

INTIMACY

By Christine Kniffen, LCSW

Intimacy is a broad concept. There are many different ways that couples can be intimate with one another. However, intimacy takes place in two main arenas. This is what I like to call the “communication arena” as well as the “physical arena”. A healthy relationship must have a balance of intimacy in these two areas in order to be successful.

Communication intimacy is the real mainstay of any relationship. It involves vulnerability, as demonstrated by a willingness to risk letting another person know you completely. This would include telling anything you think might cause him or her to run to Mexico. It involves the willingness to verbally discuss and negotiate the compromises that are necessary in *any* relationship made up of two people from varying backgrounds. It involves the development of a deep sense of trust and respect that continues to grow throughout a healthy relationship. It involves the acceptance and eventual appreciation of the *differences* between the two partners. Communication intimacy is the *real* building block that creates a stable foundation for any relationship. However, too often at the beginning of a relationship all effort to achieve intimacy is placed solely in the “physical arena”.

Most people have experienced first hand the problems created when much of the intimacy is placed on the physical side at the expense of the communication side. This is the feeling you get after the initial bliss has worn off and you suddenly realize that the person you are dating is not necessarily someone you would ever gravitate to as a friend. You wouldn't have been so blindsided if there had been more effort put into the communication side from the start.

Sometimes people have a hard time building intimacy on the communication side. *First*, it is safer for many people to experience intimacy in the “physical arena”. You have heard the old saying, “If you really knew me then you might not like me at all”. Deep down many people really feel this way. *And*, rather than risking letting this happen, people often hesitate to share everything they think and feel at the beginning of a new relationship. Therefore, it is safer to put all of the energy toward achieving intimacy into the physical side. Take a serious look at your dating patterns and see if this is happening with you.

Another reason that someone may shy away from building *communication intimacy* is that they simply find it hard to express their feelings. They may have received direct or indirect messages that their feelings did not matter or that it makes someone angry when you state them. Some people stop expressing their feelings altogether because “know one really listens anyway”. Partners in healthy relationships work to create an atmosphere where each partner feels heard and validated. If you don't, you will never really know the person sitting across from you.

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