

# FEAR OF INTIMACY: WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO LOVE AND BE LOVED?

## 親密恐懼——為什麼我們無法好好愛人，好好被愛？

*When we feel frustrated in our intimate relationships, when we feel we are not good enough, or unworthy of love, what is actually needed is that we learn to love ourselves. Psychological counselor Chou Mu-Tzu gently guides readers through the root causes of our fear of intimacy, and teaches practical strategies to overcome it.*

We all want to be loved, and to establish a stronger connection to our intimate partners, but we often find that the closer we get, the more we fear being hurt. Chou Mu-Tzu, author of Taiwan's top inspiration/self-help title *Emotional Blackmail*, returns to address our fear of intimacy by exploring the nature of love, and the influence of our family of origin and childhood environment on the way we interact with our intimate partners.

The first half of the book explains what the fear of intimacy is, how our childhood experiences shape the way we establish relationships later in life, and the ways in which the fear of intimacy manifests. Drawing examples from the Japanese film *Memories of Matsuko*, the book demonstrates the connection between childhood wounding and the patterns that repeatedly play out in the love lives of the film's characters. Cases studies in the latter half of the book will help readers identify their individual fear-type in intimate relationships: the fear of abandonment, the fear of not being good enough, the fear of the loss of self, and so on. Balancing theory and practice, the author analyzes the root causes of each fear-type, and suggests practical exercises for dealing with them. Through deepening self-awareness,



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readers are guided to reflect on how their relationships are impacted by the fear of intimacy, and initiate a profound process of self-healing.

More than a book about love, *Fear of Intimacy* is a master class on loving others, and accepting that we are worthy of being loved. This work of healing presents its knowledge in a clear, well-structured, and practical manner, helping readers to face themselves and overcome the deepest obstacles in their intimate relationships.

## Chou Mu-Tzu 周慕姿

Chou Mu-Tzu holds a master's degree in psychology and counseling from National Taipei University of Education. She has worked as a psychologist and school counselor, and is a frequent guest on TV shows where she discusses issues of mental health. She currently runs the Sincere Counseling Center, and is the lead vocalist of the folk-gothic metal band Crescent Lament. Her first book *Emotional Blackmail* sold over seventy-thousand copies in its first six months of release. The book sparked a discussion in the media about the concept of emotional blackmail, and has been translated into Korean, Thai, Vietnamese, and Indonesian.

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By Chou Mu-Tzu

Translated by Christina Ng

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## **Chapter 1: What We Do Not Know About the Fear of Intimacy**

She looks at him lounging on the sofa, and anger rises from within.

“Why don’t you take me out? Or try to chat with me?”

He stays silent, as he doesn’t know what to say. He feels like whatever he does, it won’t make her happy.

“You simply don’t care about me. Work and other people are more important to you, aren’t they?” she says with a sob.

He still doesn’t say a word.

She sits in the room doing her own thing.

He is outside the room, desperately knocking on the door. “Is there anything wrong? Can you please not ignore me? Please, tell me what I can do.”

She doesn’t say a single word in the room. She is fed up with everything, and wants to find a place where she can catch her breath.

“It’s time to put an end to this,” she thinks aloud.

## Perhaps We All Have a Fear of Intimacy

When we broach the topic of the fear of intimacy, many people might think of an elusive person who keeps others at arm's length; a seemingly talented and charming person who is simultaneously volatile or hard to get close to; a person who can't stay in a relationship for long and can't build long-term relationships.

Maybe you've met someone like this in your life before. Or, maybe, you yourself are such a person.

We might think that a person like this isn't adept at building close relationships. Not only that, anybody who is in a relationship with such a person must be excellent at building close relationships, since they must be the one putting all of the effort to keep the relationship going. Otherwise, how would they manage to stay in such a relationship?

However, would you believe me if I told you that the two people involved in such a scenario might actually both have a fear of intimacy?

I started with two classic scenarios (the genders can be swapped) which are very common: One person wants to be close and to be loved, whereas the other person is distant and needs space. These two classic characters might both be knee-deep in a fear of intimacy, but both are unaware of it.

Having read up to this point, your curiosity might have been slowly piqued:

"I can understand that a person who is distant and needs space might have difficulties with intimacy, but why would the other person, who wants to be close and to be loved, also have difficulties with intimacy?"

### What Causes a Fear of Intimacy?

Intimacy is a feeling we have when we connect with people that are important to us. This feeling – which we continue to seek in our relationships – brings us a sense of security and happiness.

A person first experiences closeness with their parents or main guardian, thereby forming their very first intimate relationship. *If we feel that person responding with love, care, protection, and understanding as we explore and reveal ourselves in the relationship, then we develop certainty: "you will be there when I need you. You will love and protect me without judgment or criticism."* When we look at this from an attachment theory viewpoint, there is a higher possibility of these children having a more secure attachment style, where they are willing to reveal and express themselves in relationships, as well as enjoy intimacy more freely.



However, when a parent or main guardian holds themselves back in expressing their needs, avoids dealing with their emotions, and curbing themselves from understanding them, then the intimacy that we feel in relationships will be affected.

For example, if the parents:

- ◆ find it hard to accept others' feelings, and express their own feelings
- ◆ have volatile emotions and lack clarity about their own emotions. They often show their emotions through rage, and even dump these emotions on their children.
- ◆ are long term absentees in their children's lives...

