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## Desperately Seeking a Mate

**Even for singles who have all but given up, there is hope in finding the right they learn the basic relationship skills.**

By *Stephen Gregory*  
WebMD Feature

March 20, 2000 (Los Angeles) -  
- Meaghan Muir wants a life partner. But the 28-year-old Santa Barbara woman has decided to take a breather after a failed 3-1/2-year relationship. At one point, the couple talked seriously about spending the rest of their lives together. But not now.

"There were differences between us," Muir says. "And I don't know if we weren't able to work through them or if we just didn't put enough effort into getting past them. When I'm being practical about it, I say to myself it never would have worked out, but sometimes I think, 'Did I really explore it? Did I really get into it?'"

### Singles Seeking Singles

Muir is one of millions of single adults reflecting on their efforts to find true love. Th but they also know that it's harder and harder to find. And those who think they've often mistaken. The rate of marriage is down; the rate of divorce, up. The number marriages for every 1,000 women dropped 43% between 1960 and 1996, while th divorce more than doubled in the same time period, according to a report publishe by the National Marriage Project, a research and education initiative at Rutgers Un New Jersey.

And the news on cohabitation isn't much different. In a study scheduled to appear i summer's *Annual Review of Sociology*, Pamela Smock, PhD, a researcher at the of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, finds that five out of six cohabiting cou that living arrangement within three years, with only 30% of them legalizing their u marriage. The majority of cohabiting couples simply break up.

### Retreating for Self-Protection



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What gives? Some experts suggest that our longer life expectancy and society's acceptance of divorce mean that many singles (or once-again singles) feel no pressure to get the knot sooner rather than later.

But one expert has another view. Many singles are emotionally rudderless in relationships because they subconsciously retreat from truly loving and being loved, seeing the risks involved as too great, says Robert Firestone, PhD, a Santa Barbara psychologist. He says they slip into a self-protective retreat mode for fear of getting emotionally wounded.

In his book *Fear of Intimacy*, published in 1999 by the American Psychological Association, Firestone theorizes that exploring true intimacy is often anathema to the self-protective mechanism people have used since childhood to guard against emotional pain. Although many people enter relationships with the best of intentions, they often have difficulty breaking past these self-protective walls, he says. As a result, they fail to achieve lasting love and intimacy with their partners.

### **The Solutions**

Firestone encourages intimacy-phobes to seek counseling and to become their own emotional trainers. By urging themselves to take risks and bare their vulnerable sides, they may be able to establish a true connection with their partners. "Defenses shut out experiences and cut off feeling," Firestone says. "Move toward openness and honesty and directness and take your chances."

Two other often-cited pieces of advice are as obvious as they are ignored: Talk to couples about how they were able to achieve a meaningful, long-lasting relationship. Learn basic relationship skills, such as how to handle disagreements. "Too many couples believe that if they find themselves disagreeing, they haven't found true love. Of course they're going to have disagreements," says Diane Sollee, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples' Education, which represents a nationwide network of courses in building relationship skills. "They just need to know how to handle them. You have to learn to understand and respect your partner's position even if you don't agree with it."

Fear of intimacy, experts concede, usually can't be overcome quickly. But for singles looking to become part of a couple, relationship skills definitely can be honed.

Stephen Gregory has been a journalist for 10 years and has worked for such publications as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.