matter how angry, disappointed, or sad I am, has led to a heart connection that continues to deepen beyond anything I ever thought possible.

When you know you can have fights and periods of emotional disconnection or even tremendous disappointment, and your partner is willing to accommodate it all for you (and you for him), now we're talking true love. Over-the-top romance is fun, but it doesn't go the distance; openheartedness can continue to deepen the relationship in ways you never imagined.

Ask Yourself Will I be able to hang in there throughout a range of emotions, or do I only want him to act and feel a certain way? Is he capable of doing this for me? Can I be angry without being mean? Can he?

2. I promise to relax my boundaries

You've heard it before: The way to make a relationship work is to set clear boundaries. But if you focus more on getting him to follow your rules than on stepping outside your comfort zone, you limit, to some degree, the relationship's potential—and your own. By relaxing, rather than constricting, your boundaries, you help the relationship grow. Case in point: My husband and I live in an environment that he calls

cozy and I call a pigsty. I thought if I came home to one more yard-sale purchase, pile of laundry, or stack of photos, I would lose it. But instead, I gave up the idea that "I can't live like this" and tried to relax. When you see what it's like to loosen some boundaries, you discover a whole new set of skills for making a relationship work. Instead of surreptitiously throwing things away (and angrily muttering to myself as I did so), I polished up the lawn ornaments and then brought home more photo albums and frames. I could not believe how desirable he suddenly found me.

Ask Yourself Have you demonstrated the ability to let go of some of your strictly held notions in order to accommodate the relationship? Has he? Can both of you give something up, not as a gesture of submission, but from the power of a very big heart? What's the worst that could happen?

3. I promise to tolerate unresolved issues

When my husband and I first began to get serious, we had one major obstacle which I feared we might not overcome. He lived in Boston; I lived in New York City. He had a son; I had a career. While I couldn't ask him to move, I also couldn't imagine leaving my favorite city in the world. I told a friend of mine, a couples therapist, about my dilemma; he was nonplussed. "As long as no one issues an ultimatum," he said, "you'll be fine." In his opinion, any statement that began with "Unless you ..." was the death knell of a relationship. Sure enough, after we lived apart for several uncertain years—arguing and crying, but never saying "It's my way or the highway"—I eventually made the tough decision to leave New York City. It was entirely mine to make, and I made it as an act of generosity, not sacrifice.

Ask Yourself Can you cope with conflict without becoming a bully or a wimp? Can you express yourself without passing blame? Is he patient with unresolved issues? Are you? Can you be in an argument about one area of life but still appreciate all the others that are going smoothly?

I realize that promising to remain open-hearted, relax your boundaries, and let some things go unresolved may not sound like a recipe for romance. Nonetheless, these vows are noble and honest. And they have the added benefit of teaching you to let go of your fears and your fantasy—and, in return, love a real person instead.

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