

Improving Intimacy



10 Powerful
Strategies

A Spiritual Approach

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Sanctuary

IMPROVING INTIMACY:
10 Powerful Strategies...
A Spiritual Approach

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Dedicated to the God of Love who is
always available to help us in our relationships;
with a special note of thanks to all who have
taught me how to expand my
own ability to give and receive love;
and sincere appreciation to Wendy
for her assistance
and enthusiastic support.

"Feeling understood is the only
way an adult can be validated."
-Psychologist ANNA ORNSTEIN

IMPROVING INTIMACY

**10 Powerful Strategies...A *Spiritual Approach*
by Tom O'Connell**

1) A Look at Intimacy and Addiction

In today's world, the kind of closeness that many people describe as "intimacy" is actually addiction. But addiction impairs intimacy, so before we discuss the 10 powerful strategies for improving intimacy, we are going to look carefully at addictive relating.

Actually, one extremely important strategy for improving intimacy is to become more aware of our addictive tendencies and recover from them. Only then do we have a chance of achieving the kind of intimacy that enriches and helps to fulfill our lives.

First, let's look at the word "intimate," which comes from the Latin "intimus" and means "within," "private," "personal," "closely acquainted," or "very familiar."

Many people think intimacy is just another name for sexual intercourse. But the sexual act is only a part of intimacy. True intimacy is a blending of mind and spirit (and sometimes body) that goes beyond the sex act and brings us into unusual closeness to another human being. True intimacy is not achieved quickly. This labor of love takes time and demands respect for oneself and another. It's not a quick fix; it's an ongoing work of art.

Are you attached to your partner so strongly that you can't picture functioning without him? Are you so connected that you can't imagine living without

her? Do you have habits that you perform with your partner? Are you preoccupied with your partner? Haunted by your partner? Lost in your partner? Easily disturbed by your partner? Caught in moods based on feelings about your mate?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, there's a good chance that you are a relationship addict. And if you want to have healthy relationships you need to address your addictive tendencies. They impair your relationships, making healthy ones impossible to achieve, and form a triangle in which we are separated from our loved ones, our inner selves, and our God.

Don't take offense at the word "addict." It's a fine word, but many of us apply it mainly to drug addiction. The word "addict" means someone who is "devoted" to a "constant practice" or "habit." Most of us, at times, are relationship addicts. How about you?

2) Some Definitions to Consider

Basically, addiction is a condition of unhealthy dependence that impairs a person's ability to function to full potential. A very important problem we have when we're addicted is that we lose our ability to relate properly to another human being.

Another viewpoint of addiction is that it is a condition in which we will use any technique for adapting to the problems of life, other than healthy interpersonal relating. To lead a healthy life we need to learn to relate in healthy ways. But our addictive

tendencies can be a serious barrier.

I think of addiction as Dependence with a Capital D. In a relationship when we are too dependent we are acting like an addict who is fixated on alcohol or drugs. A dependent person is in a state of suspense because when we're addicted we're left "hanging" much of the time.

When we are too dependent, it robs us of our freedom of choice when it comes to thoughts, words, actions and reactions. And freedom is a key element in building healthy relationships. Therefore, it's worth preserving and protecting.

3) FIVE Cs Of Relationship Addiction

If you're thinking you might be a relationship addict, reflect on the following factors. To help me remember them, I call them the Five Cs of addiction.

Addiction, or unhealthy Dependence, involves Craving, Compulsion, loss of one's Control despite attempts to control, and Continuation of the behavior even though there are life-damaging Consequences.

Do you find yourself Craving certain behaviors from your partner? Do you feel Compulsion driving you to get your own way? Do you feel like you are losing your Control at times? And do you Continue the behavior even though the Consequences are damaging to your life?

If you are caught in this kind of cycle, you are in a process involving more than just habit; you may qualify as an addict. But remember that the degree

of intensity or harmfulness of addiction varies from person to person. The dividing line between habit and addictive tendency is not easy to pin down.

4) The O/C Of Relationship Addiction

Are you addicted or not? To find out, take a close look at what I call the O/C of addiction, Obsession and Compulsion. If you are haunted by the object of your addiction, preoccupied with thoughts of it, you are experiencing Obsession. Do you feel irresistibly drawn toward some particular behavior? And are you impulsive about it? Do you feel compelled to act? If you feel driven, that is Compulsion. Obsession and Compulsion are at the heart of every addiction, and if you can relate to what I'm saying here, consider that you may be more addicted to your partner than in a state of healthy love.

