

## Staying Five-feet Apart from Commitment

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory research was to understand the fear associated with long-term commitments, aka Commitment Phobia, in the Indian context. The present study also highlights the possible antecedents, consequences, and maintaining factors associated with it. In-depth and open-ended online interviews of 10 respondents in the age group of 18-25, comprising 7 females and 3 males, were conducted, and the transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's model of thematic analysis. Parental relations, Family structure, and Past relationships emerged as prime factors in the formation of a skewed notion of commitment, while hearing about other people's negative experiences in relationships maintained the negative thought pattern. Effects of Commitment Phobia were physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral in nature. Overall, it can be really distressing for some people, and a proper understanding of the condition is vital.

**Keywords:** *Commitment Phobia, Commitment, Fear of Commitment*

John Joseph Powell, quite persuasively says, in his work '*The Secret of Staying in Love*' (1974), that *it is an absolute human certainty that no one can know his own beauty or perceive a sense of his own worth until it has been reflected back to him in the mirror of another loving, caring human being.*

From ancient philosophers to modern thinkers to lyricists of pop culture, everyone has talked about love, affection, care and a desire to be with someone who can make them feel complete. Religions like Sufism and Buddhism constantly talk about being whole, though through different means, yet they talk of a human in search of either a noble truth or a union with their God. To simplify the vast wisdom spread around the world, literature and religion, it can be said, *humans are social animals* who thrive on bonds and meaningful relations.

Maslow might have put the need for belonging on a much lower pedestal in his Hierarchy of Needs model (1943), it doesn't mean one can sideline the importance of relations completely in a person's life. Weir (2018) discussed the life-saving role of relations for a person at various stages of life. From childhood bonds with parents to meaningful romantic relationships, from friends to children, and friendship in old age - everything is detrimental for a person's well-being. Uchino and Way (2017) established a neurochemical connection

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between healthy relationships and better functioning of the immune system and physiological pathways.

Thus, it is fair to say relationships are important for a person's positive health. Yet, we know, not everyone is capable or finds it easy to maintain relations. Everyone has their unique way of addressing relations and understanding them.

### ***Bowlby and Ainsworth's Attachment Theory***

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, being inspired by psychoanalytic viewpoints of child development (Bretherton, 1992), developed their theory of attachment (1991).

Based on their research, the researchers explained four different attachment patterns - *Secure* (trusting, cooperative, emotionally secure), *Anxious* (sensitive, struggles with communication, dependent), *Avoidant* (cold, extremely self-reliant, independent), and *Fearful-avoidant* (fears rejection, low self-esteem, facing trust issues).

Though their explanation came from experiments with children, the theory has been used mostly with adolescents and adults. Today, these attachment patterns have been closely linked to a diverse range of psychological and biological factors. Pines (2007) found that avoidant attachment patterns are positively linked to psychological burnout while secure attachment styles often protect people from burnout. Platts and colleagues (2002) also discovered that an individual's attachment style also influences their core beliefs and cognitive patterns. Rowe and Carnelley (2003) saw that attachment styles create a priming effect on recall of items, expectations and emotional affect too. Feeney (2001) explored the link between secure attachment styles and positive health behaviors. People often reported choosing healthier activities when their attachment styles were also positive and secure.

These attachment styles are also closely linked to the idea of commitment in people. Commitment can mean different things to people, and their views can be unique in nature.

### ***Commitment and the Cultural Understanding***

Commitment has been defined in a myriad of ways and unlike some stable constructs, its meaning can differ from culture to culture. A common component in most definitions of culture is the fact that it refers to a shared system of meaning that differentiates various societies (Fischer, 2009).

Individualism and Collectivism are two major dimensions that have been used in measuring cultural variability in terms of commitment. While Individualism involves independence, individual initiatives, and an element of 'I,' Collectivism on the other hand focuses on belongingness to a group, interdependence, and an element of 'We.' Commitment in personal relationships is found to be higher in collectivistic cultures like that of India, China, and Korea, in comparison to individualistic cultures which include the United States, Australia, and Great Britain among others (Gao, 2001). However, the way in which the word Commitment is used accommodates several variations both culturally and temporally, between and within cultures. For example, even within the Western culture, its meaning can differ in the way a couple sets specific long-term goals which can be with the intention of fulfilling them 'forever' or only 'as long as it can work' (Delaney, 1996).

