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'Tis the season of love - and being afraid of love

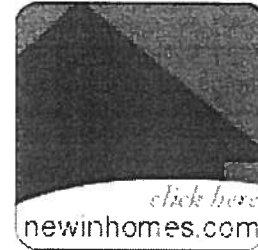
Valentine's Day is almost upon us, luh-uv is in the air, hearts are everywhere.

JUDY GERSTEL



Red may be the official colour of the season, but it's only superficial. More relevant is yellow. 'Tis the colour of fright.

Forget fragrant bouquets, candlelit dinners, bittersweet truffles. Think cold feet and the stink of fear.



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GO

More and more, the mere idea of intimacy is scaring people into a state they compare to having one's insides clean as a whistle.

How bad can intimacy be?

I'll tell you.

It can terrorize grown men (not a few women, too).

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"Indeed, most people," write Robert Firestone and Joyce Catlett, "are both frightened of and tend to withdraw from intimacy.

"Why?" they ask, in their new book with a title that doesn't mince words: *Fear Of Intimacy* (American Psychological Association). Firestone, a psychologist, and his co-author Catlett, wrote this book for therapists, as well as for lay people who want to understand what the devil is going on in their relationships.

Fear of intimacy is what fear of commitment is really about.

It's fear of being vulnerable, fear of rejection, fear of being hurt.

Often, the fear is based, according to Firestone's theory, on what he calls "fantasy bonds" - a once-useful, but now destructive form of self-parenting and self-nurturing.

In childhood, defences are formed against harmful or even just

thoughtless or ignorant, but hurtful, parenting.

These children grow up nurturing themselves. As adults, they may be characterized by creativity or addictive behaviour, or both.

When these defences persist into adulthood, and they inevitably do, they interfere with the ability to form real-life, intimate connections.

"Defences formed early in life preclude satisfactory attachments later on," the authors state succinctly.

So how do we sabotage intimacy?

Simple. We find fault with the other person, or find a reason to be angry, or provoke the other person's anger, or remove ourselves physically or emotionally, claiming we need our space and privacy.

How do I interfere with loving thee? Let me count the ways.

"When somebody is nice to us and warm to us," Firestone and Catlett write, "we may attack them to get them angry at us so that we don't have to face that closeness."

Firestone is a Ph.D. who counsels and trains at the Glendon Institute in Santa Barbara, Calif. So he tends to talk like an academic psychologist.

But what he's really talking about is how we turn others - and not incidentally, ourselves - off.

"Withholding (becoming distant or not being sexually responsive) . . . insulates us and helps maintain a posture of pseudo-independence."

It is frightening to be close, to want, to really feel love, to feel worthwhile, acknowledge the authors.

"All of those things are frightening but we have to take that chance."

Healthy people also feel apprehensive about being vulnerable in love. They also have boundaries.

But they don't exclude "transactions."

"In the truly loving couple," the authors maintain, "each partner recognizes that the motives, desire, and aspirations of the other are as important as his or her own . . . and tries not to interfere, intrude, or manipulate in order to dominate or control the relationship."

Easy, eh?

So why does there seem to be an epidemic of intimacy avoidance while truly loving couples are hard to find?

I tracked down Firestone in Florida, on a book promotion tour.

Fear of intimacy isn't more prevalent now than it was years ago, he says. "We're just more aware now."

Many, if not most, people in relationships are "living in a dishonest way," he says, and it has probably always been thus.

People give up the reality of a truly intimate relationship for the fantasy of security, an illusion of connection. They'll say they love each other, and believe it, even though they may be acting in a very destructive manner to each other, Firestone says.

Oh dear, not exactly a romantic valentine to coupledness, is it?

The truth is, they say, "that mature love (kindness, respect, sensitivity, and affectionate treatment) is not only difficult to find but is even more difficult to tolerate or accept."

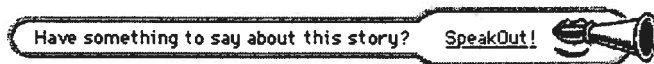
Finally, being academics and not romantics, they sum up in a list:

- It is difficult to find individuals who are mature enough emotionally to manifest love on a consistent basis. It is even more problematic to accept love when one does receive it, because being loved challenges core psychological defences.
- Survival and healthy psychological functioning do not require that one be loved. We're programmed in childhood to believe that happiness depends on finding "true love" and a long-term, exclusive relationship or marriage. This is unrealistic and often leads to misery.
- Relationships based on compensation for personal inadequacies usually fail. The quest for love is more likely to succeed if people achieve their full potential and also seek partners who are strong and independent.

In other words, don't focus on "Be Mine" this Valentine's Day.

Instead, be of sound mind.

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