

CONVICTION

MEANS NEVER HAVING TO SAY “I’M OUTTA’ HERE!”

by Janet O’Neal, as told to Ron Kaye

You’ve been together with “the love of your life” for months now. The sex just keeps getting better, you are enjoying each other more and more, and your friends have begun to see you as a matched set. Then, out of the blue, he starts pulling back, BIG TIME! Your standard Sunday brunch has suddenly become less important than watching a pre-game show with the guys, and he starts making more and more excuses for not being with you. You go through all the normal panic-stricken scenarios: Is he seeing someone else? Has he gotten bored with you? Is it OVER?

The next logical step, of course, is the time-tested preemptive strike, where you dump *him* before he has a chance to dump *you*. You emerge with your dignity intact (at least as far as anyone can tell), and you’ve managed to hurt the jerk as badly as he was about to hurt you. You go on with your life, healing your pain, and getting yourself ready for the next “love of your life” to appear. You turn the page.

The sad thing about this little scenario isn’t that you’ve ended a relationship. The sad part is that you may well have been perfect for each other. What looked like the “beginning of the end” may simply have been the “end of the beginning,” as described by Richard Bach in his book *The Bridge Across Forever*. You have come to that terrifying milestone in a relationship known as “the switch,” where one (or both) of you begins to pull back dramatically for no apparent reason. Passing that milestone will either leave your relationship strengthened or it will leave it behind. The trick is to be a conscious, willing participant in the

direction the relationship takes, instead of being a powerless observer.



It is perfectly natural, even inevitable, for a person to pull back somewhat when they near the point in a relationship where the “C” word (commitment) begins to rear its head. This point is the “pre-commitment” stage, or what I call the “conviction” stage, when you’re both in the process of becoming convinced that

your relationship is (or is not) a keeper. I would be more concerned about a partner who *didn’t* exhibit some reservations at this stage than about one who did. “The switch” is the natural tendency of a person to step back and evaluate their position — both as an individual and in the relationship — when they realize that the relationship is evolving toward a deeper level of commitment. Though this behavior may appear hurtful, it may be merely an exercise of good judgment.

Look at the way most people behave when they are about to make a major purchase, such as a new car or a

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home. While they may be absolutely enamored of the item they are about to buy, they balk at the last minute, citing any number of reasons for their hesitation. In truth, they may just want to be sure that they are investing wisely. A knowledgeable salesperson will recognize this hesitation immediately, and attempt to reassure the customer, without pressuring them or angrily abandoning the efforts to close the sale.

We are able to calmly accept such an exercise in judgment when it involves buying an item that we may later sell without regret. It seems silly to be unable to recognize the same wisdom in someone who is on the verge of making a (hopefully) lifelong commitment. But that's what we frequently do where our emotions are involved.

That is not to say you blindly accept this type of behavior. After all, there *are* people, both men *and* women, who are mortally afraid of true intimacy, or who, for one reason or another, want only the thrill of the pursuit. I do recommend that you look honestly, not only at the behavior of your apparently fickle partner, but at your own agenda in the relationship. And, very important, don't be so attached to a specific outcome that anything the least bit inconsistent with that outcome turns into a red flag of impending doom. Enjoy the relationship for what it brings to your life, and allow it the freedom to develop, even to end, in its own unique way. Attempting to modify its course can only short-circuit a relationship that could have developed into something even better than what you had hoped for.

So how do you tell whether one of you is going through normal "buyer's anxiety" or has simply reached the limits of your or his commitment in the relationship? Here's a checklist of clues to help you make your decision:

1. Does one of you have a pattern of dating a person, becoming very picky after a

couple of months, and "discarding" that person? Have you done this time after time?

2. Does romantic interest tend to evaporate in three or four months?

3. Do you (or does he) always date more than one person at a time?

4. Do either of you tend to become involved with people who are unavailable emotionally, perhaps married, or in some other way unsuitable as partners?

5. When you start a relationship, do either of you start it with some sort of "escape clause" where you justify why the relationship probably won't last? You know what I mean — he doesn't make enough money, or she's too pushy, or you aren't the same religion, etc..

If you tend to answer "always," or even "usually" to any of these questions, then it may not be the normal switch that is occurring. It may be that one of you has an internal problem with commitment. If, on the other hand, none of the above patterns applies, there's a good chance that you can get beyond "the switch" and share something really beautiful for a long time. It's a tough call, but if you're truly motivated and you stay honest with yourself and each other, you'll do just fine. Even an ended relationship isn't a failure. It's just a step closer to the relationship you really want. ■

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