I'm aware of the health benefits of nurturing, intimate relationships whether it is with a friend, loved one, or romantic partner.

In our modern culture the word "intimate" has informally become synonymous with sexual intercourse. What we mean here is more in line with the dictionary definition relating to your deepest and private nature or a close, long-term association with another person.

Intimacy between individuals is borne of a reciprocal trust and safety to disclose personal aspects of the self, depending on the kind of intimacy involved. Each relationship is usually cultivated over time and can be quite unique in its makeup. In fact, Howard and Charlotte Clinebell have distinguished at least twelve different types of intimacy which can apply to different relationships. Most intimate relationships involve multiple types of sharing that unfold slowly within the relationship as safety is established. The types are:

- Emotional intimacy (being emotionally vulnerable).
- Intellectual intimacy (closeness in the world of ideas).
- Sexual intimacy (erotic or orgasmic closeness).
- Aesthetic intimacy (sharing experiences of beauty).
- Creative intimacy (sharing in acts of creating together).
- Recreational intimacy (relating in experiences of fun and play).
- Work intimacy (the closeness of sharing common tasks).
- Communication intimacy (the source of all types of true intimacy including both verbal and nonverbal communication).
- Crisis intimacy (closeness in coping with problems and pain).
- Conflict intimacy (facing/struggling with differences).
- Commitment intimacy (mutuality derived from common self-investment).
- Spiritual intimacy (sharing ultimate concerns).

The more types of intimacy we experience with another, the more likely we feel that we are accurately seen and understood. This in turn engenders a lack of self-consciousness and sense of authenticity when we are in the other's presence.

The human brain is a social organ. We are literally hardwired for relationships. Recent scientific research indicates that the brain, the mind, and relationships are so integrally connected and interdependent that we need at least one intimate relationship to thrive. Indeed, our wellness depends on it.

The type of intimacy is not crucial. It can be with a spouse or partner, a family member, friend, or a helping professional. As long as the relationship is characterized by positive regard, self-disclosure, and a sense of unself-conscious connection, there is a kind of integration that happens within both people's mind and body that is health-enhancing.

Research documenting the correlation between intimate connections with others and emotional/psychological wellbeing and physical health has been steadily increasing. Benefits include increased longevity; decreased depression and other psychological disorders; decreased onset or increased recovery from illnesses such as heart disease, various forms of cancer, epilepsy, inflammatory bowel disease and arthritis. In addition, social support and interpersonal relationships have also been reported to influence the physical health of the elderly, an individual's immune system, reproductive health, smoking and drinking habits as well as other risk-taking behaviors.

Important health tip: Be sure to make time to be with someone you like or love. It's good for both of you mentally, emotionally, and physically.
I have had the experience of feeling completely understood and acknowledged by another person.

Have you ever had the experience of "feeling felt" by another person? Of knowing without question that they really "get" you? Have you ever experienced another person with such empathy and understanding that you are able to sense who they are, what they think, and what they feel?

It may sound like we're talking about mind-reading or a psychic experience, but this experience that many people have had many times, is soundly substantiated by science. Daniel J. Siegel, PhD, author of the groundbreaking book, *The Developing Mind*, calls the experience "mindsight"—or the "seventh sense." It's an experience where two brains become integrated in mutuality. Two separate entities that are differentiated coming together as a whole. During the exchange, verbal and, most importantly, nonverbal communication is collaborative.

There are many examples of this phenomenon that we see every day. Have you ever noticed that when you are deep in conversation with someone you find yourself assuming the same body position as the other person, or vice versa? Or perhaps those people who say they know each other so well that they find themselves finishing each other's sentences? Or when you can communicate volumes with someone in just a glance? That's collaborative communication which is the result of mindsight. The neuroscientific understanding is that the brains of both people are influencing each other.

The other aspect of collaborative communication is that the content of the responses are contingent to the message—they accurately respond to what is being said. That's the skill that is required in "reflective dialogue," which is when the listeners replies accurately reflect what the speaker is saying so the speaker feels heard. More on this can be found in the commentary for the statement "I am a good listener" in the Communicating section.

So how does mindsight work?

Our brains have evolved with mechanisms that allow us to read the internal states of others. Recently, neuroscientists discovered in the motor area in the frontal cortex of the human brain a region they called "mirror neurons." These neurons appear to be responsible for our capacity for empathy, which is one of the first emotions that infants express. These mirror neurons enable us to understand social experience and to put ourselves in the other's shoes. We understand others' internal states by the states that the mirror neuron system creates inside us. Mirror neurons can move from perception, to motor action, to emotional state, to bodily response very rapidly and outside of our awareness. This is how we get a clear sense of what the other person is feeling.

The ramifications are profound. Emotional understanding of others is directly linked to our awareness and understanding of ourselves. The more we are in touch with our own internal landscape, the better we are at understanding the internal landscapes of those we love. The more available we are to our own experiences with insight, the more we can empathize with the experiences of others. The more we can empathize with others, the more we can engage in compassionate action. Mindsight is the broader term that encompasses all three: a visceral insight and ability to look inward to know one’s self, the ability to empathize with others, and the ability to respond with compassion. This experience, when repeated over time, is the foundation for an integrated relationship and paves the way to wellbeing through trust and intimacy.