These sorts of emotional neglect – not understanding your own emotions or those of others – and low frustration tolerance will create a sense of insecurity and danger in children when they are growing up. Therefore, the child will start to find ways to protect their inner self. They will respond to the unsafe environment by not showing their real emotions, or they will center on other people's wishes rather than their own in order to prevent themselves from getting hurt, or to get themselves out of danger.

However, this method of self-protection will cause us to be more and more out of touch with our real emotions and our real selves. When we deal with our possibly “menacing” parents, we will respond in self-protective ways which, in turn, make it even harder for us to build close and intimate relationships with them.

### Why Is It Hard to Feel Intimacy?

I once witnessed this situation:

A five-year-old kid was crying over his broken toy, to which his mother responded vehemently, “What’s there to cry about! If you don’t stop crying, I’m never going to buy you toys again!”

It is possible that this mother never really wanted to be angry with her child in the first place. However, when she saw her child crying, she immediately felt frustrated. Anger was her way of quelling this frustration. On top of that, she wanted to use rage and punishment (I’m never going to buy you toys again) to stop her kid – the source of her frustration – from expressing their emotions.

Of course, as a bystander, it’s easier for me to think of five hundred better ways to respond: hug the child, stay by the child’s side to comfort him, understand why the child is behaving like this....

However, the key point is not only “why can’t this mother respond to her child’s emotions adequately?” but also “why does the mother have such a vehement reaction to her child’s negative emotions?”

Why was the mother so quickly affected by, and frustrated with, the child’s negative emotions, and why did she respond just as hastily with anger and the desire to punish her child?

*This might be related to how other people responded to this mother's emotions when she was young.*

### **Do You Think That Negative Emotions Are Bad?**

If this mother grew up in a family that deems negative emotions as bad, then her parents would always be angry with her and punish her when she showed negative emotions. If that was so, she would never have had the opportunity to gain an understanding of her own emotions, nor would she have experienced acceptance and forgiveness when she suffered a meltdown.

To her, "negative emotions are bad", and this belief stays with her.

When her parents got angry with her and punished her for her negative emotions, they were also dumping their frustrations on her. When parents do not understand their own emotions and find it hard to accept their children's emotions, it also means that the parents themselves are strangers to the needs and emotions of their real selves. They are helpless when it comes to dealing with them. Therefore, when their child encounters similar situations, exhibiting their real feelings and needs, they also find difficulty accepting and understanding those. This results in an emotional distance between the parents and the child.

When we cannot show the parts of ourselves that are real and vulnerable, then *we cannot really understand each other and feel closeness towards each other either.*

In the case of this mother who got angry when her child exhibited negative emotions, her anger is not only a tool to manage her child's negative emotions, but also to *protect herself – to protect her own vulnerability and helplessness by using anger to deal with her child.*

As a child, if we never had a guide who showed us how to understand our emotions, we would develop all kinds of survival strategies to cope with the situations that render us helpless and vulnerable. We are not able to understand what we really feel about things, and we have no ability to understand the real feelings of others. This then results in difficulties feeling intimacy with others.

### **Our Neglected Real Selves Are the Cause for a Lack of Closeness**

Many times, parents not only fail to listen and pay attention to their children's feelings and needs, they also suppress their children's needs. They feel inadequate at managing emotions. In order to have a sense of security and control in the family, they intentionally or unintentionally send a message that "this family can only function if it follows my rules; no one can bend the rules." *In this kind of environment, out of a need to survive, children will forgo their wish of wanting to be close and understood.* Instead, they will try their best to invent a survival strategy that allows them to live under these rules. The strategy helps them to follow these rules. In exchange, they receive attention and care, and, eventually, a sense of security that helps them to survive.

Simply put, this means:

We learn how to use our own survival strategy to get limited love, care, and attention in the families we grow up in. But we do not get a feeling of closeness when interacting with other family members, nor do we feel our real selves will be seen and accepted with empathy and respect.

We also lose the opportunity to get to know our parents' real selves. What our parents truly feel is elusive to us. We don't get to know our real selves either, because what our parents reflected back to us as children were the people our parents wanted us to be and not our real selves.

In the end, the survival strategy that we invented makes us believe that this is the only way to get even a tiny fraction of what we want in the relationship, and eventually have some sense of security.

Now let's go back to the examples in the beginning of the chapter:

"Why won't you take me on a trip?" This question reeks of anger within, pointing fingers at the other party so as to get attention or an apology. Needs are met in the end – this is a survival strategy.

However, what this girl really wanted to say might be:

"We haven't spent a lot of time together recently. I really want more time with you, because you are very important to me."

This is *what the girl really feels and needs*.

The irony is, *the kind of partner that this girl seeks out will most likely be a partner who lets her use this survival strategy*. That is to say, the partners she seeks out are likely to be the kind of people who give her plenty of reasons to point fingers, or complain about not spending enough time with her.

### Is It Dangerous to Show Your Vulnerability?

It is not easy to understand and express your real needs, especially if you've never had the space to really get to know yourself. When you do not have any experience expressing your real self, or being accepted for who you are, showing your vulnerability is the most dangerous thing imaginable, even if having more intimacy in your relationship is right there at the top of your to-do list.

"What if I am not understood, or even rejected and mocked? What would I do?"

"What if the other person doesn't respond to me? What then?"

The feelings that arise would be intolerable. *The hurt and indifference that you experienced from your parents will come surging forth like torrential waters. This is what we call "emotional replay"*. We find ourselves drowning in an emotional tsunami, desperate for some piece of driftwood to cling to.

