

The Importance of Intimacy in Relationships

https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Intimate_relationships

The systematic study of intimate relationships is a relatively new area of research within the field of **social psychology** that has emerged within the last few decades. However the social thought and analysis of intimate relationships dates back to early Greek philosophers.

An **intimate relationship** is a particularly **close interpersonal relationship**. It can be **defined by the characteristics of trust, mutual respect, emotional attachment, enduring behavioural interdependence, unique patterns of interaction, and need fulfillment**.

Intimate relationships play a central role in the overall human experience.^[1]
Humans have a universal need to feel connected and belong to a group which is satisfied in familial groups and when mature intimate relationships are formed.^[2]

Intimate relationships consist of **people that are invested in each other, are interested and attracted to each other, and who like and love each other. They include close romantic and sexual partnerships** - those people we **marry and provide emotional and personal support to.**^[1] Intimate relationships **provide a social network of people that provide strong emotional attachments and fulfil our universal needs of belonging and being cared for.**^[1]

Love in Intimate Relationships

Love is an important factor in intimate relationships. Though the term is notoriously difficult to define, any thoughtful inquiry into the subject will show it to be qualitatively, not only quantitatively, different than liking, and the difference is not merely in the presence or absence of sexual attraction.

There are two types of love in a relationship; passionate love and companionate love. With **companionate love**, potent feelings diminish but are enriched by **warm feelings of attachment, an authentic and enduring bond, a sense of mutual commitment, the profound knowledge that you are caring for another person who is in turn caring for you, feeling proud of a mate's accomplishment, and the satisfaction that comes from sharing goals and perspective.** In contrast, **passionate love** is marked by infatuation, intense preoccupation with the partner, **strong sexual longing, throes of ecstasy, and feelings of exhilaration that come from being reunited with the partner.**

People who are in an intimate relationship with one another are **often called a couple**, especially if the members of that couple have ascribed some **degree of permanency to their relationship**. Such couples often **provide the emotional security that is necessary for them to organise and accomplish life tasks, particularly forms of labor or distributions of work**.

Intimacy

Intimacy generally refers to **the feeling of being in a close personal association and belonging together**. It is a **familiar and very close affective connection with another as a result of entering deeply or closely into relationship through knowledge and experience of the other**. **Genuine intimacy in human relationships requires: dialogue, transparency, vulnerability, and reciprocity**.

As a verb **"intimate"** means **"to state or make known"**.

The activity of **intimating (making known)** underpins the meanings of **"intimate"** when used as a noun and adjective.

As a **noun**, an **"intimate"** is a **person with whom we have a particularly close relationship**. This was clarified by Dalton (1959) who discusses how anthropologists and ethnographic researchers access 'inside information' from within a particular cultural setting by establishing networks of intimates capable (and willing) to provide information unobtainable through formal channels^[3].

As an **adjective**, **"intimate"** indicates **detailed knowledge of a thing or person** (e.g. "an intimate knowledge of engineering" and "an intimate relationship between two people")

In human relationships, the meaning and level of intimacy varies within and between relationships. In anthropological research, intimacy is considered the product of a successful seduction, a process of rapport building that enables parties to confidently disclose previously hidden thoughts and feelings. **Intimate conversations become the basis for 'confidences' (secret knowledge) that bind people together^{[5][6]}**. **Developing an intimate relationship typically takes a considerable amount of time (months and years, rather than days or weeks)** and both anthropologists and zoologists have tracked the subliminal changes in body language as rapport develops between two or more people^[7].

To sustain intimacy for any length of time requires well developed emotional and interpersonal awareness. Intimacy requires an ability **to be both separate and together participants in an intimate relationship**. This is called **self-differentiation**. It results in a connection in which there is an **emotional range involving both robust conflict, and intense loyalty^[8]**. **Lacking the ability to differentiate one self from the other is a form**

of symbiosis, a state that is different from intimacy, even if feelings of closeness are similar.

From a **centre of self knowledge and self differentiation** intimate behaviour joins **family, close friends as well as those with whom one is in love**. It evolves through **reciprocal self-disclosure and candour**.

Poor skills in developing of intimacy can lead to **getting too close too quickly; struggling to manage a boundary and to sustain connection; breaking trust, being poorly skilled as a friend, rejecting self-disclosure, or even rejecting friendships and those who have them**^[9].

Understanding Types of Intimacy

<https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/sexual-vs-emotional-intimacy-do-you-know-the-difference-dg/>

Often, the term “**intimate**” is understood in a **purely physical context**. A couple may be referred to as “intimate” in order to express that they are in a sexual relationship. In fact, this is a narrow and somewhat misleading use of the term, and scholars distinguish between **several types of intimacy**:

- **Intellectual (a rich meeting of the minds)**
- **Experiencing (closeness in activity such that you are in sync)**
- **Sexual (characterized by shared sensual and sexual expression)**
- **Emotional (characterized by shared feelings, openness, trust, vulnerability)**

For purposes of this discussion, we will focus on **sexual and emotional intimacy**.

