

Making Love Last

Developing Intimacy Skills



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MAKING LOVE LAST

Creating and Maintaining Intimacy in Long-Term Relationships

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Developing Intimacy Skills

After having looked at some of the truly amazing recent discoveries about our natural drive toward intimacy and some of the ways we can restore and maintain intimacy, what has emerged for me is a series of possible skills we can cultivate with our partners for the purpose of enriching the intimacy of our relationships.

Intimacy Skill One: Learning to Pay Close Attention to Ourselves

We grow up trying the best we can to be simply who we are—to interact as honestly and spontaneously as we know how—given the emotional environment we were raised in. All our lives we have received feedback from other people telling us who they think we are or who they want us to be—and yet those ideas often don't match our ideas of who we are or want to be. So the first intimacy skill is learning to focus on the truthful details of ourselves as we participate in emotionally significant relationships. Easier said than done.

If we want improved intimacy we must cultivate with our relationship partners the habit of noticing what's going on inside ourselves as we relate to each other on a daily basis. Next we must find ways to share our reactions with our relating partners while taking responsibility for them. In this intersubjective process we hope to become familiar with our own emotional patterns even as we struggle to de-center ourselves in order to learn about the emotional patterns of the other person.

The rule of thumb for self-discovery is simple. Every time we have any strong reactions to someone we are in relationship with, we need to assume that the strength of that reaction points to a reflexive emotional habit of our own—no matter whether the reaction is “appropriate” or not. We have no power to change others, only the power to examine and sometimes to change ourselves!

“Is this difficult work?” Absolutely, it is. “Does intimacy require a lot of togetherness time on a regular ongoing basis?” Yes, it certainly does. “Will all the time and effort spent be worth it?” You will have to be the judge. But if you want to try, you have to begin by paying close attention to yourself in all of

your emotionally significant relationships—as non-defensively and non-judgmentally as possible—and hope for the same from your relating partner.

Intimacy Skill Two: Examining Our Negative Projections

We can only see the world through our own emotional lenses. Our lenses have been conditioned by past emotional relationships so that we simply see the world in certain ways and fail to notice how many other ways there are of constructing personal worlds and personal truths. In the beginning of a relationship, of course, we rely on conventional ways of getting to know each other. We search out things we like to do together and things we have in common. But have we as relational partners been getting ready for the inevitable disillusionments that we know will come? What will things look like when the going gets rough?

Fast forward into what couples' therapists call the “negative projection” phase of relating—to how things become after the illusions have started to diminish. One very simple way to understand the projection process is to realize that in the course of growing up we are taught about our “good self” and our “bad self” by those who raised us. We also learned from experience about “good others” and “bad others.” In the romantic illusion phase of relating we project like a movie on a screen our good sense of self and other onto our relationship and new partner. That is, the idealized aspects of ourselves and of other people we have known in the past are brought forward to positively color our experiences of the relationship and the new partner. But over time as the relating becomes more complex and more real, the negatively valued parts of ourselves and of others from the past begin to be projected onto our partners—quite without our realizing it!

Surprisingly enough, this is *the expectable way* our minds treat relationships—and this is where relationships start to bog down. In the first place I become disillusioned by my new awareness that you are not quite the person I thought you were. Then I begin to see how out of touch and really bad you can be at times. At first I don't notice that what I most dislike in you are the very things I have worked for a lifetime to eradicate or deny in myself. Then—surprise—I begin to experience you in the same ways that I once experienced my parents and other significant others throughout my life! Next we notice ourselves treating our partners in the same awful ways that we hated in our loved ones treating us in a complete

role-reversal. Negative projections are not simply sometimes events—they are at the center of the ways our minds operate!

As couples enter the phase of negative projections the natural tendency is to become confused and disillusioned, to blame, and/or to avoid or to withdraw from emotional engagements. We tend to project this emerging sense of badness from the past onto the partner of the present and then, like a projected movie, we begin to believe that what we see “out there” is reality not our projections. People caught in the throes of mutual negative projections become disillusioned and then begin to fear the relationship is falling apart. In this way people often come to dread the very relational confrontations that might allow repair of relationship ruptures. So added to the already deteriorating situation are the anxiety and despair over feeling devalued and rejected or feeling abandoned without hope of change.

