

Five pathways to intimacy

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It is not a problem for feelings of intimacy to change in committed, long-term relationships. It is a problem when a couple doesn't know how to recover when distance has grown between them. While feeling close and connected to your romantic partner is an experience that ebbs and flows, there are five pathways to intimacy that will help strengthen the love in your relationship. These are conversational, physical, emotional, recreational, and sexual intimacy.

Conversational intimacy

Conversational intimacy is an important relationship skill. I am not referring to the challenge of resolving conflicts. What I am talking about is how simple conversation can be a way of getting and staying close. It is well-known that novelty is a big factor in our experience of excitement—which is why there is such passion when a relationship is new. After years together, it can feel like areas of common interest have been all talked out. If there are children, they often become an easy and familiar focus of conversation.

The first step in improving conversational intimacy is to let go of the idea that you already know all about your partner. Instead, assume that they are more complex than you can ever know and be open to being surprised. As human beings we have a tendency to see what we are looking for. So go looking for the surprises. With that openness to surprise, allow yourself to become curious. Being curious is not a passive stance but requires action on your part. Cultivate curiosity about what you don't know about your partner. What is their favorite part of the day? Their favorite

movies? How is their relationship going with their best friend? What is most relaxing or exciting or sad or scary for them?

Ask questions, listen for what is new to you and try to appreciate that your partner can be full of surprises if you are open to it.

Recreational intimacy

Another way of maintaining closeness in your relationship involves doing things together. When you share important interests with your partner, you strengthen the experience of friendship and companionship between the two of you. When doing things together there are passive/receptive activities like watching movies or going to concerts, and active ones like cooking and antiquing. Try to mix it up and make room for both in your relationship.

Finding things to do that you are both enthusiastic about may not be easy. Often one partner enjoys an activity far more than the other one does. However, joining your partner in something they love to do is a way of showing your interest in them and your commitment to the relationship.

In one couple I worked with, the husband joined his wife in the garden simply because that's where she liked to spend her time on weekends. He came to appreciate both gardening and his wife much more through immersing himself in her passion. In turn, she found herself feeling more affectionate towards him.

A common experience for all of us is that things that are new and unfamiliar tend to generate more interest. Take advantage of this by being willing to experiment and get out of your comfort zone. Try an adult education class that neither one of you is familiar with, such as improv comedy, pottery or home brewing. Decide whether you both need to agree or whether you want to take turns picking out something to try. In either case, bring an attitude of openness and curiosity to the activity. You may find yourself becoming more open to your partner as well.

Physical intimacy

Another area to be mindful of in order to develop more intimacy in your relationship is the use of non-sexual touch. Research has shown that touch has powerful effects upon us including reducing our heart rate and lowering our blood pressure. The opposite has been studied as well—that isolation and lack of physical touch increases our vulnerability to physical illness.

There is good reason for this. As infants our affection bonds were established through touch. We are still wired to have strong positive emotional and physical reactions to loving touch. This is why couples in love touch each other a lot during the course of a week. These small gestures of affection, which may only last a second, carry enormous weight as they send messages such as; “I care about you”, “I’m here for you”, “I enjoy being around you”.

If you want to strengthen your relationship, then allow that intention to be shown by frequent and spontaneous gestures of non-sexual, loving touch. A stroke of the arm, a kiss on the head, a rub of the back, a hug, a touch on the hand—all are easy to do. When done with no expectation of being returned this kind of touch communicates to our partners that you value your relationship to them. It is a wonderfully easy way to move towards closeness.

Emotional intimacy

Emotion is the glue in relationships. Like touch, before we could talk to others we broadcast our feelings on our face or in the tone of our voice in order to let others know what was going on inside us. Emotions are a direct and effective way of connecting.

The key to developing emotional intimacy as a couple is to prioritize listening for emotion over listening for content. Growing up, we are sometimes taught to listen more for clues as to how to make things better rather than to how the other person is feeling. This works in lots of areas of our life, just not particularly well in intimate relationships.

To strengthen your bond to your partner, try to become attuned to the emotion they are experiencing. Ask yourself, “What is she (or he)

feeling right now?” If you don’t know, then ask. And if you think you know, then check it out with them. Next, try to bring up that feeling in yourself. If that doesn’t happen easily, try to think of a time when you felt the way your partner may be feeling. Lastly, let your partner know that **you know** how she (or he) feels by allowing your emotions to show. What I just described is what makes for empathic communication. It is a powerful way of letting your loved one experience being understood at a deeper level.

Sexual intimacy

Sex is one of the most powerful ways we have of expressing love. It requires the capacity to tune into and to surrender to one’s partner. As a result, it has the potential to create intense feelings of connection as well as highlight difficulties in getting close.

At the start of a relationship, sex is often exciting, fun and an easy way of getting close. However, for many couples the stress of everyday life can have an eroding effect upon this wonderful way of being in tune with each other. Changing this will require both of you to recognize the importance of sexual intimacy for the health of your relationship.

When it goes well, sex is a lot like dancing. Good sex requires moving together, having fun and letting go. Sex uses touch, movement and non-verbal displays of emotion as the primary means with which we communicate to our partners.

Being comfortable with physical affection, as well as the capacity to talk with your partner openly about sex, greatly enhances enjoyment. Try to be curious about what your partner likes and doesn’t like to do, and share your likes and dislikes as well. If you have trouble being open when talking about sex then it will be that much harder to fully let your guard down when making love.

Like dancing, sex requires someone to lead and someone to follow. As the initiator, there is a balance between being clear about where you want to go and being sensitive to your partner’s willingness to follow. The

goal is to be in sync so that the pace and rhythm of the sexual dance is carrying both of you along.

Just as important is the capacity to follow with enthusiasm and to surrender to where your partner is trying to take the two of you. Taking turns leading and following, and being open to being curious and playful, can allow for passion to continue even when you have been together for many years.

The potential of couples therapy

There may be a lot of reasons why some of the pathways to intimacy are filled with obstacles. Often, people have had experiences growing up where they learned to be cautious and avoidant in some of these areas in order to feel safer. Just as often, couples have developed patterns of relating to each other that allow them to be comfortable but not necessarily close. When these patterns continue for years they become habits that require attention and effort in order to change them.

For all of us, it can be very difficult to change habits all on our own. Sometimes we don't know what needs to change. And even if we do, we may not have a good idea about how to do it or what to put in its place. While some couples can work this out on their own, sometimes the habits themselves can make that an unreasonable expectation. Couples therapy has the advantage of having a third party who will understand how each of you got where you are and who can be a guide in the process of getting to where you want to go.

Developing more intimacy in your relationship can be hard work. And it will be some of the best work you have ever done.