

The Dangers of Intimacy

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I have two careers—I am chair of the psychology department at the University of Hawaii and a family therapist at the King Kalakaua Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. In both roles, I'm bombarded with questions about love, sex, and intimacy. One of the most common dilemmas people face is "How intimate dare I be with friends and lovers?"

Theorists and therapists take it for granted that people need intimacy. (In Chapter 2 of this volume, Chelune, Robinson, and Kommor review such theorizing.) In intimate encounters we discover our own and other people's innermost natures. Close family relationships spark the deepest of feelings. It is in our early intimate encounters that we learn our basic strategies for dealing with the world.

Yet most people are wary of intimate encounters. My cotherapist Dr. Richard Rapson and I spend most of our time dealing with people's fears of intimacy. Why? Their caution is not without reason.

In the preceding chapters, theorists and researchers have assumed that intimate relationships are critically important; they have reviewed the conditions under which close relationships flower. (see Chapter 1 of this volume by Derlega.) In this Epilogue, I would like to complete the circle. Here I will discuss some of the reasons why people fear intimate encounters.

INTIMACY: WHAT IS IT?

The word intimacy is derived from the Latin *intimus*, meaning "inner" or "inmost." In a wide variety of languages, the word intimate refers to

a person's innermost qualities. For example, the French *intime* signifies "secret, deep, fervent, ardent." The Italian *intimo* conveys "internal, close in friendship." In Spanish, *intimo* means "private, close, innermost." To be intimate means to be close to another.

In this Epilogue, we will define *Intimacy* as: A process in which we attempt to get close to another; to explore similarities (and differences) in the ways we both think, feel, and behave. (In Chapter 2, Chelune, Robinson, and Kommor review other possible conceptions of intimacy.)

Intimate relationships have a number of characteristics:

Cognitive: Intimates are willing to reveal themselves to one another. They disclose information about themselves and listen to their partners' confidences.

Research supports the contention that men and women are willing to disclose far more about themselves in intimate relationships than in casual ones. In casual encounters, most people reveal only the sketchiest, most stereotyped information about themselves. Yet, as the French essayist Montaigne (1948) observed, everyone is complex, multifaceted:

All contradictions may be found in me . . . bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn . . . I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word. (p. 242)

In deeply intimate relationships, friends and lovers feel free to reveal far more facets of themselves. They reveal more of their complexities and contradictions. As a result, intimates share profound information about one another's histories, values, strengths, and weaknesses, idiosyncracies, hopes, and fears (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Huesmann & Levinger, 1976; Jourard, 1964; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969). In Chapters 2 and 6 of this volume, Chelune *et al.* and Patterson provide a lengthy discussion of this aspect of intimacy.

Emotional: Intimates care deeply about one another. When discussing intimate encounters, most theorists seem to assume that the more intimate a relationship, the more friends and lovers like and love one another. (See Chapters 3 and 6 of this volume by McAdams and Patterson.) In fact, most scales of liking and loving assume love and intimacy are unidimensional concepts—that human feelings range from love (the high point), through liking, through neutrality, through dislike to hatred (the low point) (Berscheid and Walster [Hatfield], 1968).

Yet folk wisdom and our own experiences tell us that there is something wrong with such a unidimensional view of love—often love and

hate go hand in hand. The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. It is in intimate relationships that we feel most *intensely*. True, we generally feel more intense love for intimates than for anyone else. Yet, because intimates care so much about one another, they have the power to elicit intense pain as well; the dark side of love is jealousy, loneliness, depression, and anger. It is this powerful interplay of conflicting emotions that gives vibrancy to the most intimate of relationships. (See Berscheid, 1979, 1983; Hatfield and Walster, 1981).

Basic to all intimate relationships, of course, is trust.

Behavioral: Intimates are comfortable in close physical proximity. They gaze at one another (Argyle, 1967; Exline, 1972; Rubin, 1970), lean on one another (Galton, 1884; Hatfield, Roberts, & Schmidt, 1980; Mehrabian, 1968), stand close to one another (Allgeier & Byrne, 1973; Byrne, Ervin, & Lambreth, 1970; Goldberg, Kiesler, & Collins, 1969; Sheflen, 1965), and perhaps touch. (In Chapter 5 Patterson provides a review of this literature.)

