WEDDING CEREMONIES

The Ultimate Handfasting Guide

Handfastings are one of the oldest known wedding ceremonies but the tradition has evolved over the centuries. A tradition that was once common, grew to near extinction as time progressed, but the last few decades have seen a resurgence of this lovely tradition once again.

What Is A Handfasting?

The short answer: A handfasting is an element of a wedding ceremony that includes wrapping cords, ribbons, or cloth around the couple's clasped hands. The couple or the officiant then ties a knot which symbolizes the binding of their union. Handfasting is an ancient matrimonial tradition that has made a resurgence in popularity in recent years. They are also known as hand-tying ceremony, handfasting wedding, or binding ceremony.

The History of Handfastings

Handfasting is a lovely ritual that has been used for ages. In Scottish and English ancient times, a handfasting ceremony would take place for 1 month to 1 year prior to the wedding. In fact, Handfasting was a commonly used term meaning "engaged to be married" in some circumstances. It represented the couple's intent to marry and their commitment to each other. Another form of handfasting was the more permanent and binding kind, in which it took the place of a church wedding ceremony, and was considered legal in every way.

It is believed early handfasting ceremonies and weddings were part of pagan worship, Celts migrated to Britain from Europe around 7000 B.C. and brought the ritual with them. As settlements became more structured, the importance of marriage increased. Handfastings lasted well through the Middle Ages. It is believed that even Shakespeare was married via a handfasting.

The term handfasting derives from the custom of tying the bride and groom's hands and wrists together during the ceremony. A specially made cloth was used and in some traditions, it was not untied until the marriage had been consummated. It is believed the term handfasting is derived from the Anglo Saxon word 'handfaestung'.This described the tradition of shaking hands to signify any contract, not just one associated with marriage.

Over the centuries handfasting ceremonies have changed. For example, in addition to marking a wedding or betrothal, they have been used as a means to renew vows at relevant points in a union. Some of the core elements remain fundamental to it, however, particularly the way in which the ribbon or chord is tied during the handfasting, which has roots in legal aspects of the tradition.

It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, in our increasingly secular and diverse society, handfasting is having something of a renaissance. Many couples are choosing to include elements of the ceremony or indeed replicate ancient pagan rituals linked to the tradition. This combination of the ancient and modern lends itself well to creating ceremonies that are unique and personal to each individual couple.

But Isn't A Handfasting Just For Pagan Weddings?

Handfasting does have Pagan origin but it is not required to be a practicing Pagan to take part in a Handfasting. Handfastings are becoming increasingly popular as a choice for engaged couples to add to their wedding ceremony. Since Handfastings aren't religious, it is a great option for couples who want to enjoy a spiritual but not religious ceremony. No one wants a boring ceremony! This is a great addition to any wedding idea to give the audience and the couple lifelong memories.

Modern couples in the last few decades often used Handfastings when legal marriage was not an option. Before the 2015 passing of the Marriage Equality Act, many LGBTQ+ couples used Handfastings as a way to join together in ritual. Of course, a commitment ceremony was the common choice in these situations, but handfastings were often incorporated either into the commitment ceremony as an additional element, or in some cases, the handfasting took the place of the entire ceremony. In either case, Non-Denominational Officiants learned how to perform Handfastings in order to offer the ceremony to couples from all walks of life.

Ok, But A Handfasting Is Mostly A Hippy Dippy Thing, Right?

Because handfastings are an ancient ritual, where nature was often a large part of all ritual ceremonies, it was not a large stretch that the more "nature-oriented" couples (e.g. hippies) would gravitate to the beautiful and natural handfasting ritual. It has often been used in outdoor weddings, rather than the more formal church settings or the more conservative rented hall settings. There is nothing inherently "hippy" about the ceremony, however, and its lovely sentiments add a beautiful element in any setting.

Handfastings in Pop Culture

Popular television series and movies have contributed to the surge in handfastings. Many couples long to capture the romance found in the epic tales of love found in such shows as Outlander, Braveheart, and of course, Game of Thrones. Even when the weddings themselves may be fraught with problems, the significance of the moment is captured in the simple act of wrapping hands with a cloth.

