

The Well Tempered Heart

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The Well-Tempered Clavier revolutionized the history of the piano. Before Bach's famous publication, the clavier (the precursor to the modern piano) was limited in range. It was tuned to a particular key; the strings were strummed instead of hammered, and each note had the exact same volume and duration. Bach discovered that if you constrained the tuning only slightly, you could get all 24 keys (12 major and 12 minor) on the same keyboard. With that broader capability, the clavier became a more attractive instrument. With the addition of hammered strings and the sustain, the modern piano was born. It was an instrument of such impressive versatility that composers would create music for it alone.

Success in relationships requires the well-tempered heart. Most of us play only a limited range of melodies; we can play well with only a few others. We quickly run out of the versatility needed for robust and vital relationships. The well-tempered heart is a choice, a discipline, and a skill set. It is a way of increasing our range and adaptability by expanding the range of inter-actions we can easily entertain and support. "Being in love" is not enough; it is only the motivation to learn what is enough.

And that's the big question: beyond love, what is required?

In Your Life...

- Who among you hopes to find a long-term relationship during your life that is...
 - Emotionally satisfying? Intimate?
 - Sensual and affectionate? Sexy?
 - Safe and comforting?
 - Stimulating and exciting?
- Do you imagine such a relationship will be relatively straightforward to cultivate and sustain?

Before we pose that most difficult question, let's start with something simpler.

Potential Challenges

- What do you imagine might make such a relationship difficult to achieve?
- What do your friends and clients report as sources of difficulty?
- Differences in values or interests
- Changes over time
- Attitudes toward conflict
- Lack of good communication skills
- External constraints and circumstances
- Conflicting expectations
- Lack of supportive friends and family

Turn to the 2 or 3 people nearest you and come up with 2-3 reasons why intimate relationships are problematic.

I'll give you 4 minutes. GO!

What's especially disturbing is that we all know the list of potential challenges. There's very little new insight in the list.

But despite that knowledge, we continue to stumble. It's telling that this course is perhaps the only one in the University that offers an answer to issues that are so well known ... yet routinely ignored!

A Little Historical Context

- We inherited the brain wiring for lust, romance, and attachment ... not for intimacy
- Marriage initially evolved as an economic and social institution ... not a personal one
- In the mid-twentieth century, we started to *value* emotional intimacy...with neither a built-in brain system nor the requisite personal skills

If we jump back a few million years, we can see our inherited capabilities. These 3 systems have distinct brain wiring, and work on different hormonal sequences. They are interconnected, but only loosely. **The net impact is that we are**

- **driven to mate,**
- **focused on the one mate, and**
- **attached to mate and offspring long enough to pass them onto a multi-age play group, which is sufficient for a lifestyle based on grazing and foraging.**

If we fast forward to the last few hundred years, **we see the evolution of marriage *not* as a container for intimate relations, but as a societal tool for managing wealth, creating lineage, and knitting together networks of families.**

My parents were among the earliest generation to hope for intimacy as well as financial stability and social success in marriage.

Unfortunately our value or hope is not supported by a built-in brain system or a well-articulated understanding of the required skills.

A Short History of Marriage

Emotionally intimate, personally satisfying relationships are a *novel* and *noble* experiment ...

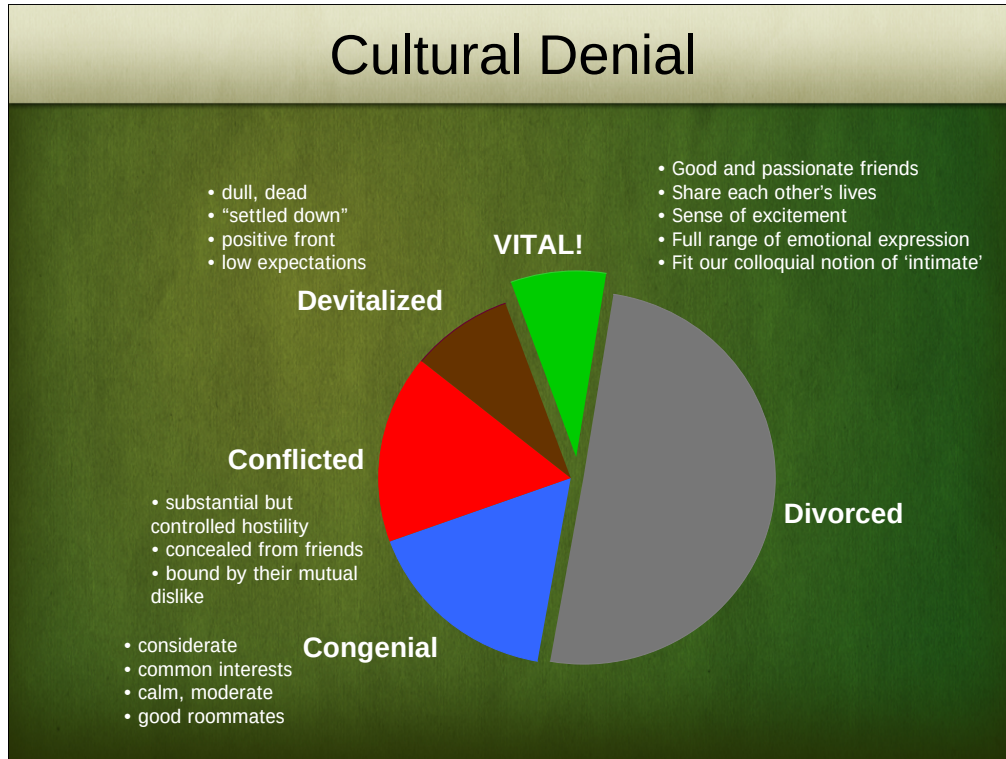
But what does the early data suggest?

