

## From Casual to Commitment

By Sara Eckel



How to move your relationship to the next level.

### Upping the Ante

The beginning was bliss: He'd show up on your doorstep wearing a sport coat, armed with the "research" he'd done on swank bistros and out-of-the-way spots. You were giddy with new romance, but since you only saw each other once or twice a week you still had plenty of solo time. But that was three months ago. Now you'd like to move out of your Wednesday- and Saturday-night date schedule and spend a lazy Sunday afternoon with him or maybe even take a trip. You'd like to say, with complete conviction, "my boyfriend," rather than, "this guy I've been kind of seeing." The trouble is, he still seems perfectly comfortable with the more casual arrangement. How to move to the next step?



The answer is simple: Talk to him, says a survey of men across the country, courtesy of the Web site GuyCritical.com. Although a few men suggested a woman wait for her man to broach the commitment issue, the majority urge her to initiate a dialogue. "I'm clueless when it comes to reading women's minds," says a 37-year-old Boston engineer. "I need to be told straight out what's going on in her head, especially when she wants to get more serious."

And a 41-year-old Los Angeles schoolteacher says that although many women fear that having "the talk" will scare him off, most men expect it. "It shouldn't come as a big surprise to him," he says.

Indeed, Nina Atwood, a therapist and author of *Date Lines: Communication from Hello to I Do and Everything in Between* (Owl, 1998), says that being coy could actually be damaging to a relationship. "Playing it cool and casual in the hopes of not scaring them off is a huge mistake because it sets a tone for the relationship that's not authentic," she says.

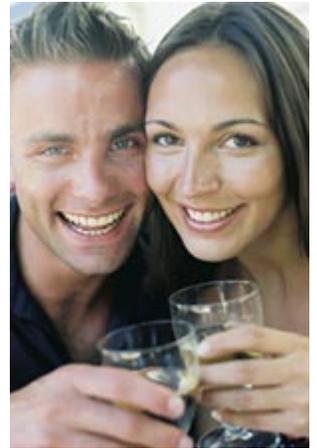
Granted, there are no guarantees that you'll be happy with your guy's response. He may indeed go running for the hills. But if you're really looking for a long-term relationship, you're better off knowing sooner rather than later whether your new love has potential or not.

## Things to Consider Before "the Talk"

Before you sit your man down for a heart-to-heart, it's important to take a look at where your relationship stands now. Have you been dating for three months or more? Have you met his family and friends? Can you leave a toothbrush in his apartment without him flipping out?

Or have you two stayed on a fixed dating schedule, without a lot of conversation between dates? "If there's no spillover into the rest of life, that could mean that he's still dating other people," says Atwood.

You also need to take a look at your own motives. Do you really want a serious relationship with this man? Is he someone you could potentially spend the rest of your life with? Or are you just looking for the validation?



## When and Where To Do It

If you decide to have the talk, the GuyCritical guys suggest making the setting as low-key as possible. Don't bring up the issue during a busy time, or when the two of you are in bed. "Keep in mind that talking about feelings is tough for a lot of guys. You can help by explaining that you need to understand things, and the only way you know how to do that is to talk through them. And make sure you let him know that you appreciate his willingness to talk about his feelings," says a 36-year-old computer programmer from Boston.

To keep from putting him on the spot, Atwood suggests the "shopping conversation," which basically goes like this: "Brad, I've really enjoyed the past few months and I like you a lot. However, I think you should know that ultimately I'm interested in finding a long-term committed relationship, and I was curious to know what you're looking for." Why this works: "You avoid scaring him off by letting him know that you haven't decided that he's necessarily 'the one,'" says Atwood. "You're just saying, 'I'm looking for a life partner. And if you're not, then I'm going to move on.' This actually increases men's respect. Men like a strong woman who knows what she wants."

## What If You Don't Like His Answer?

If he doesn't say what you want to hear, stay calm. Don't try to convince him that commitment is the right thing, just listen to his point of view. "Don't react if he has a negative reaction; it will make him more defensive. Guys just need time to come around," says a 37-year-old Los Angeles consultant.

Of course, sometimes guys don't come around. Sometimes they do indeed freak out. If the problem is that he's genuinely afraid of commitment, Atwood says that the situation isn't hopeless. She advises that you gently point out the problem -- you want commitment, and he's afraid of it -- and ask him what he thinks you two should do. "He's the one with the problem right here, give him the problem to handle," says Atwood. If he's willing to tackle it, then it could be worth sticking it out.

If, on the other hand, he's simply not interested in a commitment with you, then you need to get out. As painful as this may be, it's critical that you let him know that you want to hear the truth. "Make it safe for him to express his doubts by saying, 'Look I would rather you hurt my feelings right now than not tell me the truth because that will hurt me much more in the long run,'" says Atwood.

## How You Can Let Him Down Easy

And what if, in all this soul-searching, you realize that you're the one who doesn't want to bring your relationship to the next level? Let him go. "If you know that you don't want to go forward, and you continue to occupy his life and heart and time, then you're using him. If you want a loving relationship, be a loving person," says Atwood.

The GuyCritical guys heartily agree. "Put him out of his misery as soon as possible," says a 40-year-old Miami executive. "The sooner you move on, the sooner he will, too."