

The Relationship Institute

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SELF INTIMACY

In our work with individuals and couples it has become clear that a lack of self intimacy is crippling Homo sapiens in the modern world. Most of us are simply not intimate with our self. Since how we relate to the world around us is but a reflection of how we relate to our self, it is not then surprising that most of us are not truly intimate with others. Instead, alienation and detachment increasingly define society (Gergen, Kenneth J., The Saturated Self, New York: Basic Books, 1991).

But again, this societal dysfunction starts with each of us. In order for us to reach significantly further towards our individual and species capability, each of us must take much more responsibility for his or her own psychological being (Bowlby, John, Attachment, New York: Basic Books, 1969, Johnson, Robert, Femininity Lost and Regained, New York: Harper & Row, 1990). In our work we have found that the most powerful way for any individual to do this is to be self aware.

Unless we become more aware of what is going on in our psyches we relegate our selves to being automatons that merely exist for year after year. Automatons that are blindly reacting to external reality based on programming that is too often immature and driven by fear, programming that defines “the worst part” of our self (Seligman, Martin, Learned Optimism, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990). Becoming more self aware means striving to be truly sentient humans engaged in the challenge of living full lives (Deikman, Arthur, The Observing Self).

Lack of self intimacy causes a person to lack in his love for self; how can someone love self much when he doesn't know self much? And then as a result the person develops low self esteem or fragile, externally based self esteem. He becomes unhappy and depressed, and treats his self without respect, self destructively. And he ends up in a marriage that is not intimate and doesn't last, or lasts but is empty and miserable. These are all dominoes falling from the original fact of the individual not being taught to be intimate with him or her self.

So is self intimacy rare because it is exceedingly difficult? Is it the purview only of Zen masters, or saints or gurus? No, self intimacy is not so hard to achieve. It is possible for anyone. It is not complex or difficult to understand, and it doesn't take years of hard labor, or years of self denial or years of anything. Significant growth in self intimacy can be achieved in weeks and months and then it feeds on itself for the rest of your life.

But if self intimacy is not an unattainable goal, what has blocked it from being more forcefully emphasized and more widely disseminated in our modern world? We believe

that self intimacy has not been seen to be nor taught as the necessary tool of wellbeing that it is for two reasons. First, because of the cognition bias (reference) in modern culture and secondly, due to the cultural bias against a focus on self (reference).

Great emphasis and value are placed on the intellect in human society, and in and of itself there is nothing wrong with this. However, this emphasis has caused a devaluation of the non-cognitive aspect of existence that is the emotional. While intellectual pursuits are greatly esteemed, the expenditure of time and energy in the pursuit of emotional growth is most often relegated to secondary importance, if that (reference). The idea that the quality of one's life will be profoundly enhanced through ongoing efforts to improve one's emotional self awareness is reacted to today with the same type of disdainful dismissal that an American 25 years ago would have reacted to someone telling him that the types of food he eats will have a significant effect on how long he lives (Bieler, Henry, Food Is Your Best Medicine).

But indeed, the key to well being is self awareness, not intelligence. Nonetheless, even the recent popularization of the concept of "emotional intelligence", while correctly focusing on the importance of mature emotional functioning, is still stuck in the cognition prejudice of our society when it defines this ability as intelligence (Goleman, Daniel, Emotional Intelligence, New York: Bantam Books, 1994). At it's most fundamental, healthy emotional functioning is not about the intellect, it is about emotions and our awareness of them. As we'll see later, some thinking about the cause and the meaning of our emotional reactions is important, but this pales in comparison to the non-cognitive act of emotional self awareness.

In addition to this hegemony of the intellect, there is also a cultural bias against the importance of the self that hinders society's acceptance of the value of self intimacy. Indeed, in English we don't even give the "self" it's own word usually, most often tying it to another noun like "my" or "her".

This cultural bias results in the focus on the self having a negative connotation Johnson, Robert, Femininity Lost and Regained, New York: Harper & Row, 1990). The negative consequences of this on psychological well being are manifold and profound. For example, one of the most common psychological misconceptions that we find people have is their confusion about the difference between "selfishness" and "taking care of one's self". The bias against emphasis on the self causes many to believe that what is truly just taking care of the self is actually selfishness and should be resisted. Giving "too much" importance to one's feelings defines selfishness, but contrary to our society's zeitgeist, giving one's feelings importance, that is, paying attention to them, is not giving them "too much" importance. This unwholesome misconception arises out of the biases of our society, based on the Protestant ethic, which tell us that we should be focused on the external, on our work and on others, rather than what we definitely should not be focused on, the internal, our selves.

