

The Space Between You & Me

How
to find
and
how to
create
intimacy

Physical attraction is usually the springboard for romance. But for true intimacy, authors Robert W. Firestone and Joyce Catlett say in *Fear of Intimacy*, it's important to look for someone who is:

- non-defensive and open
- honest and has integrity
- respectful of the other person's boundaries, goals and priorities
- not afraid to show physical affection
- willing and able to see their mates as they are and not how they'd like them to be
- not controlling, manipulative or threatening

ADVICE

To develop relationships:

- Don't avoid or repress your feelings. Be willing to show vulnerability. Men, especially, tend to ignore feelings of hurt or sadness. Instead, talk them out in a non-aggressive way, using statements starting with "I" to express yourself, such as "I feel sad we're not connecting" or "I feel lonely for you." Criticism and blame push people away.
- Don't use the Internet to avoid face-to-face communication with others.
- Rushing into a sexual relationship is likely to lead to a false sense of intimacy. Strive for emotional intimacy first.

■ Explore the past, but don't dwell on it. Regardless of what happened when you were growing up, take responsibility for making changes in your behavior and actions.

■ Evaluate your expectations of your mate. Don't expect that person to meet your every need.

■ Be aware that certain periods in a relationship, such as getting married or having your first child, require difficult adjustments.

SOURCES: Dr. Robert W. Firestone, Joyce Catlett, Dr. John Amodeo, Dr. Les Parrott, Dr. Althea Horner, Dr. Ralph Earle

— Jennifer Packer

Our fears keep us from achieving true intimacy. Here is how to help the walls tumble down

By Jennifer Packer

Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

Men may be from Mars and women from Venus, but don't blame the galactic divide for your relationship problems. Blame Mom and Dad instead.

As clichéd as it sounds, that's what psychotherapist Robert W. Firestone and educator Joyce Catlett have concluded. And their arguments are compelling.

Many people who say they want serious romance are afraid of the very thing they seek: intimacy. And

RELATIONSHIPS

Hooking up at the Internet Cafe.

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the reason they have trouble forming genuine bonds is that they learned negative attitudes as children.

If, for example, Mom and Dad were stingy about doling out affection, their children will be, too. Or, if one or both parents smothered their children with attention, their children will become smotherers.

"Typically, people have the same defensive patterns as their parents, because they imitate their parents unconsciously," says Dr. Firestone, who collaborated with Ms. Catlett to write the recently published *Fear of Intimacy* (American Psychological Association, \$39.95).

Those defense mechanisms, such as hostility, Please see TODAY'S on Page 3C.

Today's time crunch undercuts intimacy

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mistrust, emotional withdrawal and manipulative behavior, are the main culprits in failed adult relationships. And although giving up those life-long defenses can free people, the process can force them to question their very being.

Intimacy comes from a close, loving relationship in which both partners respect each other and communicate openly and honestly. Both people show affection, consideration and kindness without losing their individuality.

But achieving such intimacy has become increasingly difficult because people seem to be leading busier lives and depending on technologies that isolate them further.

From automated teller machines to the Internet, the range of alternatives to face-to-face communication is boundless, says Les Parrott, a psychology professor at Seattle Pacific University.

"It's so easy to go through your life these days and hardly talk to a real person," says Dr. Parrott, co-author of *Relationships: An Open and Honest Guide to Making Bad Relationships Better and Good Relationships Great* (Zondervan/Harper Collins, \$16.99).

For some, deep-seated fears of forging close, romantic bonds can cripple their social lives.

Althea Horner, a clinical psychologist in Pasadena, Calif., tells the story of a college student who was so terrified of becoming intimate with a woman that he threw up during dates as soon as he felt an emotional connection.

As it turned out, his mother had demanded constant attention from him and consumed his life, never respecting his individuality. So as an adult, Dr. Horner says, "He was terrified because his expectation was 'I will just be taken over. I will have to be who she wants me to be. I'd rather go back to being lonely and full of despair.'"

Difficulties with intimacy are the root of a range of problems people face once they're grown up, says Dr. Horner, author of the book *Being and Loving* (Jason Aronson Publishers, \$19.95).

Eating disorders, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder — "These are all manifestations of

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people's failed capacity for intimacy," she says. "Every decade has its own vehicles for expressing this."

Unfortunately, people tend to choose mates who possess the same negative characteristics as one or both of their parents. That's because, no matter how distasteful, those traits are familiar to them, says Dr. Firestone.

Those who don't examine their attitudes and try to change them may never be able to have or maintain healthy, intimate relationships, particularly the kind that lead to marriage and other long-term arrangements.

Dr. Firestone says people who can't form healthy relationships may have a "fantasy bond," an imaginary connection that gives them a sense of security, albeit false, and an illusion that they don't need other people.

They retreat into their imagination and act in ways that push their mates away rather than take the risk of trying to achieve real satisfaction with them.

"People get married and become gradually more distant. They become less sexual," says Dr. Firestone, who is based in Santa Barbara, Calif. "They maintain a fantasy of closeness, giving up love, sensitivity and affection for the fantasy."

An increasingly mobile society is also undermining intimacy, some experts say. For young people, it can be even tougher.

"Today's youth face a level of uncertainty that previous generations never had to deal with," Dr.

Horner says. "It used to be that you went to college, then got a job and you stayed until you retired and got a gold watch. People no longer have loyalty to a company. They just move on.

"Young people are a lot more anxious as a result. What happens is, some young people latch onto one another because they're frightened and they form unusually dependent relationships too soon."

Once they've settled down, the couple may well find they aren't suited at all. And that's hardly helpful in developing a healthy, long-lasting relationship, Dr. Horner says.

Yet another mechanism for avoiding intimacy is overwork. "It's a safe area, says Dr. John Amodeo, a marriage and family therapist and the author of *Being Intimate: A Guide to Successful Relationships* (Penguin Books, \$11.95).

"You get instant results, you can feel like you've achieved something, but then you go home and there's this gnawing desire for connection, so you go back to work. People don't want to feel that longing that's so deep and unmet."

With today's fast-paced culture and emphasis on instant gratification, many people simply aren't willing to put in the time and energy it takes to build healthy romantic ties.

"Intimacy is built on secrets, the information the two of us share about our history and our various shared experiences, but people have less and less time together," says Dr. Parrott.

What can people do to bring more intimacy into their lives? Be less defensive, Dr. Firestone says. Be honest about who you are. Get to know yourself better. Don't forget to be affectionate with your partner. As sex becomes less of a priority in a relationship, show tenderness; it helps keep you close with your partner.

People should understand "why they need to build defenses, how they learned to hold back physical affection during childhood and why they tend to prefer a fantasy of love rather than genuine relating," he says. Then "they can begin to overcome these barriers to intimacy."