



Close To You

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We all want to live happy lives, and I believe every one of us is trying our best to do just that. For most of us, arguably the most important key to happiness is achieving **closeness** with at least one other person. We all want someone to journey with through life in a committed relationship.

But as our ever-increasing rates of committed relationship failures and increasing rates of loneliness evidence, being close is easier said than done. Ironically, many clients coming to my counselling practice share with me their loneliness despite living in a committed relationship, something I have also felt. I would now argue that success doesn't come from how long we stay together, but what we do when we are together. "Happily ever after" doesn't simply happen and good relationships are no accident.

So how do we nurture closeness in our relationship? I believe closeness is felt in our committed relationships not only via the skills we use to effectively communicate with each other, but also in the attitudes we hold that drive the way relate.

Relationship Skills

When I became a Gottman Institute trained couples therapist, I learnt to teach skills needed by couples to nurture closeness in their relationship – communication, trust, respect, and conflict skills.

Gottman training is evidence-based, grounded in over 50 years of solid relationship research, and has the ability to predict divorce with 91% accuracy. Perhaps surprisingly, this research found that **every** couple has "irreconcilable differences", which has often been used as **the** code for divorce. It also found that 69% of conflict in our partner relationships centres around **perpetual problems** based on lasting differences between a couple that they'll never likely resolve. This is common for **all** couples and doesn't change if you change partners. So, to have a successful partner relationship we would be wise to learn how to navigate these differences.

This is what Gottman therapists teach couples to do - how to navigate these many natural differences between two adults. Differences like genes, personality, culture, family, values, life experiences, past traumas, beliefs, needs, which form the imprint of each person's identity can often lead partners into gridlocked conflict. With training, couples can learn skills that enable them to have a successful dialogue about, navigate through, and value and welcome these differences.

Some key skills couples learn through the Gottman training workshop *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* include:

1. **Share Love Maps** - Enhancing a deep understanding of your partner's inner world - their life history, likes/dislikes, hopes/dreams, fears/pleasures.
2. **Fondness And Admiration** - Build these to keep romance alive. What about affection? Say it and show it often!
3. **Turning Towards** - Create a habit of attending and responding to each other's bids for connection.
4. **Create "Team Us"** - Let your partner influence you in all of life's decisions.
5. **Solve Your Solvable Problems** - 31% of a couple's problems are solvable, and you should keep talking about the 69% of perpetual problems that aren't solvable.
6. **Perpetual Problems** - Use skill and empathy to ensure perpetual problems don't become "ground-hog day" gridlocked.
7. **Create Shared Meaning** - Support each other's dreams for creating deeper life meaning by sharing life's journey together.

I provide much more detail on these skills in an article [available for download here](#), where you can also express interest in completing "7 Principles" workshop, and enquire about couples counselling.

Relationship Attitudes

Whilst these relationship skills are essential to building closeness, they are not sufficient in themselves - I was reminded of another important ingredient when I recently re-read *Are You (REALLY) Fun To Live With*¹ - a ground-breaking, and, in its day, quite controversial relationship and sex education book written by my Dad, Jim Vickers-Willis, who was a driving force in me pursuing an awesome career in psychology.

Jim wrote about how critical this other ingredient was in creating a successful, close, loving committed relationship:

***"If you want to be married and you want your family relationships to work out happily and healthily, it all starts from one thing...be sure you make your marriage partner the most important person in the world"** (p.58).*

Driven to find out why so many marriages were falling apart, Jim, a one-time investigative journalist, undertook and personally funded a 7-year investigation, speaking with doctors, psychologists, social workers, and many other professionals, plus about three hundred couples, to learn what marriages needed to survive the turbulent new social pressures of the mid to late 20th century. He found that some entrenched, distorted, and dangerous attitudes held towards relationships and sex were wrecking marriages and killing happiness. *Are You (REALLY) Fun To Live With* passed the insights he gained through his investigation on to others.

Below are some summaries of key insights on relationship attitudes, particularly about closeness and sex, that Jim gathered from his investigation (NB: the page number is shown for direct book quotes).

Rethink Your Attitudes About Closeness

Jim created “The Love Test” to help us reflect with our partners on the priority we each place on the other. Read these four simple questions and score your partner out of 10 on each question. Listen to and be inquisitive about each other’s feedback as you may learn useful relationship lessons.