We can, however, welcome this sense of impasse as the point in relationships where new and creative forms of intimacy can be developed. When negative self and other projections begin to mingle in committed intimate relationships with the realities of two unique subjective worlds of experience, fresh possibilities for transformation and growth become possible. The second intimacy skill is for partners to learn how to focus on themselves in such a way as to understand the mutual emotional processes of negative projections and to find creative ways of recognizing and dealing with the inevitable negativity that comes.

Intimacy Skill Three: Developing the Courage to Relate

In intimate encounters when we come nose to nose—each believing we are right and the other is wrong—this is when we have the greatest possibility of noticing emotional relatedness patterns in ourselves that we have never known about before. We begin when we notice that we have a strong emotional response to what is happening. Our strong emotional reaction, has tipped us off that we are bringing an emotional load to the encounter that derives from our own past experience.

How do we discover what it is that we are bringing to the encounter? We begin by non-defensively and non-accusingly attempting to discuss our puzzling reactions with our partner or with another intimate person such as our therapist. We can be sure that any heretofore unnoticed childhood reaction

patterns that emerge in our current intimate relationships have been safely guarded from becoming conscious for a lifetime by intense anxiety and fear. So whenever we get close to some blocked body-mind fear reflex we can expect a strong defensive emotional reaction—some kind of shaking in our boots. Honestly looking at ourselves and our deep reactions to our relating partners always requires mustering our most courageous selves. Oddly enough, when one person begins taking responsibility for his part in a relationship dilemma, usually the other person quickly gets in touch with what her contribution is.

Intimacy Skill Four: Resisting the Dullness of Attachment

A common observation about partnering relationships is that the excitement dulls with time. But the problem can't simply be time. So what is going on? Sigmund Freud believed that marriage leads to attachments that give rise to the incest taboo so that the edge of sexual excitement dies (Freud, 1918). His thinking is that in our original families sex was taboo so that as our lover slowly enters the category "family" it is only a matter of time before the conditioned taboo against having sex or other kinds of intimate contact with family members catches up with our partnership.

Along different lines relational psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell proposes that sexual excitement relies on risk, uncertainty, and creative spontaneity within the relationship. But as we become more attached to our partner our dependency needs increase, making us more vulnerable to abandonment so that our risk-taking in intimate relating declines—and with it the creative spontaneity, novelty, and uncertainty of love and exciting sexuality.

Yet another set of considerations regarding dullness of attachment is advanced by anthropologist and sociologist Helen Fisher who concludes that human relationship history reveals a consistent four-year plot associated with genetically-driven neurotransmitters. We are biologically driven, Fisher says, to mating, to romance, to attaching for child rearing, and then to philandering, porce and mating again. Getting past these ancient mating patterns demands a partnering relationship that "tricks" our brains and neurological systems by arranging continuous novel experiences of excitement and adventure within the relationship.

Each of these theoretical approaches to the problem of dullness setting in after a while in bonded

relationships outlines grim prospects for long-term relationships. But despite these potentially grim prospects exceptions to the pattern of relatively short-lived romantic relationships do exist. Indeed sometimes love lasts! So the question before us is can we locate ways of relating with each other that expand our capacities for long-term intimacy? We must find ways of working together in our relationships to resist the dullness of attachment.

Intimacy Skill Five: Representing and Tolerating “Otherness”

Aspects of ourselves that do not fit within our accepted views of who we are—of our identity—are spoken of as “otherness” that has been split off, denied, disowned, or repressed and that re-appears. Likewise, from time to time in our relationships despite our best efforts to disavow them parts of our relating partners we have “chosen” not to notice—or had hoped would go away—come inevitably to be experienced as “otherness” in our partners.

As the phase of negative projections in relationships begins, the heretofore denied “otherness” of ourselves and our partners can easily become the target of disillusionment and blame. Doing our best to mentalize together, to talk about the puzzling or surprising aspects of ourselves and our partners with our partners allows us to begin mutually exploring these split-off, denied aspects of “otherness” in ourselves as well as in our partners so that we can find ways of integrating them into the expanding co-consciousness of the relationship.

Mutually struggling to be as non-defensive and non-judgmental as possible toward aspects of ourselves and our partners, that which we experience as strange or otherness goes a long way toward starting the consciousness raising dialogue. In the long run the couple’s growing capacity to tolerate and even to value otherness in each partner has rich potential for expanding both personalities as well as for deepening the relationship. A third party discussant such as a therapist can be very helpful to a couple in sorting through emerging aspects of self and other “otherness.”

