

The Path of Intimacy

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When I see a couple for the first time, I usually open with a good old-fashioned open-ended question to get the ball rolling: “What are you doing here?”

I pay very close attention to their opening line in response, what I call the headline story. Often it is clear that they have thought about this carefully, and the first answer to this question tells me exactly what our project is going to be together: *I have a drinking problem and it's killing our marriage* or *It just seems like we have drifted apart* or *My husband found out that I have been seeing someone else and he can't forgive me.*

Sometimes, however, I get a vague answer that doesn't tell me much, and the most typical vague answer is this one: *WE HAVE A PROBLEM WITH INTIMACY.*

I am never, at first, exactly sure what that means to these particular two people. Are they not having sex? Are they having sex but not enjoying it? Are they not speaking to each other? Have they drifted into leading separate, distant, parallel lives? Do they not feel safe and trusting with each other, thus blocking intimacy? Is someone having an affair? Does it seem like they just don't like each other very much?

So I start asking questions, and I find out what they really mean by that statement. And I have heard enough of these statements--and discovered the true meaning behind them--over the past quarter century of seeing couples that I have developed a map of the multiple components of an intimate relationship.

I call these components the *Four Pillars of Intimacy*. The healthy, vibrant, loving, trusting, connected, self-actualized relationship rests on these pillars—and when these pillars are shaky or collapsing, the structure above collapses as well.

It is especially important for couples to realize the broad definitions of intimacy and the multiple forms in which intimacy is expressed in a relationship. For the man who relies on sex as the only measure of intimacy: pay attention to how many different ways your partner may feel and express intimate feelings towards you that are not just in bed and in passion. For the woman who has elevated deep meaningful verbal communication to be the only true litmus test for relationship intimacy: recognize how many paths and styles express genuine intimacy besides your favorite one.

THE BASIC ASSUMPTION

I am making a basic assumption here: that all of you reading this book really crave intimacy and connection and meaningful attachment. The small percentage of people who don't are generally identified as psychopaths, or sometimes just people who are so profoundly burned by the rigors of human relationships that they have chosen avoidance and emotional isolation. So if you are reading this, and you consider yourself to be a psychopath or profoundly avoidant, feel free to ignore most of this insight and advice.

For the overwhelming majority of you who are not psychopaths (approximately 99% of the population) or shell-shocked and avoidant, I know that you long for the rewards that genuine intimacy has to offer in contributing to a life lived well.

That doesn't mean that it comes easily or without profound internal conflicts and obstructions on the pathway towards intimacy. If it came easily, therapists would become obsolete and you wouldn't have much need for this book. You want it, but the complexities and conflicts of an emotionally intimate relationship conspire to trip you up.

That's what this book is all about: to help you recognize what trips you up—then figure out ways to get past those bumps and experience the intimacy that you and your partner crave and deserve.

WHY CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

There are only three reasons why intimacy gets complicated.

And the story you tell yourself about why you are struggling with intimacy, or why your partner is, can make all the difference in the world.

If you can see the intimacy struggles as an expression of reasons #1 or #2 (below), you can be (and should be) compassionate and hopeful—both with yourself and with your partner. There are ways out of the behavioral patterns that emerge from these issues. That doesn't mean it will always resolve itself and work out, but at least it's possible. I have seen it hundreds of times.

Not so with reason #3. Then it is, for all practical purposes, hopeless.

Reason #1: Pure Fear

For a thousand reasons, we carry fears associated with intimacy. We feel vulnerable. We are afraid of being hurt, rejected, abandoned, humiliated, betrayed. Everyone is afraid. Some of us are more afraid than others, almost always because of experiences growing up that have shaped us, consciously or unconsciously.

Contemporary research on childhood attachment issues have taught us about how powerfully these patterns of attachment shape our adult needs, beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors. Attachment theory carefully identifies the nature of early experiences of children--and the impact of these experiences on aspects of later functioning. Since attachment is the context within which the human infant learns to regulate emotions, this attachment style serves as a blueprint for adult experiences, particularly in the most intimate of relationships. Intimacy, of course, activates attachment issues.

