



Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Intimacy

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Human Relationships
Chapter Title: "Intimacy"
Pub. Date: 2009
Access Date: December 11, 2015
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9781412958462
Online ISBN: 9781412958479

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479.n297>

Print pages: 920-924

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Intimate relationships enrich our lives with meaning and pleasure. Confiding in close relationship partners provides significant benefits to physical and mental health, distinguishes more rewarding from less rewarding relationships, and contributes to relationship satisfaction. Human beings have a *need for intimacy* that, when unfulfilled, leaves them feeling lonely and depressed. This entry defines intimate interactions and relationships, discusses three specific forms of intimacy (emotional support, expressions of positive regard, and sexuality), and addresses intimacy within friendships and romantic relationships. It concludes with discussions of intimacy changes over time, how people cope with the psychological risks of intimacy, and how individual differences in intimacy needs affect close relationships.

Three Defining Characteristics of Intimate Interactions

Karen Prager and Linda Roberts distinguished intimate interaction from other kinds of interactions by three necessary and sufficient conditions: self-revealing behavior, positive involvement with the other, and shared understandings.

Self-Revealing Behavior

Self-revealing behaviors are those that reveal personal, private aspects of the self to another. Self-revealing behavior, or self-disclosure, is related to greater emotional involvement, fulfillment of needs, and relationship satisfaction. Self-disclosure facilitates the development of new intimate relationships and helps to maintain ongoing ones. Self-revealing behavior and accompanying emotional support are the *sine qua non* of intimate interactions for men and women.

Both verbal and nonverbal behavior can be self-revealing. Deeply self-revealing behavior usually involves the expression of “vulnerable emotions,” such as hurt or sadness that expose the “innermost self.” When interaction participants reveal more personal, vulnerable aspects of themselves through self-disclosure, and when they express feelings about what they have disclosed, they perceive their interactions to be more intimate.

Self-revealing behavior is that aspect of intimacy that has been most closely associated with higher levels of well-being; however, the mechanism by which it benefits the individual has not yet been determined. One study tested the hypothesis that changes in hormone levels, specifically salivary testosterone levels, would account for some of self-disclosure's health benefits. The study found that higher self-disclosure moderated short-term testosterone changes in men who interacted with a female peer versus sat alone for 15 minutes.

Positive Involvement

Positive involvement refers to the individual's devotion of full attention to the partner during an interaction. It also refers to positive regard for the other that is communicated through nonverbal and verbal cues. Some behaviors that signify positive involvement convey *immediacy*, defined as the directness and intensity of interaction. Decreased distance, increased gaze, and greater facial expressiveness create immediacy, as does verbal “tracking” of the partner's communication and use of present-tense verbs. Interactions characterized by immediacy are associated with positive affect.

Partner responsiveness refers to behavior that conveys attention, interest, understanding, and empathy for the other's perspective. In Harry Reis and Philip Shaver's interpersonal process model of intimate interactions, intimacy is a process that begins with one person's self-revealing behavior and continues with the other person's display of understanding, validation, and caring toward the discloser.

Research supports the contention that responsive behavior contributes to daily experiences of intimacy in romantic couple relationships, over and above effects of self-disclosure. In both college-age dating couples and married couples, interactions are not as intimate when partners are perceived to be insensitive or unresponsive to the other's self-disclosure. Responsiveness is also important in helping relationships. Early research by Carl Rogers identified therapist acceptance, warmth, and caring as critical conditions for therapeutic change. A recent study found that rape victims disclose less about their experiences when counselors are less responsive.

Mutual Understanding

The third condition for an interaction to be intimate is that it results in shared understandings between partners. Through intimate interaction, both partners understand (or come to understand) an aspect of the other's inner self. This intimate knowledge endures beyond the interaction and becomes a distinguishing feature of relational intimacy.

Partners who believe they are understood accurately are more satisfied with their relationships, as when partners read their thoughts accurately during an interaction. One study compared interaction partners' ability to guess what the other was thinking in pairs of strangers, casual acquaintances, friends, and dating partners, assessing the influence of intimacy and gender in each group. Partners with higher perceived levels of relational intimacy were better able to guess the other's thoughts than less intimate dyads. Female partners were more perceptive than males regardless of the level of relational intimacy.

Forms of Intimate Expression

Several areas of research have shed light on specific types of intimate interactions. These include research on reassurance and emotional support, communication of positive regard, and sexuality.

Reassurance and Emotional Support

Some intimate interactions are characterized by *emotional support*, in which one partner shares a difficulty and the other offers comfort, reassurance, confidence building, and more benign perspectives for thinking about the problem. Adults who perceive that others, especially their spouses, are available to provide emotional support when they need it enjoy positive outcomes, including better mental health and immune functioning and less marital distress.