Generally, the concept of *Romantic Love* and its blossoming into marriage is associated with the Western culture, and arranged marriages, where love is expected to blossom after

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marriage, are linked to the East, especially India. Even though the scenario is changing with time, it happens to be an important demarcation between the two cultures. In the Indian context, commitment may not be restricted to the mutual fulfillment of the couple but it extends to include the family members as well. This is what makes the idea of commitment very rigid and laden with societal expectations. Since historical times, marriage has been regarded as the ultimate form of long-term commitment, which is based on the idea of duty (*dharma*) rather than love. While Western culture has begun to regard romantic love as the 'only right basis of marital commitment,' Indian culture still has other components of responsibility and societal norms attached to the idea of long-term commitment (Gala & Kapadia, 2014).

Cultural beliefs and expectations continue to influence commitment, and these also form the basis for change over time. Cross-cultural influences are instrumental in broadening horizons and introducing fresh perspectives. For example, the popular Canadian Netflix show 'Anne with an E' inspired the very first case of sologamy (long-term commitment to self/self-marriage) in India. It's a classic example of the expansion of the term 'Commitment'.

All in all, cultural shaping of the very idea of commitment is the highlight of this section and it must be kept in mind while studying this topic in any context, which in this case is Indian.

### ***Phobia: Definition and meaning***

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5<sup>th</sup> edition), Phobia refers to marked fear or anxiety about a specific object or situation (e.g., flying, heights, animals, receiving an injection, seeing blood). This leads an individual to experience extreme fear or anxiety or to avoid the object or situation altogether. It actively hampers social, occupational, and other significant areas of functioning. The minimum duration for diagnosis of phobia is 6 months given it is not better explained by the symptoms of any other mental disorder like agoraphobia, PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder), OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), Panic Disorder, etc (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2022).

Different schools of psychology offer distinct explanations of Phobia. Behaviorism, the first force of Psychology, views phobia as an association between a neutral stimulus and an anxiety-provoking unconditioned stimulus. The association is learned and reinforced over time which leads to its strengthening and taking the form of Phobia. The second force- Psychoanalysis- focuses on theories of repression and displacement. Conflicts between the Id and Superego during childhood are repressed and are later displaced onto another object, developing into fear or phobia. A relatively recent school of thought- Cognitive- focuses on irrational beliefs, faulty thought patterns, and selective attention as factors leading to the development of phobic responses.

In DSM-V, Specific Phobia has various types of phobias under it but currently, it doesn't include commitment phobia. Further research on commitment phobia is required in order to do that.

### ***Understanding the term - Commitment Phobia***

In his book, *The Zahir* (2005), Paulo Coehlo said, '*Freedom is not the absence of commitments, but the ability to choose - and commit myself to - what's best for me.*' However, the modern perspective of commitment is far from it. People have begun believing that commitment means being tied down, being chained to oneself. In such cases, they are

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unable to see themselves grow, prosper and live fully. This skewed notion of commitment gives birth to the fear of committing, commonly being called ‘commitment phobia’.

Hodalska and Dixon (2015), as a part of their project, *Fears and Anxieties in the 21st century*, studied the fear of commitment and relationships in men and women. They believed that the gender differences are slowly reducing and both the partners need to come to the same level of understanding and vulnerability in a relationship, which is becoming a challenge in itself. This might not have anything to do with the partner or their relationship with them. As popular literature and sparse research in this area tell, commitment-phobic individuals have problems accepting their own feelings, fear vulnerability, and inability to trust their partner. The intimacy that might be an epiphenomenon of any healthy relationship makes them afraid. Dr. Jerabek (2015) conducted a study on 496 commitment-phobic men who revealed various causes for their fear like losing their privacy, freedom, space, and identity, along with emotional investment, too much work, and most importantly, fearing being with the wrong one.