For most people, their intimate relationships are the most important thing in their lives. (See Berscheid & Peplau, 1983; Cook & Wilson, 1979; Duck & Gilmour, 1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1982; Fisher & Stricker, 1982; Pope, 1980). Clients who come to see us at King Kalakaua clinic are usually seeking intimacy—they are eager to find someone to love, to maintain a faltering love affair, or are adjusting to separation or divorce. Everyone needs intimacy. Why then is it so hard to find? Why are people reluctant to risk it? To understand this, theorists must focus not just on the advantages of intimacy, but on its *risks*. In the following section of this epilogue, we focus on the dangers of intimacy. In the section called “Prescription for Intimacy” we review what theorists and scientist-practitioners know about securing the benefits of intimacy while minimizing its risks.

INTIMACY: WHY NOT?

Why are people reluctant to become intimate with others? There are many reasons:

Fear of Exposure

In deeply intimate relationships we disclose far more about ourselves than in casual encounters. As a consequence, intimates share profound

information about one another's histories, values, strengths and weaknesses, idiosyncracies, hopes, and fears. (See Altman & Taylor, 1973; Huesmann & Levinger, 1976; Jourard, 1964; Perlmutter & Hatfield, 1980; Worthy *et al.*, 1969.)

One reason, then, that all of us are afraid of intimacy, is that those we care most about are bound to discover all that is wrong with us—to discover that we possess taboo feelings . . . have done things of which we are deeply ashamed.

Such fears are *not* neurotic. The data make it clear that people who reveal too much to others, too soon, *are* judged to be a little peculiar. (See Derlega & Chaikin, 1975, for a review of this literature.)

Fear of Abandonment

A second reason people fear exposure is because they are concerned that if others get to know them too well, they will abandon them. (In Chapter 6 of this volume, Margulis, Derlega, and Winstead discuss such concerns.) Such concerns, too, are sometimes realistic.

We can think of examples:

One of my favorite graduate students was a beautiful Swedish woman. At one time, three sociologists at the University of Wisconsin were in love with her. Her problem? She pretended to be totally self-confident, bright, charming. In intimate affairs, each time she tried to admit how uncertain she was, to be herself, the men lost interest. They wanted to be in love with a *Star*, not a mere mortal like themselves.

A second reason, then, that people are reluctant to risk intimacy, to admit how needy they are, is that they are terrified that their friends and lovers will abandon them. (In Chapter 6 of this volume, Margulis *et al.* discuss people's fears of abandonment.)

Fear of Angry Attacks

Another reason people are reluctant to reveal themselves to others is the fear that "anything they say will be used against them." Most of us worry that if we reveal confidences to our friends, they will reveal the confidences to their friends, who will reveal them to their friends, etc.

One of my clients was Sara, A Mexican-American army wife. Her parents had divorced when she was three. Her father was granted custody, thereafter she was abused both sexually and physically. Sara was

justifiably proud of the fact that she learned to be "a perfect lady" in even the most impossible of circumstances. Her voice was always calm, her emotions in control. She took pride in not ever needing anyone for anything. Her only problem was that she didn't have a single friend in which to confide. At long last, she decided to trust one of her sisters. She painfully revealed that her marriage was falling apart and that she was thinking of leaving. Her sister became enraged and denounced her. What kind of a Catholic was she!

Similarly, a powerful businessman I interviewed observed that if he were to reveal that he was worried about getting old, worried that he was not as smart as his computer-age competition, he could expect his competitors to seize on his revelations with glee.

Sometimes it *is* dangerous to trust.

Fear of Loss of Control

Men and women are sometimes afraid to risk becoming intimate for yet another reason—they fear losing control. Some theorists have speculated that *men* may be particularly afraid of intimacy and the loss of control it brings. (See Hatfield, 1982). Traditionally, men are supposed to be in control—of themselves, of other people, and of the situation. The ideal man carefully controls his *thoughts*; is logical, objective, and unemotional. He hides his *feelings*, or if he does express any feelings, he carefully telescopes the complex array of human emotions into a single powerful emotion: anger. A "real man" is even supposed to dominate nature.

In contrast, the ideal woman is supposed to be expressive and warm. She is comfortable expressing a rainbow of "feminine" feelings—love, anxiety, joy, and depression. (She may be less in touch with anger.) She is responsive to other people and the environment.

Broverman and her colleagues (1972) asked people what men and women *should* be like and what they really *are* like. Their answer was clear: men should be/are in control and instrumental. Women should be/are expressive and nurturant.