*My search for my own identity is often aided by seeing myself in the mirror that others provide when our relationship is authentic. My search for a way to connect with you and to create ways of revealing me to you is, in part, my search for my own identity. As I grow in trust, my uncovering of me becomes an intrinsically meaningful quest in its own right. The questing is the being. I show my being to you. Loving me, I can trust you to see me whole, to experience me uncovered, unfiltered. The more fully comfortable I am with my own being, the less risk I experience in showing me to you. And in seeing myself as whole and worthy, I am able to see you as you are,*
with little defensive distortion. I come to see you not as a threat to me, but as an adventure, an experience in seeing and feeling.

Genuine intimacy is a pervasive human want. It is made possible by our seeing each other as we are, without our masks, filters, or facades. In trust and intimacy I am able to show you my vulnerability. I recognize that my concept of vulnerability arises out of my defensive and protective fear. I project into you the capacity to wound me. If I trust you in depth, I know that you will not hurt me and also that I cannot be hurt. Thus, if I am hurt, I hurt myself. I have two sources of inner calm: my trust in myself and my trust in you. Genuine intimacy, achieved only in a state of high trust, is a calming state because risk of hurt is minimized. If risks are present, they loom small relative to the rewards of intimacy.

Researchers have postulated that when we have not had this kind of caring connection in our formative years, our mirror neuron system gets damped down and our ability to empathize can be severely reduced. The good news is that, unless there is damage to the brain, we can consciously increase our ability to connect empathetically with others. We know that the brain is capable of forming new neural networks well into advanced age. It's never too late to connect to ourselves or to others.

Exercise:
The Internal Welcome (Creating a Space for Connection)

- Go to a busy public place (e.g., a shopping mall, airport, or busy restaurant) where you can easily sit and "people-watch." Choose a comfortable place to sit.
- Take a moment to become aware of your breathing, as you settle into the present, the here and now.
- Allow yourself to begin to notice your surroundings and the people around you. Simply observe without judgment or seeking to make a connection. [If eye contact occurs, it's OK, but that's not your goal at this point.]
- As you become aware of each person, silently greet each one with the following phrase: "I welcome you as you are." (If you wish, you may substitute any adaptation that is more comfortable. Some people say "I greet God's spark within you" or "I greet you as my brother/sister.")
- Notice the person's face, body posture, and movements and see if you can find a place in your body (it might be from memory) that might correspond with what that person might be feeling. Just notice and acknowledge it, repeating your phrase, "I welcome you as you are." Keep it simple. Don't do anything more with it.
- Then choose another person and repeat the exercise.
- Continue breathing slowly and gently as you notice whatever feelings emerge throughout the exercise. Especially notice your body sensations. Keep returning to simple observations without judgments for the person you are observing-or for yourself.
- If your thoughts wander at any point during this process, don't worry. Just gently guide them back to your breath and then resume the exercise.
- Afterwards, write in your journal or share with a friend what you experienced in this exercise.
I am able to experience a gratifying relationship despite the presence of unresolved conflicts.

To have a happy relationship, we need to resolve all our conflicts-right?

Wrong, according to the preeminent marriage researcher, John Gottman, PhD, in his book The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. In fact, he says that his research with thousands of couples over the last 30 years indicates 69% of all relational conflicts are not resolvable! Differences in family-of-origin and cultural rules, personality, lifestyle, or personal values often preclude a permanent resolution.

So do we throw up our hands and take up residence in a monastery? Not at all. Gottman's research indicates that while the problem may not be solved, it's how we deal with it that predicts whether we'll have an intimate and happy union. He's become very good at predicting whether a relationship will stand the test of time. He can predict in the first 5 minutes of a discussion about a problem, with 91% accuracy, if the marriage will last (at least up to 14 years--the limit of his research studies so far)! He can also predict in the first 3 minutes, with 96% accuracy, if the problem being discussed will be resolved.

The bottom line secret to a happy relationship, says Gottman, is building a friendship. This entails cultivating certain awarenesses and learning some relatively simple skills and new behaviors. In comments to follow, we'll look at some of these in more depth. First, let's get a brief overview of what his findings show.

Build Rather Than Fix

Friendship is borne of fondness, respect, and admiration. If how we interact conveys respect and appreciation, even if we don't agree, a relationship can thrive. Gottman has identified what he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. When these are permanently entrenched in a relationship, it doesn't bode well. The big four are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (ignoring). None of these styles convey fondness, respect, or admiration. Even if partners resort to the Four Horsemen from time to time, the relationship can still thrive if the partners are able to allow themselves to be influenced by the other person. So even though you sometimes get critical and defensive, if you are ultimately able to take in what the other is saying and learn from it, the relationship is likely to thrive.

So how does fondness and friendship get forged? Gottman says it comes from building and nurturing positive interactions with each other. He's identified The Magic Ratio of 5:1. If you and your partner experience a minimum of five positive interactions to every one negative interaction, you should fare well. Of course if the ratio is even higher, so much the better. So the message is: build on the strengths-don't focus on fixing the weaknesses. Build positive experiences in the little everyday interactions rather than relying on those special big romantic getaways and expensive gifts. Remember why you fell in love in the first place. Pay attention to each other in little ways. Keep track of and mentally recycle what you appreciate rather than what you don't. Get to know each other and discover what makes the other person hum. Then find ways to help your partner experience it more. The more he hums, the more likely it is that he will want to help you hum. And pretty soon you are humming along together, conflicts, defects and all.

