

## **Working Through Fear of Intimacy**

By Geoff Garton

It seems very difficult for people to achieve genuine, satisfying intimacy in their relationships. I have found it difficult. Perhaps we have all experienced so much pain in relational settings that we avoid the personal vulnerability and openness to what is going on in the hearts and minds of others. Rather than connect in a place of mutual respect and enjoy open-hearted conversation that recognises and values the other, we settle for far less.

I grew up in a social setting where people were practical and hard working and very self-contained. They had strong opinions and were critical of others, often trying to appear superior. People's feelings were usually ignored or dismissed. Some bullies were cruel and mocking.

I longed for people to sympathetically understand me and help me understand myself, but that was like asking for bread and being given a stone. I've noticed even prominent people, like parents, aunts and uncles, school teachers and even church leaders, frequently fail to meet us with understanding, acceptance and respect. The effect is hurt and a sense of violation. What can children do with such wounding experiences? They need the active involvement of wise, strong, kind adults to help them process such pain. When children's feelings are named and acknowledged respectfully, they can feel validated, comforted and gain hope that the world is safe for an open heart.

What if no such adult is available, which is the dilemma of so many vulnerable children? Many children simply survive this emotional trauma by concluding that it's their fault – they think they deserve to be treated this way because of terrible flaws in them. They resolve the pain by assuming they are at fault and then often shut down their hearts and withdraw from meaningful open-hearted engagement with others. They can either become shy social isolates, or angry frustrated loners who at times may control or bully others. Inside they feel unworthy and look for ways to support their self-esteem that don't require personal vulnerability. I found I had talents in sports and academic pursuits and so I competitively focused my energies there, and kept my heart detached and shut down so I didn't have to feel my loneliness. I've noticed many people use addictions to dull the ache of inner emptiness.

As these patterns form and are practiced throughout childhood and adolescence, it becomes difficult in adult life to form genuinely intimate relationships. Intimacy requires open hearts and space for the other. I had a shut-down heart and felt threatened by others. I needed help, and found it through compassionate people who could accept me, but invite me to change. To mature in this way, I had to open my heart and, face, feel, and grieve the pain in my life and let go of my coping mechanisms of driven, self-sufficient performance.

The Psalms of David have been a helpful model for me – especially ones like Psalm 62 where David pours out his heart to God – finding refuge in God's love, acceptance, strength, and goodness. I've also been deeply encouraged when some of God's people, further along than me, have shared their journeys and entered my journey. Over time I've found myself able to deeply enjoy intimacy with my family, and other open-hearted people God has put in my life.