



Loss & Love

Learning to offer sympathy rather than advice, to avoid dependency, to stop breaking hearts... You can learn a lot in relationships. Michael Flood tells all.

INTIMACY is a constant theme in the pages of the diary I've been keeping for eight years. It's present in page after page of my scribbles, as I dwell on my relationships with women, agonise over break-ups, note my joys and losses and consider my friendships.

I flick back through the pages of those books and it all comes back to me—falling in love with so-and-so, delicious times by the beach or in bed in the afternoon, the shock of breaking up, the toxic pain of grief and jealousy. I read of hanging around with mates, building connections with my dad, wondering about my emotions and my identity.

Intimacy is a catch-all term, and I could write about men's relations with friends, parents and children. Instead, I want to focus here on my (and men's) relationship with women. I don't pretend to have the answers—there are twenty books I'd have liked to read before writing this article, a thousand conversations I could have had, and at least as many things I could have changed. But I hope that this account at least provides food for thought. I've organised it by themes, each a central issue in itself: respect, dependency, love, monogamy and sex.

Respect

ONE of the sayings I remember most clearly from an ex-partner is, "I want sympathy, not advice." She would be talking about her awful day at university or her dramas with a friend, and I'd offer solutions and strategies—"Why don't you...? Have you tried...?". All she wanted was

sympathy—"That sounds really frustrating...". She wanted to be listened to and acknowledged.

This little story is part of the general concern I've had to develop respectful and equal relations in sexual relationships. In trying to do this, I've had to avoid or undo a series of traditional masculine patterns of relating; dismissing women's feelings, being emotionally hot and cold, not offering support, and "out-feministing" my feminist partner (by using feminist knowledge in ways that make her feel stupid or attacked).

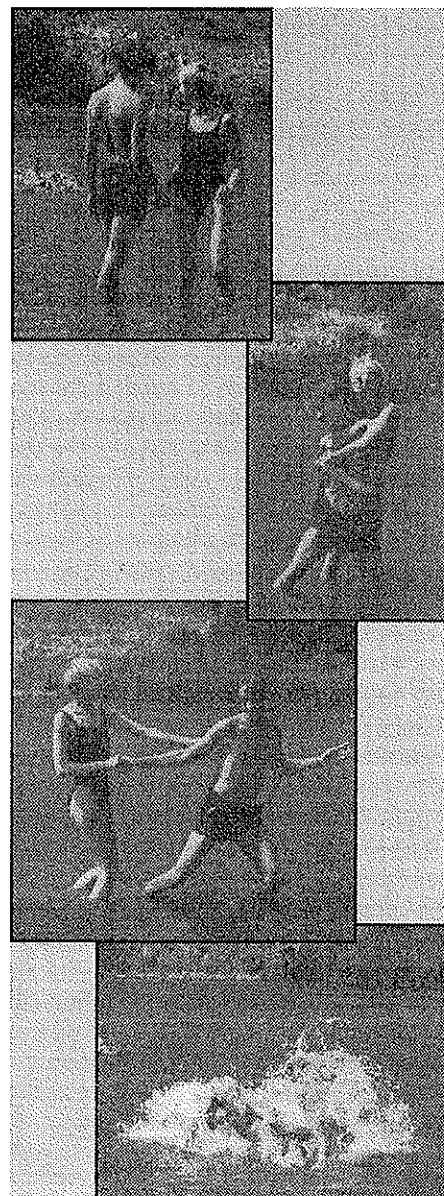
Dependency

I LEARNT my lesson about dependency the hard way. I started a long-term relationship (my second) with N— just after I turned 18. When we broke up three years later, I quickly discovered how emotionally isolated and dependent I'd become. I'd let my friendships slide, and I was largely without sources of support. It took me ages to get over this breakup, and I'm sure that my emotional dependency compounded the process.

This is a classically masculine pattern, one I am now determined to avoid. I put energy into my friendships with both men and women—they're my safety net, my community. And while I really like relationships, I try to set up my life so that I'm also happy without one.

Love

JUST lately I've been reconsidering how I "do love" and "do relationships". That's the problem with being around feminism





The messy, unpredictable and inspiring business of having relationships.

and queer politics and studying sociology. You learn that the organisation of love, relationships and sexuality in this society is not "natural", but the product of culture and history. As that fantastic feminist slogan "The personal is political" suggests, you learn that such things involve questions of power and injustice.

