**Intimacy**

“As I see it, intimacy comes from telling your partner the most important things on your mind and hearing the most important things on your partner’s mind. Intimacy is the contact partners make with one another about their hopes, fears, and problems, especially those about the relationship.” Dan Wile, *After the Honeymoon,* p. 37

“The heart of a couple relationship is saying what you need to say and feeling that it has gotten across.” Dan Wile, *After the Honeymoon, p*. 73

Our real self, what we are on a day to day basis, just is the collection of spontaneous thoughts, interpretations, evaluations, emotional reactions, day dreams and wishes that we experience as we go about our activities. Intimacy between two people consists in showing each other those things, feeling like our partner accepts, understands, and takes pleasure in most of them, and feeling that our partner shows us who he or she really is and feels accepted, understood, and liked by us.

When partners fail to share these feelings and reactions, they become strangers to each other. But something else happens: whether they know it or not, partners are typically quite in tune with one another. When they fail to share important feelings, partners tend to misunderstand each other. If partner A comes home from work angry at his co-worker and doesn’t share this with partner B, partner B is likely to assume that partner A is unhappy with him. So in addition to the loss of closeness, there will also be a loss of understanding.

Reasons why intimacy between partners is hard:

***It’s not always easy to tell our partners what is on our mind, even when we know what it is.***

**Self criticism:** One reason is that many of us believe we shouldn’t be thinking what we are thinking, dreaming what we are dreaming, or feeling what we are feeling; we think our thoughts are stupid, our dreams unrealistic, or our feelings childish, inappropriate, selfish, entitled, dependent, etc. There is unfortunately no end to the ways in which we criticize our inner life. We don’t want to acknowledge our thoughts, emotions, desires, etc. to ourselves, afraid that we would then have to conclude that we are much less lovable than we thought, and we certainly don’t want to acknowledge them to a partner whose love and respect we value.

**Expecting criticism from others:** In addition to inner rules about what emotions, wishes, and thoughts we’re allowed to have if we want to resemble our inner ideal, we also have certain expectations of how our partner is likely to react to them. These expectations are usually based on a combination of how important others have generally responded to our allowing them to see our inner self in the past (this includes how our parents responded to us in childhood, as well as how partners and friends have responded in previous relationships, and how our present partner has tended to respond in this relationship). We will be much less likely to show ourselves if we assume (on the basis of a broad range of previous experiences) that our partner will react to our thoughts and feelings, our fantasies, hopes and dreams, with anxiety, criticism, blame, competition, envy, contempt, ridicule, sarcasm, or any number of hostile responses, than if we assume they will respond with curiosity, interest, delight or compassion.

***It’s not always easy to know what is on our minds that we want to tell our partners.***

One of the ways in which we respond to our own panic about what we think we might be feeling or thinking when we think those things are bad and forbidden is by putting an end to our own thinking, perhaps to avoid the terrifying conclusion that we don’t resemble our inner ideal, that we are not the good version of ourselves we hoped.

For example, let’s say that I feel a little down after my husband is given an important award. I’m violating one aspect of my ideal, because I think I should be quite happy for him. I have a tendency, inherited from childhood interactions with my suspicious and insecure parents, to assume the worst possible interpretation of my own reactions, so I conclude that I am not very happy for my husband because I’m envious of him. But in my own inner (not altogether explicit) moral code, envy is (a) a forbidden attitude towards those I love, and (b) resembles my mother who was envious of my successes, and whom I desperately don’t want to resemble. The idea that I’m feeling envious like my mother so fills me with horror that I stop thinking, or even experiencing my own experience.

Stopping myself from thinking can take a number of different forms; here are a few common examples:

* I blame or accuse someone else (probably my husband)—To avoid the conclusion that I’m envious, I accuse him of gloating about his success and feeling superior to me.
* I use cultural slogans and clichés to justify my feelings—I’m not unhappy because I’m envious, but because, so I tell myself, my husband is a narcissist and a workaholic, and the award will greatly aggravate these tendencies.
* I accuse someone else of thinking I have the emotion I hate or fear—I accuse my husband of thinking I’m envious, and then I respond defensively that it’s just like him to think that; that the reason I’m not as happy as he is is because I have other things on my mind, and that he’s not the center of the universe.