Recent research indicates that it is just as important for partners to share one another's joys as it is for them to provide sympathy for their sorrows. Shelly Gable, Gian Gonzaga, and Amy Strachman videotaped young dating couples while they talked with each other about a positive event and a negative event, and then they asked them to report on how understood, validated, and cared for they felt during the interaction. The listening

partner's responses to disclosures of positive events, more than his or her responses to negative event disclosures, predicted the disclosing partner's feelings of well-being and relationship satisfaction 2 months later.

Expressions of Positive Regard

Communicating positive, loving feelings toward a partner is an important aspect of intimate communication, both as a disclosure and as a response to disclosure. Perceiving one's partner as having a positive view of oneself, especially a partner who knows one very well, helps partners maintain high self-esteem.

Partners who communicate positive regard to one another may be in a better position to sustain intimacy in their relationship. Work by Sandra Murray and her colleagues suggests that people determine how much vulnerability they will risk with their partners, in part, on the basis of how positively they believe their partner regards them. Expressions of positive feelings contribute uniquely to couple relationship partners' daily experiences of intimacy.

Sexuality

Heterosexual couples that remain married report that their sexual relationships are better after marriage, whereas those that divorce report, in retrospect, that theirs were worse. Whether they engage in more kissing and affectionate touching or more frequent sexual contact or both, sexuality both signals and maintains relationship satisfaction. Although satisfied partners engage in more frequent sexual relations than less satisfied partners, frequency varies as a function of partners' age, sex, sexual orientation, and length of time together.

Desire or lack thereof is a more significant indicator of a relationship's functioning than coital frequency. Pamela Regan found that sexual desire is more closely associated with feelings of love than sexual behavior in the minds of college students, although passion may better reflect a developing intimate relationship than one that is stable and ongoing. Couples that present to therapists with sexual desire problems have a poorer prognosis than those whose problems are centered on a lack of shared gratification. Although satisfaction with the sexual relationship correlates positively with romantic partners' overall relationship satisfaction, the presence of sexual contact does not guarantee that partners are emotionally intimate.

Intimate Relationships

The defining characteristics of intimate interactions—self-revealing behavior, positive involvement, and mutual understanding—provide the basic elements for defining an intimate relationship. Intimate relationship partners have shared multiple intimate interactions that, over time, distinguish an intimate relationship from a casual or nonintimate one by virtue of accumulated knowledge or understandings of the other.

Intimate Friendships

As people get to know one another, the intimacy in their interactions increases. Among teenagers and adults, the breadth and depth of self-disclosure and emotional support increases as relationships progress from casual acquaintances to close friendships. As relationship satisfaction, love, and feelings of security increase, so too does

intimacy. This pattern of increasing intimacy with acquaintance is discernable in face-to-face contact between college friends and, as more recently demonstrated, in teenagers' online relationships. More intimate friendships have more staying power, as a recent 19-year longitudinal study of intimate friendships from college to middle adulthood demonstrated.

From their first contact with a new acquaintance, girls and women on average communicate more intimately than men do and continue to do so once they become friends. This gender-related pattern replicates in Western cultures outside the United States, but is less evident in non-Westernized countries. Maria Cancian suggests that Western men have less intimate friendships than women do because Western cultures have linked intimacy with femininity. Gender differences are not due to different conceptions of intimacy held by women and men, however. Rather, they reflect the fact that men, relative to women, describe themselves as less concerned with meeting emotional intimacy needs within their same-sex friendships.

Sex differences in friendship intimacy seem to reflect traditional norms for masculine and feminine behavior in the United States. In gay communities, some men may actively reject traditional norms for masculine behavior, and intimacy in their friendship pairs resembles that for female pairs. Similarly, androgynous boys (i.e., those who have incorporated feminine traits into their personalities) are more likely to have intimate male friendships than masculine sex-typed boys. In contrast to men, women are believed to be "relationship experts" and are encouraged—even pressured—to place more emphasis on becoming skillful at relating intimately. This expectation is reflected in women's ability to communicate their emotions effectively to their spouses. Excessive concern about intimacy on the part of women may have a downside, however. In their zeal to maintain a high level of openness, warmth, and emotional support in their friendships, women may fail to deal constructively with anger and competitiveness, occasionally leading to inappropriate aggressive behavior against their closest friends.

Intimacy and the Romantic Relationship

Intimacy is a central desire and expectation that most romantic partners bring to their relationships. More intimate couples are happier couples; partners who self-disclose more to one another, who have more frequent sexual contact, who are emotionally responsive, and who perceive each other as each perceives him or herself are more satisfied and stable couples.

Mutual understanding assumes special significance in the context of an ongoing couple relationship because the personal knowledge that is obtained through intimate interactions endures and accumulates. Over time, understandings of the other extend beyond the experiences contained within any particular interaction. These understandings, or *intimacy schemas*, mediate the impact of individual interactions. Intimacy schemas guide future relationship behavior and elicit emotional reactions to specific partner behaviors. When frequent intimate interactions result in partners feeling understood, other potentially volatile differences, including religious and ethnic differences, are less likely to contribute to relationship problems.

