

Love hurts

Fear of Intimacy

Robert W. Firestone and Joyce Catlett
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Relationship books sell in the millions, but actual relationships don't seem to be getting any better. In fact, divorce and dissatisfaction among couples remain sky-high despite the near-ubiquitousness of relationship gurus assuring us that bliss will ensue if we learn to listen to each other, communicate more clearly and develop more tolerance for gender-based differences.

What's going on? Is the problem that not enough couples are mastering interpersonal communication skills? Or does the issue perhaps go deeper?

If one believes the perspective presented in *Fear of Intimacy* by Robert W. Firestone and Joyce Catlett, the answer is the latter. Firestone and Catlett believe that the central problem in relationships lie with the defenses against pain developed by each partner in childhood, which they unconsciously bring into their adult relationships and which prevent genuine

intimacy. The daughter hungry for love from a remote father is both likely to be initially attracted to a distant man as an adult, and disappointed when he proves as cold as was her father. Her partner, who initially looked to her to provide the emotion and sparkle he lacked, will eventually come to resent her as much as he did his emotionally hungry mother.

Firestone and Catlett suggest that such profound issues require in-depth solutions that go way beyond seven-point programs for better communication. First, each partner must take responsibility for his or her own role in the relationship. They must stop trying to change their partner. They must then have the courage to face their own defenses against pain. If they are willing to "sweat out" the initial anxiety that will result from doing so, they can move toward the genuine intimacy needed to sustain a long-term relationship.

Perhaps most intriguing in *Fear of Intimacy* is the role of negative thought patterns, or "voices," in relationships. Each of us is plagued by a

Laugh at Woody Allen's therapy jokes all you want—you are unlikely to achieve a lasting relationship unless you learn to deal with your unconscious negative thoughts.

series of unconscious negative thoughts that have a major impact on how we relate to our partners, they suggest. Men and women might both have "voices" telling them to withhold emotional commitment so that they will not be taken advantage of. Unless both partners are willing to do the hard work of surfacing such voices, and developing strategies to break their influence on their behaviors, they are unlikely to have the kind of relationship they want.

It is often fashionable these days to deride analyzing childhood problems, with Woody Allen being a poster boy for the ineffectiveness of long-term therapy aimed at surfacing childhood issues. While it is not useful to dwell on the details of childhood, say the authors, it is critical to understand negative thoughts, originally developed as a child, that influence partners' behavior *now* in their relationships.

This approach is not easy. Few of us would choose sweating out painful childhood emotions if we could avoid doing so. But, the authors suggest, we often have no alternative if we are serious about achieving an intimate relationship.

The *Fear of Intimacy* approach requires a willingness to undergo emotional pain, but it also leads to far greater intimacy and understanding. And it may well offer the only path that can truly work for couples committed to building sustainable relationships for themselves and their kids. □

Author Joyce Catlett and Robert W. Firestone's daughter Lisa Firestone will be appearing at the Avid Reader bookstore in Davis at 2 p.m. Sunday, March 4.

