

# Introduction

During my years caring for patients, the most common condition I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness.

—Vivek Murthy,  
Surgeon General of the United States

Natalie is a woman in her early thirties who came to me for counseling. Prior to meeting me, Natalie appeared to have it all together. She had a large social circle, and she was moving fast toward becoming a tenured professor. She was very close with her sister, whom she considered her best friend, and her sister's children. She was the coolest aunt on the block. She lived the ideal young adult life: traveling, socializing, vibrant faith life, dating, and increased responsibilities at work.

But Natalie didn't come to see me to tell me how perfect her life was. Something had been bothering her, but it was difficult for Natalie to put a finger on it. Then, shortly before she came to see me, Natalie's boyfriend of three years ended their relationship. Suddenly single, she realized she was lonely. But the loneliness was not due to the breakup. Natalie realized that she had been feeling lonely for several years. She had felt lonely for

so long that it was difficult to recall when she hadn't felt lonely.

As she shared more with me, she admitted that she had used the external factors in life—friendships, dating, and work—to distract her from the nagging loneliness. The end of her long-term relationship had just made things bad enough for her to pay attention. She realized she was a worried, anxious, and insecure person. She worried about people judging her for not being married at this point in her life and that others would assume something was wrong with her. She felt like an imposter at work and was afraid that her colleagues recognized her as a fraud when she was promoted. Though she was surrounded by so many people who cared about her and she appeared to have a fulfilling life, she felt detached, misunderstood by others, and alone. “I don’t get it,” Natalie expressed during our first session. “People have it so much worse than I do. I feel so silly complaining about this. Something just doesn’t feel right. I just feel off . . . and really lonely.”

What Natalie didn't realize was that she wanted more out of all her relationships, she just didn't know what. Natalie knew how to make friends, how to be social, and how to find a boyfriend, but she didn't know how rich, deep, meaningful, and interpersonal those relationships could be. Friendship and dating had simply never been that way for her. My job was to help her see what she was missing.

## **Made for Relationships**

You were made to taste and see the best of everything God has to offer. One of the remarkable things about God's goodness is that it is experienced primarily in relationships. If you think about the most powerfully

positive emotional experiences of your life, how many of them have occurred in the presence of other people? How many with those you love and call friends? There's a good chance that nearly all of them were so. This should come as no surprise to us because relationships are fundamental to human existence. From the moment we are born, we need relationships. Children who grow up surrounded by love thrive in a variety of ways, while children who experience a severe lack of love languish; some even die if the neglect is severe enough. From the moment we are conceived, we are made for relationships and nearly every facet of our lives confirms this reality.

God made us for relationships because he made us like himself. Our God is trinitarian and exists eternally in relationship. We, uniquely in all of creation, reflect this reality in our being. Our whole self—our physicality and our emotional interior life—confirm this. Our experiences of love, intimacy, and longing for closeness confirm this. We are made to love and to be loved. The greatest commandment confirms this. When Jesus was asked by a student of the law to condense the moral life into one commandment, Jesus told us to love God above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mt 22:36–40). You were made to experience the best of everything God has to offer and you will do this primarily in and through relationships.

*Gaudium et Spes* highlights the type of relationships we are made for: "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (sec. 24). This points us back to the words of Jesus in Luke 17:33: "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it." The mystery

and paradox of our faith is that relationships allow us to experience the fullness of life and self-sacrificing love for the other. Part of the reason Natalie was unsatisfied with her relationships is that those relationships rarely required her to be self-sacrificial. Because she never risked much, she never gained much.

Pope St. John Paul II in his theology of the body refers to this mystery of human love as the spousal meaning of the body. Now, don't worry too much about the term *spousal* here, as Pope St. John Paul II isn't saying that only married couples can love this way. He explains that in marriage, spouses make the mystery of God's love visible in their complete gift of self to each other, in not only the unitive sexual act but also every sincere act of love they make for each other. In other words, the human body reveals the reality that we are made for intimate, self-sacrificial relationships.

This reality follows the pattern of love set out for us by Jesus, who as our bridegroom makes a perfect and perpetual gift of himself on the Cross and in the Eucharist. When we reciprocate that gift, we experience the greatest mystery of all in the love of the Trinity. Just as the heights of human experience occur in relationships, so too does our experience of the divine exist only in a deeply intimate relationship. Relationships with God and neighbor are the key to understanding, experiencing, and participating in the greatest goods possible.