Experiment:

- Take a few minutes to write down things you appreciate, respect, or admire about your partner.
- Watch for little opportunities where you can let your partner know you appreciate her. Don't just unload the list all at once. Spread it out artfully in the course of your daily interactions.
- Do this for at least two weeks.
- Keep adding to the list as you go.
- Write in your journal or share with a friend what you notice as a result of doing the experiment.
I'm aware of the other person's attempts to make a meaningful connection even when they are indirect.

When John Gottman, PhD, opened what has been dubbed "The Love Lab" at the University of Washington in 1990 he had some predetermined, "common knowledge" notions about what he would find in his research.

As the data was compiled, he realized that he couldn't have been more wrong.

The Love Lab is a fully furnished apartment, equipped with video cameras, one-way mirrors, heart-rate monitors, and equipment for measuring pulse amplitude, jitteriness, and skin conductivity. Couples stay in the apartment for a weekend and interact normally while they are being recorded in various ways. Subjects report that they soon forget that they are being monitored. Researchers code their moment-by-moment interactions and correlate them with physical and emotional reactions. The mountain of data this intensive research produces, combined with long-term follow-ups, has put nails in the coffin of some long-held, cherished ideas about what produces happy relationships.

When he began the research, he believed, like so many others, that self-disclosure was the key to intimacy. His research found otherwise. Rather than the long "heart-to-hearts" expected from happily married subjects, it was the small, daily interactions that we may not even think about that promoted intimacy. This led to his identifying "bids for connection." They come in all shapes, sizes, and subject matter. They can be a direct request to spend some time together, or they can be the slightest touch. They can be a look, gesture, little comment, question, or even a criticism or complaint. We all make bids for each other's attention all the time. Our happiness together, says the research data, depends on how we respond and are responded to hundreds of times a day.

Daniel Siegel, PhD, in The Developing Mind, concurs. He refers to this as "reflective dialogue." Very simply, if the response is appropriate to the bid, correctly reflects the bid, and the bidder has the feeling that she's been correctly understood, then connection has been made. There is a resulting coherence in the brains of both the bidder and the responder. It just feels good to have our spoken or unspoken requests for connection met positively. It's a feeling of completion.

Gottman identified three essential responses to bids for connection.

1. **Turning-toward:** The receiver of the bid responds positively with humor, respect, attention, or a sense of joining in. This response over time builds trust and respect and develops stable, long-lasting relationships, rich in good feelings for each other.

2. **Turning-away:** This involves ignoring another's bid or acting preoccupied. If this is a regular response, it is very destructive to relationships.

3. **Turning-against:** This response is often belligerent or argumentative, involving ridicule and/or hostility. It's very destructive. It doesn't engender friendship, respect, or admiration. Most relationships are not likely to last long with this kind of chronic response.

There are two basic kinds of bids: verbal and nonverbal. The verbal bids include thoughts, feelings, observations, opinions, and invitations. The nonverbal include touching, facial expressions, affiliating gestures (e.g., a motion with the arm, or the OK sign), vocalizing (e.g., laughing, grunting, sighing, etc.).

**Turning-toward Responses:** These responses let the bidder know that they are being welcomed, understood, or joined. There's either an explicit or implicit communication that the bidder matters. Here are some examples:

He: "Wow! There's a huge boat on the river." She: "Is the river deep enough for it?"

She: "This stupid computer! I'm sick of this job!" He: "Sounds like you need a break. Go get a cup of coffee and I'll find that number for tech support."

He: "I can't believe that you were so late!" She: "Sorry. I get that you're mad. Do you want b talk about it?"

She: "I don't suppose you'd ever think of going for a walk with me." He: "I might. Hey, I've gdt an idea: Do you
Fuzzy Bidding

Fuzzy bidding is bidding that is not easily identified by the receiver:

1. We make ambiguous bids on purpose to avoid vulnerability or emotional risk.
2. We unintentionally communicate poorly, such as using inexplicit language.
3. We frame bids in negative ways that are hard for others to hear or accept.
4. We fail to acknowledge our needs in the first place.

For example, “We should do something romantic sometime” or, with her arms akimbo, “We never do anything fun!” instead of making a specific request such as, “Let’s get a babysitter for this Saturday night and go to that little inn our friends told us about.”

Sometimes the action can be in forms that we don’t even recognize as bids for connection. One man realized that his wife often made bids by asking him questions or presenting problems about their business. He usually responded with irritation. When he viewed those same interactions with his new awareness of bids for connection and responded accordingly, it made a big difference in their relationship.

The most difficult kinds of bids are in the form of criticism, complaint, or lament. They are hard to recognize as bids for connection, let alone respond to. Nevertheless, if you want to build a positive relationship, the challenge is to muster the patience, creativity, and trust to turn toward the bidder with a helpful response.

