

H E L P O U T

Committed relationships — A thing of the past?

by Sandra Pinches

Frustration over the failure to find and sustain a committed love relationship brings more people to the counselor's office than almost any other personal problem. Gay men and lesbians face special obstacles to commitment because of societal prejudice, but nongay people as well have become increasingly discouraged by the transitory aspect of most intimate involvements. Many people now enter relationships already assuming that they will not last, which unfortunately tends to increase the likelihood of an early ending.

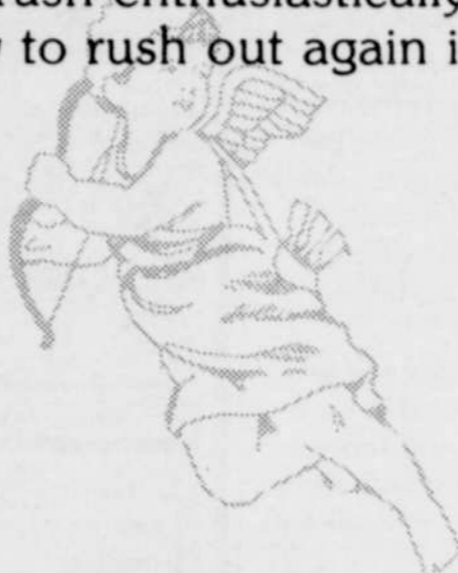
Difficulties with intimacy and commitment are so widespread, sociocultural conditions rather than individual personalities must be the basis of the problem. One contributing factor is the rejection of shared traditional values, roles and rules, which previously helped to equalize people's expectations about how a relationship would work. In a changing society, individuals struggle to define new values for themselves, resulting in a wide variety of beliefs regarding the nature of a good relationship. The number of areas in which individual differences may develop into disagreements or even incompatibility is thus greatly increased. Since people still tend to assume that their partners' values and goals

are somewhat similar to their own, intense feelings of betrayal often accompany the recognition of the magnitude of differences. The demise of many relationships may be simply a reaction to this disillusionment experience. Other couples struggle to find a common ground despite the differences, but are unable to do so. Relatively few couples re-commit themselves to each other at this stage, which usually occurs during the second or third year of a relationship.

socialization prescribed an accommodating role for women with an emphasis on preservation of the relationship rather than on self-gratification. This role probably contributed significantly to the stability of both heterosexual and lesbian relationships in past generations. Most women still fear becoming too selfish, but at the same time want to become able to put themselves first in some situations. When a woman and her partner are in conflict, the woman may become confused

panying conflicts within and between people, new skills are needed for resolving conflicts without necessarily ending relationships. Central among these skills may be the ability to identify the positive contribution of individual differences to a relationship. Learning fair fighting, active listening, and negotiation techniques can also improve the chances of sustaining a commitment through rough times. An increasing number of classes and workshops teach these interpersonal skills. Couple counselling is also an option for people who want ongoing work.

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Unfortunately, epidemic numbers of people have such intense fears of intimacy and commitment that they are unable to apply new relationship skills. Many individuals rush enthusiastically into new relationships, only to rush out again within a few months. Ending the relationship decreases the fear, so the pattern is repeated, either with the same partner or a series of new ones. Obsessions and addictions often develop in place of intimacy with another person. Compulsive runners, for example, relate primarily to their own bodies, while other people become deeply involved with a drug. Long term psychotherapy is usually necessary to change these destructive patterns.

Some of the values which are especially relevant to intimate relationships today include beliefs about the proper roles of women and men, the ethics of selfishness versus concern for others, and the question of how bad a relationship must be before separation is justified. For example, traditional

about when to assert and when to accommodate, and may even leave the relationship abruptly rather than risk a challenge to her weakly established belief in her personal rights.

Given that the process of redefining values will continue indefinitely, with the accom-

Help is available for the great number of people who want to create committed relationships without returning to traditional roles and rules. Counselors do not have magical answers to the dilemma, however. We all live in the same changing society, and we must work together to bring committed love back into our lives.

a habitat for women and their friends



Dinner at six:

Chicken Noisette:

Whole Chicken Breast with Spinach, Fettucinne in a Walnut and cream sauce.

Scallops Ceviche

Oregon Bay Scallops, marinated in Lime Juice, tossed with Green Onions, Garlic and Peppers in an oil and lemon dressing.

Wild Mushroom Soup

A purée of Chanterelle, Morel, imported and domestic mushrooms in a cream and wine sauce.

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