PATIENT EDUCATION

Building Intimacy in Your Relationships
Do you have a health condition?

There are many things that could affect your intimacy. Changes to your body and changes to your body image can affect your sexuality, your sense of intimacy or both. If your medical condition has changed recently — especially if you have a long-term condition — changes to your body and your body image are part of your medical journey too.

This material includes general information about building intimacy in your life and your relationships. If you have a medical or emotional condition or you’ve experienced abuse, please work with your health care provider as you build intimacy in your relationships. You may be referred to other health care providers for specific care if needed.
Why Is Intimacy Important?

Most people need to feel connected to other people at each stage of life. For example, research shows that children need loving caregivers to grow well. Kids and adults confide in friends who they feel close to. Intimate life partners share an emotional and physical closeness. And people who live alone often have family, friends and pets who give them a sense of connection.

No matter what your age or health is today, no matter what stage of life you are in, no matter what your relationships are like today, you can start where you are to create the intimacy you want.

This material gives tips about how to:

• Begin to build a new intimate relationship.
• Enhance or develop more intimacy in a relationship you have now.

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What Is Intimacy?

When you think about being *intimate*, what do you think of?

Many people think about being physical or having sexual relations. If you do too, that’s perfectly OK. Those activities are part of some intimate relationships. But “intimacy” has a bigger meaning than those activities.

Intimacy is about sharing a *personal* experience with another person. It is a deep level of familiarity, closeness and trust shared between people. It’s a “*high-quality,*” close relationship.

Connections help us grow emotionally and physically. Being intimate with someone includes feeling connected. And, it’s bigger and deeper than that. It includes creating a deeply felt bond — believing that the other person really knows you and you are safe with him or her.

**Different people = different intimate relationships**

When you plan to ask a friend to go to a movie with you, do you stop to think about which of your friends likes to go to movies? And then do you think about whether those people like the type of movie you want to see that day?

Intimacy is a bit like that example. Most people have different types of intimacy with different people. For example, some people are great to go to movies with. But you wouldn’t call him or her if you broke up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Some people aren’t comfortable hearing deeply personal information. Some people aren’t comforting or nurturing. And some people don’t have strong senses of humor. You can enjoy each person *for who they are.*

**The qualities of an intimate relationship**

An intimate relationship includes many of these qualities:

- Openness, respect and trust.
- Honesty and understanding.
- Caring and kindness.
- Devotion to each other; helping and protecting each other.
- Emotional commitment to each other.
- Commitment to the relationship — and to working on it as needed.*

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* There are different amounts, or levels, of commitment. For example, you may be 100 percent committed to your life partner. But you may feel 80 percent committed to some of your friends.
The Different Types of Intimacy

There are many types of intimacy. Each type of intimacy is an important part of your overall well-being. Each is closely related to your feelings of happiness and wholeness and to feeling connected with the world.

Every relationship you have doesn’t have to be intimate. And each relationship doesn’t even have to build toward intimacy.

Most people have some acquaintances. These are people with whom you are friendly, but you don’t intend to build an intimate relationship with them.

When you have behavioral intimacy…

You have connections with people that are based on shared activities. For example, coworkers, classmates, fishing buddies, soccer moms, exercise partners, and neighbors. Some of these relationships may become more intimate. But they may not start out that way.
**When you have *spiritual* intimacy…**

You have a connection with something that is greater than yourself.

For many people, being spiritual includes feeling satisfied with one's life, like you are whole. You may not feel this way all the time. But over all, you have a sense that you are who and where you want to be at that time.

For some people, being spiritual may include some or all of these elements:

- A connection with a higher power. This may be related to a religion or it may not be.
- Being with the person you know you are meant to be with.
- Serving the purpose you believe you were called to serve. Examples may include a job, or role in a family or a volunteer position.

Please note:

- *Being spiritual* is not the same as being religious or following a religious leader or faith. You can be spiritual and not religious. Or you can be spiritual and religious.
- You can have spiritual intimacy without having another person in your life.

**When you have *emotional* intimacy…**

You can share your most personal feelings and thoughts freely with the people you are close to.

To have emotional intimacy, you need to have good trust and good communication with other people. You should feel safe, respected and accepted. When you have this kind of connection and closeness with other people, you feel cared for, or *nurtured*.

Emotional intimacy is vital to every person's health and well-being.
When you have physical intimacy…

You may share many types of physical closeness with other people. Examples include patting your kids on the back and hugging your friends, relatives and life partner. Gentle, physical closeness is how we can be with other people in their personal space. These examples are ways to share physical intimacy.

When you have sexual intimacy…

You have a very close, shared physical relationship with another person. It includes sexual desire and excitement. But it isn’t only about having “sex” or sexual intercourse.

There are many ways to satisfy the human need for closeness. They include touch, self-stimulation, vibrators, and other aids.

Being close to another person physically does not always include sharing sexual intimacy with that person.

