

Sexuality & INTIMACY

Society's attitude to sexual behaviour has changed - not necessarily the behaviour itself. What is judged to be *normal* has shifted from reproductive sex, to relational sex, to recreational sex, & now to sex with friends with benefits.

Men have always enjoyed all levels. Recently women have begun to demand the same privileges. This has resulted in changes in the nature of family relationships and an increasing variety of possible patterns from total involvement with one person, to central but not exclusive involvement, and to having friends with benefits. **This creates problems.** Intimacy today is difficult for many people to attain and it may become more difficult if society no longer promotes one-to-one involvement.

Sexuality

Sexuality covers both behaviour based on a desire for sexual pleasure and gender behaviour associated with masculine and feminine roles. Once assigned by tradition, today gender roles are negotiable. Serious problems arise if negotiation is not possible because of poor communication or conflicts over rights and privileges. Communication often breaks down because of disturbed perceptions or fear of compromising.

With today's increased sexual freedom and elevated expectations regarding its rewards, many couples feel that their sex lives, although not necessarily fraught with anxiety or even particularly troublesome, are lacking in quality and depth. As a result of increased **media norms**, others feel that their sexual experiences are decidedly inferior and they become a source of anxiety and displeasure.

More frequently dissatisfied individuals are discussing their problems with their GPs. Unless it is a performance problem that can be assisted with medication, many physicians refer these couples to a counsellor or therapist.

Usually, both partners require time to feel comfortable freely communicating with the therapist and each other. In the initial session, the therapist stresses the emotional aspects of sexual difficulty, pointing out that lack of agreement or satisfaction usually results from a combination

of complicated factors. The therapists remind the couple that sex problems are interpersonal problems. Both partners must be committed to alleviating the difficulty.



Intimacy

Intimacy is close contact between two persons where they reveal their weaknesses without fear, letting down their normal protective barriers. Intimacy characterizes the best marriages and all true friendships. We often call it love.

If a relationship is to mature into intimacy, it must meet two conditions—

the couple must spend time together and must see each other under informal conditions.

Intimacy & Health

50% of clients seek therapy because of marital difficulties and an additional **25%** have problems related to their marriages. Lack of marital intimacy is a vulnerability factor for developing depression and other non-psychotic emotional illness. **Obstacles to intimacy** include-

- **Loss of Self-Esteem** Someone with low self-esteem can feel as though they have nothing to offer their partner or their needs start to annoy their partner.
- **Role Strain** Fears of career inadequacy and obligations can drain energy from a relationship. Properly faced, these tensions could lead to sharing and intimacy. Instead, the person may respond with behaviour that aggravates the problem at home eg when the person does come home, it is to recuperate from exhaustion rather than contribute energy to the marriage.
- **Role Conflict** Some jobs require a logical, unemotional approach. Having learned to keep their head, while others are losing theirs, these people may be uncomfortable with feelings appearing professionally competent, but rigid, distant, and controlling. This trained behaviour may suppress traits needed for effective family functioning eg interpersonal warmth, generosity, gregariousness, emotional flexibility & the ability to shift gears to relaxation and self-indulgence.
- **Early Childhood Experiences** Evidence shows that early-life adjustment problems (eg abusive or overprotective parents) increases susceptibility to emotional and marital dysfunction. While they have accommodated to a long-term pattern of emotional deprivation, intimacy may seem a great deal of work, if not impossible.

An authority on marital therapy, E.M. Waring, identified 8 indicators of intimacy in marriage, the degree to which-

- ✓ Differences of opinion are resolved - **Conflict Resolution**
- ✓ Feelings of emotional closeness are expressed - **Affection**
- ✓ There is commitment to the marriage - **Cohesion**
- ✓ Sexual needs are communicated and fulfilled by the marriage - **Sexuality**
- ✓ The couple has self-confidence and self-esteem- **Identity**
- ✓ The couple is able to work and play together comfortably - **Compatibility**
- ✓ Thoughts, beliefs & feelings are shared within the marriage - **Expressiveness**
- ✓ A couple is independent from their families of origin and offspring - **Autonomy**

What Can Be Done?

Couples should seek help early for marital difficulties before a breakdown becomes chronic. They must give intimacy a priority and be convinced of its substantial reward. The treatment of choice is relationship or family therapy.

The goal of marital therapy is to achieve fulfillment for each partner, individually and within the relationship, without sacrificing the fulfillment of either.

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