It is important to mention at this point that commitment phobia is not specific to just romantic relationships. It can be a fear of committing anywhere, from pursuing a long-term educational program to staying in a job for ten or twenty years, to simply dedicating yourself to a research project which you don't know will be successful or not. Wolfe and Betz (2011) found that fear of commitment is closely linked to career-related indecisiveness through the mediating factor of attachment styles.

The present research is inspired by the lack of literature about commitment phobia and a clear etiology and understanding of the disorder.

### ***Rationale behind the Study***

Commitment is an integral part of human life. Throughout life, people set goals, commit to them, and strive hard to achieve them. Achievement brings them happiness and satisfaction, and it in turn reinforces them to set further goals. This cycle continues throughout one's life. Committing to long-term relationships leads to healthier and longer lives. It brings discipline and stability to life (Stanley et al., 2010). However, some people develop an extreme aversion to long-term commitment and experience intense fear upon thinking about it, let alone indulging in it. This can have a long-lasting impact on an individual's life and the different spheres associated with it- physical, social, emotional, and psychological.

Even though the term ‘commitment’ is regularly used by people in various contexts, the amount of research done in this area remains scarce. The usage and meaning of the term can differ across cultures and the present study attempts to understand its notion in the Indian context. A major focus of this exploratory research is to develop an understanding of fear/phobia associated with long-term commitment in personal relationships- commonly known as *commitment phobia*, and to shed light on its possible antecedents, consequences, and maintaining factors. By understanding the condition better and highlighting its adverse effects, developing appropriate prevention and treatment techniques can become less challenging.

## **METHOD**

A sample of 10 individuals aged between 18 to 25 years was selected through a non-random sampling method. Information about the study was shared on the internet after which individuals who showed interest were given a few questions as part of the selection criteria.

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The questions were based on existing symptoms and ideas related to commitment phobia in the research literature. The individual who said ‘Yes’ to four out of five questions was selected as a research participant. The demographics of the selected participants are mentioned in Table 1.

The questions for the filter selection round were as follows -

1. Do you feel anxious or stressed when thinking about commitment or long-term commitment?
2. Do you experience palpitation, shortness of breath, lightheadedness, or other such physical symptoms when talking about relationships or commitment?
3. Do you have a tendency to push people away when things appear to get ‘real’ or serious?
4. Does the feeling of anxiety (if answered ‘Yes’ in Question 1) remain for long durations and do you think about it excessively?
5. Do you try to avoid questions or discussions about love, relationships, or any kind of commitment, in general?

After the selection of participants, online interviews were conducted based on a semi-structured interview model that included questions around certain themes like parental relations, past relationships, conceptual views on commitment, and commitment phobia. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and later on, analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s model of thematic analysis (2006).

**Table 1: Demographic Data of Participants of the Study**

Participants	Age	Gender	Previously been in a Relationship	Pseudonym used in the Study
Participant 1	21	Male	No	Canary
Participant 2	21	Female	Yes	Violet
Participant 3	21	Male	Yes	Lavender
Participant 4	21	Female	Yes	Crimson
Participant 5	21	Female	No	Sienna
Participant 6	21	Male	Yes	Olive
Participant 7	25	Female	Yes	Teal
Participant 8	20	Female	No	Peach
Participant 9	18	Female	Yes	Beige
Participant 10	21	Female	Yes	Indigo

## RESULTS

Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis model, specific codes and their equivalent themes were analyzed from the transcripts of the interviews which are mentioned in Table 2. The analysis also led to a model (Figure 1) that showcases the antecedents and maintaining

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factors related to commitment phobia. An interesting relation of people with supposed commitment phobia and their attachment patterns and orientation to attachment was also found that has been shown in the model.

