

## *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*

# Sexual Intimacy and Emotional Intimacy

**John D. DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development; Gail L. Brand, Extension Educator; Maureen H. Burson, Extension Educator; Ann M. Fenton, Extension Educator; Jeanette L. Friesen, Extension Educator; Janet S. Hanna, Extension Educator; Mary E. Nelson, Extension Educator; Cynthia R. Strasheim, Extension Educator; Dianne M. Swanson, Extension Educator; LaDonna A. Werth, Extension Educator**

If a couple can achieve both emotional intimacy and sexual intimacy, an enduring bond is likely to be developing between the partners. This is No. 9 in a series of 20 NebGuides that focus on building and maintaining strong couple and family relationships written by a team of University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension Educators.

When people talk about being sexually intimate, they are usually talking about behavior that involves sexual behaviors of various levels, including touching and stroking of the genitals, and sexual intercourse.

On the other hand, to be emotionally intimate or close with another person involves honest, open, and straightforward communication; it involves sharing our most important thoughts and feelings with each other and gaining comfort and strength from these dialogues. Emotional intimacy is the kind of intimacy that genuine friends have with each other. It tends to be relatively stable and can last a lifetime.

Sex sometimes goes hand-in-hand with emotional intimacy, but sometimes people engage in sexual behavior without any feelings of closeness and emotional connection at all. Sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy are very different from each other and individuals should not get them confused.

If a couple can achieve both sexual intimacy, which is relatively easy, and emotional intimacy, which is relatively difficult to achieve, a strong and enduring bond is likely to be developing between the partners.

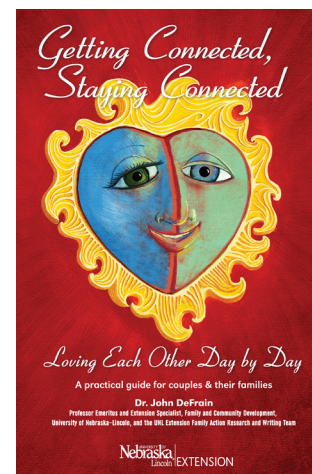
How do you explain the differences between sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy? Have there been times when you have had one without the other? Have there been times when you have had both simultaneously?

### Developing Emotional Intimacy

Couples face many challenges together in life. As they struggle through these challenges, they learn more and more about each other. If they are skillful in meeting these challenges, their sense of emotional closeness is likely to deepen over time. Developing emotional intimacy is a complex process that can take several years. Older couples will likely tell you that the process has continued throughout their long-term marriage.

David H. Olson, Amy K. Olson-Sigg, and Peter Larson conducted a national survey of more than 50,000 married couples. They wanted to identify the differences between happy and unhappy couples. The researchers classified 20,675 couples as happily married and 20,590 couples as unhappily married based on their scores on a marital satisfaction scale. A middle group of about 10,000 couples was not included in either group because their marital satisfaction scales were moderate or because one partner scored high and one scored low. Those who were judged to be happily married had developed emotional intimacy in their relationship. The researchers found that emotional intimacy for couples is especially tied to success in eight challenging areas of their relationship:

- *Communication skills.* Couples who are good at communicating with each other are likely to develop an emotional bond with each other.



**For more information about strong couple and family relationships, refer to the book *Getting Connected, Staying Connected*, which can be ordered online at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).**

- *Conflict resolution skills.* Feelings of emotional intimacy are linked to a couple's ability to find win-win solutions to their inevitable conflicts in life.
- *Sexual relations.* Satisfying sexual expression for both partners can build emotional intimacy.
- *Couple flexibility.* A couple's ability to adapt to life's inevitable stressors and make necessary changes to meet these difficulties head on is linked to the development of emotional intimacy. Couples who work together during hard times are likely to feel closer to each other than those who work at cross-purposes.
- *Couple closeness.* A common complaint of many couples is the difficulty finding time for each other in a busy world. Couples who demonstrate the importance of their partnership by making time for each other every day are likely to feel closer than those who let the many concerns and cares of the world pull them apart.
- *Personal compatibility.* Things we like about our partner strengthen the bond of intimacy we are trying to develop in our relationship. Positive traits include friendliness, optimism, honesty, kindness, the ability to communicate, reliability, and many others. What are the personality traits that make your partner attractive to you? And, what personality traits do you have that make you attractive to your partner? How can these traits be strengthened?
- *Good relationships with family and friends.* Positive relationships with the extended family make it much easier for the couple relationship to flourish. Strained relationships outside the marriage put pressure on the couple. Though a strong partnership can withstand enormous difficulties brought on by troubles in the families of origin, problems with the extended family do cause stress for many couples. Similarly, friendships with other couples who are basically happy with each other are important to develop. Having couple friends to talk about couple ups and downs can be very helpful in developing emotional intimacy, because we learn very quickly that every partnership faces difficulties and we learn how generally healthy and happy partnerships deal with adversity successfully.
- *Shared spiritual values.* It has been said that human beings find it easier to argue about their religious faith than to actually practice it. Couples who find a set of broad spiritual values that they can share without fighting over the details are more likely to develop the emotional closeness so vital for a strong marriage. If you get in a power struggle over who is right and who is wrong, you both are likely to lose in the end for the relationship will be severely damaged. Emotional

intimacy does not dictate that the partners agree with each other on everything. Emotional intimacy does dictate, however, that the partners trust each other and feel safe and comfortable enough with each other to share their religious and spiritual beliefs without getting into an argument.

### Maintaining Emotional Intimacy Over Time

Couples find soon enough that the initial excitement and passion so common among relationships in their early stages can disappear as time passes. The thrill of getting to know another person emotionally and sexually is a wonderful process, and we all hope at some time in our lives that it would last forever. In truth, however, the thrill does disappear as life inevitably gets back into its normal routine. School, jobs, in-laws, broken-down cars, children — whatever the challenges couples face, these challenges drain energy away from the initial thrill of love. This has led some observers to say that the long-term, routinized process of marriage by its very nature can lead to difficulties.

And yet, countless couples maintain emotional intimacy over time, and they do this by making sure that their partnership is the most important asset they have in their lives together. When we realize that a strong bond between the partners is the glue that holds our life together, we invest time, energy, and creativity every day into maintaining that bond.

It is, indeed, the best investment we can make.

**For greater understanding** of the topic in this publication, refer to *Getting Connected, Staying Connected: Loving One Another Day by Day* written by John DeFraim and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Family Action Research and Writing Team. (2012). Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.

### Resource

Olson, D. H., Olson-Sigg, A., & Larson, P. (2008). *The couple checkup*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

**This publication has been peer reviewed.**

UNL Extension publications are available online at <http://extension.unl.edu/publications>.

**Index: Families  
Family Life**  
Issued September 2012

Extension is a Division of the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln cooperating with the Counties and the United States Department of Agriculture.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension educational programs abide with the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.

© 2012, The Board of Regents of the University of Nebraska on behalf of the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension. All rights reserved.