

TWO SIDES OF LOVE

That this means in many homes is that the race is on between otters and golden retrievers who are pushing forward, wanting that close connection with their spouses, while lions and beavers see them coming and pull just as quickly.

That distance and closeness have to do with developing the soft side of love? If people don't allow others to come close to them both physically and emotionally, they'll almost always fail at trying to communicate and love.

As and golden retrievers have as strong a natural desire to move closer to others as lions and beavers do to move away.

You can't tell you the number of now-grown children who longed for a parent to come closer. Nearly each week in counseling, we see a spouse who has tried for years to draw the other person into the relationship and pushed back each time.

There is a way, however, to stop this distance/closeness dance, shrinking apart between people and helping them gain the closeness they need in a strong relationship. It begins by first gaining a clear picture of the current distance or closeness between you and others.

Take a moment to answer the questions below. They'll help you to see how close or far away you are from others. Then share the results with your spouse.

Smalley/Trent Distance-Closeness Survey

Answer the following questions with particular loved ones in mind (you, your mate, child, close friend, parent). Fill in the blank with a number between 1 and 4, indicating your answer to each question as follows:

- | | |
|------------|------------|
| 1 = never | 3 = often |
| 2 = seldom | 4 = always |

Fill in the blank with a number between 1 + 4
Increasing Softside Love, Part I
 1 = never 3 = often
 2 = seldom 4 = always

With your loved ones, do you...

- Give them the freedom to ask you questions without reacting or becoming defensive? _____
- Seek to hear their real inner feelings without ridiculing them? _____
- Freely express your own inner feelings and thoughts? _____
- Know clearly their ideas and plans for the future? _____
- Watch your everyday manners so as not to offend them? _____
- Plan your schedule to include time with them? _____
- "Light up" when they return from a trip? _____
- Say "I love you" regularly and without conditions? _____
- Share your personal problems and victories? _____
- Laugh regularly? _____
- Actively attend or support their hobbies or athletic events? _____
- Regularly hug or kiss them? _____
- Seek and value their opinions on family issues first? _____
- Pray with and for them regularly? _____
- Keep yourself well-dressed and manicured? _____
- Build their trust by being consistently honest with them? _____
- Actively listen to them by putting down the paper, turning off the television, or looking up from cooking? _____
- Allow them to borrow your things? _____
- Smile toward them regularly? _____
- Seek their forgiveness immediately when you've offended them? _____
- Attend church together regularly? _____
- Keep their secrets if they want you to? _____
- Keep your promises? _____
- Show an honest interest in their friends and relatives? _____
- Act cheerful and encouraging? _____

- Make a genuine effort to be on time? _____
- Watch your tone of voice? _____
- Do your fair share of the housework? _____
- Respect their personal property? _____
- Avoid using negative nicknames? _____

The highest score you can get on this survey is 120; the lowest 30. If you're in the top third of the range (90-120), you can be fairly certain your loved ones are sensing your attachment and closeness. If you're somewhere in the middle, you may need to ask how connected your loved ones feel to you. However, our counseling experience indicates that if you scored at the bottom end of the distance scale (45 or less), *your independence from others is probably being perceived by them as unhealthy distance*. Please understand that there's such a thing as a healthy degree of emotional distance. Some families are so close that if one member sneezes, everyone else reaches for a tissue. People need enough independence that they're able to stand on their own feet. But in marriage and as parents, we need to be close enough physically and emotionally to communicate warmth and love.

What's the answer to a distance problem in our relationships? Is it just us? "That's the way I am! I'm not naturally a close person. My parents weren't close. My grandparents weren't close. My great-grandparents weren't close?"

Not if we're serious about giving others the two sides of love they need much—or about reflecting God's kind of love.

We know it can be difficult to give up the protective comfort of emotional distance. It can be scary to get close to someone, particularly if we've been hurt in the past. But keeping others at more than arm's length can easily turn into a selfish distance that allows us to go our own way without making the kind of significant attachments for which our family members and close friends long.

If you've found yourself with far more distance than closeness in your family or friendships, increasing your softside skills can help you bridge the gap. And one of those skills is our third step toward building softness into your life.

3. Learn to give others a "softness sandwich."

My (Gary's) youngest son's football coach is one of the best in the area. But he became an even better coach this past year by learning to give his players what we call a "softness sandwich."

Jack, our coach, is a former professional football player. And like many coaches, he has a great deal of lion in him. That's understandable. There's nothing soft about taking a team through the rigors of two-a-day practices or making players run wind-sprints in Arizona in August to get them in shape for the season. What Jack has realized, however, is that hardness alone won't motivate every player on the team.

In Jack's first year here, he was really frustrated by his inability to motivate a number of players. Some of his top prospects even quit the team, leaving him with glaring holes in his lineup. Interestingly, the kids he was having trouble with were almost all golden retriever personalities.

After practice one day, he expressed his frustration to me. "I know I'm tough with these boys," he said emphatically. "But they've got to get motivated and intense. They need to get with it, or maybe they need to bag football and go out for some other sport."

"Coach," I said, "are you open to a suggestion?"

"Our season starts in three weeks," he said. "At this point, I'm willing to listen to anything."

That's when I gave him a two-minute explanation of the different animal personalities and told him about the softness sandwich that John and I teach in counseling.

