

PHYLICIA MASONHEIMER

Safe
to
Feel

*A 30-day Devotional for Women
Who Struggle with Physical Affection*

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*To my husband Josh, who loved me
at my worst and helps me to be my best*

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Introduction

I am not good at hugging. My friends know this and it has become something of a joke among us: “Phy hugs like a praying mantis” is a common tease when we get together. For most of my life I just accepted I was bad at affection. I didn’t ask questions; I didn’t dig into *why* I disliked hugs or being touched.

Marriage forced me to acknowledge this area that for so long went unaddressed. My husband and I are opposites on every personality test, including the Five Love Languages. If you’re not familiar, the love languages are five ways you express or receive love from your spouse (or anyone, for that matter). I love to receive gifts and spend quality time! Josh loves quality time and physical affection.

During our dating and early marriage years, I was able to express affection more freely. But a few years into our marriage, with the honeymoon stage officially over, I reverted back to my comfortable patterns of behavior – patterns which excluded affection. After our first daughter was born, we went *weeks* without kissing or touching one another. I wasn’t being malicious; *I just didn’t think of it!* Add to my personality a case of *severe post partum anxiety and the adjustment after our first baby was the perfect storm*. Affection didn’t even register as a need to

me. Josh, however, was withering up inside, feeling unloved and unwanted. He wanted affection (and by affection, I mean non-sexual touch, not sex). I didn't know how to give it. When we talked about it, I became inflammatory and angry. I felt like he was asking me to give something I was incapable of providing.

It's important to note that physical affection as a love language – and as discussed in this devotional – does not refer to sex. When I mention intimacy, I'm referring to emotional and spiritual intimacy, not sexual. I also want to make an important point: I am assuming that those reading what I share here are in *generally healthy Christian marriages*. If you are experiencing abuse, please contact the authorities and a trusted person in your life for help and guidance!

Back to intimacy: in my own marriage, sex was never the problem. Our problem – *my* problem – was *intimacy*. If you've only understood intimacy as a pseudonym for sex, it's so much more than that! Webster's Dictionary defines it as "close familiarity, attachment, togetherness, confidentiality." Intimacy is a deep, close relationship with another person.

In my first book, *Christian Cosmo: The Sex Talk You Never Had*, I opened up about my history of sexual addiction (which began at age twelve and lasted into my early twenties). For most of my life I saw my sexual issues as something sequestered into a corner of my existence, but as most of us know, sin never stays in a corner. I learned about sex through an erotic romance novel and expanded my knowledge in the throes of addiction. This meant sex, to me, was always about passion and "heat," never about love and affection. I didn't realize the damage that was done while I was a child. Only when I became a married woman, attempting to understand a physical relationship apart from the sexual act, did I see the impact of sexual sin on marriage.

I wish I could say I started asking questions in that first hard season, but I didn't. I decided Josh was needy, and the very idea of being affectionate made me so uncomfortable I just

avoided the issue altogether. Naturally, this did not improve our marriage. Fast forward to after our second daughter was born: I desperately wanted our marriage to improve. Josh was making efforts, but every time I tried to reciprocate, my whole being felt held back. I felt like there was a wall between my emotions and my true self. One morning as I prayed about it, the Lord revealed the root of my aversion to affection: *Fear*.

Most people would never consider me a fearful person; people describe me as confident, bold, and *fearless*. But in this area of my life, I was crippled by fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of intimacy. Fear of trying and failing. I was so completely afraid of giving affection that I didn't even try. But even more than my fear, I had a deep desire to feel *safe*. If I didn't feel safe, I was (and am) unlikely to express emotion and physical affection. Through marriage counseling with a licensed professional counselor I learned that my experience with emotional and verbal abuse via extended family had played a role in this response. In my marriage and close relationships, my fear-response to intimacy made it almost impossible to show physical *affection*. Counseling provided a much-needed reason for my struggle with intimacy, but I still needed to heal. There was more for me to learn.

Over time I realized my fear of intimacy was also a fear of being "weak": if I allowed myself to feel, and to express my feelings physically, would I still be a strong woman? The walls around my heart were high after years of protecting myself from rejection, mockery, and unsafe relationships.

