



# CREATING AND MAINTAINING INTIMACY

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...the challenges of forging an authentic connection with another person inevitably spur us to become more conscious, to examine ourselves more deeply, and to develop greater intention, courage, and awareness in the way we live.

John Welwood, *Love and Awakening*

We are seeing an epidemic of couples who, because of years of neglecting their relationships, are in trouble. As a married couple, and as therapists working with couples, we realize there are times when all relationships hit emotional “stuck-spots”. These “stuck-spots” are most often caused by a lack of time, attention and energy given to the relationship. Then, when the relationship goes off track because they have lost their connection, the couple realizes they lack effective tools for reconnecting and putting their relationship back on track.

Couples have multiple excuses for this lack of connection, i.e. they been too busy with children, their work has consumed too much time and energy, or a family crisis has preoccupied them. They insist that they truly had no time for each other. They have forgotten how to make their relationship a priority and give it the time and energy all good relationships require. Many have even forgotten how to relate to their partner.

How sad this is is, for most of these couples once had a good basic connection which they could use to build true intimacy. Even though these relational difficulties could be easily overcome, without the right emotional tools small problems often become serious blocks to intimacy. And, large problems feel almost impossible to overcome for these couples have let so much time and hurt occur. Now there is “too much water over” the proverbial dam.

Hence this article, which spells out our mutual observations about the behaviors that enhance intimacy and what gets in the way. None of us practice constructive behaviors all of the time, for it is very difficult if not impossible, to use them in the heat of an argument. Therefore, we offer you these ideas in hopes that you will read and discuss them with your partner. As you integrate them into your relationship and see the positive changes they create, we believe that over time the old destructive habits will fade away and that the new behaviors and habits will reward you and your partner with a greater depth of intimacy.

We believe that intimacy is not optional for the healthy human being, and that we all have an innate need for deep connection with another. Even more important, intimacy is the best way to mature and enhance our sense of Self. So, if we put intimacy off, we will have to deal with it later – *if* we

want to grow and discover those hidden parts of ourselves. Intimacy is one of the most powerful growth experiences.

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We all learned about relationship by first watching our significant role models and then by unconsciously mimicking them. Unfortunately many of us had poor role models, and as a result have developed ineffective ways of relating. So we must learn to use new relational tools. There are multiple modalities for doing this, such as being in therapy or attending workshops and retreats geared toward enhancing relationships. Just like learning to play golf or tennis, it is best to have a teacher/trainer first observe the way we hit the ball to point out our bad habits, tell us what works, and then show us how it is done. Then, give us an opportunity to try out the newly discovered skills.

In order to reconnect it is vitally important to have a partner who is willing to explore and experiment with new relational tools. This article contains basic tools that we believe work in establishing and sustaining intimacy. As you will see, these tools are ones that *both* partners need to learn for a relationship to work. Additionally, both partners need to be working together to develop these tools. When we work together (as equals) there is no relational hierarchy. If there is a hierarchy – that is, one person dominates the other – it is not an intimacy.

To facilitate a discussion between you and your partner, at the end of this article there will be a list of things to keep in mind. First use the list to identify areas to work on and then refer to the list when you are having difficulty. Do not use this list as a means to blame, but as a means to begin healthy communication.

- **LISTEN!**

Listening is the most important part of good communication. Real listening is magical. We cannot over emphasize the importance and value of developing the skill of paying intensely-focused attention to our partner's words and emotions when they are talking.

Mainly, we need to avoid making assumptions and jumping to conclusions, and instead wait until we *fully understand* what our partner is saying before we respond. Listening intently to our partners is the strongest tool we have because it is a powerful statement of respect. Many of us, particularly those who have been together for a long time think they know what their partner is going to say after one or two words, and they are often wrong.

Also, there are many ways to signal our partners that we are listening, including direct eye contact, attentive body language, and mirroring. With eye contact our partners know we are paying full attention and are thus they are being heard. We often have clients practice looking into each other's eyes without words, to help them become comfortable with the intensity of the connection. Also, the ability/inability to do this is often a good indicator of the level of intimacy.

