

Emotional Intimacy

Alfred C.W. Davis
MBA, M.Div.

When couples come for counseling, the most common problematic issue is the subject of "emotional intimacy" or to be more accurate - the lack of emotional intimacy in the relationship. In most cases, the woman is the partner who wants more emotional intimacy and the man often thinks that everything is fine. The more the woman pushes for increased emotional intimacy, the more the man withdraws. This dance of woman pursuing and man distancing is common. The interesting question is why?

In our North American culture, even though feminism has produced significant changes, men are still taught from the youngest age to be independent, strong, competitive winners who control their own emotions, solve their own problems, and fight their own fights. Men are taught to be rational thinkers. When I told my male friend about Daniel Goleman's excellent book "Emotional Intelligence" his immediate reaction was, "Isn't emotional intelligence an oxymoron?" – a combination of contradictory or incongruous words. The old paradigm was to do away with emotion and put reason in charge. Daniel Goleman documents research that proves the existence of two brains – the emotional brain (the amygdala and the limbic system) and the thinking brain (the neocortex and the prefrontal cortex lobes). He explains that the emotional brain is as involved in reasoning as the thinking brain because it provides the likes and dislikes of a lifetime that guide our moment-to-moment decisions. Conversely, the thinking brain plays an executive role helping us manage our emotions. In this way, the two brains are involved in a full partnership with feelings being indispensable for rational decisions. Are feelings important? As Goleman says, "Our humanity is most evident in our feelings". Otherwise, we would just be smart, cold computers.

Men in our society have learned to be action oriented. They are doers. They make things happen and they fix things. Men tend to listen to record important information. Watch two men converse. It tends to be competitive. Who has the right answer? Who has the best story? Who has the most interesting information? And when the information runs out, they stop talking. On the other hand, women tend to function in a different way. They listen to understand and feel the other person's situation. Then, they connect with the other person by reflecting back their understanding of the feelings. To generalize, men exhibit an "action empathy" while women more often exhibit an "emotional empathy". The word empathy comes from the Greek word "empathia", which means – feeling into. Empathy is described as the ability to perceive the subjective experience of another person and to be attuned to the other person's feelings. When a woman is asking for emotional intimacy, she is communicating that she wants to be affirmed as a real person, not as a problem to be fixed.

Dr. Peter Sifneos, a Harvard psychiatrist, coined a term in 1972 called "alexithymia". It is a condition where a person is unable to put feelings into words because he/she is unable to know his/her own feelings. Dr. Ron Levant, a Harvard professor, took this further when he described "normative male alexithymia". He says that men with this



condition tend to have a limited range of emotional experience. They have learned two main ways to respond to their feelings: 1) they use anger when they are vulnerable, [which seems to be a socially acceptable male quality], and 2) they use touching and sex to communicate caring and nurturing. The dilemma is that many women do not perceive sexual intimacy as emotional intimacy in the same way that men do and anger drives them away. For the man who limits his emotional expression to anger and sex, he ends up with a partner who feels empty and searching for more. As Daniel Goleman says, "When the emotional brain is driving the body with a strong angry reaction, there can be little or no empathy. Empathy requires enough calm and receptivity so that the subtle signals of feeling from another person can be received and mimicked by one's own emotional brain".

So what is Emotional Intimacy? Emotion is defined as sensitivity to feelings which include an excitement or agitation of pleasure, pain, attraction or repulsion. Intimacy is defined as a delicate communication; a close, warm relationship which is private, personal and belongs to one's deepest nature. Therefore, Emotional Intimacy is a warm and personal communication that is sensitive to deep feelings and cares for another's state of emotional well being.

The following list itemizes some of the ways that barriers are created to effectively block emotional intimacy:

- 1) self-centeredness – you cannot focus on yourself and the other person at the same time
- 2) pride – I am right and you are wrong
- 3) intellectualizing – rational thought only
- 4) mind-reading – I do not need to talk to you because I know what you are thinking
- 5) anger and insensitivity – cannot be angry and empathetic
- 6) cutting off – must listen to communicate
- 7) judgment, putdowns and sarcasm – need to be open and sensitive
- 8) blaming – need to replace why with how and share responsibility
- 9) control – an equal relationship is needed that respects the other
- 10) lack of time – need to make time for each other – patience
- 11) fear – deep feelings need a safe environment to come out
- 12) "you" language – feelings need to be communicated as "I" statements
- 13) infidelity and lying – need to be able to trust

As Christians, we are called to a high level of personal relationships. Respect and love disarm hostility and apologizing for a wrong and forgiving pave the way for intimacy. Dying to self and seeing things from another person's perspective facilitate compliments and smooth the way to validation and genuine appreciation. Empathy leads to caring, compassion and altruism.

Daniel Goleman describes the five domains of emotional intelligence, which help facilitate emotional intimacy:

- 1) knowing one's own emotions
- 2) managing one's own emotions and shaking off bad moods
- 3) self-control and self-motivation
- 4) empathy – recognizing the emotions in others
- 5) managing interpersonal relationships – through observing, being attuned, communicating and engaging

Lastly, the communication skill that will help improve emotional intimacy is outlined below:

- 1) Choose to take the time
- 2) Attend to the person - be in the person's presence
 - offer eye contact
 - be open and interested
- 3) Actively listen and encourage communication
 - smile
 - nod head positively
 - gesture with hands to encourage
 - repeat one word encouragers
 - repeat key phrases in person's words
 - summarize what you have heard
 - do not be additive
- 4) Communicate understanding – “I hear you saying...”
- 5) Validate the person's feelings - accept the person's feelings
 - feel the feelings
- 6) Connect with the person's feelings - care about the feelings
 - share understanding of the feelings
 - be with the person in the feelings