According to theorists, there are marked gender differences in three areas: (1) desire to be "in control"; (2) desire to dominate their partners versus submit to them, and (3) desire to "achieve" in their love and sexual relations. If such gender differences exist, it is not surprising that women feel more comfortable with intimacy than do men. Unfortunately, although a great deal has been written about these topics, there is

almost no research documenting that such gender differences exist. (See Hatfield, 1982).

Fear of One's Own Destructive Impulses

Men and women sometimes fear intimacy for yet another reason.

Many of my clients keep a tight lid on their emotions. They fear that if they ever got in touch with what they are feeling, they would begin to cry . . . or kill.

One of my Korean clients was a traditional macho man. As he sat in my office he often explained that men *had* to be cool. He refused to even allude to the things that were bothering him. As a therapist, it was obvious to me that he was anything but cool. He looked like a seething volcano. He was an enormous, powerful man—a Tai Chi expert. As he explained “analytically” how he felt about things, his eyes blazed, his jaw clenched, he smashed his fist into the palm of his other hand. People were terrified of him. He had to stay cool at all times he insisted . . . otherwise he would kill.

He was undoubtedly wrong. In therapy, I have found that as people learn to be ever more aware of what they're feeling, they find that their emotions are not as powerful, not nearly so overpowering as they had assumed, that somehow they can learn to express their feelings in a controlled way. Yet the fear is real.

Fear of Losing One's Individuality or of Being Engulfed

When I first began reading the intimacy literature, I discovered that theorists believed that one of the most primitive fears of intimacy was the feeling that one would be engulfed by another, the fear that one would literally disappear as he or she lost himself in another. (See Diamond and Shapiro, 1981, for a discussion of this point.) To me, such a concern was inconceivable.

Then I met the Watsons in therapy, and for the first time got some sense of what it meant to fear engulfment. The Watsons were a bright, delightful, and thoroughly crazy family. The father and the mother insisted that they wanted their girls to become independent, to leave home and build families of their own. However, every time the “girls” (who were 50) showed the least independence, their parents got angry.

They complained that the girls weren't doing "it" right. They should be more relaxed about their endeavors. They should be breezy . . . while succeeding spectacularly. The daughters were the first people I ever heard say they were afraid to get close to anyone for fear that they would be "swallowed up." Basically, Patti and Mary were confused about what they wanted versus what everyone else in the family wanted. Each time they were tempted to express themselves, they would be overtaken by guilt. They began a tortured internal dialogue. Why were they so ungrateful? Demanding? Their parents would be hurt terribly. Was it fair to do that to them? "No." They inevitably decided to remain mute.

Nor were Patti and Mary capable of really listening. If they listened, if they permitted themselves to see what their parents needed, they would be responsible for sacrificing themselves completely to provide it. They would lose their freedom. Even then what could they do? They were too weak.

So everyone stayed in their own shell. No one could ever be really independent: no one could ever be really intimate with others for fear that they would be engulfed.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR INTIMACY

Everyone needs a warm intimate relationship. At the same time, one must recognize that in every social encounter there are some risks. What, then, is the solution? Social psychological research and clinical experience gives us some hints: (See Sprecher & Hatfield, in press)

A basic theoretical assumption provides the framework we use in teaching people how to be intimate with others. People must be capable of independence in order to be intimate with others; capable of intimacy, if they are to be independent. Independence and intimacy are not *opposite* personality traits, but *interlocking* skills. People who lack the ability to be independent *and* intimate can never really be either. They are never really with one another, never really without them.

What we set out to do, then, is to make people comfortable with the notion that they and the intimate are separate people, with separate ideas and feelings, who can sometimes come profoundly close to others.

According to theorists, one of the most primitive tasks people face is to learn how to maintain their own identity and integrity while yet engaging in deeply intimate relationships with others. (For a fuller dis-

cussion of this point, see Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume by McAdams and Schlenker, respectively, as well as Erikson, 1968; Fisher & Stricker, 1982; Freud, 1922; Hatfield and Walster, 1981; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Kaplan, 1978; Maslow, 1954; Pope, 1979.)

Once individuals have the skills to be independent/intimate, they must find an appropriate lover or chum on which to practice their art.

In a few situations, the only thing one can do is to play out a stereotyped role. In most situations, one has to be at least tactful; in a few, downright manipulative, in order to survive. But on those occasions when real intimacy is possible, men and women can recognize its promise, seize their opportunities, and take a chance. (In Chapters 3 and 5 of this volume) McAdams and Patterson discuss the factors that people use in calculating how intimate it is safe to be.)

Are There Gender Differences in Intimacy?