To put it most simply, if a child in distress is soothed in a “good enough” fashion by a parent, the child develops a sense of *secure attachment*. If the parent is absent, inattentive, unattuned, significantly distracted or downright cruel and rejecting--on a regular basis--then distress disorganizes the child and desperate behavior escalates.

The child who is fortunate enough to be “securely” emotionally attached stands a better chance of having intimate adult relationships in which he can maturely seek support—and he is better at giving it. She is more resilient to emotional injuries, and she experiences a more “cohesive” sense of self. He understands himself better and typically likes himself more. He is more curious and open to new information. The world—or at least the world of intimate human relationships—feels like a relatively safe place. The adult with a blueprint of secure attachment is more likely to have long and stable relationships. He or she feels reasonably confident that the chosen partner will come through—and, for all of us, the more we can reach out successfully to our partners, the more genuinely separate and independent and adventurous we can be.

That’s the good news.

However, many children growing up have some sort of gaps in their development of secure attachment, some subtle and some severe. One typical course of insecure attachment is known as the *Preoccupied attachment* style. As infants, these people were difficult to comfort or soothe after their anxieties had been aroused by the disappearance or lack of connection with their mother. These children sought contact with their mothers (as opposed to ignoring them upon their return) but also became angry at being abandoned or neglected.

As adults, people with this insecure attachment style are more likely to perceive some threat of rejection or abandonment (which they perceive more often than others). They can become extremely clingy and angry. They are overwhelmed by their attachment needs and are unable to contain the anxiety and attachment-seeking behaviors. often try to please others in order to receive approval.

Preoccupied attachment makes it more likely for an adult to carry a negative self-image, fearful and doubting as to their capacity to maintain the interest and

attention of the loved partner. Adults with this blueprint are more obsessed with trying to please others and they worry excessively about rejection. They feel unappreciated. Most significantly, they are excessively emotionally dependent, romantically obsessive, and jealous. They are “pre-occupied” with their partners. The conflicts that this generates in adult relationships are based, quite simply, on fear.

Another very common type of insecure attachment is known as *Dismissing attachment*. People with this attachment style come across as emotionally disconnected. The infants from whom these adults grew up tended to avoid or ignore their mothers upon reuniting with them after a separation. It is as if these children made a major life choice as these patterns of development took place: *I will not let you hurt me again and I will seal up my heart to make sure and protect myself*. They seem to lack empathy. They often appear to others as if they are cold and uninterested in intimate relationships. They can vacillate between being distant and cut-off emotionally to critical and controlling.

When you explore the belief systems of people with *dismissing* styles, you discover cynical and negative views of others; they are particularly guarded and mistrustful in the most intimate relationships. They are reluctant to self-disclose. They seem less invested in relationships and tend to have more breakups. When the breakups do happen, they appear to experience less grief or distress than others; they just don't seem to care as much. They seem to lack an “emotional soundtrack.”

One man in my men's group has the nickname of “Next!” His solution for every relationship problem that is discussed is simple: get rid of her and find another one. Of course it sometimes is appropriate to end a relationship that is marked by betrayal and profound disrespect. But he views all relationship flaws as “felonies” rather than “misdemeanors” and is remarkably expert at denying his own collusion in the relationship problems he has dealt with. Furthermore, he consistently chooses women who are unstable and who betray him—this confirming his attachment-based life script that women can't be trusted and should be quickly discarded before they hurt him again.

Do you recognize yourselves in any of these descriptions?

Again—why do so many of us have this style (or at least some degree of it)? Pure fear. We are afraid of being hurt or betrayed, like we have felt before. We still want intimacy, but we are afraid of depending on someone and then getting screwed, again. We anticipate the worst.

Not all of these fear-based attachment styles are dictated by childhood experiences, but sometimes by teen or adult intimate relationships as well. Ultimately, it doesn't matter (or isn't always easy to identify) where the style came from. All we know is that every one of us filters intimacy experiences in a unique fashion, and usually in ways outside of our conscious awareness. The way we perceive and the way we feel

just seems like “reality” to each of us, not just perception through our own particular lens.

And these blueprinted fears are usually at the core of ambivalence about intimacy. The more painful and unresolved our earlier experiences, the more we crave the intensity of intimacy--and the more we feel threatened by it. So the dance begins: get close, get afraid, find fault with your partner, feel hurt, push away, sabotage closeness--then feel alone, crave closeness again, and start the cycle all over again.

