

# **Bidding for Intimacy**

Paul David, Ph.D.

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 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 bidding process 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 your 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 yourself, your body, and your feelings is 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 (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%, 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 couples in the two groups 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. Those headed for divorce engaged 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 our 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 marriages that are headed for divorce people hardly re-bid at all.

### **Critical Moments**

As couples therapist Brent Atkinson (2005) observes, there are critical moments when it is especially important 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 our need 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.

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