

Intimacy In Marriage

– Saraswathi Shyamal

Intimacy in marriage can bring shared ecstasy, mutual satisfaction, well-being, joy, serenity, and peace. In the absence of intimacy, marriage is self-defeating. Intimacy is the degree of mutual need-satisfaction within the relationship (*Clinebell, 1970*).

Intimacy refers to two different things in marriage (a) a time of intense sharing (b) an ongoing quality of the relationship which is present during the ups and the downs. The latter is a sense of “we-ness”. This is when the couple have formed a marital identity.

The different areas in which we can nurture intimacy in our marriage are sexual, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, recreational, work, co-creating, commitment to a common cause and pulling through a crisis.

Intimacy is never a once-and-for all achievement but must be nurtured throughout our marriage. An intimate marital relationship requires certain qualities of the husband and wife as individuals as well as of the interaction between them.

What facilitates the growth of intimacy? Intimacy grows as couples have the courage to be more open and learn to be emotionally present to each other. Intimacy also grows as couples develop a high degree of caring for each other and where there is trust.

Do you yearn for more intimacy in your marriage? Are you committed to strengthening and deepening your marriage? Every marriage has many untapped potentialities. This is true of relatively functional and successful marriages. This is also true of marriages facing several challenges.

I have a problem!

“We promise according to our hopes and perform according to our fears”

- Francois, Duc de la Rochefoucauld

Someone has suggested that there are two fundamental reasons for problems in marriage – not finding what one expected to find, and not expecting what one actually finds!

Expectations: Realistic vs. Unrealistic

There are realistic needs or expectations and there are neurotic or unrealistic expectations. God has created us with an innate need for meaningful relationships. Marriage is usually the most significant and meaningful relationship that we share. One of our basic needs is security, where we want to know that we are in this together, till death do us apart. We also need to be accepted for who we are. Another important need is self-esteem and spouses help us maintain a healthy self-esteem. We all want to love and be loved in our marriage. We also want a certain degree of freedom to be the person God has created us to be and achieve our potentialities.

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While these are realistic expectations, there are some unreasonable ones. When we say security, some expect freedom from want! When we say stability, some expect freedom from change! When we say love, some expect their spouses to become their parents and want to receive all that they missed receiving from their parents while growing up. When we say self-esteem, some expect their spouses to complete them as a person and to give them an identity.

Some expect their partner to be able to read their mind. “If my spouse loves me, he/she will know what my needs are and do everything he/she can to meet them.” A subtle corollary to this is, “If this doesn’t occur to you, then you don’t love me”. Unfulfilled expectations eventually evolve into demands that destroy intimacy.

Looking at the unrealistic expectations listed, we get an idea of where some of the problems stem from. When a person has grown up in a family where he didn’t receive love and care and therefore didn’t develop a sense of belonging, he wants his spouse to fill that void. This leads to frustration and disappointment. If a person doesn’t have a healthy self-esteem she fears rejection because she doesn’t love herself and therefore feels unlovable. They have a great sense of anxiety and uncertainty about themselves.

They have high expectations from their spouses, but also great fears and are only too ready to expect disappointment. They tend to cling to their spouse for fear of losing them. This is called “fear of abandonment”. Some have the “fear of absorption”, they fear that they will lose their identity to their dominating partner. Now put these two people together and you have a recipe for disaster. The person with the fear of abandonment will cling to their partner, while their partner will back away due to fear of absorption. Now both partners being dissatisfied in their marriage might find a substitute for their dependency. The husband could become over-involved in his work. The wife could become over-involved in their children. Thus a triangle is formed with something or someone coming between the husband and wife. Both receive their basic needs from other sources. The reason for triangulation is that couples don’t want to openly address the issues in their marriage.

Additional challenges!

Some enter marriages expecting to have problems! This is true especially in our days. We don’t expect our marriage to last forever. All differences are magnified and there comes a situation of “irreconcilable differences”. Some would like to file for divorce on the grounds of incompatibility or irretrievable break down of marriage.

The family we were born into forms a sort of a framework for our marriage. All of us carry patterns from our families of origin. For example one’s father might have been married to his career while mother might have been too concerned about their children. They might not have shared an intimate marriage. We also learn how to communicate with our spouses from our parents. If we

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witnessed our parents having cold wars, we tend to do the same. This is because we have not learnt other ways of communicating.

When problems occur in marriage, communication is usually involved.

Communication

You might say, lack of communication is not a problem in our marriage. You might think “I told him a thousand times...”, “He keeps telling me...”. So obviously there is communication in an intellectual sense. What is missing is the empathic communication or real understanding in the emotional sense. Words contribute to 7% of our communication, tone of voice comprises of 38% and body language adds another 55%. So we are constantly communicating, through our actions, attitudes and even in our silences.

Avoid discussing important things that have the potential to lead to disagreement when either of you is emotionally or physically exhausted. After a few years in our marriage, I grew in patience and was able to put this into practise.

When we discuss how we feel, especially unpleasant emotions it is best if we make “I” statements. “I am disappointed because you came late from work and we can’t go out to dinner”, instead of “You are late and you upset me!” We take responsibility for our feelings.