Your way of sharing sexual intimacy may change over time. You may discover new ways to show that you care for your partner. Anything that is safe and agreeable to both of you can be a way to connect.

• Your sexuality includes all parts of you — your spiritual, emotional and physical aspects — coming together to take this type of intimacy to a very deep level.

• The level of connection you feel with your partner may depend on your body image. It may also depend on how you choose to express your feelings for other people.
How Did You Learn To Be Intimate?

As with many things in life, most people have learned about intimacy from other people. It began when you first experienced intimacy from your parents and other caregivers. Research has shown that the quality of a person’s relationships during their early years has a big affect on their physical, emotional, psychological, and even spiritual health as they age.

During and after your early years, you began to learn about yourself. This included your sense of self-esteem and self-confidence. It also includes your ideas about which friends and family you felt close to.

Probably without knowing it, you learned about intimacy each time you shared information with friends. When a friend broke your trust, you may have decided to stop taking emotional risks with that person.

*Building a deep, intimate relationship always includes taking emotional risks.*

As you got older, you likely began to identify what intimacy meant to you. Thoughts about body image, personal boundaries and sexuality usually affect a person’s sense of intimacy.
How do relationships develop?

Think about one of your closest relationships. It may have developed like this.

- Your relationship began with talking and sharing about your lives. Facing risks like that may cause a person to worry and wonder or feel some anxiety. Common concerns are about how much information to share and whether the other person feels the same way you do about the new relationship. This part of a new relationship can be uncomfortable.

- During those talks and some shared activities, over time, you slowly began to share more. The information you shared, over time, was more personal. It is a risk to be vulnerable like that — to tell someone very personal information.

- As you shared more information and took more risks, if your friend was interested in developing a relationship with you, he or she also shared more and took more risks. It means that what you gave in trust was given back to you. You listened too, to see if the other person was fairly equally invested in building an intimate relationship.

- Through these conversations and activities, you and your friend began to trust each other more.

- As the relationship continued, you built a sense of safety and security with that person.

- Some relationships may include physical intimacy, with hand-holding, hugging, kissing, or more.

Building an intimate relationship isn’t “easy”

As the information above shows, building intimacy includes a lot of risk taking, trust and time. Some relationships break apart when trust is broken. Others are rebuilt with more communication, risk-taking and trust.

The “building” part of intimacy isn’t easy. You (and the other person) may feel anxious or simply not sure about the steps it takes to reach intimacy. Even after you’d say that you and the other person have reached intimacy, it could change. Keeping, or maintaining, an intimate relationship takes time and work.
Your definition of intimacy may change over time

This may happen as you age and learn more about yourself. It may happen after you have had a few long-lasting, intimate relationships. And it can happen as you have more, different types of relationships.

Factors that can change intimacy

There are many reasons that intimate relationships change. Some of them are listed below.

Note: When there is a medical condition involved, some of these issues affect the person who is getting care. Other issues affect the partner. And some issues affect both people.

- **Physical limitations:** Examples include fatigue, lack of energy, pain or other medical issues, hormone changes, and medication side effects, such as vaginal dryness and reduced sexual desire.

- **Psychological (emotional) issues:** Examples include grief, stress, depression, anger, resentment, low self-esteem, sadness, worry, fear, and lack of trust or confidence. Emotional changes related to shifting hormones can affect intimacy too.

In addition, your desire for intimacy may be affected if you have experience with rejection or abandonment, neglect or abuse. Your experience with intimacy may also be affected if you keep secrets or have intimacy issues that you are afraid to talk about.

- **Body-image issues:** Examples include being unhappy with your body or how it works, or being unhappy with your partner’s body. These issues are not necessarily related to any known medical problem.

- **Lack of time:** Having too much to do and not enough time to do it can affect your intimacy. Lack of time often leads to stress and may lead to physical issues, such as fatigue and lack of energy.

When any of these issues happens, relationships can change. When a few of these issues happen at the same time, intimacy can become strained.

Whatever issues you may face today, it’s OK. You can start wherever you are now.
How Do You Begin to Build Intimacy?

It’s OK if you don’t know everything about intimacy. You can start where you are and work from there. The first steps are about you.

What’s in your personal history?

Some of the issues you may want to think about are listed here.

• Your hopes for what will happen as you build intimacy with this person.
• Your feelings about yourself right now.
• Any worries or problems you have had in past relationships.
• Any reason(s) you may have for not getting close to other people.
• Any health conditions you or your partner may have.
• Your willingness to explore your relationships and make changes, as needed.
• The possibility that the other person may not be ready or able to build intimacy.

What are your thoughts about any of these issues?

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Are you willing to trust and be open?

Intimacy can grow when a person is open, honest and willing to trust other people. That is, you need to be somewhat vulnerable. You also need to be willing to accept whatever the outcome is. For example, your relationship(s) may not change as quickly as you wish. Or the other person may decide not to continue or deepen the relationship.
Be Willing to Talk About Your Relationship

Intimacy develops over time, as each person shares information and activities. Most people don’t talk about intimacy as they’re working to build it. But...

