

Finding Real Love

Human beings crave intimacy, to love and be loved. Why then do people feel isolated in their intimate relationships? Four researchers and clinicians, Ayala Malach Pines, Shirley Glass, Lisa Firestone and Joyce Catlett, discuss the alienation that affects so many people and how to overcome it.

By Cary Barbor

We need to be close to other people as surely as we need food and water. But while it's relatively easy to get ourselves a good meal, it is difficult for many of us to create and maintain intimacy with others, particularly with a romantic partner. There are many variables that affect the quality of our relationships with others; it's difficult to pin it on one thing or another. But in this article, based on a symposium recently held at the annual American

Psychological Association convention in Washington, D.C., four mental health professionals discuss their ideas about how we sabotage our intimate relationships—and what we can do to fix them.

Choose to Lose?

Many factors influence the level of intimacy we enjoy in our relationships. The various decisions we make, and our behavior toward one another, are what foster closeness or drives us apart. These decisions are all under our control, although we are influenced by old patterns that we must work to change.

The first decision we make about a relationship is the partner we choose. Whom we fall in love with determines the level of intimacy in our relationships, according to Ayala Malach Pines, Ph.D., who heads the behavioral sciences in management program at Ben-Gurion University in Israel. We often choose partners who remind us of significant people from our childhood—often our parents—and we set out to recreate the patterns of our childhood. Let's look at an example:

Tara met Abe at a party. She was instantly attracted to the tall, lean man with a faraway look in his eyes. Abe, who had been standing alone, was delighted when Tara approached him with her open smile and outstretched hand. She was not only beautiful, but she struck him as warm and nurturing as well. The conversation between them flowed instantly. It felt comfortable and easy. Eventually, they fell in love, and after a year, they were married.

At first things were wonderful. They had the kind of closeness Tara had always dreamed about with her father. Though she was sure he loved her, she never felt she had her father completely to herself. Even when he held her on his lap, he had a faraway look. But with Abe things were different. He was there with her

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completely.

The intimacy between them also felt terrific to Abe. It was not the kind of suffocating closeness he always dreaded—the kind of intrusive closeness he experienced as a child with his mother, who used to enter his room uninvited and arrange his personal belongings with no regard to his privacy. But Tara was different. She did not intrude.

But occasionally, Abe would come home from work tired and annoyed. All he wanted was a drink and to sit with the paper until he could calm down and relax. Seeing him that way, Tara would become concerned. “What is going on?”

she would ask anxiously. “Nothing,” he would answer. Sure that there was something very wrong, and assuming that it must be something about her or their marriage, Tara would insist that he tell her. She reminded him of his mother, and he responded the way he did with his mother: by withdrawing. To Tara, this felt similar to the way her father behaved. She responded in the same way she did when her father withdrew: by clinging. The struggle between them continued and became more and more intense over time, with Tara demanding more intimacy and Abe demanding more space.

Recreating the Family

Like Abe and Tara, people choose partners who help them recreate their childhood struggles. Tara fell in love with a man with “a faraway look in his eyes,” and subsequently had to struggle for greater intimacy. Abe fell in love with a woman who was “warm and nurturing,” then spent a lot of energy struggling for more space.

Tara's unresolved intimacy issues complement Abe's. For example, one partner (often the woman) will fight to break down defenses and create more intimacy while the other (often the man) will withdraw and create distance. So the “dance of intimacy” follows: If

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the woman gets too close, the man pulls back. If he moves too far away, she pursues, and so on.

To achieve greater intimacy, the partners must overcome the anxiety that compels them to take their respective parts in that dance. In the example, Tara needs to control her abandonment anxiety and not pursue Abe when he withdraws, and Abe needs to control his engulfment anxiety when Tara pursues him and not withdraw. Working to overcome these anxieties is an opportunity to resolve childhood issues and can be a major healing experience for both partners.

Infidelity: The Road Back

If a couple can't overcome their anxieties and achieve a balance, however, fear and an inability to achieve intimacy will linger. This can create a vulnerability to affairs, says Shirley P. Glass, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in private practice in Baltimore. Either partner may feel burned out from trying to get his or her emotional intimacy needs met in the relationship. A pursuing woman, who wonders if her needs will ever be met, may withdraw out of hopelessness. Yet her partner may think that the relationship has improved because the complaining has stopped. Meanwhile, she could be supplementing her unmet intimacy needs through an extramarital relationship that could ultimately lead to separation or divorce.

Once an affair has occurred, it only serves to erode intimacy further. Intimacy requires honesty, openness and self-disclosure. The deception that accompanies an affair makes this impossible. In addition, if the affair partner becomes the confidante for problems in the marriage, it can be threatening to the marriage because it creates a bond of friendship between the affair partners that goes beyond sexuality.

