

The Stages of Intimacy:  
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Relationships that include deep layers of intimacy are more satisfying and long lasting than those lacking in intimacy, and the longer our relationships last, the more intimate they will be!

There are two core foundations required in order to build intimacy in a relationship.

1. Safety.

As a relationship grows, our partner(s) should become our safe harbour. We should feel safe turning to them when we are upset, and they in turn should feel safe with us. Every time we keep a secret, accept our partner(s) as a love worthy, flawed person, every time we are able to demonstrate our commitment and caring to the wellbeing of our partner(s), we are also building a safe space for them.

2. Connection.

We need enough common ground with our partner(s) to feel as if we are connected, understood and in tune, while still having enough differences to be separate individuals.

Deep, long lasting intimacy cannot be developed without these two foundations. The more we feel a sense of safety and connection in our relationships, the more likely we are to be able to develop deeper levels of intimacy.

NOTE: As we go through these levels, remember that these stages are not likely to be done in sequence, where you will fully develop the first level, then move on to the next until you complete all the steps of stage 2. Instead, you will likely find that you develop part of one stage, move to another and develop a bit there. Your relationships will likely develop little bits of various levels simultaneously, and be lacking in others. This is normal, as relationships are subjective to the individuals, the situations shared, past experiences and problem solving styles.

I repeat: These are not steps. You are unlikely to develop all of stage one, then all of stage two, then all of stage three. In fact, most people develop only the first couple levels on intimacy in their relationships before jumping to sex (stage 7).

That is absolutely ok! Not all relationships need to be long term, intensely intimate, relationships.

Each stage, however, does support growth in the next stage, to some extent. Often if we notice we are lacking in a certain type of intimacy, we can work on developing intimacy in one of the previous stages to support growth in the next.

The point of learning this relationship is to begin to understand how intimacy is developed, so that when you are feeling the lack of intimacy in a relationship that you wish to sustain, you can determine what is lacking, and work on building the relationship up (with your partner(s) cooperation, of course).

This handout is a modified version of Laura Dawn Lewis's paper on "Eight Stages of Intimacy", found at [www.couplescompay.com](http://www.couplescompay.com) It has been adapted to be more supportive of the diversity of relationships, and without ranking only long term, sexual and romantic relationships as the top of the relationship hierarchy. We can use these stages (minus stage 7) in order to develop strong relationships with friends and family, not just lovers.

## STAGE ONE: PHYSICAL

Most of our chosen relationships start here. Physical intimacy begins when something about the individual(s) interest us. We find ourselves wanting to get to know them, to connect.

This stage is all about charisma and interest. When our relationships are struggling, it is the lack of physical intimacy that we often notice. If you have ever been so upset with a lover or loved one that the sound of them breathing infuriates you, that everything about how they look and act is irritating, you are feeling the impact of a relationship that does not (in that moment) include physical intimacy.

Check Your Relationship:

Do you:

- like something about the way your partner(s) looks, sounds and/or smells.
- feel proud to be seen together or enjoy being together.
- Feel positive when you think of your partner(s)

Every person defines physical intimacy in a slightly different way. We each have qualities and traits that we hold as attractive. You can explore another person(s) definition of physical attraction by asking questions such as

Who do you admire? If you could swap places with someone, who would it be?  
What is the best and the hardest part of meeting someone new?  
What draws you to a person?

\*\*If your relationship is lacking in physical intimacy, sometimes that is a symptom of the lack of intimacy in other stages. If you are simply not attracted to the person- if nothing about them draws you to them in any way, then you may need to consider the relationship and what that will mean for you.

Even in friendships, we need to feel drawn to the person in some way, in order to build deeper friendships or even to maintain the relationship. For example, I am drawn to people who are compassionate. People who lack compassion often irritate me.

## STAGE TWO AESTHETIC INTIMACY

This stage is all about learning about one another and discovering all the things we have in common. This stage is all about compatibility. Conflicts can arise in relationships when we have strong interests, such as music, that do not align with the interests of the person we are developing a relationship with. Some aesthetics can be a point to compromise on, others not so much.

