



BUILDING CONNECTION: Understanding Intimacy Anorexia

By Dr. Dave Currie

What if one or both of you have intimacy anorexia? How are this condition identified and how does it affect your marriage? What are the steps to addressing it?

Note: The concept of Intimacy Anorexia and the core content contained here are derived from the ground-breaking works of Dr. Patrick Carnes (Sexual Anorexia) and Dr. Doug Weiss (Intimacy Anorexia).

A. Definition: *Intimacy anorexia* (I.A.) is the state where a person actively withholds emotional, spiritual & sexual intimacy from their spouse. Note: it is an addiction. The person is addicted to “withholding”. Their goal: is to **CREATE DISTANCE** to feel emotionally safe. Here are the key aspects of I.A.:

- **Active Withholding:** Active is intentional. Though the IA won't want to own this, it is deliberately NOT giving what they know their spouse needs. Their own fears and insecurities are choking out their ability to love well and they knowingly do whatever it takes to create distance and maintain safety
- **Emotionally Vacant:** They do not want a close relationship and will find any excuse to stay disconnected. Their tone can become harsh and they often withdraw. They show little to no interest in the life and activities of their mate. They avoid affection, tenderness and romance. They sidestep it all to create distance. They are mentally unavailable during sex on the rare occasion it does occur; they are not “making love” - not emotionally present at all. They don't share their heart and are evasive with personal questions. Their mate feels starved emotionally with little to no affirmation, appreciation or connection.
- **Spiritually Distant:** Closeness to God might imply a need to be open toward their spouse. Remember, they don't want closeness. Growing spiritually would also force them to deal with their cruel pattern of withholding love and blaming their spouse. They avoid discussion about God, faith and beliefs. Publicly they may look great but privately with their spouse, it's not the same. They withhold how they are doing inside spiritually, do not readily make faith commitments or share their views on spiritual issues. They might pray publicly and fool outsiders that they are spiritually alive but they will avoid praying with their mate or connecting hearts spiritually.
- **Sexually Absent:** Sensuously, they don't “make love”. They may have sex but it is either rare or they are barely there. When sexually involved with their spouse, they are not engaged with spouse, not emotionally present, not

looking at or talking to their spouse during the sexual experience. Sex is void of love and passion. They do not enjoy sexual togetherness. They might tolerate the physical act or focus selfishly about it but shun the feeling of closeness. They often embrace sexual self-stimulation as an alternative. They may even act out with others beyond the marriage. They will go to bed early or stay up later to avoid the possibility of an intimate, sexual encounter. They may even say they have erectile dysfunction and are not feeling well to avoid being available for intimacy.

B. The Intimacy Anorexia History & Dr. Dave's Connection

1. The concept of **SEXUAL ANOREXIA** was first formulated by Dr. Patrick Carnes in the mid 1990's and came out in print in 1997 with his book *Sexual Anorexia: Overcoming Self-Hatred*.
2. Dr. Weiss and Carnes were pioneers in the field and Weiss first talked about **SEXUAL ANOREXIA** publicly in the late **1990's** ... after years of treating couples himself with marital breakdowns largely due to sexual addiction and sexual unfaithfulness working hard to put together why especially men were avoiding sexual intimacy.
3. Weiss did a DVD on **SEXUAL ANOREXIA's** 9 characteristics in early **2000's**.
4. Initially, Weiss went with the term Sexual Anorexia but began to use SA and IA interchangeably. He later preferred the term **INTIMACY ANOREXIA** as he more clearly observed that the marital disconnect included emotional, spiritual and sexual withholding – not just a person wanting or having little to no sex.
5. Dr. Weiss appeared on *Marriage Uncensored* TV Talk Show with Dr. Dave in **2005**, the first time ever that **INTIMACY ANOREXIA** was discussed in Canada. The concept was just beginning to be referred solely as IA though the show was called Sexual Anorexia. We see in the show comments by Dr. Doug that he was growing to prefer to call this paradigm of understanding - INTIMACY ANOREXIA.
6. The **Sexual Anorexia DVD** featuring Dr. Weiss was redone under the name Intimacy Anorexia came out in **2005-7**.
7. The **Intimacy Anorexia book, workbook and exercises** written by Dr. Weiss came out in **2010**.
8. The **Married & Alone DVD** for partners of IA's featuring Dr. Weiss came out in **2013**.
9. The **Intimacy Anorexia Training for Therapists (IAT)** for AASAT came out in **2016** – with requirements including over 40 hours of training, a written exam, and 6 months of weekly supervision with Dr. Weiss.
10. **INTIMACY ANOREXIA THERAPISTS:** Beyond Dr. Weiss, who is the President of the American Association of Sexual Addiction Therapy (AASAT) and who created the INTIMACY ANOREXIA training, there are only 9 other IA therapists in the world – 2 in Canada; Shawn Rumble in Kitchener, Ontario and Dr. Dave.
11. **Dr. Dave's Specialized Training:**