"Coach, try an experiment for one week of practice," I said. "For every thirty seconds you spend getting on a player about a missed tackle or assignment, leave him with thirty seconds of softness as well. Look him right

3. Can you ask others for a favor or ask for help with a problem you're having? _____
4. Do you have difficulty saying no to an added responsibility, even when you know you're overcommitted? _____
5. Do you leave most of the discipline of the children to your spouse? _____
6. When someone compliments you, do you feel uncomfortable or have to explain it away? _____
7. Are most of your times with friends spent listening to their needs and concerns, without voicing your own? _____
8. Do you feel that being aggressive and being assertive are basically the same thing? _____
9. Do you often walk away from confrontations with your children and feel, deep inside, that they've won again? _____
10. Was it difficult for you to express anger in your home growing up? _____
11. Do you feel that your spouse is being too hard when he or she disciplines the children, even when you know the discipline is appropriate and justified? _____
12. If you say no to a friend's request, do you feel you may lose the relationship? _____
13. Do you find yourself being convicted by a message, Scripture or book, but put off taking any steps to change? _____
14. Do you often think that something will "just happen" that will quickly turn a negative situation into a positive one? _____
15. Do you feel insecure in your spiritual life and growth? _____

If you had more yes answers than you have fingers on one hand, this chapter is definitely for you. You're on the low side of the hardside scale and will really benefit from what follows. But even those who answered

no fifteen times can learn a great deal about how to be hardside in a healthy, balanced way.

Where do we begin? Just as in the last chapter, by blasting before we build. For as important as it is to spot emotional freeze points that can block softness, it's equally important to see how they can shut off hardside love.

1. Recognize the effect of emotional freeze points.

The year was 1951, and Sergeant Davis's part of the Korean War had just ended. When the war began, his reserve unit was one of the first called into active duty. The Army had paid his way through college. In return, for twelve months and eleven days, he paid the Army back the hard way: fighting up and down the freezing mountains and hills, often with fixed bayonet, near the thirty-eighth parallel.

Sergeant Davis was now just plain old Dad to Margie, his nine-year-old daughter. But one night soon after his return from the war, he put back on his stripes in an incident he would never forget.

It was bedtime, and Margie had asked for a glass of milk and some cookies before turning in. She was laughing and clowning around in the kitchen when she knocked over her glass, shattering it and spilling milk all over the floor.

The late hour, the loud noise and his overwrought nerves from having recently been in a war zone combined to cause Margie's father to forget whom he was talking to. Instinctively, he reamed her out with a tongue-lashing fit for a disobedient soldier. Shocked by his harshness and vulgarity, Margie burst into tears.

Unfeelingly, he shouted at her, "Get down the hall and get to bed." Then he stormed outside as she fled to her room.

"It was her that broke the glass, not me," he said defiantly to his wife when she came out later to talk to him. He refused to go in and apologize to Margie, ending the discussion with a halfhearted admission, "All right, I was a little hard on her. But she'll forget it." Only she didn't.

Later that night, terrible screams came from Margie's room. Davis rushed

top of the locker Robin shared. No charges had been filed because their girl had been caught in direct possession, but an explosion went in Steve's mind when he faced the facts.

He didn't know how involved Robin was, but he could no longer explain her moody behavior and deceptive stories. He could tell he was losing his daughter to drugs, dead-end friends, and who knew what else, if he had to do something about it.

There are times when life calls us to take a stand, when strength has to be added to softness. In a move far out of character for Steve, he made several major decisions at once.

First, Robin would transfer to a different school. While drugs are on every high school campus, he felt strongly that she needed to make a break from this school. The same thing went for her newfound friends. She was cut all ties with them, including phone calls or "accidental" meetings at the mall. (He chaperoned her to make sure of that.) Finally, they were going back to church, and she was to go into counseling, along with the rest of the family, beginning immediately.

You can imagine the impact these decisions had on the entire family. Robin was enraged and threatened to run away. Night after night, she refused to speak to him or even look at him unless forced to do so. Her younger sister, a golden retriever by temperament, responded to the hurt she saw in Robin's life and also attacked their father as being too harsh and cruel. Even his wife began to doubt him and wondered aloud if he had gone overboard with the whole situation.

Two months had now passed, and Robin was in her new school, away from the old friends. It was past midnight, and once again, Steve had been unable to sleep, tossing and turning with his stomach tied in knots as he struggled with conflicting emotions. *Am I being too hard? Have I gone overboard?* he thought. At last, he decided to do the only thing that seemed to give him any comfort; he was going downstairs to pray. But this night, on his way to the stairs, Steve stopped by Robin's room. The door was half open, and he peered into the darkness. After a moment letting his eyes adjust, he stepped inside and watched her sleep.

Emotions gripped him as he remembered all the nights he had stood there when she was young, looking down on her as she held her blanket or a favorite stuffed animal. He recalled how she used to smile whenever he walked into a room. But now he felt only hatred from her, and it was tearing his heart to pieces.

Tears filled his eyes as he started to turn away. And then his daughter spoke. "Daddy?" she said. "Is that you?"

He stopped where he was and turned slowly. "Yes, Honey," he said. After a long pause, he could tell his daughter had begun to cry softly. "Daddy," she said, "thank you for loving me. I was stuck, and I didn't know how to get out. Thank you for being firm with me..."

Steve had paid a tremendous price to hear those words. There is no anger like that of a person who is caught up in darkness and then forced to look at the light. Steve even had to shoulder the anger of others who felt he was overreacting and cruel.

Tough love isn't easy, and it often doesn't bring rewards in just two months. We know other people who have had to be hard with a loved one and seen a child or spouse walk away for years. But one thing is certain: Had Steve decided to give only the soft side of love to his daughter, he would never have won back her love, and he might have lost her forever.

This chapter is for all of us who have struggled with being too soft in our love for others—people like Steve who lean toward the soft side, who need a healthy hardness to balance their love not just in a crisis, but every day.

It's our otter and golden retriever friends who tend to camp out on the soft side of love. Being naturally soft on people, they're often too soft on problems as well. To see just how well you fit that description, go down the following softness survey, answering yes or no to each question.

1. Do you tend to hold your feelings inside rather than express them to others? _____
2. Can you criticize a friend? _____