Partner Chats: About Our Closeness

1. Do you care for your partner? Is your partner the one you care about most in life?
2. Do you regard caring for your partner’s needs and problems as one of the pleasures of life, rather than just a dutiful responsibility?
3. Do you regard helping your partner to be happy as one of the most important factors in your life?
4. Do you enjoy sharing with your partner more than with anyone else?

Long-term relationship commitments, like marriage, are so important in our society. For many people it is their greatest chance to relate (or get close) to another person – to live. Getting close to someone who counts and is worthwhile in our eyes is what is really satisfying and fulfilling.

Jim wrote that healthy relationships are a primary human need, not unlike our need for food, and oxygen. All human adults have a deep innate need to achieve closeness with another - closeness with a partner is the greatest asset available to mankind and one of the peak experiences in life, and sex is the easiest natural way to develop closeness with the other.

Many doctors reported to Jim that they considered at least half of their patients were “psychosomatic”. Jim speculated from his investigations that this sickness would reduce, perhaps even disappear, if men and women were able to drop their preconceived attitudes about adult close personal relationships. He further surmised that if they took time and interest to study these attitudes and find out how to use them best to relieve their tension, it could even enrich their lives.

Jim found that many people live by attitudes that crush the fun and enjoyment out of their relationships and out of their sexuality, noting that ever so easily we bungle these important relationships. Many partners report relationship boredom and discontent, and escape through distractions in the vain hope these will provide the closeness they are missing in their relationships, which further reduce their chances of having satisfying committed relationships. Jim wrote, “I wish I could show you just how many people I have interviewed whose marriages are dull and uninteresting. They do not provide much fun for each other. They have caused it to get that way” (p. 64).

Jim brought to attention that escape takes many forms, including drugs (e.g. alcohol, tranquilisers) but also when we immerse ourselves in work, hobbies, pets, and other relationships (including parents, and friends), with many partners putting these at a higher priority than their committed relationship. One psychologist Jim interviewed estimated that more than one-third of the patients he saw were regular drug takers in their effort to relieve their psychological dysfunction. They had neat

homes and fine careers, but had they been slovenly in looking after the real core of their married life. As this psychologist cleverly put it, “You can’t replace a relationship with a pill” (p.67).

Jim proposed that many affairs were just another escape. Certainly, in the case of a number of husbands and wives Jim interviewed, having an affair made life more tolerable for the one who was being affection-starved. It also kept the family unit together and took pressure off the marriage. But isn’t this “easy way out” just side-stepping the problem instead of facing it? How often does it lead to further complications? Isn’t the real solution that both parties should understand the vital importance of closeness in their marriage, and in their life, and start questioning why one of them is minimising and avoiding a happy, enjoyable relationship?

What do these lovers do when they are having an affair, sneaking off from wives and husbands to a motel room or flat? It’s most revealing when you find out that it is often more mundane pursuits. They sit and have a cup of tea or a glass of wine together, they walk together, or they go for a drive in the car. Most importantly, they talk and they listen to each other. Now I’m asking, why can’t this happen at home? All sorts of excuses are offered.

Jim also alerted us to watch out for how some escape by making other, often unhealthy, connections, such as dangerous clinging parent/grown-up-child relationships. He realised that none of us can expect to enjoy the fun and fulfilment of an adult relationship whilst we cling to our children, or our parents. Maybe some parents become jealous when someone else partners up with their child; others restrict their child’s development by hanging on to them for selfish purposes; yet others become over-close by creating and maintaining adult/child dependence that impedes the child developing natural healthy adult independence. Jim proposed that over-parenting of children is sometimes used as a substitute for what was lacking from the partner relationship.

A marriage guidance President told Jim that 90% of marriage breakdowns are caused by failure of children to satisfactorily break away from their parents grip. One woman stated that “My husband’s mother is like a clutching hand; she’s ever-ready to suck the life out of our marriage” (p. 14), highlighting our need to take care who we might seek relationship guidance from. Being frank with your partner can build closeness, but this can be undermined by even closer outside confidants whose advice may also not be independent or objective, and may be biased to meet their own underlying needs.

So, where did we learn these relationship habits?