If I were to encounter a sympathetic person (or inner attitude) instead of a panicky critical one, I might be able to continue thinking until I actually figure out what is on my mind in this case: My husband’s success has made me feel insecure. I am worried that, now that he’s such a big shot, he won’t like and respect me as much, he will feel he deserves a better partner, and he’ll leave me. Here again, my thinking might come to a stop: if I think being insecure, being afraid of being left, being afraid of not being admired and respected are incompatible with an acceptable or tolerable version of myself (I might think it’s needy and childish to want to be admired, or that it’s dependent, servile and antifeminist to be afraid of being left).

The difficult thing about intimacy is that we all want it with our partners. We want them to see and accept our real self, and we want them to show us their real selves. But since we ourselves have such a hard time accepting and knowing what our real self is at any point, and since this is also true of our partners, we end up telling each other things that are not quite what we needed to say. And this is typically what leads to fighting: that we have not gotten through (because we haven’t really said it) and that whatever we do say tends to feel critical, blaming, or hostile to our partner.

**Fighting**

There are many reasons why romantic partners get into fights, but most often, what happens is that one partner tries to say something important, often (but not always) something important about the relationship, and their partner perceives the comment as a criticism.

Reasons why partner B might hear partner A’s comment as a criticism:

* It really is one. Partner A is dealing with a problem by blaming partner B.
* Partner A phrases the comment critically because it is part of an argument she is having with herself where the comment is a response to a self-criticism (*I wish B would spend more time with me*; *that’s such a babyish wish, you have no right to ask for that; I do too have a right, that’s what it means to be romantic partners*).
* The comment is said in a way that is tense or awkward because partner A is afraid of hurting or angering partner B (this is especially common when the topic has led to many fights in the history of this couple).
* The comment hits close to one of partner B’s sensitivities (ones he’s carried over from childhood, or developed as part of this relationship, e.g., it sounds very much like a criticism B tends to level at himself ).
* A just wants B to listen sympathetically to her problem, but B thinks he has to fix things—i.e., that A is implicitly blaming him for the problem.

Once A’s comment is perceived as a criticism, it is almost inevitable that B, feeling criticized, will defend himself, even if, a few moments before, he might have readily agreed with the comment, or even made it himself. It’s almost a law of psychology that ***people who feel accused defend themselves***. The problem, from the point of view of A’s attempt to communicate something important, is that it’s almost a law of psychology that ***people who are defending themselves are not listening****, and so won’t be able to sympathize or agree*.

So the situation is this: A is trying to say something important and feeling unheard, and B is feeling attacked and trying to defend himself. What happens next is that A uses different strategies to try to get B to listen (unfortunately, strategies for forcing another person to listen tend to look uncannily like attacks), and B uses different strategies for defending himself (unfortunately, all the defense strategies are incompatible with listening).

Fighting strategies for being heard:

* Accusations (“you statements”) explicit or implicit.
* Exaggerations: making ‘always’ or ‘never’ claims, overstating the problem
* Dredging up old complaints or dumping out unrelated complaints.
* Interrupting, misinterpreting your partner’s words: it is very hard to work on listening to your partner when you are feeling unheard.
* Criticizing what your partner thinks, feels, or wants, or criticizing his or her character by calling him or her names .

Defensive strategies

* Denying
* Explaining or making excuses
* Counterattacking
* Self-accusing
* Fixing
* Withdrawing

**Basic facts about fighting**

When partners fight, they use strategies that are almost designed to get them the opposite of what they want:

* A partner who accuses, exaggerates, interrupts, dredges up old or irrelevant complaints, and asserts things about her partner’s inner life, is doing everything she can to be heard, but is making it nearly impossible for her partner to hear her or adopt her perspective or agree with her on anything.
* A partner who defends is trying to protect herself from accusations and criticisms, but, since she is not hearing her partner, is actually leading her partner to amplify her criticisms and accusations.

A fight is not the best way to have a discussion: partners stop being able to listen, hear, or agree, and, when feeling really embattled, are more interested in scoring points, refuting their partner’s last accusation, proving their partner wrong even if on irrelevant details, than they are in the original important point that led to the fight. It’s quite rare that an important relationship problem will get resolved through a fight.

Mostly, if partners could just remember and believe three things:

1. If you notice your partner using any of the defensive strategies, it’s likely they are feeling criticized, blamed, or accused, and will not be able to stop fighting until you have heard them say that this is the case, and until they feel you have stopped criticizing, blaming, or accusing.

