

Being Intimate

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“Every couple in the world has the potential over time to become a small and isolate nation of two—creating their own culture, their own language, and their own moral code, to which nobody else can be privy.”

Elizabeth Gilbert
Committed

Intimacy between partners involves both an emotional and sexual dimension. One of the prime functions of sexuality is to reinforce and deepen the affection and attachment in a relationship (Levine & Heller, 2010). However, the essence of intimacy is feeling emotionally close, connected, and valued. At its core, intimacy involves a respectful and trusting friendship where each partner feels uniquely prized by the other (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003).

While each partner can have close relationships with friends, siblings, parents, and colleagues, it is the integration of sexuality and emotionality in their relationship that makes a couple's connection special and, ultimately, intimate (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003). This article discusses the reciprocal bidding and active caring that takes place as couples attempt to integrate these two dimensions of intimacy into their relationship.

Sexual & Emotional Intimacy

Sexual intimacy is more than functional sex. The essence of sexual intimacy is openness and comfort, the ability to share one's body, especially sensual and erotic feelings. Partners can be sexually responsive with no intimacy. Consider impersonal or angry sex. Sex reaches its full capacity when the sexual relationship combines eroticism with emotional intimacy. Sharing oneself, one's body, and one's feelings are the essence of sexual intimacy (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003).

Feeling cared for and caring for the other, sharing positive feelings, experiencing empathic communication, feeling emotionally validated, enjoying a sense of “we-ness,” and establishing closeness are all integral aspects of emotional intimacy. But emotional intimacy involves more than just affirming experiences. Genuine intimacy involves the entire range of personal and couple experiences including the sharing of weaknesses, vulnerabilities, fears, and negative experiences. In other words, couples who are emotionally intimate share a wide range of feelings—from anger to love, sadness to joy, boredom to fascination, aloneness to closeness (Love, 2001).

Bidding for Connection

Researcher John Gottman found that reciprocal bidding is one of the key variables that predicted a couple's ability to maintain an intimate relationship (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001). The “bid” is considered by Gottman to be one of the fundamental units of sexual and emotional

communication between a couple. A bid can be any verbal or nonverbal expression that says, "I want to feel connected to you." A response to a bid is just that--a positive or negative answer to a partner's request for sexual and emotional connection.

In his research with couples, Gottman (Gottman & DeClaire, 2001) discovered how profoundly this bidding process affects the quality of relationships. He learned, for example, that husbands headed for divorce disregard their wives' bids for connection 82% of the time, while husbands in stable relationships disregard their wives' bids just 19% of the time. Wives headed for divorce act preoccupied with other activities when their husbands bid for their attention 50% of the time, while happily married wives act preoccupied in response to their husbands' bids just 14% of the time.

When Gottman compared how often happy versus unhappy couples extended bids and responded to them, he found another significant difference. During a typical dinner-hour-conversations, the happily married partners engaged one another constantly throughout a ten-minute period. The unhappily married couples engaged one another only infrequently in that same period. On the surface the contrast may seem inconsequential, but taken together over a year, the additional moments of connection among the happy couples played a very important role in the satisfaction they experienced in their relationship.

The Biding Process

Bids and responses to bids can be big, overblown, and dramatic such as we see in the movies: *"Will you marry me, Scarlet?" "I will, Bret, I will."* Or they can be small, mundane exchanges of everyday life: *"Get me a soda while you're up, okay?" "Sure, do you want anything else?"* Bids can be subtle: *"That's a nice shirt."* Or they can be very blunt: *"I want to make love."*

Positive responses to a bid typically lead to continued interaction, often with both partners extending more bids to one another. Listening to this kind of exchange, according to Gottman, is like watching a Ping-Pong game in which both players are doing well. Negative responses to a bid typically shut down communication where all bids cease, i.e., where partners want to pick up their Ping-Pong paddles and go home.

Gottman's research shows that after a bid is rejected, reconnection often does not take place. In fact, the probability that a partner may re-bid once an initial bid has been rejected is very low. That's not to say that every bid that comes along needs to be accepted. However, a partner can refuse a specific invitation while still accepting a bid for connection.

A: *"Do you want to go to dinner tonight?"*

B: *"I wish I had time for dinner. I've got to finish this report tonight.
Are there any other evenings we could go?"*

A: *"I'll check my calendar, but I think next week at this time would work."*

Gottman's studies of couples indicate that partners typically respond to one another's bids for connection in one of three ways: (1) they turn toward, (2) they turn against, or (3) they turn away. To "turn toward" means to react in a positive way to a partner's bid for connection. One

partner makes a funny comment, for example, and the other partner laughs. Partners who “turn against” one another's bids for connection might be described as belligerent or argumentative. For example, if a husband fantasized about owning a passing sports car, his wife might reply, "On your salary? Dream on!" The pattern of “turning away” generally involves ignoring a partner's bid, or acting preoccupied. The husband in this instance might comment and point to that impressive sports car, but his wife wouldn't bother to look up.

Gottman's studies indicate that unreciprocated bids are clearly destructive to marriage. Even the couples in his studies who habitually turned away from each other found themselves to be more happily married than couples in which just one partner (usually the wife) was constantly turning toward and getting no response. He also found that once bidders are ignored or rejected, they usually give up trying to connect in the same way again. Among people in stable marriages, spouses re-bid just 20% of the time. In unstable marriages people hardly re-bid at all. The net effect of these unreciprocated bids takes a major toll on the quality of marital life. About 70% of all marriages now end in divorce and separation or deteriorate into bitterness and dysfunction (Tashiro, 2014).

