

How to Increase Emotional and Physical Intimacy in Your Relationship



By Karen Goldsum



There is a common assumption that men want sex, while women want emotional closeness. While the research does corroborate this divide, most people regardless of gender highly value connection (both physical and emotional) in their relationship. When it is missing partners yearn for more attachment. Intimacy is a fundamental, near universal need in romantic relationships. As a couples counselor, I created this zine to help partners explore ways of asking for and hopefully getting more affection.

Emotional intimacy

Emotional intimacy is feeling deeply connected and safe within a relationship. It allows for expressing vulnerability, thoughts, and feelings without judgement. Couples that are experienced in emotional intimacy feel truly seen and understood. Even though we all annoy our partners from time to time, maintaining deep fondness for one another is key.



Signs Your Relationship needs more Emotional Intimacy

One of the most common indicators that you need more closeness is feeling like roommates, rather than romantic partners. If you are sharing the same physical space, but feel light years apart emotionally that's not great.

Feeling like your partner doesn't "get" you; they don't know who you are, what your values are, or how you operate.

Very similarly, if your partner doesn't notice when you change. In Gottman therapy this is expressed as not updating your love maps. It often means your spouse isn't really paying attention. And, how could that not be painful?

When your conversations are superficial

When you stop sharing yourself with one another. After a period of disconnect, this might be evidence that ya'll have given up on one another.



When a couple spends more time looking at their phones than focusing on each other.

Feeling detached from your partner during sex is another manifestation that something is off. Sex usually turbo charges a relationship. If you feel disengaged during sex it's a good sign that something is missing.

This last one is possibly the most important indication that you may need more intimacy in your relationship: feeling lonely when you are together. We get into relationships to feel companionship, to feel seen. Feeling isolated is the antithesis of a healthy relationship.



How to talk to your partner about wanting more emotional intimacy?

Dive into this topic like a kid in a candy store—curious, excited, and maybe a little messy! Most of us get anxious when asking for concessions from our partners. In order to help alleviate their defensiveness approach the topic in a fun playful manner. Wanting more closeness with your partner is a lovely thing. What you are asking for is less not extractive (can you do x for me?) but more additive—like “I want to spend more time with you.” I want to know you better. Use the same energy as you would asking if your partner would like to explore a new restaurant with you.





You may want to explore the idea that emotional intimacy is not an individual problem, emotional intimacy is something you have to tackle together. We need to work together in order to feel closer.

Make specific requests. If you state “I want more emotional intimacy” they might feel a little lost about how to get there. Spend some time thinking about some small practical ways that ya’ll can connect. With time and repetition, these small gestures will lead to more rapport.

Prioritize quality time. We all know that our phones are distracting. Asking your partner to have phone free dinners with you once a week (to start off with)

Invite your partner to go on nightly walks around the block

with you. This can be an excellent first step (ha!) towards your goal

Engage in novelty. Try new activities or hobbies together to create new memories and shared experiences.

Practice active listening. Focus entirely on your partner, asking questions to understand their perspective rather than merely preparing your response

Get (and stay) curious. Cultivate curiosity about your lover. Update your love map. Ask your other half how you make them feel closer to you.

Use this zine to open up the conversation. Say something like, "Hey, I just read this interesting zine, check it out and let me know what you think....is that something we could work on?"