Mirroring our partner's words and feelings also helps tremendously. Letting our partner know we have heard them by describing our understanding of what they have said and felt, is an extremely helpful strategy. Mirroring does not mean that we agree, nor does it mean to merely parrot back or mimic our partner's words. Mirroring acknowledges that we have heard accurately. If we don't understand what our partner is saying or where they are coming from, we need to ask questions. For example, even if our partner does not say so directly, but indicates his/her anger through body language, we can mirror the anger by acknowledging its presence. With effective listening comes curiosity and a desire to know more about our partner's feeling and needs, to better understand them.

- **SHARE COMPLETE INFORMATION:**

Another skill involved in effective communication is giving complete information about our perspective. The first thing to remember is to always use "I" statements, such as "I feel hurt when I think I am being ignored", rather than "You always ignore me." If we speak with "I-statements" we are making unarguable statements since, we are being genuine and we are the experts on the subject of us. Our partners don't have to agree with us, but they must respect our authentic thought, feeling, and needs and show that they respect us.

Part of being authentically you, is expressing complete information. We all have a tendency to leave out significant parts. Thus our partner doesn't

understand the whole picture. A complete intimate expression consists of our observations, thoughts, feelings, needs, and proposed actions. Therefore, in any situation it is important to express (1) what we observe, (2) how we are interpreting our observations – what assumptions we are making, (3) what feelings we are experiencing, and (4) what we need or want as a result. (5) and what action/actions we are going to take. Number 1 and 2 would sound like this, “When I saw your face tighten and heard your raised voice I assumed you were really angry at me for being late. Is that accurate? In most relationships the part of communication which is most often left out, is our interpretation or assumption. Sometimes the assumptions are so subtle and familiar that we aren’t even aware of them. Number 3 might sound like, “That look scares me because it reminds me of my father. With number 4, the need might be to discuss the situation. And number 5 might be that I am going to check out my assumptions to find out if I am accurate.

Once it is clear that we have heard each other accurately, *then and only then*, is it imperative to agree what to do in the future. Step number five is taken after the resolution of the conflict and must include an action plan, in order to avoid the same issue arising again. Continuing the previous example about being late, an action plan would be for the partner who was late to agree to call in the future, and for the partner who was waiting to agree to express the anger directly so the other partner would not have to guess.

We find that the two toughest parts are expressing needs and developing an action plan. People leave out an action plan because they just don’t even think about doing it. As for needs – it is often hard for us to ask for what we need. Carol was surprised when Jane Fonda in her book, *My Life So Far*, confessed to having this problem. Fonda said, “Ask! I’d rather die. What if he won’t or can’t give me what I want? Then he’ll feel bad and I’ll feel worse, and I don’t want to make him feel bad because then he won’t like me even more.....” And so on. Yet, intimacy requires that we be honest about our needs. Having needs does not mean we are “needy”. Nor does it mean that we must have our needs met, but we must have them *considered with respect*. Also, not stating our needs does make us co-dependent and almost always leads to resentment. Once we have expressed our needs and wants, it is equally important not to give them up prematurely. Yet, compromise is important, but if we compromise too quickly in an attempt to avoid conflict we again create resentments, which are toxic to relationships because they eat away at mutual respect.

- **WORDS AND ACTIONS MUST MATCH:**

Words are a commitment – to one’s partner. “I’ll be home for dinner by 6:30.” “I will only spend x-amount of dollars buying new clothes.” “I will help clean up the yard.” “I will just read the paper and then we can spend time together.” As Carol said in her “Pathways” article, “It’s a Deal – I Promise”, “With every commitment there is a promise and with every promise there is hope that the commitment will be kept. With each kept commitment trust is built and each broken commitment breaks trust. A commitment, when kept, validates ourselves – to ourselves and to others – raising our self-esteem, and allowing others to more deeply trust and respect us.”