Intimacy Skill Six: Sustaining the Tension of Uncertainty and Insecurity

No one likes the disruption, turmoil, disorientation, and fragmentation necessarily involved in expanding and re-aligning relationships. We strive for emotional harmony and security in our

committed relationships. But during the phases of negative projections and emergent otherness we become distressed and insecure by the unfortunate aspects of ourselves and our relating partners that we experience as newly emerging. Common alternatives are: cave in and lose ourselves; force our partner to capitulate; or allow the relationship to go stale or sour. Our tendency is to end up losing the very thing we were attempting to create in the first place—a lively, creative, always uncertain and exciting relationship.

THE LESSON: We cannot have a totally safe and secure relationship that is free from threat. So how do two people learn to sustain the tension in their relationship that is required to provide for basic security needs while simultaneously allowing room for novelty, change, and excitement. Again, a third party discussant like a therapist may be helpful from time to time as a couple works on finding ways of sustaining the relationship tension.

Intimacy Skill Seven: Learning Nonviolent Communication

Marshall Rosenberg has studied the words and language we use in relationships.⁴ He concludes that, quite without realizing it, we often speak and interact in “violent” ways. Nonviolent Communication focuses our attention on compassion as our motivation, rather than fear, guilt, blame, or shame. It emphasizes taking personal responsibility for our choices and improving the quality of our relationships as our goal.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is based on the premise that we are all simply trying to get our needs met. We fare better if we know how to get these needs met through cooperation rather than aggression. People naturally enjoy contributing to the well-being of others when they can do so willingly.

The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. We need to clearly observe what we are seeing, hearing, or touching that is affecting our sense of well-being, without mixing in any evaluation.

The second component of NVC necessary for expressing ourselves is expressing feelings. By developing a vocabulary of feelings that allows us to clearly and specifically name or identify our emotions, we can connect more easily with one another.

The third component of NVC entails the acknowledgment of the root causes of our feelings. NVC heightens our awareness that what others say and do may be the stimulus or trigger, but never the cause of our feelings.

The fourth component of NVC addresses the question of what we would like to request of each other to enrich each of our lives. It is important to avoid vague, abstract, or ambiguous phrasing of our requests, and to remember to use positive action language by stating what we are requesting rather than what we are not. For example, NVC encourages the expression of appreciation solely for celebration—not as a means of expressing a positive judgment. We state: the action that has contributed to our well-being, the particular need of ours that has been fulfilled, and the feeling of pleasure engendered as a result. When we receive appreciation expressed in this way, we can do so without any feeling of superiority or false humility by celebrating along with the person who is offering the appreciation.

Rosenberg's book is replete with everyday expressions that carelessly slip off our tongues that, when examined carefully, contain disguised violence. Use of Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication can go a long way towards building a relationship that remains inspiring and that feels safe.

Intimacy Skill Eight: Making Contact with Seven Deadly Fears

Relationship fears are universally experienced consequences of the human predicament of growing up dependent for many years on families and communities to sustain us.² Depending on our original relational circumstances, these seven relational fears manifest themselves differently in different people. Relational fears leave a chronic mark, a tissue constriction of some sort, on the mind/body that affects subsequent intimate relationships. The seven relational fears set up somatopsychic constrictions in different organ systems throughout our bodies thus threatening our health and longevity. It is only a matter of time before each of these seven fears is experienced in relation to a partner in any committed relationship.

In a committed relationship it is essential to dedicate regular time toward mentalizing with each other the frightening experiences that necessarily arise in the course of a relationship—to consider what each partner is feeling afraid of at each and every point. At first this may be difficult because we are

taught to deny and/or cover up our fears. The Seven Deadly Fears are a regular part of the phase of negative projections and a manifestation of the disavowal of aspects of “otherness” and, as such, require constant monitoring.

In my *Overcoming Our Relationship Fears* book and the separate *Overcoming Our Relationship Fears Workbook* there are many mental and physical exercises that individuals and couples can do that will put them into contact with where in their mind/body tensions their childhood relational fears are stored. The Seven Deadly Fears are thought to arise in the course of normal child development and in the following chart are ordered in terms of their interpersonal complexity.

