

SHARING EXPERIENCES: UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL INTIMACY

Social intimacy has to do with spending time together around the events of life. Many of these events involve other people. Some of them we experience together; others happen while we are apart and are shared through open communication. Both build social intimacy. Much of life centers around encounters that happen throughout the day—things people say to us or do for us or with us or against us, situations that arise with which we are forced to deal. Our supervisor delivers us an encouraging word or drops a bombshell; Tim gets a D in algebra or Hannah comes home sick from school. Life is made up of a combination of routine and unexpected events. Many of these encounters take place while we are apart from our spouse. It is in verbally telling these events that we come to feel that we are a part of each other's experiences. Life is not limited to what happens to me throughout the day. As I talk with my spouse, our horizon is broadened. We feel that we are a part of what each other is doing. We sense that we are a social unit, and each of us understands that what happens in the other's life is important. This telling of events will often involve the discussion of thoughts and feelings. We tell each other how we interpret the events of life, and we may also explain the feelings that accompany these events. For many years in my marriage seminars, I have encouraged people to establish the practice of a "daily sharing time" in which each of them tells the other a minimum of "three things that happened in my life today and how I feel about them."

In establishing this daily practice, many couples have indicated that the daily talking time has become the highlight of their day and that, in this time, they genuinely experience social intimacy. There is another aspect of social intimacy, however, which involves the two of us doing events together. These times may be done in the presence of other people, such as going to a movie or attending an athletic event. Social activities are not limited to spectator events. We may go bowling together or play Scrabble or plant a dogwood tree in the front yard. We may even go shopping together (which would also be an act of service for some husbands). A picnic in the park or even on the deck can add excitement to an otherwise cloudy day. Much of life involves doing. When we do things together, we are not only developing a sense of teamwork, but we are also enhancing our sense of intimacy. The things we do together often form our most vivid memories. Will we ever forget climbing Mount Mitchell together? Or who can forget giving the dog a bath? I held while you scrubbed. Then there were those times we went sledding together before the children came. Then, with the children. And that one time at midnight when we slipped out and left the children in bed and had our own slide down toboggan hill. In a loving family, social intimacy is a way of life. Time pressures, stresses, and other barriers must be negotiated, but there is conscious effort on the part of both husband and wife to continue to make time to experience life together, doing things that one or both of them enjoy.

BUILDING SOCIAL INTIMACY The third week, the focus is on social intimacy. Social intimacy is the result of enjoying events and doing things together, sometimes in the presence of other people, sometimes just the two of you. It also involves verbal communication about events each of you experience separately. For example, the wife hears a special speaker at church and comes home and tells something of the experience to her husband. Social intimacy involves the willingness of one party to tell and the willingness of the other party to receive with at least

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some interest. Here are some ways to stimulate social intimacy in your marriage. An easy place to begin is with each of you discussing with the other one social encounter that occurred in your life today. Your immediate response may be, "Wait a minute. I don't have a social encounter in my life every day." But unless you commute to work alone and work in a totally isolated atmosphere and come home alone, you do have social encounters throughout the day. My definition of a social encounter is an encounter between two or more people. We are social creatures. We do not live in isolation, but in community, and in the normal flow of life, we have many social contacts. An elevator ride is a social encounter unless you are alone on the elevator. A phone conversation is a social encounter unless you are talking to a voice-mail machine. A walk in the neighborhood where you encounter human life, a visit to the grocery store, a stop at the Exxon station are all usually social encounters. What are we telling each other about these encounters? We are describing them and our thoughts and feelings that accompanied them. Since we spend a great deal of our lives apart and experience many social encounters while we are apart, the only way to enter into each other's social encounters is to verbally tell these to each other. **Discussing one social encounter each day is a good place to begin. Telling about three encounters each day is even better.**

Social intimacy is also fostered when the two of you do things together. **Begin by evaluating the time you have spent together during the last six months. You and your spouse should each make a list of the social events the two of you attended together.** Perhaps you will need to confer with one or both of your calendars. These may include sporting events, theater, church, school programs, banquets, and other civic events. Compare your lists with each other and talk about the ones you enjoyed most, and why. Make another list of all the social encounters between the two of you in the last six months—the activities and projects the two of you have done together. Include joint projects around the house, inside and out; going shopping together; taking weekend or day trips together; going out to lunch or dinner; watching movies on DVD; or having extended conversations. Encourage your spouse to make a similar list. Show your lists to each other and talk about the things you enjoyed most. What activities would you like to repeat? What other activities would you like to do together in the future? On a scale of 0–10, how pleased are you with your social involvement with each other over the past six months? Tell each other your scores and discuss why you feel the way you do. Use this conversation as an opportunity to plan over the next two weeks a social event the two of you can enjoy. Continue to plan and schedule these events for each two-week span. If the two of you have different social interests, take turns planning the events. As you enter into each other's world of interest, not only will your world of experiences be broadened, but the by-product will be a growing sense of social intimacy. Keep in mind that social encounters involve a wide spectrum of activities. If he is playing softball and she goes along to watch, and afterward they grab a hot dog together, they have experienced a social event together although most of the time they were not physically near each other. If the two of you go for a visit to her parents and she spends the bulk of the time with her mother and you with her father and on the ride home you discuss with each other some of your experiences, it will engender social intimacy.