

Deepening Intimacy

Emotional Intimacy

By Alison Poulsen

Based on the work of David Schnarch

“What counts in making a happy marriage is not so much how compatible you are, but how you deal with incompatibility.”

George Levinger

Most people and even some therapists confuse intimacy with closeness. They think relationships will improve if we communicate with more empathy, validation, and acceptance. Intimacy, however, does not thrive where there is too much all-accepting, all-validating closeness with another person.

Beware of Fusion

Too much agreement and feigned empathy result in fusion, which destroys intimacy in a relationship. Fusion is the dissolution of boundaries between people, which causes anxiety to be extremely infectious. Intimacy, on the other hand, requires that people are emotionally separate, and thus aren't reactive in face of others' anxiety.

Squeezing validation out of your partner

It's a myth that people lack intimacy because they don't communicate. The problem is that many couples use communication to squeeze validation out of each other, either through manipulation or complaints. “Do you love me?” “Don't you agree with me?” “Don't you think it's terrible what she said to me!”

Many people have an unspoken agreement to take turns disclosing personal information while the other lavishes empathy on them in return. “You validate me, and I'll validate you.” Such empathy may make people feel better temporarily, but it encourages fusion by promoting others to reciprocate out of a sense of obligation.

While there is nothing wrong with enjoying the validation from others, there is a problem with unconsciously pressuring another person to provide it for us. It stifles growth, which is key in sustaining passion; it stifles honest self-revelation, which is key in attaining intimacy.

Giving away your sense of self

The problem with fusion is that one's sense of self depends on another person's feelings and acceptance. To hand over your sense of self as well as security is tantamount to saying "Here's my sense of self-worth—take care of it, or else I won't take care of yours." Mutual dependence and fear then run the show, rather than autonomous choice and affection.

Self-presentation

A person who is dependent on validation is tempted to start screening himself and to show only those aspects that will generate validation. We accommodate our partner's limitations rather than challenging ourselves and our partners beyond those limitations.

"I'd better laugh at her joke or she'll be hurt."

"I'd better not disagree with his ridiculous political view, or he'll get upset."

"I'd better not leave her side at this party, or she'll feel insecure."

"I'd better not wear this stunning dress, or he'll be upset if other men see me looking beautiful."

"I'd better not talk about quantum mechanics, or he'll feel inadequate."

Selective self-disclosure is antithetical to intimacy. We hide or stop developing parts of ourselves that allow us to become more whole and multifaceted individuals, whether those parts are powerful, romantic, silly, smart, or passionate. As more and more aspects of ourselves remain unexpressed, fear of rejection increases. When we

stifle ourselves, we stagnate. We shrivel up and resent our partner for lack of intimacy and vitality.

Tolerating the anxiety of intimacy

People say they want more intimacy, yet often they can't tolerate much of it. Tolerating intimacy requires the ability to maintain a clearly defined identity while disclosing a core aspect of the self.

For instance, a woman with low intimacy tolerance will first ascertain her partner's probable response before expressing a novel part of herself. If she thinks he won't validate her, she might limit her expression to what's tried and true between them. Or she might try to squeeze validation from her partner. Both alternatives start the cycle of self-screening and fusion, which forestall intimacy.

In order to develop more intimacy, then, we need to stop being reactive and limiting ourselves because of the fear of our partner's reactions. For example, if we tolerate discomfort, we no longer need to feign agreement, laugh at a poor joke, wear the ugly dress, or dumb down our conversation, all too avoid upsetting our partner. Our relationships become based on stimulating authenticity, rather than feigned closeness.

Communication intolerance

What we call "communication difficulties" is often simply intolerance for what is communicated. We need to learn to communicate with honesty and respect, and to tolerate hearing our partner's message. Both partners need to express themselves despite the other's response. Respectful communication is different from acceptance and validation. Good communication does not necessarily make the other feel good, that is, if they don't agree with the message. Yet, it is not aimed at hurting the other person either.

Intimacy

“Intimacy is knowing who you are and letting someone else in on the secret” (Schnarch, 2003).

Intimacy requires a boundary between two people, not agreement and validation. Intimacy develops through conflict, self-validation, and unilateral disclosure or expression of ourselves. People who validate themselves evoke respect and interest.

In other words, you allow another person to truly see you without imposing an obligation to validate you or to reciprocate with disclosure. You disclose yourself of your own free will with no strings attached. This requires having a clear sense of self, the ability to self-validate, and a willingness to grow.

Moving beyond limitations

Relationship struggles are often fought to determine whose limitations we’re going to live by. Instead, we may want to attempt to go beyond both sets of limitations. Rather than saying “love me and now live within my limitations,” we could say “I love you and I’m willing to stretch.”

Intimacy requires learning to live with the totality of another person without becoming reactive. It also means expressing more of our own totality despite our discomfort in doing so. When we are taken aback, we have the choice of getting upset or taking the challenge and becoming the best person we can be. Ironically, disclosing the very parts of ourselves we fear will be rejected, and doing so with a spirit of self-validation, not neediness, results in the deepening of intimacy and meaning within our relationship.

<http://www.alisonpoulsen.com/intimacya.html>