It may be that men have the easiest time achieving an independent identity; women have the easiest time achieving closeness with others. Napier (1977) describes two types of people who seem, with uncanny accuracy, to attract one another. Type I (usually a woman) is only minimally concerned with maintaining her independence. What she cares about is achieving emotional closeness. (She seeks "fusion with the partner," "oneness" or "we-ness" in the marriage. She puts much energy into planning "togetherness" activities.) Type I fears rejection and abandonment.

Type I's partner, Type II (usually a man), is most concerned with maintaining his sense of self and personal freedom and autonomy. He feels a strong need to establish his territory within the common household: to have "my study," "my workshop," "my car." Similarly, he fears being "suffocated," "stifled," or "engulfed," or in some manner intruded on by his wife.

Napier observes that men and women's efforts to get close, but not "too close" for each of them, makes matters worse. Women (seeking more closeness) clasp their mates tightly, thereby contributing to the men's anxiety. The men (seeking more distance) retreat further, which increases their wives' panic, inducing further "clasping."

There is some evidence that men are less comfortable with intimacy than are women. Researchers find:

1. *In casual encounters*, women disclose far more to others than do men (Crozby, 1973; Jourard, 1971). Rubin and his colleagues (1980, p. 306)

point out that the basis for such differences appears to be in socialization practices. In our culture, women have traditionally been encouraged to show feelings; men have been taught to hide their feelings and to avoid displays of weakness. (See also Pleck & Sawyer, 1974). Kate Millett (1975) observes "Women express, men repress."

2. In their deeply intimate relationships, however, men and women differ little, if at all, in how much they are willing to reveal to one another. For example, Rubin and his colleagues (1980) asked dating couples via the Jourard Self-Disclosure questionnaire how much they had revealed to their partners. Did they talk about their current relationships? Previous opposite-sex affairs? Their feelings about their parents and friends? Their self-concepts and life views? Their attitudes and interests? Their day-to-day activities? The authors found that, overall, men and women did *not* differ in how much they were willing to confide in their partners.

There was a difference, however, in the *kind* of things men and women were willing to share with those they love. Men were more willing to share their views on politics and their pride in their strengths. Women were more likely to disclose their feelings about other people and their fears. Interestingly enough, Rubin and his colleagues found that that the stereotyped form of communication is most common in traditional men and women.

Some authors have observed that *neither* men or women may be getting exactly the amount of intimacy they would like. Women may want more intimacy than they are getting; men may want far less. There is evidence that couples tend to negotiate a level of self-disclosure that is bearable to both. In the words of the movie *My Fair Lady*, this ensures that "*neither* really gets what either really wants at all" (Chaikin & Delega, 1975).

3. Women receive more disclosures than do men. This is not surprising in view of the fact that the amount of information people reveal to others has an enormous impact on the amount of information they receive in return (see Altman, 1973; Davis & Skinner, 1978; Jourard, 1964; Jourard & Friedman, 1970; Marlatt, 1971; Rubin, 1970; Worthy, Gary, & Kahn, 1969).

There does seem to be some evidence, then, that women feel slightly more comfortable with intense intimacy in their love relationships than do men, and are far more comfortable revealing themselves in more casual relationships than are men. Tradition dictates that women should be the "intimacy experts." And today, women *are* more comfortable sharing their ideas, feelings, and behavior than are men. But what happens if this situation changes? Rubin and his colleagues (1980) suggest that such changes have already begun.

The prognosis is mixed. Young women usually say that they would be delighted if the men they love could be intimate. I'm a bit skeptical that it will be this easy. Change is always difficult. More than one man has complained that when he finally dared to reveal his weaker aspects to a woman, he soon discovered that she was shocked by his lack of "manliness." Family therapists such as Napier (1977) have warned us that the struggle to find individuality *and* closeness is a problem for everyone. As long as men were fleeing from intimacy, women could safely pursue them. Now that men are turning around to face them, women may well find themselves taking flight. In any case, the confrontation is likely to be exciting.

People need intimacy; yet they have every reason to fear it. What advice can social psychologists give men and women as to how to secure the benefits of deep encounters while not being engulfed by their dangers?

The advice we would give follows directly from the theoretical paradigm we offered earlier—one must be independent before one can be intimate; intimate before one can be independent. How do we teach the impossible? It's easy.

Developing Intimacy Skills

Encouraging People to Accept Themselves as They Are

It is a great temptation to dwell in the realm of absolutes. One is either a saint or a sinner. Many people are determined to be perfect (at least); they can't settle for less.