**Table 2: Showing the Thematic Analysis of the Data**

THEMES	INITIAL CODES	EXCERPTS	DESCRIPTION
Idea of Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Including someone in future plans</li> <li>● Being devoted to someone</li> <li>● Compassion</li> <li>● Understanding</li> <li>● Compatibility</li> <li>● Respect and growth</li> <li>● Being Honest</li> <li>● Sticking to something, not matter what</li> <li>● Getting tied down</li> <li>● Being stuck with someone</li> <li>● Exclusive relationship</li> <li>● Emotionally investing in someone</li> </ul>	<p>“Someone asks you for a commitment directly, then it’s like to be stuck”</p> <p>“Giving your 100 percent”</p> <p>“Companionship of two people, who understand each other, help each other grow... there should be compatibility but most importantly respect towards each other and love also.”</p>	<p>Commitment to many people felt like being stuck at one place and the inability to get out of it. It also involved emotionally investing in other individual that can be tiring.</p>
Feelings about Long Term Commitment (LTC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Combining social circles is anxiety-provoking</li> <li>● Requires persistence, time, and efforts</li> <li>● Stressful and scary</li> <li>● Fear of not having feelings and efforts reciprocated</li> <li>● Feeling of suffocation and discomfort</li> <li>● Uncertainty of people’s behavior and situations</li> <li>● Intrusive thoughts while making long-term decisions</li> <li>● Good for people</li> </ul>	<p>“If you know it’s going to be long term and it’s not going to end anytime soon, it’s good for you.”</p> <p>“Long-term commitments are scary because they take up a lot of time of yours. You have to be persistent and give your 100 percent.”</p> <p>“I’m going to be suffocated. Like I’m going to be forced and I’ll become really uncomfortable.”</p>	<p>Long-term commitment meant something anxiety provoking, scary, and a decision that required constant effort and time.</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stability and sense of assurance</li> <li>● Shouldn't involve societal tags and labels</li> <li>● Autonomy is important along with LTC</li> </ul>		
Meaning of Commitment Phobia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Adjusting and altering one's plans according to others</li> <li>● Fear of failure and not being good enough</li> <li>● Trust issues</li> <li>● Suffocation</li> <li>● Being hurt</li> <li>● Distraction from goals</li> <li>● Not being able to get attached to a person despite liking them</li> <li>● Thoughts about relationships going wrong stick in the head</li> <li>● Lack of self-trust and self-worth (in terms of decisions)</li> <li>● Being burdened</li> <li>● Being constricted</li> <li>● Afraid of the expectations of the other person</li> <li>● Afraid of societal expectations</li> </ul>	<p>"It means even if you find someone who is committed to you, perfect and all, you still would not be able to attach yourself to them."</p> <p>"I feel commitment phobia is the getting afraid of the expectations of the other person in the relationship because you might not be on the same page...So you have to keep adjusting."</p> <p>"It's like a fear. When I think about commitment, I feel like I can't do it because it'll distract me from my goals and I also might end up getting hurt."</p> <p>"Commitment phobia is a lack of self-worth."</p>	Commitment phobia, for the participants, meant failure to maintain a relationship because of problems either in oneself or the partner. It also involved being hurt or being distracted from life goals.
Physical and Psychological Sensations Associated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shutting down mentally</li> <li>● Shortness of breath and suffocation</li> <li>● Crying</li> <li>● Pressing fingernails under the skin to feel pain as it helped in keeping her focused on the present.</li> </ul>	<p>"When you are in an intimate state with your partner, I am not able to relax properly. I depersonalize, I am not able to feel things properly, I can't have sensations properly."</p> <p>"I get very sweaty. And then my mind goes blank."</p> <p>"I would shut down</p>	When thinking of commitment, people felt shortness of breath, palpitation, and suffocation. Other physical symptoms involved shutting down mentally or the inability to feel anything.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Body Image issues leading to an inferiority complex</li> <li>● Unease and tense</li> <li>● Overthinking</li> <li>● Not able to relax when in an intimate state with a partner</li> <li>● Not feeling any emotional connect</li> <li>● Feeling of depersonalization</li> <li>● Sense of freezing</li> <li>● Sweating</li> <li>● Mind goes blank</li> </ul>	<p>mentally, shortness of breath and I would press my fingernails in my skin to feel pain because it helped me focus on what was going on presently. Just like general anxiety, I felt like crying and all.”</p>	
<p>Past Relationship Experiences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Overall healthy relation</li> <li>● Believed themselves to ruin it</li> <li>● Presence of partner created anxiety</li> <li>● Inability to prioritize the partner in Life</li> <li>● Bad relationship with a cheating partner</li> <li>● Forced to do things in the name of love</li> <li>● Being rejected made her doubt herself</li> <li>● Idea of marriage made her ruin the relation</li> <li>● Failed relationship</li> <li>● Associated poor mental health with bad relationship exp.</li> <li>● Feeling of guilt (for not reciprocating)</li> <li>● Took a lot of time to commit</li> </ul>	<p>“I had a failed relationship in school and that’s where it started. It was just one relationship but it was scary.”          “A relationship turned bad and I thought this was it. But now, I know it was my own anxiety and depression during that time that was the problem. So, I started hating relationships altogether.”          “I was with a guy for 8 years but when the question of marriage came, I felt uneasy and I deliberately created conditions that would lead to breakup.”</p>	<p>Many people had a problematic experience with relationships in the past because of which they developed anxiety or a distorted view of relationships.</p>



