

West Side Spirit
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An Intimate Look at Relationships

We learn about issues relating to intimacy from books, magazines and on television. There seems never before to have been such an understanding of the role that intimate relationships play in emotional and physical well-being. Yet ways of achieving intimacy successfully have always been elusive.

It appears that the longing for intimacy at times conflicts with other basic human needs, causing confusion and anxiety. As much as we want closeness, we also need to feel independent, capable of functioning autonomously.

From early infancy we confront the task of becoming separate, competent individuals. But we also must feel part of a family, part of a peer group, an involved member of society. How we resolve this dilemma will have a great deal to do with how close and vulnerable we can allow ourselves to be with loved ones.

Small Child in Adult World

Furthermore, how well our parent have helped us with these dual needs will also have a major effect on our adult capacity for intimacy. Many parents, who have not resolved their own conflicts in this area, are not able to adequately support the development of their children. They may withhold love when the child seeks individuation, conveying the message that separateness means abandonment. This is an anxiety-provoking situation for the young child who needs parents for physical and emotional survival.

The end result is a fearful adult who feels like a small child in an unsafe world. Self-esteem, which is based on the sense that one can manage one's life, is shaky. And there is mistrust of the self and of others.

When adults with low self-esteem attempt to relate with others, the difficult issues that beset all of us seem overwhelming. And even more so when the relationship is a male-female involvement.

Sex and Disappointment

There are five basic reasons for the special difficulties that people face in seeking emotional and sexual intimacy with another. The first has to do with the fact that such a relationship has an intensity that most others do not and, as such, elicits many of the same feelings experienced with the earliest parenting figure. This results in people having enormous expectation of each other that are often unrealistic and unconscious. Thus the chances for disillusionment and disappointment are greater.

This is fertile soil for what I call "old stuff" to grow and for the reality of the loved one to be distorted to fit images of the parents who have failed us in one way or another.

Soul Mates Gone Sour

The second reason intimacy is so hard to manage is that there will always be differences that must be accommodated; no matter how compatible a couple's needs and interests. But when the sense of having found a "soul mate" wanes in the face of the reality of the other person's differences, the same old dilemma of finding a balance between closeness and individuality emerges.

Most often, couples are not prepared for the negotiations and struggles that this stage of the relationship requires. There is a failure to move beyond the "in love" phase to what I call "the loving" phase, in which empathy, acceptance, and willingness to compromise and make the relationship top priority become of prime importance.

A third factor that makes for problems with intimacy is the myth that "it should be easy." We live in a "quick-fix" society and do not understand that a good relationship takes more effort than that of being a parent, friend or achieving success in a career. If things do not go smoothly, there is something wrong with the partner. Ironically, through ignorance and self-indulgence, many couples give up just at the point where real intimacy becomes possible.

Men and Women Differ

A fourth reason for fears of intimacy has to do with the fact that men and women are indeed quite different! While the bodily distinctions are obvious, there are the more subtle differences, such as mental and emotional processes. As a result, men and women find each other "alien" in a number of significant ways. Thus we will probably never fully fathom the psyches of our mates. It is important to accept the reality that gender differences exist even when we don't understand them.

A fifth reason for the difficulties in couple's relationships is the cultural "dissonance" between men and women. Women do not have equal status in most significant areas of society. They have not been able to achieve the same economic and career levels that empower men to make most economic, social and political decisions. Greater income seems to give more decision-making power in intimate relationships as well. Women view this control with resentment and caution which creates conflict between the participants in an intimate relationship.

My Love Let Me Down

We can see that men and women come to each other with vulnerabilities that make intimacy problematic, even frightening. As couples move from the first flow of being "in love" to getting to know each other as real people, disillusionment creeps in. We feel that our mate has let us down, betrayed us. Mistrust develops. We feel that in a healthy relationship bad feelings should not exist, and we become more and more dissatisfied. Battles for control and power struggles replace fair fighting. Unresolved issues from childhood create and increase distortions until the original good feelings and attraction get buried under layers of anger and ill will. Infidelity, the greatest betrayal in a marriage, is often the result, as well as the cause of separation and divorce. And we then move on to another relationship where we will again make the same mistakes if we have not developed wisdom from our first ones.

How Can We Stop Messing Up?

What can be done to salvage ailing relationships? If people cannot learn the necessary tools to develop successful ways of interacting, or are too mired in trouble to see a way out, then couple therapy can help them to understand what intimate interrelating is about and what can be expected realistically from this kind of relationship.

Here's The Answer

By being empathic and respectful of both parties, the therapist models a different kind of relation, one that seeks to understand and reach compromises rather than place blame. Couples begin to see and accept each other realistically. Sometimes one or the other will be called upon to make changes by way of a "gift" to the relationship—one that will ultimately benefit them as a unit.

When a couple goes through such a process, partners can come to see and love each other for who they really are, replace conflict with cooperation, communicate rather than seize control, trust and respect rather than mistrust and dislike, care and commitment rather than prolonged hostilities. It is not an easy struggle, but the alternative – that of following the same old defeating pattern, possibly leaping in and out of relationships—makes the effort worthwhile. With the development of mutual understanding and goodwill, a pathway can be found.