**What is Intimacy?**

**Four Areas of Intimacy**

**Four Areas of Intimacy**

Intimacy is not just physical, nor is it just emotional. Intimacy is multidimensional. It mysteriously combines all four aspects of the human person:

* the physical
* the emotional
* the intellectual
* the spiritual.

Therefore, it is important to understand intimacy as it affects and is affected by each of the four aspects of the human person.

Human beings yearn above all else for intimacy. We desire happiness, and sometimes we confuse this desire for happiness with a desire for pleasure and possessions. But once we have experienced the pleasure or attained the possessions, we are still left wanting. Without intimacy, all the world's riches cannot satisfy our hungry hearts. Until we experience intimacy, our hearts remain restless, irritable, and discontented.

Intimacy requires allowing another person into our heart, mind, body, and soul. Intimacy is a complete and unrestrained sharing of self. Not all relationships are worthy of such total intimacy, but our primary relationship should be.

To be truly intimate with another person is to share every aspect of yourself with that person. We have to be willing to take off our masks and let down our guard, to set aside our pretenses, and to share what is shaping us and directing our lives. This is the greatest gift we can give to another human being: to allow them to see us for who we are, with our strengths and weaknesses, faults, failings, flaws, defects, talents, abilities, achievements, and potential.

**Physical Intimacy**

Sex is not intimacy. It can undoubtedly be a part of intimacy, but sex doesn't equal intimacy. It also doesn't come with a guarantee of intimacy. Sex isn't absolutely necessary for intimacy. And yet, almost every reference to intimacy in modern popular culture is a reference to sex. If we are ever to experience intimacy truly, we must first move beyond the idea that sex and intimacy are the same thing.

As a couple grows closer and seriously considers marriage, they develop a level of intimacy that comes from truly knowing each other and sharing their thoughts and feelings in a vulnerable way.Intimacy is not sex, although intimacy can enhance it. The full range of physical intimacy of body, however, can only be fully unifying and healthy when protected within the institution of marriage.

All of our relationships have a physical aspect. Even in a relationship that is completely confined to the telephone or cyberspace, you are still experiencing the other person through your senses.

Some may claim that there is no physical dimension to their relationship with God, but again, while this relationship is predominantly spiritual, it has a physical aspect. Some people kneel to pray; others sit in a meditation position; some raise their hands; others walk while they perform their spiritual routines and rituals, and some prostrate themselves for prayer. Our physical bodies are the vehicles through which we experience everything in this life.

When physical intimacy is established too quickly, we may think it is wonderful, but almost immediately, it begins to stunt the growth of the relationship in other areas of intimacy. We begin to overvalue physical intimacy, become preoccupied with it, and begin to judge and value our relationship based only on physical intimacy. It can also blind us from an honest assessment of the character and personality of the potential partner. With an over-emphasis on physical intimacy, we can neglect the nurturing of the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the relationship.

**Emotional Intimacy**

Emotional intimacy is much harder to achieve than physical intimacy. It requires humility and a level of vulnerability that most of us are not comfortable with at first. It requires mutual trust, which takes time to build. The process of becoming emotionally intimate can therefore be a slow one. Even in the best relationship, with the most genuine person, it takes time to feel safe to let our guard down and truly be ourselves. And if we have been hurt or betrayed in the past, it may take longer. Our opinions, feelings, fears, and dreams are things we guard closely, as we should.

Being intimate means sharing the secrets of our hearts, minds, and souls with another fragile and imperfect human being. Intimacy requires that we allow another person to discover what moves us, what inspires us, what drives us, what eats at us, what we are running toward, what we are running from, what silent self-destructive enemies lie within us, and what wild and wonderful dreams we hold in our hearts.

Emotional intimacy cannot be isolated from the other three aspects of the human person. The physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual are interconnected in a thousand ways that we have not even begun to understand.

**Intellectual Intimacy**

The third aspect of the human person is the intellectual. Like emotional intimacy, it takes longer to establish than physical intimacy does. The creation of intellectual intimacy requires both a variety and a number of shared experiences. It is established through conversation, by experiencing different cultural and political events together, and by ways that draw out our personal philosophy of life.