Turning-away Responses: Responses that lack coherence are problematic. Some of them are simply the result of “mindlessness”-responses that are outside of our immediate awareness. Here are three types of “Turning Away” responses:

1. Preoccupied responses: The receiver is involved in another activity. E.g., She wants to share her day and he wants to watch the news, so he ignores what she is saying.
2. Disregarding responses: The receiver ignores the bidder or focuses on insignificant details of the bid. E.g., He tells her about a new car he wants to buy and she rambles off in a soliloquy about what color it should be, completely derailing his excitement.
3. Interrupting responses: The receiver introduces unrelated matters or counterbids. E.g., She tells him about a fear she’s grappling with and he interrupts by talking about a new project he’s beginning.

Do you recognize any of the above in your own relationships?

Turning-against Responses:

1. Contemptuous responses: The receiver responds with hurtful, disrespecting comments, or put-downs. E.g., “You, lose weight? I doubt it!”
2. Belligerent responses: The receiver is provocative or combative, as if they are looking for a fight. E.g., He: “You look tired, dear.” She: “I wouldn't be if you got off your ass and helped more.”
3. Contradictory responses: The receiver seems ready for a debate or argument. It’s less hostile than the contemptuous and belligerent responses above, but it still blocks the attempt to connect. E.g., she: “I just got a book about homeopathy that I’m excited to read.” He: “My friend says that stuff is all just a bunch of voodoo.”
4. Domineering responses: The receiver attempts to control the bidder by getting them to withdraw, retreat, or submit. There is often a negative parental tone. E.g., “Now dear, that really is no way to behave.”
5. Critical responses: The receiver issues a broad-based attack on bidder's character, using global terms like always or never, or statements of blame or betrayal. E.g., “The problem with you is that you always let people down!”
6. Defensive responses: The receiver creates a sense of separation by disavowing all responsibility and being an innocent victim, thus discounting the reality of the bidder. E.g., “I don’t care what you say, I didn’t do anything wrong!”

When met with either “turned against” or “turned away” responses, the bidder will quickly give up bidding in that same way. Gottman says, “Among people in stable marriages, spouses re-bid just 20% of the time. In marriages that are headed for divorce, people hardly re-bid at all. Instead, they simply fade away from conversations, relinquishing their attempts to connect. Such reactions are a sobering display of what it means to lose your confidence and enthusiasm for a relationship.”

We are not suggesting that anyone can turn toward their partner all the time. It’s just not realistic, or even
desirable. If we want to build a long-lasting emotional connection, the idea is to turn towards our loved one's bids as much as we can, while also caring for our own needs. (More about that in Commentary #6 of this section.)

Marital Masters
In his book, *The Relationship Cure*, Gottman talks about the "marital masters." They are the "folks who are so good at handling conflict that they make marital squabbles look like fun. When they disagree, they're able to stay connected and engaged with each other. Rather than becoming defensive and hurtful, they pepper their disputes with flashes of affection, intense interest, and mutual respect—and seem to have access to their sense of humor even when they are arguing."

Like the marital masters, to increase our relating abilities we can do our best to employ open affection, kidding around, surprises, and humor. The idea is to build up our relationship-resilience bank accounts. The more of these enthusiastic, positive responses we deposit into our relationships during normal times, the more we have to draw on during difficult times. By repeatedly turning toward our partners, we're literally building those neural networks into our brains. When an argument arises and the emotional flooding begins (heart pounds, body tightens, and clear thinking is nearly impossible), we have more ready access to that goofy grin or friendly reminder that soothes us both, helps us re-engages our clear thinking, and enables us to remember that we're talking with someone we love, respect, and/or admire.

- One of the best practices couples can cultivate is the simple self-applied question before we respond or choose not to respond: "Will this serve to connect us or disconnect us?"
- On the other hand, in the interest of balance and lightening up, remember that we can make it a point to turn toward our loved ones' bids for connection when we can and forgive ourselves when we can't. Remember, it's all just a learning process.

In the next commentary we look at the healing power of making repairs when we blow it.
When we are upset with each other, I'm able to respond appropriately and focus on rebuilding our trust and intimacy.

Research from the University of Washington by John Gottman, PhD, has dispelled some long-held myths about what makes stable and happy intimate relationships. One such myth was if you fight a lot, you won't be happy with your partner and your relationship won't last. It seemed to be a reasonable theory, but the research didn't substantiate it. Another myth is that if you don't confront your problems with each other and work through them to a mutually satisfactory resolution, you won't have a happy marriage.

Gottman and his team found that couples who fight frequently and couples who avoid conflict can be as stable and happy in their relationships as those couples who confront issues and calmly talk things through. He found that the agreement between people about how they deal with problems was more important than their style of relating. In other words, if both people preferred a vigorous fight now and then, they had a better chance of being satisfied with their marriage. However, if one person preferred to avoid conflict and the other person preferred a good argument to clear the air, then it required a lot more understanding and compromise to have a happy marriage.

The most important factor in predicting marital longevity and satisfaction was the ratio of positive interactions to negative. In general, if the couple enjoyed five positive interactions to every negative (ratio of 5:1), or better, then the partners had the best chance for happiness together.

However we relate with one another, we all get upset with our partners from time to time. Sometimes it results in a very intense emotional state that psychologists call "flooding," which alters our physiological functioning and hampers our ability to think. The most immediate cue to this powerful experience is the heart rate. It can increase 30 beats per minute within the space of a single heartbeat. Muscles tense causing labored or decreased breathing. And most importantly, the ability to think clearly is severely reduced because the thinking part of the brain literally gets put on hold and the emotional part of the brain takes over. For survival reasons, a part of the limbic area of the brain which controls emotions has the ability to bypass the cortex, or the thinking part of the brain. It was undoubtedly useful when we were living in the midst of wild animals.

