



# Intimacy Anorexia

Healing The Hidden Addiction  
in Your Marriage

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## Dedication

To those on the journey to love and to be loved.



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## Introduction

Well over 15 years ago, I sat among some of the leaders in the field of treating sexual addiction in a hotel boardroom in Dallas, Texas. Back then, we came to the realization that we were seeing something quite baffling to all of us.

My colleagues and I were all treating sex addicts professionally and it was still early in this new field of sex addiction treatment. Each of us had seen a type of client that we couldn't explain from our clinical experience. We characterized this client as male, because at the time we were mostly counseling male sex addicts. This client was a sex addict, habitually having sex with himself, looking at pornography and/or having sex outside of the marriage.

We noticed that often this client was not having sex with his wife. This lack of sex lapsed for weeks, months, and in some cases, for years. This might make sense for a sex addicted client in the midst of his addiction, but these were clients in recovery for months, or even up to a year or more. Since many of the leaders in our field are also recovering sex addicts, we were looking at this client like “a cow at a new gate,” as they would say in Texas. We didn't quite know what to think of it.

It was at this point that the leaders in the field of sexual addiction started discussing this new paradigm, which later was

called sexual anorexia. Over time, it was clear to me that this dynamic had a whole lot more to do with avoiding intimacy, than it had to do with avoiding sex. Now, much later in my career of treating intimacy anorexics, statistics show that very few men and only some women avoid sex altogether. However, there were both male and female clients actively avoiding intimacy (sexual, emotional, and spiritual). Hence, in our field, the terms sexual anorexia and intimacy anorexia have been used interchangeably.

In your hands is the first book dedicated specifically to intimacy anorexia. This book will be helpful for both the intimacy anorexic and the spouse of the intimacy anorexic. Companions to this book include a *Intimacy Anorexia: The Workbook* (with more than 100 exercises) and a Twelve Step workbook called *Intimacy Anorexia: The Steps*. Together these resources promote healing of this unique addiction process that is devastating to so many marriages.

You and your spouse deserve true love, intimacy, sexuality, and a relationship that is authentic, fun, and full of the hope and dreams you've always wanted. I have seen many brave men and women wage war on this stealth addiction and begin to give and receive intimacy from the love of their lives—their spouse.

This book will provide insight and support through the shared experiences of others who have traveled on the path toward keeping their flawed (but open) hearts approachable. You will be challenged. However, there are fewer journeys as amazing to watch as a human heart that begins to open up toward love.

Wishing you a rewarding journey,

Douglas Weiss, Ph.D.



## 1 What is it?

Sometimes I feel like I was placed in this culture to observe something before others could. Most of us are not old enough to remember the prohibition days of the 1920s in America. What was happening to America in that era was horrible. Alcoholism was running rampant and it was hard to get good employees. Our nation was suffering from alcoholism in every sense, but we had no idea what it was back then. There was no name for what was happening. The paradigms for alcoholism were many years away.

That's exactly where many of you reading this book may find yourself. You may know something's not right in your marriage. The evidence of coldness, distance, lack of love, and connectedness are so prevalent that it almost pushes you to the point of insanity. You're trying to talk to those around you, but you can't quite explain it, especially when others see you or your spouse (depending on who is the intimacy anorexic) as warm and caring. They can't imagine either of you being neglectful of the other spouse.

There are cycles of pain, silence, withholding, and angry outbursts, combined with a sense of hopelessness in your marriage, without any significant change. I have had clients go to other therapists (for more than a decade) and still bang their head against the wall because an explanation was never given for their situation. Later they learned about intimacy anorexia and finally felt understood. It is my goal that you,

too, will feel understood as you embark on your journey of discovery and healing.

Let's go back to the alcoholics we looked at earlier. There were two brave souls that decided to swim against the stream in the culture of drunkenness. Bill W. and Dr. Bob decided that they had to stop drinking. Along with some others, Bill W. and Dr. Bob swam against the current—locking hands and hearts—and started a group called *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

They began to see alcoholism as a disease that needed to be treated. They recognized that some alcoholics had clear similarities to others. Slowly, the clergy and clinicians began to look through this new lens as a cultural problem.

As support and understanding grew for alcoholics, recovering alcoholics became living proof that recovery was possible, through this new paradigm of alcoholism as a treatable disease. The pursuit of this freedom began by knocking at the door of the medical community of the day. Knock after knock, the paradigm advanced, and, over time, it was heard.

The medical profession of the day gave way to this revelatory paradigm. Over time, they included alcoholism as a diagnosis, and the rest is history. Alcohol treatment became accepted and promoted. Millions of people's lives have been changed because of the willingness and efforts of a couple of men who said "no more" to the paradigm that had limited the understanding and experience of alcohol addiction.

Recovering alcoholics opened the doors for all addiction recovery programs. Each addiction recovery process seems to start somewhere with a small group; success happens, and the knocking begins at the door of the older paradigms. A whole new era of recovery is in rapid growth today. The battles have been fought and won over chemical addiction of every kind.

Now the battle fronts are engaged on process addictions to gambling, sex, food anorexia, food overeating, codependency, and so many others.

This book is a tool—a weapon even—to be used in battling a withholding addiction that manifests mainly in marriage. This withholding addiction is called intimacy anorexia. On the following pages of this chapter, we will walk through the definition of intimacy anorexia.

I mentioned in the introduction how we, as clinicians, were looking at intimacy anorexia. We could see something, but at the time, we didn't really have a clear paradigm. Since the beginning of our understanding of sexual addiction, the term "sexual anorexia" was the first tagging of this interpersonal avoidance dynamic that was highlighted in marriage. It didn't seem to fit into any of the current grids of our diagnostic criteria, in our small field, or the larger clinical field of psychology.

In this book, we include feedback from 21 intimacy anorexics and their spouses. In reading the stories of intimacy anorexics or their spouses, you will clearly see things going on inside each of the individuals and in their marriage. Before I go any further, I will answer a question you may already be asking: "He keeps talking about inside the marriage. Doesn't intimacy anorexia impact others as well?"

The short answer to that is both yes and no. Marriage is the only relationship that by definition demands emotional, spiritual, and sexual intimacy on an exclusive, committed basis over a prolonged period of time. Or, as the vow goes, "Until death do us part."

All other relationships can demand some, but not all of us. Even dating relationships can demand all three major aspects, but not in a committed or prolonged basis. The back door is

easy to find in dating, and harder to find in marriage. That's why intimacy anorexics look normal or even wonderful in the dating process, but on the wedding night (or a month or so later) it's totally different than it was in the dating relationship.

Intimacy anorexia can impact other primary relationships like children and extended family. However, in my experience, the marital relationship is the primary relationship where intimacy anorexia manifests itself.

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**Intimacy Anorexia:**

The active withholding of emotional, spiritual,  
and sexual intimacy from the spouse.

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As we continue our journey throughout this book, we will cover various aspects of intimacy anorexia. In future chapters, we will read about the hopeful side of intimacy anorexia recovery. First, I think it is prudent for us to go into more depth in defining intimacy anorexia, so we can build from here.

### **Active**

The first word in the definition of intimacy anorexia is the word *active*. The word *active* is by far the most argued word in the definition by the intimacy anorexics themselves. Everyone around the intimacy anorexic agrees that the word *active* is very appropriate for what they are experiencing. Although it's clear their behaviors of withholding and pushing the spouse away have been practiced hundreds or even thousands of times, the intimacy anorexic wants to claim no intentionality for these behaviors.

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