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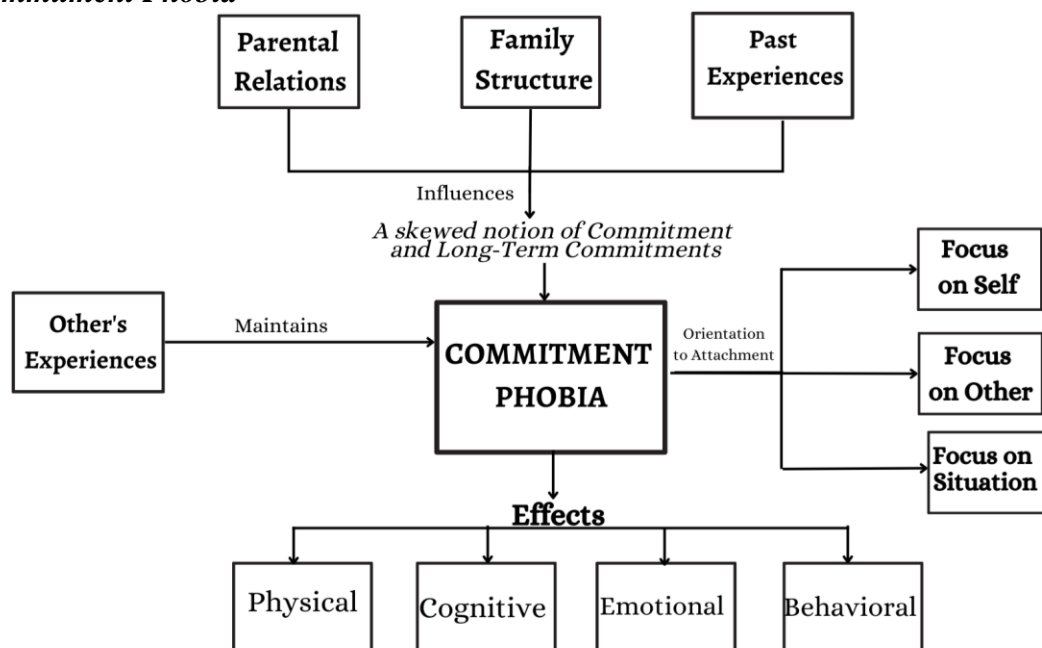
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Liked a guy but refused when he asked for a commitment</li> </ul>		
Consequences of Past Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Created boundaries</li> <li>● Considering oneself happy and independent</li> <li>● Pushing people away</li> <li>● Fearing being attached to someone and getting no reciprocation</li> <li>● Sense of rejection and poor self-esteem</li> <li>● Developing a Defense mechanism</li> <li>● Wants to initiate relationships but doesn't</li> <li>● Doesn't want to talk about feelings and emotions</li> <li>● Self-sabotaging</li> <li>● Apprehensive about future commitments</li> </ul> <p>Feeling an aversion to seeing people talk about relationships</p>	<p>“Even if people want to stay, I just don't. I push myself away too.”</p> <p>“I can meet you but you cannot expect a relationship out of me. It can always be platonic. Like maintaining a general boundary.”</p> <p>“It was like a conscious defense mechanism that I developed and it has now become a part of my personality.”</p>	<p>Because of past experiences, individuals created strict boundaries for themselves to protect themselves. They began fearing attachment and tend to push people away.</p>
Friends and Bonds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A healthy relationship with friends</li> <li>● A healthy relationship with friends (given they don't talk about feelings)</li> <li>● Not supportive friends</li> <li>● Keeping online friends with boundaries</li> <li>● Has close friends; feels tired and cannot talk to them on a daily</li> </ul>	<p>“I have a bunch of amazing friends. All of them are from different places, so each of them offers something different to me.”</p> <p>“If I talk about my old friends... They don't talk to me anymore. It always happens with me that people suddenly stop talking to me and I don't even react much to it.”</p> <p>“If you're talking about comfort, even with them I'm quite</p>	<p>Surprisingly, participants didn't have attachment fears or phobias related to friendships and those with strong peer support also showed higher self-esteem.</p>

