

A person wearing a white apron is shown from the chest down, mixing a salad in a large, light-colored wooden bowl. They are using two wooden spoons to toss the salad. The salad consists of green and purple leafy vegetables. The bowl sits on a wooden surface, and there are some limes and more salad leaves in the foreground. The background is bright and slightly out of focus.

INTIMACY

***the missing ingredient
in your marriage?***

Like a hunger that gnaws at us, like a homesick longing for we're-not-quite-sure-what, the possibility of real closeness with another human being can often seem just out of reach ... tempting us on, but all-too-often slipping through our fingers.

Talk to Angela and Peter, and they'll list their blessings: a 20-year marriage ... two teenage daughters ... good jobs ... and a decent life in their small NZ town. They'll also tell you what they HAVEN'T got: "Intimacy," asserts Angela bluntly. "Close, loving communication. Shared feelings. Concern about the other person's needs.

"There are lots of negatives in our marriage. Not slanging matches, just conflict. And I think, 'Who needs this?' I'm no longer prepared to go on.

"I really want to make a go of it, but Pete's withdrawn from me. He gets in moods and shuts himself off. If I can't handle it and cry, he just tells me to stop snivelling.

"I deserve better than that ..."

Strangely, Peter agrees. "I often behave like a child, clamming up, pushing away. But I honestly want our relationship to work. I want to learn how to love, how to care, how to share myself and be more intimate with Angela.

"But I'm finding it hard to change."

Two really nice people ... one of them hungry for intimacy, the other scared of it ... but both frustrated and frazzled by their failure to find it.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE:

Deep down, most of us yearn for that 'special something' with another person – that closest-of-all friendships, that delicious sense of belonging in someone else's arms, 'owning and being owned', the wondrous certainty that we're fully known and deeply loved.

Shakespeare calls it "the marriage of true minds". The Bible calls it "one flesh". But it comes down to this: INTIMACY ISN'T A LUXURY – IT'S ONE OF OUR MOST BASIC NEEDS!

The search draws many of us into marriage. Despite so many marriages ending in separation or divorce, it's still the most successful and lasting union to be had. And there are enough happily marrieds around to show it *can* still be done.

Others, of course, don't marry, but simply choose to live together. But still the dream for intimacy lingers ...

And if it doesn't happen? If we're bitterly disappointed? Chances are we'll never tell anyone. We'll just nurse the loss, carrying it around like a wound in the heart. We know there's something much better out there, but we just can't *reach* it.

Or maybe we'll give up on the relationship, enduring all the heartache that comes with separation. Yet even a break-up doesn't destroy the yearning. The hunger's *still there*, eating away at us. And there's every chance we'll go looking for a *new* partner – still searching for intimacy and still, perhaps, not finding it.

It's a weird business. Even as we long for intimacy, many of us FEAR it! Why? *Because closeness can be costly.*

Marriage isn't some minor matter. It's like a great tree growing right in the middle of our living room. Sure, we could chop it down – but not without wrecking our house. And yes, the tree is often beautiful and unique. But sometimes (let's face it) it's also an enormous inconvenience.

The truth is, marriage frequently turns out to be more than we bargained for. The joyous wedding ceremony soon fades into the day-to-day reality of being *fused together* in this eating-sleeping-talking-thinking bond. There's nothing and no one that can stomp on our ego, intrude on our privacy and threaten our independence like a spouse.

FOR ALL TO SEE:

Our partner is always THERE, morning-noon-and-night ... in person, over the meal-table, in the bedroom, on the loo. Not only do we exist under the same roof, but we sleep under the same sheets. Our lives in all their secret, sordid, silly, embarrassing details are now on-show.

We soon discover it's impossible to hide! And that, if we're honest, can be hard to take ...

"Intimacy," says one author, "is a two-way street – involving both joyous discovery and painful disclosure." The deeper we're drawn into the loving mystery of another person, the more we risk being exposed for what we are. And the risk often proves too great.

Many of us grow up in dysfunctional households, seeing our parents argue, experiencing harsh discipline, perhaps even suffering abuse – all from the first people with whom we're 'close', our parents. And, as we grow older, we can come to fear intimacy.

It's a big gamble when we let someone into our private arena. Those deep, personal feelings can be betrayed and blabbed all over town. Little wonder that some of us will (at best) permit only a kind-of-closeness or closeness-at-a-distance. Anything more intimate seems just too scary ...

When most people hear the word 'intimacy', they think of SEX – to be intimate (they assume) means *getting physical*.

That's one sort of intimacy, for sure – sharing your body and your sexuality *is* intimate. But, sadly, it can mean nothing at all. In fact, it can even be a way (for men especially) of *avoiding* genuine intimacy. Sex on its own, without a relationship and without communication, is like a child playing with a cellphone – pushing buttons, but with nothing serious to say. You can have sex and make the 'equipment' work, but still keep the REAL you hidden from your partner.

