

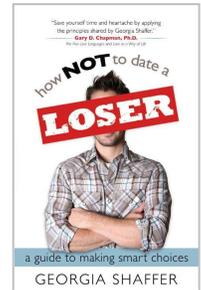


Georgia Shaffer



Overcoming Intimacy Blockers

How to Identify What's Hindering Your Ability to Connect with Others



“Georgia!” my father yelled. “If you don’t straighten out, we’re going to drop you off right there.” He pointed to the large sterile hospital-like building that they called the children’s home. “That’s where they put children like you.” I had been picking on my little brother as we rode in the backseat of the car.

This experience, and others like it, caused me to believe if I made someone mad or unhappy they would leave me. And even today, more than 40 years later, I still catch myself striving to please others. The problem is this people pleasing attitude interferes with my ability to authentically connect with others. Instead of being the person God created me to be, I try to be whatever I think someone wants me to be.

Like me, most of us can identify with the feeling that our parents could have been more accepting or different in some way. Maybe your parents could have been less smothering, or more involved in your life. The issue isn’t whether we had a perfect, loving, and supportive family. The real issue is what are the patterns or defining messages we learned in childhood that impact our relationships today?

Until we are aware of how our history influences the choices we make today, we will continue to repeat these unhealthy behaviors. However, once we become aware of what we learned, our intimacy blockers, we are then able to minimize their destructive effects

I define intimacy blockers as any behaviors, patterns or habits that inhibit our ability to give or receive love. You can begin the process of uncovering yours by answering the three key questions listed below:

1. Describe what it was like growing up in your family?
2. What bad habits, beliefs, or messages have you internalized?
3. What does healthy look like for you today (in light of what you learned)?

To help you get started, I’ll share the experiences of other singles. As you are reading, think about what you have learned or the habits you formed while growing up that could impact your closest relationships.

1. Describe what it was like growing up in your family?

What did your parents, or whoever acted as your parent, model about handling conflict?

Did they avoid conflict entirely, or did they punish one another with the silent treatment? When your parents had a disagreement, did you observe that they showed respect for each other, listened intently, and worked to solve the issue? Or, did you see one of your parents blow up while the other shut up. Matt said, “My parents ignored their problems, but later would explode when some little thing triggered what was really bothering them.”

Jenn not only heard her parents yell and scream at each other, but sometimes their disagreements escalated to the point that they physically hit each other. Katie, on the other hand, never overheard a disagreement between her parents, because her mother didn't like it when people fought.

How do you handle conflict today? If any of the following examples describe you, realize they could affect your ability to connect with others (or them with you) in an open and honest way:

Examples of Intimacy Blockers:

- Avoiding conflict at all costs
- Failing to express your true feeling for fear of rejection
- Physically acting out anger instead of using words and speaking with respect
- Withdrawing
- Giving the silent treatment to others
- Placating or giving in just to keep the peace
- Having an affair to “punish” the other person
- Blaming the other person for your anger

How did your parents handle bad times and loss?

Did they acknowledge their difficulties and talk about their feelings of sadness and pain? Perhaps you saw them use food or alcohol for regular comfort. Maybe they shut down or became super busy. In some families, we learn that it's important to keep up the image that all is well even when life spins out of control. We learn people don't talk about “things like that.”

Lily's parents always put a positive spin on everything. When her father had an affair, her mother said, “We must look on the bright side. Your dad has chosen to stay with us.” Lily rarely saw her mother cry or communicate any feelings of betrayal.

When Gabe's father lost his job, he withdrew from family and friends. “My father as I knew him died. He just checked out.” As adults, both Gabe and Lily had to learn healthier ways of coping with loss in order for them not to repeat their family's pattern. How do you handle loss and bad times? Do any of the following descriptors apply to you?

Examples of Intimacy Blockers:

- Numbing pain with food, alcohol, sex, drugs, work, or busyness
- Withdrawing from others
- Pretending all is well
- Refusing to discuss the obvious—“ignoring the elephant in the room”
- Attempting to control everything

What did your parents model about rules and authority?

Did your parents respect authority, or did they criticize those in charge? Troy's father continually mocked Troy's baseball coach and teachers with degrading comments like, "They have no clue what they're talking about."

Was your father a drill sergeant and your mother easy going? Maybe your father was passive and your mother a perfectionist? Jenn's father told her, "You will either respect me or you will fear me," while her mother warned, "You'd better not make me mad."

Do any of the following descriptors apply to you regarding how you handle authority or rules?

Examples of Intimacy Blockers:

- Having an attitude of "It's my way or the highway"
- Failing to set clear boundaries because it takes too much effort
- Using threats and fear to control others
- Disrespecting, criticizing, or demeaning authority figures
- Passively going along with others without thinking for yourself

What did your parents communicate about love?

