



## Intimacy

All human beings crave intimacy. It is part of human nature and therefore a normal part of what it is to be human. As infants we are (or supposed to be) born into an intimate relationship with our caregivers. This desire for intimacy changes over time, but never goes away.

Intimacy has enormous rewards and also enormous risk. We have all experienced the pain of separation, so the risk of intimacy will be familiar. If you get close to another, then you will hurt if they pull away from you. The dread of rejection and abandonment can and often does overshadow our hope for the benefits of intimacy. A conservative approach to intimacy is the norm in the Western world. We err on the side of caution often avoiding even the possibility of intimacy. No wonder there are high incidences of depression, anxiety and other related issues in and throughout Britain, Europe and the USA.

Genuine intimacy requires openness and vulnerability. Our most sensitive emotions get exposed to another when we are intimate with them. As their tenderness, likewise often gets exposed to us. Of course, the extreme sensitivity of the human heart gives us the experience of both sweet pleasure and bitter pain. However, when we avoid openness and vulnerability in an effort to avoid the most intense pain, we also deny ourselves the most intense pleasure/happiness/wellbeing.

Intimacy is only possible with trust. You have to trust the other with whom you are being intimate. 'If I expose my most sensitive part to you, will you treat me with tenderness, care and respect?' You must believe this is so before you can open yourself. Only time will bear out the trustworthiness of your partner and it is no surprise that many of us don't take that risk. However, our ability to connect, disconnect and then reconnect makes relationships possible. Without this, we become isolated and lonely and this manifests itself in depression, anxiety, compulsive behaviours, rage and the like.

We ask ourselves, 'When I expose my true self to you, how will you respond? Will you see me? Will you accept me as I am? Will you judge me?' We don't always do this on a conscious level, for instance if we have been tremendously hurt, we can begin to do this on 'automatic pilot' and it can take the 'eyes and ears' of a trusted professional to untangle this process with you.

We often cover over our enormous sensitivity with the practice of role-playing. We take on a role, or mask that helps insulate us from emotional hurt. But distance from our own emotional authenticity is not selective. When we cut ourselves off from our pain we also cut ourselves off from our joy. We then become a little bit (or a lot!) numb to everything.



We may act out a role to win the appreciation and affection of others (again, perhaps on 'automatic pilot'). If we succeed in this endeavour then their attraction to us is based on the role we have projected rather than to our authentic self. We dare not reveal our true selves for our dread of the rejection that may ensue. Yet without exposing our genuine selves we can never experience the profound joy of actual connection and true intimacy.

Wearing the mask seems to help, because when we experience rejection while doing so, the pain of rejection doesn't go all the way to our heart. It hurts, but not too deeply. Acceptance of our mask is ok, but it lacks depth. The joy from artificial connection is superficial and usually short-lived, although it can feel unusually intense at the time. This is not true 'connection' or 'intimacy'. It is the act of 'settling'. When it is better to lie a bit and get a bit of intimacy than to tell the whole truth and perhaps risk getting nothing at all.

Eventually we are forced to ask, 'My role, my mask may be loved, but am I loved?' Even those who come close to me and want to love me can never love more than what I am willing for them to see. They can never reach deep intimacy with me. This will ultimately leave me isolated, lonely and feelings of being 'without purpose'.

A mask reveals what it conceals just by the act of concealment. We seek to cover over our most tender wounds of the past. Our most carefully guarded spot is our most vulnerable point. Yet the uncovering of that wound is the way to a new wholeness; a new and healthier way of being. Yes, this may involve being more vulnerable sometimes and as such leaving us open to potentially feeling uncomfortable and emotional pain. However the potential gains are that release from loneliness and isolation that is a result of not connecting and developing true intimacy with another human being.