Therapist Donald Harvey tells of a couple he worked with. Tim was a good husband, but he never showed any



closeness to his wife, Lisa. Except in one area – sex. And Lisa, eventually, got tired of living with what she called ‘an emotional stranger’. Here’s how she put it:

OFF THE MENU!

“I want someone who’ll talk to me. Someone who’ll listen. Someone who wants to be with me, besides in bed. For six years it seems as though all I’ve been good for is sex. Well, now I’m not even good for that. I’m tired and fed up!”

Faced with Lisa’s angry frustration, Tim agreed to go with her to a counsellor. They committed themselves to a plan: before having sex together they were to spend at least 30 minutes talking – somewhere other than in the bedroom! (They

were given special topics to use during these conversations.)

“Some interesting changes occurred,” recalls Harvey. “As Tim began sharing himself emotionally and intellectually with Lisa, his need for sex decreased. He began to feel more comfortable in his sharing.

“For Lisa, there was also a change in her interest in sex. Rather than reducing, as it had for Tim, she found her desire actually increasing.”

The lesson, surely, is that intimacy is achieved at several different levels.

Of course, you’ll be closer in some areas than others. No couple has total closeness. (That could prove unhealthy – you’d swamp each other!) But the thing to work towards is an ‘across-the-board intimacy’ that touches the whole of life.

Emotional Intimacy, where you share your feelings ... your hurts and delights and hopes and fears ... your longings, frustrations and failures.

Social Intimacy, where a number of people are friends to both you and your partner.

Sexual Intimacy, in which you genuinely enjoy your lovemaking – not just going through the routine, but giving and receiving pleasure.

Intellectual Intimacy. Sharing ideas and opinions, valuing and respecting each other's suggestions, not putting down what your partner thinks.

Recreational Intimacy. Playing together. Having some common interests, hobbies or sports.

Spiritual Intimacy, where you have similar life values and are *together* in your spiritual quest.

Remember Angela and Peter? Angela, as a young wife, set out to develop a close relationship with her new husband ... and ran into a brick wall! "He told me straight that he didn't want to be smothered – that he felt suffocated when I showed intense feelings or affection."

Peter remembers the occasion. "I just didn't have the ability to love openly. I was a loner, in my own head all the time. It goes back a long way, to my childhood. As I grew up I didn't bring my feelings out very much. I've got a wall there."

For Angela the incident was shattering. "At the age of 19, I took that seriously. I shut off part of my life from Peter ..."

Sometimes, when one partner brings a serious personal problem to marriage, intimacy can be stifled. But most marriages don't have blockages that deep. Most

newlyweds relish their initial closeness. They've found someone they can trust and open up to. And the rewards are immediate.

So how come many fizzle 10 years later? Well, at some point they begin drifting ...

"I didn't want to be hurt again," Angela told us. "So I closed off. And the children took up my time, filling that gap for me."

Peter also found something to take the place of closeness. "I did lots of work – my normal day's job and then I'd work extra hours at home, to earn more income."

DRIFTING can easily begin after the birth of the first child. And, initially, it's not too serious.

The wife devotes all her energy to her new baby, who demands huge chunks of time. But that's no problem – she naturally adores this delightful, dependent little newcomer.

The young husband starts to feel left out and just a little jealous. To make up for it, he throws his energies into his job or hobby or sport. The drifting's begun. But it's not serious ... yet.

As they both make an effort, he gets used to the new arrival, and she realises there's more to life than her baby. Or ...

Hurt by his lack of enthusiasm, the new mum soothes her loneliness by giving even more attention to her child.

Hurt by her lack of interest, dad decides his 'real life' is outside the home ...

Ron and Beth, an Auckland couple, are familiar with the staying-on-at-work ploy – but with a different twist. Because he's unemployed, Ron's at home during the day looking after their five-year-old son – and Beth has a managerial job in the city.

"At a marriage seminar we attended," she says, "they pointed out that you can have an extra-marital affair with your



job, with your sport, or with your church or club. Whenever our relationship is drifting, I tend to have an affair with my job. I often find the 'need' to stay at work a bit longer."

A MARRIAGE ADRIFT

There are lots of other ways to distance yourself from your partner. Going silent, for example. Or drinking too much. Or going to bed early and alone – and being 'asleep' when your partner arrives. Or the opposite – staying up till he/she is finally asleep.

"If we've had a serious argument," says Beth, "I'll go off to bed. But if it's just that we're not getting on, we tend to watch the box. Television's a real killer. You can get to the stage of not talking to each other – even during the ads ... or endless talking on the phone or surfing the net."