Jim’s research identified family culture and poor examples passed on by parents as the root cause of their children developing poor attitudes towards healthy adult committed relationships. It highlighted and challenged some prevailing faulty attitudes being passed on about relationships and sex that were a leading cause of skyrocketing marriage failures. “Unfortunately, many people ‘learn’ from the example of their [parents] that married life is boring...and because that’s the example they have had from their mothers and fathers, that’s the way a lot of husbands and wives continue...and become dissatisfied with each other... If you set an example of a sexless, unexciting, no-fun relationship, why should you expect your children to regard sex as important, and treat it with the respect it merits?” (p. 34)

“They’ve only been married six months,” said one person. “Oh well, if they’re not happy now they never will be,” said another. This sort of comment shows that the person saying it believes marriage

is more likely to be interesting and exciting at the start, rather than growing more interesting and exciting as it develops. How many people have been sold wrong ideas about marriage and sex by their parents, who convey these ideas to their children as part of their effort to cover up deficiencies in their own relationship? “Oh, but they are not married,” was one person’s comment when Jim described how happy a couple who were living together were. She held the false and dangerous attitude it was easier to have a warm affectionate relationship with a man outside marriage than inside marriage. Why do people so often act in a certain way in affairs and in pre-marital relationships, then become less desirable and less interesting as companions after marriage?

Rethink Your Attitudes About Sex

You’ll recall Jim created “The Love Test” to help us reflect with our partners on the priority we each place on the other. He raised many questions too about our attitudes towards sex. Meet with your partner and take turns to chat about the following matters. Don’t criticise. Listen closely and be inquisitive about each other’s feedback. Use this information to learn more about each other.

Partner Chats: About Our Sex

1. Describe to your partner the importance of sex to you and explain why.
2. Tell your partner how you learnt about sex in relationships. What example did your parents provide about sex, and how do you think that influences you today?
3. Describe how easy or difficult it is for you to ask for what you want when it comes to sex.
4. Tell your partner what actions they could do that you think would likely improve your sex? Does your partner have sexcuses – what are they and how does this make you feel?
5. Ask your partner, what actions you do that help & that hinder their interest in having sex.

Jim identified sex as **the** aid to relationship closeness:

“If sex is nature’s method to help men and women come closer together – and as we still are a society based on marriage – one thing becomes really important to most of us; how to enjoy sex to the maximum within marriage” (p. 44).

So often when Jim was giving talks on relationships he is asked - “Do you believe in sex before marriage?” He notes that they don’t ask the question he was really interested in answering - “Do you believe in sex after marriage?” Jim concluded that “When the mother and father love each other more strongly than they love anyone else, and particularly, of course, when at the centre of this there is a happy sexual relationship, then the family relationships all fall into place easily” (p. 49). Contrary to the prevailing knowledge of his generation, Jim learned from medical sources that women can enjoy sex much more than men. Women are far better equipped physically to enjoy sex than are men - the clitoris and its related structures were much larger than the male organ. The

nerve and blood supply to the clitoris and the rest of the female sexual organs was much greater than to the penis. It is only destructive attitudes that women hold without question, plus male ignorance, preventing many women from enjoying this important side of their life. [Tony's note: We have of course made big strides in assisting women and men to develop female sexual pleasure, and I encourage everyone to learn more by visiting OMGYes].

One typical husband complained, "From morning till night my wife's life is a long series of anti-sex habits. When we get into bed she picks up a book and reads herself to sleep. In the morning - when I am usually at my strongest sexually - she says she is always in a bad mood and 'doesn't talk before breakfast'. Sex is allowed about once a week and the rest of our life is sexless, and without much affection. My wife suffers backaches, neck aches, pins and needles, and other neurotic-type ailments which make it all the harder from day to day to achieve any sort of sexual relationship." (p. 61). One psychiatrist said to me, "Sex may be only 25% of marriage but I find sexual failure behind 90% of marriage breakdown". I feel that if we wanted to have happy marriages, we must look at the attitudes and ideas that caused people in marriage to fail to satisfy each other sexually and also the way these attitudes came about.

It appeared to Jim that what people "thought" about sex they got out of it. Those with "cheap and nasty" ideas about it, receive enjoyment of sex on a cheap and nasty basis; those who were brought up to consider it "unimportant", get little out of sex; those who linked it with guilt, enjoy it when it is under guilty circumstances; those who saw the prime purpose of sexuality as an aid to enriching relationships, find it an enrichment of their life. Are we passing on our guilt? It seems that millions were subconsciously subscribing to the idea that sex is more acceptable and more exciting when it is guilty. Where did we learn such a horrible destructive attitude? Most likely from the people who love us most but are misinformed or unaware, our parents, from the day we were born.