5) PMESS of Relationship Addiction

Relationships involve our whole being, whether we realize it or not, and addiction also affects us in all of our aspects whether they be Physical, Mental, Emotional, Social, or Spiritual. Relating affects our bodies, minds, emotions, social activity, and spiritual journey. So a healthy relationship is a good medicine for our whole being; and an unhealthy one is poison. But when we are used to taking in addictive poison over a long period of time there are certain responses that are common. I call them the DDT&W.

6) DDT&W of Relationship Addiction

As we round out this very brief course in the key factors that appear in addictive relating, let's look at the DDT&W, which may sound a bit like a corporate name but stands for Defense, Denial, Tolerance, and Withdrawal. Each of these four factors is found in unhealthy dependence. They can be called hallmarks of addictive disease, whether the problem involves alcohol, drugs, food, gambling, or relationships.

Defense

It is human to Defend our behavior once we have chosen a course of action. When we're addicted to another person we have turned over our inner power to an outside force that is doing our choosing for us. But we still want to think we're calling the shots. So we are likely to use phrases such as these: "I can handle the relationship." "I've got things under control." "The good things outweigh the bad." "The sex is so good!" "There's pain but there's comfort, too." "I think there's definitely going to be a change for the better."

Denial

Denial is also a trait that accompanies addiction. It's an attempt to shield myself from the shock I must face if I square off and recognize the truth that will pressure me to make changes in my life that I'd rather not make. If you try to persuade me to believe I'm in

an unhealthy relationship, I may simply say: "That's ridiculous." "You don't know what you're talking about." "There are a lot of people worse off than I am." "You don't know the whole story."

I may refuse to admit my problem, no matter how obvious it may be to you. And my Denial may include outright lying and manipulative behavior. It can even involve limiting the amount of contact, similar to the way an alcoholic may attempt to measure the number of drinks. Also, we can deceive ourselves, and claim we are only hurting ourselves a little, not a lot. This is sometimes called minimizing.

Tolerance

Tolerance is another important factor that goes with addiction. In simple language, it means that we need increasingly more of our object of devotion to get the originally desired effect. Our bodies and minds adapt to our behavior; our responses change, and sometimes our Tolerance may build to a level at which the original sensation can't be reproduced. This is not only true of drug effects, it's also true of sexual effects and other behaviors that accompany addictive relating.

Withdrawal

The W in DDT&W refers to the Withdrawal symptoms that happen when we try to quit an addiction. After stopping our addictive behavior, we are faced with unpleasant symptoms: "I think I'll die!" "I can't live without him!" "I need her!"

Among the unpleasant Physical symptoms are sweating, cramps, and even tremors. Mental and emotional symptoms include feelings of impending doom, insecurity, mood swings, anger, isolation, depression, and confusion. Spiritual withdrawal symptoms include despair, loss of hope, anger with God, a basic dissatisfaction with life, a feeling of powerlessness, and a loss of confidence.

The pain of relationship withdrawal is similar to grieving over a death.

7) The CPF Of Relationship Addiction

Addiction also has a CPF factor. It is Chronic, Progressive, and potentially Fatal. Yet some people seem able to maintain a steadily destructive holding pattern without escalating the harmful course of events over a long period. The Chronic nature of relationship addiction is similar to other addictions in that it is an ongoing problem.

Just as there are many kinds of chronic alcoholics such as those who are daily drinkers, weekend drinkers, and periodic binge drinkers, relationship addicts may be involved in unhealthy, addictive relationships daily, weekly, or even less frequently. But in any case, the problem is Chronic.

Looking at the Progressive aspect of relationship addiction, usually the relationship deteriorates over time while causing untold pain and suffering.

The Fatal possibilities include suicide, homicide, and using other hazardous addictions to cope with the

pain. There is another kind of fatality too, when we carry around with us the emotional death that happens when we persist in staying with a failed and toxic addictive relationship. My belief is that God did not intend us to be functioning like zombies.

8) Attempting To Fill Inner Emptiness

Addiction, whether we are discussing unhealthy relationships with people, alcohol, drugs, betting, or food, involves a continuing attempt to fill an inner emptiness or relieve inner discomfort by turning to some behavior that will bring the sense of fulfillment or comfort we are looking for. The relief is always temporary, and to be free we must pay a price.

It takes courage to choose pain in order to find freedom from addiction. But it's worth the effort to free ourselves, and there's a special bonus. When we choose healthy instead of addictive relating, we access a level of happiness beyond description.