My questioning of my relationship habits began in earnest during the break-up of a two-year relationship, about three years ago. I was deeply unsettled to realise that my partner D— had a fundamentally different approach to the relationship, one that was more pragmatic and everyday. We'd had a lovely two years, but D— began to feel that it was time to move on. She said this to me, and I resisted. It became clear that I had a much stronger interest in being in the relationship in itself, a greater investment in what I saw as a special kind of intimacy.

My preference for long-term relation-

ships can get me into trouble; if I start flirting with or being sexual with someone, I can go sometimes into "long-term relationship mode", almost automatically making the moves to build intimacy when it may not be appropriate to do so. So I'm more careful now about how and when I do this.

Monogamy

I'M KEEN on monogamy. Not because I believe it's biblically ordained or right for everyone, but just pragmatically. It comes down to the fact that I have a bad time trying to do non-monogamous relationships, because of how I "do" sexual intimacy.

I've stuffed up on monogamy though, and this is one of my most embarrassing

stories. A long time ago (no, really), after the three-year relationship with N— had ended, I'd started seeing another woman, I—. But I was still far from over N—. I— and I had talked about this, and I'd said (and believed) that it would be okay.

A month or so into seeing I—, she went away for a week. I was still very attracted to N—, in fact, quite obsessed about her. Anyway, one night she ended up staying the night. I— was due back the next day. Well, you can guess what happened. N— and I are in my bed, dozing, mid-morning, and there's a knock at the door. It's my housemate, come to tell me that I— is back and she's dropped around to say hello.

I go out and see I—, and we have a very tense conversation in the loungeroom. But it gets worse. I go off with I—, leaving N— in my bed feeling utterly used and abandoned. You're thinking, "What a bastard", right? Well, I was, for sure. I stuffed ➤

Men and emotions

THE literature on men and emotions offers a series of generalisations about the state of affairs among men in contemporary Western countries. Here is what I've read so far.

Men have emotions but men are widely perceived to be unemotional, because of the association of "emotions" with femininity, according to James Doyle's *The male experience*. Many men try to avoid or get rid of troublesome emotions, emotions that leave a person open and vulnerable to others, such as love, fear and compassion.

Jack Sattel argues in the anthology *Men's lives* that male emotional expressiveness is a prerequisite for assuming adult male roles of power. Masculine inexpressiveness is a way of appearing powerful and in control, whether in marriages or in the workplace. Ultimately however, it leads to psychological and emotional isolation, keeping others at a distance and making us difficult to love.

Men come to display both "emotional incompetence" and "emotional constipation". We learn an inability or reluctance to display our own troublesome emo-

tions, at least not in public. We are uncomfortable with other people's expression of emotions, for example distrusting women's expression of emotions and perceiving them as manipulative. Marianne LaFrance and Mahzarin Banaji summarise the evidence on the gender-emotion relationship in Clark's *Emotions and social behaviour*, showing for example that gendered stereotypes about emotion and 'display rules' about the appropriate display and management of emotions have a profound effect on men's and women's personal experience and expression of emotions.

Men attempt to get all our emotional needs satisfied by a female partner, without doing the same in return. There is an emotional division of labour, in which the wife or girlfriend provides both emotional and sexual servicing. This pattern intersects with heterosexual men's typical friendships, which are rarely sources of deep sharing and support. We may spend lots of time together, but it is not emotionally satisfying or personally rewarding, and we have few other men with whom we can share our fears and

anxieties, pleasures and joys.

Many men conflate love and sex; intimate and loving relations can only be pursued through the medium of sex. For most adult heterosexual men, sexual relationships are the only place where they get held, nurtured, and treated with affection and love, as Michael Kaufman writes in *Cracking the armour: power, pain and the lives of men*.

Men's intimate relations with both men and women are fundamentally structured by homophobia and misogyny. Masculinity is defined by what it is not—*not-feminine*—and stereotypically feminine qualities are denigrated. Intimate relations between men are treated with intense fear and hatred, and all closeness is treated with suspicion.

Are these depictions broadly accurate? Perhaps so, but I wonder if they are not really about "men" but about particular groups of men—heterosexual men, men from Anglo backgrounds, maybe even middle-class men. I don't really know, but my guess is that there's more diversity and complexity out there than might first appear. ●



➤ this up good and proper, and I was told this in no uncertain terms.

I've done lots of agonising and thinking about this whole mess in the intervening years, and I'm confident that it will never happen again. Not because I'm suddenly a perfect person, but because I have a much greater sense of the absolute damage and pain which such behaviour causes, and because I've undone some of the emotional habits that put me in that situation in the first place.

