Andrea M. Kulberg, Ph.D.
Doctor's Journal

Relationships & Marriage - Fear of Intimacy

Many people come to my office to receive help for a "fear of intimacy." Somehow, they've learned that they are afraid to trust other people, yet, they don't know what this really means, or how this may relate to their personal history. Fear of intimacy is most commonly associated with a history of emotional abandonment by a primary caregiver. This means that one or both caregivers significantly reduced contact with the child (perhaps after a divorce), or were otherwise unavailable due to an addiction to a substance or work, or due to a mental or physical illness, or death. Although the child may not recall the actual abandonment or may seem to be coping in an acceptable manner at the time of the loss, they retain a very keen emotional memory for the pain related to the loss. Thus, they spend most of their lives, consciously or unconsciously trying to prevent its reoccurrence. Understandably, such persons avoid emotional closeness with others and have difficulty with trust in general. This means that they are not able to tell others their loving or tender feelings, nor are they able to communicate hurt, anger, or fear directly in a relationship. They are scared by conflict, because after all, the resolution of conflict brings greater closeness. So, they tend to distance themselves from folks with whom they encounter anything more than superficial interaction. Recovering from fear of intimacy involves a willingness to take risks in learning how to tolerate the tension (and the closeness!) that comes from expressing our true thoughts and feelings to others with gentleness and respect. The fear of loss and/or abandonment is, over time, replaced by a deep sense of stability and oneness in relationships (and greatly improved mental health!). This risk-taking behavior can begin in any relationship, but may require therapy or a confidential small-group setting.