Another option is going to therapy together

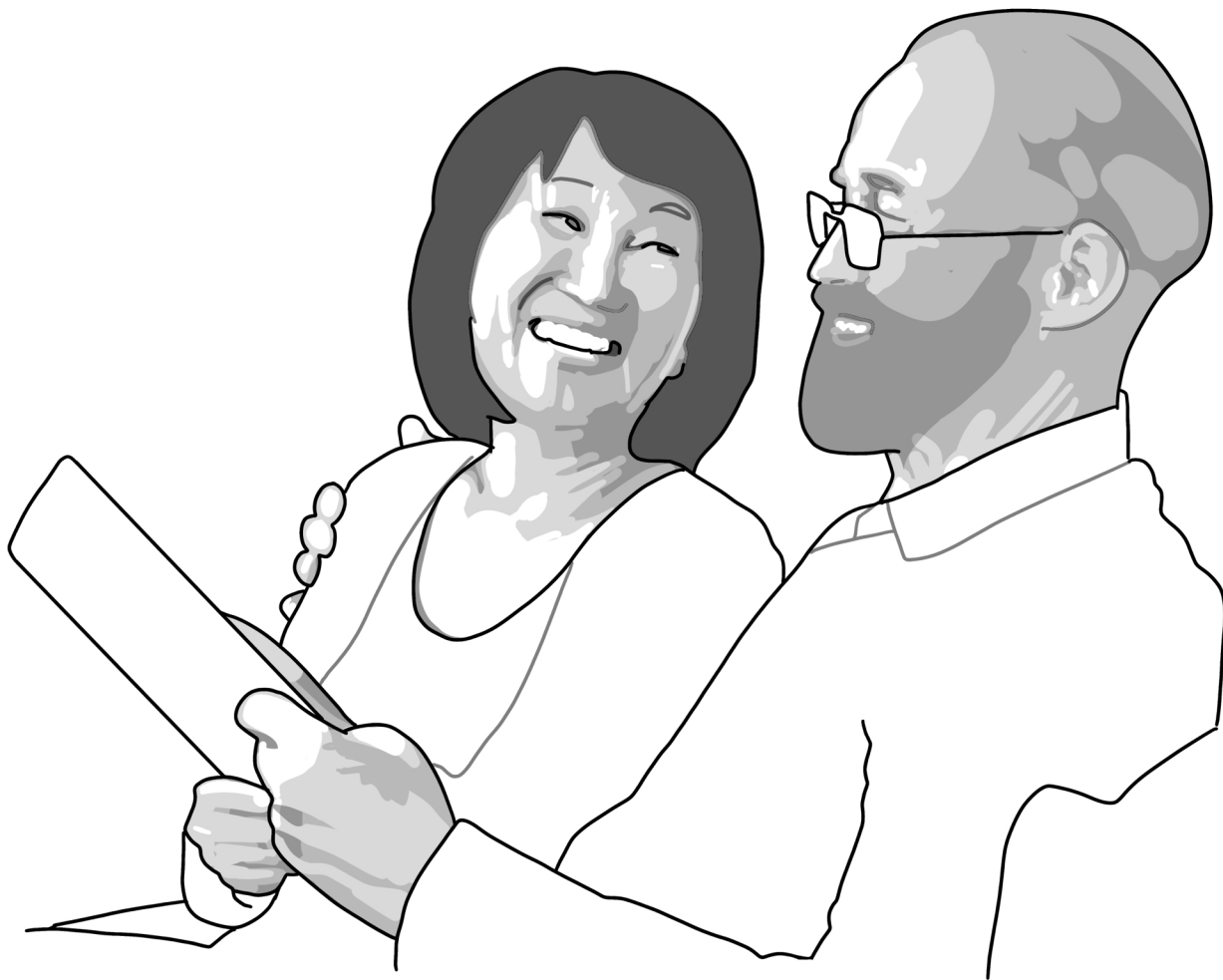


What to do if you are talking to your partner about emotional intimacy and they are just not getting it.

This is a great opportunity to learn more about your partner. Did their families express love for one another? Were they allowed to express their full range feelings to each other? Were some emotions privileged, while others were suppressed? How did intimacy show up in other relationships?

If you are dating a fella you may need to have a bigger conversation around how different genders are encouraged or denied opportunities to connect with their emotions. They may say something like “I’m not good at talking about my emotions.” Remind your partner that they don’t have to be good at connecting (yet). You can be patient while they learn.





You may even need to remind them of the many instances they already express emotions with statements like “I had a bad day at work” or the glee they feel when their favorite sports team wins. Go sports ball!

If your partner says something like “I think our emotional intimacy is fine the way it is,” you could remind them that the two of you are a team. Your priorities should align—what’s important to one should be important to both of us.

If your partner is being staunchly ignoring your request with demands for more sex, you can validate them. You can admit that you, too, want more physical intimacy. And, you can acknowledge that you want to feel closer in that way, as well.

If at all possible try to frame this conversation as we are a team, let’s work together to make sure we both get more physical and emotional intimacy.

Physical Intimacy

Yes, physical intimacy includes sex. But sex is not the whole enchilada. For most heterosexual relationships, sex is typically a few minutes of making out, a few moments of groping, and then straight on to intercourse. Intercourse is just one small part physical intimacy. Physical intimacy also includes non-sexual touch and closeness that you maintain throughout the day.

For couples who are trying to build a future together, physical intimacy is more than just genitals. So many people forget about the intimacy in physical intimacy; we get stuck in the physical part. There are so many other ways to be intimate than just intercourse—cuddling, hugs holding hands, sitting close each other, dancing in the kitchen, and caressing each other's backs....