I needed to be *safe to feel*.

This epiphany began my search through the Word and online for resources about affection and fear of intimacy. There are some fascinating psychological reports online, and I highly recommend meeting with a Christian LPC to process these issues from a mental, emotional AND spiritual level. In this devotional, I'm only taking a spiritual approach. The psychological reasons behind fear of physical touch are helpful to understand and

I recommend an LPC for pursuing those answers. And since no issue in the Christian life is purely physical or mental - everything is spiritual as well - this devotional will address the spiritual aspects of affection and intimacy.

I wrote this little book as a heart-to-heart from one struggling woman to another. Much of it will simply share what I have learned in this journey. I'm not going to give you many action items, because heart change has to happen before action can take place! Rather, here is what I hope you do these next thirty days:

- Read the short chapter and ask, "Does any of this resonate with me? Have these thoughts or feelings entered my mind?"
- Read the daily verse and pray, "God, how does this truth address my deepest fears?"
- Challenge yourself: ***What would happen if I stepped out in courage and let God free me from my fear of intimacy?***

It took years for me to really make progress in this area of my life and I am still in process, so I don't expect you to find freedom in thirty days! My goal is to lead you to our Savior, who truly overcomes the world - including the fears of our hurting hearts.

-Pm



Averse to Affection

DAY ONE

Do you pull back when someone initiates a hug? Forget to kiss your husband? Feel weird about embracing your kids? When you meet people do you say, “I’m not a hugger?”

When I first opened up about my own struggle with affection, dozens of women responded with, “**me too!**” I had no idea so many women battled with this aversion. Most of us simply accept that this is who we are, not bothering to ask questions or probe deeper into our own hearts.

This month I’m asking *you* to ask those questions. Together we’re going to probe deeper into your heart, uncovering the reasons you withhold affection from those closest to you. Perhaps, like me, you watch other people with sadness or jealousy, wishing you could give yourself as freely. Perhaps – like me! – you feel an emotional wall rise up the second you try. People who don’t struggle with affection don’t really understand this and probably advise you to “just do it” (there is a little truth to this, as we will talk about later, but motives must be addressed first). Before we step out and challenge ourselves, though, we

need to do some heart work. Or rather, we need to invite the Holy Spirit to do it for us.

As believers in Jesus we are given a Helper, God's Spirit, who declares truth to us and enables us to live out an overcoming Christian life (John 16:33). Chances are you've already tried overcoming this on your own wisdom and effort – it doesn't work long term. You burn out, feel overwhelmed or end up right where you were before. It is God's Spirit who does the work in our hearts, minds, and emotions, enabling us to overcome our reservations and give affection even when we feel ill-equipped.

The Spirit began this work in me long ago but it took years of growing with Him, learning to listen to His voice, and diligently spending time in the Word before I realized the role affection would play in my life and family. Day by day He showed me that my aversion to affection wasn't just my personality; it was something God desired to refine and sanctify. He wanted to free me from bondage. And He has!

The question I want you to ask today is: *when did I first notice I didn't like affection?* Were you a child? A teen? Was it toward everyone, or just a specific person? Did it start because of a childhood wound, a poor parental relationship, or an incident of abuse? (All of these would be wise to process with a licensed counselor, trustworthy pastor and mentor!)

Then today, meditate on John 16:13 (below). To meditate is to "think about"; to absorb into your mind, to remember and rehearse to yourself. Scripture calls us to meditate on God's Word (Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:2). Today, remember that you are not alone in this struggle. The Spirit is already working in you for healing.

"When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."-John 16:13



The Connection Between Anger and Fear

DAY TWO

I have a temper. Anger comes easily to me like depression or anxiety may come easily to others. I particularly hate being interrupted when I'm working, and in a season of small children, that's pretty much all day except for nap time! God has used my season with small children to teach a lot about grace: the grace He shows me and the grace I need to show others.

My anger was another "personality trait" I wrote off when first married. My husband is one of the calmest, most patient men I know, but even he was pushed away by my zero-to-sixty emotions. During one particular fight—the kind where you go in circles, never really getting anywhere—I shouted, "I just need to know I'm **enough!**" We both stopped. I'd never expressed that to him—or to anyone. I didn't know I was *afraid* of being "not enough." This moment was pivotal because while we continued to struggle with anger in our marriage for a few more years, I saw the connection between my anger and my fear.