So if you (or he or she) seems to sabotage intimacy, and you label this as a hopeless and nasty character flaw, try to focus on the “pure fear” that lies underneath the behaviors: *Oh, now I get why she gets so jealous when she sees me talking to women that I work with.. She is worried about losing me. So I need to do everything I reasonably can to reassure her. Because I know she loves me, and I know she really wants us to be close. I can help her with that.* We can all be compassionate with fear, both in ourselves and in others.

Until you see yourself and your fears and your needs (and the fears and needs of your partner) more clearly--and together the two of you break the cycle. As you read through this book, you will see how to do this. And you will probably discover ways that you are already doing this, and then will learn how to do it even better.

Reason #2: Cluelessness

Even if we are dealing reasonably well with the inevitable fears associated with intimacy, many of us still shoot ourselves in the foot because we just don't realize how to act in ways which are intimacy-friendly. Men often have not been sufficiently schooled in the art of empathic communication with women. Women often drive men away by seeking verbal intimacy in ways that alienate men. Many men confuse the intensity of sexual intimacy with the big picture of full intimacy and seem mystified when the woman they are trying to be close with seems uninterested, turned off, misunderstood, or disrespected. Women often try to be “helpful” by offering excessive suggestions or interpretations of their male partner's behaviors, and end up driving him away because he feels controlled and maligned.

Often, this is simply a learning process that is enhanced by the ebb and flow (or, in many cases, the violent roller coaster) of experiences with relationships. Many of us have not always had the greatest modeling experiences for respectful, flexible, and successful intimacy-enhancing behaviors in the complexity of 21st century meaningful relationships. With experience comes maturity and skill development. Sometimes it requires specific training, like relationship workshops, couples therapy, or books like this.

Most people, who love each other and are motivated to foster more intimacy and a better relationship, can learn skills about how to do intimacy better. This requires learning what the other person needs and how to best deliver on these needs.

Nobody can learn to be a perfect partner, but we can all get a hell of a lot better. *If* we're paying attention. And *if* we care.

So—again--if you (or he or she) seems to sabotage intimacy, and you label this as a hopeless and nasty character flaw, try to focus on the “cluelessness” that lies underneath the behaviors: *Oh, I get it now, he never really knew how to talk to me about my worries without criticizing me. I'll help him learn how to do that, because I know he loves me and I know he cares.* We can all be compassionate with cluelessness, too, both in ourselves and in others.

Reason #3: Not Caring and/or Burned Out

If you are in this category, don't bother reading this book because it will not help you. You may “suffer” from a personality disorder of psychopathy (often used interchangeably with sociopathy), or you may be so profoundly emotionally shut down as a result of trauma that you have permanently given up on the possibility of human intimacy. Psychopathic individuals are characterized by extreme callousness, lack of remorse, lack of empathy, manipulations, and emotional coldness. The emphasis here is on the word “extreme”, because many people have moderate levels of these traits and can still change or manage at least a functional level of meaningful human relationships. But true psychopaths seem to be missing a chip for normal human interaction.

If you are in a relationship with someone like this, my best advice is to get out. You cannot experience genuine intimacy with someone whose primary motivating forces in their relationships are power and control. You likewise cannot experience genuine intimacy with someone whose primary way of dealing with emotional discomfort is to defend, blame, and attack (don't get me wrong—we all do this sometimes; the examples here apply to the people who do it practically all the time). If you are a person like this, my best advice is to do the world a favor and stay out of allegedly intimate relationships. The advice in this book and all the others out there will not be of any value for you—except possibly in learning how to be a more effective manipulator of others!

WHAT DOES HEALTHY INTIMACY LOOK LIKE?

The *Four Pillars* each represent a map for what intimacy looks like. They are pillars because they serve as foundation for the structure above, the riches and bounty of a loving, committed, connected, exciting relationship.

Not every couple has all of these pillars in great shape—but there is a direct correlation between the strength of these pillars and the healthy intimacy that couples experience.

No one pillar is any more important than any of the others. They create a synergistic effect, the more the merrier.