Summary Chart: The Seven Deadly Fears

1. The Fear of Being Alone

We dread reaching out and finding nobody there to respond to our needs. We fear being ignored, being left alone, and being seen as unimportant. We feel the world does not respond to our needs. So what's the use?

2. The Fear of Connecting

Because of frightening and painful experiences in the past, connecting emotionally and intimately with others feels dangerous. Our life experiences have left us feeling that the world is not a safe place. We fear injury so we withdraw from connections.

3. The Fear of Being Abandoned

After having connected emotionally or bonded with someone, we fear being either abandoned with our own needs or being swallowed up by the other person's. In either case we feel the world is not a dependable place; that we live in danger of emotional abandonment. We may become clingy and dependent or we may become super-independent—or both.

4. The Fear of Self-Assertion

We have all experienced rejection and perhaps even punishment for expressing ourselves in a way that others don't like. We thus may learn to fear asserting ourselves and letting our needs be known in relationships. We feel the world does not allow us to be truly ourselves. We may either cease putting ourselves out there altogether, we may assert ourselves with a demanding vengeance, or we may even relate in passive-aggressive ways.

5. The Fear of Lack of Recognition

When we do not get the acceptance and confirmation we need in relationships, we are left with a feeling of not

being seen or recognized for who we really are. We may then fear we will not be affirmed or confirmed in our relationships. Or we may fear that others will only respect and love us if we are who they want us to be. We may work continuously to feel seen and recognized by others or we may give up in rage, humiliation or shame.

6.The Fear of Failure and Success

When we have loved and lost or tried and failed, we may fear opening ourselves up to painful competitive experience again. When we have succeeded or won—possibly at someone else's expense—we may experience guilt or fear retaliation. Thus we learn to hold back in love and life, thereby not risking either failure or success. We may feel the world does not allow us to be fulfilled. Or we may feel guilty and afraid for feeling fulfilled.

7.The Fear of Being Fully Alive

Our expansiveness, creative energy and joy in our aliveness inevitably come into conflict with demands from family, work, religion, culture, and society. We come to believe that we must curtail our aliveness in order to be able to conform to the demands and expectations of the world we live in. We feel the world does not permit us to be fully, joyfully, and passionately alive. Rather than putting our whole selves out there with full energy and aliveness, we may throw in the towel, succumb to mediocre conformity, or fall into a living deadness.

Intimacy Skill Nine: Becoming Fully Alive in Love and Life!

Our growing-up experiences have left us silently terrified of intimate relationships because we have all been repeatedly injured by our intimates. Most of us do our best to deny and cover up that fact much of the time, but when we pay close, honest attention to ourselves we will note that WE DO NOT WANT:

- To examine our negative projections
- To develop the courage to relate
- To resist the dullness of attachment
- To learn to tolerate “Otherness” in ourselves or in our partners
- To sustain the tension of uncertainty and insecurity, or
- To make contact with the Seven Deadly Fears.

When we get honest with ourselves and our partners we see that altogether too often instead of facing the fear, uncertainty, and internal disruption required for re-alignment of our relationships, we would rather turn the other way, project and blame, deny otherness, pretend that we are fearless—and

then move on to a relationship that suits us better!

When it gets right down to it Stephen Mitchell has said it most clearly—we are highly invested in degrading our love, in sabotaging the very intimacy that we hope to establish and enjoy!³ How and when do we stop this deadly relationship cycle that has been endlessly repeated down the millennia? Some few couples have succeeded in achieving intensely satisfying long-term relationships—do the exceptions to the rule show that “the rule” is basically wrong and that we do, in fact, have the power to over-ride our genetically based mating habits so that we can have more sustained intimate loving relationships? Or do we need to learn to accept our historical fate of serial monogamy—of changing partners every four years before hopeless boredom sets in? Can we become fully alive in love and life? Or are we forever doomed to live in fear, constriction, and short-term relationship unhappiness? The question is, “can we make love last”?

Notes

- ¹ Rosenberg, M. B. (1999). *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion to Improve the Quality of Your Personal and Professional Relationships*. Encinitas: Puddle Dancer Press.
- ² Hedges, L. E. (2012). *Overcoming Our Relationship Fears*. Chevy Chase, MD: IPI eBooks.
- ³ Mitchell, S.A. (1997). Psychoanalysis and the Degradation of Romance. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*. 7:23-41. And Mitchell, S. A. (2002). *Can Love Last? The Fate of Romance Over Time*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.