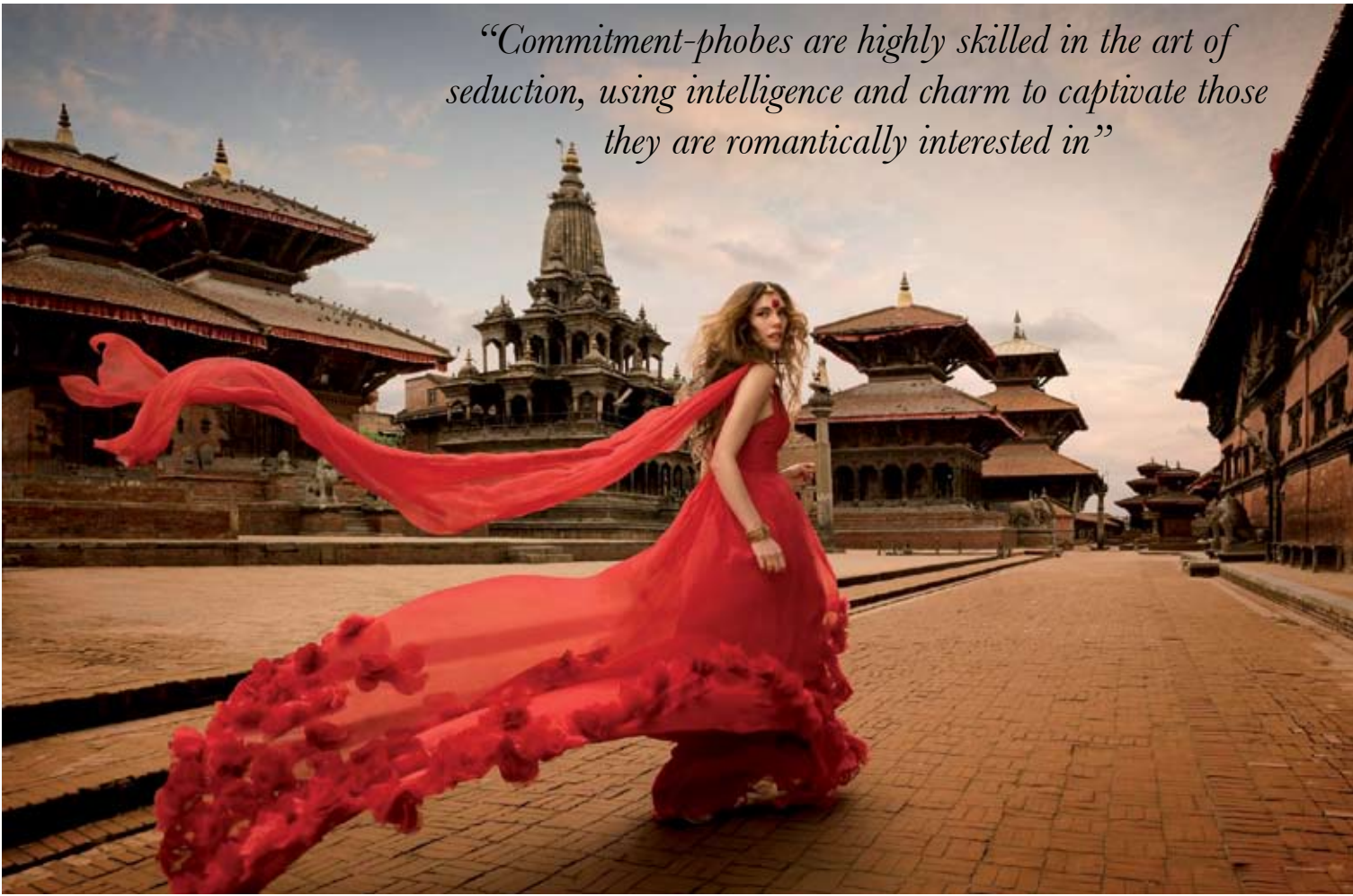




# LOVE YOU AND LEAVE YOU

Some people find it very challenging to establish and maintain romantic relationships. These commitment issues can be so paralyzing that they prevent the person affected from seeking out a relationship altogether. And, even though “commitment phobia” may not be a recognized medical condition, relationship anxiety plagues many men and women alike. By **Mira Khreino**

*“Commitment-phobes are highly skilled in the art of seduction, using intelligence and charm to captivate those they are romantically interested in”*



**C**ommitment phobia, as with any other phobia, is based on fear – fear of connection, fear of intimacy, fear of loss, and fear of getting hurt. Emotional protection is central to those with relationship anxiety, as is the incessant need to be in control. Though these fears and anxieties may be very evident to their romantic partner, very often, the person afraid to commit is unaware of the issue and acts based on their subconscious.

Commitment-phobes are highly skilled in the art of seduction, using intelligence and charm to captivate those they are romantically interested in. Their allure overshadows their inability to form healthy, long-lasting relationships. When in a relationship, the commitment-phobe enjoys the same excitement and romantic feelings as their partner; however, once their feelings become too intense for them to handle, they find excuses to distance themselves from their loved one. This sudden and unexpected detachment is a reaction to them feeling “too much,” not, as it’s often interpreted, as feeling “too little.” In this way, people with relationship anxiety maintain their romances for only a limited time, often making a swift exit when their fear of intimacy mounts.

