

## CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

by Judy Hess, Ph.D.

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One of the major challenges any couple must face in spending time together is that of distance regulation. i.e. how to regulate the amount of closeness and distance between them, given the natural fluctuations in desire that each partner may have. When one partner consistently wants more closeness than the other, this can result in difficult power dynamics. The "pursuer" becomes labeled as the "needy" one and the "distancer" assumes a more powerful position in the relationship, often thought of as "withdrawn" or "withholding" by the partner.

But even in couples who tend to be very well matched on the **overall** amounts of closeness or contact they desire, there will still be daily, hourly or even moment-to-moment fluctuations in desire for contact, based on any number of internally or externally generated conditions. Feelings of abandonment and engulfment are very common couple complaints that are engendered by differences in amounts of contact desired. This can result in painful feelings of rejection, guilt, feeling smothered or feeling uncared for by the partner.

When couples first get together, they often find themselves in a "honeymoon" phase and experience feeling unconditionally loved and nourished by their partner. In this state of merger, they usually are very much aware of their similarities but less aware of their differences. Because these feelings are so positive, they may fantasize about or actually move in together to maximize the bliss or optimism they are experiencing.

In the natural course of a developing relationship, the couple will usually pass from the honeymoon or "symbiotic" stage into a more "differentiated" stage, where differences come to

the fore. If they have already moved into a shared space, it can be very disconcerting to find that their bliss has now shifted into something much more irritating. It may seem like they can't agree on anything from money to sex to amount of contact desired. As positive projections onto the partner are shaken up and withdrawn, partners may rudely awaken to a person who seems to be the opposite of what they had hoped and longed for. However, having now set up their entire lives around living with this person, they may try to suppress these feelings of disappointment and/or irritation due to feeling shame for having made a "mistake".

Or conversely, they may be in such a state of shock about the loss of "bliss" that they believe they have made a mistake about being with this person at all, and hasten to get away as quickly as they moved in. Clearly this can be a difficult and damaging time for both partners.

In this fast-paced world of the 21st century where everything moves so quickly, there is pressure on couples to move in together, get married and have a family, sooner rather than later. To not go along with this program can be eyed suspiciously as a "fear of intimacy". It is the view of this author that "one size fits all" does not apply to all individuals or couples. While one couple may decide to co-habitate very quickly and their situation could turn out favorably, another couple may rush into this and find themselves unhappy and disillusioned. What is of greatest import here is to encourage partners to tune in to their own

natural pace of couple development and not to give in to societal and familial pressures for how relationships ought to be lived; to really look inside themselves and to discuss openly as a couple what kind of context would be most fertile for their commitment and intimacy to thrive. It may be that partners could increase the probability of having their relationships work if they took these steps more slowly and waited to really know their similarities as well as their differences before they made costly decisions about their living situations. Some couples may find that they choose to maintain their own separate domiciles for the duration of the relationship, while still deepening their intimacy and shared growth in other ways.

There is no one way to have a relationship. The "pursuer" who wants to spend more time together is not necessarily more or less healthy than the "distancer" who wants more time and space alone. Each one's position can be valid and needs to be understood and appreciated by the other. Living situations, whether separate or together, have pros and cons. It is the hope of this author to increase the reader's awareness of different ways of having relationships so that they can create a form of relationship that works best for them.