

The true meaning of intimacy

We often hear that we live in an age of “me first”. So it may come as a surprise that a study has found that a massive 83 percent say it is really important to have a partner with whom you have a satisfying relationship.

More than a quarter of respondents nominate having a good relationship with a partner as the single most important factor in their happiness with life. So it's clear that satisfaction with life overall is strongly linked to satisfaction with relationships. And one of the strongest factors that keeps a relationship alive is intimacy between partners.

But what is this elusive quality called intimacy? It is much more than a sexual relationship, though that is a major contributing factor to maintaining a healthy and satisfying partnership.

True intimacy is being able to laugh together and cry together and share each other's vulnerabilities and care for your partner. Intimacy involves feeling safe with a partner, and this is where sexual intimacy is often a window into the intimacy of the whole relationship.

The popular stereotype is that women say they want more talking and emotional closeness before they feel like having sex, while men find that having sex is their first step to feeling closer to a partner.

In fact, both partners want the same end result but have different ideas about how to achieve it. It's easy to get into a stalemate on this one, but it's worth remembering that opposites do attract, and the solution is usually for both partners to acknowledge their different points of view and work out a compromise.

It's rare for a couple to have an exact match in their need for intimacy and closeness, so most couples have learnt to negotiate so that they can achieve a deeply satisfying relationship. Polarised viewpoints that send partners into red and blue corners belong in a boxing match, not in a committed relationship.

Maintaining intimacy is important because it's the key to good relationships. If one partner has a doctor's appointment and the other rings during the day to see how they got on, that's a demonstration of intimacy. Sometimes it's the knowledge that you are in your partner's consciousness, rather than an overt physical demonstration.

All couples need to be able to talk about their positive and negative feelings together to work as a team through life stresses and events, such as bringing up children, surviving the death of dearly loved pets, and perhaps coping with the death of elderly parents.

If emotional and/or sexual intimacy has decreased over the years, rather than increased, all is not lost. It can be regenerated.

People facing the empty nest syndrome may find their need for emotional intimacy has been met by the children, and once they're gone they feel they don't know their partner very well any more.

You need to be able to talk about how you are feeling with your partner and look at a new interest you can develop together. It might be tango classes, golf lessons, taking out a theatre subscription or learning to play competition bridge. It doesn't matter what it is, as long as it's something you can both share. Or you might try introducing some intimacy by doing little things for your partner on the home front – having a glass of wine together at night, or sitting down to a candlelit meal, or buying the occasional impulsive gift for your partner.

If it all seems too hard, investigate a couples group run by organisations such as Relationships Australia where you can re-discover communication skills, or consult an experienced counsellor.