What Does A Handfasting Represent?

What a handfasting represents is very simple – the binding of two people who are in love. The couple joins hands as the officiant wraps the hands with a cloth or cord (the binding), a number of times while speaking ceremonial words with each wrap of the cord. At the end, the cords are tied into a knot, which you may have guessed by now is where we originally got the term "tie the knot".

There are various methods of wrapping the cords as well as several ways of tying the knot. One of the most interesting methods involves the couple pulling their hands through the cord at the end of the ritual, which "magically" ties the knot in a grand gesture. Applause always follows this magical knot-tying moment as it is fun for the audience and is indeed a fun way to start a marriage! We'll show you how this "magical handfasting" works later, as well as other styles which may be more suitable for different couples.

When Is the Handfasting Performed During the Ceremony?

There are a few answers to this question depending on whether the couple wants the Handfasting to be done as *part of the* ceremony or *as* the ceremony. If the Handfasting is done as part of the wedding, it can be done before or after the vows.

If the Handfasting Ceremony IS the ceremony, then the ring exchange happens first, then the hands are bound for the remainder of the ceremony. The couple can choose to pull the cords and *tie the knot* before or after they are pronounced as a married or committed couple.

Is a Handfasting Legally Binding?

Any wedding ceremony must include elements that the local presiding government office requires in order to make it legal. A Handfasting without those elements would mean the wedding is not legally binding. But of course, it's a simple matter of making sure your ceremony includes the required elements.

If you wish to make it legally binding, you must include those elements as required by your local statutes. This is usually, but not always, the need for a Declaration of Intent and the Pronouncement by the Officiant, as well as other requirements such as a Marriage License.

Once those elements are included, everything else is optional, which means if you want a Handfasting included in your wedding ceremony, you can have it! It's all up to you!

Can Handfasting Ceremonies Be Personalized?

Absolutely! Handfastings can certainly be customized so that they are fun, memorable, and a complete reflection of each couple.

Here are a few ways you can customize a handfasting to fit your particular style and wishes:

- Family members could come up and take turns wrapping the cord around the couple's hands. Involving loved ones always adds a special magic to any ritual.
- Use 1 cord or as many as 13 cords – whatever feels right to the couple. 1, 3, and 6 cords are the most common.
- Using a rope-style cord tied into a beautiful Celtic knot makes a beautiful display during the ceremony.
- Adding charms or decorations to the ends of the cords is a nice way to personalize the cords.
- Many couples like to choose their own colors for the cords that represent some special meaning in their lives or their relationship.
- The happy couple gets to keep the cord in their home as a sweet reminder of the ceremony. Couples will often bring a special box, cloth bag, or any other decorative container that the cord is placed into after the ritual is complete.

Where Do I Get A Handfasting Cord?

Many couples like to craft their own cords. Ribbons or cords can be purchased from local fabric stores or the fabric section of department stores such as Walmart, etc. Choose any colors that are significant to you, or that have historically significant meanings. You can braid them together if you've purchased multiple ribbons or cords, perhaps attaching small beads or charms.

This DIY approach has two advantages. First, it's very budget-friendly, and second, it is a fun project that the couple can work on together.

If there's just no time to create your own, or you'd simply prefer something pre-crafted for you, Etsy is the best place to find beautiful Handfasting cords for sale. In most cases, you can still have the cords customized just for you, with the style and colors you prefer. The cost is usually quite a bit more than a DIY version would be, but the end result can be quite stunning.

What Do The Cord Colors Mean?

The colors of the cords can be entirely personal. They don't have to "mean" anything. If your favorite color is magenta, then using a magenta-colored cord is perfect! However, throughout time, certain symbolic meanings have been placed on colors. A few of those are:

- **White**: purity, devotion, peace
- **Red**: passion, love
- **Dark Blue**: strength, longevity
- **Light Blue**: health, patience
- **Gray**: balanced
- **Black**: wisdom, empowered
- **Green**: fertility, luck
- **Yellow**: charm, harmony
- **Orange**: plentiful, kindness
- **Purple**: progress, power
- **Pink**: romance, happiness
- **Gold**: unity, longevity
- **Silver**: protection, inspiration
- **Brown**: earth, home

In the end, the choice of colors is entirely personal, just as it should be.