9) The Three Basic Relationships

In this discussion I am emphasizing the addictive relating that goes on between two committed people who are trying to live full lives together. But it's important to realize that there is more to life than relating to just one other person, in a couple.

There are three key relationships to concern ourselves with in life: the relationship with self, the relationship to others, and the relationship to God.

When all three relationships are in balance, we achieve a wonderful wholeness. Each relationship, healthy or unhealthy, affects the others, and to focus on one of the three to the exclusion of the others leads to serious problems. Balance is the key.

10) The Process of Addictive Relating

Addictive relating, as with other addictions, is a process that begins with the choice of a love object, or object of devotion, that makes us feel good or lessens our discomfort with life. We move from habit to unhealthy dependence, and finally to addiction. At that point we lose our freedom to choose what is best for ourselves.

Obsessed by our love object, we are preoccupied or haunted by thoughts about the person. Becoming compulsive, we feel driven to actions designed to achieve our desires. Irresistibly drawn by the power of our chosen love object, we lose power over ourselves. That's why they call it "falling in love."

When we "fall" out of balance we are in danger, and even though true love is a wonderful thing, addictive love that masquerades as true love can lead us to disaster.

In this painful process we exhibit the Five Cs of addiction as we become caught up in a cycle of intensity that involves Craving, Compulsion, loss of Control, and Continuation of the unhealthy behavior despite life-damaging Consequences. Caught in a web of powerful thoughts and feelings that affect us

physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually, we defend our behavior, deny it, and suffer from the tolerance factor, meaning we need more and more of our love object. And we experience painful withdrawal symptoms when we cannot get what we desire.

Finally, we find ourselves in the CPF of addiction as we become diseased by our chronic, progressive behaviors that tend to worsen with time and may lead us to fatal outcomes.

Now that we know how addictive we can be, we are in a position to take steps toward recovery, and start practicing real intimacy.

First, though, we need to take a look at what intimacy is all about:

Love!

11) Some Thoughts About Infatuation

Many people mistake infatuation for love, and the word comes from the Latin "infatuatio" meaning "foolish." Dictionary language tells us that when we become infatuated we are "thoroughly under the influence of foolish passion; acting without sense or reason."

We are attracted, like travelers in the desert, to the "ignis fatuus," or "foolish fire," which is a false light or illusion. The real thing would be a nurturing campfire.

Infatuation is a state of mind that's a bit like being in love with love. The self-identified great addict St. Augustine, who chased love passionately, said, "I

loved not yet, yet I loved to love...I sought that I might love, in love with loving."

12) Healthy Relating

Healthy relationships are based on a foundation of unselfish love, not on the false light of infatuation or the pursuit of pleasure. To live is to need to connect, and "relate" means "connect." But our challenge is to connect with another in a balanced, not addictive, way.

Also, we must remember that our partner shouldn't be expected to fulfill all of our insatiable needs. After all, our perceived "needs" are subject to changes based on moods and desires which are very unpredictable and basically self-centered.

Self-centered expectations are the very stuff that leads to addictive relating and deteriorating relationships. If we act out our desire to connect in the same way we approach our use of alcohol and other addictive love objects, we feel good briefly, feel unfulfilled the rest of the time, and are about as close to understanding love as Columbus was to reaching the Orient.

Romantic love is by nature exhilarating, and operates like cocaine, with a series of highs followed by a series of crashes, and no real middle ground. Yet the middle ground is where love lives. In the middle ground we will sacrifice a perceived need for the sake of the one we love. And we will learn to think of our needs as "preferences."

With healthy love, "Enough is enough." With addictive love, "More is better." There's nothing wrong with romance, but expecting a relationship to be always romantic is a form of unbalanced thinking. And so is the notion that our "highs" are "needs."

13) Some Thoughts on Love

Love is an art that few have mastered, I believe, and it's a subject that fascinates and mystifies me. I don't pretend to be an expert at it, just a serious student. And it's important for us to become students of love because love doesn't just "happen." We make it, and we can decide to dissolve it.

In my lifetime I have had a variety of theme songs about love. One of my favorites was "Send in the Clowns." Yet at other times I was haunted by the romance of "Love is a Many Splendored Thing."

In search of love, many of us thought we had found it, and then we lost it, and there we were with our heads shaking back and forth, wondering what had happened to us. Then we went through the grieving process after parting with a partner, and once again there we were in the arena of life with questions on who to connect with, and how to do it.

