

## Steps Towards Intimacy

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Intimate relationships are at the core of our emotional life. There is no other context so infused by and responsive to the ebb and flow of human emotion. The social interactions that are most crucial to our senses of well-being, positive adaptation, and physical and emotional health are those that occur with significant others on whom we depend for our sense of security and belonging in the world.

Research findings suggest that satisfying intimate relationships are the most important source of most people's happiness and sense of meaning in life. Conversely, they suggest that social isolation and loneliness constitute risk factors for psychological and physical disorders. On the basis of increasing research evidence, it appears that confiding, intimate relationships buffer individuals against stress and promote mental and physical well-being. These findings may be particularly significant for males in religious life. There is sufficient research to suggest that single males are more likely to experience a lack of intimacy and feelings of loneliness and isolation than their female counterparts. Why is this? One possible explanation is that, on average, males are less likely to engage in emotional self-disclosure than females, and thus, may be less likely to feel emotionally connected to others. For these reasons, it may be important for individuals, particularly males, to evaluate their relationships and friendships and to enhance their understanding of the manner in which to build a close and confiding relationship.

Although there have been numerous attempts to define intimacy, the consensus appears to be that intimacy is a process and an experience that flows from the disclosure of intimate topics and sharing of intimate experiences. One example of an intimate experience is the sharing of hurts and fears of being hurt. A model of the development of intimacy, called the Upward Spiral Model of Intimacy, has been formulated and examined by social scientists and psychologists. This model stipulates that various factors need to be present to set in motion the ever growing spiral of intimacy. On the basis of this model, the following factors are deemed prerequisites for intimacy to occur in a relationship:

**Commitment:** No relationship can last unless both individuals are in some way or another committed to its perpetuation. What does this commitment consist of? It may be stubbornness or a determination not to give up. Or, it may be based on the many positives in the relationship that have been obscured by stressful factors or the other person's behaviour. I would define commitment as a commitment to a positive, mutually rewarding relationship.

**Equality:** Some have suggested that equality refers to equality of importance of both individuals in the relationship. The attribution of importance may take place directly or indirectly, consistently or inconsistently, verbally or nonverbally. It may be expressed by paying attention to the partner's feelings, thinking, and behaviours. If one pays attention to these component parts, a message is given to the whole individual as to his or her importance.

**Reciprocity:** There cannot be reciprocity without commitment to the relationship and affirmation of equality of both individuals. Reciprocity refers not only to actions (i.e. treating one's partner the way one wants to be treated) but also to attitudes, such as valuing the partner's strengths as well as weaknesses as being the expression of humanness in its multifarious manifestations.

Once these three prerequisites are satisfied, an upward spiral of increasing intimacy takes place according to a sequence of at least six steps:



**1) Communicating personal values:** Each of us needs to express to our close friend our values, our difficulties and our experiences, no matter how painful, without ever feeling coerced to do so. Otherwise, the level of intimacy in the relationship may be damaged.

**2) Respecting each other's feelings:** To avoid fusion, diffusion, and confusion between individuals, it is important to stress the need for individuality; i.e. "I take care of and I am responsible for my feelings. As much as I care for you, I cannot take care of and be responsible for yours". Aside from valuing limitations, errors and positive qualities, each individual has the right to be whatever she/he wants to be, without interfering with or depreciating the other as a fully functioning individual. The central nucleus of this individuality is represented by one's feelings, tastes, preferences, memories, aesthetic and spiritual sensitivities, and sense of ethnic, religious, and family history. Respect for each other's feelings, thoughts, and actions implies appreciation of feelings for both partners.

For example, when I respect my friend's feelings, I am asserting their importance because I want my friend to respect and appreciate the importance of my feelings. By stressing the importance of feelings, we are also affirming the importance of the person whose feelings are expressed, accepted, and eventually shared.

**3) Accepting personal limitations:** This factor could also be called "vulnerability". It implies a reciprocal acceptance of each other's limitations with an implied capacity for forgiveness. This factor is founded on the solidarity of seeing ourselves as fallible, vulnerable, and needy pilgrims along the same hard journey. Accepting and helping each other allows us to go beyond those limitations and to accept them in a more mature fashion. Admitting to errors may make one feel vulnerable to retaliation, revenge and, ultimately, rejection from the partner. Many individuals are fearful of presenting the jugular vein, so to speak, for fear of having it pierced by the other. Consequently, they may never achieve genuine intimacy with any partner.

**4) Affirming respective potentialities:** In intimate relationships, each individual favours the personal and potential growth of the other and, indeed, stimulates the positives, the hidden or downplayed strengths of the partner. In this process of encouragement, one individual makes it easy for the other to actualize these hidden or downplayed potentials into concrete and specific behaviours.

**5) Sharing of hurts and fears of being hurt:** This may be the key factor in reaching and maintaining intimacy in the full sense of the word. It implies being emotionally available to oneself and to others, without demands for doing or having anything ( i.e. "be with me now when I am hurting"). Without emotional availability, intimacy would be superficial, and therefore, occasional, sporadic, and short-lived. Hurting means experiencing and congruently expressing one's hurts and expecting the other to respond empathetically to them. This sharing lessens the experience of hurt and provides comfort.

**6) Forgiving errors:** One important aspect of intimacy is represented by the capacity to forgive and tolerate one's own as well as a friend's imperfections. Forgiveness may imply letting go of demands for performance, perfection, production, or problem-solving in the self and in loved ones. Essentially, forgiveness, aside from its seemingly theological connotations, implies a process of acceptance, accepting oneself as well as accepting others as they are.

This model suggests that intimacy may or may not be an instantaneous process. For some individuals, it may be instantaneous; in others, it may take years to develop. In some, intimacy may wax and wane and may never be reached fully. In others, it may stand as an unshakable foundation, regardless of life's struggles. Although there may be no single or easy path to intimacy, developing and maintaining close, intimate



relationships appears to provide us with a safe haven during times of distress and a secure base for facing challenges, and opportunities in our life.

