

Intimacy

I'd been invited to speak to a group of profound stutterers about developing successful relationships. Twelve men and women formed the group and after my presentation, I asked if anyone had comments or questions.

As one person in the group tried to form the word "Is" he struggled with "i..i...i....i" he waited and tried again, "i..i...i...i.....i.....i." He worked at the word "is" for what seemed like an eternity, but in fact it was only a few seconds. He took the risk of feeling embarrassed or humiliated to share his thoughts with the group.

The group sat quietly, and patiently observing his efforts. As partners in his journey, we suffered on his behalf, waiting, hoping, and anticipating his ability to verbalize his thought. Yes, we were anxious that he might never say the word "is". He might give up or even leave the group in frustration or embarrassment. He struggled to articulate his thoughts and the group suffered with him as he struggled. No one in the group dared say the word for him, as this would have been to relieve our suffering, rather than assist him in his struggling. Willing to suffer while each person struggled to verbalize his or her thoughts, made the risk worth the effort. Interestingly, an emotional intimacy emerged from their "disability." As I listened and observed group member after group member struggle to fluently share their thoughts, I realized the process of struggling and suffering ... suffering and struggling is how intimacy develops in couple relationships.

As one person struggles with an issue and has the courage to risk sharing it with his partner, she suffers on his behalf in anticipation of his working it out or getting through it. The purpose of a relationship is to know and be known. Taking the risk of letting your partner know how you struggle and being willing to suffer as your partner works it out is how intimacy develops in a relationship. Is the struggle and risk worth exposing your true self to your partner? Is suffering on behalf of your loved one worth the pain? Seeing your partner struggle tempts you to give into your anxiety and suggest you can "fix" his or her struggle, when the real reason for your "fix" is to relieve your suffering. Intimacy develops as two people come together; one struggling and the other suffering then in completely different ways the other struggling and your partner suffering.

Jane loved to shop, spending money she and her husband didn't have. Tom confronted her and after several months she recognized her problem had more to do with anger and resentment than money. As she struggled to face her fear of Tom's reactions, she slowly but with great determination began her long struggle to be assertive telling him what she thought and felt. Jane's, struggle to be direct required her to risk herself and trust John would not attempt to "fix" her. Instead of trying to fix her, John listened quietly to Jane talk about her frustrations and resentment. Willing to suffer with her through feelings of inadequacy, fear and disappointment, John refused to react to her struggle and continued to listen and stay connected. As a result they both opened the door to a level of intimacy they had never experienced before.