

Intimacy: What's so scary about being close?

by Carolyn Blackman, RN, LCSW

Diane thought that her relationship with Tom was coming along beautifully. They had just spent a lovely weekend together. On Wednesday, she discovered that Tom had gone out with another woman on Monday night.

Nancy got a promotion. Since then, Don felt that she had been more demanding and critical of him.

It seems that every time Jim and Ann get closer, they have a big fight that drives them further away. These are the examples of the kinds of ways that couples drive each other apart when they get too close for comfort. It's sometimes called the "Push/pull" phenomenon, or the "Cha-Cha". Some couples exist on an emotional see-saw; one minute they are intensely loving, and the next minute they are intensely arguing.

If this has ever happened to you, you may have been aware that what you were arguing about or was resentful of was not the issue. Some people never seem to get close to another person. They may have a desire to find a mate, but something always gets in the way. Why do we do this to ourselves?

Intimacy problems can arise from childhood experiences. One particular phase in life that can present difficulties later on is that time around age two, when the child learns to establish his/her own identity as separate from his primary nurturer. If the nurturer is overly attached or overly neglectful to the child, he or she may have a difficult time resolving this stage. Later on, you can feel smothered when you get close. Some people worry about being overly compromised with nothing left.

A rejection or death of an especially close person can cause so much pain that the individual involved may try to protect himself from getting hurt again, by pushing people away.

People who have been divorced may be particularly gun-shy. If one person became too dependent, or both were too dependent on each other, the relationship was fused, leaving no room to grow and change. Bitter memories of such a stifling relationship can make you very self protective.

Caution in a relationship is wise. A certain amount of fear is healthy; it keeps us from getting involved with the wrong person. When we allow our fears to become destructive, or to prevent us from getting close to anyone at all, we need to work through them.

It is best to bear in mind what it is in you that you are really afraid of. That way, you can choose whether or not it is safe to push through your fears. Hold a model in your mind of how you would like to be in a relationship; self-directed, independent, as well as capable of being warm, soft, and full of feeling and attractive. When you become demanding, resentful, or argumentative, try to remember what came before. Ask yourself if you are acting out of fear. It takes a lot of hard work to maintain a good relationship.