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	basis Cautious in friendships	cautious.”	
Antecedents while growing up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Growing up in different cities</li> <li>● Good relationship with father</li> <li>● Unstable Relation with mother</li> <li>● Parental bond is good</li> <li>● Unstable link with father</li> <li>● Good relationship with mother</li> <li>● Healthy Family</li> <li>● Troubled relationship with parents</li> <li>● Broken marriages at home</li> <li>● Heard or seen incidents of troubled relation and marriages</li> <li>● Troubled relationship between parents</li> <li>● Best friend passed away</li> <li>● Negative experiences in early and middle childhood (constantly being replaced by best friends)</li> </ul>	<p>“It’s like a phrase na, you love people you don’t like. It’s my relationship with them (Parents). I think they project things on me.”</p> <p>“With my mom, I have some issues. She had said some things to me during my childhood, pretty mean things.”</p> <p>“Like the relationship between my parents...it’s not a happy relationship. I have three sisters whose marriage has broken and nothing ended well. My friends too.”</p> <p>“People whom I considered my best friend as children do, I have been replaced by them. They moved on and left me behind. It surely has been a negative experience.”</p>	While growing up, observing failed or problematic marriages, conflicting couples can often lead to a distorted view of relationships and create issues in future.

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**Figure 1: Showing theoretical model derived from thematic analysis of interviews on Commitment Phobia**



### DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present exploratory study was done to assess the meaning of ‘commitment’ and the phobia associated with it on a personal level. Due to the lack of literature in the area, it was important to define the terms properly, and establish some causes, antecedents, and impact of the problem in focus. Assessing ten individuals in the age group that Erikson (1950) believed faces the challenge of ‘Intimacy versus Isolation’, we gathered their views and conducted an in-depth thematic analysis to establish our findings.

Figure 1 shows a thematic model of Commitment Phobia, highlighting the antecedents, maintaining factors, and direct consequences of it.

First of all, the term ‘Commitment’ was discussed, and revealed that in today’s time, people hold a skewed and problematic notion of commitment. Rather than believing it to be something supportive and concrete in one’s life, they see it as restrictive, burdensome, effortful, and exhausting. However, some participants did use terms like ‘compassion’, ‘being respectful’, and ‘compatibility’ in their description, shedding a positive light on commitment. But when it came to long-term commitments (LTC), the views were mostly negative. Participant Indigo repeatedly mentioned the *fear of not having their feelings and efforts reciprocated in a relationship*. Most participants simply said LTCs are scary and stressful. It is quite interesting to note that Gala and Kapadia’s study (2014) clearly pointed out that individuals in India, regardless of the kind of relationship they are in, hope to see it go long-term. It is embedded in their very culture and value system.

When asked directly about Commitment Phobia, participants mentioned being burdened and constricted somewhere. Fear of trusting someone, being emotionally hurt and abandoned, and things being monotonous also found their way into the description. Participant Peach mentioned it as the *fear of societal expectations, tags, and the expectations of the other person*. They mentioned that the phobia stems from *having to adjust one’s life and goals according to another person’s wishes*. Here, ‘fear of societal expectations’ becomes

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important when placed in the Indian context. Ironically, the very culture which emphasizes forming and nurturing long-term relationships can sometimes become so rigid in upholding its societal norms that it tends to have a boomerang effect on people, resulting in a fear of those societal expectations and consequently long-term commitment.

