



Daniela Roher, PhD, LPC.
Psychotherapist

Intimacy and Safety

By Daniela Roher, PhD, LPC.

Intimacy and **Safety** are the two fundamental pillars of all relationships.

Intimacy develops from a shared emotional space created by people when they open up to one another, sharing their thoughts and feelings, each making the other part of who they are.

Emotional and physical safety, as the word implies, occurs when the two partners can let their guard down when together and be fully who they are. Intimate relationships, when healthy, provide a feeling of comfort and security to the two people involved.

Safety and intimacy cannot exist without each other. When there are problems, one or the other or both are at risk. Partners become defensive when together and they can no longer share their inner lives with one another.

All relationships reach this point at one or more times. If we understand what is happening and why and identify the feelings involved, we can be better equipped to deal with the problems.

All relationships have common elements that contribute to create problems. The approach we suggest consists of several steps. These are:

Understanding what is problematic in intimate relationships,
Identifying the emotions involved in the problem areas, and
Learning to express these emotions appropriately.

These steps, if carefully followed, allow for:

Increasing awareness of your partner's and your emotional reactions, and **Learning good communication skills.**

In turn, these steps facilitate:

Reconnecting with each other, and **Feeling safe** when together.

The first two sets of steps aim at rebuilding intimacy; the last step at rebuilding safety.

So, let's start from the beginning: How do you find out if you are in a good place in your intimate relationship or if you need help?

There are many psychological instruments you could use to assess this. However, I pose a very simple question to you:

Do you feel emotionally safe with your partner?

You should feel that your partner is there if needed; that each of you has the other's back covered, that each trusts the other and has his or her best interests in mind **at all times**. This means even – and particularly – when there is tension and conflict in the relationship. When there is no safety, intimacy is prevented from developing, as partners are self-protective and don't open up with one another.

If you answered “no” to the question about feeling safe in your love relationship, or if you had to think hard and couldn't give a straight answer, then you know that there are problems in your relationship that need to be addressed, because they prevent you from feeling connected with your partner at a deep level.

What can you do?

Remember that loving requires constant work and only couples who consistently work at their problems can succeed in developing and maintaining healthy and loving relationships. So, don't get discouraged about experiencing problems. Everybody experiences problems of one sort or another in intimate relationships, as they are part of life and as such unavoidable. It is how you handle them that makes all the difference between being successful in love, or not.

As you can see from the earlier list of key steps, achieving emotional safety with your intimate partner should be your ultimate goal. So, we start from the end and work our way in a backward fashion to figure out what, in your love relationship, went wrong, where and why, and what you can do to bring back the emotional safety that was there before.

As we figure out the **what, where** and **why** things went wrong in your intimate relationship, you can start to reflect on how you and your partner interact and see if you can introduce changes that can make things less tense between the two of you.

Change in intimate relationships should occur at two levels concurrently:

Internally.

In order to acknowledge the problems and work at changing them, you need to become aware of them. Awareness is the first step in dealing with challenges and difficulties. It creates options and choices about how to manage such challenges and solve the problems they pose. When you are not aware of the problems, on the other hand, you are doomed to repeat them over and over.

In order to facilitate awareness, **try to remember when you first felt your partner no longer had your back covered.** Was it a particular event that caused this to occur? Or was it a gradual disconnection that developed over a stretch of time? What do you think? This part is important because it helps you **understand** what happened and why. As you engage in this piece of introspective work, connecting the dots between past events and present feelings, you gain more awareness of those less evident elements that contribute to your intentions, motivations, thoughts, emotions and actions.

Interpersonally

Do not isolate yourself, even if this at times may sound as the least uncomfortable thing for you to do. Don't tell yourself there is nothing you can do to change your current situation. How do you know what your partner really feels? It is quite possible that both your partner and yourself feel unhappy about your present situation, but neither of you may know how to get out of it.

Remind yourself that your partner may feel as unhappy as you. Each of you may be waiting for the other to take the initiative, so **be the first to get things started!** Take a risk and approach your partner and let her/him know how important this process of reconnecting is for you.

Notice something positive about your partner and acknowledge it to him or her. Perhaps lately both of you have been more aware of each other's faults, to the point where these seem to be all there is about each other. Focusing on the positive – and everybody has positive traits, if you look for them – helps keep things in perspective.

Conflicts are often not about right and wrong. Each of you may feel on the right side of the issues, but to stay stuck in this position does not make for a good relationship. What makes for a good relationship is the ability to be flexible, to see the other's position even if you don't agree with it, and to be respectful of the differences between the two of you.

Of course, how to communicate with your partner in a healthy, not antagonizing manner is a learned skill, not an innate one. However, even if your approach is not perfect, your partner will appreciate your good intentions and motivations. After all, we all want to be acknowledged, valued and appreciated for who we are, particularly by the people we love. When you ignore your partner,

or attack him or her, you certainly won't get love back, but reinforce hostility, avoidance and mutual distrust.

When your partner feels acknowledged, on the other hand, you increase your chances of getting a positive response and being acknowledged and appreciated back. An act of kindness can break a negative pattern and shift it from a cautious and defensive one to one that is more empathic, sensitive and caring.

Soooo, observe how you come across to your partner, put yourself in his or her shoes and overall think connectively, not adversarially.

From "Couples at the Crossroads", by Daniela R. Roher, Ph.D. and Susan Schwartz, Ph.D., unpublished.