Consider a person's taste in clothing and style. If you are someone who has a strong interest in fine things, and the person you are trying to develop a relationship has zero interest and prefers to shop at garage sales, this can be a serious point of conflict-particularly if you try to share living space.

Check yourself!

Do you both:

Enjoy the same type of music, shows, entertainment?

View nutrition the same way, be that for health, politics, ethics, or taste?

Conversely:

Do they dress in a way that embarrasses you?

Do you strongly dislike the way they adorn (or do not adorn) their body?

Are you unsure as to if you are compatible with the person you are developing intimacy with? Ask questions! From what type of food they like and why, what music they listen to, what their thoughts are on fashion, tattoos, etc.

Are they neat and tidy? Or do they leave things everywhere?

It is still possible to grow a deeper relationship with (a) person(s) you have dramatically different tastes and interests from. It requires compromise and strong boundaries; communication and compassion for one another. That said, some aesthetics can make sharing space a traumatic experience.

### STAGE THREE RECREATIONAL INTIMACY

What do you enjoy doing? This stage is all about being able to spend time together, enjoying activities together, creating shared experiences.

While having separate interests is absolutely lovely (and even key to healthy boundaries in relationships), common interests are also important when seeking to develop intimacy. Most friendships and even professional relationships will include this type of intimacy, and family members who are close will often also have this type of intimacy. Most people enjoy sharing their favorite activities with someone whose company they enjoy.

Check yourself! Do you

- Enjoy spending time together?
- Have shared interests?
- Have your own “thing”
- Support your partner(s) in enjoying their own “thing”.

If you notice a lack of this type of intimacy, you can ask questions to find things you are both interested in. If neither of you has many interests, you can explore new things together to see what you enjoy doing!

*Questions you can ask: (Excerpts from Laura Dawn Lewis' paper, The Eight Stages of Intimacy)*

*1. What is the most extreme activity you have ever participated in?*

*What Your Partner's Answer Means: Tells you how much of a risk taker he or she is and whether you are compatible in this area of risk tolerance.*

*2. What is your fondest memory from childhood of your father?*

*What Your Partner's Answer Means: Clues you into his/her relationship with his/her father and what activities hold a special sentiment for him/her.*

*3. Do you have any hobbies? What are they?*

*What Your Partner's Answer Means: Helps you identify if he or she has interests outside of work or if work is his/her primary means of fulfillment.*

*4. What would you like to do that you haven't done yet? What Your Partner's*

*Answer Means: Helps you understand if his/her dreams and goals are compatible with yours.*

## STAGE FOUR INTELLECTUAL INTIMACY

Intellectual intimacy is not necessarily about our IQ, our education or our cognitive ability. This stage of intimacy is more about being able to communicate your innermost thoughts and feelings and feel validated and heard. As we develop this type of intimacy we are able to talk about things that are personal to us—our beliefs, our hopes, our opinions. We are able to hear our partner(s) thoughts and ideas without mocking or rebuffing. During this stage we can learn about and share our core beliefs and we get to know one another's character.

This is not to say that we become echo chambers. Deep intellectual intimacy is about being able to share and receive ideas and challenge them respectfully when needed, and / or support and strengthen them.

Intellectual intimacy is required for our personal growth within the relationship, as well as for our personal validation. This stage is important for our friendships, our professional peer relationships, and our romantic relationships. We may also find we grow closer with family members if we can develop this stage of intimacy.

Check yourself!

Are you able to:

- Share your opinions and ideas, when they are not in line with your partner(s) ideas?
- Share thoughts and feelings respectfully, and feel accepted and supported?
- Learn from one another?
- Do you know their fears, dreams, hopes, values and goals?

You can explore this type of intimacy by learning to communicate (that includes active listening) respectfully. Developing communication skills will be vital at this and the next stage.