The direct impact of this fear comes in the form of physical suffocation, exhaustion, tension, uneasiness, sweating, crying, and stress while discussing LTCs or while facing commitment issues in one's life - some commonly found signs of phobia or panic according to DSM-5. Participant Beige shared their personal way of pressing their fingernails in their palms to actually feel any sensation. Going blank, being frozen, and a sense of *depersonalization* were also mentioned.

The cognitive impact of Commitment Phobia involved creating a distorted schema about commitment and relationships. Also, developing body-image-related issues oneself and lowered self-esteem was also mentioned by Participant Indigo. "*I began questioning myself, what's wrong with me? An inferiority complex took over me.*"

The emotional effects of this phobia were seen in the direct form of being emotionally blank or the inability to reciprocate others' feelings. Participants Teal and Sienna mentioned their phobia as a 'defense mechanism' to protect themselves from any emotional hurt in the future. Participants mentioned creating defensive borders around themselves they didn't let anyone penetrate, emotionally. This sometimes even led to a feeling of guilt in them when they were unable to be emotionally available for someone or reciprocate their feelings.

Lastly, behavioral effects were closely linked to emotional effects. Not initiating relationships, pushing people away, and showing aversion to any talk about relations or feelings, in general, were some common ideas discussed. Along with it, a self-sabotaging tendency was mentioned by Participant Lavender. An interesting aspect mentioned by Participant Beige was that they preferred keeping online friends. In the case of online friendships, they have control over how much they want to share with the person, and their personal boundaries are never invaded.

But all these skewed thoughts do not just *exist* in a person. They stem from sources like *parental relations, family structure, and past experiences*. Some of the participants reported having problematic relations with either their father or their mother. This can be anticipated to some extent as a developmental cause while growing up not being emotionally secure to form healthy relationships (Palkovitz et al., 2002; Dekel & Farber, 2012). Parenting style has been studied by Candell (2022) to be directly related to relational satisfaction and couple conflicts. Participants Teal, Violet, and Peach reported broken marriages at home that can have a direct impact on one's perception of relationships and commitment. This impact can get amplified in an Indian Society which, owing to its collectivistic roots, often relies on family values and support, and interdependence among members through the ups and downs of life (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Seeing a significant support system fall apart can leave an individual shattered and emotionally vulnerable, and it can distort their perception of commitment in long-term relationships.

A few participants developed their negative schemas based on the stories they heard of other people's failed relations and marriages in their immediate environment. In simple terms, the context a child gets while growing up in their home or any other immediate environment plays a vital role in a child's development as an adult - emotionally and psychologically

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(Palkovitz, 1998; Newman & Newman, 1988). Also, in a country like India, many individuals have reservations about ideas of commitment, relationships, and sexual intimacy because of being brought up in conservative homes (Darak et al., 2022).

Still, personal experience came as a common ground for all individuals to discuss their commitment phobia. A healthy relationship that turned awry and ugly was something most participants mentioned. However, each of them had a unique approach to why it ended. Some mentioned it was because of their own selves. They believed themselves to have sabotaged it. They felt guilty for not being able to prioritize their partner or reciprocate their feelings. Participant Beige said, *“After a time, it started appearing as a burden to me. All their text messages started to give me anxiety, I would feel guilty about not replying to them.”*

Participant Indigo had a troubled relationship where they had to do things for their partner in the name of love, in the belief that it would make the partner happy. When they found that their partner cheated on them, their first response was of self-doubt, whether they did something wrong. The rejection affected their self-esteem and made them fear relationships altogether. Overall, past relationships were that starting point where the individuals first felt or developed their negative attitude towards commitment and developed commitment phobia. As already mentioned, seeing or hearing about other people’s negative experiences in relationships and marriages leads to the development of negative schemas. This acts as a maintaining factor that is responsible for the persistence of Commitment Phobia in an individual. People tend to pay more attention to negative information than positive and are likely to get influenced and learn from it faster as compared to the latter (Vaish et al., 2008). This tendency is commonly referred to as *Negativity Bias*, and it explains why others’ negative experiences can have such a profound impact on an individual. One of the participants, Olive, mentions, *“I have seen many of my close friends whose relationship started off well but ultimately ended up in a breakup only. I find that really distressing.”*