Intellectual intimacy blossoms in a non-judgmental environment. Different people have different ideas. Your ideas are not always right, and their ideas are not always wrong. Keeping an open mind is an important part of intellectual intimacy. If we are to delve into the beauty and mystery of the way people think, we must condition ourselves to look beyond the ideas themselves. Beyond the ideas themselves, the secret of developing intellectual intimacy is to look beyond the idea itself and discover what has caused a person to believe that such an idea is good, true, noble, just, or beautiful. What is most fascinating is not knowing what people think or believe but understanding why they think and believe what they do.

Intellectual intimacy is much more than simply knowing what a person thinks and believes about various issues or topics. It is about knowing how a person thinks-what drives, inspires and motivates their ideas and opinions.

**Spiritual Intimacy**

Spiritual intimacy is considered by many to be the most precious and rewarding form of intimacy. Some couples who have spiritual intimacy have virtually identical traditional religious beliefs, while other couples who enjoy spiritual intimacy have very different beliefs or ways of expressing their beliefs.

Spiritual intimacy begins with respect for each other and blossoms in the idea that the partner will do everything within their power to help the beloved become the best version of themselves. The partner would never do anything to harm the beloved or to cause them to become less than who they were created to be. This is the first principle of spiritual intimacy. While it does not demand agreement on all issues, spiritual intimacy does demand agreement on our essential purpose in life.

This common purpose is the foundation of spiritual intimacy. We may have investigated the physical aspect of the human person. We may have delved into the emotional and psychological aspects of the human person. And we may have a reasonable understanding of the intellectual faculties and capacities of the human person. Still, the make-up and potential of the spiritual aspect of the human person may still remain uncharted territory. The reason is that our spiritual potential is both difficult to explore and easy to neglect.

The role of spirituality in relationships is to provide the tools necessary to help us grow in the development of our virtues. Virtues make all respectful relationships possible. Two patient people will have a better relationship than two impatient people. Two generous people will have a better relationship than two selfish people. Two forgiving people will have a better relationship than two people who choose to hold grudges and refuse to forgive. Two faithful people will always have a better relationship than two unfaithful people.

Conscious development of our virtues make for great relationships. Why? Virtues are the foundation of character. You can build your life on a foundation of virtues such as patience, kindness, humility, gentleness, forgiveness, and love. Or you can build your life on a foundation of whims, cravings, fancies, illegitimate wants, and selfish desires. The former will create a life of passion and purpose, while the latter will create an irritable, restless, and dissatisfied life.

In our relationships, we have to make the same choice: to build upon a foundation of virtues or upon a foundation of selfishness. If we choose to base our relationships upon the foundation of a common goal to become the best version of ourselves, and we understand that the best way to pursue this goal is by growing in virtue, then our relationship will likely be marked with joyfulness and contentedness.

Spiritual intimacy is the most rewarding form of intimacy and the hardest to achieve. Once you have tasted spiritual intimacy, you will discover that physical, emotional, and intellectual intimacy do not belong in the same realm as spiritual intimacy. You will also discover that as you and your partner grow in spiritual intimacy, your experience of physical, emotional, and intellectual intimacy will also be heightened. At the core of the human person is the soul, and it yearns to be fed and nurtured. Our true selves long for spiritual intimacy.

**Summary of the Four Aspects of Intimacy**

In our quest for intimacy, we must move beyond our preoccupation with the physical and understand what each of the four aspects has to contribute to our relationships. Physical intimacy is limited. But emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacies are limitless and relatively unexplored. If you truly wish to experience the upper reaches of physical intimacy, you must first explore and develop the depths of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy.

We should pay careful attention, especially if we are just beginning a relationship, to see that we grow steadily in each of the four areas of intimacy. The danger is that we develop one type of intimacy very quickly and neglect the other forms. This imbalance distorts our relationship.

Intimacy is sharing the journey of becoming the best version of ourselves with another person. It is a mutual self-revelation that takes place gradually, cannot be rushed, and can only be realized by the commitment of time. Most of all, it is critical that we recognize that intimacy cannot be confined merely to the physical realm or to just one of the other realms of intimacy.



**References:**

* Wilmette Institute Course: Foundation for Relationships.
* Matthew Kelly, *The Seven Levels of Intimacy*