How Is a Handfasting Performed?

As we mentioned, there are many styles of handfastings, and of course, each can be customized and personalized, so there isn't just one way. But here are three common Handfasting Ceremonies that you can customize as you'd like.

"So Are Your Lives Now Bound" Handfasting Ceremony

This ceremony works especially well if your family, friends, or guests are involved. You may ask certain members to wrap the cords, or you may have the cords passed throughout the guests first, to have them hold the cords and imbue their wishes for your marriage before passing them on to the next guest. Once the Officiant begins the ritual, she will recite this, or similar, wording:

> *As this knot is tied, so are your lives now bound. Woven into this cord, imbued into its very fibers, are all the hopes of your friends and family, and of yourselves, for your new life together.*
>
> *With the fashioning of this knot do I tie all the desires, dreams, love, and happiness wished here in this place to your lives for as long as love shall last.*
>
> *In the joining of hands and the fashion of a knot, so are your lives now bound, one to another.*
>
> *By this cord you are bound to your vows..*
>
> *May this knot remain tied for as long as love shall last.*
>
> *May this cord draw your hands together in love, never to be used in anger.*
>
> *May the vows you have spoken never grow bitter in your mouths.*
>
> *As any child discovers when they are learning to tie their own shoes, the first move is to cross the ends.*
>
> *As your hands are bound by this cord, so is your partnership held by the symbol of this knot. May it be granted that what is done before the gods be not undone by man.*
>
> *Two entwined in love, bound by commitment and fear, sadness and joy, by hardship and victory, anger and reconciliation, all of which brings strength to this union.*
>
> *Hold tight to one another through both good times and bad, and watch as your strength grows.*

Nature's Elements Handfasting Ceremony

This ritual harkens back to the ancient times when Nature was a prominent part of any ceremony. An Officiant who is well versed in Wiccan or Pagan rituals will often be a good choice for this type of Handfasting. This Handfasting ceremony is fairly long and includes similar rituals as those of a traditional modern ceremony where the couple is asked questions (like the "I Do" portion of a ceremony). For this reason, this style of Handfasting is sometimes used as a complete replacement for a modern wedding ceremony.

If you do intend to use this as a complete replacement, however, keep in mind that it does not inherently include the legal aspects required by law to make this a legally-binding wedding. Please verify with your Officiant that you will have everything needed to make your ceremony legal if a legal ceremony is what you desire.

The absolute honesty inherent in the answers to the questions in this ritual usually takes guests by surprise. This leads the guests to concentrate on what is happening and gets them more emotionally invested in this part of the ceremony.

Here is the typical wording for this type of Handfasting ceremony:

> *Know now before you go further, that since your lives have crossed in this life you have formed ties between each other.*
>
> *As you seek to enter this state of matrimony you should strive to make real, the ideals which give meaning to both this ceremony and the institution of marriage.*
>
> *With full awareness, know that within this circle you are not only declaring your intent to be handfasted before your friends and family, but you speak that intent also to your creative higher powers.*
>
> *The promises made today and the ties that are bound here greatly strengthen your union; they will cross the years and lives of each soul's growth.*
>
> *Do you still seek to enter this ceremony?*
>
> *Couple replies "Yes, We Seek to Enter."*

In times past it was believed that the human soul shared characteristics with all things divine. It is this belief which assigned virtues to the cardinal directions; East, South, West and North. It is in this tradition that a blessing is offered in support of this ceremony.

- *Blessed be this union with the gifts of the East. Communication of the heart, mind, and body Fresh beginnings with the rising of each Sun. The knowledge of the growth found in the sharing of silences.*
- *Blessed be this union with the gifts of the South. Warmth of hearth and home The heat of the heart's passion The light created by both To lighten the darkest of times.*
- *Blessed be this union with the gifts of the West. The deep commitments of the lake The swift excitement of the river The refreshing cleansing of the rain The all encompassing passion of the sea.*
- *Blessed be this union with the gifts of the North Firm foundation on which to build Fertility of the fields to enrich your lives A stable home to which you may always return.*

Each of these blessings from the four cardinal directions emphasizes those things which will help you build a happy and successful union. Yet they are only tools. Tools which you must use together in order to create what you seek in this union.

