

Romantic Relationships: The Intimacy behind the Sex

Susan Blackburn, M.A.

What do you think of when you hear the word intimacy? Perhaps it conjures up images of sexy lingerie, a deep soul mate connection or a passionate, sexual relationship. Certainly, it can refer to all of those aspects but the entire meaning of intimacy is far greater than that. In our relationships, whether they are marriages, long-term relationships, exclusive partnerships or casual dating experiences, true intimacy is often missing. In fact, most of us don't know how to achieve a high degree of intimacy with our significant other. When intimacy is lacking in a relationship we get that dark, lonely feeling. You know the one where you feel even lonelier sitting right beside your partner? Nobody wants to feel this empty, so although intimacy takes some work to achieve, it's well worth the effort.

Open communication, vulnerability, transparency and reciprocity are required to realize intimacy. It requires letting our partner into our hearts and our minds. Since we all have thoughts and feelings we don't even accept in ourselves, it seems like quite a stretch to share many of these shameful ideas with others. We often believe that our loved ones would think less of us if we were completely honest. This results in our revealing very little about our true nature.

Disclosing personal information within a romantic or sexual context is important, but being intimate involves much more than this. It requires imparting our ideas about everything, including negative points of view. Sharing how you like to be touched or kissed is an example of open communication. Another is telling your partner in a kind and respectful way that you would appreciate it if he or she would do his or her share of the laundry, instead of just doing it yourself and saying nothing. Speaking in a calm, confident manner is assertive and highly effective. How many of you choose instead to 'pick your battles' figuring it's not worth speaking up? When we 'sweep it under the carpet' by not saying a word, or choose to blame and criticize, we inhibit intimacy. Some of you are probably thinking that 'speaking in a direct and considerate manner might work for some people, but not with my partner!' Fortunately, this calm, respectful communication style works with everyone. Having ongoing conversations about your life goals and what your life was like as a child are also necessary, as are discussions about your preferences. Most importantly, you must make a point of letting your partner know what you need to feel loved, what your values are and what makes you happy, angry, jealous or sad. Who are you behind the social mask we all wear in public? We drop the mask a lot in romantic relationships, but much of it still remains.

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When our partners only know a percentage of our personality, they can only love us in part, leaving us feeling deep down that if he or she really knew us they might possibly leave or love us less. This type of thinking keeps us stuck in unsatisfying relationships and often leads to the end of a relationship. By exchanging our ideas directly and sincerely we can create an intimate bond that is strong enough to revive or maintain our relationship instead. If we say it gracefully, we can say anything, because our messages are primarily transmitted through our 'tone' of voice. It's our tone that conveys love or hatred, rather than our words. Without honest, upfront communication it is impossible to feel a close connection. The more our partner knows about us, the more he or she is able to love us. The more we are loved, the happier we are. Happy people have fulfilling relationships.

Since we can only feel lasting intimacy when our partner knows us at a deep level, we often think this means that we have to share our most personal secrets. This is neither necessary nor advisable. We all need a place inside that's just our own, that we don't share with anyone else; a special space that's sacred. Outside of this though, there is a whole lot we keep to ourselves out of fear that we would be judged harshly, ridiculed or even left.

Fortunately, those fears are largely unfounded. Sharing aspects of ourselves that we are ashamed of has the exact opposite effect that we think it will. Being vulnerable enough to disclose things we feel silly about or ashamed of creates real closeness with others if it's done within the right context. The reason for this is that we all hold very similar negative thoughts. For example, when your partner is busy all the time, even though it's unhelpful, it's normal to start thinking that he or she is losing interest, which often triggers a fear of abandonment. Most likely, when this situation arises, your partner is simply focusing on other essential areas of his or her life. Instead of feeling abandoned, we can choose instead to use this time to engage in interests and activities of our own. This will make you even more vibrant and attractive. When your partner starts focusing on you again, and he or she will, you will have a lot to talk about and perhaps something new to teach each other. Sharing novel ideas with one another creates both increased interest and intimacy and is necessary to keep your relationship exciting.

