

COMMENTARIES ON THE CHARACTERISTICS MOST OF US SEEM TO HAVE IN COMMON

Characteristic 11:

We feared relationships, but continually searched for them. In a relationship, we feared abandonment and rejection, but out of one, we felt empty and incomplete.

Relationships, even friendships, triggered the fear of enmeshment or the fear of abandonment in many of us. Relationships of all sorts were anxiety-provoking. This included work relationships and family relationships, as well as romantic relationships. Nevertheless, many of us felt that having a romantic relationship might provide the validation and sense of comfort that had continually eluded us. However, we often had little experience in finding and sustaining healthy bonds with another person. Those experiences we had often involved romantic obsession or perhaps inappropriate relationship partners whose abuse we had tolerated. We settled for scraps of attention, fearing abandonment if we asked for more. We had deep-rooted issues around our shame, self-esteem, and acting out behaviors. We sometimes struggled with the sense that we did not deserve a lasting connection.

We were frequently conflicted: we desperately wanted an intimate relationship that would both meet our need for companionship and assuage our feeling of emptiness, but our fear of rejection was ever-present. Often, childhood trauma made us fear abandonment, and we brought this fear into any relationship we engaged in. We may have felt defective and unlovable, and our fear seemed justified in the face of our experiences. Parental neglect sometimes resulted in both the need for approval and the fear of rejection in us, which shaped how we acted within relationships. Our desperate need for another often drove us to seek out relationships despite our fear of them. We searched relentlessly for another person whose attentions we hoped would fill our feeling of emptiness and resolve our sense of incompleteness.

We believed that being in a relationship with another person would somehow make us feel whole, relieving us of our isolation and self-doubt. Nevertheless, we also had fears which limited closeness with another person. Fully sharing our lives felt threatening to our inner selves and our need for control. We feared that by revealing our true selves, we might lose any chance of gaining the love and respect we imagined others having, which had only been a dream for us. We still wanted the people to whom we were attracted to cherish us and hold us in high esteem, so we tried desperately to please them, hoping to win their approval.

Often, the need to control and conceal our feelings made us reluctant to cultivate anything but casual relationships. For many of us, habitually searching for sex or retreating into isolation became a way of life. We kept our distance from others, even as we were having sex with them. We often lied about ourselves, trying to hide the details of our lives and possibly even creating a fictional alternate persona.

Many of us had minimal experience with being honest and present in a sexual encounter, and we were equally unprepared for a relationship. We were afraid to share any more of ourselves than necessary to get what we wanted from our relationship interests. These conditions made it nearly impossible to maintain any close bonds. Inevitably, these relationships ended, leaving us feeling more desolate and defective than before.

Many of us had a relationship as the ultimate goal of our search for a meaningful expression of love, affection, and our sexuality. However, our issues with trust and low self-esteem interfered with our objective. How would we share our lives with another person while continuing to project our fiction of self-worth? Our need for validation easily led us to allow unsuitable, insincere and even abusive intimate partners into our lives. We wanted a partner to like us, even while we had doubts about whether or not we deserved it. We felt like an impostor, a kind of hollow shell, having nothing but negative qualities at its center. We feared that if the person we were interested in began to share in these misgivings, they would quickly reject us.

We wanted the other person's attention and affection but often found we could not reciprocate, more than superficially. We somehow felt we had very little to bring to the relationship, that we took more than we were able to give. This sense of a lopsided arrangement created a strain. We tried to make the other person happy, but feared they would soon abandon us after becoming tired of our emotional unavailability. Our need to hold onto the relationship sometimes forced us to compromise our values to satisfy our partner's demands. We often felt humiliated by allowing our boundaries to be ignored, but we did not know how to prevent this from happening. We often settled into a pattern where our desire for closeness collided with our fear and anxiety about being exposed for the people we were, and the accompanying risk of losing what we had in the relationship.

We generally avoided commitment since it would magnify our feelings of neediness, fear, and self-loathing. Often, relationships of this kind ended painfully. No matter how deep the involvement had been, we felt its absence like a chasm in our lives, leaving us with a renewed sense of emptiness. We found ourselves no longer half of a couple and, facing that void, we often searched for another relationship. Many of us began the sexually compulsive cycle again. This meant isolating while we searched for just the right person, with all that entailed. If we were not in a relationship, to us it meant no one wanted us. Feeling empty and incomplete turned out to mean the same as feeling abandoned and rejected. We lacked the self-esteem, openness, and other intimacy skills we needed to support an honest relationship. We were looking for emotional and spiritual wholeness from another human being, rather than working on our spiritual condition and finding healing ourselves.

In Recovery

Our relationship with our Higher Power is our foundation. We learn to look on our Higher Power as our divine matchmaker. We no longer fear rejection. There may be

times when we feel that we do not want to be in a relationship. Recovery allows us to accept that reality. We feel okay about ourselves, whether we are in a relationship or not. We work on ourselves, and our lives. We find that the more we grow, heal and become whole, the more fulfilling our life is, and the better our spiritual condition, then the better our relationships with others will be.

(Extract from "The Characteristics Most of Us Seem to Have in Common"
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