I bid you look into each others eyes.

Spouse 1, Will you cause her pain?

Spouse 1 says, "I May."

Is that your intent?

Spouse 1 says, "No."

Spouse 2, Will you cause him pain?

Spouse 2 says, "I may."

Is that your intent?

Spouse 2 says, "No."

To Both

Will you share each other's pain and seek to ease it?

Couple says, "Yes."

First cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the first binding is made. Join your hands

Spouse 2, Will you share his laughter?

Spouse 2 says, "Yes."

Spouse 1, Will you share her laughter?

Spouse 1 says, "Yes."

To Both

Will both of you look for the brightness in life and the positive in each other?

Couple says, "Yes."

Second cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the second binding is made.

Spouse 2, Will you burden him?

Spouse 2 says, "I may."

Is that your intent?

Spouse 2 says, "No."

Spouse 1, Will you burden her?

Spouse 1 says, "I May."

Is that your intent?

Spouse 1 says, "No."

To Both

Will you share the burdens of each so that your spirits may grow in this union?

Couple says, "Yes."

Third cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the third binding is made.

Spouse 2, will you share his dreams?

Spouse 2 says, "Yes."

Spouse 1, will you share her dreams?

Spouse 1 says, "Yes"

To Both

Will you dream together to create new realities and hopes?

Couple says: "Yes"

Fourth cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the fourth binding is made.

Spouse 1, will you cause her anger?

Spouse 1 says, "I May."

Is that your intent?

Spouse 1 says, "No"

Spouse 2 , will you cause him anger?

Spouse 2 says, "I may."

Is that your intent?

Spouse 2 says, "No."

To Both

Will you take the heat of anger and use it to temper the strength of this union?

Couple says "We Will."

Fifth chord is draped across couple's hands

And so the fifth binding is made.

Spouse 2, Will you honor him?

Spouse 2 says, "I will."

Spouse 1, Will you honor her?

Spouse 1 says, "I will"

To Both

Will you seek to never give cause to break that honor?

Couple says, "We shall never do so."

Sixth cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the sixth binding is made.

The knots of this binding are not formed by these chords but instead by your vows. Either of you may drop the chords, for as always, you hold in your own hands the making or breaking of this union.

The cords are removed and placed on altar.

"These Are The Hands" Handfasting Ceremony

Although similar in style to the Nature's Elements Handfasting Ceremony, it differs in two ways. First, it begins with the Blessing Of The Hands, which is a lovely popular element. Second, the "I Do" portion (or "I Will" in this case) has a much more modern feel, as it is very similar to the standard traditions of this era than of the one from centuries ago.

Otherwise, all other notes about using this as a full ceremony, and the legalities involved, remain the same.

Here is the sample wording:

Know now before you go further, that since your lives have crossed in this life you have formed ties between each other.

As you seek to enter this state of matrimony you should strive to make real, the ideals which give meaning to both this ceremony and the institution of marriage.

Do you still seek to enter this ceremony?

Couple says "We do."

Blessing of the Hands

- *These are the hands that will passionately love you and cherish you through the years, for a lifetime of happiness.*
- *These are the hands that will countless times wipe the tears from your eyes: tears of sorrow and tears of joy.*
- *These are the hands that will comfort you in illness, and hold you when fear or grief racks your mind.*
- *These are the hands that will hold you tight as you struggle through difficult times.*
- *These are the hands that will give you support and encourage you to chase your dreams. Together, everything you wish for can be realized.*

Prepare the cords

Back in earlier years, the hands would be bound with whatever was available – vines, colorful cords, or scarf. Today we will use these cords to symbolize the binding, or promises.

The first promise

Spouse 1, Will you be Spouse 2's faithful partner for life?

Spouse 1 says, "I will."

Spouse , will you be Spouse 1's faithful partner for life?

Spouse 2 says, "I will."

To Both

Will you be each other's constant friends and one true love?

Couple says, "We will."

First cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the first binding is made.

The second promise

Spouse 2, do you promise to love Spouse 1 without reservation?

