

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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THE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

INTIMACY IN RELATIONSHIPS IS ONE KEY TO EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Some of us search our entire lives for a feeling of oneness with another person. It's hard to describe, really, what we search for, but we know it when we finally achieve it. Maybe we tire of that dark feeling of being ultimately alone as we struggle through life. If only there were someone else here, we say to ourselves, who could understand and share these burdens. Then it wouldn't be so lonely. It wouldn't be so hard. Or perhaps, in our more positive moments, we want to share not just the burdens but our pleasures too, our strength and beauty. We want the powerful impact of our internal experience to have an impression on someone else, as if to say that we count, we are whole, and we want to impart this feeling to another person.

Humans are social beings. Is that why we search for intimacy with others? Is the quest for intimacy the reason we commit ourselves to another person in marriage or other public declaration of loyalty? In trying to find intimacy, are we simply searching again for the ultimate feeling of bonding that we felt toward a parent during our infancy? The search for intimacy may be one reason we form social groups, and it may explain why we quest for spiritual fulfillment in our religious lives.

Many people in contemporary society feel lonely. For all the benefits we derive from living in a highly technological world, we still may find it difficult to discover ways

We do
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to form intimate relationships. In fact, our high tech society seems to fragment our social connections, to drive us away from other people. For example, electronic mail seems to make connecting with other people much easier, but in truth our messages are usually just flashes of ideas – briefly written, briefly read and instantaneously deleted – and they barely fulfill our desire for more complete relationships based on our inner experiences. In our modern society, we lack ways to see, hear, or touch other people – not in person and not to the extent that humans have in the past. What our high tech world has brought us is an abundance of stress in our personal lives. And stress and intimacy are hardly compatible bedfellows.

To have an intimate connection with another person requires first that we have access to our own personal emotions and ideas. We cannot expect to be intimate with another when we are out of touch with our own internal experiences. We must explore and become familiar with our own personal thoughts and feelings before we can share them with someone else. Our intimate experiences may involve our emotional, cognitive, social, physical, sexual, and spiritual lives. Two people, each of whom is in touch with his or her own internal experiences, may be able to share an intimate relationship on any one of these levels. True intimacy is one of the ultimate expressions of the human experience. And that may be why we strive so hard to find it.

HOW DO WE REACH INTIMACY?

Each person seems to understand the intimate experience in his or her own way. In a sense it takes a journey of personal discovery to learn how to share intimacy with another person. Here are some guidelines that may help to define that journey –

Know Your Self:

Get in touch with your own private experiences. In our stressed-out world this is often hard to do because our attention is directed outward much of the time. It helps to sit – doing nothing and being distracted by nothing – and spend time in reflection and introspection. Observe your thoughts and feelings. The brain has pleasure centers – close your eyes and imagine yourself experiencing pleasure. Become familiar with those parts of yourself that are strong and that

feel whole and integrated. Learn to feel comfortable with the part of yourself that senses calmness, confidence and peace. (Some people like to spend a few minutes every night before bed, perhaps with just a candle burning, reflecting on the events of the day. Others prefer to keep a daily journal of their private thoughts and feelings.) Until you know your own private feelings, it is difficult to share them with someone else.

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Communicate

With Another Person:

Share what you know about yourself with another person who can be trusted. This involves several steps. First, you need a sense of **commitment** to that person. Strangers passing through your life are not the appropriate people with whom to share your deepest feelings. Intimacy has to be reserved for a person who will be there over the long haul – a close friend, a partner, a family member, or, if we're lucky, a soul mate. You also need a feeling of **trust**. If the other person is not able to appreciate the delicacy of what you are sharing, it is futile to try to achieve intimacy. In the worst case, your words might be held against you later, which can be damaging and may lead to cynicism and distrust. Knowing whom to trust involves acquiring good judgment about other people. A trustworthy person is one who can honor and respect you for sharing your most intimate experiences. Finally, understand that intimacy involves making yourself **vulnerable**. The guarded and defensive person will never find true intimacy. Finding intimacy means taking a risk, opening yourself up, sharing the most personal part of yourself with another person. Can the other person handle it? Can the other person care? If they can, you are no longer alone.

Intimacy Is Reciprocal:

A healthy intimate relationship is one in which both partners know themselves and are able to come together with a sense of equality. Certain relationships are not meant to be reciprocal (the therapist/client relationship, for example, often involves a high level of deeply personal communication, but this is primarily on the part of the client). Perhaps the most intense and lasting levels of intimacy are achieved when both

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partners are able to share equally with each other. As the listener, you have to be able to honor and respect the openness, vulnerability, and courage of the one who is communicating personal ideas and emotions. Value judgments, criticisms, and advice-giving have no place in intimate communication. The goal is to appreciate and acknowledge the validity of the other person's deepest feelings. If you are aware of your own thoughts and feelings, you may then have the ability to appreciate similar experiences on the part of the other person.

