



What is intimacy?

From 'the family' to 'the couple'

There has been a historical shift from 'the family' to 'the couple' as the central organising unit in contemporary life, with an emphasis on intimate connection. The 'ideal' couple of today are both friends and lovers immersed in a disclosing intimacy of mind and body. For previous generations, the modern discourse on intimacy would be an anathema. Where once we may have ploughed the land together, bound by a common task to a shared end, today we talk. Rather than being a by-product of a long-term relationship, intimacy is now a prerequisite for one. Today, we expect much more of our intimate relationships, including personal happiness and sexual fulfilment, yet we lack the role models for the new intimacy we seek. No longer bound together simply by survival needs, and with sex separated from reproduction, our closest relationships become conduits for 'higher' intimacy ideals.

Our early experiences of intimacy

Our understanding of intimacy and intimate connection is grounded in our social, biological and psychological histories. In the evolutionary account, 'attachment' is a biological imperative rooted in an infant's need to maintain physical proximity to its caregiver to ensure survival. Our early emotional attachments, though, are not simply about protection from present danger. They are also about the emotional and psychological human need for a secure base. Our physiological and mental development always takes place in a relational context. Our emotional responses are organised and regulated through our formative relational experiences of the presence and absence, sounds, smells, gaze and touch received from our caregivers. Herein our attachment styles are forged, informing our later capacities and appetites for intimacy.

We receive our initial cues about how the social world works in our families, and here too, we learn the rules of intimacy. We learn whether we are supposed to be strong, competitive, angry, sad or tender. We treat as truth the things we learn about love, trust and life. We make decisions about the world and ourselves on the basis of these truths. Many of these decisions (made out of conscious awareness) will have great bearing on our adult emotional lives. When our attachment experience is secure, we are less likely to struggle with psychological issues of self-worth. When it is not, for myriad reasons, such as traumatic experience, loss, separation and fundamental failures of attunement, we are more likely to develop core beliefs about ourselves as not being 'lovable', 'enough' or any number of injunctions against being important, being visible or belonging. These will inevitably play out in our intimate adult relationships. The developing infant is continuously learning about the boundaries between self and other at the same time being schooled in the power dynamics of intimacy. We all bring the legacy of intimate childhood relationships to our adult pairings, activating our original relational templates to confirm old and new

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beliefs about our value and worth. We navigate a perilous path between 'too much' and 'not enough' proximity and distance, me, you and we.

How couples therapy can help

Our need for meaningful connection remains throughout our lifespan. In its absence, symptoms from physical illness and depression to addiction may develop. Therapy can support couples in tracing the lineage and source of their beliefs and assumptions about intimacy and in an exploration of their disappointments and discontents, as they are experienced in the here and now context of their relationships. The couple willing to risk the emotional vulnerability of open-ended conversations about the tensions, conflicts and failures in their relationship be they sexual or domestic are indeed brave. True intimacy requires the recognition and will to balance the dual imperatives of individuality and interdependence, amongst other things.

Gerry Gilmartin is an accredited, registered and experienced psychotherapeutic counsellor who is available at our Hove practice.