

Enhancing Emotional Intimacy

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Emotions about your relationship are the “energy source” for your sexual feelings. When relationship distress infringes on this positive energy, sexual problems can result. Feeling resentful, rejected, or fearful of your partner undermines your emotional energy as a couple. To recover from distress, you will want to take steps to enhance your feelings of being an intimate team. You will want to improve your ability to recognize and gently express your feelings, deepen your appreciation of your partner’s feelings, and together experience emotional empathy. Accepting and embracing each other’s emotions will provide the foundation for working as an intimate team.

Feelings Are Essential to Intimacy

Focus on your emotions because feelings are not only signs of the distress but also the key to resolving your conflict and hurt. Because *your emotions are indispensable for achieving relationship satisfaction*, it is crucial that you be aware of them and comfortable with them. Everyone who has a body has feelings, but we differ in our level of awareness and comfort. Some are very aware of their body’s sensations and feelings and have elaborate words to express them. Others are aware of their feelings but have few words to describe them clearly, or have learned to not express them out of shame, fear, or sensitivity. Still others ignore their feelings, believing emotions interfere with adult living.

What Are Feelings?

Feelings can be confusing, distracting, irritating, or frustrating unless you understand what they are about. Because many people—especially men—rely on reason more than emotion for direction in life, feelings are often viewed as irritants, distractions, or even enemies. At base, feelings are biochemical energies in your body in response to various situations, influenced by your past experiences and current thoughts. Feelings are not enemies at all; they offer you important information that your reason might overlook. Feelings offer data about yourself and your experiences that are not available to you from logic or thinking alone.

Feelings Can Be Complicated

Often we have “mixed feelings”—we feel two or more at the same time. For example, you may worry that it is impossible to resolve your hurt and irritation at yourself or your partner, and feel shame that you have failed to find a resolution—all simultaneously.

You may focus on only one dimension of the energy (feeling) in your body, ignoring the other feelings. For example, focusing only on frustration, you may miss feelings of hurt and worry.

One feeling can be converted to another. A person who is taught to not feel anger may convert feelings of anger to shame. A person who is taught that anger is okay but fear isn't may feel angry when afraid or threatened.

Feelings Are Useful

People tend to think of feelings as positive or negative, good or bad, depending on whether they agitate (like fear, anger, and guilt) or encourage (like pleasure, contentment, and satisfaction). Our approach to understanding feelings is to think of them as voices trying to get your attention so you'll consider factors other than logic in your response to a situation. Feelings try to help you respond to different situations. Every feeling is good in terms of its purpose to serve you, protect you, guide you. Your feelings offer honest information, some of which you may not like. Listening for feelings is an important skill.

Metaphors for Feelings

Consider two metaphors that a number of men and women have told us helped them appreciate the value of emotions.

Psychological sonar.

As you navigate through life, you are continuously monitoring the environment for information about your situation. Imagine your logical reason to be your “psychological radar,” supplying information about what is going on “above ground.” Then imagine that your emotional intelligence is your “psychological sonar,” supplying information about what is going on “below the water.” (If you are a sportsman, imagine the sonar fish finder in your boat.) Different systems offer different information, and the composite information from both radar and sonar offers you a more complete picture of your situation.

With PE, your “radar” or reason may have told you, “I will again fail to please her” while your “sonar” or emotions likely alerted you with anxiety and tension in your body. Both alert you in different ways to a challenging situation.

Lifelong, loyal friends.

Another way to understand your feelings is to consider them to be your “buddies” or lifelong, loyal friends. They have been with you through your experiences, and they remember them even when you forget. Each feeling, then, is a savvy veteran of experience who will alert or protect you from situations that experience leads him to believe could distress you. Your friend vigilantly looks after you. He will not lie to you, abandon you, or be silent when concerned that you may forget or be misled by your logic. A good buddy will take you aside, counsel you, even argue with you when he thinks you could be making a mistake or overlooking potential trouble. You may not like the counsel of these friends, thinking they overprotect or make things worse for you, but they are just doing their job whether you like it or not.

Suppose you have experienced your partner’s disappointment when you ejaculated quickly and concluded that you were inadequate. You experienced intercourse as failure. Your loyal friends—your feelings of shame and anxiety—wanted to protect you from further failure, so they tried to get your attention and maybe even advised you to avoid sex.

Exercise: Listening for Your Feelings

Alone, provide yourself a quiet, relaxing atmosphere. Relax your body until you are feeling calm, centered, and comfortably aware of your body. Then imagine that you are a miniature explorer traveling around inside your body to find where different feelings are most strongly noticeable to you. Where in your body do you experience joyful feelings? In your face, eyes, mouth? In your chest or legs? Where in your body do you experience feelings of anxiety or fear? In your stomach? In your chest? In your cold hands? Where in your body do you experience anger? In your hot cheeks or ears? In your throat or neck? In your stomach? Where in your body do you experience feelings of sadness? Where in your body do you experience feelings of confusion, indecisiveness, ambivalence? Where in your body do you experience feelings of sensuality with your partner?

Write down what you learned.

Are You Free to Feel?

While your feelings are valuable sources of personal information, it's not always a good idea to act on them. Whether and how to act are ethical choices that you need to make. For example, a feeling of anger offers personal information to you about your situation, usually one in which you feel hurt, threatened, or blocked. These feelings get your attention by agitating your body so you recognize the problem. What you do with this information is the ethical issue.

