

A LINE ON LIFE

1/4/89

Barriers to Intimacy *

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In another article, we discussed characteristics that typify a healthy, intimate relationship. However, many people have difficulties in developing such relationships. Here is a list of common reasons for these difficulties.

1. Shyness. This trait causes people to avoid social interactions or to isolate themselves in social settings — which restricts their opportunities for intimacy. Even though shy people often desire intimacy and companionship, they seem unwilling or unable to take the everyday risks necessary to overcome their shyness. Lacking in self-esteem, their fear of any negative response is so great that they usually make no attempt to initiate contacts.

2. Aggressiveness. Aggressive people may scare potential partners away — or cause them to use a defensive, mistrusting response for fear of being overpowered. Toning down aggressive language and behavior can improve a person's chances for intimacy. (However, do not confuse assertiveness with aggressiveness. Assertiveness respects the needs and desires of others without minimizing one's own needs. Aggressiveness involves meeting one's own needs by denying the needs of others.)

3. Self-centeredness. These individuals want to be the center of attention but ignore the needs of others. (However, ignoring others' needs is not out of malice, but merely because they are unaware of the needs of others.) Self-centered people monopolize conversations and are generally unwilling to do what a partner wants — unless it goes along with their own needs. These people frequently begin intimacy by telling others a great deal about themselves, but the conversation is usually too one-sided to develop real intimacy.

4. Selfishness. Going beyond the self-centered person, a selfish person is often manipulative, trying to gain a "*tactical advantage*" over others to gain their own way. The selfish person doesn't care about what is best for the relationship or the other person. Instead, that person only seeks to exert control for personal gain. Although this control can be aggressive, it does not have to be.

5. Lack of empathy. These people are unwilling or unable to accept the other person's views, thoughts or feelings. They seem to have difficulty in listening. Either they block out what is said, or they fail to internalize the message and look at the situation from their partner's point of view. This type of person will have much difficulty in establishing an intimate relationship. (Don't confuse empathy with sympathy — feeling sorry for someone. Empathy attempts to see the world from another's viewpoint; sympathy merely pities them for having that view.)

6. Unrealistic expectations. Many people have such idealistic expectations about intimate relationships that *no* relationship could ever meet up to their standards. In this view, the prince and princess "*live happily ever after*" without the multitude of real-life problems. This view often leads to disappointment, frustration and possibly to giving up.

7. Fear of intimacy. This fear may be related to all of the previous problems. In order to be intimate, each of us takes the risk of **vulnerability** in the process. When we share the deep, personal sides of ourselves with others, we take the risk of being rejected or ridiculed. This risk is too much for people who distrust others, fear rejection or fear losing control. These people may avoid forming more intimate ties, preferring to have many superficial relationships. If they do form an intimate relationship, they try to protect themselves by regulating the degree of closeness. Whenever a relationship becomes too intimate, they pick a fight, become distracted or bury themselves in work. In short, these activities form barriers against too much intimacy, keeping it under control.

In some cases, fear of intimacy is a life-long condition. Sometimes, such a fear reflects traumatic relations with parents during early childhood. In other cases, it develops after a painful experience in an intimate relationship. If the emotional scars are deep enough, the fear of intimacy is easily understandable.

Discovering what changes need to be made is the first step in changing your life.

Very few of us can comfortably develop closeness and rapport with others in a seemingly effortless way. Most of us have to work in developing intimacy. At one time or another, we have found that our intimacy overtures are ignored or rejected. However, if your lack of success is rather consistent, one or more of the above causes may be at work. Finding out what is wrong is only the first step in changing your life.

If you have trouble with intimate relationships, to start the New Year, knowing the reasons for your problem is the beginning of changing your life. It may not make the New Year more prosperous, but it is very likely to make it happier.

* Adapted from Denny and Quadagno's *Human Sexuality*, Mosby Publishing, 1988, pages 366-367 and Masters, Johnson and Kolodny's *Human Sexuality*, Scott-Foresman, 1988, pages 324-328.