

Relationships

Part III: Intimacy

Quiet your mind, focus your attention on your breath for a few moments, and after you have done that, continue reading. I'd like you to pay attention to what happens within yourself as you read the word after the upcoming colon; notice whatever thoughts, feelings, ideas, memories, sensations, images, and anything else that happens in response to the following word: Intimacy.

What did you notice? There's no right or wrong answer here; there is only what happened. So what happened?

While the word intimacy may not have elicited much, intimacy itself often does. This is why intimacy is the focus of Part III on Relationships.

What is Intimacy?

Let's start with a solid definition of intimacy: *Intimacy is the process of revealing oneself in the presence of another person.* The revealing of oneself includes sharing anecdotes, personal details about your life, your feelings, your opinions, your views, your beliefs, your spirituality, your reactions, your body, the skeletons in your closet, any other part of your experience as a human being, and even silence. If you notice, by this definition, intimacy does not require for both partners to be in touch with themselves together or simultaneously; it only requires one person to connect deeply with him or herself for intimacy to occur in another's presence.

Think about a recent time when you revealed something personal to someone. This was an act of intimacy on your part. How did you feel just before you shared what you shared? How was it as you shared what you shared? What did you experience afterward? How about much later afterward?

Risk and Vulnerability

Most of us have had the experience of revealing something about ourselves with someone and feeling like it was a big deal to share that something. We take a risk, and sometimes it's a huge risk, in our relationships when we reveal something about ourselves to someone else. Revealing ourselves can feel like being naked; we realize we are exposed, and we feel vulnerable.

Vulnerability can be scary, anxiety-provoking, or uncomfortable, so we may find ourselves avoiding revealing things about ourselves to avoid feeling vulnerable. Or we may plough through our fear, anxiety, and discomfort around vulnerability by revealing things about ourselves only to end up feeling scared, anxious, or uncomfortable afterwards. Sometimes our fear of being vulnerable is an indication that we are not safe enough in a relationship to take the risk of revealing ourselves. It's especially important if you come from an abusive (verbally, emotionally, sexually, or physically) background to honor your need for trust and safety in your relationships by slowing down the pace of your relationship and by seeking psychotherapy at the first sign of reactions that get in the way of your creating intimacy in your relationships. Feeling vulnerable is a normal reaction to revealing ourselves, and it is our job, not the person to whom

we revealed ourselves, to manage this reaction along with others.

Reassurance

When we reveal ourselves to someone else, we take a risk that the other person will not respond in the way that we would like. If you feel upset, hurt, disappointed, frustrated, or angry in addition to feeling vulnerable after you reveal something to someone, you probably had some expectation as to how that person was supposed to respond and that person did not meet it. *What are your expectations about how another person is supposed to respond to your attempts to deepen intimacy? Is that person aware of your expectations? Are your expectations realistic?* Start identifying those moments, before you reveal yourself, if possible, in which you have expectations for your partner or other person in your life such that they need to respond in a particular way to your attempts to deepen intimacy. These kinds of expectations may mask a desire for reassurance.

Reassurance is a perfectly reasonable thing to want or need from someone with whom you have an intimate relationship in those moments when you feel scared or vulnerable, and reassurance is something a partner would want to offer you, especially if he or she understood how scared or vulnerable you were feeling in a particular moment. However, it is not your partner's or anybody else's responsibility to save you from having to feel your feelings. Herein lies the dynamic tension of being in an intimate relationship: It is your job to manage your emotions as it's your partner's job to manage his or her own, but we human beings are interdependent; we need certain things from other people. The key here is to find balance both within yourself (internally) and in your relationship(s) (externally). It's important to be able to reassure yourself such that you are not completely dependent on your partner for reassurance, but it is equally important that you can find reassurance from your partner if and when you need it.

Have a discussion with your romantic partner or close friend about vulnerability and reassurance and try to come to mutual understanding about how these moments should be navigated, so together you can build and sustain intimacy in your relationship. Ask questions to try to understand what he or she experiences in those moments when you feel like you're taking a risk and becoming vulnerable. Share what your experience is, too. Ask explicitly for what you want and need and encourage your partner to do the same. Discuss anything that prevents you and your partner from giving and receiving what you need. Decide together to try to put more effort forth to meet each others' needs but also work individually on learning to reassure yourselves.

While having meaningful discussions with your partner is valuable in navigating these issues, it is essential that each person in a partnership be responsible for simultaneously doing his or her own personal inner work. Everyone's got baggage, so start unpacking yours. Don't be afraid of your baggage or of addressing it. The more you work on your personal intimacy issues, the better you will feel, the more fulfilling your relationships will be, and the less fear you will feel in your relationships.

Knowing Yourself and Being Present

In an intimate romantic relationship we experience the highest of highs when we first fall in love,

the lowest of lows when we end a romantic relationship, and everything in between while in the relationship. If we are going to be fully present in our relationship, then we must be willing to experience everything that we go through in our relationship. Being intimate, then, is not just the revealing of ourselves in the presence of another person but a revealing of ourselves to ourselves. In fact, David Schnarch's definition of intimacy is exactly that. In *The Sexual Crucible* Schnarch writes, "Intimacy is the process of being in touch with or knowing oneself in the presence of a partner." (p. 109) In other words, real intimacy is knowing yourself and sharing the experience of knowing yourself with your partner.

If you are not open to knowing yourself, then you're not going to be able to allow yourself to experience whatever arises in your relationships. Usually, comfortable or pleasant emotions like joy, peace, love, bliss, and ecstasy we warmly welcome into our minds, hearts, bodies, and souls, but uncomfortable or unpleasant ones like pain, fear, vulnerability, anxiety, loneliness, anger, frustration, disappointment, and loss? *How willing are you to feeling these feelings as they arise? What kind of reaction did you just have to the prior question?* Answers to these two questions will offer you some insight into whether or not you play favorites with your feelings. And if you don't accept all of your feelings, chances are you will not accept those same feelings from another person. *Which emotions are you open to feeling and which aren't you open to feeling? What can you do to cultivate greater openness to feeling those feelings you haven't been willing to feel?*

Feelings aren't the only experiences we have in our relationships. We also have sensations, thoughts, ideas, fantasies, opinions, beliefs, images, energies, connections, dreams, movements, sounds, and altered states of consciousness, and this list is not comprehensive. Knowing yourself also means making space and being with these experiences, too. And, of course, being aware of these experiences within yourself then allows you to share them with another person.

Below are some questions for self-reflection. Notice your reactions to them as well as your responses. If you are ready to deepen intimacy in your relationship, consider sharing your responses to these questions with your romantic partner, or if you don't have one, a close friend.

Do you know all of the parts of yourself, the parts you like and the parts you don't, the parts that make you feel good and the parts that don't? Do you make space for the parts of yourself you don't want or like to exist when they arise? What are your relationship patterns and how do they relate to the patterns in your relationships with members of your family? How do you deal with fear? How you handle conflict?

The above are just some of the questions that might instigate self-exploration, or if you're ready for more, start a mindfulness meditation practice. For more on mindfulness meditation, go to www.opendoorthery.com/meditation.html.

In this brief article, I've presented to you a definition of intimacy and some of the relationship dynamics involved in an intimate relationship such as risk and vulnerability, reassurance, knowing oneself and being present, and I've still only just barely scratched the surface. There is

so much to intimacy, so much for us to learn about in our relationships. I hope you've enjoyed reading about this topic and found it useful. For recommended readings on relationships and intimacy, please refer to www.opendoorththerapy.com/resources.html.