The guiding principle is this: Accept your feelings, judge your behaviors. When you make this distinction between your feelings and behaviors, you are free to feel. You can feel frustration and choose not to express this feeling to your partner. Rather, you can choose a more positive course of action by asking your partner for a few moments to rest and recover, and then offering to talk calmly. You want to learn from your feelings but not let them run your life; you don't have to act on them. You want to listen to your feelings, consider their counsel, and decide how to respond in a constructive fashion. Integrating your feelings and reason gives you a more complete picture of your situation.

Value Your Partner's Feelings

Accept your partner's feelings as well as your own. Accepting a feeling does not mean agreeing or condoning. It means listening, valuing, caring, accepting, affirming, and nurturing her. You can accept and affirm your partner's *feeling* of anger without agreeing with her or his interpretation (attribution) of the problem and without condoning any *behaviors* expressing anger. Don't try to "fix" or change your partner's feelings. Ironically, your acceptance is the major thing that will help your partner's feelings to change. Strive to acknowledge, affirm, and accept feelings.

Different Ways of Expressing Feelings

There are many direct and indirect ways to express feelings. The words to describe feelings are learned. Some words directly describe emotions: "I feel sad," "I feel warm and close," "I feel frustrated." Others express feelings indirectly. You might say, "Isn't it a nice day?" to express "I feel wonderful today" or say, "All you do is spend money" to mean "I am worried about money." The more directly you express your feelings, the more likely it is that your partner will understand and interpret your meaning correctly.

You and your partner have your own emotional language, nonverbal (a smile, a glance away) as well as verbal. How do you express your feelings? How does

your partner? How have you expressed feelings about your relationship distress? How has your partner? Verbally? Nonverbally? Negatively? Calmly? Dramatically? Developing healthier ways to share feelings is important and will deepen your intimacy. Learning to “read” your partner’s words and actions is part of the uniqueness of intimacy. It takes months or years of sharing experiences, explaining to each other your thoughts and feelings, for better and for worse.

Communicating emotions is an important skill in an intimate relationship. For many men and women, it is difficult to feel close without sharing verbally what and how you feel. Love involves sharing warm, positive feelings and romance, but also involves sharing feelings even when that may lead to conflict. Communicating negative feelings in a positive, constructive way can lead to emotional closeness. You can still be loved and valued even if you are down, anxious, or had a failure experience. Love tries to provide that safe harbor amidst the storms of life.

Vulnerability within Emotional and Sexual Intimacy

Sharing your feelings with your partner is important to healing and deepening your long-term relationship. *Emotional openness and the nakedness of sex are the two most vulnerable and tender aspects of committed love.* During these experiences, we are most exposed and fearful of rejection. You can appreciate your sensitivity when you consider how it hurt when you shared feelings and felt rejected or shamed. Or consider when you ejaculated quickly and felt sexually vulnerable but your partner seemed frustrated, misreading your distress as blame or abandonment. You probably wanted to hide your emotional vulnerability and cover up your physical nakedness. When you give and receive empathy while you are vulnerable emotionally and sexually, you communicate powerful acceptance and comfort, and generate trust and love.

Exercise: Expressing Feelings and Emotions

If you have difficulty describing your feelings with words, use the same words over and over, or tend to confuse feelings with thoughts, you can fine-tune your skills with this exercise.

Below is a list of words that describe feelings or emotions. Add any favorites of your own or others you can think of. Then do the three “building blocks” that follow.

pleased	excited	comfortable
happy	jubilant	satisfied
glad	elated	contented
aroused	surprised	stimulated
confident	eager	peaceful
witty	joyful	calm
hopeful	playful	composed
fascinated	silly	thoughtful
angry	frightened	bored
provoked	anxious	weary
quarrelsome	afraid	apathetic
insulted	cowardly	complacent
irritated	cautious	tired
discontented	uneasy	worried
uncomfortable	hesitant	nervous
overwhelmed	ashamed	worthless
daring	energetic	embarrassed
intense	distracted	earnest
enraged	hurt	tender
confused	passionate	sad

Building block 1.

Alone, take a moment to reflect and write down some notes on your experience. What words do you use most frequently to describe your feelings? What words do you hear your partner use most often? Do you and your partner have different favorite words to express a similar feeling? What are they? Which feelings are most familiar to you? What are your labels or words for these? What other feelings might be concealed behind these words? After you have finished your

notes, share these with your partner. (Spend at least ten minutes each to do this.)

Building block 2.

For one full day, discuss with your partner your impressions as you observe each other giving nonverbal signals such as tone of voice, facial expressions, physical movements, and body positions. Tell each other what you interpret the other to be feeling. Share where you got your impression and check this out with each other. For example, "I see you chewing your nails and it makes me think you are feeling nervous. Am I right?" "I hear you talking very loudly and it makes me think you are feeling irritated. Are you?" "You are quiet. Are you feeling sad?" "I feel your arm around me and it makes me think you are feeling romantic. Do you want to make love?"

The Emotional Skill, Empathy

In intimate relationships, an important ideal is to feel emotionally valued and accepted without conditions, to feel unconditional positive regard from and for each other. Empathy, the skill of affirming feelings, is the glue of your relationship. It feels good to have your successes and strengths accepted, but you feel especially loved and respected when your vulnerabilities and weaknesses are embraced. To empathize with your partner, you imagine for a moment that you are her. You imagine that you think and feel as she does, that you experience her reality. When you are empathic with your lover, you offer the greatest gift: acceptance, nurturance, warmth, respect, reassurance, validation, care, patience, and appreciation. These are the wonderful qualities of a healthy relationship.
