

The Relationship Institute

www.therelationshipinstitute.org

THE THREE INTIMACIES

The central aspect of our therapeutic approach involves you learning a new way to be intimate, especially a new way to be intimate when you are fighting with your partner. This is based on you learning two skills. The first is **self-intimacy**, which involves being keenly aware of your own self, your feelings, desires and thoughts. And the second is a unique form of communication that *is not focused on resolution of differences*. Instead, it is based on helping the speaker to own that this is about him or her self, to express self clearly and to learn more about him/herself. And just as important, it is based on helping the listener to learn to listen well, to not take the other's feelings, desires and thoughts personally, but rather see them as a reflection of whom the other is.

We each need to take responsibility for being **self-intimate**, that is, being aware of our feelings and where they are coming from, and acting to take care of our self, based on what our emotions are telling us about our self and our reality. This does not mean being self-centered, only caring about our own feelings and desires enough to pay attention to them. That's pay attention to them, not be controlled by them. Self-intimacy involves treating our feelings and desires as important, but not always as most important in our relationship. Sometimes we must choose to put our own feelings and desires aside, to not act to satisfy them when they are in conflict with our partner's. One of the most mature, differentiated choices we can make in a relationship is seeing that at times acting on our partner's feelings and/or needs instead of on our own is actually an expression of self-love and self-respect.

Intimacy results from two people communicating well who they are, be it verbally, physically and/or through actions. This is a two-part process consisting of expressing self as well as listening to who the other is. But not all intimate behaviors are soft, warm and positive. When our partner tells us that s/he is angry with us or even that s/he no longer finds us attractive, that is an act of intimacy. It is our challenge to listen, to really try to understand where s/he is coming from and to help our partner learn about him/herself by really hearing the person and by asking questions. It is our challenge not to take what we hear defensively, not to behave defensively, not to attempt to talk our partner out of his/her feeling, desire or thought, not to put the focus of the interaction back on us, and not to attack him/her. This is what leads to **conflict intimacy**: the non-avoidance of painful, difficult subjects and the non-defensive reaction to them. **Conflict intimacy** is not focused on conflict resolution, but rather, on healthy, differentiated conflict process.

As a partner in a committed relationship each of us has a responsibility to communicate to our partner through our words and actions who we are. We cripple his/her ability to be a good partner if we do not do this. How can they be a good partner to us if they do

not know who we are, how we feel and what we like and don't like? In addition, if we shirk this responsibility to communicate we deny our relationship intimacy, blocking not only ourself from being able to experience the fullness of life that results from a healthy, growing, intimate relationship, but our partner as well. For the same reasons, we also have the responsibility to listen and empathize when our partner is being intimate and genuine with us.

This healthy, intimate communication is difficult to achieve when we fear being rejected by him/her. This fear can often be recognized when we feel anxious and threatened by differences that we have with our partner. This fear of rejection and aloneness causes us to want to avoid the anxiety caused by the differences. As a result, we will often react in old, regressive, "childhood" ways. Examples of such regressive relationship reactions are: denying or acting as if we are not hurt, angry or disappointed, becoming numb and shutting down, becoming more dependent on pleasing our partner, attacking our partner either directly or passive-aggressively, becoming more dependent on pleasing our partner, moving to make premature compromises, etc. All of these types of behaviors result in distancing ourselves emotionally from not only our partner, but from our self as well. A major goal of our work with you will be to help you and your partner see that times of anxiety in your relationship present the greatest growth opportunities that each of you and your relationship will ever have.

The strongest and healthiest long term, committed relationships are comprised of two people who love each other and who are each well defined, **individuated** individuals who have achieved healthy **affection intimacy** and healthy **conflict intimacy**. And they are both able to maintain their individuation even when they are experiencing the **growing pains** of the relationship. By growing pains we mean the times differences between the two of you emerge and result in relationship **tension**.

When such **growing pains** occur we often regress to the primitive mechanism of **symbiosis** in order to avoid or eliminate the **tension** that the differences or changes cause. This mechanism is defined by our desire to merge with the other and in so doing eliminate the tension. We become symbiotic with our partner, co-dependent, replacing differences with similarities. Along with this tendency comes many powerful, unhealthy assumptions that can be brought to the relationship such as "If you love me, you will agree with me". Also, a symbiotic request carries with it a demand for compliance that entails the other partner having to give up his/her sense of self. Such symbiosis not only stunts the growth of a relationship but also threatens its very continuance. When both members of a couple have the love, commitment and courage to not avoid these growing pains, but to embrace the tension they cause and work it through, their relationship and their love will flourish.