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MARCH 23-29, 2000

BY JINA CARVALHO

Marriage as an institution appears to be in peril. A recent survey conducted by the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University finds that people are staying single longer than they did in the past.

According to the survey, only 67 percent of American women aged 35 to 44 were legally married as of 1998. This contrasts with 81 percent in the period from 1890 to 1940.

The most basic motivation for this decrease is widespread pessimism about marriage, particularly among women. Nearly 50 percent of marriages end in divorce and the average marriage lasts only seven years. Yet most people still see marriage as the ideal for which to strive. Why is there such a discrepancy between people's actions and what they claim to want most out of life?

In a new book, *Fear of Intimacy*, authors Robert W. Firestone and Joyce Catlett point out that most people don't really want what they say they want. They find it easier to fantasize about finding love than to tolerate the experience of being loved in reality. In addition, most people are confused about what love really is.

"Many people use marriage to support a destructive fantasy process," Dr. Firestone said. "Most married partners say they love each other, yet in most cases, if you observe their behavior closely, you would find it difficult to reconcile their behavior with any reasonable objective use of the word 'love.' Partners often manipulate each other in ways that violate their human rights. They intrude on each other's boundaries, speak for each other, and routinely deceive each other."

In *Fear of Intimacy*, the authors describe how many couples develop an illusion of connection and closeness to substitute for the deterioration in sexual attraction, friendship, and love that were present at the beginning of the relationship.

The causes of this decline can be traced

to childhood. The very defenses that people form early in life in an attempt to cope with emotional pain limit their ability to give and accept love in their adult relationships. When they experience genuine love and affection directed toward them, they usually react negatively, because being loved threatens these defenses.

On a more optimistic note, Catlett and Firestone emphasize that people can overcome the fear of intimacy. They offer methods that help couples develop the understanding and the skills necessary for coping with relationship problems.

Co-author Catlett asserts, "Far from seeing relationships or marriage as doomed to failure, our book is hopeful and optimistic. People really can change themselves in ways they never thought possible. Even divorced or alienated couples can come to understand and work through their problems, and many couples we have worked with have been able to re-establish positive, harmonious relationships. People really can challenge their defenses and develop a greater capacity for both giving and accepting love in their lives."

Joyce Catlett, MA, and clinical psychologist Lisa Firestone, PhD, will present two events in the Miami area. They will discuss how people can overcome the fear of intimacy and they will offer methods that help couples develop the understanding and skills necessary for coping with relationship problems.

Mar. 25, 8-9:30 p.m. — Books & Books, 296 Aragon Ave., Coral Gables, FL, Contact: Books & Books at 305-442-4408.

Mar. 25, 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. (for professionals) — "Fear of Intimacy: Challenging the Barriers to Closeness in Relationships," University of Miami Whitten University Center, Room Flamingo A, Coral Gables, FL. Sponsored by the Dade County Psychological Association (a regional chapter of the Florida Psychological Association), Contact: 305-669-3605.