But our lived reality is far from this idyllic vision of perfect relationships with our family, friends, and neighbors. Loneliness has been the sole companion for all of us at some point, and for many of us all the time. Loneliness makes us doubt God's promise, doubt our friends and family, and doubt that we are worthy of being loved at all. It tells us that no one understands us or cares about

us. It lies to us and tells us that the people we love would rather not be around us and that they only tolerate us out of pity. Loneliness even tells us that God doesn't really love us, doesn't want to give us himself, and is somehow holding happiness back from us. Loneliness tells us that we are lonely and that we are better off that way, and so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I want to help. God gives all of us certain charisms or missions in life. One of mine is to end loneliness. One of my goals in life is to help people establish meaningful relationships by learning how to build and develop emotional intimacy. This is what we seek in relationships. This is what we experience when we live in communion with God and neighbor, entering into the mystery of trinitarian life where we surrender everything and so participate in God's infinite love.

Christianity is not a coping mechanism. If you have a crucifix near you, I invite you to look at it now. If not, try to picture one in your mind. Our God didn't take on human suffering and die on a cross for us to mope through life for eighty years, waiting for eternity to be happy. He came that we might have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10). As scripture and saints help us to see and the doctrine of the Incarnation teaches us, Jesus came to redeem everything about being human, including our relationships. If you have ever encountered God in a beautiful moment of prayer, burned with zeal for him in the early stages of your conversion, or tingled with joy in a moment of deep connection with a friend or loved one, then you already know what I am talking about. Those experiences aren't fool's gold. That is the fruit of the emotional intimacy that I am talking about.

This is the adventure God has in store for you when he invites you to follow him, experience life-giving

relationships, and live as his heroic witness in the world. He wants your relationships with him and others to be experiences and icons of his love. Ultimately he invites you to share his inner life and know what it is like to love like him.

## **What Is Emotional Intimacy?**

Let's start with a definition of emotional intimacy.

Emotional intimacy: A relationship quality that allows another to peer into the depths of your heart and soul. It is allowing yourself to share more deeply by expressing feelings, vulnerability, and trust, verbally and by actions. It is an invitation to another to journey alongside you in the beautiful complexity of life and to grow in mutual affection.

Emotional intimacy permeates everything in a relationship and acts as one of the fundamental building blocks for authentic connection. It is the antidote to loneliness. It mediates how close you feel to others and makes everything you do together more enjoyable. If you consider the many relationships you have, it's likely that you enjoy a great deal of emotional intimacy with the people you love and who love you the most. I'd be willing to bet that you don't feel lonely when you are with those people.

Emotional intimacy is what makes relationships meaningful, rich, rewarding, and worthwhile. It is the difference between a relationship that has all the external markers of success but none of the internal harmony, satisfaction, and joy that human beings yearn for. If you've ever known a couple who looked like they had the perfect marriage on the outside but ended up on the rocks, it is likely they lacked emotional intimacy. When emotional

intimacy wanes, people become lonely. Lonely people do surprising things, and this is frequently the cause of one or both members of the couple seeking companionship in other people, hobbies, or material goods. Sometimes it is an affair, but it just as frequently looks like a husband spending too much time with his friends, watching sports; a wife giving priority to her girlfriends or close relatives; or an individual engaging in addictive, risky, and destructive behaviors.

Life without deep emotional intimacy can be very lonely. Life with emotional intimacy is fulfilling and draws us into our ultimate calling of communion.

There are five major components to emotional intimacy: (1) connection, (2) trust and vulnerability, (3) communicating during conflict, (4) healing, and (5) self-gift. To have profound closeness in your relationships, all five are necessary. I'll introduce these briefly, but you will have an opportunity to dive deeper as each component will be explored at length in its own chapter.

### *Connection*

Ever have that moment when you just “click” with someone? It doesn't take a lot of effort but somehow you both are on the same page and have a mutual level of understanding that you are compatible and enjoy your time together. That's connection, and it comes from having a sense of closeness and belonging. It means that you and the people you are in relationship with are in the right place, in the right way. We are created for connection and can't live without it.