Daniel Siegel, PhD, a neuropsychiatrist, tells a story about walking with his son on a trail in the wilderness. All of a sudden he heard himself yell his son's name and tell him to stop. His thinking brain had not registered seeing the rattlesnake very close to where his son was stepping, but apparently his emotional processing center registered the information and jumped immediately to the motor region of his brain which then prompted the words to come out of his mouth without him having any conscious awareness of what was happening. After his son followed the directive, stopped, and potential disaster was averted, he discovered why he was shouting. If he'd had to think about it, the snake would have bitten his son.

This is the same mechanism that is operational when we automatically respond with knee-jerk reactivity to something our partner says or does, so it's helpful to understand what happens.

First, let's look at how experiences get wired in the brain. Human beings are so good at the survival game because our brains have a remarkable ability to cross-reference an astounding amount of data. We have an estimated 100 billion neurons, each with 10,000 connections. That means we have trillions of synaptic connections. The computing power within each of our brains is awesome. Its ability to make connections can be both a blessing and a curse. For survival reasons, in real-life experiences sometimes events can get wired in strange ways that create a lot of trouble in our relationships.

Here is a simplified example to illustrate how this works: Frankie is three years old. He's walking with his mother when a neighbor's dog charges them and bites Frankie. At the same time a plane is passing overhead and a red car is driving by. Frankie is upset but isn't hurt badly and quickly forgets the incident—but his brain doesn't. Fast-forward 30 years. Frankie, now 33, is walking with his wife. A dog starts barking at the same time a plane is passing overhead and there is a red car parked on the side of the road. Frankie suddenly feels threatened, gets very irritated with a racing heart and labored breathing, attributes his irritation to what his wife just said (because...
the brain is a very creative story-making machine), and verbally blasts her in a defensive burst of reactivity. His wife is stunned, can't figure out what she said wrong, and feels very hurt. Frankie's brain perceived a threat and jumped into a kind of survival reactivity that emotionally pushed his wife away, thus harming the trust and closeness they had both been feeling.

When your brain disconnects from the thinking function, your body is flooded with adrenalin, the hormone that gives the body increased strength and speed with which to combat the perceived threat or to escape (fight or flight). You can't think straight and your bodily senses are obliterated by your intense emotions. You are in a primal, survival mode. Think of a cornered animal and you're approximating what is going on emotionally within. If this is happening with you and your partner about being late to dinner, do you think you have a prayer of coming to a reasonable conclusion to a discussion about time management?

What can you do? Here are some suggestions:

- When you are both calm, talk with your partner about how it feels when you enter into emotional flooding and ask him how he feels when he gets flooded. If you can think about it as a neurological process, then the problem becomes your brains, not your selves. Making that distinction can do wonders for your understanding and respect. And it's excellent material for a humorous quip and good laugh, which is a wonderful method for quickly reconnecting.
- See if together you can devise a signal that will indicate that you're starting to flood and you need to take a break to calm the electrical activity in the limbic area and lessen the adrenalin surge before you reach that cornered animal/protection state where nothing productive can occur.
- Researchers have found that it takes 20-30 minutes after a flooding experience for the brain to reconnect and the adrenalin levels in the body to drop, so give yourself plenty of time to come back to balance before you resume your discussion.
- Men are much slower to return to calm than women, they tend to experience flooding more intensely than women, and are more easily overwhelmed by marital conflict. A pattern commonly seen in relationships was poignantly described by Daniel Goleman in his book, Emotional Intelligence.

> As I was entering a restaurant on a recent evening, a young man stalked out the door, his face set in an expression both stony and sullen. Close on his heels a young woman came running, her fists desperately pummeling his back while she yelled, "Goddamn you! Come back here and be nice to me!"

Gottman's research has revealed that women are usually the initiators of discussions about marital problems. He says that marital discussions invariably end on the same note they begin. If they are initiated harshly, then flooding is more likely, and the end result is likely to be some variation of the above scene. Be mindful about how you begin and you'll be more likely to have a productive ending.

- Research shows that men tend to maintain their distress longer by recycling their negative thoughts. If you continue mentally rehashing what you are angry about, then your brain will remain disconnected and you won't be able to process all the information and make a sound decision about how to proceed. You need to change your emotional channel and get your brain connected again. Here are some channel changers that work: physical activity like exercise or hard work, something requiring total concentration like a complex game, TV or movies, meditation, deep breathing, or talking with a skillful friend or coach. Use whatever works for you to soothe yourself into a calmer state of mind and body. Support your partner in doing the same.

After you've calmed down and have an integrated (connected) brain again, take stock of the situation and evaluate what you need to do to re-establish closeness. Gottman calls them "repair attempts." The magic words, "I'm sorry," often do wonders. Sometimes it's just a touch, or a look, or an unrelated subject. Very often both partners completely miss each other's repair attempts, which can cause a lot of undue mental and physical stress. Like a bid for connection (see commentary 4 in this section), the repair attempt can be in myriad forms that can only be recognized if you are in present time and your brain is integrated enough to be able to notice it. The elements that are necessary for repair are the same that are necessary for connection: generously pay attention to and appreciate each other and build a friendship as the basis of your relationship. It's never too late for a repair attempt. And most often, the repair can actually build a stronger connection. When you understand the power of repair, it can help you to lighten up, which makes for a lot more fun in your relationship, whatever your relating style is.