2. If you notice your partner using any of the strategies for being heard, it’s likely they have something important on their chest that they need to get across to you, and they will not stop fighting until they feel that you have heard and understood them.

3. It’s often hard for people to know what it is that they need to communicate. The more hostile and argumentative the reception (or the expected reception), the more difficult the formulation (see Intimacy Hd.). As a consequence, the initial statement of what is on a partner’s mind is likely to be exaggerated, inaccurate, and accusatory. (e.g., “you never speak to me anymore.” As a first draft of “when you come home and disappear into your study and don’t say anything at dinner, I feel lonely, and I’m not sure I can tell you anything about myself, because I’m not sure how you feel about me.”)

Most people respond to these three points with something like the following:

“My partner is completely unreasonable: he has a hair-trigger defensiveness that comes out as soon as I open my mouth, even when there’s no reasonable way of interpreting what I say as critical.” Or “My partner is always hostile, he can’t open his mouth to talk to me without viciously criticizing me and making me feel like a failure and an idiot.”

To which my best answer is that in matters of feeling criticized or feeling unable to get across something really important, ***reasonableness is not the most relevant consideration***. No doubt partner A is being more accusatory than she knows, and partner B is very sensitive to criticism; most of us are (more accusatory than we know, and sensitive to criticism). What’s relevant is that B **really** felt criticized and needs his partner to know that, and that A **really** is feeling that she can’t get A to hear what she needs to say.

**Recovering from a fight**

Fights are important because they are clues to important things that need to be expressed. It would be too bad to waste a good fight without working out what needed to be said, the little bits of truth partners snuck into all those hurtful exaggerated accusations. If we stop panicking about fights, and learn to be sympathetic about our having them, and curious about their structure, then we can adopt what Dan Wile calls a *collaborative stance*: together with our partner, we can work on what it was that needed to be expressed, and what happened to make it hard.

When the fight ends, usually because one of the partners gets overwhelmed by a particularly spectacular, clever, or cruel attack, or because one partner calls a truce, and when both partners have cooled down, here are a few things it is useful to know about attempting a recovery conversation.

* I statements—Most people have heard that the best way to communicate about something that is likely to be sensitive is to use “I statements” (“I feel like such a failure when we have these fights” vs. “we fight all the time, and I’m the only one trying to avoid it, you just don’t really care about it, do you?”). But “I statements” are hard to formulate because we often know only that something is bothering us, but not quite what it is (see Intimacy Hd). “You statements” (accusations and criticisms) are approximations, attempts at figuring out what the “I statement” is that we need to communicate. When trying to recover from a fight, it’s helpful to try to translate the “you” statement that started the fight (whether it was explicit or not) into and “I” statement.

A specific application of the recommendation to use I statements after a fight is this: it’s best to limit yourself to explaining and commenting on your own contributions to the fight, and to avoid commenting on your partner’s except to describe your own feelings about them.

* When trying to collaborate on understanding the fight, it’s a good idea to make an effort to see things from your partner’s point of view: e.g., trying to understand how he felt criticized, or what his statement, which you heard as a criticism, was actually meant to convey. It’s a good idea, in other words, to try to see the hidden reasonableness of your partner’s reaction. (“I guess that comment really did come out more critical than I intended” or “actually you’re right, I’ve been kind of avoiding you lately, I was afraid you’d criticize me for being depressed”)
* Remember that although you are now done fighting, your partner may not be done. So when you approach him or her in a peace-making mood, he or she may respond in a fighting mood. This is usually very painful, because the peace-making partner has made a great effort to come round and would like their effort recognized and welcomed.
* Remember that things you said in anger during the fight that you know you don’t mean may still be very hurtful to your partner who may not be able to recover until you acknowledge them, retract them, and apologize.

The hope is that the collaborative approach to understanding why you fight will actually lead you and your partner to share some of what is on your chest, and will therefore increase intimacy. One important reason why couples stop feeling close and intimate is that they become so afraid of fighting that they stop trying to tell each other about what is on their mind. This is unfortunate, because it turns partners into strangers who, whether they know it or not, really long for the intimacy they once had. Being less afraid of fighting (because they understand it better and know that they can recover) might help partners to risk showing themselves again.