Sexual Intimacy

There are times when we hunger for **sexual connection**, and **the longing is physical**. Not only do we yearn for intercourse, but we want the press and presence of another person in all his or her sensual splendor – the tastes, scents, sounds, textures – and naturally, visual aspects enhance the experience.

In sex, we let down barriers, and we **permit another person into our most private personal spaces**. **Sexual intimacy** involves a degree of **vulnerability and trust** – for some more than others, and in some scenarios more than others. (Have you ever

considered why a “quickie” with your clothes on may be “hot” but less intimate than slowly undressing with your partner? Think about it. It’s a matter of exposure and vulnerability.)

There are times people engage in **sex, not lovemaking**. This **may occur with no “attachment” whatsoever, with some affection, or with friendship**. As adults, if we’re paying attention, we understand the nuances of sharing parts – not hearts.

Physical intimacy is characterised by romantic or passionate love and attachment, or sexual activity. In new relationships, **sexual intimacy often develops slowly and in a predictable way**. Research by Desmond Morris, a behavioural psychologist, found that most new relationships followed **12 predictable steps** on the **path to sexual intimacy**. **Couples that rushed or skipped steps were found most likely to break up**.

The 12 steps he identified (in order) are: Eye to Body, Eye to Eye, Voice to Voice, Hand to Hand, Arm to Shoulder, Arm to Waist, Mouth to Mouth, Hand to Head, Hand to Body, Mouth to Breast, Hand to Genitals, and finally, Sexual Intercourse.

Emotional Intimacy

Emotional intimacy does not derive from the same drive as sex and physical intimacy. Human beings also seek to satisfy needs for **connection** and **emotional bonding – i.e., being interested in, accepted and loved for being ourselves, and sharing our happiness and deepest hardships**. Human beings **crave that state of being that is all about closeness, trust, and comfort**. We want a special connection with another person at a **deep emotional level**.

Psychology Today describes **emotional intimacy** as **closeness that requires:**

“... a high level of transparency and openness. This involves a degree of vulnerability that can feel uncomfortable or anxiety-producing to many of us.”

When achieved in a relationship, **emotional intimacy may act as:**

“... a formula for enhanced emotional well-being, and physical health as well...”

Note that **emotional intimacy does not require physical affection**, though certainly for most of us it is **enhanced by physical affection, as simple as a kiss on the cheek or holding a hand**.

Emotional intimacy, particularly in sexual relationships, typically develops after physical bonds have been established. **'Falling in love'**, however, has both a **biochemical dimension**, driven through reactions in the body stimulated by sexual attraction (PEA)^[11], **and a social dimension driven by 'talk' that follows from regular physical closeness and/or sexual union**^[12].

It is **worth distinguishing intimate (communal) relationships from strategic (exchange) relationships**. **Physical intimacy** occurs in the latter but it is **governed by a higher order strategy**, of which the other person may not be aware. For example getting close to someone in order to get something from them or give them something. That 'something' might not be offered so freely if it did not appear to be an intimate exchange or if the ultimate strategy had been visible at the outset^[13]. Mills and Clark (1982) found that **strategic (exchange) relationships are fragile and easily break down when there is any level of disagreement**.

Emotionally intimate (communal) relationships are much more robust and can survive considerable (and even ongoing) disagreements.

Communication: Essential to Emotional Intimacy

We can be married to a person for years and never achieve emotional intimacy – keeping in mind that intimacy isn't a "destination" but rather, an experience or set of feelings.

Communication is an essential ingredient in emotional intimacy, but we often communicate *superficially* about family life, as we:

- talk about the work day
- discuss domestic duties
- strategize over money and schedules
- organize events around exes and kids.

We also **use humor, sarcasm, and activities to fill up our time together**. Intentionally or not, we may **"deflect and protect"** in order to avoid the very vulnerability and **transparency that we need to thrive as a couple**.

The Importance of Vulnerability

Vulnerability involved in emotional intimacy is anxiety-producing to many. One way to **alleviate that anxiety** is by **allowing enough time to pass so trust is well established.** Still, vulnerability is very disorienting when we're out of practice.

While many people feel that sex is the relationship glue from which communication (and intimacy) will flow, others feel that emotional intimacy is the prerequisite to a satisfying intimate - emotional and sexual - relationship.

What if your partner finds vulnerability too difficult? What if he or she is unwilling or unable to communicate in a deeply personal way? Even if the sex is fabulous, will an unsatisfying degree of emotional intimacy leave you languishing?

We may be paired with a partner who doesn't provide the emotional confidences or intimacy that we want or need, much less the acceptance of our own. The resulting void is a lack of intimacy - which is often the impetus for emotional affairs and infidelity, the betrayal of trust that causes broken hearts and relationships to fall apart.

People Experience Intimacy Differently

Emotional and sexual intimacy can be tricky; they are not absolutes. On the contrary, what we each need in terms of intimacy will vary: my "deep sharing" will not be yours; yours will not be mine. Likewise, our comfort level with sexual and emotional intimacy will change over time and evolve according to our partner or our own circumstances.