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Intimacy, not divorce, can be best solution

By Don Bosley
Bee Staff Writer
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To divorce or not divorce? In scores upon scores of American marriages, that is the question.

It just happens to be the wrong question entirely, according to Joyce Catlett and Dr. Lisa Firestone.

"A conflicted marriage, with arguments and dissension, can really disturb the children. Divorce can really disturb the children," Catlett says. "The answer is partners learning to be close and compassionate toward each other. When they do that, they provide what their children really need."

Intimacy, and the fear thereof, has become a passionate banner for Catlett, Firestone and the Glendon Association, a nonprofit Santa Barbara group that conducts relationship workshops nationwide.

Catlett has collaborated with Firestone's father, Dr. Robert Firestone, on "Fear of Intimacy" (American Psychological Association), a study of why many people instinctively gravitate away from the very intimacy that would fulfill them.

Catlett and Lisa Firestone will lay out some of their findings at a book signing and lecture/video presentation next Sunday in Davis.

"If you look at the high divorce rate, we feel like one of the major reasons is the psychological defenses that each partner brings to the relationship," Catlett says. "They develop those defenses when they're children, to protect against pain, and they were functional then.

"But they can keep us from sustaining intimacy now."

The typical flash points for troubled marriages -- finances, sex, child-



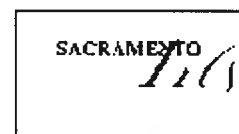
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...according to the two relational experts.

Instead, Catlett and Firestone find three general factors that contribute to relational distress: Selection (the choosing of a mate that is not "ideal"), distortion (seeing our partners or relationships as more negative than they are) and provocation (acting in ways that bring out anger and rejection from our partners).

Selection, for example, may be a factor tied intrinsically to those child psychological defenses. A young girl may learn to psychologically cope with a father who ignores or criticizes her; later, when she selects a mate, her entrenched defenses may steer her toward the same kind of man even if it's plainly unhealthy.

"Sometimes over and over again, we can be drawn to people who fit in with our defenses," Firestone says. "We're finding someone in our comfort zone, and not anybody who's outside the realm of what our defenses are formed to cope with.

"What we want to do is help people step outside those defenses."

The issue of distortion is one that plagues many couples, sometimes from the moment they say "I do." Catlett argues that people become more self-conscious as their relationship becomes more serious, and at some point they begin to act on that discomfort.

The result can be more and more criticism of the partner and the relationship. Some of the behavior can ultimately take the form of provocation -- which often brings out the worst in the partner, and thus seems to justify our criticism.

"A lot of this happens on the unconscious level," Catlett says. "I had a friend who went on her honeymoon, and her husband said he loved her hair. She went the next day to the barbershop and got it cut.

"She was surprised at his puzzled and angry reaction. But she had just been anxious about being married, and so did an action that made her less anxious."

Firestone says that more couples are likely to bail on a relationship than to face their fear of intimacy. That, in the end, may best demonstrate how very real the fear is.

"Even now, with the high divorce rate, half the people who stay married say they're unsatisfied," Firestone says.

"We think that getting rid of the partner is supposedly the problem. In reality, we have the power to change ourselves, but zero power to change our partner."