For trust to be rebuilt and intimacy reestablished, the walls of deception created by the affair need to be broken down. The spouse needs to be back on the "inside" of the partnership and the

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extramarital partner on the "outside." The involved spouse must stop all personal exchanges with the affair partner and disclose to the marital partner any unavoidable encounters with the affair partner, without prompting. Unfaithful partners can only regain credibility by being completely honest. People report that they recover from their partner having a sexual relationship with another person before they recover from being deceived.

But if both partners can be totally honest, and if communication in the partnership improves, there is a good chance that the marriage can survive the infidelity and the relationship can become strong again.

Overcoming Fear of Intimacy

It is our fear of intimacy that inspires these ingenious ways of avoiding it. This raises the question: How can we overcome our fear of intimacy? We can start by breaking down our defenses.

We all bring defenses to relationships, and, unfortunately, it is often these defenses that spell trouble. We develop our defenses and negative beliefs in childhood. They are what we utilized to protect ourselves against emotional pain and, later, against anxiety about death.

A core defense that often leads to the downfall of a partnership is "the fantasy bond," according to Lisa Firestone, Ph.D., adjunct faculty at the University of California Santa Barbara Graduate School of Education, and Joyce Catlett, M.A., co-author of *Fear of Intimacy*, published recently by the American Psychological Association. The fantasy bond is an illusion of a connection to another person. It develops first with the mother or primary parent figure, and people often try to recreate it in their adult relationships.

People use various techniques to reestablish this primary relationship. They may first select a partner who fits their model, someone they can relate to in the way they related to their parent or other family member. They can distort their partner and perceive them as being more like this

The View

People have conflicting views and beliefs about relationships. Here are a few common ones:

1. Relationships are important and central in affecting a person's life.
2. Relationships are generally unstable. Young people marrying for the first time face a 40% to 50% chance of divorce.
3. There is a good deal of dishonesty in relationships. People are duplicitous in many ways: sexually, emotionally, etc.
4. Relationships are often based on emotional hunger and desperation. People mistake longing and desperation for love.
5. Few long-term relationships are based on high-level choices. Often people "take what they can get."
6. Choices can be made for negative as well as positive reasons. For example, people have a tendency to select mates who are similar to a parent, which can be good or bad.
7. People confuse sex with love. During the early phase of a relationship, attraction and pleasure in sex are often mistaken for love.
8. People feel they are failures unless they succeed in finding mates.

(Source: *Fear of Intimacy*, 1999)

significant person than they are. Third, if all else fails, they tend to provoke their partner into the behavior they seek. All of these mechanisms curtail their ability to relate and make it less likely that people will be successful in achieving true intimacy in their relationships.

A secondary defense that helps preserve the fantasy bond is, according to Firestone and Catlett, "the voice." All people tend to carry on some form of internal dialogue within themselves as though another person were talking to them: reprimanding them, denouncing them, divulging negative information about others, and so on.

In intimate relationships, both individuals may be listening to the dictates of their respective voices. Unfortunately, these only create more defensiveness. Both partners may use rationalizations promoted by "the voice" to ward off loving responses from the other and justify their distancing behavior.

Speak Up, Therapeutically

A technique developed by Robert Firestone, Ph.D., and used to reverse this process and allow greater intimacy is voice therapy. Voice therapy brings these internalized negative thoughts to consciousness. The goal of voice therapy with couples is to help each individual identify the "voice attacks" that are creating conflict and distance in the relationship. In identifying specific self-criticisms as well as judgmental, hostile thoughts about the other, each partner is able to relate more openly.

Here is an example of someone using voice therapy. Sheryl is in a four-year relationship and was starting to have problems. She and her partner Mark came to therapy for help, and they progressed through these four steps of voice therapy over the course of treatment. Following is a glimpse into Sheryl's process.

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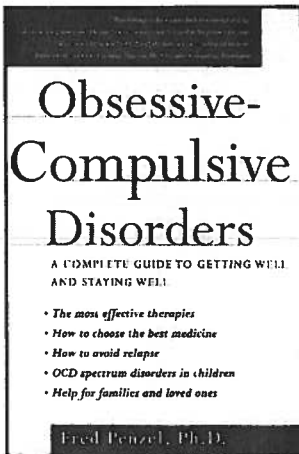
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If this sounds too good to be true, remember that it's usually only our own mental programming that holds us back.

