

Learning the Secret of Establishing True Intimacy In Your Relationship

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

People commonly think of sex when they hear the word, "intimacy", and sex is a component of physical intimacy. But there is a whole lot more to intimacy than sex. There are several different types of intimacy, and it is important to know how to "do" all types. Regardless of whether you are talking about physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual intimacy, many people struggle with intimacy.

Those who grow up in dysfunctional families typically do not understand how to be intimate with others. There are various reasons for this, some of which have to do with not knowing what will happen next in the family and in relationships, not having your needs met as a child, and learning to not trust your own perceptions, feelings, and judgment.

There are numerous things that go into being able to be intimate. Self-esteem, self-knowledge, being comfortable in one's own skin, being able to trust yourself and another person-all go into development of comfort with intimacy. Intimacy is about being able to be yourself, and to enable others to perceive you as you are-foibles and all. It is about being able to be fully present in your relationship without fear of rejection or abandonment. This is very critical because at any given time, two partners will have differing needs for closeness vs. distance in the relationship. If you are secure in your sense of worthiness of being loved, you are more comfortable with differences in that need.

The "secret" to gaining the ability to be truly intimate is to become comfortable with different levels of need for closeness vs. distance at any given moment in time. In any close relationship, two people will rarely have the same degree of need for closeness. People are usually at odds with each other over needs.

When you are not comfortable with yourself, you may feel the need to formulate a hypothesis to explain why your loved one has wants more distance than you do at any given point. You may speculate that they are less invested in the relationship than you are, or that if you were different that they would want more closeness. You may think that it means that they don't want to be around you, that they don't love you, or that they are losing interest in you.

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When people are not aware of their own emotional baggage and intimacy issues, they can create patterns where they engage in a perpetual, self-reinforcing and circular behavior pattern. This interaction pattern has been described as pursue/distance and demand/withdraw. In this pattern, one person habitually pursues emotionally and perhaps physically, and the other distances. This typically goes on until the pursuer, for whatever reason, decides that they are getting nothing for their investment and begins to distance. As this happens, the "distancer", who looks like they are not engaged in the relationship, begins to pursue.

Many, if not most, couples engage in a more subtle version of this continuing pattern. The dynamics seem to become obvious during a relationship crisis, when the relationship may be in imminent danger of collapse or in crisis. This pattern can be a roadblock to true intimacy, when intimacy is actually the target of the "pursuer" or "demander".

Individuals who do not know how to talk about relationship issues including their need for closeness or their need for distance, tend to act out their feelings in some way. Many couples, in their attempt to problem solve on issues in their home or family may be working on different issues and not even realize it. All kinds of normal events take on "relationship meanings" when you have a difficult time communicating your wants, needs, and feelings. An example might be the wife who becomes quite upset when the husband is fifteen minutes late from work. She wants more closeness and because he seems to need less closeness she believes that he does not want to spend time with her and is avoiding her. Rather than tell him that she wants and needs more time with him, she nags him to complete his work earlier in the day, be assertive, and get out of the office "on time". The more she nags, the later he gets.

Although these patterns are difficult to see and to break, they can be ended. It is hard for couples to recognize the pattern because they are invested in their own perception of the events. They are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is the other person who is at fault and that if the other person changed, they too, would change.



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Each waits for the partner to change and they become more and more stuck in the pattern. The pattern can be broken, and intimacy can be established when each partner is able to acknowledge and express their wants, needs, and feelings. When they can identify that at

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any given moment that they have a difference in their need for closeness, and that it is merely a difference and not something "bad", they can interrupt the pattern. Each person has to be able to accept himself or herself as worthy of love and to trust that they are loved in the relationship. When they are able to tolerate the differences in their needs for closeness as simply difference, without value judgment, they can interrupt the structure and create a comfort that allows for growth of true intimacy.



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