Jim was aghast learning that young people who didn't get enough information about sex end up with all the hang ups. "We all teach our children from a tender age to be responsible for themselves against traffic dangers. Why do we have to be so hush-hush and guilty about sex - and thus fail to prepare our young ones adequately to act responsibly in this vital area of their lives?" (p.38).

When parents fail to provide their kids adequate sex and relationship information, they often get into conflict over these matters and force a disconnect. This leaves the kids vulnerable to the only guidance now available to this at this crucial time - from some equally uncertain and inexperienced peers. The secretive attitude forced on so many young people by unthinking parents brings maximum danger. My advice to parents is to stop worrying about their own anxieties when engaging with their teens about sex and relationships. Instead, keep communications open so there is opportunity to guide, explain, and inform.

Jim also asked, "What's Your Sexcuse? Are you one of those people who engages in sex avoidance?" (p. 68). Fear is a great paralysing agent. With sex, we fear failure, pregnancy, responsibility, or closeness. Fears and other similar feelings can cripple us and discourage us from doing things; we get busy to avoid doing things. Have a look around yourself and your friends and see who fills up their lives with work, hobbies, social outings, and more, in every possible moment of recreational time. Even the domestic routine can be twisted around into a **gigantic** sex excuse! Of course, there's nothing wrong with these things, but do people also set an equivalent amount of time aside for the most important matter of building their relationships with their spouses? So, if the opportunity for developing a

sexual relationship is almost never present, they never give themselves time to settle down and enjoy each other.

“How come we give hours and hours every weekend to making the garden bloom, and so little to making our sexual garden bloom? Have our priorities become so distorted that inanimate things get priority over our most important personal relationship in life?... If we neglected the garden the way we so often do our relationship with our marriage partner, the garden, too, would finish up a disappointing wilderness.” (p. 44).

Jim also found that some people who enjoy sex very little take a spoilsport attitude of “if I can’t enjoy it, why should anyone else.” Everything connected with sexual enjoyment - contraception, the value of sexual relationships, orgasms and sexual pleasure, and so on - is anathema. It seems that when people spoil their own sexual fun and fulfilment, the last thing they could bear was to see other people happily enjoying it, as this would be an admission of their own failure. They labelled sexual activity with words like “depravity”, “pornography”, and “obscenity”. Jim concluded that we are the victims of intense long-term propaganda surrounding sex and relationships. Sex is exploited and distorted - in the media for commercial gains, and in religions to exert control over parishioners.

For example, in the popular women’s magazines, and the mass media in general, the constant theme is “instant bliss”. The emphasis is on the glamour and thrills of engagements, weddings, glamour film star lovers, beautiful homes, furnishings, and food. Nowhere has the emphasis been on the tremendous excitement, joy, and satisfaction in building a long-term sexual relationship with a partner, through hard work, effort, and intelligent use of one’s natural abilities.

The demoralising, destructive results of prudish thinking in religion are all around us in our daily life. “A psychologist in a country town told [Jim] of a female patient he had, whose husband was a bishop. This woman suffered from all sorts of pain including backache, neck ache, and headache, and had revealed that her husband had not made love to her for twelve years. The bishop said that her pains were ‘God’s punishment for wanting sex’. The psychologist added, ‘This bishop sometimes gives marriage guidance and advice to young couples’ ” (p.53).

The Heart Of The Matter

Jim finished his book stating “...although some of the ideas contained herein were ‘way out’ from my own line of thinking when I started writing, I am convinced that this book will be regarded as very conservative indeed in future years - when the importance of developing our relationship and using our sexuality to the fullest is better understood” (p.74). Are we there yet? The evidence suggests we are way short, with much to learn about how to secure successful and healthy committed relationships.

Perhaps it’s time to refocus on creating greater honesty and reality about our need for human warmth, closeness, fun, affection, and sex in our personal relationships, and learning how to develop it. If we do our prize will see instant and exploding improvement in our physical health, our mental health, and the death knell to a great many drug companies.

¹ Vickers-Willis, Jim. (1973). Are you (really) fun to live with / [by] Jim Vickers-Willis; With a foreword by Dr. Francis Macnab. Melbourne : Potts Distributors. Free PDF download available at <http://www.vickers-willis.com.au>.