The central chapters of this book give you a complete description of each of these pillars: what they are made of, how they can crumble, and how to make them strong and durable.

The first pillar (not first in importance, but lists have to start somewhere) is *Safety & Security*. No relationship has even a fighting chance of true intimacy if one or both partners do not feel safe. Intimacy requires vulnerability, and vulnerability requires safety. The most obvious safety is physical; any threats of violence are totally incompatible with intimacy. Likewise for issues of infidelity. The more subtle forms of safety and security are emotional. The relationship needs to be free of lies and deceptions, as well as threats of abandonment, humiliation, and betrayals. If your partner is emotionally or physically threatening, or emotionally or physically unfaithful, or fundamentally not to be trusted to refrain from deeply hurting you, how can you be intimate?

Another pillar, *Knowing & Being Known*, rests on the ways in which both partners truly know each other. Even if you feel reasonably safe, you are not likely to experience intimacy unless you really know each other. The rewards of truly knowing another and truly being known by another are enormous. This goes beyond knowing details of your partner's life; it also includes knowing about his or her inner world, vulnerabilities, fantasies, dark places and wonderful places. Knowing leads to empathy, empathy leads to genuine acceptance, and genuine acceptance paves the way for true intimacy. Some couples have this naturally, some need to work harder to enrich it, and others never quite get it at all.

Affection and "Likeability" determines another pillar. These qualities contributing to intimacy show up in multiple venues: physical touch (non-sexual), non-verbal cues (like smiling), verbal statements (like "I love you" or "I'm so proud of you") and generous behaviors or gestures (like bringing someone a cup of coffee or laughing at their jokes). When this area of a relationship is thriving, both parties feel consistently and genuinely liked by the other. The joys and rewards of feeling genuinely liked help people withstand the inevitable assaults and dissatisfactions in the course of any normal relationship.

The fourth pillar, *Passion, Chemistry, & Sex*, is the most complex. It is not necessarily the most important; they are all important. But the other three pillars all are, more or less, receptive to conscious effort and creative manipulation if the individuals are truly motivated. Passion, chemistry, and sex are more difficult to consciously generate. Many couples who are blessed with at least moderate levels of attraction lose the connection—and the strategies for generating more passion often rest on making sure that the other three pillars are solidly constructed. This is not measured by frequency of sex or other minor differences—but rather by the feelings

of attraction and “chemistry.” Couples can utilize a wide range of strategies for clearing roadblocks to passion and generating more.

WHY BOTHER?

This might seem like a stupid question for all of you who naturally crave intimacy in all its forms. But for all of you who are conflicted about intimacy (which covers a lot of the population), and for all of you (usually men) who are reluctant to engage in the rituals that seem to enhance intimacy, let me appeal to your self-interest.

Years ago, my friend Alex was suffering in a young marriage that was quickly getting more and more frustrating for both him and his wife. This was a familiar male-female story. She wanted more from him; he was allergic to emotional conversations or even the basics of keeping her in the loop about what he was thinking or feeling.

They went to see a marital therapist. Then Alex had a session with the therapist alone to try and sort this out. Alex whined, “Why do I have to talk more about myself with her? I hate talking about myself. I don’t see the point!”

Rather than try and analyze the roots of Alex’s emotional repression or condemn him for his unempathic, self-centered view of relationships, the therapist just got practical: *Because that’s the price we have to pay to have intimacy and relationships that work.*

This was a light-bulb moment and it worked for Alex, because nobody was requiring him to buy in to the superiority of touch-feely relationships or to sacrifice any of his self-perceived masculinity and go feminine. It was like telling a business executive that he needed to hire a new marketing director simply because that seemed to be what works in his field—with no moral judgment or philosophical perspective attached. This appealed to Alex because he could accept the notion that he should engage in this behavior simply out of his own self-interest.

It feels good. Attachment stimulates vasopressin and oxytocin, the “bonding” chemicals. Think of how many times we hear the words of wisdom from people who have lived a long and rich life—they tell us that, in the end, relationships and people trump all the accomplishments.

It usually beats the alternative. The alternative to experiencing genuine intimacy is loneliness and alienation. It may be worth it, for people who consistently fail at intimacy and feel beat up by the all the attempts, but it is not a very rewarding life.