When we look at relationships in the Indian context, commitment, and emotional investment become important parts of them. Individuals, regardless of the duration of relationships, report being committed and emotionally invested in their relationships (Darak et al., 2022). This may be because of the cultural values and collectivist ideology we grow up with. Even in the times of globalization and a culture of flings and hook-ups, emotional attachment and being vulnerable become a part of relationships, which if turned sour, leave a person hurt and afraid.

The general notion is that commitment phobia is likely to exist in all types of close relationships. However, the findings show that commitment phobia in romantic relationships doesn’t necessarily mean it’ll surface in other close bonds too. Although, it may cause some people to draw boundaries and remain cautious, even in friendships, in order to protect themselves. Most participants reported having normal long-term friendships without any fear of attachment. Participant Teal said, *“I have other close friends too who have been there with me for many years. I never face any issue in these relationships.”* Participant Violet added, *“I have my best friend. And I am comfortable with people, as long as they don’t talk about my feelings.”*

Apart from the themes discussed, there’s yet another observation that would help in strengthening the link between Commitment Phobia and Bowlby & Ainsworth Attachment theory (1991). Bowlby and Ainsworth have identified four major attachment styles- Secure, Anxious-preoccupied, Dismissive-avoidant, and Fearful-avoidant, which develop during

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childhood but play a significant role in shaping an individual's personality and relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth, 1967). Secure attachment style is characterized by high self-esteem and high interpersonal trust, Anxious-preoccupied by low self-esteem and high interpersonal trust, Dismissive-avoidant by high self-esteem and low interpersonal trust, and Fearful-avoidant by low self-esteem and low interpersonal trust (Thakkar et al., 2016). Now, these can be associated with the kind of orientation a person has with respect to who/what they hold accountable for the possible failure of their past or future relationships. The following three orientations are hereby proposed (Fig. 1)- focus on the Self, focus on Others, and focus on the Situation. Individuals who focus on self tend to hold themselves responsible for the failure of their relationships in the past or future. This shows that their self-esteem is low but their trust in the other person is high (high interpersonal trust). Consequently, they have an anxious-preoccupied attachment style. Participant Lavender said, *"But it was related to me, I was too much in my head. I know it was my own anxiety and depression during that time that were the problem."*

In the second orientation, people tend to hold the other person accountable for the failure of their relationships in the past or future. They have high self-esteem and low interpersonal trust which is indicative of a Dismissive-avoidant style. Participant Violet mentioned uncertainty of people's behavior as the problem- *"People lie a lot. They get in your head and influence you."*

The third orientation is similar to the second one but instead of holding the other person responsible, people shift the blame of the failure of their past or future relationship onto the situation. They have high self-esteem but they don't trust the situations that may arise (low interpersonal trust). This again implies a Dismissive-avoidant style. While talking about Commitment Phobia, Teal said, *"If I'm in a relationship, it feels like something terrible is going to happen that will screw everything up."*

To conclude, the present study highlighted the themes derived from individuals living in urban, modernized cities of India. They are the ones expected to hold a fine balance between Western ideas and Indian *sanskari* values. In the midst of it, we were able to see how they perceive commitment and the heavy burdens of long-term commitments. Family influence and values, personal experiences, and the culture they grow up in project upon their relationships and ideas related to them. It was evident in the findings too.

Commitment Phobia is a prominent fear in today's generation that affects them and inhibits the development of healthy relationships. Dealing with commitment phobia is important to protect people from feelings of isolation, loneliness, and inadequacy in general. But before learning ways of treating it, understanding the phobia is crucial. That is what this research study aimed at, along with looking at this concept from an Indian contextual lens.

The inclusion of Commitment Phobia in the DSM can be a useful step in providing specific treatment to the concerned individuals, and adding to their well-being. However, due to the meager research done on this topic, acknowledgement of commitment phobia under specific phobias in the DSM remains heavily dependent on future research.

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The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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