MARRIAGE-BUSTERS! There are plenty waiting in the shadows – and most couples will tangle with a few sooner or later: sexual tensions, money worries, differences over raising kids, sheer tiredness. Or just the ho-humness of living (where hello and goodbye kisses become automatic pecks ... or get dropped altogether). These pressures can push you apart.

Intimacy is no accident. Living together successfully isn't a matter of simply 'doing what comes naturally'. There are new habits to be formed, new skills to be learned. Like learning to communicate, to deal with differences, to fight fair, to handle the practical stuff.

Beth and Ron can now spot the danger-signs.

Beth: "When our relationship gets strained, we never make eye-contact with one another. There's also no touching."

Ron: "And we lie back-to-back in bed!" Alarm bells ring and they know: it's time to do something fresh.

In the past, couples could put up with a drifting marriage for years. Maybe it was dull and dreary, but they got on okay. And at least they weren't fighting. But today's couples demand much more. Our parents and grandparents may have settled for mediocre, but not us!

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Marriages, today, are measured on the strength of love and love alone. The demand for intimacy in marriage has never been so overwhelming. And without that closeness, a relationship crumbles. That's why drifting marriages are at high risk ...

OUR MARRIAGE:

Does anyone know where we're going?

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR IN MARRIAGE? WHAT ARE YOUR hopes and dreams? If you and your partner are pulling in different directions, you both need to know about it – and soon!

No two people expect exactly the same from their relationship. But it's important to know where you differ. Otherwise you can cause each other a lot of hurt – without even realising it. Bringing it out into the open is the first step. And here's a way you and your mate can do just that. Work through Steps A and B on your own.

STEP A

How important to you are the eight 'marriage-ingredients' listed below? Copy them out, and then (separately) rank them in order, using the explanations to guide you. Grade them from 1 (for the most important) down to 8 (for the least). Suggestion: start by choosing the first and last – highest and lowest; then fit the others in between.

STEP B

In the same way, rank the eight items in the order you think your partner would grade them.

STEP C

Finally, compare notes with your partner – discussing how you've ranked yourselves and each other. Here's a great opportunity to see your relationship through your partner's eyes!

MARRIAGE INGREDIENTS	How YOU rank them	How you think your PARTNER ranks them
Friendship	[]	[]
Support	[]	[]
Sex	[]	[]
Security	[]	[]
Shared values	[]	[]
Tenderness	[]	[]
Togetherness	[]	[]
Finance	[]	[]



Explanation:

Friendship: Having someone to share your feelings with. Someone to discuss your ideas with. Someone whose companionship you enjoy.

Support: Having someone who will tell you when you do things well – when you're a good mum/dad. Someone who'll back you up in front of the kids – and in front of friends.

Sex: Receiving and giving physical pleasure.

Security: Feeling confident that your marriage is going to last.

Shared values: Having a partner with similar standards, spiritual beliefs, goals in life.

Tenderness: Valuing frequent touches, kisses, phone calls, notes – reminders of the love between you.

Togetherness: Sharing interests and friends – doing things, going places and just being together.

Finance: Knowing that you've got enough money to manage your home as you'd like it.

It doesn't take much to tip them over the edge: an affair, a teenager causing trouble, a midlife crisis ... almost anything. Or maybe you just wake up one day to the fact that your marriage isn't worth putting up with any longer.

"I felt as if I was starting to shrivel up inside," Angela confesses. And with her daughters now teenagers, she sees her problem more sharply. "Our children will soon be leaving home. I know what's going to happen between Peter and me unless we sort things out.

"We just don't connect. It's become more and more obvious. And the thing is – all our friends are the same!

"I used to think this was normal. My parents were like that too. They were totally indifferent towards each other. Very little affection was ever shown. So I've never had anything better to compare it with. But I know inside it's not enough.

"I just don't want a relationship like that anymore."

A new danger, of course, is that we rush to the other silly extreme. Instead of 'grinning and bearing it', as Granny and Grandpa did, we give up too early and too easily. When closeness doesn't just happen (like magic!), we assume the marriage was a mistake, or that love has died, or that the two of us were never 'meant' for each other.

But it's not like that. Good marriages *aren't* made in heaven. They're good because two people **MAKE** them good. Intimacy is always difficult ... and when it stops being difficult it stops being intimacy. But (write this down!) ... *intimacy is always possible!*

One night,” says Angela, “I decided he wasn’t going to do this to me anymore. I decided to tackle him head on. I did something I haven’t done in years. I went up to him and cuddled him and showed affection. And in the end he melted!

“It was a small start, but he didn’t push me away. And we experienced a closeness way beyond what we’d had together – ever!”