When we are afraid we respond reactively, not rationally. Until we can look at a situation objectively our emotions will do

the “thinking” for us. Anger is often a gut-level response to fear of loss, fear of intimacy, or fear of failure. In my case, I lashed out when Josh wasn’t happy because I thought it was a reflection of my own failure as a wife. Our marriage counselor once pointed out that anger is a “visible” emotion masking an invisible one. Anger is rarely the disease; it’s the symptom. And since anger is not a welcoming emotion, my husband naturally pulled away from me during my outbursts. This made me feel **more** like a failure, which made me **more** angry – at myself and him. What a crazy cycle!

What does anger have to do with affection? I think the two are more connected than we think. When we feel like we’re failing at affection, we get angry: first at ourselves, then at others for exposing our failure. Then our anger pushes our loved ones *further* away, which leads us to despair. We decide to make a little effort to hug or kiss in hopes of restoring connection. But when our loved one doesn’t respond the way we hope, we get embarrassed, feel like we’ve failed, get mad – and the cycle starts all over again.

Have you experienced this cycle? Yours might look a little different. Think for a moment about your temper. Do you struggle with anger? If so, ask yourself: *what am I afraid of losing when I get angry?*

Is it approval? Is it love? Is it control? Do you think, if your spouse ignores your attempt to hug them, that you’re losing their love? If you do, you may react in fear. The emotions build up. But because you don’t know how to express emotion, you get mad.

Get inside your own head today. This is going to take some time, so set a timer for ten minutes and really think about it. Set a timer and get a notebook to brain stream your thoughts.

Today’s verse is important to our journey with affection. It has

to do with **fear**. Write it on your hand or post it where you can see it today!

“For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.” -2 Timothy 1:7



Perfect Love Casts Out Fear

DAY THREE

I want you to think of your heart as a house. It's a beautiful house, one that's been well cared for over the years. Then one day a visitor stops by: a pretty nasty dude always nagging about things that might happen. He brings up worries over the future: "what-ifs" and "what-thens." He was only supposed to visit but he ends up staying. He sets up shop in the guest room. Pretty soon his stuff is spilling into every room in the beautiful house – ugly stuff, remnants from a past he can't let go. He doesn't like sunlight so he draws all the blinds. The house starts to become dark and dusty. He hates visitors because he hates new things, so he locks the front door to keep community away.

That visitor is Fear. When you let him in the door of your heart, you're letting him in to stay. Pretty soon he'll invite his friends Anxiety and Isolation, and they'll stay too. Pride and Gracelessness will join him, and Control isn't far behind. The house will be full, but it will be dark and crowded. There's no room for light and freedom.

Now imagine that the landlord of the house stops by to see

why the blinds have been drawn so long. He unlocks the door, takes one look around, and seizes Fear by the collar. “You don’t belong here!” He states firmly. “I’m evicting you from the premises.” And he takes Fear, his friends, and all his ugly stuff and *casts him out of the house*.

Sometimes I need an image of what God does for us through His Spirit. This analogy sums up what John described when He said, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.” (1 John 4:18) God is the **epitome** of love; *perfect love*. When you invite Him into the core of your being, into the darkest and most broken parts of you He literally *casts out fear*. He takes it by the collar and throws it in the street! Fear cannot live in the same space as the Spirit of God.

The key here is *knowing* the love of God, which you do by being in the Word. If you’re struggling with affection, I recommend being **daily** in the Word. This devotional should not be replacing your time in Scripture. I will be very disappointed if it does! Start somewhere simple, like John or Psalms, get a notebook, and write down what you observe about God. Then write down how this changes the way you live. This will teach you *knowledge* of God’s love, which leads to the second step: *believing* God’s love. Believing God actually loves you and that His love changes your life is like inviting the landlord into the house. Fear can’t be kicked out until Perfect Love walks in.

Today, assess your spiritual life. Have you been in the Word? Yes or no? Why or why not? How can you change this? Don’t shut this book until you’ve answered that question!