I guess what I'm saying is that, sex in long term committed relationships is not just purely physical, it's so important to recognize that sex is also about connection. It's a special act





we do with each other. It's a way to show up and truly be vulnerable with one another. It's an opportunity to play and explore.

If a couple has not been connecting physically for a while, it's easy to dismiss sex as just a purely physical act. This leads to writing off sex and making excuses like "i'm too tired" or "I'm too busy" or "I have too much on my plate" and even "Who is going to watch the kids?"

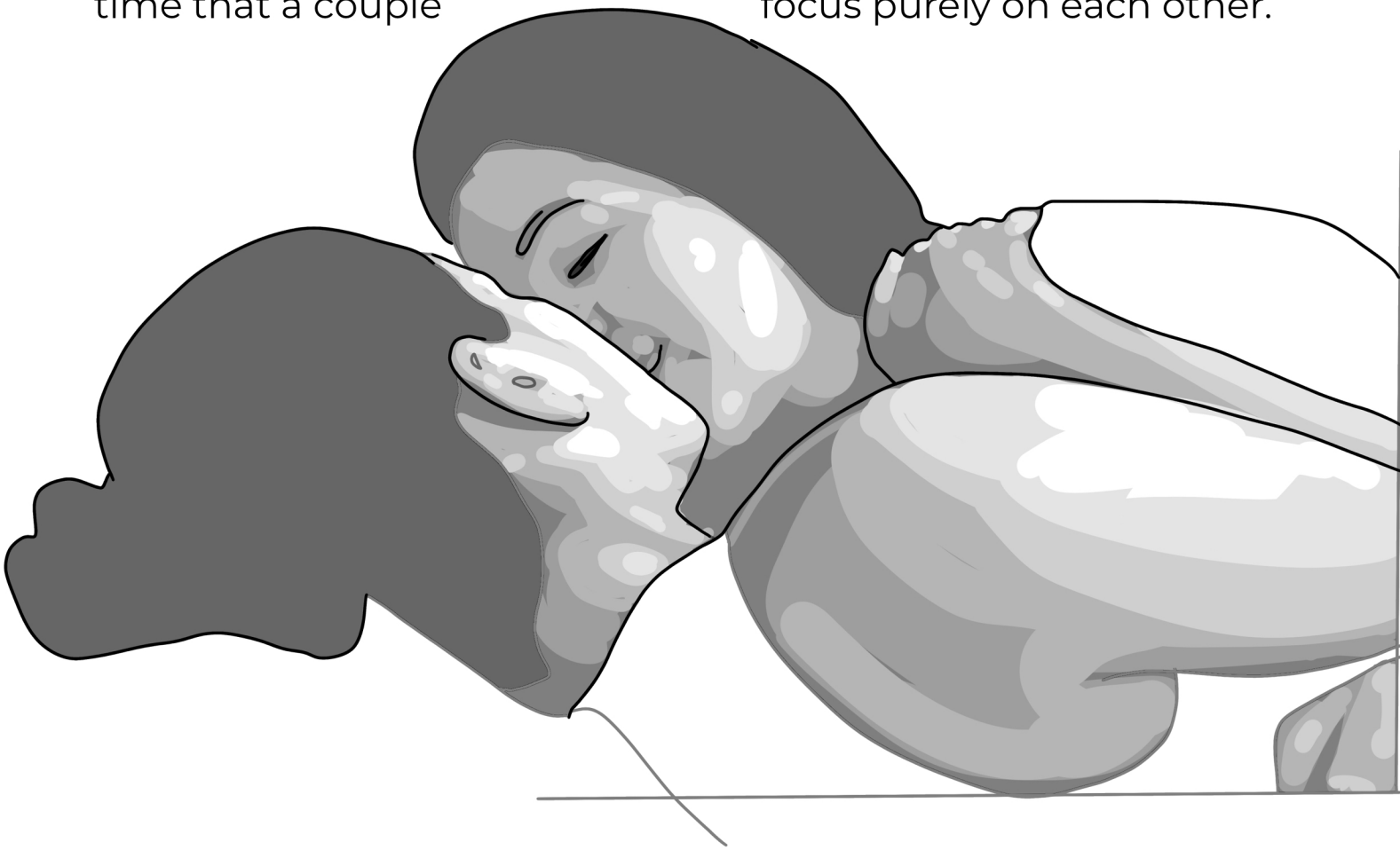
Another trap is assuming that all physical touch is just a preamble for sex. In my practice I hear from so many women who complain about this trend. They feel sexualized and objectified at every turn.

