



Creating and Keeping Intimacy in Your Life

What is intimacy?

Intimacy is the sense of being close to other people. It can occur with bonding between parent and child, between two adults as friends or partners, or even with coworkers. This feeling of being accompanied in the world, of not being alone, "outside of things", or lonely, is important for self-esteem. Experiencing joy and love in relationships is a source of strength for human beings.

How can you create intimacy in your life?

- **Make friendships and relationships the most important elements in your life.**

This means commitment to others. People who make time for their friends, who reach out to other people, and who use tender gestures or expressions of concern often have many friends. People move toward those who are loving and who take the time for them.

To assess the role of friendships in your life, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you have someone you can call on if you are very upset?
- Do you have people with whom you "play," sharing recreation?
- Do you have people who will care for you in practical ways such as giving you a ride or lending you money if you need it?
- Do you have people you talk to just to see how they are doing?

You may "see" many people at parties, but still not have close friends unless you initiate intimate, feeling conversations.

- **Practice active listening skills with others.**

Really try to understand how others feel. Make sure you know what people are talking about by asking them questions and clarifying what they mean. Express interest in what others are doing. Do not be afraid to listen to others in distress and to let them know you care. Let others know you are available to them. Avoid giving advice. Just be there.

- **Learn how to talk about yourself.**

When you confide in others and open yourself to others, they will confide in you. When you are upset about something, ask an acquaintance for a few minutes time to talk about it.

Learn how to express your feelings. As you consider your reactions to daily events, mentally start sentences with "I feel...." Then say the sentence aloud to someone. Try not to hide your feelings in relationships. Know that depending on others can be a sign of strength and can help your friendships develop into a relationship of interdependence.

If you live with others, start conversation at the dinner table. Talk about things that happened at work, items in the news, and what you are feeling that day.

- **Be genuine.**

This means being honest and open about your feelings and ideas. It means stating what you really think as often as you can. It means accepting different views and feelings, even anger.

- **Respect and support other people in an accepting way.**

When others talk to you about their feelings, focus on their words and don't judge their feelings, even if they are different from what you would be feeling in the same situation.

- **Show warmth.**

Smile, call people by name, ask them questions about themselves, look them in the eye, remember things about them, find out how their life is for them. This will help you feel connected.

- **Use your sense of humor.**

Be willing to laugh at yourself. Concentrate on humor that does not make fun of others, but that makes us all laugh together.

What makes intimacy difficult?

People who have been raised in surroundings that are not "safe" -- where emotional or sexual abuse occurs, where people neglect each other, where criticism is constant and praise is never heard -- have trouble feeling confident enough to have friends. For many people, the risk of friendship feels very great. It feels to them as if friends will betray them or will use confidences against them. They don't trust their judgment about other people and fear that they will be hurt.

Living does involve being hurt by others, and people who have been hurt in their childhood have learned to expect this kind of pain. They tend to disregard the times people have been kind or generous or loving in their adult lives. They feel that their view of the world as a dangerous place has been proven.

Only by taking risks can people find friendship and love with others. Practicing listening, humor, self-disclosure, and warmth can make the stakes seem a little less high. Behaviors like these can be rewarded with warmth and caring from others and new friendships can be born.

How can someone be encouraged to risk intimacy?

To encourage people who fear intimacy to overcome that fear, it is crucial to create a safe and loving environment. It is important to listen carefully and nonjudgmentally to what they say about their feelings, even when those feelings seem irrational. Their feelings may be based on a combination of circumstances and unconscious beliefs from earlier life experiences. Listening can be even more important than offering reassurances. Support groups can be very helpful in learning how to take risks.

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