These two prejudices, causing the devaluation both of the self and of the emotions, have worked to retard our maturation as individuals and as a society. We must overcome these biases in order to continue our evolution as a species. To do this, the zeitgeist needs to be changed. It needs to be shown, the people need to learn, that a

tangible, transformational leap in an individual's quality of life results from increased self intimacy.

In our work we are seeing clients make this leap. But, restricted to our practices, we can't reach enough people. So in order to facilitate growth and change on the larger scale we write this article in order to disseminate how this growth is being accomplished. More and more individuals can then apply this knowledge and thereby help change the zeitgeist constricting our development as individuals and our evolution as a species.

In beginning this explication of self intimacy and one path that leads to it, it is important to know that, as alluded to above, what is most basic to an understanding of self intimacy is the knowledge that the foundation of it is emotional self awareness. The awareness of our thoughts is not nearly as vital to our self intimacy. In fact, too often our thought stream serves to keep us removed from the intimate experience of our self. Our desires and values are also vital components of who we are, of course, but like our thoughts, our desires and values are not as primary as our emotions in gaining us access to the self. Awareness of them is important in knowing the self, but this category of knowledge is not as powerful as emotional self awareness in attaining the immediacy of true moment to moment self intimacy.

Reflective of this emotional primacy in self intimacy is the fact that our feelings are the closest thing to our true self that we have (Rusk, Tom, Mind Traps, Los Angeles: Price, Stern, Sloan, 1988). Through our work as therapists we've come to conceptualize them as messages from our true self (or our soul, essence, inner being, etc., whichever you prefer) about how we are doing keeping our life proceeding along a path that is healthy or righteous for us.

Does this contention have any validity? Well, think of it this way. The emotions did not develop through evolution just to spice up an otherwise dull existence. They developed to serve a purpose: to act as motivational mechanisms to get us (and seemingly our mammalian brethren) to act in ways that would help insure our individual and thereby our species survival (Plutchik, Robert, Emotion: A Psychoevolutionary Synthesis, New York: Harper & Row, 1980). In other words, they are electro-biochemical cattle prods hardwired into our neural circuitry for the purpose of getting us to stay on the behavioral "straight and narrow" path approved by our evolutionary development as safe and productive.

And just as with the rancher's cattle prods, they are very effective behavior modification tools. For example, to occurrences that are healthy or safe for us, this hardwiring causes us to react with pleasurable feelings such as happiness and contentment so that we want to stay safe. Or to circumstances that are dangerous we react with fear, motivating us to avoid or escape the danger. Or, for example, when a rival threatens our primary love relationship, we react with jealousy, motivating us to try to protect the exclusivity of that relationship.

Now, we can choose to let these cattle prods control our behavior. In this way we can be like every other animal that is motivated by primitive emotional mechanisms. And sadly, this is the case for most of us far too much of the time. However, it need not be

this way. We can work at consciously choosing our own path. To do so we must listen to our emotions, hear them instead of blindly react to them. See them as messages from our true self rather than not really consciously seeing them at all. In this way we move beyond the mammalian legacy of unconscious, automatic, pre-wired reaction to emotions to the neocortical awareness and analysis of emotions and their meaning.

In modern society most people are “civilized” to the point of not letting the more primitive emotional reactions control their actions. But beyond that basic level of control there is a wide range of emotional maturation. Most of us are not all that mature emotionally. All of us could stand to be more mature emotionally. To do this we must work at not going through life awake but unconscious, at not going through life unknowingly controlled by our emotions. The key to doing this is to become a master at knowing what it is that we are experiencing emotionally and then using that awareness to take care of our self and to grow as individuals.

This emotional self awareness is defined by the conscious acknowledgement that we are experiencing an emotion or a matrix of emotions, and also by the knowledge of what specific emotion or emotions we are feeling. During every moment of every day we are feeling, responding emotionally to external and internal stimuli and being in various emotional states or moods. But most of these emotional experiences go unnoticed or at best just brush our consciousness. The “magic” of self intimacy is that in bringing this “stream of affect” into our conscious awareness we potentiate a quantum jump in our ability to lead a deeply fulfilling life.

Self intimacy potentiates this jump in four profound ways. The first way is by greatly enhancing the individual’s ability to exercise freewill, to be able to consciously make decisions that are healthy and constructive. Without emotional self awareness, our actions are too often out of our control. We tend to react on the basis of unconscious, emotion based motivations as, for example, when we get defensive out of fear. So by becoming more and more aware of what we are feeling, moment to moment, we empower our self to be able to exercise much more volition in the way we live our life. We become more and more able to choose how to respond to our emotions and what led to them instead of finding our self blindly reacting to circumstances. We gain in our capacity to exercise the informed freewill necessary to lead our life along a path that is healthy and fulfilling for us. We become better able to take advantage of the gift of life.

