

The Path of Intimacy

by David B. Wexler, Ph.D.

When I see a couple for the first time, I usually open with a good old-fashioned, open-ended question to get the ball rolling: “What are you doing here?”. I pay close attention to their opening line in response, i.e., “the headline story.” Often, it is clear that they have thought about this carefully, and the first answer to this question tells me exactly what our project is going to be together: “*I have a drinking problem and it’s killing our marriage,*” or “*It just seems like we have drifted apart,*” or “*My husband found out that I have been seeing someone else and he can’t forgive me.*” Less often, I get a vague answer that doesn’t tell me much, typically, and “***We have a problem with intimacy.***”

I never presume what “having a problem with intimacy” means to these particular two people. Are they not having sex? Are they having sex but not enjoying it? Are they not speaking to each other? Have they drifted into leading separate, distant, parallel lives? Do they not feel safe and trusting with each other, thus blocking intimacy? Is someone having an affair? Does it seem like they just don’t like each other very much? Over the past quarter century of working with couples, I have heard enough of these statements and discovered the true meaning behind them, which has led me to develop a map of the multiple components of an intimate relationship. I call these components the *Four Pillars of Intimacy*.

What does healthy intimacy look like?

The healthy, vibrant, loving, trusting, connected, self-actualized relationship rests on the *Four Pillars*. When these pillars are shaky or collapsing, the structure they hold up collapses as well. Not every couple has all of these pillars in great shape, but there is a direct correlation between the strength of these pillars and the healthy intimacy they experience. No one pillar is any more important than the others; rather, they create a synergistic effect.

The first pillar is *Safety & Security*. No relationship has a fighting chance of true intimacy if one or both partners do not feel safe. Intimacy requires vulnerability, and vulnerability requires safety. Physical safety is paramount, in that, any threats of violence are totally incompatible with intimacy. Similarly, the relationship needs to be free of lies and deceptions, as well as threats of abandonment, humiliation, and betrayals, i.e., there needs to be emotional safety and security. If your partner is emotionally or physically threatening, or emotionally or physically unfaithful, or fundamentally not to be trusted to refrain from deeply hurting you, how can you be intimate?

The second pillar, *Knowing & Being Known*, refers to the ways in which both partners truly know each other. Even if you feel reasonably safe, you are not likely to experience intimacy unless you really know each other. The rewards of truly knowing another and truly being known by another are enormous. This goes beyond knowing details of your partner's life; it also includes knowing about his or her inner world, vulnerabilities, fantasies, dark places, and wonderful places. Knowing leads to empathy, which leads to genuine acceptance, which in turn paves the way for true intimacy. Some couples have this naturally, some need to work harder to enrich it, and others never achieve it.

The third pillar is *Affection and "Likeability."* These qualities contributing to intimacy show up in multiple venues: physical touch (non-sexual), non-verbal cues (like smiling), verbal statements (like "I love you" or "I'm so proud of you"), and generous behaviors or gestures (like bringing someone a cup of coffee or laughing at their jokes). When this area of a relationship is thriving, both parties feel consistently and genuinely liked by the other. The joys and rewards of feeling genuinely liked help people withstand the inevitable assaults and dissatisfactions in the course of any normal relationship.

The fourth pillar, *Passion, Chemistry, & Sex*, is the most complex. The other three pillars are, more or less, receptive to conscious effort and creative manipulation if the individuals are truly motivated. Passion, chemistry, and sex are more difficult to consciously generate. Many couples who have at least moderate levels of attraction may lose that connection, and the strategies for generating more passion often rest on making sure that the other three pillars are solidly constructed.

Why can't we all just get along?

There are only three reasons why intimacy gets complicated. And the story you tell yourself about why you are struggling with intimacy, or why your partner is, can make all the difference in the world.

Reason #1: Pure Fear

For a thousand reasons, we carry fears associated with intimacy. We feel vulnerable. We are afraid of being hurt, rejected, abandoned, humiliated, or betrayed. Everyone is afraid, but some of us are more afraid than others, almost always because of experiences growing up that have shaped us, consciously or unconsciously.

Reason #2: Cluelessness

Another reason that often complicates intimacy is gender-specific intimacy behaviors that backfire; men, in general, have not been sufficiently schooled in the art of empathic communication with women. Women often seek verbal intimacy in ways that may alienate men. Many men confuse the intensity of sexual intimacy with the big picture of

full intimacy and seem mystified when their female partners seem uninterested, turned off, misunderstood, or disrespected. Women often try to be “helpful” by offering excessive suggestions or interpretations of their male partners’ behaviors, who may perceive that behavior as controlling or maligning.

Reason #3: Not Caring and/or Burned Out

If you are in this category, don’t bother reading this article because it will not help you. You may “suffer” from a personality disorder of psychopathy, or your “dismissive attachment” may have shut you down so profoundly that you have permanently given up on the possibility of human intimacy. You may be missing a chip for normal human interaction.

If you are in a relationship with someone like this, my best advice is to get out.

Why bother with nurturing/enhancing intimacy?

This might seem like a rhetorical question to those among us who naturally crave intimacy in all its forms. But to those who are conflicted about intimacy or are reluctant to engage in the rituals that seem to enhance intimacy, here are some good reasons to reconsider that reluctance:

Intimacy feels good: Attachment stimulates vasopressin and oxytocin, the “bonding” chemicals in our brains. People who have lived a long and rich life consistently attribute their emotional wellbeing to relationships, rather than accomplishments.

It usually beats the alternative: The alternative to experiencing genuine intimacy is loneliness and alienation. Some people who consistently fail at intimacy may decide that pursuing it is not worth the pain of failure. Rarely do these people express mental wellbeing and contentment from life. It must be acknowledged that nurturing intimacy in relationship can be demanding. Commitment comes with loss and conflict and vulnerability, and in rare cases, even even trauma.

Intimacy can facilitate the resolution of other relationship issues:: When there is a solid foundation of intimacy, every other relationship bump in the road remains a bump in the road and nothing more. It is easier to listen. It is easier to accept criticism. It is easier to bounce back after spats and hurt feelings. It is easier to accept dull periods, losses, disappointments, frustrations, sexual deprivation, sexual rejection, differences on vacation preferences, disputes about child-rearing philosophies, and everything else.

Intimacy helps cope with loss: Researchers on midlife transitions and the psychological aspects of aging identify the inevitable losses involved as we move through different life stages. But one quote about this process that I often pass on to couples offers

tremendous perspective and tremendous hope: Real intimacy diminishes “the narcissistic sting of aging” (Colarusso, C. A., & Nemiroff, R., 1981). The “sting” may refer to changes in physical appearance, or the realization that we have been imperfect parents or friends or workers. But the rewards of genuine, seasoned intimacy, the kind that can only develop over time on the mutual and emotionally raw ride through good times and through bad, provides a profound buffer to this “sting.”

Real intimacy often leads to more and better sex.

Last but not least, for most of us there is no more powerful way to genuinely grow as a human being: The brilliant psychiatrist and psychoanalyst C. G. Jung once said: “One is always in the dark about one’s own personality. One needs others to get to know oneself” (Jung, C. G., & Hull, R. F. C., 1977).

There is nothing that gives you the opportunity to know who you *really* are more than a truly intimate and authentic relationship. Intimacy is not limited to lovers. The unparalleled personal growth opportunities from intimacy can also be generated in your relationships with your children or parents or perhaps a few select others. If you needed even one more reason to really dig for intimacy, this is it: a purely selfish one.