The following are some questions from the original paper:

- 1. What is the biggest misconception people have about you? What Your Partner's Answer Means: Allows you to understand him/her from the perception he/she believes others have of him/her.*
- 2. Where do you see yourself in ten years? What Your Partner's Answer Means: Clues you in to his/her aspirations, dreams, and goals. Also lets you know if this*

*is a person who defines their destiny or lets others do it for him/her.*

*3. What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment? What Your Partner's Answer Means: Lets you find out what he/she thinks of as important and what his/her values are.*

*4. How do you define success? What Your Partner's Answer Means: Lets you find out what he/she thinks of as important and what his/her values are.*

*5. Can you define your principles...what do you stand for and why?*

*What Your Partner's Answers Mean: Very few people can articulate their principles and these should be easy, off the top of your head in sixty-seconds or less. If he or she can, you are dealing with a person who is not easily manipulated, strong in conviction and thinks critically. Principles can change over time due to new information and experiences. They are dynamic rather than static, yet they remain the benchmark each of us measures our decisions against.*

*6. Where do you stand on, (pick any hot topic from current events) and why is that your position? What Your Partner's Answers Mean: This will tell you if he or she thinks critically or if he or she simply parrots the pundits, whether he/she consults both sides of an argument, where his or her values lie and what he or she stands for.*

*This is the definition of a "loaded question". A well-informed person should be able to argue both sides of any topic effectively and then through an explanation of his or her principles explain with facts why he or she thinks that way. Someone who thinks critically will avoid propaganda techniques..*

## STAGE FIVE SPIRITUAL INTIMACY

This stage is about shared goals, our ethics and our morality. Relationships that include this type of intimacy often feel as if there is a shared sense of purpose, as if the relationship has meaning.

This stage is not likely to be developed at once, as it requires that the individuals have figured out who they are, and to have resolved any past trauma that impacts identity.

It is at this stage that couples/throuples become “we” rather than you and I, and often siblings will experience this type of intimacy.

Check yourself!

Do you

- Refer to yourselves as ‘we’
- Use couple/throuple language when introducing one another
- Have shared short term and long term goals, based on the relationship

Have you

- A good sense of who you are
- Worked through past traumas
- Communicated to one another about your ethics and morals, and found many similarities

## QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE SPIRITUAL INTIMACY (from original paper)

*1. What is the toughest lesson you have learned in life the hard way?*

*What Your Partner’s Answer Means: Clues you into whether he/she reflects upon his/her mistakes and learns from them.*

*2. Is your faith important to you? Why or why not?*

*What Your Partner’s Answer Means: Tells you if religion and spirituality are going to be an issue and if you both are compatible in morals and beliefs.*

*3. Describe your ideal relationship.*

*What Your Partner’s Answer Means: Helps you understand his or her aspirations and expectations in a relationship.*

*4. Have you ever had a partner try to change you? What did you do? What Your*

*Partner’s Answer Means: 1) Tells you if he/she is confident and likes him/herself*

*2) Tells you if he/she is able to recognize manipulation and effectively diffuse it.*

*5. What does Marriage mean to you? What Your Partner’s Answer Means: Helps you understand his or her aspirations and expectations in a relationship and if his/her ideas are based on realistic achievements or fantasy.*



## STAGE SIX EMOTIONAL INTIMACY

At this stage we begin to really accept our partner, and to be accepted ourselves, for the flawed person we/they are.

This can be a very challenging stage to develop, as it requires for us to be able to share the uglier parts of ourselves, in ways that are often not taught to us as we are growing up.

At this stage we can share our anger, fears, irritations, tears etc, without being afraid of what will happen. We trust that our partner(s) care about us as real, multidimensional persons. We know we are loved, even when we are not smiling and telling them how wonderful they are. In return we also love, even when they are not at their best or happiest. You have emotional intimacy with the person you turn to when things are falling apart. In a healthy family, this is the first place we experience this type of intimacy.

Check yourself:

- When you are afraid, who do you turn to?
- Are you comfortable crying or being angry in front of them?
- Do you feel certain you will not be abandoned in a crisis?
- Is love shown in words and actions?
- Can you talk about your secrets without being ridiculed?
- Do past wrongs stay in the past, rather than being weaponized?

If your relationship lacks this type of intimacy, you may want to identify areas you want to develop, and talk to your partner(s) about it. Safety is a key part to developing this stage, as you each will need to feel safe to disclose to one another, in order to grow this.

