

Intimacy in a Healthy Relationship

"Intimacy begins with oneself. It does no good to find intimacy with our partner if we are alienated from within". *Thomas Moore*

Valentine's Day seems to promote a magical way of thinking which is the illusion that someone else or a particular someone can make us lovable and happy. Although I enjoy a designated day of the year to remember a special person, I believe valuing our own worth is the key to finding intimacy in a relationship.

After counseling couples for thirty-three years, I noticed that the couples who are most able to incorporate strategies for building a healthy relationship are those who have a sense of dignity and respect for self. The following suggestions begin with what we can control to foster intimacy with our partner.

I. Value Self: The more you can accept and respect yourself, the more you will be able to respond lovingly to your partner. By taking care of yourself and nurturing your needs, you will then be able to give to your partner without keeping score. A common trap couples fall into is holding onto the belief that if a kind deed is performed, there has to be a pay back.

II. Realistic Expectations: No one can be everything we might want him or her to be. Sometimes our loved ones disappoint us. This does not mean they do not care. Another common pitfall in relationships is the illusion of perfection. By establishing boundaries based on current reality, couples can allow for limitations with each other and in life.

III. Respect Differences: Recognize you and your partner are a team. You are two unique individuals bringing different perspectives and strengths to the relationship. By avoiding judgment such as right or wrong, good or bad, there is more opportunity to find creative solutions to disagreements rather than being stuck in a power struggle.

IV. Accurate Communication: There are limitations to language. Dr. Milton Erickson says that often "no two people interpret the same sentence in the same way". The majority of my couple counseling is about coaching couples on how to listen.

Effective listening includes being able to:

- 1) Clarify by repeating back what you heard from your partner without judgment, and,
- 2) Validate your partner's point of view. You do not have to agree, but you do need to recognize this is how your partner feels.

Listening with empathy and compassion breaks down barriers of defensiveness which allows for increased communication and openness in the relationship.

V. Forgiveness: Forgiveness is a virtue of being able to accept and to own our humanity. Healthy relationships can admit mistakes and forgiveness can heal past and present wounds. Holding onto grudges is one of the most common reasons relationships end.

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VI. Have Fun: Having fun together allows couples to identify each other as a source of pleasure and safety. When couples can laugh together, sharing their private jokes and secret silliness, they intensify an emotional bond. Laughter is the best medicine for a healthy relationship.

As we celebrate Valentine's Day, perhaps some of the most profound quotes on intimacy in a relationship are written by a group of four to eight year olds. The following is a sampling of their quotes.

"Love is when you go out to eat and you give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs".

"When you tell someone something bad about yourself and you are scared they will not love you anymore, but then you get surprised because not only do they love you, they love you even more".

"Love is what is in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen".

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know your name is safe in their mouth".

"Love is when someone hurts you. And you get so mad, but you do not yell at them because you know it would hurt their feelings".

"You really should not say `I Love You` unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it a lot. People forget".