That’s not to say that the demands of intimacy are not, well...demanding. They are. Commitment comes with loss and conflict and vulnerability. It has to. Sometimes even trauma.

Turning the typical proverb on its head, commitment means that when one door opens, the rest close. In Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, the narrator describes a discussion with his friend, Cardozo, who is mulling over proposing to his girlfriend. Cardozo sees a beautiful woman on the street and moans, "I'll no longer be able to go up to her and ask her out." This is, of course, true, and it is difficult to argue with the truth. It's just that it doesn't reflect the context or big picture. The narrator describes his own thought process: "Plainly the logical response is to inquire of Cardozo exactly when was the last time (a) he asked a girl out on the street, and (b) she said yes, and (c) he and she went on to greater things; and in this way bring home to him that he's being a dummy." (p. 179)

Cardozo, of course, is also omitting one key element from his decision-making process: the potential for tremendous gain from committing to his girlfriend. With any gain comes necessary losses, but the individual who cannot bear any losses is doomed to miss out on a lot of good stuff.

Intimacy makes other relationship issues go a whole lot better. When there is a solid foundation of intimacy, then every other relationship bump in the road remains only a bump in the road. And nothing more. It is easier to listen. It is easier to accept criticism. It is easier to bounce back after spats and hurt feelings. It is easier to accept dull periods, losses, disappointments, frustrations, sexual deprivation, sexual rejection, differences on vacation preferences, disputes about child-rearing philosophies, and everything else. Every skill that you learn and use regarding communication, problem-solving, and empathy works an average of 18.4 times better when both partners feel genuinely intimate and genuinely secure in this relationship (statistic is an estimate).

Intimacy helps cope with loss: Researchers on midlife transitions and the psychological aspects of aging identify the inevitable losses involved as we move through different life stages. But one quote about this process that I often pass on to couples offers tremendous perspective and tremendous hope: Real intimacy diminishes "the narcissistic sting of aging" ¹.

This perspective has always inspired me. It reflects a recognition of the losses we face as we age and as we make life choices—because every choice closes a door somewhere. The pain and grieving of these losses is not avoidable.

But the rewards of genuine, seasoned intimacy--the kind of intimacy that can only develop over time on the mutual and emotionally raw ride through good times and through bad--diminishes this "narcissistic sting." We may not have the same body (and our partner may not either!) and we may recognize that we have been imperfect parents or friends or workers—that's the sting. The "real intimacy", however, provides a profound buffer to this sting. It's better than anything. In many

¹ Colarusso, C. A., & Nemiroff, R. (1981). *Adult Development: A New Dimension in Psychodynamic Theory and Practice*. New York: Plenum Press.

relationships, it actually trumps the sting, and life satisfaction increases despite the losses, narcissistic and otherwise.

Real intimacy often leads to more and better sex: No explanation necessary.

And, last but not least, for most of us there is no more powerful way to genuinely grow as a human being: The brilliant psychologist C. G. Jung once said: “One is always in the dark about one’s own personality. One needs others to get to know oneself.” ²

There is nothing--except perhaps, for some of you, your relationship with God—that gives you the opportunity to know who you *really* are more than a truly intimate and authentic relationship. Intimacy is not limited to lovers. The unparalleled personal growth opportunities from intimacy can also be generated in your relationships with your children or parents or perhaps a few select others. But if you needed even one more reason to really dig for intimacy, this is it. A purely selfish one.

ASSIGNMENT #1: INTIMACY ASSESSMENT AND INTIMACY ENHANCEMENT

One of the first tasks I assign couples with “intimacy” issues is known as *The Surprise Task*. You can find out a lot about yourselves, as a couple, by trying this assignment. Do you know your partner? Do you care enough to do anything about feeling closer? Does your partner receive your moves towards intimacy well? Are you both excited to discover how much you can offer each other?

The assignment is simple:

Think of something you can do more of (or sometimes less of) that you KNOW would be really meaningful to him or to her. Figure out what this is. Then between now and the next time I see you, change this behavior—but don’t tell your partner that this is the Surprise Task! You’ll each have to guess at what the other person’s behavior change was when we meet next week—that’s why they call it a “surprise.”

