

How a Lack of Self-acceptance Can Hurt Your Relationship

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

"For a marriage or relationship to flourish, there must be intimacy. It takes an enormous amount of courage to say to your spouse, 'This is me. I'm not proud of it -- in fact, I'm a little embarrassed by it -- but this is who I am.'"

~Bill Hybels

There is a great deal of wisdom in this quote. I hope the following article captures a piece of this wisdom.

Intimacy is all about connection--the feeling that you and your partner are kindred spirits. The hallmark of a healthy marriage or relationship is feeling close and emotionally attuned to your partner, but maintaining this connection isn't always easy—in fact, it can be quite difficult.

Numerous marriage problems and relationship difficulties occur when couples are unable to maintain a meaningful emotional connection; the gifts of intimacy make us feel whole and uplifted; it can feel a lot easier to transcend the hassles of daily life when the bridges of intimacy are open and secure between you and your partner.

Therefore, finding ways to maintain and enhance intimacy is a priority for all couples.

Relationship Help: Understand Your Intimacy Hurdles

So much can stand in the way of intimacy, and one significant hurdle that I often see in my work with couples arises from a lack of *self-acceptance* in one or both partners.

A lack of self-acceptance is a powerful obstacle to creating a strong connection with your partner. Struggles with self-acceptance may be overt and obvious ("I hate myself"), but a lack of self-acceptance can also be subtle and still exert a powerful influence on your relationship.

Each of us carries around a lifetime of emotional baggage that can make intimacy a real challenge. But too often, we point our finger toward our spouse or partner as the source of problems ("If only she would...; "He always..."), rather than examining our piece of the relationship pie—in other words, how do *you* contribute to whatever relationship problems exist?

One way you may inadvertently contribute to a lack of intimacy is by a failure to fully accept yourself.

Self-acceptance: The essential prerequisite to emotional intimacy

You are probably in many different relationships: with acquaintances, friends, family, co-workers, to name a few. When you think about the relationships in your life, does your relationship with *yourself* ever come to mind? Probably not, yet this relationship is *central* to all of your other relationships. Let's look at your relationship with yourself in a little more detail.

Self-acceptance leads to *self-intimacy*--self-intimacy is the experience of feeling connected to *all* of yourself--the parts of yourself you naturally embrace as well as the parts you wish didn't exist. This connection allows you to feel grounded--giving you an emotional center that anchors your experiences. This anchor has an important place in your marriage or relationship.

To get a better understanding of your relationship with yourself, reflect on the following questions (to deepen your experience, try journaling your responses):

- In general, how do I feel about myself?
- Which parts of myself do I find easy to accept? (List as many of these traits as you can think of.)
- Which parts of myself do I try to ignore or wish didn't exist? (List as many of these traits as you can think of.)
- Do I have a love/hate relationship with myself? (Describe how this plays out in your life and relationship.)

Your answers to these questions reflect the type of intimate relationship you have with yourself.

The parts of yourself that you refuse to accept still remain active and impact your relationship. Behind the curtain of your mind, these ignored or rejected parts of yourself exert a pull on you and your relationship, coloring your experiences and influencing your decisions in both positive and negative ways.

The Paradox of Change

People often confuse self-acceptance with self-love, but these are very different phenomena. You can fully accept things about yourself that you don't necessarily like—self-acceptance is akin to saying, "This is who I am at this point in time and while it may not be my ideal, I'm not going to beat myself up over this fact."

One coaching client recently told me that he's afraid that self-acceptance would mean that he'd become indifferent and unmotivated to change and grow as a person. The logic behind this fear seems to be that a refusal to accept oneself (in his case, self-directed anger) acts as a propelling force that creates self-growth—he feared that when you work toward self-acceptance, you remove the motivating energies of change. But this simply isn't true: the motivation that arises out of a lack of self-acceptance is tenuous and doesn't lead to meaningful change.

Self-acceptance allows you to see yourself more clearly and move deeper into your experiences; *Self-acceptance paves the way to greater self-understanding*—an essential ingredient for growth.

Rather than turning away from yourself (ignoring certain internal experiences), self-understanding allows you to move forward with greater self-knowledge and the tools necessary for change. The paradox of change is that you must learn to move toward and accept those things about yourself that you wish didn't exist (the things you want to change)—turning away will only keep these disparate parts of yourself energized, alive, and influencing your relationship.

Here are some final questions to ponder:

If a miracle occurred overnight and I was able to accept myself fully, what would be different about my life? My relationship?

For change to occur, it can be helpful for you to behave in ways that reflect the desired change you want. You act differently in order to feel differently; with this in mind reflect on the following question:

What new behavior can you gradually incorporate into your life and your relationship that would reflect greater self-acceptance? (For example, treating yourself kindly even when you might not feel like it.)

Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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