Were they warm and open with their affirmations and hugs? Some parents never verbalize their feelings, but you know by their actions that they loved you. Perhaps your parents reassured you with a comment like, "Of course we love you."

In Alex's family there were no outward displays of affection, and he was never told he was loved. In fact to him the message communicated was, "We wish you never had been born."

Liza was taught that love is a feeling that comes and goes. When she was eight her parents divorced and told her, "We are no longer in love with each other." It was only as an adult struggling to hang on to her second marriage that she faced her trust issues. Liza came to understand that love is more of a decision and a commitment than a feeling.

What do you believe about love? Would those closest to you say that you display any of the following characteristics?

Examples of Intimacy Blockers:

- Believing and acting as if love is a feeling that comes and goes
- Believing and acting as if once love fades, it is over
- Believing and acting as if love is something you must earn
- Believing and acting as if I'm unlovable
- Communicating that people have little or no value: they're objects to be used

2. What bad habits, beliefs or messages have you internalized?

Unknowingly, Liza had learned that major life decisions, like whether or not to stay married, are based primarily on feelings. When she no longer felt "in love" with her first husband, she incorrectly assumed, like that of her parents, the marriage was over.

Because Jenn's father spent most of his time outside of work with either Baseball for Boys, the Explorers or the Booster Club, Jenn believed she wasn't valued because she wasn't a boy. Years later, when Jenn's husband physically abused her or spent all night at the bar, her parents ignored her complaints saying, "That's what people do when they've have a bad day—they get nasty. Let him go to the bar." To her, the unspoken message was she wasn't important enough to be protected.

For some of us, whether we are married or single, it isn't what we learned as much as what we were told by those who mattered most to us. The list of messages that hurt and define us is long, but here are a few with which you may identify. "Your brother/sister is smarter (prettier, stronger, nicer, more talented) than you are." "It's all your fault." "Who cares what you think, your opinions aren't important." "You shouldn't feel that way." "Good little girl/boys don't do that." "Don't bother—you'll never get it right,"

3. What does healthy look like for you today (in light of what you learned)?

While we'll never reach perfection, healthy is being intentional about healing those past hurts and overcoming those lies so we can grow and lovingly connect in our current relationships. As children, our parents seemed so big and powerful. We didn't have the ability to recognize their flaws. We didn't understand that they, like everyone on earth, were broken, damaged or disturbed in some way. Healthy is accepting their humanness.

In the article, "Making the Most of Life, Even Without a Perfect Childhood," California psychologist Philip A. Cowan says that those who can forgive and put their less-than-perfect relationships in perspective by realizing that someone either didn't know any better or was doing the best he/she could do, are the people who will "do better in their current relationships with partners and with children than people who are still angry."¹

Healthy is also realizing that there are going to be times when our childhood patterns resurface, when we react to what someone says or does because of our past. We can often avoid that knee-jerk reaction or prevent further damage by getting still, praying, and waiting until we can talk things over with someone we trust. In light of what you learned about your family, what changes do you want to make?

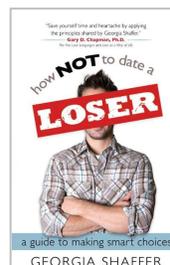
Jenn, whose parents screamed and hit each other, now says, "Healthy for me today is talking things out and not being afraid to express my opinions. It's also about praying and being part of a supportive community of people where we love and accept each other as the broken people we are. We are all in the process of growing."

Healthy for some singles is to take the first step toward expressing their honest feelings and setting clear boundaries. Isabella constantly tried to please others and had trouble saying, "No." Her boyfriend could pressure her into saying, "Yes" to something she either had no interest in doing or something that was against her moral convictions. Healthy, for Isabella, was learning to set boundaries and say, "Please don't pressure me. I really don't want to do that."

For some, healthy may be seeking professional help to resolve a past trauma. A counselor can guide you as you deal with the hurts and help enable you to break any destructive patterns. This will minimize the chances of recreating them in the future.

It can be hard work to overcome the unhealthy habits we've learned, but the benefits are worth the effort. The key is to recognize your intimacy blockers and heal from those old wounds. Then, you will discover that your relationships become much richer and more intimate. And, isn't that what we all want?

Note: This article was adapted from:
How Not to Date a Loser:
A Guide to Making Smart Choices.



Georgia Shaffer is a licensed psychologist, life coach, and the author of *How Not to Date a Loser: A Guide to Making Smart Choices*. She writes and speaks frequently on the subjects of relationships, dating, grief, and rebuilding after loss. Georgia has over 15 years experience helping people identify: "What needs to grow? What needs to go?" For more information, visit: www.GeorgiaShaffer.com