14) Sex and Wholeness

When the time became right to connect again, many of us got involved in too much too soon. We were like the camel in the desert who, after spending

much time with great thirst, started to swig in all the water in the oasis. It was too much for us. And it was not true intimacy because the emphasis was too much on the sensual instead of the spiritual.

In Latin, the word "sex" means "to cut." I wonder if this goes back to an ancient concept that one person was cut in half, with one part male (Adam) and the other female (Eve). Destined to come together as Adam and Eve, they were two separate yet united beings.

In a caring relationship, the halves are rejoined physically, psychologically, and spiritually, which includes much more than repetitive acts of sexual intercourse. In a relationship a new entity is created, a kind of new being.

I think this rejoined state, this reunion of halves, is that natural state of wholeness we are striving for in our intimate relationships. It's a state in which two halves add up to more than one whole. And it's a state of living, or lifestyle, that can be liberating, maturing and fulfilling.

15) The Various Kinds of Love

There are many viewpoints on love, but I have a special fondness for the description C. S. Lewis used in a book called *The Four Loves*, where he discusses affection, friendship, Eros and charity.

"Affection," says Lewis, is modest and familiar, ordinary and easy, like "old clothes" that get more comfortable the more often you wear them. This kind

of love involves give and take, fairness and decency.

"Friendship" is appreciative love, and involves common interests, he suggests. It's when we see the same truth, accept each other for ourselves, share our mutual respect, and develop understanding.

"Eros" brings a preoccupation with the beloved, Lewis observes. Erotic love, which is more intense than friendship, wants the whole person, not just the sex act, and Lewis says it enters into a relationship "like an invader." Passions soar and "pleasure pushed to its extreme, shatters us like pain." There are pledges of "true love" and there is "idol worship." Obviously, at this point our addictive tendencies can escalate dramatically.

"Charity" is on yet another level. Lewis says it involves "practicing the presence of God," and he emphasizes that in this kind of love there are "no safe investments." It's unconditional love!

Charity is the kind of love that St. Paul was so beautifully describing in I Corinthians 13: "Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail..."

A healthy intimate relationship of the best type will include each of these kinds of love, at one time or another, and sometimes they will overlap.

16) Real Love

What is real love? It's mysterious and defies rigid defining, but you know it when you have it in your heart. And you know its joy whether you are giving or receiving it.

I greatly appreciate the way psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan chose to describe love. "When the satisfaction or security of another person becomes as significant as your own...a state of love exists."

Then there is Erich Fromm's belief that love is a decision to "know, care, respond, respect...." The word "respect" means to "look at." How many people are willing to truly look at each other in mutual respect as whole persons?

Fromm views real love as an art form requiring discipline, concentration, patience, concern with mastery, faith, courage, and activity. These are the same ingredients we need when we try to master any behavior. Imagine the results throughout the world if we were all willing to work at love as a way of life that demands the best we have to give.

C.S. Lewis emphasizes that "to love is to be vulnerable." He also says promiscuous sex is like chewing things and then spitting them out again.

I once heard some unforgettable words about love and connectedness from psychologist Anna Ornstein: "Feeling understood is the only way an adult can be validated." How are we able to validate, or love, one another? We do it through empathy, not through the addictive pursuit of pleasure. Ornstein defines "empathy" as the ability "to realize and understand

another person's feelings, needs and suffering."

Empathy is the opposite of indifference, which hurts and shrivels us. Empathy heals and expands both giver and receiver. And it is a very important ingredient in what we call "love."

We need empathy for ourselves...and for others.

17) Love and Self-Discipline

One of the problems with our yearning to connect is that it brings on feelings that are very powerful and can easily move us into addictive behaviors. We can become overwhelmed by our own obsessive thinking and worrying, and exhausted by compulsive actions based on fear. Fear of not getting what we want, or fear of losing what we already have.

Instead of being caught up in fear, we need to extend ourselves for another person's benefit and discipline those inner urges of ours that can't be fully satisfied in this existence. We have to learn how to defer gratification. To really experience joy in eating ice cream, we need to learn to lick it slowly instead of swallowing it in four bites that send jabs of pain into our skulls. And instead of eating the blossoms on the apple tree we should have the patience to wait for the fruit to ripen. It's worth the wait.

True love is not the continual satisfaction of appetites, it is the willingness to commit ourselves to another while not losing ourselves in the process. To do that, we need to be disciplined. Also, we need to invest time and energy in our partner, not expecting an instant return. We have to be willing to set aside

our own desires when we do the dance of intimacy.