Despite the importance of commitments, many of us have a very difficult time making and then keeping them. We often get into trouble because we make promises we know we cannot, or don’t want to keep. Sometimes we just say things to get our partner off of our backs. That may work in the short run, but never in the end. Remember it is human nature to change our minds, especially when something new arises to change the situation. If we do, we must communicate the change, not act unilaterally, and always renegotiate this change.

- **WATCH FOR PROJECTIONS AND TRANSFERENCES:**

Projections and transferences are destructive to intimacy because they color the lens through which we see our partner. A projection is something we can’t accept about ourselves, so we deny it and then observe it in someone else – in this case our partner. For example, if I can’t accept my anger and I might project it onto my partner by assuming and insinuating that he/she is angry even when they are not. Also, projections aren’t always about negative traits. Many of us deny our positive traits, project them onto our partners and place them on a pedestal. When this occurs an equal relationship is impossible. (One useful clue is that a projection is likely present when we use the terms “always” or “never” about our partner’s behavior.) The reason projections are so destructive is that trying to change something in your partner that resides in you is like projecting a slide onto a screen and trying to erase it from the screen because you don’t like it. Good luck!

Transference occurs when we ascribe a trait to our partner that really belongs to someone else. For example, if our fathers or mothers were distant or emotionally abandoning, and if we have not worked through that issue, we would accuse our partner of emotionally abandoning us. When we have not worked through this issue, we will be sensitized to it and often misjudge the other person's intent. Bill and Alice's story is a good example. Bill liked to watch sports on T.V. and Alice often interpreted his behavior as abandoning and therefore unloving. In fact, for Bill, his love of sports had no relationship to his love for Alice. **elaborate**

- **REMEMBER THE 90/10 RULE:**

The 90/10 rule says that, if we are experiencing a very strong negative reaction to a situation and/or our partner, assume that 90 percent of the intensity of our emotion is coming from our history (probably before we met our partners) and only 10 percent can be attributed to the situation at hand. If we do so, we will be much less likely to blame our partners and much more likely to use "I" statements. Also, we will be much more likely to own our feelings and reflect on our responses before dealing with the current situation. In addition, the 90/10 rule helps us avoid transferences from former experiences and thus does not contaminate the current situation. It also prevents the conflict and feelings of helplessness that might result if we blame our partner for our reaction, and then feel we must change them in order to prevent these strong negative emotions in the future.

Early on in our relationship a 90/10 situation occurred every time Tom would snap his fingers which caused Carol to become afraid – even if the snapping had nothing to do with her. Carol had no idea why it was so upsetting, but rather than blaming him for upsetting her, she asked him to avoid doing it if possible. Of course he stopped. When we understand the 90/10 rule, negative emotional incidents become less personal. Also, when the "90" part is sorted out, the "10" part is usually easy to resolve.

- **EXTEND MUTUAL RESPECT AND FORGIVENESS:**

Mutual respect builds trust and trust is the foundation of any relationship. Mutual respect is best communicated through affirmations, affection, encouragement and appreciation. The most important attribute of an intimate

relationship is truly believing, even in the darkest moments, that our partner is equal to us in every way that matters. When judgments about our partner arise we must explore them thoroughly, and if they are accompanied by a strong emotional reaction, explore the 90/10 rule. When we hold onto a judgment, for example that our partner is inadequate, these judgments are *always* communicated in some way and frequently build an unconscious base of resentment and/or disrespect, subtly permeating and severely damaging the relationship by destroying trust and intimacy.

Another important way to show respect for our partner is to consider requests, thoughts, feelings, and needs, from our partner as valid even if we don't agree with them, don't like them, or think the idea is impossible. Conflicts become destructive if we believe our partner *is not considering our needs, not because they don't act on them*. We are not considering our partner's needs and not showing respect when we try to convince them that their needs or requests are not valid. This never works and only creates conflict. Their feelings and needs are always valid and need to be honored. Again, we must restate, *honoring* feelings and needs does not mean we agree, it merely means we respect our partner's motivations and reasoning.

