

Pathways to Greater Intimacy

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

One of the most meaningful experiences in life is feeling emotionally connected to someone you love. In my work as a psychologist and relationship coach, I witness first-hand how couples often struggle to feel connected to one another as they navigate the complexities of life. Unfortunately, many roadblocks can stand in the way of intimacy.

But the gift of intimacy is well worth your time and effort. When people feel deeply connected to their partners, they often describe feeling "whole," "complete," or "really understood." This is one of the remarkable gifts that only intimacy can bring. We all have the emotional need to feel understood and connected to those who are most important to us.

Listen to how Barbara describes the emotional connection she shares with her husband:

"It's like we're dancing to our favorite song. You know how a song you love makes you feel really alive? When things are going well, our steps are in tune and I can almost anticipate my husband's next move and he can anticipate mine. This lifts me up in ways I can't fully explain."

Dancing is the perfect metaphor to describe intimacy. It involves being in sync with each other, attuned to the needs and emotional rhythms of your spouse or partner.

Let's look at how you can nurture the dance of intimacy.

5 Pathways to Intimacy

1. Effectively communicating your needs.

It's important to *clearly* communicate to your partner what you feel works in the relationship and doesn't, what you find helpful and what stands in the way of you feeling connected to each other.

Healthy communication needs to exist alongside healthy and realistic expectations about your spouse/partner. If you expect your partner to meet *all* your needs, or to intuit your needs without direct communication, you are setting the stage for frustration and intimacy will suffer. Focus on communicating what you need and what your partner can do to meet your needs (rather than highlighting how your partner fails to meet your needs).

2. The ability to compromise and accept the differences that exist between you and your partner.

Distressed couples often exacerbate their relationship problems by trying to control and change each other.

No matter how attuned you and your spouse/partner are to each other's needs and desires, the fact that you are separate individuals will become a reality at some point in your relationship (e.g., you might have different ways of handling stress or you may express your needs differently). When you and your partner acknowledge and accept the inherent differences that will always exist between two people, you create a relationship atmosphere that allows each other's essence and uniqueness to unfold. Suspending judgment is essential to nurturing intimacy.

Don't forget, your spouse's/partner's unique traits were what drew you to him/her in the first place!

3. Work to become a *reliable* and *consistent* presence for one another.

You have a great deal of power in your marriage or relationship: Each day the decisions you make, as well as the actions you carry out can:

- a) Deepen intimacy;
- b) Keep the relationship right where it is (the status quo) or;
- c) Weaken the emotional connection between you and your partner.

Raise your consciousness to how your decisions and behaviors impact your marriage or relationship each day.

Trust is the foundation of intimacy, and if you want to build a stronger connection with your partner, you must act in ways that continuously feed trust (you need to follow through on your word). Don't make promises you can't keep. Obviously we all mess up now and then, but repeatedly failing to be a *responsible* partner will only erode the foundation of intimacy. When you do what you say you were going to do, and you respond to your partner's needs in a consistent way, the dance of intimacy is likely to proceed smoothly.

4. Acknowledge, validate and affirm each other's strengths and vulnerabilities.

When you and your partner affirm each other, your uniqueness is recognized and appreciated. Marriages and relationships that include affirmations are more robust. Consider for a moment how you feel when your partner acknowledges your victories as well as when s/he is compassionate and supportive whenever you feel insecure. Couples often report greater levels of intimacy when meaningful affirmations and validations are a regular part of their relationship.

In what ways do you validate your spouse/partner?

5. The ability to forgive your partner.

Forgiveness plays an important role in your marriage or relationship. Even with the best intentions, partners end up hurting each other. This is heightened when you bring the most vulnerable parts of yourself into the relationship—intimacy requires this level of emotional exposure.

Without the ability to forgive your partner for his/her blunders and relationship missteps, resentments build. There is no greater obstacle to intimacy than pent-up grievances. When forgiveness is part of your relationship terrain, space is created for the missteps that are inevitable. This gives you the freedom to be yourself—an imperfect human who is trying his/her best to be a loving partner.

Forgiveness isn't a one-time event—it's a mindset. When you and your partner create and share a *forgiveness mindset*, you'll discover that you're able to let go of the little things that often stand in the way of intimacy.

Conclusion

All marriages and relationships involve cycles of closeness and distance, intimacy and loneliness— even the best dancers (like the best relationships) fall out of step with each other, and if you're like most people, your relationship dance will stumble from time to time. Even "soul-mates" clumsily step on each other's feet. When this occurs, the goal is to recognize your particular relationship dance and to work on ways to recapture (or create anew) a level of emotional connection that you and your partner find meaningful.

Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

You can reach Dr. Nicastro via his website <http://www.strengthenyourrelationship.com>