- Dave became a certified **Sexual Recovery Therapist (SRT)** with AASAT in January **2016**,
- He became certified to conduct **Sexual Addiction Intensives** with Dr. Weiss' personalized training in July of **2017**.
- He became a **Partner Recovery Therapist (PRT)** with AASAT in December **2017**.
- He became an **Intimacy Anorexia Therapist (IAT)** with AASAT in June of **2018**.
- He returned to Colorado to take a second week of training regarding **Sexual Addiction Intensives** becoming the most trained therapist by Dr. Weiss personally in the world in August of **2019**.
- He was recently invited (October **2019**) to be part of a **Sexual Addiction Recovery Leadership Summit** with nearly 50 leaders from North America representing about 30 different ministries who banded together to tackle how to best help the church to face the growing battle with porn and sexual addiction within its members.

12. Currently, Dr. Dave's counselling practice is over 50% related to sexual addiction, intimacy anorexia and marital unfaithfulness, their effects on marriage and the recovery journey.

B. PRIMARY CAUSES of Intimacy Anorexia

It is important to begin to understand how a person becomes an I.A. displaying a strong urge to withhold rather than connect to their spouse – maintaining distance vs establishing closeness. They might appear warm and balanced with outsiders and a caring and responsive to their spouse at first. What's behind them being emotionally, spiritually and sexually obstructed within the marriage? The major factors are:

1. **Family Attachment Issues:** Healthy family relationships set the tone for a lifetime of satisfying human connection. Where warm and loving interaction between parents and from parents exists, future well-being and interpersonal meaning is plausible. One's family of origin - balanced and nurturing - initiates and develops the attachment capability of the child.
 - a. **PARENTAL ABSENCE:** Without significant level of cross gender parent physical availability, genuine affection and meaningful affirmation, the child grows up feeling unloved and unvalued. Further, without ascribed significance and verbalized appreciation by the same gender parent, the child grows up disconnected and distanced with an empty heart. They don't feel connected to their parents so they don't learn how to attach to others.
 - b. **PARENTAL ABUSE:** Where parental harshness, explosive rage and emotional instability exist, these dysfunctional primary relationships lead to emotional barrenness. There is little chance of future connection. To protect oneself from an angry and cruel parent, the child has to withdraw to be safe. They end up with a closed heart unable to be intimate with others down the road – especially their spouse.
2. **Parental Neglect:** Emotional deprivation caused by the constant absence of one or both parents creates a hollow, empty child with no roots of

connection. Nobody reached out to them. They grew up without receiving a welcome and warmth from anybody. Possibly, their entire family was private and withholding. They had both no experience with attachment or no relational modeling of any kind. They have never experienced a true loving bond.

