

# Close encounters of the intimate kind

Valentine's Day can give rise to some very conventional images of how we demonstrate intimacy in our special romantic relationships.

While red roses and eating by flickering candlelight are certainly attractive manifestations of intimacy, what does the word really mean in a committed relationship?

Intimacy is best defined as being close enough to someone to let your love flow and be comfortable about showing your vulnerability.

Intimacy means sharing at every level, feeling confident that your partner loves you for what you are. It is indeed a very special bond and one to be treasured.

Achieving intimacy is a big challenge for anyone, regardless of gender. We all achieve varying degrees of intimacy and men and women tend to express their intimate feelings in different ways.

Many men may experience intimacy sharing something practical with their partner. Men tend to see sex as leading to a sense of closeness, with talking and feeling as an important by-product.

Women, on the other hand, think that being together and sharing and feeling together should lead to doing things together, including sex.

Both methods achieve intimacy, and one is not better or worse than the other, just different. Often men cannot express what they are feeling, but just because they might not talk about it as much does not mean they don't experience and want intimacy.

How good we are at achieving intimacy depends to a large extent on what sort of role modelling we had as we were growing up.

If we had a secure upbringing with loving parents who met our needs most of the time, then we know that we can trust intimate relationships.

If we were not fortunate enough to have that kind of childhood, then there is a bit of work to be done learning how to trust. This is learnt by choosing trustworthy friends and partners who can teach us to trust.

Over the years our forms of intimacy will change. When their children are young, women may find they are so physically exhausted that having a sympathetic partner lying beside them, rather than a long sexual liaison, provides the best intimacy.

At this stage of life, getting a phone call during the day from a partner just to say "how are you, I know you were a bit tired this morning" can be the ultimate intimate thrill. Just to know that someone cares enough to know what you are going through can be very special.

Later in life, intimacy may mean the comfort zone of going out to dinner without feeling that you have to talk all the time.

At this stage, you know each other so well and feel so comfortable that it is not necessary to verbalise everything.

When you are really intimate, there is a sense of a relationship flowing without feeling it is hard work. If you lack this feeling of flowing, you probably have work to do. If you are stuck, you may need some outside help to get started again. Most people find that at some stage they need to fire up the intimacy in their relationship.

The best thing about intimacy is that if you both really want to achieve it you can – it just takes a little ingenuity and tuning in to a partner's needs.

And achieving intimacy can be a lot of fun. Anyone can play Romeo and Juliet, so start planning.

Like the old song says – all you need is love.

## Survival tips

- **Remember that men and women tend to express intimacy differently**
- **Intimacy means different things at different life stages**
- **If the intimacy seems to have disappeared from your relationship and you are stuck in a rut, get some help to fire things up again – it's well worth it!**