We all feel inadequate about certain things. It's common to feel we're not good enough, feel insecure about our competence or that we're unlovable or unworthy sometimes. Part of learning to create and maintain an intimate relationship comes with

accepting these parts of ourselves; our humanity. As humans we all share these same frailties, the same fears and shame. I know some of you are thinking, 'but I don't accept that part of me.' To say that you don't accept your weaknesses is the same as saying you don't accept that you are human. There isn't anyone without weaknesses. Some people pretend they are without fault. However, people with only positive traits, without a shadow side, do not exist. Everyone is comprised of both negative and positive characteristics. If we don't accept our weaknesses, in both ourselves and our partner, we cannot fully appreciate our strengths since they are two sides of the same coin. If there is to be any change, it will start with your acceptance of your perceived faults. We are unable to alter those things that we do not identify as existing within us. Admitting that we lie at times, make mistakes, fear standing up for ourselves in certain circumstances or mistrust our partner on occasion is incredibly freeing and creates a starting point for change.

When we have the courage to share personal information, our partners can relax and love us more. If your loved one is honest, he or she will admit to having similar concerns of his or her own such as feeling inadequate or unlovable. Disclosing this information increases trust and understanding. How many of you believe that saying 'no' to requests from your partner and spending time away from him or her to do things you enjoy will be detrimental? Although the fear and anxiety around admitting to your weaknesses and having the courage to be independent is very real, it is unlikely to end your relationship. In fact, the opposite will occur and your bond will become stronger. This level of self-disclosure and self-sufficiency will free up extra energy since you are no longer pretending to be someone that you are not. Another added benefit is that your partner will now know more of you to love. In order to get to this stage, it's necessary to tolerate and push through bodily sensations like the queasy stomach, racing heart and dry throat that often surface when we engage in conversations that make us feel vulnerable. Based on our own individual experiences and personalities, this will be easier for some of us than others. In order to attain a desirable level of intimacy, some people might choose to work with a therapist who specializes in assertive communication and relationships.

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So, how do all of these intimacy-building skills relate to passionate lovemaking and sex? As physically gratifying as sex can be, it reaches the height of ecstasy when real intimacy is involved. When you keep most of what you think and feel inside, it's as though all of those thoughts and feelings stand between you and your partner. Remember the laundry? When we say/don't say or do things out of fear instead of desire, a lot of resentment builds inside. What looks like a nice gesture is actually not nice at all. When that resentment reaches the limit, as inevitably it will, you are guaranteed to do something to get your partner back. This is typically unconscious and often takes shape in some sort of acting out behaviour. When we are unable to express what we really think and feel we become very angry inside. Depending on your personality, if you are someone that never gets mad, you might not be aware of just how angry you are. If you are prone to feeling depressed you might be someone who is disconnected from your anger. When anger and resentment build up enough we will act out unconsciously by hurting our partner in some way, such as making sarcastic and rude remarks, withholding affection, becoming impotent or by cheating. Although we aren't consciously aware of the connection between acting out and our mishandled laundry for example, we can become aware that 'sweeping it under the carpet' or complaining ensures there will be a high level of emotional damage in your relationship. When intimacy is in short supply, rest assured that there are countless unspoken thoughts, dreams, bitter resentments, interesting ideas and assumptions standing between the two of you and blocking the closeness you desire.

When we lack the skills to be fully transparent, we are unable to feel close, which leaves us open to stepping outside of our primary relationship to find the love and security we need to feel whole. Frequently, we are unable to ask our partner for what we need, making it seem easier to cope with the feelings of emptiness this creates by using infidelity, pornography, food, alcohol, drugs, activities, religion, work and television to fill ourselves up. When we fall prey to these outside forces, we are usually not even aware why we're so drawn to them. All we know is that we feel good or better when we engage in them because they take our minds off of the feelings of shame, abandonment and loneliness that surfaces when we spend time alone with our thoughts. Starting with acceptance, communication and individuality (having a life of your own, separate from the life you share with your significant other), we can eliminate many of our humiliating feelings and create the kind of magic we crave with our loved one. This is possible regardless of how dismal things might seem and safeguards us from wanting to end our relationship or fantasize about someone new.