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Keep the Light Alive:

Once two people have entered into a deep level of sharing, they usually want to stay there. If there is true equality between the two, they achieve a balance which feels right and which they don't want to lose. If, however, one of the partners feels the need to lessen the level of intimacy, the probability of conflict increases. You can avoid misunderstandings by maintaining your commitment and trust during these natural cycles that occur within any relationship. Intimacy takes work and a sense of maturity. To shirk the responsibility of keeping an intimate relationship alive invites a return to isolation.

The intimate relationship is healthy. Intimacy allows us to end loneliness and to share the deepest and most personal parts of ourselves with a trusted partner. As social beings, we respond physically to the experience of intimacy. People who have intimate relationships live longer and healthier lives and they report more personal happiness and satisfaction with the way they live. Intimacy gives us a feeling of comfort, security, and a sense of being loved and accepted. It gives us the freedom and support to stay true to the special qualities that define each one of us as a unique person.

Psychotherapy can allow us to explore our own deepest and most intimate feelings in a safe and accepting setting with a professional trained to understand these inner processes. We can learn to stay true to our uniqueness and to feel comfortable in sharing our authenticity with another person. We can explore who can be trusted, and who can't, as well as the features of our lives that may have led us to hide ourselves from others. Psychotherapy has the potential to teach us how to break out of isolation and loneliness into a world of love and acceptance. It prepares us to explore an intimate relationship outside of the therapy setting.

The Healthy Benefits of Intimacy

A number of research studies have shown persuasively that people in intimate relationships live longer and happier lives than those who are not.

- For example, we know that people in marriages or other committed relationships live longer than people who are single.
- In one classic study researchers found that 95 percent of people who described their parents as uncaring had diseases by midlife, while only 29 percent of those who described their parents as caring had midlife diseases. Having supportive and close relationships with parents in our childhoods leads to healthier relationships in general when we grow up, and it is these healthier adult relationships that are linked to a lower prevalence of heart disease and cancer in midlife. In other words, one can compensate for a deprived childhood by learning later in life how to sustain supportive relationships.
- In another series of studies, researchers found that people who are socially isolated are *two to five times* more likely to die prematurely than those who have a sense of connection and community.
- A study at the University of Texas looked at patients who had undergone open-heart surgery. Those who had neither ongoing group participation nor were able to derive strength from their religion were more than *seven times* more likely to have died six months after their surgery.
- Women with metastatic breast cancer were assigned to support groups which met once a week for a year. The women in the support groups lived twice as long as those who were not in these groups.
- One study has even found that people with fewer relationships of any kind (e.g., friendship, a partner, family, work, social groups, religious affiliations) were *four times* as likely to develop a common cold as those who had more relationships.
- Interestingly, research showed that people with pets are healthier than people without them and have to make fewer visits to doctors.

Trusting Well

It is difficult to achieve intimacy in a relationship unless we have the ability to trust. We tend to focus on other people when we think about trust – that is, we might ask, who out there can be trusted and who cannot? But it may be more helpful to look inside and to think about trust also as something that we do well, or not. Some people grow up with a good ability to trust appropriately, and others, because of their needs and life experiences, have more difficulty with this issue..

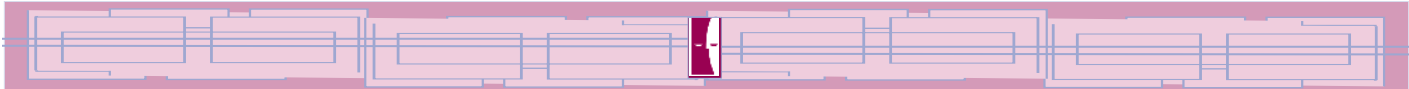
Having a good eye for trust involves having a healthy sense of our own identities – and this means having a positive self-image, the ability to value ourselves and our decisions, and a good sense for protecting our own boundaries. We need to know what we stand for and what is best for us. Trust also involves acquiring a knack for making good judgments. When we have the self-confidence that comes with knowing and liking ourselves, as well as the ability to make life-enhancing decisions, we should be able to decide fairly easily about whom to trust.

Trust between two people emerges from a process of mutual self-disclosure – we gradually reveal more and more about ourselves to the other person until the relationship achieves a sense of intimacy. The first person self-discloses only to the degree that the other person has, in a series of

steps. A good balance is maintained between both people. If this balance is disrupted, it is difficult to maintain trust. For example, if one person reveals everything all at once and the other person reveals nothing at all, the balance is broken – and neither party will be able to trust the other. The building of trust is a mutual process that takes time. We feel comfortable revealing things about ourselves when the other person has shown that he or she is willing to take the same risk.

Some people trust blindly. They reveal everything all at once, expecting that the other person will be able to reciprocate immediately. What is more likely is that the other person will feel overwhelmed and may back off from closeness. People who trust blindly may want to look into issues like boundaries, self-image and why they need to be so close so quickly.

Other people find it difficult to trust at all. They may feel protected, but the walls are so high that they may never find an intimate relationship – and what a price to pay for protection! People who have difficulty with opening themselves to trust may want to look into the pain that may have closed them off – and they may want to look into ways of improving their communication skills. The rewards of intimacy are well worth it.



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