Intimacy schemas, if they represent mostly positive experience, can result in a backdrop of loving, positive feelings about the partner that buffer the relationship from negative emotions that arise. This *positive sentiment override* can sustain the

relationship even when shared intimate experiences are not immediately forthcoming. A similar pattern exists with perceptions of support availability, which may persist during times when the partners are not seeking support from each other. Positive expectations of support availability reliably distinguish between more and less satisfied couples. Conversely, when partners hold negative perceptions of the relationship, those perceptions predict divorce with more than 80 percent accuracy.

More relational intimacy is usually associated with more satisfaction; however, some couples have less intimacy than others, but are satisfied because their level of relational intimacy fulfills their lower needs for intimacy. Partners whose needs are not met may argue about intimacy-related issues, such as how much each should express to the other about his or her private feelings and thoughts, how often partners should have sexual relations, and so forth. Partners who argue about intimacy report higher levels of marital distress than those who have other kinds of incompatibilities.

Because romantic relationships typically involve intense emotions, both positive and negative, the skillfulness with which partners handle and communicate their emotions contributes to both relational intimacy and relationship satisfaction. Partners who not only manage their own emotions skillfully, but are able to respond skillfully to the other partner's emotional expressions, create an atmosphere of *intimacy safety* in their relationship, which enhances intimacy and thereby enhances marital satisfaction.

Relational Intimacy over Time

In romantic relationships, on average, intimate interactions decline in frequency over time. Sexual intimacy declines most precipitously within the first 1 to 2 years. There are also documented declines in affectionate expression, in the number of pleasing things partners do for each other, and in the time partners spend in joint leisure activities. These changes do not necessarily create dissatisfaction for the partners, however.

In established, long-term relationships, partners' level of mutual understanding may mitigate the need for frequent intimate interactions. Even in the absence of explicit self-disclosure, close friends are better able to infer each other's thoughts and feelings during an interaction than are pairs of strangers. Research suggests that long-standing friends and romantic partners may not need to self-disclose in order to know what the other needs in the way of support, acknowledgment, or validation. Possibly, relational intimacy is an overriding knowledge and familiarity with the partner that may reduce the need for frequent self-disclosure.

Regulating Intimacy: Intimacy's Risks and Joys

In the best relationships, the possibility of a joyful and meaningful intimate encounter coexists with the risk of hurt. In an intimate relationship, partners maintain a delicate balance between openness and unguardedness, on the one hand, and self-protection and concealment, on the other hand.

Relationship partners are well aware that they can be hurt in the context of an intimate relationship. Partners who feel less secure may inhibit their levels of self-disclosure or distance themselves for the sake of self-protection. Disclosure regarding taboo topics (e.g., extrarelationship activity) is avoided in college student dating relationships because some topics are perceived as threatening to the relationship. Secrecy is sometimes used to prevent rejection or breaking up.

Sex differences in self-disclosure are mitigated in heterosexual romantic relationships where women and men report similar patterns of self-disclosure. Despite these similarities in disclosure levels, women are lonelier in their romantic relationships than are men, initiate more separations, and report more problems. Women and men have similar standards for their romantic relationships, although women are more likely to report that their standards are not being met. Either women's socialization to be relationship experts causes them to be more aware of relationship problems or more willing to report them or women are more effective relationship partners than are men, resulting in men who are less likely to be lonely.

Individual Differences and Intimacy

Some people appear to be content with much less openness, emotional support, sexual contact, and/or affectionate expression than others. Dan McAdams's research on intimacy motivation has supported the notion that some people desire and seek out opportunities for intimate interaction more frequently than others. High-intimacy motivation may be an advantage because individuals whose intimacy needs are stronger put more effort into their intimate relationships and engage in intimate and problem-solving communication more frequently. Perhaps as a result, individuals with strong intimacy needs have more satisfying relationships. Further, they prefer partners who are warm and open and have similar interests. Partners whose needs are met more frequently have more intimate contact and less conflict.

Individual differences in working models of attachment (i.e., secure vs. insecure working models) are also associated with variations in intimacy needs and preferences. People with certain insecure attachment expectations (e.g., those who dismiss their need for a close and secure relationship) have little tolerance for the risks of intimacy and are more likely than others to maintain multiple and superficial sexual relationships. In contrast, secure individuals are more often sexually exclusive and least likely to engage in behavior destructive to their relationships. Individual differences in intimacy-related needs and fears appear to be systematically associated with attachment expectations.

- intimacy
- satisfaction in relationships
- self-disclosure
- disclosure
- partners (relationships)
- the self
- friendship

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412958479.n297>

See also

- [Affection and Affectionate Behavior](#)
- [Closeness](#)
- [Deteriorating Relationships](#)
- [Developing Relationships](#)
- [Emotional Communication](#)
- [Empathic Accuracy and Inaccuracy](#)
- [Friendships, Sex Differences and Similarities](#)

- [Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy](#)
- [Intimacy, Individual Differences Related to](#)
- [Marriage and Sex](#)
- [Self-Disclosure](#)
- [Sex and Love](#)
- [Understanding](#)

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