An incredible transformation takes place when both partners risk feeling vulnerable enough to share without reservation. Our hearts and minds open up allowing us to feel the sparks we had when we first met. Do you remember the butterflies, laughter and endless conversation? When we start to reveal what we think and feel, our loving feelings and desire come back. During this time, you have the opportunity to create an exhilarating and dedicated relationship. Let's say that you've learned to attain a

high degree of intimacy. What now? Having this strong bond allows us to feel together even when we are apart, increases the amount of laughter and makes us feel deeply loved. When we have this level of safety in our relationships the sex can be outstanding. I know some of you are wondering exactly how this takes place. Surely it doesn't just spontaneously occur on its own? The same skills you cultivate to create and sustain a joyful connection are primarily the same skills you need in the bedroom. These are courage, confidence and cooperation, along with the fourth required 'c', compatibility, which we will assume exists if you've made it this far.

The same inadequacies we discussed earlier, including fear, shame, and guilt often show up in the bedroom. Being aware of these, accepting them and discussing them openly with your partner is essential. An attitude of equality between you and your partner will also help set the stage for a sensual, trusting experience. Both partners need to be able to give and receive, and feel safe enough to express vulnerabilities, desires, dislikes and fantasies. Bringing a sense of humour, playfulness and imagination to your sex life, will intensify your sense of pleasure and intrigue.

When real openness and communication exists between the two of you, you have created a relationship that can sustain sexual requests and the sharing of dislikes and fantasies without your partner feeling unloved or incompetent. There is a collective misnomer that our partners should just know how to satisfy us if they truly love us. Most of us don't even know what we need sexually or otherwise to be happy. If we don't know how to really satisfy ourselves is it even possible for our partner, no matter how much they love us, to know what we need? How many of you have made statements such as 'if she really loved me she would do that for me' or 'if he really loved me he wouldn't have said that'? The way we need to be loved and made love to is extremely personal. The only way your partner will know what you need is if you tell him or her in a kind and respectful way.

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Making requests in a positive manner works extremely well. Instead of saying, “I don't like it when you reach orgasm first and don't consider my needs,” you might try saying “I would love it if we made sure that I reach orgasm first next time.” In the first instance your partner will feel criticized and will not be very willing to give you what you need, but in the second scenario, your partner will feel respected enough to honour your request. What if he or she doesn't want to do what you've asked? Well, don't give up. Perhaps over time he or she will be more inclined to meet your specific needs. Depending on your request, it's important to acknowledge that anything you engage in sexually needs to be mutually satisfying. If this is not the case, it's essential to be able to say 'no' in a kind and respectful manner. Many of us believe that once we've had these discussions, our partner should know what we want for all future sexual liaisons. However, this kind of thinking won't usually get us what we want. To get our sexual needs met we need to become confident about making direct requests during every lovemaking session. Our needs change over time and the only way to achieve new ways of connecting sexually is by communicating in a self-assured manner (a way that suggests you believe your partner wants to please you), instead of dropping hints, which is rarely effective.

Once you start expressing what you need in a friendly and forthright manner, making specific requests for your sexual enjoyment will become automatic. You might be thinking that asking for what you want all the time is too difficult or is simply unfair. This may be true, but it works! If you refuse to ask, the only one standing in the way of your own sexual satisfaction is you. Nobody is very good at mind reading, so help your partner out and let them know what to do and what not to do. An added benefit of sexual cooperation and experimentation is that it will greatly enhance your attraction for one another and make challenges and conflicts outside of the bedroom easier to deal with. In the end, you will enjoy sustained intimacy, eroticism, sensuality and long-term loving.

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