



Invite *intimacy* into your life



Tantra teacher **Jan Day** tells us that in order to be intimate in our relationships, we need to be intimate with ourselves

What is intimacy? Most people long for it, but what does it mean to be intimate? Is it the same as being sexual? The answer is that sexuality is only one possible part of intimacy. To be intimate is to be known. To be totally intimate is to be fully known on all levels – physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual. To be intimate with another is to see and be seen, fully. It is to be naked whether our clothes are on or off.

So yes, we can be intimate without being sexual, and we can also be sexual without being intimate. When we are intimate and sexual with a partner, a powerful and ecstatic sense of union can be created; we can feel as if we are all one. To be intimate in this way with our beloved can be transformational for both the partners and to their relationship.

However, this leads to another misconception, which is that we can only be intimate with another person. In fact, our first step into intimacy is to be intimate with ourselves. This means being transparent with ourselves and

willing to listen to ourselves – in other words, to be aware of what we experience and to be tuned in to our inner world. This also requires us to be friendly with ourselves whatever we find, including all the uncomfortable parts like sadness, jealousy and anger. We – despite our wishes for an easy life – cannot be with ourselves if we are simultaneously pushing away parts of ourselves or judging ourselves.

Get intimate with you

This is the first intimacy, our intimacy with ourselves. Many of us spend a lot of time avoiding this first intimacy. Afraid of what we might have to feel, we avoid the activities that touch us by deadening ourselves or getting busy and preoccupied with other distractions. There is a place for such activities, but it's great if we can choose to do them consciously as enjoyment, rather than using them for avoidance.

We all have our favourite ways of turning our attention away from what is happening within us – shopping, overworking, computer games, drink and drugs, overeating, being fanatical about something... the list is long. In fact, truly getting to know ourselves starts with becoming

aware of the ways we avoid ourselves and being willing to be curious about what we would be experiencing if we weren't eating, drinking, working, pounding the treadmill etc.

The first step to intimacy

Create time for intimacy with yourself. Start to meditate – just sit – for five minutes every day in the morning or evening. Notice what feelings come up for you. It might be, 'I am envious of my friend having a baby,' or 'I long to leave work.' Start writing these feelings down in a journal. That way you start to have an intimate relationship with yourself.

Gradually – be patient, this takes time – as we are more willing to see ourselves without needing to be perfect, a self-acceptance emerges that enables us to be friendly and loving toward our own self. As the Buddha said, there is no-one in the whole Universe more deserving of your love than your own self.

This willingness to be with ourselves makes it possible for the next step, which is being willing to be transparent and intimate with another. With partners who have been together for many years, there can be an unspoken agreement to avoid some areas of life, an agreement to live with 'the left overs' – in other words, to restrict being together to all that is left over when the stuff we reject or find uncomfortable in each other is left out.

This often includes missing out each other's vulnerabilities. Sadly, this way of living is the opposite of intimacy and leads to unfulfilled and often dishonest relationships. Similarly, when people are getting to know each other, there can be a reluctance to enter areas which feel 'negative'. This often results in both showing each other something other than reality and there is no possibility of an authentic meeting.

Dropping the masks

Just as it requires courage to open to all the feelings that arise when we open fully to ourselves, it necessitates courage and trust to be willing to let another person really see us, including things that they may find uncomfortable. I call it being naked with your clothes on, and it requires an emotional range that allows for both sweetness and conflict.

There are inevitably good reasons why we develop masks to protect us from showing certain 'negative' aspects of ourselves to others; it was painful or we felt judged or ridiculed, or perhaps love was withdrawn from us when we did show ourselves fully.

So we have good reasons for being cautious and that brings us to one of the keys to building intimacy – go slowly. Intimacy isn't built on carefree reckless disclosure.

When we go slowly, we can build trust and stay connected with ourselves as we allow aspects of ourselves to be seen by a friend or lover. We look after ourselves by taking things slowly and not risking more than we or our partner can cope with at that time.

Your secret self

Make a list of 10 qualities that you would show if you trusted someone and then write about why

you don't fully reveal yourself. In other words, finish this sentence: "If I knew you would accept me just the way I am, I would show you / share with you _____, I don't tell you about _____ because _____."

Sometimes it is great to have our masks – they protect us when we need it. But if we don't know the masks are there, or if we don't know how to take them off, or don't trust ourselves to take them off, they get in the way of intimacy with our friends, our children and our beloved. It's a bit like going to bed with armour on. We may need it on the battlefield, but we sure don't need it in the bedroom or, hopefully, with our nearest and dearest.

Do it with your eyes closed

Another of the barriers to intimacy is our auto-pilot. This is the way that we habitually do things. Ever arrived at work in the morning and can't for the life of you remember how you got there, or anything about your journey, which is the same journey you take every morning?

There's nothing wrong with having an auto-pilot. It saves us a lot of energy not having to think of every manoeuvre when we make a right turn in the car, or being able to do something 'with our eyes closed'. But when we are in a relationship with our lover and find our physical connections are becoming repetitive or stuck in a certain pattern, we may choose to recognise that we have lost intimacy in favour of auto-pilot.

