For months, you and your partner have barely seen each other. There was a fleeting glance here, a quick kiss there, and a brief but heated argument over a bill someone forgot to pay. Sometimes it feels like you don’t know each other anymore.

A large part of relationship happiness is intimacy. In spite of a popular myth that men and women are from different planets, intimacy is as important to men as it is to women, and lack of strong emotional ties is depressing for both. There are some differences in how men and women typically show emotional distress (for example, women are sometimes more verbal and expressive; men may give more subtle cues and have more difficulty understanding and putting their feelings into words). There are often also differences between partners in preferred ways of expressing intimacy and in how much intimacy is desired. Each of these differences can cause distress even though both may want and need closeness. Because there is no correct style of emotional expression or perfect amount of intimacy, each couple must work to find what is right for them.

Creating intimacy takes time and effort. Both partners must develop a “relationship work ethic” (specific plan for how they will prioritize and work on their relationship) and be willing to stick to it. Here are some things that happy couples report doing to keep their relationship strong.
Be Positive with Each Other
This involves treating one’s partner with courtesy, smiles, cheerfulness, and minimal criticism. This means looking for and emphasizing the good parts of the other. For some, this may be more like how they treat their friends or co-workers than the partner they see every day.

Q How can I better treat my partner like a valued friend?

Share with Each Other
This includes talking directly about activities and feelings. It can bond people to share regularly, especially any concerns.

Q How can I better communicate with my partner?

Reassure Each Other
Reassurances send messages that one is committed to continuing the relationship and to helping the other person feel secure. In this hectic world, where relationship breakup is common, such messages help create a clear relationship safety net. The reassuring messages need not always be words but also can be actions. One could say “Don’t worry, honey, I still love you even when I am frustrated” or take the other’s hand and give it a comforting squeeze.

Q How can I let my partner know frequently that I value our relationship and want it to continue?
Connect with Others
Reaching out can maintain and strengthen relationships with extended family and friends. Such a network can provide important support for a couple.

Q How can I reach out to family and friends to keep those relationships strong?

Protect Couple and Family Time, Energy and Traditions
It is important to prioritize the couple and the family in a world where jobs, social obligations, and electronic devices often take as much time as they can. Setting explicit boundaries can help hold such intruders to their proper places in our lives. An example would be to say “Cell phones have to be turned off during dinner.” Or “Saturday mornings are always our brunch date, no matter what.”

Q How can I protect our relationship from the pressures of the outside world?

Share Responsibilities
In the happiest couples, both partners contribute to the many jobs that keep a household running, such as cooking, cleaning, doing errands, and shopping. Women often carry the heavier burden of these household chores but are much happier in relationships where their partners willingly do their share. It can help to create a plan of work that clarifies expectations and commitments. It is important to allow for different styles and standards for doing household tasks. It can also help to adjust expectations about having the “picture-perfect home.”

Q How can I communicate with my mate about household responsibilities?

Jobs I can do
1. 
2. 
3. 

Jobs I can do
1. 
2. 
3. 
Jobs he or she is willing to do

1. ______________________________________
2. ______________________________________
3. ______________________________________

When these behaviors are all part of a package, a healthy, intimate relationship can emerge, one where both partners can give and receive support.

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Recommended Reading

*He works, she works.* R. Barnett and C. Rivers, 1996.

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