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Now we are all developing a phobic fear of intimacy relationships

By Cherry Norton, Social Affairs Correspondent

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People are failing to form intimate relationships as they become tougher and more cynical and self-protective, research suggests.

This lack of intimacy, caused by inadequate or stressful parenting, is contributing to the rising divorce rate, said Dr Robert Firestone, a clinical psychologist at the Glendon Association in Santa Barbara, California. He has published his findings in a book, *Fear of Intimacy*.

Dr Firestone and colleague Joyce Catlett found that many people fail to be intimate because they put up psychological defences learnt in childhood, which act as a barrier to closeness in adulthood.

The research, examining the emotional state of 200 people, showed that those who were smacked or beaten as children, who have overly critical or punitive parents, or whose parents tried to live their own lives through their children, are at risk of being unable to be intimate as adults.

"People form defences on the emotional pain they experience during their childhood, which varies significantly from one person to another. Home life is becoming more stressful for everyone, and because the world is becoming a tougher and more competitive place, more and more people are protecting themselves," said Dr Firestone. "People are more cynical and distrustful and are less willing to take a chance and open themselves up emotionally. The lack of intimacy is contributing to the high divorce rate."

Dr Firestone believes people do not always want what they say they want, and find it easier to fantasise about finding love than tolerate the real experience of being loved. "When people are loved and chosen it often disturbs their self-protective, psychological equilibrium and fosters anxiety."

In the UK, almost one in three marriages ends in divorce. The researchers believe that if people chose partners for honesty, good health and the ability to be independent, rather than sexual attraction, similar education and compatibility of interests, they would have a better chance of having an intimate relationship.

People with strong addictive personalities, who drink, smoke or work to excess, are to be avoided as they are less likely to be capable of intimacy, said Dr Firestone. But people can learn to be more intimate, he said. "It is about emotional maturity. People can be taught how to open up to life and given the courage to be vulnerable."



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