With awareness and practice, you can strengthen your ability to keep your brain integrated which can translate into more emotional intelligence in all of your relationships and less wear on your body. If emotional flooding is a frequent experience in a relationship, intimacy is more difficult to achieve and there is a higher likelihood that the relationship will end. It's tiring to be in a constant state of alert. It simply wears you out.
You don't have to understand why people do what they do. It can help to just understand that we all have different life experiences that are sometimes wired into harebrained beliefs and conclusions that often circumvent intimacy. Remembering this can help you to detach from interactions that you previously automatically interpreted as personal affronts. When you can think about how differently our brains are wired, perhaps it will be easier to approach your partner, family member, friend, or colleague with fewer defenses, more compassion, and more light-heartedness, which will help build healthy relationships that are so essential to your wellbeing.
I respect the other person's boundaries and am clear about my own.

When we look at the organizing principles of any healthy system, there are two essential elements that allow for maximum resilience—integration and differentiation. Integration is coming together into a functional whole. Differentiation is breaking down into specialized components. These two principles are particularly relevant in the sphere of relationships.

- If the emphasis of a relationship is too heavily on integration, it would be "enmeshed" with both people liking and disliking all the same things. Individuality would be discouraged and compliance would be a spoken or unspoken rule.
- If the emphasis is too heavily on differentiation, connection and intimacy would be discouraged. The partners would be essentially two individuals sharing the same space, but little else.
- Differentiation, the respect for each other's individuality and private needs, and at the same time, integration, the ability to come together in supportive interactions on a daily basis, provides the most stable and satisfying kinds of relationship.

Differentiation within relationships has to do with personal boundaries. Psychologists Merle Fossum and Marilyn Mason, in *Facing Shame*, talk about interpersonal boundaries as the invisible line, rigid or permeable, which defines the limits of each individual in the relationship. In healthy relationships, the permeability of each partner's boundary is set and regulated by that individual. In unhealthy relationships, the boundary is set and regulated by the other.

One of the most elegant expressions of interpersonal boundaries and self-responsibility comes from Byron Katie (www.thework.org), a remarkable woman who transformed her life from bottomless despair to boundless love and freedom. She now guides thousands of people with a simple process of investigating our thoughts that she calls *The Work or Inquiry*. In her characteristically simple way, she says that as much as she's tried, she can only find three kinds of business. There's my business (my own thoughts, beliefs, and actions), your business (your thoughts, beliefs, and actions), and God's business (everything that isn't my business or your business). When I'm in your business or God's business, then no one is taking care of my business and my life isn't working very well. When I'm taking care of my business, then I'm taking care of the one area in which I actually have some control. Nothing else is really under my control.

Consider the widely-held beliefs that I am somehow responsible for my loved one's happiness and my happiness depends on my loved one. On the surface it appears to be very loving-witness all the love songs professing this kind of love. But when you look a little more closely, you can see that it is, in fact, quite disrespectful. The boundaries are not healthy. If I'm responsible for your happiness, I'm saying that I'm the source of your power, your creativity, and your responsibility for yourself. I'm attempting to take away the very things that give you your sense of self-esteem. I'm making your happiness about me! How very self-centered. And if you are responsible for my happiness, then what power do I have? What chance do I have for self-esteem? I can't be happy unless you allow me to be. That sounds more like slavery than a partnership.

Jordan Paul, PhD, and Margaret Paul, PhD, wrote a book with the provocative title: *Do I Have to Give Up Me to Be Loved by You?* It's a concise question that addresses this issue of boundaries, responsibility, and intimacy. They show that when we give ourselves up, rather than helping the relationship, we are hurting it because we are not a fully present participant.

We cannot do more here than touch on the subject. It's a lifelong learning process that unfolds from daily awareness and "small moves." Finding the skillful balance between being interested and supportive of our loved ones, being respectful of their process, and clearly and kindly asserting our own needs and wants is a delicate dance. All people and couples are unique and have to find their own way. Use the resources that are provided in your Resource Center to continue your exploration.

Perhaps the following questions can help. Be honest. Take a moment and write down your responses. It helps to put your thoughts and feelings on paper. Just let your responses emerge as a stream of consciousness—don't...
In what ways do you get into your partner's business or cross her boundaries? With your thinking? With your words? With your actions? How does it feel in your body when you intrude into your partner's business?

- How do you feel when your partner is in your business? How do you react to him? What are your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions?

- In what ways do you give yourself up? What thoughts and feelings do you notice?

- What are some creative and kind ways you can live more from within your own integrity and request respect for your boundaries? How might this bring you closer with your loved ones? Brainstorm some possibilities.

Once you have questioned your thoughts, beliefs, and actions, see if you can apply your new awareness to your relationships. Think in terms of small moves, slowly making almost unperceivable daily adjustments that add up to big improvements over time.
My sexual education enables me to make responsible and caring decisions about sexual activities.

