

## MAKING INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS WORK

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Have you ever heard Barbara Streisand sing: "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world?" Stop and ask yourself, What is your reaction when you hear this song? Does it convey a profound truth or overdone sentimentality? Now stop reading again for a moment and ask yourself why the relationships we desire so ardently can be the source of so much frustration and pain? Is it inevitable that we will be disappointed when we allow ourselves to need another person?

In my psychotherapy practice, I commonly hear accounts of people loving and getting hurt and deciding to be more careful next time. One such person, who I will call Tom, fell deeply in love with a woman who I shall call Elaine 15 years ago. When Elaine broke the relationship off after dating Tom a year, Tom was "crushed." Fortunately, Tom was strong enough to go on with his life. He embarked on a journey of self-discovery and decided that he would never again need another woman the way that he needed Elaine. He decided that he was a whole person on his own and that he did not need anyone else to make him feel complete. When Tom married Lori five years ago, he did not feel the passionate love for her that he felt for Elaine. Initially Tom was relieved that his relationship with Lori was less intense; but after five years, he began to become bored. Sensing this, Lori became fearful. Her behavior changed in ways that further destabilized the marriage. After a particularly angry fight, Lori asked Tom if he would be willing to see a couples' therapist. Tom agreed.

Tom entered couples therapy with his wife not knowing what he wanted. What he learned was something that he did not expect. Over the course of the next several months, Tom began to realize that he was not allowing himself to depend on Lori because he was afraid of getting hurt the way that Elaine had hurt him. As Tom learned to depend on Lori and ask for what he needed, his commitment to her and his love for her grew. Tom's desire to understand and fulfill his wife's needs grew too. Tom then began to understand what his therapist meant when she talked about **interdependence**.

Interdependence is the best of independence and dependence. It is the maturity required to thrive on one's own combined with the ability to trust and depend on someone. Forty years ago,

dependence was still emphasized in relationships. In marriage, two people became "one person." The divorce rate was low and committed relationships were the norm. Starting in the sixties, things began to change. Women discovered that there were some aspects to their dependence that were holding them back. They began to demand equal rights in the workplace and elsewhere. Simultaneously, mental health professionals began talking about the needs of the individual. The "me-generation" was thus born. If a couple were not fulfilling each others' personal growth needs or if their relationship became too conflict-ridden, they were far more likely to get a divorce.

What do couples *really want* from each other? Do we over emphasize attributes associated with independence in our relationships because we have inwardly given up on the possibility of a deeper intimacy? If so, what are the results of this denial of our needs? We may become bored or depressed. We may begin to look outside of the relationship for our self-fulfillment. Either way, couples who have lost their capacity for intimacy either spend empty time together or increasingly spend more time away from each other.

Typically, when couples are asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-10 (one being dependent and ten being independent, most couples are above midline (five or slightly above). When asked what their ideal rating would be, couples respond at about midline. This is good news. When we realize that our intimate partners want more intimacy it can allow us to hope for more intimacy too.

Too often, however, couples wait until there is a crisis between them before they ask for help. Fearful of exploring intimacy needs with their mates and also afraid that the therapist will take sides (and cause us to feel even more blamed than we already feel) many couples initially do not consider counseling. Once in counseling, however, couples will find that the therapist's intent is not to provide answers or to ascertain who caused the problem but to help the couple to actively understand their own relationship better. When this begins to occur, couples stop playing the "right-wrong" game with each other and begin earnest work on their relationship.