In being given this gift, each of us has a sacred responsibility not to waste the time of our life. It is incumbent on us to strive to get the most fulfillment and enjoyment out of each day and to also endeavor to give back to others. So it becomes evident that self intimacy is a most potent tool in helping us carry out this duty in that it grants us the ability to have a much better chance of making wise decisions for our self. It enables us to be conscious in the moment, aware of the relevant internal variables defining who we are in that moment and aware of what the nature of our relationship with our external reality is.

The wisdom of any decision made, of any action chosen, depends upon the relevance, quantity and quality of the information upon which a choice is based. Self intimacy, in providing us the information most pertinent to any personal situation, affords us a much better chance of making a wise decision and of taking good care of our self.

Another way that a focus on self intimacy creates a significant advance in the individual's quality of life is by weakening and even breaking the hold that self doubt has on the relationship with self. It causes a shift from the self alienation caused by humanity's ubiquitous over-focus on external reality towards the self acceptance that results from treating the self, and one's feelings, as important.

In fact, in our work we have never seen this fail, even though self acceptance wasn't the original goal that the work on self intimacy was designed to achieve. The original goal was to help clients learn to take better care of themselves so that they would make healthier choices for themselves and lead more happier, more fulfilling lives. But what would inevitably happen as these clients got better and better at being self intimate is that we would see an inevitable increase in their level of self love and self respect.

We came to see that there is a very strong, direct correlation between level of self intimacy and level of self acceptance. What happens is that the more an individual becomes intimate with his self, the more he gets to really know, on a deep level, who and what he is, the more he realizes that he is a worthy, lovable being who deserves to be cared for. So in a very powerful way self intimacy leads to an ending of the pandemic self alienation that is the ultimate cause of so much of the havoc of the modern world.

The third manner in which self intimacy potentiates a quantum leap in the quality of the individual's life is by deepening his experience of the moment. In becoming more self aware the experience of the present is made richer and more meaningful.

The more one works on becoming emotionally self aware the better one gets at not only being aware of what was felt in the past, but also at being aware of what is being felt in the moment. This latter is more difficult for most of us in that we are so used to being externally focused in the moment that it is difficult to break out of this reflexive self ignorance. But as we become more able to access our emotional self awareness we also become more able to do so in the present moment. This illuminates our experience of the moment, making our living more real and substantive. Our experience of life becomes enhanced, going from too much like reading about a journey to much more like being on the journey, in the journey, of the journey.

Lastly, self intimacy also results in the quality of our life experience being profoundly improved by helping us to form and maintain healthy relationships with others. An increase in self intimacy has an immediate impact on our relationships. In becoming much more aware of our emotional responses to others we are much better able to take care of our self and our relationships. We learn to act to keep negative emotional experiences involving others from being unresolved, creating alienation and otherwise toxifying the relationship and our self. And we learn to acknowledge the positive emotions that help imbue the relationship with its strength. So an increase in our self intimacy pushes us to become more intimate with others. In so doing it creates for us a much more successful and fulfilling level of interpersonal relating and bonding. This adds immeasurably to the beauty and meaningfulness of our lives.

In our work at The Relationship Institute, one of the central aspects of our strategy in helping couples heal and develop their relationship is encouraging each member of the

couple to strive to increase the level of self intimacy he or she experiences. Restricted self intimacy restricts interpersonal intimacy. And the level of emotional intimacy shared in a relationship is a prime determinant of the quality of that relationship and its ability to endure and grow over time. So it has become quite apparent to us that self intimacy is a key to intimate relationship fulfillment, and the more important the relationship is to the individual the more essential that self intimacy is for that relationship's healthy functioning.

The most common question we get from our clients wanting to learn how to take better care of self is what can they do to learn to be more self intimate. To many it seems impossible. But actually these people are confusing impossibility with unfamiliarity. That is, it is not impossible but it just seems so because to so many of us the actuality of self intimacy seems so foreign. The fact of its unfamiliarity does not mean it is impossible to attain. Quite the contrary. Self intimacy is simple to attain. It is not complicated. It does not involve complex procedures or complicated intellectual schema. What it does take is little bits of work, work on your self, done in an ongoing way, day after day.

We have devised a simple way to do this work. It involves asking your self three questions and striving to find the right answers for you. The three questions are:

1. What emotion(s) am I feeling?
2. What is the cause of this emotion(s)?
3. What, if anything, do I need to do about this situation in order to take care of my self?

The first question seeks to access the basic foundation of self intimacy, emotional self awareness. The key here is to be as specific as possible as to what emotion or emotions is being felt. A common mistake here is to use a thought to answer this question, like, "I am feeling that it was a mistake to wake up this morning". The goal in answering question #1 is to be able to come up with a one word emotional label, such as excited, content, angry, sad, etc., to describe what is being felt. Even if a person can only determine that what they are feeling is a positive feeling or is a negative feeling, that is progress. Keep trying to narrow down the possibilities until the specific emotion is captured. Many clients find that in these situations a list of emotions is helpful in this feeling identification process.