Inviting intimacy back into our lives means being willing to be present in every moment. A good way to begin to do this is to bring consciousness to the moments in our lives when we find ourselves in auto-pilot and realise that we'd rather not be.

For example, Linda and Steve are getting ready for bed after a lovely evening out. They decide to cuddle and get into bed naked. Steve always starts by stroking Linda's hair and then her face, then he moves down her body caressing her and kissing her skin. At a certain point, she will reach down and start to touch his lingam. This particular evening, she notices that everything feels the same. She knows what is going to happen next, where they are heading and how it will feel. Even though it feels nice, there is something missing.

At this juncture, Linda could be courageous and say, "Steve, I love your touch and I'm feeling a bit disconnected. Could we stop a moment? I

want to just look at you and feel my body against yours. I'd love to lie face to face and just see you for a while." The change of pace and activity disrupts their habitualised flow and they can find a new way back together. It's unfamiliar and they both feel a bit tender

and uncertain. However, words of love flow from this place of vulnerability and freshness and their connection is re-established.

A fresh start

Auto-pilot doesn't only take over in couples who have been together a long time. Often we have our routines that we go through when we meet someone new. These patterned responses help us to feel secure and less vulnerable. If we are willing to slow down and breathe into the anxiety ►

“PERHAPS LOVE WAS WITHDRAWN WHEN WE DID SHOW OURSELVES”

or insecurity or vulnerability, we'll be more present with ourselves and then we're more likely to be able to make or maintain a connection with the person we're with. We might share how we're feeling in words, or we may simply let it be seen on our face or in our body language. The important thing is that we aren't trying to hide our insecurity or vulnerability. When someone shows us their vulnerability in this way, it's an invitation to emotional intimacy. A closeness and trust begins to form when we take these small risks to reveal ourselves in our humanity – to be a little more naked with our clothes on.

Now that we've taken some steps toward vulnerability, we have to be willing to keep on being there. Just as we have ways of escaping being with ourselves, we all have our ways of escaping from an intimate encounter if it gets too intimate or too much. If intimacy is scary for us, we're likely to have many ways of getting ourselves out of there. Common strategies are: blaming, getting angry and walking off in a huff, shutting down emotionally and pretending nothing is happening, falling asleep or going into action – to work or to do something 'really important'. Anything, in fact, to avoid staying with the discomfort of feeling what we're feeling.

Calm the drama

A foundation stone of intimacy is that we are able and willing to hold and calm ourselves and each other. If we are not, we're likely to find a drama emerging. One person storms off, and we both exit in terms of our vulnerability and intimacy. Early in my own marriage, my husband Frieder and I discovered for ourselves a way to break the habit of storming off: simply move in the opposite direction of where you want to run. So if he was about to storm off, instead he'd move towards me and ask me to hold him. And likewise, I would do the same thing. Sometimes we just need choices and then we can do something different.

Bringing conscious awareness to the ways we avoid being intimate can help us summon the courage to keep choosing to move towards intimacy or at least to face the feelings of fear or anger arise when you are close.

Make a list of your exit strategies when you are with someone you're close to. How do you maintain a 'safe' distance? For example, do you turn on the television and zone out, or read endlessly, Facebook, avoid eye contact, bury yourself in the paper or the garden or the kids or the tennis court, volunteer for endless committees. This is anything that takes a lot of time and is a higher priority than your beloved. The awareness of how we protect ourselves from the possibility of experiencing intimacy can lead us to make different choices.

Building emotional intimacy and trust requires not only that we reveal ourselves but that we are interested in learning about and understanding the other, even in the ways that can cause us distress or upset. Learning to listen as a way of understanding, with a fascination and curiosity about who we're with, is a bridge to intimacy in many situations.

See the world through their eyes

A good way to break the pattern of defensiveness in communication is to practice active listening. This means listening as if from the perspective of the other person, so that we can see the world through their eyes rather than from our own often reactive stance. This enables us to hear what our partner is telling us so that we can understand them even if we don't agree with what they are saying. This is a big step to seeing each other, and so it is a big step towards intimacy.

Finally, appreciation and the little surprises and tokens of love that we give each other are crucial to maintaining the container of love in which intimacy is built. We all, both men and women, need praise, encouragement, to be told

that we are loved, to be adored and delighted in. Most of all, we need to know that we are loved and accepted just the way we are. If we never show anyone who we are, essentially we can never be loved. Appreciation and acceptance are crucial to building the trust that allows us to reveal ourselves.

As the great Persian mystic, Hafiz said, "My dear, how can I be more more loving to you? How can I be more kind?" ■

More info about Jan Day and her intimacy workshops can be found on janday.com. You can call for a chat on 0208 123 9831. Learn more at a weekend introduction to Living Tantra at the Grange on the Isle of Wight on 1st-3rd March. You can enroll on Living Tantra 1 at EarthSpirit in Somerset on 28th March-4th April, or on the couples workshop, Mirror of The Heart in Dorset on 19th-21st April

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