

Creating Intimacy

By Peter Kane

Intimacy is not just about love and connection in close partnerships. Intimacy is part of our relationship with everyone we contact.

That's a lot of people—and a lot of opportunities. Our emotional and spiritual health increases when we allow others to be closer to us.

Intimacy is about being seen, and this requires that we share ourselves. That takes some work. We need to address old barriers where we keep a distance. Whether this distance is a habit or a way of protecting ourselves from relationships that may cause us further pain, letting go of the ways we create emotional distance creates abundance in all areas of our life.

As a potentially life-changing bonus, intimacy allows us to move through fears and negative associations we hold from past wounds. We replace those negative relationships with new and positive beliefs about people and relationships.

I'm guessing here that we all lack intimacy in some if not all of our contacts. You can start to build or rebuild intimacy by expressing yourself in meaningful ways to others. Sharing truthful information is an obvious and vital part, but intimacy deepens most when we are emotionally and energetically present.

Being present on the emotional and energetic levels (and not faking your way) is critical to getting into and solving the deeper issues and blocks in relationships. Here is a first mini-retreat exercise to explore your ability to be emotionally and energetically present. It focuses on deepening the dialogue process.

Exercise 1: Being Present in Dialogue

Sit facing another and decide who will go first. Say the phrase, "A fear I have of people really seeing me is..." and respond with the first thought that comes to your mind. Keep repeating the sentence over and over and answer honestly each time with whatever comes up. If you draw a blank repeat yourself.

The person listening should respond to each answer by saying "Thank you" only; do not add to or detract from what is expressed. Be sure to include everything big or small, silly or not. For example, "A fear I have of you really seeing me is that you won't like me, or that I'll have something wrong with my appearance if we meet, or that I would share something intimate with you that you would use it against me at a later time." After at least two minutes, switch and have the second person do the exercise.

Then use a new statement: "Something I'd like for people to see about me is ..." Do this for at least two minutes each. Discuss what came up for you after the entire process is complete.

The second part of this exercise might be harder, as most people were trained that positive self-disclosure is arrogant or conceited. It isn't; it is part of intimacy. If you are supposed to "own" your fears and wounds, you should also own your brilliance, hopes and dreams. Allowing for intimate expression of the positive can make you feel vulnerable.

The next task for deep work is protection. Protection is necessary in many areas of our lives. Just as emotional wounds are real, the way we have learned to survive and protect ourselves from further wounding is important.

You need a strong inner protector to see and avoid danger or abuse. Protection is a healthy and necessary part of learning how to cross the street or make sure you are loved and therefore secure in the world.

The problem with protection is when unconscious, habitual protection mechanisms create a distance that is not needed in safe relationships. By learning to let go of these on a daily basis, you can have more fulfilling relationships and be better able to access and resolve the wounds underneath.

Don't gloss over this point. Letting go of your wounds in safe relationships—admitting them, exploring them, sharing them—is your quickest way to learn how to grow and heal yourself.

Protection is not just about avoiding pain or abuse. Even strides toward love and success are proactive forms of protection, because they increase our safety and security in the world.

We protect ourselves by working hard, creating success, pleasing people, observing whether others are safe, withdrawing, or being smart, right or judgmental. Taking care of our health, resting and playing help protect us from failure, too, and so does criticizing ourselves, because we subconsciously feel it helps prevent us from making mistakes.

The personal growth movement is a newer and more evolved form of protection; by learning positive things, we are in part bracing ourselves against failure.

It is valuable to become aware that protecting ourselves by pushing for success can negatively affect intimacy. By working hard in the world or by trying to push toward love in relationships, we lose the presence and

contact that is part of emotional intimacy. Pressing for love is a form of protection, because the motive is to achieve love and security. It helps to see that we lose our emotional contact and availability both when we push for love and when we withdraw from it.

Exercise 2: Your Protection List

Make a list of ways you protect yourself. Try to be specific, and write longer descriptions of how you do or feel these things. Describe how you work or attend a party, and feel the vulnerability underneath how you think and behave. Discuss this with a friend, partner or therapist.

By feeling our basic vulnerability in the world, we become better at self-care and self-comforting. This gives us the strength and courage to open up and risk intimacy.

Please don't cast self-protection aside completely; it is necessary at times. Protection has been misunderstood by some therapists and personal-growth workshops, and many people have been unnecessarily made wrong for it. In actuality, having protection is closer to having good boundaries. The key is to let go of unconscious and habitual protection that inhibits your intimacy goals.

Acknowledgement is a relationship skill that harvests intimacy when regularly practiced. As we resolve the negative issues in relationships, we will benefit from focusing on the positive. Acknowledging others and ourselves creates positive energy that helps transcend our wounds, low self-esteem, defensiveness, criticism and fear of intimacy.

I can't overstate how important it is to make acknowledgement part of our lives. We are all so sensitive that we remember criticisms easily. Acknowledgement is harder to let in and believe. Our psyche needs many acknowledgements to recover from each criticism. Some marriage research suggests that ratio might be five to one.

Exercise 3: Building Acknowledgment

Step A: Make a list of what you would like to acknowledge yourself for. This is similar to admitting what you would like people to see about you. Include everything, without worrying about exactly how true it is.

Step B: Sit facing someone with whom you would like to do an acknowledgement exercise. Say the phrase, "Something I'd like to acknowledge you for is..." and say the first thought that comes to your mind. Continue for at least two minutes. Switch. When you are receiving the acknowledgement, just make eye contact and breathe it in.

Be a risk-taker. Do this exercise with more than just the "safe" people in your life.

One more thing: Acknowledge people in your life as often as possible. Make the phrases "Thank you for ...", "I appreciate that you ..." "I like that you are ...", "You are so ..." a common part of your vocabulary. When people acknowledge you, don't correct them; just let in by saying thank you.

Too often we think of love and connection as something we need to get from someone. Perhaps the biggest step toward greater intimacy is not to give love, or go out and get it, but to let love in and allow others to see, feel and know us.

Intimacy is certainly as much about receiving as it is giving. If two people are giving and neither is receiving, then the love won't be felt by either. For many of us, letting in intimacy is harder than giving it, but both are required. So give love and acknowledgement, but remember to slow down, make contact and allow the other to give to you.

It will change you and our world for the better and deeper.

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