Even if we are a good street fighter, we cannot attack our partner. It is incredibly destructive to our intimate relationships to shame, blame or threaten. Words of shame or words that label are like emotional missiles. Once they are launched – even in the heat of an argument we cannot take them back. The destruction remains.

Destructive comments are sometimes delivered through “humorous sarcasm”. This is equally destructive since the truth behind the sarcasm is usually denied and thus hard to confront. Apologizing by saying, “I really did not mean it, I was just angry”, doesn't totally work because our partners will always wonder if there was a bit of truth in the comment. For example, if you call your partner a bitch, or label them stupid, or a slob, they will wonder on some level if you really meant it. And even if there is some truth to the statement – i.e. your partner tends to be sloppy – labeling them will not facilitate positive change. A more respectful approach needs to happen. (Refer to the section “Complete Communication”.)

No one is perfect. We all make mistakes and fall into that proverbial hole. And, we all regret certain behavior and words. Once apologies are made and a new understanding occurs, then forgiveness is in order. Again,

forgiveness does not mean we forget, but it does mean that we trust that the issue has been resolved to the best of our abilities. Then we let it go.

- **DON'T TRIANGLE:**

Triangling occurs when we feel we can't share with our partner certain feelings, thoughts and needs, so we share them with a third person either as a way to get support. Triangles create secret alliances and secrets are destructive to an intimacy. Please do not misunderstand – when times are difficult, we *all* need support from trusted friends, etc. The difference is that in the end we will still share whatever we are feeling with our partner. Whenever we feel free to talk to another person about our partner and/or our relationship, we must also feel free to discuss the same issues with our partner/spouse, (again, using all of the points of communication talked about earlier in this article.)

- **CHOOSE BATTLES AND TIMING WISELY:**

There are several guidelines in this category that help. Don't rehash old issues. Don't start a difficult discussion when are tired (like near bedtime). Don't ever start an argument when you are both stressed and exhausted, for it only leads to frustration and anger. When we are fatigued, we more easily say things we do not mean and are quicker to loose our tempers.

It is also amazing to us how many couples want to rehash old issues over and over again. If an issue cannot be put behind, it is usually for one of two reasons. Either one person is not feeling heard or understood, or there has been no solution created to insure that the problem will not happen again. Do feel free to take a "time-out" when the going gets rough, or when an impasse is reached. Sometimes we all need space to clear our heads and emotions. Remember though to agree on a time to continue the discussion. Say something like, "I am too tired and upset to talk anymore, but I would like to continue this discussion another time. Would after dinner tomorrow be okay?"

- **SPEND QUALITY TIME TOGETHER:**

It is imperative that we spend quality time together. During this time we are totally focusing on one another. This can be time to play, to dream, to speak of our creative visions, to have sex, or to just “hang out”. I saw a recent study that asked couples to passionately kiss more often each day. When they did, their intimate connection was enhanced. In order to do this, we must be alone – not with kids, another couple, or watching television. It is time to be totally together. Although it may feel selfish at times, in the end everything of importance will be enhanced – including connection to children.

We need to share some common interests and be able to venture into our partner’s world of interests. It is helpful to take classes together, enjoy a common sport or physical activity like dance, or have a similar spiritual focus.

- **KEEP AN ENERGETIC CONNECTIONS:**

When a problem seems insurmountable, the real problem is that you have lost connection with your partner. If possible, find a way to reconnect with each other before addressing the problem that pulled you apart. (Actually, this is probably true for all difficulties, that is, most problems become problems in a relationship because the feeling of being connected to our partner has been lost.) In fact we sometimes find that couple’s pick fights to reconnect because they know no other way.

Couples tend to focus on the surface issue, i.e. the children consuming too much time and energy, or one partner spending too much time working, when the real problem which is the loss of connection, is being ignored. This problem is very prominent in couples who love each other and are determined to improve their relationship. They have very good intentions but they focus on the wrong issue and/or use ineffective communication.