And here’s my advice: think small and think unique. Any guy can probably pick up a dozen roses and make his wife happy, but this works better when you figure out something that you are probably the only one who would know how meaningful it is. And it doesn’t have to be a trip to Tahiti. It can be just not playing your music so loud or calling him during the day to check how his meeting went with an important client..

² Jung, C. G., & Hull, R. F. C. (1977). *C.G. Jung Speaking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 165.

The purpose of the *Surprise Task* is to identify the strengths that already exist in your relationship—and to celebrate them. This technique was first developed in 1982 by Steve

de Shazer at the Brief Family Therapy Center. It represents an implicit expectation of change. The task was devised to begin exploration of vague goals and designed to shift the focus temporally, from the past to the present and thus to the future³. It also helps to uncover an area that you may not have been highlighting: the already-existing strengths in your relationships.

Highlighting the strengths does not mean ignoring the weaknesses or sweeping the problems under the rug. It just respects the obvious truth that couples who appreciate the positives in themselves, their partners, and their relationships find it easier to relax their defenses, and to foster more genuine intimacy.

The intention of the task is to introduce some difference (in behavior or thought) which is “a difference that makes a difference”⁴.

Let’s take an example in which Doug’s *surprise task* for Chris involves his increased attentiveness to home security issues. A running argument in their relationship takes place when Chris perceives Doug as being sloppy about making sure that all the doors are locked in their house and setting the security alarm at night. He thinks she is too anxious about this, and she feels betrayed that he is not sensitive to her anxieties. She feels unsafe—not just because of possible unlocked doors but because she worries that her husband does not really have her interests and needs high enough on his list of priorities.

The *Surprise Task*? Doug makes sure that he locks the door behind him when he comes home at night. He does a double-check of all doors and windows before going to bed. He makes sure that he sets the alarm. Her will even get out of bed if he realizes that he has not made sure about these things. And he doesn't say anything about it—he just does it.

Later, when they try to guess at the *Surprise Task*, Chris identifies it right away. And she tells him that this really meant a lot to her. Doug, of course, feels damn good too.

When couples do this task right, like Doug and Chris, the following positive and encouraging things MUST have taken place:

³ Walter, J. L., & Peller, J. E. (1992). *Becoming solution-focused in brief therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel Publishers.

⁴ Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

1. Doug had to know Chris well enough to identify something that would be really meaningful to her, something that probably no one else would have known. This deep knowledge of the other person is one of the cornerstones of intimacy.
2. Doug had to care enough to override his old and more comfortable way of doing things, paving the way to generously offer this behavioral gift to his wife. Author Terrence Real ⁵ calls this “relational heroism.” Caring this much is another indicator of intimacy.
3. Doug had to have the skills to execute this behavior change successfully. That’s not much of a challenge when it comes to checking for locked windows, but it can be when it means responding with more empathy. Proper execution of behaviors that are meaningful to the other person is another key component of intimacy.
4. Chris had to be receptive to this change! I have worked with many couples where the *Surprise Task* failed even though Doug did his part great—because Chris was either so angry, so untrusting, or so self-centered that she refused to notice or refused to acknowledge the significance of his behavioral gift. In this example, Chris took it in. She chose to see Doug’s behavior as a sign of his fundamentally loving nature and as a possible harbinger of more to come. This trust, even if is tentative when there has been a history of mistrust, is both indicative of and fostering of intimacy.

Sometimes I give this assignment and we all discover how much intimacy has deteriorated in this relationship:

1. She reports that she “forgot” to do it. This makes us wonder how much commitment she has to enhancing intimacy.
2. He reports that he was too mad at her all week to do anything positive for her. Most couples are able to set aside their resentments, at least temporarily, to offer something positive in their relationship. The inability or unwillingness to do this suggests that the resentment has killed any sparks of life for this couple.
3. He puts effort into the *surprise task*, but he picks something that means very little to her. She politely shows her appreciation, but is quietly hurt and disappointed that he didn’t know her well enough to know what would really make a difference to her.
4. Her *surprise task* is to try and be more appreciative, but she speaks only in clichés: *You must have had a hard day at work, I love you very much*, etc. Nothing wrong with those statements per se—but he may feel like she doesn’t really “get” him and what his inner world is like.