### A PERFECT MATCH

One of the most common ways a person with relationship anxiety convinces themselves (and others) that a relationship is not working is by finding intolerable faults in their partner. This not only shifts the blame for relationship problems away from the commitment-phobe, but also acts as a justifiable, reasonable, even rational motive to leave. Often, they become consumed with finding negative traits in their lovers. These faults then form the basis of and legitimize the split-up.

The quest for perfection in a partner is also a common pursuit. People struggling with commitment fears feel that only the “perfect” partner can offer them the emotional safety and happiness they need in a relationship. This, coupled with quite dichotomous thinking (black or white, all-or-nothing, perfect or not), makes for a destructive combination. When a commitment-phobe starts finding faults in their partner, they realize the perfection they sought has not been attained and their partner is not what they had built them up to be. This leads to severe disappointment, anxiety, and fear, and a break-up ensues.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Intense instability in childhood, parental divorce, abandonment, and complicated family dynamics are strongly correlated to adult commitment phobia, as is an emotionally detached, distant, or absent parent in childhood. Seeking love and validation only to receive rejection, insecurity and unpredictability can have a detrimental effect on a child, making them feel unloved and unlovable, while also making it difficult for them to feel secure enough to give love.

Fearing the same unpleasant childhood feelings, the adult mitigates potential pain by keeping their partner at an emotional arm’s length. This is in an unconscious attempt to avoid re-experiencing loss, rejection, and hurt. Furthermore, a person with relationship anxiety has a deep-seated fear of rejection. They often reject their partners before giving their partners the chance to reject them, a protective pre-emptive effort that acts as an emotional shield.

### FACTORS BEHIND THE FEAR

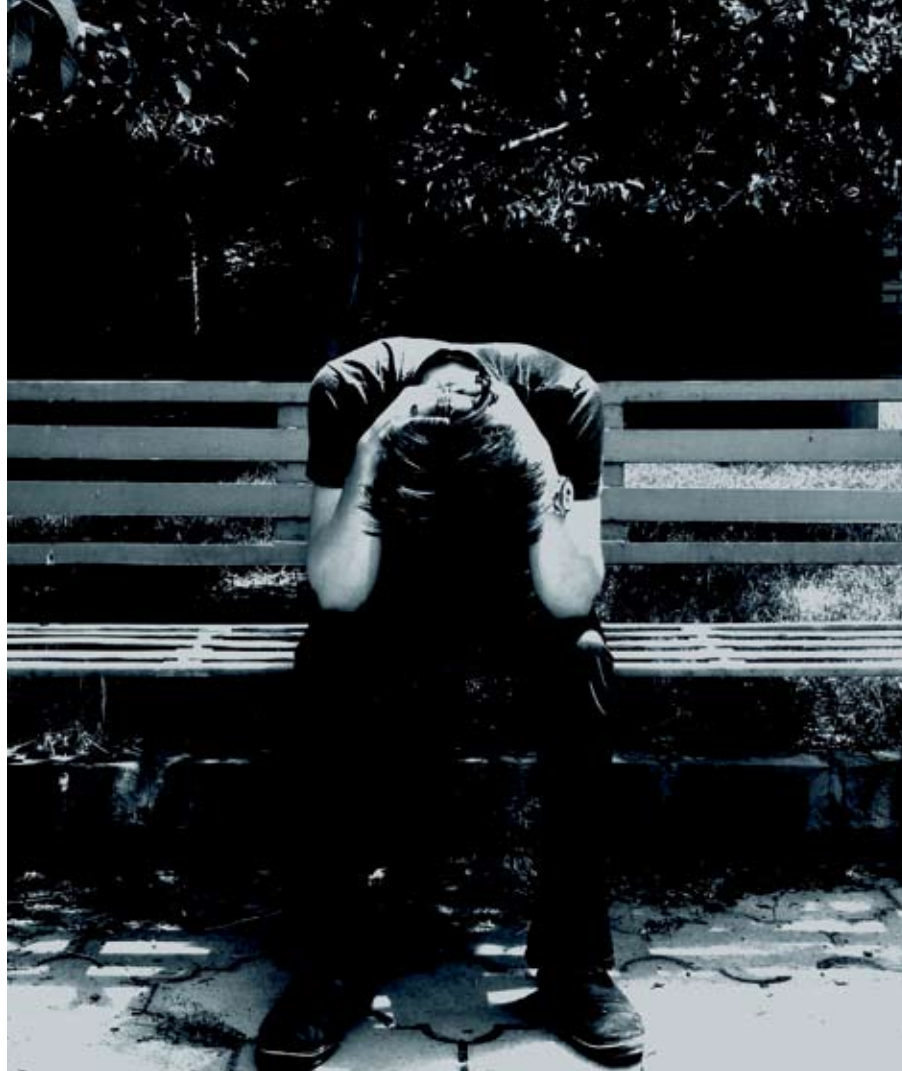
These fears and anxieties can be due to a number of factors, but usually stem from two sources: either unhealthy parental relationships in childhood or either bad





personal experiences in adult relationships. People with commitment phobia often find a degree of overlap, with both childhood and adulthood contributing factors to their difficulty. The five most common causes that lead to a fear of commitment are:

- Bad romantic experiences in adulthood, such as past abusive, destructive, or emotionally unhealthy relationships, creating a relationship-aversion.
- A relationship ending abruptly and without reasonable cause or forewarning. This can leave a person in a state of constant emotional protection, scared of being left unexpectedly again.
- Poor relationship role models in childhood may make a person hesitant to engage fully with a partner in fear that the relationship will repeat the same destructive dynamic as the relationship witnessed early on in life.
- Instability in childhood – including unmet needs, attachment issues, trauma, and abuse – can lead to dysfunctional and maladaptive behavior in adulthood. This can affect the type of person one attracts, the nature of the relationships one forms, and the interactions in those relationships.
- Trust issues, stemming either from an unpredictable childhood or from adult disappointment, make it difficult to relinquish control and depend on a partner fully.



*“People with relationship anxiety maintain their romances for only a limited time, often making a swift exit when their fear of intimacy mounts”*

#### HOW TO IDENTIFY A COMMITMENT-PHOBE

- Experiences difficulty staying in long-term relationships.
- Feels panic and fear in response to intense romantic feelings.
- Has a strong need to be in control in the relationship.
- Flees a relationship to escape feelings of anxiety rather than staying in a heightened state of emotional panic.
- Often agrees to a relationship, then, when pressed to commit long-term, backs out.
- Toils with a strong inner emotional conflict: craving intimacy and closeness vs. maintaining autonomy and personal freedom.
- Feels that being part of a couple consumes individual entity.
- Constantly thinks that their partner is not “the one” or that the relationship is “not working.”
- Finds flaws in their partner or relationship as a reason to push them away.
- Creates a push-pull dynamic, drawing a partner close then pushing them away once their feelings become too intense.
- Fears being monogamous and faithful to one partner and keeps options open.
- Only starts relationships that they foresee will not last (e.g. involves themselves with someone who is emotionally unavailable or married).
- Has difficulty talking about feelings and emotions.
- Uses criticism, distraction, and sometimes anger to create distance in the relationship.
- Is often the center of the relationship and is inconvenienced by someone else’s routine.
- Often tries to find intimate closeness in short term flings, moving on from one person to the other.
- Finds ways out of conversations about where the relationship is going.
- Is reluctant to use committal or status terms such as “girlfriend,” “boyfriend,” or partner.





*“Poor relationship role models in childhood may make a person hesitant to engage fully with a partner”*

## LETTING LOVE IN

In order to overcome relationship anxiety, one first needs to acknowledge that an issue exists. Second, one needs to be willing to put in the effort to work with one's fears and to change the current situation. An openness to change, challenging conversations, experiencing difficult emotions, and trying alternative ways of thinking and behaving are all part and parcel of the process.

One of the best therapies for any anxiety or phobia is exposure, or actually putting oneself in the fear-inducing situation and working to overcome the distressing feelings which arise. For a commitment-phobe, being in a relationship will create the arena to work with those fears in situ. Learning, growing, and showing vulnerability, honesty, and openness are

important aspects of healthy nurturing in adult relationships, which is what the commitment-phobe yearns for under the veil of fear and emotional distance. Therefore, a loving relationship is a great forum to work on trust issues and deep-seated insecurities.

If the relationship anxiety is so debilitating as to prevent one from meeting a partner altogether, then psychotherapy might be the best approach. Most trained psychotherapists are experienced in such issues and will be in a position to explore the roots, causes, and reasons for the phobia. Counselling, online support groups, and self-help books can also be helpful. *He's Scared, She's Scared: Understanding the Hidden Fears That Sabotage Your Relationship* by Steve A. Carter is an informative and enlightening book on the subject.

## BETTER TO HAVE LOVED AND LOST

There is no perfect relationship. Relationships have their ups and downs, and, like any successful project, need nurturing, care, time, effort, and personal investment. Success does not mean “happily ever after” but rather mutual understanding and respect; effective communication and trust; determination and a real willingness to work together to overcome challenge and adversity. For those commitment-phobes out there, be courageous enough to dare to love and risk the pain instead of living in fear... alone. Are you emotionally available?

- 1) Do you make excuses to avoid getting together with a potential partner?
- 2) Are you angry with the opposite sex? Do you still feel hurt and wounded by an ex-partner?
- 3) Do you have difficulty trusting people due to being betrayed in the past?
- 4) Are you afraid of falling in love in case you get hurt?
- 5) Do you think that relationships infringe on your independence?
- 6) Do you have secrets that you do not share with others because they might make you feel undesirable and unlovable?
- 7) Do you avoid intimacy by filling your quiet time with distraction?
- 8) Are you uncomfortable talking about your feelings and emotions?
- 9) Do you keep your options open in case someone better comes along?
- 10) Do you feel relationships put too much expectation and pressure on you? ■