If you want to build intimacy in a relationship, it’s important that you talk about it.
   It may not always be comfortable.
   But if you can talk about it,
   hopefully it will be easier to use the information you share
   as you make the relationship more intimate.

Talking is one of the key ways people share intimacy. For example, it’s how you share your likes and dislikes, such as your favorite foods, vacations and hobbies. It’s also how most people share when they are frustrated or angry, happy, sad, and lonely.

Growing closer in all the areas of intimacy happens much more easily with good conversation.

Starting the conversation

This conversation may be difficult — especially if you want to share very personal information or suggest some changes to the relationship.

You may be worried about how to start the conversation or about not hurting your partner’s feelings. That’s understandable. These ideas may help.
• Schedule time for this conversation; don’t let anything disrupt your time together.
• Write some notes and keep them with you if you’re worried about how to say something. It’s an act of kindness when we are careful about what we say and how we say it.
• Listen closely when the other person talks. Try to see his or her point of view.
• Recognize the other person’s feelings with caring, compassion and empathy, even if you don’t agree with what they are saying.
• Share how you feel using “I” statements. For example, “I feel sad that we don’t seem to have enough private time — for reconnecting or just talking. How can we make more time for each other?”
• If this is a conversation with your sexual partner, remember to tell him or her what you appreciate about them and what feels good about your love, including the sexual aspects. Also share your thoughts about any changes you’d like to try.
• Trust your partner to tell you when something hurts emotionally or physically during intimate moments.
• Thank your partner for his or her time and investment in your relationship. No matter what happens after your first conversation, make plans to touch base again about the topic. Sometimes, that first conversation is the hardest!
Tips to Help You Build Intimacy

Just as a relationship can change, your feeling of intimacy with a person can change. It takes time and work to maintain an intimate relationship. Some days, you may put a lot of work into it. Other days, that may not be needed.

When you reach a level of intimacy with another person, hopefully your relationship will feel comfortable most days. Here are some of the many ideas that may help.

**Keep a good attitude**

Try to be flexible. Be willing to adapt to what’s needed today. This can help you and your partner build (or rebuild) an enjoyable, intimate relationship.

**Start slowly**

It takes effort and patience to maintain what is good in a relationship and to change whatever you wish to change. Give yourself time to get to know each other, if needed, and to make changes. Spend time just talking and being with your partner.

**Remember simple gestures of kindness**

No matter what type of intimacy you’d like to build with another person, you can build trust and closeness through simple gestures, like those listed here.

- Leave a friendly note on the refrigerator or send a nice text message.
- Buy a single flower for your partner.
- Go on a picnic.
- Clean the house.
- Watch a movie.
- Go shopping.
- Cook a meal with your partner.
- Give a foot massage.
- Join your partner in doing something that he or she enjoys — even if it isn’t your idea of fun.
If you know of some other act of kindness that would be fun for both of you, make plans now!

Keep talking

The ideas shared in “Starting the conversation“ can be used anytime. They are great ways to help you and your friend or partner continue to have a healthy relationship.
Staying Connected When You Live Alone

You may wonder: how do you create more intimacy in your life if you live alone or have few friends? You have options for building relationships. Here are some ideas.

- Consider getting a pet that you can hold and hug. They are great companions.
- Volunteer for an organization you believe in. It’s a nice way to help other people, make new friends and enjoy time with other people.
- Consider other ways to connect with people: join a new club, service organization or support group. Or be active in a faith community.
- Take dance lessons. It’s a great social experience, and it’s great exercise too!
- Use social media to stay in touch with loved ones far away.
- Consider new ways to add safe physical relationships. Touch is a powerful way to feel connected. Massages, manicures and pedicures, even regular hair-washing appointments can offer some physical contact.
Final Thoughts

Intimacy can be a difficult topic to think and talk about, we know. There are many issues involved. If you have a medical condition right now, that can affect your sense of intimacy.

If you want to build a greater sense of intimacy in your life, it will take time to learn how to change your thoughts and behaviors. It will take attention and effort. And it can change your life in some wonderful ways.

Start where you are to build on your personal, spiritual intimacy, as well as your emotional, physical and sexual intimacy. As needed, consider these questions to help you continue on this journey.

• Who can you talk to if you want to reflect more about this before you take action?
• If you are ready, what can you do now to begin to build more intimacy in your life?

Spiritual:

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Emotional:

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Physical:

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Sexual:

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**When to reach out for help**

If this topic raises new memories for you that upset you, please call your health care provider, a pastor, a therapist, or a trusted family friend.

If you have questions after reading this material, please contact your health care provider.
BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal patient of Mayo Clinic for more than 40 years. She was a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family’s activities in oil, gas and ranching, even as she assembled a museum-quality collection of antiques and fine art. She was best known by Mayo staff for her patient advocacy and support.

Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. Mrs. Lips had a profound appreciation for the care she received at Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.

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