When discussing any issue, it is important to make eye contact with each other, for then we will naturally feel more connected with our partners. We often hear the complaint that the wife will want to talk to the husband, and the husband’s response is something like, “Go ahead and talk; I’m

listening.” Meanwhile he is reading the paper, watching sports, or working on the computer. First of all no one can be a good listener while paying attention to something else. But perhaps even more importantly, without eye contact, an intimacy is not possible. It is also by using our eyes can we observe our partner’s body language, and thereby understand more clearly what he/she is trying to say. We need to “sink deeply” into the other. It has been said that it is through the eyes we see into the other’s soul. Only with good eye contact can we maintain an intimate connection.

Another way to maintain connection is to expand upon and improve the way we show affection. The most obvious ways we show love are: touch, (not just sex, but that too), words, gifts, deeds and actions. The difficulty for many couples begins when each person gives love in a way that is neither appreciated by the other, nor understood as a loving gesture. This creates disconnect. For example, if Jane shows love by touch and therefore loves to be touched in return, and Bob shows love by doing chores around the house and expects Jane to do the same, there will be problems. What needs to happen is a compromise. If each person gives the other a little bit of what they need, both will feel loved. We feel that the more a couple can expand their vocabulary of love to include all of the options, the more harmonious and intimate the relationship will be.

Once we have achieved a feeling of intimacy, we need to share about the fear that may naturally arise. When we are digging deep and expressing ourselves to another human being, it can make us feel vulnerable, especially since it is often a totally unfamiliar experience. Most of us have been abandoned or controlled by others in the past, and because of this, the fear of being abandoned or controlled often arises whenever we become intimate with someone. So the issue is not whether fear arises or not, it is how we use the fear. Successful couples use the fear by sharing it with their partners and holding it until it dissipates – as John Welwood says, “...until the snow falls off the leaf.” Doing so helps build a much, much stronger connection.

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To conclude, a truly intimate relationship is a very effective and powerful method for growth (emotional, intellectual, and spiritual). When we are intimate with our partners and share our true selves in an honest way – we

discover our mature, whole Self, and that discovery leads to continual growth. Believing that we must sacrifice parts of ourselves to be in relationship is erroneous. In reality we mature, gain self esteem and in the process feel a sense of security and safety created by our intimate bond. Being in an intimate relationship is not entrapping, but very freeing, as intimacy allows us to express and experience ourselves in a free and safe way. It allows us to be as we need/want to be, and to know that we will be respected, honored and valued for that.

We had an experience on a vacation, which illustrates how an intimacy works. We were trekking three miles up in the exotic tundra of the Rocky Mountains. Carol's need was to trek, but to take photos. Tom's need was to go on a long fast hike. So, while on the same path, Tom walked ahead, then would periodically double back and reconnect with Carol for awhile, and then once again we would focus on our own interest. So while we were on the same path, we stayed totally connected and yet were able to enhance our relationship by sharing our personal experiences. We were totally free to be ourselves within our connection to one another.

As Oprah said in her April 2010 "What I Know" column, "Your relationships with others reflect your relationship with yourself...." "The key to meaningful connections" ... "is making yourself whole by honoring your body, mind, and spirit – filling the voids that cause you not to love yourself. You can't give love if you don't have it." We cannot stress enough how important it is to have a strong connection to our inner Selves. When we are able to bring our authentic Self into relationship with our partner, everything grows exponentially. The relationship is enhanced because we are authentic. Then because the relationship is more intimately real, we both grow emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Everyone benefits.

The following are the key points to remember when we are striving for an intimate relationship:

### **TEN KEYS TO INTIMACY**

- **LISTEN -- IT'S MAGIC.**
- **SHARE COMPLETE INFORMATION USING "I-STATEMENTS".**
- **BE SURE WORDS AND ACTIONS MATCH**
- **IDENTIFY PROJECTIONS AND TRANSFERENCES**
- **REMEMBER THE 90/10 RULE.**
- **DON'T TRIANGLE**
- **HOLD MUTUAL RESPECT AND GRANT FORGIVENESS.**
- **CHOOSE YOUR TIMING**
- **SPEND QUALITY TIME – LOTS OF IT.**
- **KEEP AN ENERGETIC CONNECTION.**

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