

# The Architecture of Intimacy: Building Couples' Skills & Motivation

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Part of webinar series

“Working With Couples: Innovative Approaches”

# Continuing education questions

- True or False?

- \* Some couples don't understand this, but increased intimacy can lead to increased conflict.

- \* Patients who conceptualize "intimacy" too narrowly can limit the effectiveness of the therapy.



**MARRIAGE  
COUNSELING**

**"THE ONE WHO'S  
WRONG PAYS"**

# Goals of today's seminar

- Definitions of intimacy
- How to discuss intimacy with couples
- How to inspire their curiosity and motivation
- How to support couples when improved intimacy leads to conflict
- How to discuss decision-making, powerlessness, & choice

What's your vision of intimacy?

How do you explain it, other than

“it’s important/healthy”

“it reduces conflict”

“your partner will appreciate it”?

Intimacy:  
more than “not fighting”;  
a special type of “getting along.”

An intimate relationship offers people:

- Relaxation
- Trust
- Cooperation
- Empathy
- Safety
- Satisfaction
- Exploration
- Getting what you want
- Productive conflict
- Issues are settled,  
not periodically re-visited

# Myths about intimacy

- I = sex; sex = intimacy
- I = no conflict
- I = surrender autonomy
- I = romance
- I = constant relationship conversations

# Myths about intimacy

- Love = intimacy
- Love enables mind-reading; communication is “unromantic”
- Love conquers problems
- Passion = willingness to work, sacrifice, compromise
- People always want what they say they want
- Most people can create intimacy if they want to
- Almost everyone can be wrangled into intimacy
- Men and women are very different



**“Remember what the marriage counselor said —  
it only works if I WANT to change!”**

Don't accept "more intimacy"  
as a goal of therapy too quickly.

Both partners have to agree on its definition  
before we can proceed too far.

This may require some work.

# Basic components of intimacy

- Shared values
- Explicit agreements
- Conflict management
- Empathy & self-soothing
- Communication & meta-communication
- Power dynamics
- Ability & desire to connect

# What do you get when you combine these?

- People being present with each other
- People sharing expectations
- People expecting stuff they'll probably get
- People can handle the unexpected
- People can grow/change together
- People know what the other wants, and whether they'll probably get it
- They know how they make decisions
- Conflict is about what it seems, and its goal is solving problems, not being right or establishing power

# Sometimes people talk about intimacy in unrealistic or too-narrow ways

- You'll always have sex with me
- You'll always agree with me
- You'll always "support" me You won't hold me accountable
- You'll support my dreams, even if ill-conceived
- You/We won't change
- I won't have to compromise
- I don't have to be tactful or gentle
- I won't have self-doubt or insecurity
- You'll accept my limitations without expecting me to investigate

Finding the ideal vocabulary for each couple is daunting.

Keep attuned to what each partner says is meaningful—

I'm cared about

I have autonomy

I'm trusted

I can rely on his/her word

My partner has my back

And show how we can create more of this.

*“You’ve done everything to fix this problem  
that makes sense, right?”*

*So anything that works won’t make sense.”*

*“Your formulation of the problem  
has gotten you solutions  
that don’t satisfy you...”*

*What you need is a new way of  
formulating the problem,  
so you can come up with new solutions.”*

# Curiosity—an undervalued resource

1. How do you feel?
2. Really? Why?
3. How come I don't know that?



"People find me repulsive."

Do these people like each other?

That's part of intimacy, too.

Trust your feelings on this.

If it seems they don't, ask:

1. Do you like him/her?
2. Do you feel liked?

# Narratives of powerlessness

Intimacy requires that people see themselves  
as effectual,  
and see challenges to intimacy  
as requiring choices.

It's easy to say  
"I value family more than anything"  
or

"Of course my marriage comes before my job,"  
but such priorities require choices.

Those choices can be painful.

# Narratives of powerlessness

## \*\* Karla & Denise

- Couple creates chaos, blames outside world for why they can't have intimacy
- Another baby; cat in bed; launching under-funded company; painful orgasm

## \*\* Vera & Bucky

- Mom has needs; I have to clean up her messes; "don't make me choose"
- He blames his smoking pot; she's still traumatized over dad's death;

## \*\* Metsky

- Commuting is killing him; he hates his job; he/they can't move
- Feels weak, so doesn't want too empathy; he can't satisfy her when he's exhausted

# Building couples' skills

- Model in relationship with us
- HW that they can't fail
- Guide them in session—we interrupt and gently correct/guide
- Language of experience and action—"What I did" vs "What happened"
- Asking each one to take 100% of responsibility
- Existential issues; your marriage could fail; your life could be mediocre
- Medication?
- Ask people to envision what they want—and what they're willing to pay
- ID and resolve old arguments/wounds
- ID and challenge unhelpful narratives (eg, he's the cold, logical one)

# Talking about lived experience

- have patients talk about their lived experience
- ie, their FEELINGS
- and the DECISIONS they make
- which they don't EXPERIENCE as “decisions”
- explore how that does/doesn't get them what they want



*“Let’s explore this feeling that people  
are trying to cheat you.”*

When more intimacy leads to more conflict

Remember, distance can preserve  
dysfunctional arrangements.

[that's why people don't confront their differences]

# Since intimacy can lead to conflict...

- Predict it
- Ask what they might have conflict about
- Ask what they don't have a consensus about (child-rearing, sex, etc.)
- Ask how they want/plan to handle it
- Explain it: NOT a step backwards, a step closer
- Ways to handle it:
  - See it as progress
  - See conflict as a chance to use skills
  - Wonder why this issue hasn't been settled before
  - Ask if they want to go back to old system
  - Appreciate partner's courage/curiosity
  - Recognize you're involved in a predictable process

# “Fair fighting”

- No provocative language
- No blaming
- No yelling
- No using physical force
- No talk of separation
- No discussing past
- No describing partner
- No mind-reading
- No conflict when drinking or tired
- No conflict in public or near kids
- Stick to the topic
- Argue by mutual consent
- Don't rely on categories
- Restate & reframe
- Ask for specific things
- Respond to requests
- Take turns speaking
- Stop when necessary
- Maintain confidentiality
- Take responsibility for how you express yourself

Yes, this requires that people stay conscious  
when they're upset.

Yes, adults can make this choice.

It's NOT humiliating or demeaning.  
It doesn't mean you're not in pain.

# Building motivation

- Predict tiny victories
- Notice and celebrate tiny victories
- Interpret people's hesitation celebrating these
- Each should understand & keep in mind: What's in it for ME?
- You will feel more understood
- Your partner will listen and hear better



**“Well, that guy in the restaurant warned you—he did say if you didn’t get off your cell phone, he’d stick it up your butt.”**

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