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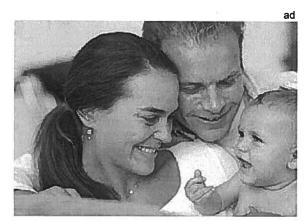
Desperately Seeking a Mate

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?'



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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



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

But one expert has another view. Many singles are emotionally rudderless in relati because they subconsciously retreat from truly loving and being loved, seeing the risks involved as too great, says Robert Firestone, PhD, a Santa Barbara psychol 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 As Firestone theorizes that exploring true intimacy is often anathema to the self-prote mechanism people have used since childhood to guard against emotional pain. Alt many people enter relationships with the best of intentions, they often have difficult past these self-protective walls, he says. As a result, they fail to achieve lasting lov intimacy with their partners.

The Solutions

Firestone encourages intimacy-phobes to seek counseling and to become their ow emotional trainers. By urging themselves to take risks and bare their vulnerable si 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 hon 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 relationshi learn basic relationship skills, such as how to handle disagreements basic. Too m couples believe that if they find themselves disagreeing, they haven't found true lo course they're going to have disagreements," says Diane Sollee, director of the W D.C.-based Coalition for Marriage, Family, and Couples' Education, which represe nationwide network of courses in building relationship skills. "They just need to kn handle them. You have to learn to understand and respect your partner's position don't agree with it."

Fear of intimacy, experts concede, usually can't be overcome quickly. But for singl 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 publi the Los Angeles Times, the San Diego Union-Tribune, and U.S. News and World