Sex

READING through my diaries, I also find writings on my desires and attempts to have mutually pleasurable, non-oppressive sexual relations. For example, I learned from my men's group, from involvement in Men Against Sexual Assault and from women themselves about men's sexually coercive behaviour (including date rape and sexual harassment). I've looked critically at my own behaviour, making con-

sent the absolute bedrock of my sexual practices and relationships. This involves explicit verbal negotiation, asking, and taking no for an answer. Doing this makes for

I've stuffed up on monogamy though...

better, hotter sex; talking and sharing build trust, which builds passion, in turn encouraging sexual intimacy and mutuality.

'Good sex' and sexual intimacy involve more than just consent, of course. We have for example to deal with contraception, and with preventing the transmission of sexual transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. It's plain as day to me that men have to take responsibility for these things, and adopting the mighty condom as our body buddy is the obvious strategy. Frankly, I've found this to be not as easy as it sounds, and it's one issue on which I continue to work.

I suppose that in a sense I've got a 'code of ethics' for how to behave in a sexual relationship. I try to be honest and act with integrity; take responsibility for my actions, and for my feelings and reactions; respect my partner—which includes acknowledging her will, desires and feelings; assert my own will, desires and feelings; avoid violence and sexual coercion; and build and maintain good friendship networks and communities, as sources of support and energy. Being clear about this is very helpful, but it sure doesn't get rid of the messy, unpredictable and inspiring business of having relationships.

I have been privileged to go out with some inspiring, powerful and absolutely lovely women, from whom I've learnt so much. At age 28, I look back over the last decade and feel warmed to have joyful and loving relationships with women as part of my history. I hope and think that they will be part of my future too. ●

Suggested further reading

THE literature on men and intimacy is huge, especially if you include works on relationships, friendships and sexuality. Here are just some of the books of this literature.

Allen, Marvin and Robinson, Jo 1993 *In the company of men: freeing the masculine heart*, Random House

Balswick, Jack 1988 *The inexpressive male*, Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Books

Blumenfield, Warren J. 1992 *Homophobia: how we all pay the price*, Boston: Beacon Press

Cardelle, Frank 1990 *Journey to brotherhood: awakening, healing and connecting men's hearts*, New York: Gardner Press

Castleman, Michael 1989 *Sexual solutions: a guide for men and the women who love them*, New York: Simon & Schuster

Driggs, John and Finn, Stephen *Intimacy between men: how to find and keep gay love relationships*, Dutton

Ehrenreich, Barbara 1983 *The hearts of men: American dreams and the flight from commitment*, New York: Anchor

Press/Doubleday

Fanning, Patrick and McKay, Matthew 1993 *Being a man: a guide to the new masculinity*, Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications

Gray, John 1993 *Men, women and relationships: making peace with the opposite sex*, Oregon: Beyond Words Publishing

Hite, Shere and Colleran, Kate 1989 *Good guys, bad guys, and other lovers*, London: Pandora

Kinsman, Gary 1987 "Men loving men: the challenge of gay liberation", in Kaufman, Michael (ed) *Beyond patriarchy*, New York: Oxford University Press

Kipnis, Aaron and Herron, Elizabeth 1994 *Gender war, gender peace: the quest for love and justice between women and men*, New York: William Morrow and Company

Kupers, Terry A. 1993 *Revisioning men's lives: gender, intimacy, and power*, New York & London: Guilford Press

McGill, Michael E. 1986 *The McGill report on male intimacy*, Perennial Library

Messner, Michael A. 1992 "Friendship, intimacy, and sexuality", in *Power at play:*

sports and the problem of masculinity, Boston: Beacon Press

Metcalf, Andy and Humphries, Martin (eds) 1985 *The sexuality of men*, London: Pluto Press

Nardi, Peter M. (ed) 1992 *Men's friendships*, London: Sage

Osherson, Samuel 1992 *Wrestling with love: how men struggle with intimacy with women, children, parents, and each other*, New York & Toronto: Fawcett Columbine

Risman, Barbara J. and Schwartz, Pepper (eds) 1989 *Gender in intimate relationships*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth

Rubin, L. 1983 *Intimate strangers: men and women together*, New York: Harper and Row

Vadasz, Danny and Lipp, Jeffrey 1990 *Feeling our way: gay men talk about relationships*, Melbourne: Designer Publications

Zilbergeld, Bernie 1992 *The new male sexuality: the truth about men, sex, and pleasure*, New York: Bantam Books

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