

Intimacy Begins with You

By Joseph and Sarah Elizabeth Malinak

“He’s just like the last boyfriend I had! He doesn’t know how to be intimate!” Jennifer was visibly frustrated and even feeling despair. “What’s wrong with men? What’s wrong with me?!” she wailed.

“Have you told him how important intimacy is to you? Have you talked about it? Maybe he thinks he’s being intimate.” Martha was happily content in her romantic relationship and she wanted the same for her best friend.

“No! If I start pressing him about my need for intimacy, I’ll probably drive him away!”

“Jennifer, if you feel you can’t talk about it then you’re being inauthentic and intimacy cannot exist in an inauthentic relationship!”

Jennifer looked at Martha as if she’d just heard the last thing she wanted to hear. But Martha is right! Intimacy requires authenticity, among other things. As Jennifer’s words reveal, she’s having a hard time being authentic with herself. How can she expect to be authentic with her lover? Does she even know how to begin?

In this article we’re going to look at five ingredients for creating intimacy – five ingredients that you can begin to use immediately because intimacy begins with you.

Honesty

The first one is honesty. It may seem obvious that honesty is an ingredient for intimacy between lovers but achieving honesty can actually be quite a challenge. Begin by examining how honest you are with yourself on a daily, even an hourly, basis. You may find you tell lies to yourself (and others) to remain pleasing and unthreatening.

For instance, let’s say you hate the way he or she monopolizes conversation but you listen anyway in order to be pleasing. Rather than put the blame on the big talker, look at what is going on with you and you’ll likely find a way to communicate your needs in a way he or she can hear you.

When your date/lover/spouse monopolizes conversation, how does it make you feel? Do you feel taken for granted? Do you feel unvalued or even rejected? As you examine the answers to these questions, you may feel a kind of heat stirring up inside. That heat could be defined as anger but, more likely, it’s the heat of putting yourself on the spot. When you quit complaining about how insensitive the other person is and look at how it makes you feel to allow yourself to be treated that way, you’ve drawn a line in the sand for yourself. That can be as frightening as it is liberating.

With this kind of honesty, you lay the groundwork for instigating a meaningful conversation. Approach the other person with how you feel, rather than what’s wrong

with him or her. Tell her you need to be heard as well. That her listening shows you she cares. Tell him you want to share yourself with him too. That his listening helps you feel valued and appreciated. Just that much honesty could turn the tide for both of you.

He may not have a clue he's being boorish. She may have no idea she's being self-centered. He could be touched that something he can do that is so simple (listening to you) could make a difference in your life. She may want you to know how much she admires you but talks all the time because she's nervous around you. Because you don't say, "This is what's wrong with you," or "You're driving me crazy!" and, instead, talk about your feelings and what you need to feel better, your date/lover/spouse is in a position to support you rather than to defend.

Honesty is an important ingredient for creating intimacy. Begin by going deep with yourself and you'll create momentum for greater honesty and intimacy in the relationship.

Compassion

The second ingredient for creating intimacy is compassion. Begin by being compassionate with you. In other words, lighten up! For instance, you look at how dishonest you've been with yourself in this relationship and you feel horrible! You want to beat yourself up for it. Don't! Instead, choose compassion. Tell yourself, "You know, I'm learning how to be a better me in this relationship. I can do this!"

Intimacy thrives in an environment of compassion. It is nearly impossible to extend compassion to another if you cannot extend it to yourself. It may seem self-centered to focus on being kind to you. The truth is the more compassion you give you, the more you have to give to others.

Compassion, rather than a feeling, is something you give. It's something you do. It's a choice you make to actively show your love, respect, and unconditional regard. For those of us who are hard on ourselves, and thereby hard on others, there are numerous opportunities in every single day to practice the gift of compassion. Lightening your load by stilling the harsh self-judgment is a great place to begin.

When you're in the habit of lightening up on yourself, laughing over a harmless mistake instead of beating yourself up, it becomes easier to refrain from disrespecting him or chastising her. When your date/lover/spouse knows you can be counted on for compassion, the intimacy in the relationship increases exponentially!