### *Trust and Vulnerability*

Trust and vulnerability are prerequisites to emotional intimacy. They act as the twin gatekeepers of the other

components. A sense of trust and safety is necessary to be vulnerable. Without vulnerability, intimacy simply can't happen. If we aren't willing to risk being hurt, we won't try to connect, we communicate inauthentically, we fear the steps required for healing, and self-gift seems far too risky.

### ***Communicating during Conflict***

We all have something to say, and we all desire to be heard. Yet how can something that seems so essential to human activity and society be so difficult at times? As commonplace as communication is, great communicators are in short supply! Communication is what allows us to share ourselves vulnerably and intimately with others and, more importantly, receive without judgment the self-communication of another.

### ***Healing***

We've all experienced hurt in our past and it colors how we view our current relationships. Ever wonder why a neutral word or phrase can set you off, or why someone's quirky habit might make you feel very uncomfortable? These can be signs that we have been hurt by someone or something in our past and we can't interpret people neutrally or with charity. Healing these past wounds is often a necessary step that allows us to experience deeper intimacy and a new sense of freedom.

### ***Self-Gift***

The paradox that "man . . . cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (*Gaudium et Spes* 24) is the ultimate answer to our pangs of loneliness. The daily interactions with those around us are mini invitations and opportunities to combat loneliness and live out our call to



communion with others. All the other keys to emotional intimacy increase our ability to be a gift.

Keep in mind that these five components don't exist in isolation. They overlap with and condition one another. The closeness that you need to feel, a sense of connection, really isn't possible without communication, and sometimes healing is necessary before we know how to make a gift of ourselves to others. While we will discuss them separately, in real life it's not so easy to keep them apart.

## **Into the Depths**

When I talk with my clients, I like to use the analogy of exploring a cave. One of my best friends is a US Air Force wife, and near one of her many stops around the country was an intricate underground cave system. This was novel to me as I've spent almost my entire life in Florida and such geological features are rare and usually underwater. Brave cave divers might venture down there, but that's not for me! But on one of my trips to visit my friend, she took my husband and me to the cave.

Tourists like us were only allowed to go down with the help of a tour guide. We were lucky to have a great guide who seemed to know the cave inside and out. Still, there were plenty of places that were uncomfortable. Some were dark, some were damp, some were cramped, and some were all three. Even with our guide, it was uncomfortable to be down there. At one point, she turned out the lights and it was true pitch black. I had never been so immersed in darkness in my life. Even though I knew my friends were near, I still felt a little scared.

The heart can be like that. It can be uncomfortable to explore it as we wrestle with painful memories, our shortcomings, and the fear of loneliness. But even Jesus's

journey included time in a dark cave, and on the other side of that journey was redemption. The good news—in fact, the best news—is that I’m not your ultimate guide. Jesus is. As we journey together, I will help you draw close to him and learn from his example how to live an abundant life.

Now, in case any of this sounds a little dramatic, I assure you that establishing authentic connection is not complicated. I have worked with hundreds of people—married couples, children, teenagers, young adults, and older adults—and have seen all of them improve their relationships and rediscover the joy of being close to those they love. This is what I want for you, and this is what God wants for you.

Thank you for joining me on this journey. I want to help you slam the door on loneliness and build a life full of rich, meaningful relationships that provide a sense of warmth and security for years to come. After finishing this book and the accompanying workbook, I’m confident that you will have the skills you need to make that happen.

This book is meant to be both reflective and interactive. As we consider the five major components of emotional intimacy through the lens of a Catholic therapist, there will be opportunities to reflect and explore your relationships. Each chapter provides ways to help you facilitate and strengthen your relationships through authentic connection. I will include examples from my work in the counseling room along with the practical actions to help you grow in these five areas. It is important to note that the details from these clinical examples have been altered to preserve and protect confidentiality. We will also turn to scripture along the way, for it is surely a light in the darkness! To maximize

your experience, I invite you to engage in the exercises within the accompanying workbook and video series. These exercises will deepen and enhance your experience of the five components and help you see measurable results as you seek to reinforce these qualities within your relationships.

What are you waiting for? Grab that flashlight and let's journey into the depths together. I'll be with you every step of the way, and so will Jesus.