

A LINE ON LIFE

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An Intimate New Year *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Each New Year brings us hopes of new beginnings. One of these hopes may involve developing or improving an intimate, loving relationship. How can we develop such relationships? What barriers stand in our way?

Psychologists Chelene, Robison and Kommor (1984) see these types of relationships as involving six characteristics:

1. knowledge of the innermost being of another
2. trust
3. mutuality
4. interdependence
5. commitment
6. caring.

The knowledge of the innermost being of another is usually called **intimacy**. Intimacy is only obtained after a relatively long period of time, once mutual trust has been established. This means that we do not believe that the person will use our intimate information in a way that is harmful or embarrassing to us.

As **trust** increases in a relationship, self-disclosure increases. Rather than the impersonal, superficial communication that initiates relationships, people share more personal, intimate information. If the other person responds in an interested, nonjudgmental way, self-disclosure continues.

Even so, the sharing cannot be maintained, if it is only one-sided. There needs to be **mutuality** — both partners are engaged in a joint venture that involves shared interaction. Fairness is involved in mutuality. Both persons need to believe that they are receiving sufficient benefits from the relationship in terms of the costs involved.

Interdependence is another component of a healthy, intimate relationship. This means that each partner depends on the other for support, resources, understanding and help of various sorts. However, just as self-disclosure depends on development of trust, mutuality and interdependence also rely on the growth of trust in a relationship. Each partner learns to trust the other to:

1. be accepting
2. avoid purposeful hurting
3. feel warmth and care
4. be sharing

5. have their best interests at heart
6. continue the relationship.

Another important characteristic — **commitment** — is the extent to which the partners see this relationship as continuing indefinitely and the extent to which they try to ensure this continuation. This commitment will influence the other characteristics of the relationship and, in turn, will be influenced by them.

In this intimate, loving relationship, **caring** is another important feature. Caring means that there is a strong affection between partners. At first, this attraction may be experienced as romantic love or sexual attraction. In time, it may develop into mutual concern and affection. Even later, it may evolve into a deeper form of love.

Not all people have healthy, intimate relationships. Criteria to judge an intimate relationship as being a healthy one were developed by another psychologist (Franklin, 1982). To judge your own relationship, see if it matches his criteria:

1. Being able to have nondefensive, unguarded communication.
2. Having empathy for each other — being supportive of each other and understanding each other's perspective.
3. Being able to resolve conflicts by mutual accommodation and compromise, as well as being able to accept differences that cannot be negotiated.
4. Confirming each other's lovability.
5. Having enjoyable physical contact from affection to sex.
6. Having a "we" identity based on a sum total of experiences from joyous to tragic.
7. Being mutually available during crises.
8. Being playful together.

From this list, you can see that developing a good, intimate relationship is not an easy process. It requires good will and effort of two relatively mature and well-adjusted people.

I hope this New Year will find you developing such a relationship or — if you already have it — continuing a relationship.

* Adapted from Denny and Quadagno's *Human Sexuality*, Mosby Publishing, 1988, pages 363-366.