How would you rate the sex education you received? The role modeling you had for an integrated view of sex? Your level of comfort in speaking about sex? Your degree of self-awareness about your own body?

Young people today enter their adolescence in a world that is plagued with epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases, some of which are literally threatening the survival of certain nations, certain races of people. One in four new infections of HIV in the U.S. today occurs in people below the age of 22, and HIV infection is increasing more rapidly among this age group than in any other. Kids are experimenting with sex much earlier and often with multiple partners. By the time they reach age twenty, almost 77 percent of women and 86 percent of men have had sex. Because part of being a teenager is taking risks, many act as if they are invincible—testing limits and questioning authority.

The need for preparation for and education about sex and its profound responsibilities is still bypassed by many parents, who assume that their kids "know more than we do" because they are exposed to more. Many are afraid to speak about sex simply and clearly. Sex education is generally left up to school systems. But many schools lack properly educated personnel. Some refuse to mention homosexuality. Others fail to offer specific instruction in the use of condoms. In many schools, these factors add up to making sex education classes a joke for the adolescents in attendance.

Another painful but necessary side of increased openness about sex is that we are hearing about the abuses that used to go undisclosed and undiscussed. We are discovering how common sexual abuse has been and still is! Parents, teachers, priests, psychotherapists, gurus—taking advantage of their power over a child's or a client's life—have misused their positions of authority to gain personal sexual favors. We have learned that others, while not the sexual perpetrators, have been enablers. They stood by or denied the obvious signs that something was amiss. It is no wonder that many today despair at the state of the world, the state of the family, the state of the church. Without consciously facing the truth of what is, we will unconsciously repeat it, or encourage its repetition.

Abuses and epidemics aside, a quick glance at the newspaper, an overheard conversation, discussions with friends, perhaps an examination of your own thoughts, will reveal that problems, misconceptions, and fears about sex still abound. Here are a few typical statements:

"Before we got married we did it all the time. Now s/he just doesn't seem to have any interest in sex. What's wrong?"

"I must be abnormal. I've never had an orgasm at the same time as my partner."

"If only I ________, then I could please my partner sexually."

"He says he really loves me. So why do I feel like a sex object?"

The basic problem remains: rather than living sex as a total body-mind experience, we have learned to block off sexual energy or to confine it to our genital organs. It is here that we get "turned on" and here that we hold our guilt, our confusion, our fear. The needs for caring, and tenderness, and total body involvement are unmet when the focus of sex becomes intercourse alone. The result is disappointment, frustration, and damage to your self-concept.

Despite their education or their best intentions, many still consider sex dirty, part of the "lower" nature, something to be feared, earned, or supplied dutifully; they still consider the body secondary to the mind, a thing you attend to when necessary and keep carefully covered up. Few of us have escaped contamination from the fear, embarrassment, confusion, and anger that surrounded sex in the thoughts and words and behaviors of our parents, teachers, ministers, and friends. The relationship of sex with all of life is hard to discover when it isn’t talked about in a balanced, commonsense, and respectful way in school, church, or polite company.

The result of all this confusion is the contamination or blockage of our sexual energy, leading to a range of...
problems that include:

- Impotence or frigidity
- Compulsiveness or sexual addiction
- Dysfunctional relationships
- Sexual abuse, including rape
- Diseases, especially of the reproductive organs
- Physical, emotional, and spiritual pain

Most of us need help-as couples or single people-to accept ourselves as sexual beings, to accept sex as a normal part of life, and to use our sexual expression in ways that enhance life, rather than promote disease, unhappiness, fear, and death.
With regard to sexual interactions and sexual advances, I say strongly and clearly "yes" to what I want and "no" to what I don't want.

Many of us learned as children that it was not OK to say "no" to touch. Remember all those hugs and kisses from aunts, uncles or grandparents who hugged too tight, or smelled funny, or pinched your cheeks too hard? Did it feel yucky to have them hug or kiss you?

In order to learn that they have sovereignty over their bodies, and to learn how to say "no" when appropriate, children must be allowed to accept and refuse touch, even from relatives. It's hard on a parent if Junior doesn't want to kiss Grandma, but it's more important that children know that we respect their feelings and the fact that they have the right to say "no."

Today, sexual abuse is a major problem in our country. It results in demoralization, depression, repression, loss of belief in the ability to protect oneself, and fear of people. The most common age at which sexual abuse begins is three. Heterosexual males commit the vast majority of sexual abuse. Nearly 90% of sexual abuse is committed by someone the child knows, not by a stranger.

Many boys grow up thinking that ignoring the word "no"--especially from a female--is an expression of their strength and manliness. Regarding males, many girls and young women were taught to be nice rather than honest towards males--which essentially results in deciding that it's better to be hurt by a male than be perceived of as unfeminine by the male who seeks to hurt you.

Many women are reluctant to appear rude because they fear they'll cause someone to be angry. In the context of being approached by a stranger in a public situation, the anger you may cause will rarely be a step towards violence. Indeed, if perceived as a rude woman, you are a far less attractive target than a polite one.

Maintaining sovereignty over our body requires that we be wary of anyone, male or female, especially a stranger, who ignores the word "no"--male and female. If we are to maintain the integrity of our body and soul, we need to care less about protocol and politeness, and to practice until we are comfortable saying and doing what needs to be said and done.