3. **Sexual Trauma:** When a person is abused as a child or teenager, it fully messes up their relational & sexual equilibrium. Their love map has been damaged. Core elements that allow for future significant connection have been violated. They cannot easily trust, commit or be vulnerable. They need to create distance to stay and feel safe. A deep fear resides due to the trauma. The greater the nature of the abuse, the greater the potential bonding dysfunction. Premature sexual exposure can enliven a curiosity that leads them to a heightened sexual interest to act out at an early age. It can also paralyze them away from sexual and relational intimacy.
4. **Sexual Addiction:** The greater the addiction to a sexual fix, the greater the grip of detachment. The Porn-Masturbation-Orgasm (PMO) cycle saturated and sustained by years of viewing pornography further objectifies sex and eradicates any need for emotional intimacy. Self-sex becomes the norm and soon is what the person's brain wants and needs. They don't want closeness; rather they want raw and self-absorbed sexual experience without commitment. It is important to treat the porn or sexual addiction and the Intimacy Anorexia paradigm of operation.

C. UNDERSTANDING the IMPACT of the ROOT ISSUES of IA:

1. **NOT THEIR CHOICE:** The IA didn't sign up for this - didn't want to be an IA. No one would. We all are born with a cavernous necessity – a soul craving – to be loved and to feel genuine attachment within our family of origin. It didn't happen.
2. **DEEP SOUL PAIN:** This profound but unseen 'Soul Pain' from either the absence of affection and affirmation or the presence of harshness and hurt anchors their fear of being connected to someone.
3. **CLOSENESS SCARES THEM:** Why? The people they let in hurt them. So, they put up walls to be safe. An IA has a core fear of closeness. Why? In most cases, they were wounded by those who were to love them and supposed to be able to trust.
4. **DON'T KNOW HOW:** They never learned the language of loving connection, never heard it at home, never saw it between Mom and Dad and never felt it from their parents. The experience of a loving bond was taken from them.
5. **SEXUAL ABUSE KILLS:** When a child or a young teen experiences sexual trauma from someone that they were supposed to be safe with – a huge sense of betrayal and fear of closeness can set in. This deepens the IA hold.

6. **PORN CREATES DISTANCE:** When the child or young person gets exposed to and hooked on porn and acting out, it further cripples the ability to connect. The PMO cycle soothes emotional pain but increases selfishness, isolates the person from others and objectifies relationship – especially the one with the future mate.

WHERE IA RESPONSIBILITY LIES: Though it may not be the IA's fault but it is their responsibility to deal with their IA pattern. Don't blame them for the verifiable **presence** of Intimacy Anorexia in their life but hold them culpable for both consistently denying its **existence** and actively maintaining its **continuance**.

⇒ **Score yourself on the Intimacy Anorexia Roots Scale**

D. Characteristics of the Intimacy Anorexic Pattern:

1. **STAYING BUSY:** *Does the IA stay so busy to avoid or not have 'US' time?* They keep their life and schedule so packed with anything that they leave no time to connect with their spouse. These activities can even be good things but in a quantity that there is no 'us' time left. Spouse is last on the list.
2. **ASSIGNING BLAME:** *Does the IA blame you for most issues between you?* They want to be seen as good so they project the blame, attack the spouse and rarely apologize. They say, "If you would have not done _____, then I would have had to done _____." It's 100% their spouse's problem. They can't take responsibility for their faults.
3. **SUPPRESSING LOVE:** *Does the IA withhold love/warmth/affection from you?* They actively withhold expressing care the way their mate needs it avoiding their love language. There's no kindness, tenderness or affection. They won't reach out and bless their mate with full attention.
4. **DENYING PRAISE:** *Does the IA withhold praise or appreciation from you?* They intentionally withhold affirmation and appreciation. No thank you's, no gratitude, no encouragement, and no reassurance. Total invalidation. Nothing is given to build the spouse up.
5. **WITHHOLDING SEX:** *Does the IA withhold sex or is not present when intimate?* They avoid or sabotage sexual connection. They may criticize their mate's performance. They say they are not enjoying it or having your needs met but won't talk about it. They make excuses like too tired or got to get up early. They go to sleep quickly or pretend to. They don't touch, flirt and make any attempts at a sexual pass. They are not available for sex and not interested.