Spouse 2 says, "I will."

Spouse 1, do you promise to love Spouse 2 without reservation?

Spouse 1 says, "I will."

To Both

Will both of you stand by one another in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want?

Couple says "We will."

Second cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the second binding is made.

The third promise

Spouse 2, will you stand together with Spouse 1 your times of joy and sorrow?

Spouse 2 says, "I will."

Spouse 1, will you stand together with Spouse 2 your times of joy and sorrow?

Spouse 1 says, "I will."

To Both

Will you share the burdens of each so that your spirits may grow in this union?

Couple says, "We will."

Third cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the third binding is made.

The fourth promise

Spouse 1, will you always tbe open and honest with Spouse 2 , for as long as you both shall live?

Spouse 1 says, "I will."

Spouse 2, will you always be open and honest with Spouse 1, for as long as you both shall live?

Spouse 2 says, "I will."

To Both

Will you dream together to create new realities and hopes for this marriage?

Couple says, "We will."

Fourth cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the fourth binding is made.

The fifth promise

Spouse 2, Will you honor this person?

Spouse 2 says, "I will."

Spouse 1, Will you honor this person?

Spouse 1 says, "I will."

To Both

Will you both seek to cherish and strengthen that honor?

Couple says, "We will."

Sixth cord is draped across couple's hands

And so the fifth binding is made.

Binding of all promises

The knots of this binding are not formed by these chords but instead by your vows. Either of you may drop the chords, for as always, you hold in your own hands the making or breaking of this union.

The cords are removed and placed on altar.

How Are Handfasting Cords Tied?

This, of course, is the most confusing part, and it requires an Officiant who has performed Handfastings in the past, or who has practiced enough to be able to accomplish this flawlessly. It is actually fairly simple to do, but it requires a bit of coordination, especially if the officiant is holding a binder at the same time.

If you have a particular style of cord-wrapping or knot-tying that you prefer, you should discuss this with your Officiant, so they can prepare accordingly.

Here are a few ways to wrap cords and tie the knot, though any number of variations are possible.

Magically Tying The Knot

Remember that earlier on, we said, "One of the most interesting methods involves the couple pulling their hands through the cord at the end of the ritual, which "magically" ties the knot in a grand gesture." This is a demonstration of this method, and it is one that should be practiced with the Officiant before the wedding, to make sure the "magic moment" goes as planned. Many thanks to Liv Lyszyk Photography for graciously allowing us to share this amazing image with you.

Is that too fast to try to replicate? Don't worry, we have another that takes you through the process in a way that's easy to understand.

How To Make The Magic Handfasting Knot

1. The couple grasps each other's wrists, with their right hands.
2. Drape the cord over the top of the wrists.
3. Drape one end over the top once again, keeping it very loosely draped.
4. Now each couple turns their wrist slightly backwards to grasp the end of the cord nearest to their wrist.
5. With the cord in hand, each pulls their arm back towards the body and watches the magic knot form!

The Magic Handfasting Knot

Simple Under The Hands Knot

The couple crosses both of their arms, grasping each other's hands so that their arms form a natural infinity symbol. The cord or ribbon is loosely wrapped around their clasped hands as many times as needed to complete the ceremony wording. At the end, the officiant ties the two ends together under the couple's hands in any standard knot desired. The officiant grasps the cord and the couple removes their arms. The cord is handed to the couple for them to place into a special box or container for safekeeping.

Family Ties The Knot

Several members of the family, or friends, hold one cord each. As the officiant reads each portion of the ceremony, one member of the family will drape their cord loosely over the couple's clasped hands, continuing with each person participating, until the ceremony is finished and all cords have been draped. The officiant, or another family member, then ties all the cords together under the couple's hands. The officiant grasps the cords and the couple removes their arms. The cords are handed to the couple for them to place into a special box or container for safekeeping. Family members may also participate in this as well, by carrying the box to a stand or other resting place.

Is A Handfasting Right For You?

A Handfasting is a beautiful and meaningful ceremony that adds a special element to a wedding ceremony. If this mix of "ancient" and "modern" tradition appeals to you, then discuss this type of ceremony with Donna

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