You cannot change how you act in your marriage and relationships unless you are walking with God, and you can’t walk with God apart from His Word and Spirit. Your verse for today should remind you of this!

“And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.” -2 John 1:6



You Are Not Enough On Your Own

DAY FOUR

Everywhere I look there's a quote saying, "You are enough." This is something we need to hear or it wouldn't resonate so much. Yet from a biblical perspective, this isn't completely true!

Apart from Jesus, we fall hopelessly short in life and godliness. If you don't like hearing that, think about why you're reading this book. Have you not fallen short in the affection category? Do you see this as a problem? I know I do! I am not "enough" for the people I love when I try to love them in my own power.

It's a tough message; one we don't like to hear. Some people say it's discouraging. But it's only discouraging when you hear the first half. The second half is altogether *empowering*.

Yes, on our own strength, we aren't enough. We fall short. We mess up. We start over. But Jesus didn't die for us to live in defeat. He died to provide us with a way to *abundance*. He didn't mean gorgeous cars and expensive houses, but an abundance of spiritual *strength*. Jesus provided a way to live on a higher plane, to live in *supernatural* strength. Supernatural literally means *beyond our natural ability*.

Right now, giving affection is beyond our natural ability. So to overcome this area of our lives, we need *supernatural strength and love*. This is what Jesus provides for us! Where we are not enough, He is our enough-ness. He fills in the gaps for us. The Holy Spirit, our Helper, does this for us as we walk in step with Him.

So how do we embrace this enough-ness and let the Spirit lead us into strength? Once again, it starts with the Word (get used to hearing that!). Being in the Word exposes us to God's truth and love, which the Spirit reminds us about throughout the day. Secondly, prayer is vital to owning our identity in Christ. I don't mean 20 minutes on our knees every morning. I mean daily, hourly, moment by moment dependence on God through prayer! Most of my prayers happen at my stove, while I'm walking, as I'm rocking a baby or doing some task. In moments when I am especially overwhelmed – such as when I feel overcome by anger, fear, or my inability to let down emotional walls – I pour myself out to God.

Sometimes I do this out loud. Sometimes I go in my room for a few minutes. Sometimes I write it out. But one thing I frequently say is: "Lord, I know you promise your Spirit to make me enough in this area. I'm not leaving, I'm not ceasing to pray until you come through for your promise." This kind of bold prayer may feel foreign to you. Many Christians are not taught to call upon God for His promises, but that's exactly what He wants us to do!

Today, be conscious of how often you pray. Do you revert to worry instead of prayer? Take those moments and turn them into conversations with God. Don't "fix" your prayers. Pour them out. That's what He wants.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." -Phil. 4:6



Afraid of Failing

DAY FIVE

Josh walked in the door – I heard it creak on its hinges – and I scrunched my eyes by the stove around the corner. *You can do it. It's one simple step.*

I smiled as I greeted him and, in a step that took everything in me, I hugged him closely and kissed him hello.

If someone could have read my thoughts in that moment, there would have been dozens of voices to record:

*What kind of wife are you that this is so difficult?
Look how stupid you look!
Why should you be making this effort? It's not your love language.
He'll notice that you did this and it will be awkward – you never initiate affection.*

So many voices. So much condemnation. So much..*fear*. I was afraid of failing at affection because it is so unnatural to me...so uncomfortable and awkward. I was convinced that the smallest effort would come off as strange, even repulsive, to my

husband. The rejection of past relationships, lack of experience in affection, and an innate fear of being vulnerable compete for my obedience. Even though I took action in the moment, my head was still in a very negative place.

Do you fear failing? Do you fear being bad at loving your husband, kids, and friends? You're not alone. It's why we don't try. We're scared of either being rejected or looking stupid or simply doing affection badly. Can I offer you a freeing thought?

People don't usually care *how* love is expressed to them. They just appreciate that you expressed it, imperfectly though it may be. Your husband might comment on your effort, but he's probably not judging how you hugged! Your kids might laugh that you kissed them when you never do, but over time, they'll stop commenting. And one day they'll be glad you did.