### *QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE EMOTIONAL INTIMACY (from original paper)*

*1. What does it take for you to feel safe in a relationship?*

*What does it take for you to want to grow within a relationship?*

*What Your Partner's Answer Means: Helps you identify the criteria that must be met in order for a relationship to grow.*

*2. Would you prefer that a person respects and admires you, or would you prefer that a person listens to your feelings and cherishes you?*

*3. Have you ever cried in front of a past partner? If you haven't, did you think if the situation became such where you wanted to cry you could do so without fearing he/she would lose her respect for you?*

*What Your Partner's Answer Means: Clues you into his/her ability to create and cultivate intimacy on a deeper level and whether past relationships have reached this level of trust.*

*4. What was the happiest moment in your life? What was the saddest? What  
Your Partner's Answer Means: Allows you to share in the telling of two pinnacle experiences of his/her life, which is emotional intimacy.*

## STAGE SEVEN SEXUAL INTIMACY

Many of us jump to this stage pretty early in the game, and that is ok! Even if we start with sex, we can, if we all choose to do the work, develop deeper intimacy, and we also do not NEED to have deeper intimacy simply because we engaged in sexual intimacy.

If, however, you are in a relationship that is missing stages 4,5,6, you may have some work to do to build those stages up.

Sexual intimacy is about touch. This can be non-sexual touch (such as with friends, family, children, clients, coworkers etc) or sexual, and includes all kinds of touch. Massage, hugs, holding hands, cuddling, kissing, caressing. Sexual intimacy includes other senses as well.

*“The key to sexual intimacy is sexual liberation, a state that takes time, patience and tremendous trust to reach.” (Laura Dawn Lewis)*

In order to be sexually liberated we need to be able to understand consent and bodily autonomy. Every person has the right to say YES! Or to decline sexual intimacy. In a relationship, in order to have sexual intimacy in its fullest, we each need to be able to say yes or no without fear of anger, mocking, violence. Sexual intimacy is a joy that is shared, not a weapon.

### Check Yourself!

- Are you comfortable naked in front of one another?
- Do you enjoy touching and giving pleasure to one another?
- Does foreplay most often last more than ten minutes?
- Do you share fantasies, likes and dislikes?
- Is sexual health an ongoing discussion?
- Are you open to sexual adventure with your partner(s)?
- Are you free to decline, without repercussions?
- If your partner declines, are you comfortable with that?

## QUESTIONS OF RELATING TO SEXUAL INTIMACY (From original paper)

1. *Have you ever been to a masseuse? What did you like or not like about it? What Your Partner's Answer Means: 1) Tells you if he/she is comfortable enough with his/her body to allow a stranger to touch it 2) Illustrates a healthy desire for*

*self-pampering and care.*

*2. What is the most romantic thing someone has done for you? What Your Partner's Answer Means: Let's you know how well he/she has been treated by past relationships and what he/she considers romantic.*

*3. What is your favorite sensual/erotic movie? (Ex: Last Tango in Paris, Henry & June, Lolita...) What Your Partner's Answer Means: Speaks to his/her attitudes about sexuality, specifically his/her curiosity and openness.*

## STAGE EIGHT UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

This stage is what we are often taught is the end all, be all of love. True unconditional love means that we love and support someone NO MATTER WHAT.

Literally, without conditions.

This is problematic, and supports some serious boundary violations within relationships. Boundaries are healthy, and mandatory for healthy intimacy. To love without boundaries is not, in my opinion, love at all.

We do not want to love and support someone, no matter what. If your partner harms you or your child, for example, and this is not due to serious mental illness or other factors outside of their control, to continue to hold them in high regard, is indicative of our own poor mental health.

(TRIGGER WARNING, the original paper talks explicitly about child abuse)

Instead of unconditional love, let's talk about consummate love.

At this stage we are committed to making this relationship last. We are willing to bend (not break), and to ride out the less joyous times in a relationship.

Research into healthy, long term relationships indicates that persons who have developed each of these stages in their relationship, are satisfied and supported by the intimacy in that relationship.

Not all love needs to be consummate. Some love is companionate, or passionate based, and that is absolutely fine. Each relationship should be seen as valuable in its own rights, for what it brings to those in that relationship, rather than ranked based on this view that consummate relationships are the only ones that matter.