Understand that when a man in our culture says "no," it's usually the end of a discussion, but when a woman says "no," it's the beginning of a negotiation. --Gavin de Becker, Protecting the Gift: Keeping Children and Teenagers Safe (And Parents Sane)

If young men learn how to hear "no," and young women learn that it's all right to explicitly reject, then acts of violence to the integrity and sovereignty of the body will dramatically decline and our sexual wellness will be enhanced.

In intimate relationships, being clear with sexual boundaries is just as important. Self-assertive sex means allowing yourself permission to say clearly what you want, and don't want.

"Yes" means: "I know what I want, what feels good to me, and how best to achieve it." Liberating yourself sexually allows you to guide your partner. Do not assume that the other can read your mind, or your body. Placing sole responsibility for your sexual gratification on your partner is one way to increase the likelihood that you will leave the encounter dissatisfied. Learning what feels good, what works for you, may mean practice and experimentation on your own. Self-massage skills are being taught by many sex educators and therapists today to aid in helping both men and women to rediscover their sensuality and to unlock pleasure centers throughout the body.

"No" means: Allowing yourself to set limits, to say "no" to any variations, or to the whole process if you do not enjoy it or feel good about it. Many times your discomfort is a shared one, and your courage in calling a halt to the proceedings may be a great gift to your partner as well. When people care about each other, they respect each other's limits. Otherwise the encounter can quickly become tense, superficial, or phony. Anger and resentment build when you feel taken advantage of. Intimacy and trust flourish when you accept the others unique and
special. If you find yourself questioning "Will he/she respect me in the morning?" realize that you are really asking: "Will I be able to accept myself?" Your ability to integrate, to feel OK about your sexual interaction, should be your guiding principle.
I am aware that unrealistic expectations of sex are a source of dissatisfaction.

As a culture we are preoccupied with sex. Sex sells! Check the latest offerings on the local magazine rack, take a critical look at advertisements, examine the contents of the average TV serial—they all underline the preoccupation with sex. This exaggerated importance assigned to sex has led us in search of the multiple orgasm, the simultaneous orgasm, the twenty-minute orgasm, and the G-spot to prove our potency. It has contributed to the pressures and tensions that many experience in connection with sex. It has led us to develop unrealistic expectations of how great sex is supposed to be, how it will solve all our problems, and how there is one perfect person out there for each of us, a soulmate, waiting to be found. When sex is defined in terms of flawless physical bodies and perfectly compatible relationships, in terms of power and prestige and ecstasy, we are bound to feel inadequate when our own experiences fall short.

In her insightful book, *The New Celibacy*, author Gabrielle Brown asserts, unapologetically:

"...we've been taught that sex is the road to personal fulfillment. This is one of the most destructive myths about sex
I am aware that deepening intimacy with my partner is the key to maintaining a healthy sexual relationship.

How different cultures through the ages have responded to the sexual biological mandate is worthy of note. From the Dionysian fertility rites of ancient Greece to the sophisticated professionalism of Japanese geishas who were expected to be accomplished musicians, dancers, actresses and artists, each culture creates its own ideals, rules, and sexual expressions.

However, according to historians, romance and the art of love making was reserved either for the young or for those with the time and money to indulge in it. The vast majority of every population appears to have had humdrum sex lives.

The first blush of romance and sexual encounter is exciting and even an ecstatic experience. This ecstasy usually wears off over time. It is often difficult to enjoy sex with the same partner over many years. However, science now gives us an important key how to master this challenge and enjoy a fulfilling sex life well into old age.

Neuroscience reveals that our brains are social organs; we are literally hardwired for connection with others. We now know that relationships actually form our brains. When we are born, our brains are only 25% developed. The remaining 75% largely depends on the quality of our connections with others. To live healthy, fully integrated lives we need to have a secure connection with at least one other person. This connection certainly doesn't have to involve sex, but it can help.

How we connect with others makes all the difference in the quality of our lives. Forming a secure, loving bond with another person requires a certain self-understanding and insight into one's own mind as well as the ability to understand and empathize with the other person's experience. Neuropsychiatrist Dan Siegel, MD, author of The Developing Mind, calls this ability "mindsight." When people connect in this way, they often report an experience of "feeling felt" by the other and a wonderful sense of wholeness and integration.

Developing and employing mindsight in our relationships requires mastering a skill that increases in complexity (higher functioning and intelligence) and reward (greater intimacy, relaxation and enjoyment) over time. It improves all of our relationships and increases our emotional intelligence. As we embrace the challenge of genuinely caring for each other, understanding and helping each other achieve our goals, sex becomes a lifelong pleasurable adventure that only deepens with time.

Simply put, the most highly erogenous zone of our bodies lies between our ears. Where we put our attention determines our experience.

For a rewarding sex life with your partner, know yourself and at the same time know your partner - not just during the sexual experience, but in every aspect of your lives together. Pay attention to your bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings. Be interested in your partner's bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings. Curiosity about the other is a very sexy, romantic state. Try stepping out of your patterns. Find new ways of connecting with each other and over time you will literally be creating new neural pathways in your brains. No matter how long you have known each other, you each contain worlds of experience and ever-unfolding possibilities for new experience. Explore them with the heart of an adventurer and your life will never be the same.