Critical Moments

As couples therapist Brent Atkinson (2005) observes, there are critical moments when it is especially import to make and respond to bids for connection. These are moments when one or the other partner is feeling upset or vulnerable because of stressful or challenging circumstances. In these situations, skilled partners are good at asking for and giving support. They know that many times, what stressed people need is not help in solving their problems so much as support and understanding. However, offering support and understanding in these critical moments can be problematic because the partner that is feeling bad might interpret these efforts as an attempt to “get over” their negative feelings. Well-intended comments like:

- Don't let it get you down.
- I'm sure everything is going to work out.
- You just can't let things get to you like that.
- Things aren't as bad as they seem.
- It could be a lot worse.
- Let's look at the bright side.
- You'll feel better after awhile.

Are often heard as:

- I can't handle your being so upset.
- I don't really want to know how you are feeling.
- You should be able to handle things without getting so upset.
- You are too sensitive.
- You are overreacting.
- You shouldn't feel that way.
- Enough said, now let's move on.
- Your feelings don't count.

As Atkinson (2005) points out, it is not that support and understanding aren't helpful, it is a matter of timing. People who are adept in responding to bids help their partners feel understood first, then help their partners explore different avenues for dealing with the problem situation, but only if their partners request help. Often, support in the form of problem solving isn't even necessary, because when people feel understood and supported, they often feel better, and know what to do on their own. Feeling understood is often the most critical factor in feeling better.

How do skilled partners help their mates feel understood and supported? Several categories of responses are particularly helpful:

Asking for More Details

- What about the situation was the most upsetting to you?
- What was that like for you? What were you thinking? How did you feel?
- What did you do?
- What did you feel like doing?
- Why do you think that happened?

Giving Sympathy

- I'm sorry you had a hard day.
- I think you've had a harder day than me. How about if you just try to relax for a while and I'll take care of the kids.
- I don't like it when people treat you that way.

Communicating Loyalty

- I'm on your side.
- We're in this together.
- I'll help you if you want me to.

Getting Affection

- Why don't you come over here and let me rub your shoulders for a few minutes?
- Here, you put your feet up while I get you something to drink.
- Let me hold you for a minute.

The motivation to make and respond to bids for connection arises naturally from partners' needs for affection and attachment. However, unless we acknowledge and accept these needs in ourselves, saying or doing supportive things will have minimal effect. A person cannot listen sympathetically unless they feel sympathetic. In essence, partners will only be able to provide the needed support and understanding if they are able to access compatible internal emotional states in themselves.

Active Caring

The key ingredients for establishing and maintaining intimacy between partners not only consist of ongoing reciprocal bidding, they also include the expression of active caring in their relationship (Tashiro, 2014). Active caring consists of concerted efforts on the part of both partners to express kindness and generosity to one another (Smith, 2014). Kindness entails partners making it a priority to look out for one another; generosity involves their capacity to give one another the benefit of the doubt. Reciprocal bidding can be viewed as a requisite interpersonal component of intimacy and kindness and generosity can be deemed as essential character traits needed for establishing and maintaining intimacy. Both are opposite sides of the same coin.

Kindness has been found in studies to be one of the most important predictors of satisfaction and stability in intimate relationships (Smith, 2014; Thomas, Jonason, Blackburn, Kennair, Lowe, Malouff, Stewart-Williams, Sulikowski, & Li, 2019). Kindness makes each partner feel valued, understood, and validated. In addition, there is a considerable evidence indicating that the more partners receive kindness, the more likely they are able to provide it for one another (Hall, 2014)—reinforcing reciprocal bidding in their intimate relationship.

Gottman (2011) refers to a state of “positive sentiment override” in healthy relationships in which partners are predisposed to perceive and emphasize the affirmative aspects of their motives and behavior. When this phenomenon takes place, partners are more likely to experience their relationship in a positive light and are less likely to find fault with one another. In effect, they are able to practice generosity and give one other the benefit of the doubt.

Psychological researchers Shelly Gable (2006) and her colleagues found that one of the most powerful forms of combining kindness and generosity is through what they call active-constructive responding. This is a form of validation in which partners provide supportive responses to their positive event disclosures. In the parlance of Gottman’s bidding model, active-constructive responding is a way of “turning toward” partners’ disclosures (sharing good news) rather than “turning away” from them.

While being there for each other in difficult critical moments is important for establishing trust and connection between intimate partners, these researchers found that partners being there for one another in good times is actually more important for overall relationship quality. In their research, they found that the only difference between the couples who remained together and those who broke up was active-constructive responding. In this context, those who showed genuine interest in their partner’s joys and who went out of their way to validate their accomplishments were more likely to stay together. These researchers also found that active-constructive responding was associated with more intimacy between partners.

In summary, being intimate in a relationship involves an amalgamation of sexual and emotional connection fostered by reciprocal bidding and active caring. In most intimate relationships, levels of satisfaction drop considerably within the first several years. However, for those couples who consistently work at their reciprocal bidding and active caring, the effects of their kindness and generosity provide them with an effective remedy to this well documented downturn.

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