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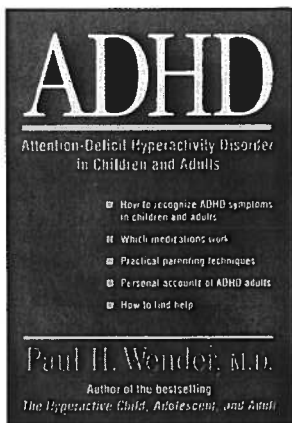
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The Ideal and Not So Ideal

Interactions in an ideal and healthy relationship:

1. Nondefensiveness and openness
2. Honesty and integrity
3. Respect for the other's boundaries, priorities and goals, separate from self
4. Physical affection and responsive sexuality
5. Understanding—lack of distortion of the other
6. Noncontrolling, nonmanipulative and nonthreatening behavior

(Source: *Fear of Intimacy*, 1999)

Interactions in an unhealthy relationship:

1. Angry and negative reactions to feedback; being closed to new experiences
2. Deception and duplicity
3. Overstepping boundaries Other seen only in relation to self
4. Lack of affection, inadequate or impersonal, routine sexuality
5. Misunderstanding—distortion of the other
6. Manipulations of dominance and submission

(Source: *Fear of Intimacy*, 1999: The Glendon Association)

perceives is limiting his or her satisfaction within the relationship.

Sheryl: The feeling I have is that I've always liked Mark, but lately I feel like I can't stand it when he's nice to me. I feel like I have a mean streak.

Therapist: In response to his liking you.

Sheryl: Yes.

Verbalize self-critical thoughts and negative perceptions of the other in the form of the voice, and let go of the feelings associated with them.

Therapist: What are you telling yourself about the relationship?

Sheryl: It's like, 'Don't show him anything, don't show him you like him.' I tell myself, 'Just don't show it, you're such a sucker if you show it.' When he's vulnerable I just want to squash him. And it's for no reason except for he's being sweet.

Develop insight into the origins of the voice

and make connections between past experience and present conflicts.

Sheryl: I've seen myself be like my mother millions of times. In previous relationships I've acted so much like her, I didn't even know it. I saw her as being a really critical person, she was very critical of my father. And she would be mean to him. Sometimes I act like that myself.

Alter behaviors and communications in a direction that counteracts the dictates of the voice.

Therapist: So the hope is for you to hang in there and to tolerate the anxiety of giving up these defenses and the fantasized connection you have with your mother. If you do sweat it out then you'll be able to have more in your life. It takes a lot of courage to go through that process but it's really worth it.

Sheryl: I feel like it would make me

sad, too, because I would feel a lot. When I have that other point of view, I feel big and mean. And when I just let things be, and don't act in ways to push Mark away, I feel like a soft, sweet person.

After trying voice therapy, Sheryl reported that she felt closer to Mark. She noticed a shift in her feelings, both in accepting his caring about her and genuinely caring about him.

In therapy sessions, both partners reveal negative thoughts and attitudes toward himself or herself and each other. In this way, they share each other's individual psychotherapy. In tracing back the source of their self-attacks and cynical views to early family interactions, they gain perspective on each other's problems and feel more compassion for their mates as well as themselves. Changing old patterns often brings up anxiety, so part of the treatment is to learn to tolerate the anxiety and work through it, so the partners can maintain the behavioral changes and ultimately increase intimacy.

Homework

For couples who are not in therapy, there are many ways to change destructive patterns that prevent intimacy. Partners could become aware of the times when they attack themselves or think negatively about their partner. They could record their self-critical thoughts and hostile attitudes in a journal; they could reveal the contents of their destructive thoughts to a trusted friend or to their mate. They could assess how close to reality these thoughts are (usually not very). Each could set goals for what he or she wants out of the relationship and then keep track of how closely his or her actions match these goals.

Another good idea for couples is to make an active effort to move away from isolated couple interaction and toward an extended circle of family and friends. This often affords a better perspective and provides a potential background for understanding and breaking destructive, habitual patterns

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of relating. Partners need to admit to themselves and their partner if they have become distant, and that their actions are no longer loving or respectful. By reawakening their feeling for one another, they can achieve a higher level of intimacy.

We always have choices to make about intimacy—from the partners we choose to the way we interact with them each day. Recognizing our patterns, tolerating our anxieties, and working together on our relationships will help us overcome our fear of intimacy. Learning how best to communicate with each other and treat one another will help us enjoy loving, lasting relationships. ■

Cary Barbor is a freelance writer based in New York. Her work has appeared on CBS Healthwatch and in Walking and Women's Sports and Fitness, among other publications.

READ MORE ABOUT IT

Fear of Intimacy, Robert Firestone and Joyce Catlett (American Psychological Association Books, 1999)

The Trauma of Infidelity: Research and Treatment, Shirley Glass (Norton Professional Books, 2001)

Falling in Love: Why We Choose the Lovers We Choose, Ayala Malach Pines (Routledge, 1999)

Combating Destructive Thought Processes: Voice Therapy and Separation Theory, Robert Firestone (Sage Publications, 1997)

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