To accomplish this, we must be fully ourselves and allow our partner to be a complete person too. A loving relationship is not an event, not a destination; it's a journey filled with unexpected daily adventures.

18) The Need to Grow Together

In the journey of intimacy, before we can extend ourselves in a loving relationship with another, we need to know and love ourselves well. We have to be aware of our strengths and our weaknesses; and we need to accept the other's need to experience self-awareness and personal growth too.

If we are a dependent type and can't live a full life alone, we are unlikely to be able to learn how to live a full life with another. Although we can help each other to grow toward our destinies, the journey of life is basically individual. And that's where love comes into the picture. It isn't easy to treasure our partner's separateness when it conflicts with our desire for closeness. But love includes elements of self-discipline and the willingness to sacrifice self.

John Donne wrote: "We are alone together, you and I, and we cannot make each other unalone." Yet we can help, nurture, and express love to each other by encouraging freedom to be oneself, with our gifts and defects. When two people relate together and look beyond the defects, appreciate the gifts, and practice being supportive, that's love in operation.

In true love we embrace all of the elements of relating, both the peak experiences of union and the

shattering experiences of loss and loneliness. That's where the development of our emotional balance becomes critically important. And it's well worth the continuing effort. Two people united in love, and dedicated to a healthy relationship, can achieve a level of happiness that is beyond description.

In the Chinese Book of Changes the harmony of such a healthy intimate relationship is expressed in these words: "True joy is the harmony between two people's essential selves." This nurturing harmony involves "sincerity, truth and goodness." With such harmony, a relationship truly blossoms.

The I Ching also notes that when joy is not your goal you are more apt to find it. Love, when chased, is like the elusive butterfly. But if we concentrate on giving love we will attract love like a magnet. It's an old idea, but ancient wisdom has stood the test of time and is valuable to us in our spiritual journey. The concept that it is better to give than receive is a powerful one. And its truth can be our guide.

19) Key Elements in the 10 Strategies

It's a challenge to condense the many possible interpretations of love and intimacy into 10 simple strategies. But I believe that the millions of words used throughout history on this subject can be boiled down to 10 basic principles.

Also, I feel that when discussing how to improve love and intimacy skills, the hazards of addictive relating must be stressed. Addictive relating is a real

barrier to harmony in partnerships, and a key issue that deserves ongoing attention in the development and maintenance of healthy intimate relationships.

As an antidote to toxic, addictive relating I stress the importance of developing a spiritual focus in all relationships. Spirituality is the key to successful relating and healthy intimacy.

20) The 10 Powerful Strategies

- 1) Become a student of intimate relating.**
- 2) Recover from your addictive relating.**
- 3) Develop a spiritual basis for loving.**
- 4) Learn to love, not compete or control.**
- 5) Learn to listen and listen to learn.**
- 6) Communicate your feelings and ideas.**
- 7) Resolve conflict in healthy ways.**
- 8) Give appreciation generously.**
- 9) Become who you really are and love it.**
- 10) Intimacy is a dance, so let's dance!**

These strategies could be the subjects of ten books. But reading has limits; and living actively is what life is all about. So we need to test what we read and see how useful it is in actual practice.

These ten strategies are not designed to bring you a perfect relationship. Perfection is not the goal. Relating in a loving, caring way is the goal, and that involves a lifetime journey. But the practice of these useful strategies will enhance your ability to enjoy life more fully on a daily basis.

As a student of intimacy, you will learn and grow, and each of your close relationships will give you opportunities to improve your intimacy skills.

Now let's look at each of the ten strategies...

#1...Become A Student of Intimate Relating

Intimate relating is an art form, and works of art aren't created by dabbling. We have to practice our art consistently. Since creating healthy relationships, or "connecting," is the essence of life itself and not just a small part of life, it requires our best efforts.

Lectures and books may be useful, and therapists may be helpful when we get stuck, but our best teachers are the people with whom we connect. People we live with are challenging teachers, but our associates in various organizations can also teach us. We all need to study intimacy in every relationship, whether at home, at work, or elsewhere.

We need to practice what we learn, and learn from our practice. And it requires humility to realize that our higher education in intimate relating brings no diploma that certifies our expertise. Intimacy is an academy for lifelong learning where we all take turns playing the roles of teacher and student.

#2...Recover From Your Addictive Relating

to be continued...

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