Authenticity

The third ingredient is authenticity. As we saw in the dialogue at the beginning, Jennifer, like many of us, wants intimacy without having to be authentic. When you are authentic you are genuine, real, trustworthy, and reliable. Being those things makes a person feel vulnerable. If your history has taught you that partners cannot be trusted with that much

vulnerability, it can make you feel scared and stupid to go there! But you will not create an intimate relationship if you don't.

Authenticity begins with your feelings. You can learn to be authentic with yourself by observing your feelings. This doesn't mean acting out on every single feeling that comes up. It does mean no longer ignoring them. You can choose to not act on a feeling. You can even choose to feel it later. But do choose to observe it.

Perhaps you've been dating a man for awhile who won't quite claim you as his own. Whether or not you two are free to date other people, has become blurry. You don't want to date anyone else and you know he isn't dating anyone else. But taking the next step to a proclamation of boyfriend-girlfriend exclusivity is one he just will not take! Because you've always prided yourself on not being "clingy," you pretend the arrangement suits you. Honestly, you prefer the ideal you as someone who can give a man his freedom. But you're feelings are hurt that he doesn't care enough to extend himself to the next level of commitment. This is no longer a matter of being honest about a philosophy but is a circumstance that hurts you deeply.

Instead of blaming one more man for having commitment issues, look at your feelings and get clear about what you need to communicate. Has the situation become intolerable? He needs to know that. On the other hand, if your yearning for him is so intense that you want to ride it out and see what happens, you can examine your choices. Maybe you want to risk it all and talk to him about it. Perhaps you want to just be really clear about your own intentions for the relationship and give him the space to take the next step on his own. You might even see the situation as a challenge and take advantage of it to become irresistible to him.

When we are inauthentic, we're operating on automatic. And when we operate on automatic, we make mistakes. However, once you've chosen to be authentic about your feelings with yourself, you open up options to experiment with to see what works and what doesn't work. If you fail, it's easier to be forgiven for trying something from an authentic space than it is for trying something while being unreal or ingenuous.

Integrity

The fourth ingredient is integrity. Integrity has to do with whether or not you keep promises. Intimacy cannot survive in a relationship where promises are not kept. This includes the promises you make to yourself.

Most of us feel lousy when we fail to keep a promise, even a promise no one knows we broke because we only made it to ourselves. Most of us also tell lies when we break promises. Rather than acknowledge our failure, we create lies to protect the other person. We really don't want him or her to think we just didn't care enough to follow through on our promise.

When a person is let down again and again by the one he or she loves most, a wall gets built up that is very hard to penetrate. The only way to take down that wall is to get busy keeping your word so that you can rebuild trust.

Because it is so easy for us to break the promises we make to ourselves, the best place to exercise keeping one's word is by refusing to break those personal, private promises. And when those promises get broken, being straight on honest and clear about how and why the promise was broken with specific plans to make up for it, is the best way to get back on track.

Treat yourself the way you'd treat the person you respect most in this world, and you'll find that treating others that well begins to come naturally and easily.

Courage

Intimacy takes us out of our comfort zones. That's one of the reasons it is so yummy! To be so vulnerable with another person that we're willing to risk being uncomfortable and have him or her see us more deeply and in surprising ways is frightening and thrilling. It leaves us feeling completely bare and empty just before it fills us up to the brim with feeling seen, heard, and appreciated. That takes courage!

This last ingredient wraps it all up because the previous four require courage and intimacy itself demands it! Even courage begins with you. It takes courage to get to know yourself so well that you can be deeply honest, compassionate, authentic, and in integrity with you. It takes courage to face yourself and your feelings. If you'll begin by being courageous with you, you will find it easier to access courage when interacting with others.

As you take the time to grow intimacy with yourself, opportunities for intimacy with others will show up for you. The courage it takes to grow intimacy with yourself will be there for you whenever you need it.

Intimacy will grow as slowly or as quickly as you want it to, as long as you begin with you.