

An Intimate Look at Intimacy

Helen Adrienne, LCSW, BCD

September, 2008

As you well know, infertility is a life crisis of major proportions that leaves no area of life untouched. Furthermore, studies have revealed that infertility escalates levels of stress to be on a par with the diagnosis of cancer or HIV/AIDS.

Stress is disruptive. Worse, it is disruptive at a point in time when meeting the enormous challenges of infertility happens best from a place of solidity, serenity and stability. The stress of infertility could shake loose the most solid, disrupt the most serene, and destabilize the most unflappable.

Intimacy is a powerful antidote for the many dimensions of the stress of infertility.

Intimacy is palliative. Intimacy is satisfying. Intimacy provides comfort. Many if not most couples report that they feel much closer, much more intimate, by the time that their infertility is resolved. But the road to resolution is filled with potholes.

Paving the Potholes

At a time like this, it is frightening to think about losing the comfort of closeness. Yet, how could any relationship remain untouched given the activation of intense emotions, given the demands of treatment and given the confusions inherent in decision-making - all of which are built into the fertility journey. It is impossible to avoid bombardment by these stressors to our intimate relationships. At the same time, an opportunity opens up to achieve the deepest form of intimacy.

Deepening intimacy is a challenge because under duress, defenses loom large. Defenses create barriers to intimacy. They are our potholes and they are within us, under the surface. Within us is where a lifetime of wounds lay in wait, ready to ambush. When old wounds are provoked - and infertility is expert at provoking them - our defenses snap to attention, which makes deepening intimacy difficult. To become aware of and work with our defenses is to pave the potholes.

What is Your Intimacy Imprint?

Intimacy is learned in early environments. The lucky ones among us observe and experience a true comfort with deep connectedness as youngsters. They have watched and experienced safety in closeness because loved ones have modeled falling into the potholes and coming out stronger for it.

But many of us have role models who give us a view of intimacy that tells us it is something to be avoided at all costs. These are the families in which intimacy is distorted. To

them, intimacy means too close for comfort. Closeness is a threat which is easily negated by provoking a fight.

In close relationships all of us must grapple with the interplay of our own and the significant other's defensive system. Those with an imprint for the deepest variety of intimacy have an easier time in developing depth in their relationships with a partner, relative or friend. But all of us, even the luckier ones, need a heavy dose of self-awareness to achieve satisfying intimacy. Expanding self-awareness at a time like this can feel like a job for which you are in no mood. It sometimes requires professional help.

The Heart of the Matter

Successful navigation of the infertility challenge relies heavily upon listening and upon sharing. Coincidentally, listening and sharing are what pave the road to deep intimacy. Say it another way, effective communication is in order. Communication is a skill which can develop well, haphazardly, or not at all. Effective communication is at the heart of deep intimacy. How else can we get past defensive barriers in a way that leads to satisfying closeness?

The Trouble with Listening

It is hard to listen to each other during the infertility struggle without feeling panicked about wanting to make things better. Everyone wants this problem fixed now if not yesterday. But, infertility is an endurance test.

Much depends upon our imprint for listening. If the man had been expected as a youngster to listen and fix things for an unhappy and histrionic mother, listening would be contaminated. He would have been too small for such a big job. He would have been justified in wanting to defend against his feeling of impotence by running away. Just when his wife needs most to be heard and understood, the "run-away imprint" kicks into gear automatically. Less commonly, the man wants to communicate and the woman runs away. Sometimes both run from adversity.

Listening and being heard makes it easier to tolerate taking one day at a time.

The Trouble with Sharing

For some it is hard to share what is felt. Perhaps this is because there is difficulty knowing exactly what the feelings are. How can communication take place if we have no idea what is going on within us? In this case, an imprint for self-awareness is absent.

Sometimes sharing feels impossible because an early imprint mandates that silence is the solution for adversity, in the hope that the problem will go away, or in the hope that the other person will stop needing connection.

In families where it was dangerous for others to know how we felt, we would have been stupid to share. In other cases, there could be a taboo against speaking, even if we know what we are feeling. In some families, sharing might have been delivered as an assault. These are not happy imprints. An internal mandate to defend against fears of reprisal would be normal.

Enhancing Intimacy

What needs to be known and understood for intimacy to deepen? In a word - vulnerabilities. It does not take much imagination to realize the snag sharing vulnerabilities can create. The defenses that we form are meant to protect us from knowing that we even have vulnerabilities.

True intimacy evolves when we can dive under our defenses to know and be known, understand and be understood. Where communication is faulty or haphazard, the journey to deepening intimacy would be very uncomfortable indeed. Without a blueprint, it could feel like a Herculean task to learn to listen or to learn to share.

How do people who love each other stop emotional patterns that are imprinted? And when we stop those patterns, what do we put in their place? Trusting that we can establish new imprints is what needs to be learned and earned.

Knowing and being known, understanding and being understood are the most profound aspects of intimacy. It comes through reciprocal listening and reciprocal speaking about our real feelings in the midst of the infertility quagmire. Learning how to get under our defenses to our vulnerabilities is to learn to open our hearts and deepen our love.

This all may seem like a side trip when what you want is a baby. But how great to get a baby AND a more intimate environment in which to raise your child!

Helen Adrienne, LCSW, BCD

From Helen's "The Baby Manifest-O™" Newsletter; September 2008

helen@mind-body-unity.com

212-758-0125