Yet Saintliness/Evil are the least interesting of human conditions. Real life is lived in the middle zone. Real people inevitably have some real strengths; yet everybody possesses small quirks that makes them what they are. The real trick to enjoying life is not just to accept diversity, but to learn to take pleasure in it.

The first step in learning to be independent/intimate, then, is to come to accept the fact that you are entitled to be what you are—to have the ideas you have, the feelings you feel, to do the best that you can do. And that is good enough.

In therapy, we try to move people from the notion that one should come into the world perfect and continue that way to a realization that one can only gain wisdom in small steps. People must pick one small goal and work to accomplish that. When that's accomplished, they can

move on to another. That way change is manageable, possible (Watson & Tharp, 1981). You can never attain perfection, only work toward it.

Encouraging People to Recognize Their Intimates for What They Are

People may be hard on themselves, but they are generally even harder on their partners. Most people have the idea that everyone is entitled to a perfect partner, or at least one a little bit better than the one available. (See Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hay, in press). If people are going to have an intimate relationship, they have to learn to enjoy others as they are, without hoping to fix them up.

It is extraordinarily difficult for people to accept that their friends are entitled to be the people they are. From our own point of view, it seems so clear that things would be far better if our mates were only the people we wanted them to be. It would take so little for them to change their whole character structure. Why are they so stubborn?

If we can come to the realization that our lover or friend is the person who exists right now—not the person we wish he was, not the person he could be, but what he is—once that realization occurs, intimacy becomes possible.

Encouraging People to Express Themselves

Next, intimates have to learn to be more comfortable about expressing their ideas and feelings. This is harder than one might think.

People's intimate relations are usually their most important relationships. When passions are so intense, consequences so momentous, people are often hesitant to speak the truth. From moment to moment, they are tempted to present a consistent picture. If they're in love, they are hesitant to admit to their nagging doubts. (What if the person they love is hurt? What if their revelations destroy the relationship?) When they are angry, they don't want to speak about their love or their self-doubts, they want to lash out.

To be intimate, people have to push toward a more honest, graceful, complete, and patient communication; to understand that a person's ideas and feelings are necessarily complex, with many nuances, shadings, and inconsistencies. In love, there is time to clear things up.

One interesting thing that people often discover is that their affection increases when they begin to admit their irritations. People are often surprised to discover that sometimes, when they think that they have fallen out of love—they are "bored" with their affair—that as they begin

to express their anger and ambivalence, they feel their love come back in a rush.

In *The Family Crucible* Napier and Whitaker (1978) describe just such a confrontation.

1) What followed was a classic confrontation. If John's affair was a kind of reawakening, so now was this marital encounter, though of a very different sort. Eleanor was enraged, hurt, confused, and racked with a sense of failure. John was guilty, also confused, but not apologetic. The two partners fought and cried, talked and searched for an entire night. The next evening, more exhausting encounters. Feelings that had been hidden for years emerged; doubts and accusations that they had never expected to admit articulated.

Eleanor had to find out everything, and the more she discovered, the more insatiable her curiosity became. The more she heard, the guiltier her husband became and the angrier she grew, until he finally cried for a halt. It was his cry for mercy that finally led to a temporary reconciliation of the couple. They cried together for the first time either of them could remember.

For a while they were elated; they had achieved a breakthrough in their silent and dreary marriage. They felt alive together for the first time in years. Somewhat mysteriously, they found themselves going to bed together in the midst of a great tangle of emotions—continuing anger, and hurt, and guilt, and this new quality: abandon. The lovemaking was, they were to admit to each other, "the best it had ever been." How could they have moved through hatred into caring so quickly? (p. 153)

Love and hate tend to flow together. (Hatfield & Walster, 1981; Kaplan, 1979)

Teaching People to Deal with Their Intimate's Reactions

To say that you *should* communicate your ideas and feelings, *must* communicate if you are to have an intimate affair, does not mean your partner is going to like it. You can expect that when you try to express your deepest feeling, it will hurt. Your lovers and friends may tell you frankly how deeply you have hurt them and that will make you feel extremely guilty. Or they may react with intense anger.

Intimates have to learn to stop responding in automatic fashion to such emotional outbursts—to quit backing up, apologizing for what they have said, measuring their words. They have to learn to stay calm, remind themselves that they are entitled to say what they think, feel what they feel, listen to what their partners think and feel and keep on trying.

Only then is there a chance of an intimate encounter.

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