Now, a frequent problem encountered in practicing question #1 is that the individual will try to check in with self and see what he is feeling and not be able to become aware of feeling anything. Does this mean he is indeed not feeling anything? No, we are always feeling. Much of the time it may not be any strong feelings, but the stream of affect is a part of our moment to moment existence. We have two suggestions for when the individual cannot gain access to this flow. First, keep trying to tap into it. It's a skill that takes practice; just because one is unable to accomplish it on first attempting it does not mean one is incapable of accomplishing it. If an individual does not give up in the face of the frustration of trying but not being aware of any emotion, she will gain the ability to do so.

The other suggestion here is to switch from the consideration of one's present felt emotion(s) to reviewing the recent past and asking what was the last emotion felt that

can be recalled. This emotional response from the past can then be worked on and thereby serves as a means of practicing self intimacy.

This brings up the prevalent misconception that there is nothing that can be done about feelings or incidences from one's past. Not only can quite a bit often be done about one's past, but it is also an important aspect of caring for the self and of being responsible that it be done. For example, everyone has had the experience of blurting something out to a friend or acquaintance and as soon as the words are out of your mouth you wish you could put them back as you realize that they were hurtful to the other. Many times we (or our friend) may try to recover by quickly changing the subject, many times there is just an awkward, painful lull in the conversation when neither of us "knows" what to say or what to do. Neither of us wants to deal with the hurt for fear of a confrontation.

If, in our drive to increase our self intimacy, we check in with our self later, we can access the memory of this incident from our past even if we are unable to come up with any emotion that we are aware of feeling in the present. Then, in working on our self intimacy and our ability to take care of ourself we can subject this interaction and our feeling(s) about it to the analysis structured by the three questions above. And based on the answers we find for our self, we can choose to take action, if called for, as indicated by the answer to question #3.

Now whereas question #1 taps into pure emotional self awareness, questions #2 and #3 deal with more cognitive aspects of self intimacy. Though not as central as the emotional, the process of answering these questions is quite important in extending self intimacy. Answering question #2 requires the development of cognitive self awareness and the cognitive analysis necessary to answer question #3 is vital aspect of the ability to make wise choices in taking care of the self.

The essential thing to remember in answering question #2 is that just as in answering the first question, here it is key to get as specific as possible as to what the cause of one's emotional response. For example, instead of being content in ascertaining that I feel angry because I was interrupted while trying to say something in the meeting, I can go further. I can realize that I was angry because the interruption meant that I didn't get to impress the others as much as I was hoping to. So my anger had a lot to do with my own need to impress, my own insecurities. The more we can get to the causal root of our emotional responses, the more they teach us about who we are, and the more we become intimate with our self.

Question #3 is all about using the self intimacy gained through emotional self awareness to guide us in taking care of our self. Here we utilize the cognitive ability to problem solve in order to determine what actions best serve use in responding to any specific situation.

The first thing we have to determine is whether any action is called for at all. Sometimes none is; many things are out of our control. In these cases, for example, no overt action is appropriate but internal action is. That is, we need to recognize the limitations on our power and accept that certain things are out of our control. When we are unable to do

this we then need to listen to the increasing anxiety we will feel and hear the message of unaccepted powerlessness that it is sending us.

A great deal of the time that we have emotional responses there is indeed things we can and should do about the situations that created them. This is where we need to consider our options and try to choose the one that is most constructive even if it is difficult, painful or anxiety producing. For example, telling someone that we are hurt and angry about something they did even though we are afraid they will get defensive and attack us for confronting them. Or having the courage to undertake a difficult task because it is vital in accomplishing a valued life objective. The important thing with question #3 is to honestly consider the alternatives available to us, choose what we sincerely believe is the right option and then act with courage to be true to our self.

So that is the most effective way that we've developed to grow self intimate. Interestingly, we've learned that spending long blocks of time working on it is not necessary, but that what is necessary is that smaller blocks of time (30 seconds to five minutes) be spent working on it in an ongoing way, day after day. With this latter strategy, significant growth in one's level of self intimacy occurs within weeks.

Self intimacy isn't a skill that you either get or you don't get, it isn't something you either know how to do or don't know how to do. The ability to be intimate with self is like a sport or an art or a discipline that you work at your whole life, ever striving to improve in you expertise and execution. And as in most things worthwhile, if one commits to the striving the improvement will come. Anyone who strives for it can achieve self intimacy. It is not something one has to have a talent for. One only has to have a self, and want to know him or her.