In many dysfunctional marriages, spouses employ coercive methods to meet their needs. For example, a husband who wants more affection from his wife but rarely receives the desired response. How does he behave when he reaches out to her for affection and she doesn’t respond? He may become verbally abusive, sulk, accusing his wife of being indifferent. This is counterproductive. By being nasty, he is less likely to receive any affection. On the other hand, if she finally responds, her affection has less significance since it was not genuine. He loses both ways. To overcome these patterns of coercion it is important to realise that the exchanges which we enjoy in our marriage are privileges and not rights. To earn privileges, one must reinforce the other; to enjoy rights, one need only insist upon his dues.

Sometimes when we are speaking we might be like porcupines with all our quills up, poking and hurting the other person. When porcupines mate, they have to stay relaxed to keep their quills – about 30,000 – lying low. We need to keep our quills lying real low and slowly shed them, one at a time to enhance intimacy in our relationship.

Conflict resolution

There are conflicts in any relationship and more so in a marriage. There are different ways of handling conflict.

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- 1) Withdraw: Some people feel helpless and think they have very little say in the matter. They might withdraw physically by leaving the room or psychologically by ignoring or refusing to speak.
- 2) Win: When a person has a low self-esteem or feels that their position is threatened, they try to win at all costs.
- 3) Yield: Many yield or give in because they fear that the disagreement will be too much for them or their relationship to handle.
- 4) Compromise: When we give a little and take a little, invariably one or both spouses are dissatisfied in the end.
- 5) Resolve: In this way of handling conflicts, a situation, attitude or behaviour is altered by spending adequate time discussing the differences. Even though some of our initial wants and ideas have changed, both are happy with the solution.

We need to recognise conflict issues and define the problem specifically. We also need to introspect and identify our own contribution to the problem. It is important to resolve misunderstandings then and there instead of waiting for it to build up. And most importantly focus on issues rather than attacking the person.

On the road to more intimacy

Naming the barrier is an important first step in this journey. Did you recognise some specific challenges in your marriage from the discussion above?

Forgive. One of my friends and I were discussing forgiveness. One of the things I said was “Actions flow from our feelings and thoughts. Also, feelings and thoughts follow our actions. So I act in a way as if I have forgiven even if I don’t feel that way yet.” Her reply was, “Aren’t you being hypocritical?” Hmm... I thought about it and said “If I want my feelings and thoughts to change and therefore I change my behaviour on purpose, then I am not being hypocritical. If I were to put on just an act, yes, I would be a hypocrite.”

Behaviour is easier to change than feelings. Behaviour is voluntary and can be changed at will. Although thoughts initiate behaviour, they are often involuntary. Behaviour changes can be the catalyst for thought changes. Also, when we change our behaviour, it not only affects our own thoughts and feelings but those of our spouse as well. A change in behaviour is visible.

One of my counselees shared that his wife constantly nagged him for leaving a mess at home before he left for work. During our session, he said he would make the effort to tidy up before he leaves the house. The next week when we spoke, I asked him if he was able to follow through with his decision. He said that he did for two days and then gave up. When asked why he said that on the days when

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he did tidy up, his wife found other things to nag him about. And so he concluded, “There is no use in changing my ways!”

When we implement new behaviour, we need to concentrate on own behaviour changes, not on the changes our spouse is making. Also many a times, we expect our spouse to immediately respond positively to our new behaviour. We forget the many months, years of anguish we might have caused. Marriage is like a dance. When we change one step, it changes the current choreography, eventually.

One way to begin establishing a positive atmosphere is to examine how we greet one another at the end of the day. Attentive time of conversation and touch for just two or three minutes at this point will help set a positive tone for the evening. Our son is two and a half years and many times I am caught up feeding, running behind him or responding to a tantrum. I need to remind myself to give my husband a warm smile, hug and a kiss when he walks in.

One suggestion I found very useful is to make use of the transition time before meeting my husband at the end of the day. I am home on most days before my husband gets back. I start calming myself down (if I have had some difficult moments with our son!) and do stuff with him that is calming, like cuddling up and reading a book. For some of you it might be the commute time to home. It is a good time to start unwinding (in spite of the traffic) and can diffuse frustrations, pressures and problems of the day.

A marriage can be either therapeutic or a cause of trouble. It is therapeutic when there is intimacy, openness, sharing and meeting of our basic needs. It becomes a cause for trouble when one or both spouses bring too many unrealistic demands, ineffective communication and conflict resolution styles.

Think of your courtship, the first few years of marriage or any phase in your marriage that was “sweet”. Do you remember the intense feelings of love you had for your spouse? Do you remember waiting for her to walk through the restaurant door? Do you remember admiring his long artistic fingers? Do you remember the feelings of security when you were by his side? Do you remember that loving glance?

Maybe your marriage has gradually cooled off. The key is to build positive expectancies, establish a commitment for change and begin the process of change.

“It is a brave thing to try to love at all, let alone completely and always. It is a brave thing – and yet it is the only thing”, says Kate Braestrup in her book *“Marriage and Other Acts of Charity”*.

A relationship is never stagnant. If husband and wife are not growing together they are probably growing apart. Let us grow to newer heights of intimacy in our marriage.

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