If they do have sex, it is about sex and there is no affectionate engagement or real intimacy.

6. **AVOIDING SPIRITUALLY:** *Does the IA withhold spiritual connection from you?* They will withhold any spiritual relationship with their spouse. They might look good to others but not in reality with their mate. They avoid talk about spiritual things and don't pray with them.
7. **HIDING FEELINGS:** *Does the IA withhold sharing real feelings with you?* They are unwilling or unable to share their emotions with their spouse. They won't give their heart or let their guard down. They may have lots of talk of how they think but never how they feel. But in a crisis – like a threat of divorce, they get flooded with feelings. They will reach out for a while but only for 7-10 days and then revert back to not sharing. At the core, they are paralyzed about opening up and sharing feelings.
8. **ANGER/SILENCE:** *Does the IA control you with their silence or anger?* They will either scare you off with rage or punish you with their withdrawal. Their goal is to push you away and keep you distant. They might bully, yell, shame or review past failures. They control the emotional distance by either explosion or exclusion. Sometimes to hurt you they won't even talk to their spouse but completely ignore you.
9. **ONGOING CRITICISM:** *Does the IA give ongoing criticism that causes isolation?* They unleash unending condemnation constantly picking at or tearing apart the spouse. Sometimes its ungrounded disapproval; there's no basis for it. They think they are right on the issues and there is no discussion. The spouse is wrong. Criticism increases when there is a possibility of having to get closer like go on vacation. It's their attempt to sabotage the time away.
10. **CONTROLLING MONEY:** *Does the IA control or shame over money or spending issues?* This characteristic is not present all the time but often is an issue. They will actually control the money and credit cards, and set spending limits. They make the spouse ask, even beg for money. Sometimes the spouse is not given access to the accounts and merely given allowances. Meanwhile, they can spend freely. Bargaining can be a pattern, too. They provide for their spouse – what more could they want – “I will give you all this so don't complain about not having my time or interest.” They provide financially to deflect interest away from the emotional gap.

11. **ROOMMATE STATUS:** *Do you mainly live as roommates not friends and lovers?*

The look and feel of the relationship is similar to those who share an apartment but are not friends and lovers. They co-exist but don't co-relate. They run separate lives and interact in limited and cordial ways and play the role well to outsiders.

Note: 5 or more of these characteristics are a sign of Intimacy Anorexia.

⇒ **Score yourself and your spouse on the Intimacy Anorexia Test**

THE INTERNAL WORKINGS OF AN IA

A. Knowing It's an Intimacy Anorexic Pattern

- **IT'S EXCLUSIVE:** Their withholding is focused primarily on YOU as their spouse. They touch others but not you. They affirm others not you. They engage with others but not you. The connection gap that is created is singularly designed to keep you away.
- **IT'S EFFECTIVE:** Negative words or demeanor works to create or maintain distance between you. You can almost predict the distraction or tension coming. Attempts to sabotage connection are consistently successful. Their negative comments or actions create detachment even if you work hard not to react.
- **IT'S ENDLESS:** Steps to keep a relational gap are repeated. They go back to this pattern of producing stress between again and again to prevent closeness. They consistently use whatever negative means to sustain emotional distance

B. Why Intimacy Anorexia is an ADDICTION

The IA is addicted to deliberately "withholding". They can't stop. They simply have to create distance. They live in fear of closeness and do whatever it takes to prevent their spouse from getting behind their 'wall' of emotional safety.

Intimacy Anorexia is an addiction because to withhold love is the opposite of **cherish**. To perpetually starve your spouse emotionally – the one that you were once committed to love, honor and respect is so hurtful. Intimacy Anorexia is not just passive neglect; it is actively taking steps to push away the spouse. For them, to create distance provides emotional safety and they have to do that.