For most couples, physical connection is just as important as emotional connection. For a lot of people, the bond created through physical intimacy can deepen emotional connection. When a couple are in a good place (feeling close and connected) sex can increase feelings of raw, unguarded emotion. It means a lot to be there in that moment together, making space for each other. Oftentimes, we are distracted by the furious pace of contemporary life. Even on date night, it's

difficult to stay attentive to our loved ones. Frequently, sex is often the only time when our spouses get our entire singular undivided attention. Physical intimacy is sometimes the only time that a couple focus purely on each other.

For anyone in a relationship with a man, it is important to recognize that for many men sex is the safest way for them to express themselves. Many male clients have shared that the only way they can connect with their partners is through sex. Rationally, men know this isn't true. Many men are taught from a young age that they are not supposed to be emotional. Because of the crappy way most guys are socialized, in everyday life their defenses are often up. They find engaging with deeper questions embarrassing. It isn't until they have sex that their fortifications come down. The rush of oxytocin, gives them the opportunity to share sincerely. For many fellas, this is a huge relief. They can just be their unfettered selves.

difficult to stay attentive to our loved ones. Frequently, sex is often the only time when our spouses get our entire singular undivided attention. Physical intimacy is sometimes the only time that a couple focus purely on each other.



Why Physical Intimacy is important in Relationships

Intimacy feels good. it's fun, pleasurable and joyful.

It builds trust. As well know, trust is fundamental to all healthy relationships.

Physical intimacy helps delineate between romantic relationships and friendships

One of the amazing health benefits on intimacy is that it reduces stress. When you are chronically stressed cortisol builds up in your system leaving you feeling tense and worn out. Physical affection triggers the release of endorphins, feel good hormones that can lift your mood and it helps bring cortisol levels back to a normal range.

Physical closeness also stimulates our production of oxytocin, aka the "love hormone," which helps you relax even more.

Somatic recreation also helps you sleep. Prolactin streams through our bodies when we touch, which in turn regulates sleep. Not only does prolactin help you fall asleep, it supports deeper more restful slumber.

Lastly, have a stuffy nose? Try engaging in more physical intimate activity. It can help your nasal passages clear right up.



How to ask your Partner for more Physical Intimacy

Focus on the intimacy aspect. It's too easy for your partner to hear, "I want more sex," and dismiss your request. You have to focus on the emotional part. Talk about how close you feel to them when you've had physical intimacy—explain what it is like for you to let down your walls.

Blame external factors. This is a way to decrease defensiveness, it helps them feel like they aren't in the wrong. You've been busy lately. This is not to downplay your request. There is a lot of stuff going on and I would like to experience more physical intimacy with you.

Removing blockages to intimacy. Couples don't stop having sex willy nilly. There are good, practical reasons for it. Too much work, no babysitter, if you want more physical intimacy you need to be their teammate. How can we support each other in removing these blockages?





Some common blockages I see as a couples counselor all of the time include:

Mental load is a huge impediment. If you are a man in a relationship with a woman, this is one you absolutely cannot skip. Stop asking “how can I help?” that puts more mental load on her. Instead, just do it. Take some of the tasks off the list. Be an adult. You have the capacity to figure out on your own what needs to be done.

Time alone. Maybe your partner needs some time to get back into their body. Especially, if you are working from home, you are going to need additional time to mentally disentangling yourself from what you were previously doing.

Take care of kids. If one partner is home taking care of the kids all day, they need a break from that responsibility.

Make sure you are focusing on their pleasure. This doesn't count just for sex, this includes simple touch, too. If your partner isn't enjoying the touch you are already providing they aren't going to want more of it. Guys, women don't like boob honks.

Make casual physical touch your priority. This includes dancing, cuddling, holding hands, spooning, back tickles, sitting next to each other and our legs feet touch, scalp scratches... Not all touch should lead to sex. Luxuriating in your partner's presence is also wonderful in of itself.





Here are Common Responses your Partner might make:

“Ugh, it’s just sex.” That means you need to focus on the emotional impacts of physical touch. Communicate that this is about feeling closer to your partner, not just getting off.

“I don’t want sex that much.” This is often a sign that there are blockages to intimacy. Great questions to ask your partner are what makes you want sex? and what makes you not want sex? This will give you insight into how to a better teammate.

“There’s not enough time” or “I’m too tired.” Dont’ try to change their mind in the moment. Come back around to the idea the next day. Validate them. Frame your comments around how do we create more time for us because we deserve connected time together?



If you need help connecting with your partner, get in touch with me.



Hi, I'm Karen Goldsum a Couples Counselor Associate, supervised by Elaine Brandon.