Fear holds us back from making an effort. It tells us that failure is inevitable, without ever defining what failure is. Is it starting and stopping? Hugging stiffly? Being someone you're "not?" Identify the fear. What are you **really** afraid of? Losing control, saving face? Afraid of losing someone close to you? Afraid of being exposed or looking silly? I have struggled with all of these, but the key to breaking free in this area of life is to **identify** the fear and commit it to the One who made you.

He did not make you to be in bondage to anything, including your own inhibitions and fears.

"There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." -1 John 4:8



Brokenness on Display

DAY SIX

My friends know I am working through this affection thing. One friend in particular has made a game of “rating” my hugs, noting how much I have improved each time. With these people, I am comfortable talking about my struggle, and they are close enough to me to lovingly joke about it!

But sometimes strangers notice that I’m uncomfortable being affectionate, even though I try to go through the socially acceptable means of greeting. In these moments I feel like my weakness is on display for everyone to see. Or when I’m out with my husband and I see other couples, with wives who naturally want to be close, and that old condemnation creeps into my mind: *why can’t you be like that?*

Not good enough. Not loving enough. Not enough.

When my brokenness is on display to myself or to others I am faced with a choice. You, too, are faced with a choice: To listen to the voice of condemnation, or to **stop**, redirect, and listen to the voice of Christ.

Romans 8 tells us that there is **no** condemnation for those

who are under the name and sacrifice of Christ Jesus. At the end of that same chapter Paul informs us that what Jesus did makes us **more** than conquerors in Christ: **more** than the Roman conquerors of old, who have gone down in history as the best of the best. In Christ, we are better at conquering than the Romans! We are overcomers in absolutely every sense.

When my broken, weak self is displayed for everyone to observe is when I tap into the power of God through His Holy Spirit. In the moment when the lies start spilling into my mind I surrender them to the wisdom and truth of God. I invite Him into my thoughts, asking for His truth to replace the untruth, and I verbally reject the lies.

Preaching truth to yourself when the lies come in is the most effective way to fight back. If you hold onto those thoughts, dwell on them, sit with them – you **will** become like them. But you don't have to do this! Your brokenness is not your identity. Your brokenness was taken over by God, consumed by the fire of His grace, and made glorious in Christ. **His** brokenness was put on display so yours could bear you no shame.

So hold your husband's hand, dear girl. Hug your best friend. Those lies have no power over you.

"That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe." -1 Tim. 4:10



Nurturing Little Loves

DAY SEVEN

Perhaps the most terrifying thought as a woman who struggles with affection is the impact my fear will have on my kids. I love my girls with everything I have, but the way I naturally show love isn't something they would recognize at ages three and one (their ages when this book was written). And as they get older, their need to be embraced and kissed won't fade. Children need affection—and I struggle to give it to them.

I think the sheer demand for affection on the woman who doesn't like it makes this journey very overwhelming at first. I sometimes feel so ill equipped, so condemned, and so incapable of providing what my family needs. Even trying to give a hug feels like a herculean effort.

How am I supposed to do this day after day?

God has been doing a work in my heart spiritually and emotionally, but alongside Him, I have to take a step of faith. I have to believe that He is doing a good work that He plans to finish and that my job in the meantime is to give to my babies what they need most. I have to step out, step up, and *act how I*

want to feel.

This is not fake; it's faith. It's faith that God is doing the spiritual work and that we're living up to the work He is doing. It's dependence on His strength and obedience to His call. If we wait to feel like embracing our little ones, or if we let fear hold us back, we will not nurture the little loves who, through our example, are being taught what love looks like.

The alternative is to repeat the pattern. It's to withhold ourselves from our kids until the "right" time, when we feel capable, even as time slips away. The alternative is handing down the generational wounds that stole so much from us. When we write off our fear of affection as a personality trait instead of a wound to heal, we miss out on breaking generational chains. We miss opportunity after opportunity because we were too wrapped up in shame to live as overcomers.

Each time we place faith in God's work and take action based on obedience (not fearful emotion) we're fighting back against the enemy's attack on our families. The enemy wants our kids to repeat our weaknesses. He wants your daughter telling her college roommate how she felt unloved as a child and isn't great at affection because of it (sound familiar?).

The pattern stops with us.

The pattern stops with God.

The pattern stops today.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." -Romans 8:35-37