

The 'Intimacy Anorexia' That Can Kill Your Marriage

When counseling couples for more than 30 years, you learn quite a bit. Over the years of counseling, I began to see on a fairly regular basis the client who almost addictively avoided intimacy. Over time, I began to put a cluster of symptoms together, and in our field of recovery it became known as intimacy anorexia.

One client I'll call Tonya was a very athletic woman who had been married to Tim for 17 years. They had one child. Tonya was a flight attendant and Tim was a chiropractor in a suburb of a larger town. Tonya would travel for work quite a bit, even though she really didn't need to work because of finances.

When Tonya was home, she busied herself with 10-mile runs, swimming, riding her bike and working out. At night she would read books, magazines or study her Bible. Sex was infrequent, and Tonya never asked Tim for sex. Tonya didn't like to pray with Tim, and Tim felt he couldn't really connect with Tonya unless they were supporting one of their child's activities.

Tim reports feeling very alone and that Tonya regularly picks a fight if they start getting closer or if they are ready to take a family vacation. He feels hopeless to ever really feel loved and feels more like Tonya's servant than her lover or husband.

Micah is an engineer. He and Trisha have been married 13 years with two boys. Micah works a lot. When he comes home, he eats and hits the computer for work, watches television, does yard work or plays video games. Micah seems to be a good dad and is really involved in the Boy Scouts with the boys. Trisha says they don't really talk. She feels avoided emotionally,

spiritually and feels like when they have sex, she feels alone.

She has tried to introduce marriage books, go to marriage conferences and counseling, but Micah's response is always the same, "I'm not a girl and I don't do that kind of stuff." Micah controls Trisha with his cold silence or outbursts of anger. Trisha tries to make the best of it but feels trapped by her faith to stay. Micah doesn't take any responsibility when he makes mistakes in the relationship. Trisha states he blames her for everything and makes her feel needy for wanting a kiss, caress or when she tries to be creative sexually.

Like the food anorexic who refuses to eat, the intimacy anorexic refuses to connect to their spouse. They can be masterful at relating within other relationships, but in their marriage, they truly avoid intimacy. I have put together a checklist to see if this is a crack might be growing in your marriage as well.

Characteristics of Intimacy Anorexia

1. Do you stay so busy that you have little time for your spouse?
2. When issues come up, is your first reflex or response to blame your spouse?
3. Do you withhold love from your spouse?
4. Do you withhold praise from your spouse?
5. Do you withhold sex from your spouse, or are you not emotionally present during sex?
6. Do you withhold spiritual connection from your spouse?
7. Are you unwilling or unable to share your authentic feelings with your spouse?
8. Do you use anger or silence to control your spouse?
9. Do you have ongoing or ungrounded criticism (spoken or unspoken) towards your spouse?
10. Do you control or shame your spouse regarding money or spending?

11. Do you feel more like a roommate than a lover in your relationship?

If you or your spouse has five or more yes answers, then one of you is probably suffering from intimacy anorexia.

Intimacy anorexia is like an addiction. The person who has it can have denial, anger, blaming or rationalization of the behavior.

The intimacy anorexic can be the nicest man or woman to friends and family. It's only in the marriage that they avoid intimacy. The spouse of an anorexic feels unimportant, unwanted, untouched and will feel that they are regularly starving for connection and begging for love.

In many cases, the intimacy anorexic will need professional help. Intimacy anorexia is very stubborn, so don't feel like a failure if you've tried everything but haven't been successful. Intimacy anorexia can be lethal in a marriage. After 10 years, the spouse of an anorexic feels hopeless to be loved yet trapped to stay.

The intimacy anorexic can be the husband or the wife. They look good on the outside, but their spouse can't get them to give their heart to them on a regular basis. Intimacy anorexics, like those involved in other addictions, can be helped if the person who has it really wants to be free.

For this person, they also have to admit that they have a problem (this is difficult because they desire to be good or seem as not flawed most of the time). They will have to do a daily regimen of intimacy exercises with their spouse. They also have to initiate sexual intimacy on a regular basis. They usually have to have consequences for withholding to be successful early on.

I will never forget my client, who was a large Texan, just two months into working his treatment plan after an Intensive. He

sat in my office and cried because he was so happy. He truly thought he would never be able to become intimately connected to the wife he really loved. Healing from intimacy anorexia is work, but the results are so amazing.

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