Joyful Musings

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Strengthening the Ties that Bind

It's a new year and a good time to bring new intimacy back into an old relationship. There are many couples who have celebrated lengthy years of marriage, yet there are far fewer who share true intimacy. Managing to live together in the same house or even share the same bed for decades doesn't necessarily imply that the partners have an intimate relationship.

What is intimacy anyway? The dictionary defines intimacy as "a close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group." It can include both

emotional and physical intimacy, but most of all it is about deeply connecting and sharing ourselves with another in an atmosphere of trust and safety.

The word expresses its own meaning if we think of it as *into-me-see.*

Emotional intimacy means opening up and allowing another to know our true self, our innermost feelings and deepest thoughts, and in return embracing and accepting the other as they do the same. It is the sense of acceptance and caring that creates the safety to do this. In healthy developing relationships, true sexual intimacy follows emotional intimacy as an atmosphere of love and trust grows between the partners.

Developing intimacy takes time. Both parties must invest time and energy in making the relationship a priority. It helps to have common interests and enjoy similar activities, but most important is sharing similar values. If only one of you enjoys bowling for instance, s/he can go bowl with other friends, but relationships don't work very well if you don't both share core values about what matters most in life.

Good communication is vital. Not just talking, but talking about the important stuff. Sure it's necessary to talk about who's going to pay the electric bill or get the car fixed. And it's easy to pass on the latest news about what's going on around town. In an intimate relationship, it's also important to share your feelings openly and honestly.

Take time to notice and let your beloved know what s/he does that you admire or appreciate. Words of appreciation go a long way to helping your sweetie feel special.

Remember that you can only change yourself, and consciously focus on being your best self every day. When you're bothered by something about your partner, know how to bring up issues without criticizing or blaming. Much better to say, "I felt hurt when you didn't ask me about that" than to put your partner on the defense by saying, "Why didn't you ask me first?"

Don't forget that listening is every bit as important as talking. Being a good listener is one of the best ways to demonstrate your love and caring for your partner.

Keep your relationship fun. Don't get so bogged down in the everyday routines that you forget how to play and have a good time with each other. Surprise your partner with a gift for no reason or an unexpected getaway, even for just a few hours. Keep the romance alive with a just-because bouquet of flowers or a weekly date night.

The glue that truly binds a satisfying committed relationship is an intimate friendship. Practicing these simple ideas will create a peaceful and relaxing environment in which intimacy can flourish. Nietzsche was wise when he said, "It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages." Strengthen the bonds of friendship and intimacy with your beloved this new year.

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