“That’s true,” agrees Peter. “It made me realise that I *do* have feelings – that I *do* care. I have all the capabilities for everything that’d be fantastic in a relationship.”

YOU’RE NOT HELPLESS:

There’s no law that says you have to stand back and watch your relationship fizzle. Yes, it’s true that intimacy (emotional, sexual, or any other kind) can’t be forced. But with patience, practice and encouragement, intimacy can take root and grow in even the most unlikely soil.

The secret ingredients aren’t new ... (or secret!) They’re as old as the universe. A bloke called Paul (from Tarsus) captured them brilliantly a long, long time ago:

“Love is patient and kind ... love doesn’t envy or boast ... love isn’t proud or self-seeking ... love isn’t easily angered, and keeps no record of wrong ... love doesn’t delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth ... love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

In short, intimacy thrives on companionship and communication – being together and talking together. As another

couple discovered, when, after eight years of marriage and baby #1, their ‘separateness’ began to hurt ...

The husband, Will, told us what happened: “I wasn’t prepared to let our friendship fade. I was away a lot with my job, which made it easier for friends at work to mean more to me. But I wanted my *wife* as my soul-mate ... not my workmates.”

These two weren’t in deep trouble – they’d just forgotten to feed their love. Will suggested they go out for dinner once a month. “No special occasion, just to be with each other. To focus on US for a change. And we agreed that we wouldn’t talk about the past or the present. Just the future – our tomorrows.”

His wife Jane found it awkward at first. “Just the two of us ... it seemed a bit intense, and I couldn’t think of much to say. But I liked it enough to try again.”

Slowly, over the months, things changed. She sensed afresh that Will didn’t just love her – he really *liked* her: her ideas, her viewpoints. And she began to value his strengths ... even if they didn’t include changing nappies! He started sending romantic cards when he was away – and little “I-love-you” notes began appearing in his folded pyjamas. Talking about the future assured them they were still on the same adventure. And that felt good.

“Ten years later,” he reports, “we still get a real kick out of the little things we do for each other. And we still have that dinner date, once a month!”

Remember the way you behaved when you were young lovers? Remember the crazy, fun things you did ... how positive you used to be ...

the nice things you said about his sense of humour, her cheekiness, his thoughtfulness, her tidiness ... the outings you used to take ... the movies and milkshakes-at-midnight ... those long, lazy hours spent gazing at each other and saying whatever came into your heads?

Okay: maybe you can't do *all* those things now (maybe you can't *afford* to!) ... but it's never too late to dust some of them off and enjoy them again.

Beth: "It means a lot to me for Ron to touch me in public – to hold my hand, for example. And we make sure we phone each other during the day."

LOST ART OF CONVERSATION

It's never too late to talk-talk-talk! SMALL TALK (don't knock it – it's better than nothing) ... can lead to BIG TALK ... which can lead to significant, meaningful, TWO-INTO-ONE TALK. Talk about anything and everything: what you enjoy and how you feel and why you believe, what you believe.

Talk about what you fear and where you differ and what turns you on. About how you rate your marriage and what you're missing most. About which things you'd hate to lose and which things you'd love to change. (See panel: "Does Anyone Know Where We're Going?")

Don't try this when you're throwing a wobbly, in the middle of a mess, or up to your armpits in kids. Pick your moments. And if you can't pick 'em, MAKE 'em! Get out of the house and go lose yourselves in a park ... or wait until baby's asleep and brew up some coffee. And whatever you do, make sure the TV's off!

Go easy on each other. Don't expect

immediate success, and don't demand perfection from your spouse. Remember: intimacy makes people nervous – even NICE people. And it can be bruising, at first, when partners plunge into an overdue stock-take of their marriage.

Each of us has warts and wrinkles, hang-ups and blind spots. And no one person can (or should be expected to) meet *all* your needs.

As Beth points out: "You're not always going to have a 'zingy' love. When the love-feelings get pushed into the background, that's when you need to continue *doing* the things that show love.

"With us, intimacy means that sometimes – by sheer willpower – we go and give a kiss or have a hug or say, "I love you."

Finally, if you're both prepared to give it effort and work with what you've got (instead of wasting all those years you've spent in each other's lives) ... you can expect some delightful surprises and unexpected changes.

After all, that's what intimacy in marriage is all about ...

Says author and counsellor David Mace: "There's just no way we can make the achievement of intimacy simple and foolproof. It's a complex operation, and it may take years to learn.

"But both my head and my heart tell me that nothing I've ever tried to learn about living has been so worthwhile." ❖

KEEPERS OF THE VINE



**WHAT DO YOU THINK?
HAVE YOUR SAY!**



GO TO GRAPEVINE'S FACEBOOK PAGE. SHARE YOUR POINT-OF-VIEW AND READ WHAT OTHERS RECKON.