⁵ Real, T. (1997). *I Don't Want to Talk About It: Overcoming the Secret Legacy of Male Depression*. New York: Scribner.

MAKE A CONTRACT
TO TRY THE *SURPRISE*
TASK NOW! CHECK
BACK WITH EACH
OTHER IN A WEEK
AND SEE IF YOU CAN
GUESS EACH OTHER'S
SURPRISE.

WHAT INTIMACY IS NOT

If you are trying to get a handle on what real intimacy is—and whether your relationship has it, and how to get more of it—you have to know what *faux intimacy* looks like.

1. It is *not* intimate to base your relationship more on need rather than want. Don't get me wrong. It is obviously normal to need someone emotionally when you get attached to him or her, and relationships would be less meaningful if this component were missing. But many people are excessively "preoccupied" with issues of attachment loss and abandonment. They mistakenly believe that the intensity of emotion that is expressed through jealousy, possessiveness, and terror of losing someone is a profound indicator of true love and true intimacy.

It is not. It is just a profound indicator of neediness. It may overlap or correlate with true love and genuine intimacy, but it operates on a different dimension. Taken to its extreme, we know how tragic it is when someone becomes so obsessed with his or her partner, and so terrified or threatened by losing that person, that a murder-suicide results: *I love her so much that I can't stand to live without her*. On a smaller scale, the same patterns are evident when one partner needs a constant stream of reassurance of love and attachment from the partner. That's not love, and it's not intimacy. Intimacy rests on the foundation of two people who feel reasonably whole and reasonably individuated—people who have decided that their lives feel immensely better by being together.

2. Another false intimacy is evident when one or both people "act" intimate but don't really feel it. Some of you may not believe this, but most of you will know exactly what I am talking about: sex is sometimes used as a way to avoid intimacy. I have seen a number of couples who report that they have an active and satisfying sex life—at least as measured by sexual frequency and orgasms. But then I hear the most important detail: they never kiss. Maybe a peck on the cheek when they see each other or depart, but no real kissing. The sex act serves as a way for them to get sexual pleasure, of course, and a way of "appearing" to be intimate. The ultimate intimacy, in these cases, lies with the tenderness and vulnerability of kissing, with or

without genitals involved. Prostitutes don't usually kiss their clients, either—it's too damned intimate.

Likewise, some couples argue, hurt each other, emotionally withdraw, even abuse each other—then immediately follow this with sex to create an illusion of resolution. I have nothing against “make-up sex”—but often it is a smokescreen that clouds the more genuine resolution. They are using sex to avoid the challenge and vulnerability of talking about their feelings.

3. Some couples also misidentify being “nice” as a sign of intimacy. I like “nice” as much as the next guy, but it is easy to co-exist in a world of polite, scripted interactions which maintain harmony but do not offer real intimacy. Nothing really gets revealed. The couple lives in dread of conflict. The authenticity and risk-taking that are absolute cornerstones of true intimacy are eliminated in favor of getting along.

4. Another way of playing it safe in relationships (which may appear to be intimate but actually does little to foster it) is to speak in clichés:

*I know you always know the right thing to do
You know I will always love you
This is God's will
Just remember: there are other fish in the sea
Today is the first day of the rest of your life*

Sometimes these clichés are actually meaningful, but more often they are words that give the appearance of connection and compassion but are actually a lazy way out. In my experience, most people going through difficult and confusing emotions are not comforted or enlightened by clichés like this. And it is hard to complain about them, because the cliché-giver *sounds* compassionate. How can you tell somebody who is being nice to you that they seem distant and disengaged?

SUMMARY

Couples often complain about a lack of intimacy, but they often mean very different things by this word. We all need to recognize the many components that generate genuine and rewarding intimacy (the Four Pillars of Intimacy) and to develop a shared vision of what real intimacy looks like. The unsurpassed rewards of true intimacy, for practically everyone, lead to increased health, life satisfaction, sexual connection—and even personal growth. Despite the roadblocks and despite the fears, almost all of us want it. And there are ways we can all do it better.