The need for the well tempered heart is obscured in our culture. We maintain a comprehensive denial that relationships are challenging, despite the obvious and widespread evidence that they are anything but simple.

In all our fairy tales, the meat of the story is how the lovers find each other, and then “happily ever after” happens. And today we have a generation of young people questioning the fairy tale, but their peers and parents usually have nothing to offer by way of an adequate answer.

Most people in their 20's have spent way more time and money learning golf, swimming, or tennis than they have learning the critical skills for intimate relationships (fair fighting, clean emotional expression, sexual expression of intimacy, handling difficult conversations, etc.).

It's not for lack of interest in a sustaining intimate relationship; it's more for simply not knowing what they need to learn, or not knowing where to learn it!



Sociologists conducted interviews with thousands of couples. They spoke with each spouse alone and then with the couple. The category scheme that resulted was their attempt to bring some order to an otherwise scattered array of couple experiences.

They found couples

- (1) who were kind and considerate, but nothing more than fairly good roommates. (Blondie and Dagwood)
- (2) who were constantly engaged in low-level, contained conflict. (The Lockhorns)
- (3) who had lowered their expectations to the point that they were automatically successful, because they sought so little. (Herman)

They found a (4) surprisingly small cohort who were truly "intimate" in any sense of the word. Perhaps 1 in 10...or less

And so...



Healthy, well-
balanced and
intimate
relationships are
the exception ...
not the rule

*And we should start
asking why?*

The net result of our cultural distortions and blind spots is that healthy, intimate relationships are rare.

Among young people there is a widespread schizophrenic optimism that deep love and commitment will be enough to “make it happen”, while at the same time they remain pessimistic about how long it will last. So they invest little in relationship skills beyond the requirements of dating and courtship. And even if they were willing to invest more, there are few forums where the realities of complex relationships are openly discussed.

Look at what passes for “sex education” in our culture; it is little more than a litany of anatomy lessons, potential diseases, and thinly veiled moral admonitions. **It’s all about maintenance of the equipment; so we’re left with sex as a sport, devoid of content, and devoid of heart.** Where are the widely available classes on how sexual intimacy and emotional intimacy are linked? On the typical stages of emotional bonding? How to fight well in close relationship? On the importance of boundaries between lovers?

The alternative to blind optimism, however, is not blind fatalism. Sound relationships are clearly possible; what we have learned is just that they are not automatic or straightforward. It makes more sense to pursue the well-tempered heart. That is, let’s assume that good relationships are an acquired taste, not some reward for good intentions or guaranteed by automatic genetic disposition. Let’s assume that a small amount of discipline returns a greatly expanded range and flexibility.

Because...

Our colloquial
notion of
'intimacy' is
actually a
cluster of
different kinds
of connections



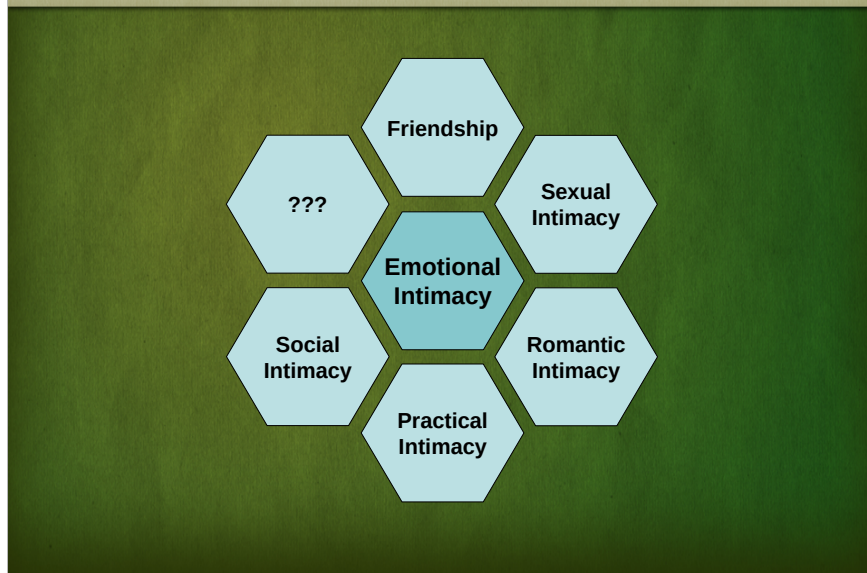
We don't see this aspect of our lives clearly. It's hard to see from the inside. Experience is often confusing. Feedback is hard to secure. Our subjective experience obscures the essence or the complexity of the process.

What we think of as "intimacy" or "closeness" is not a single dimension; it is multiple dimensions. And they don't all fit together.

The reason the game (of love, romance, marriage) is played so poorly is not because the players are unmotivated, it is because the rules of the game are inherently complex. Only the most skilled can navigate this terrain successfully.

When so many people play the game so badly, it's time to stop flogging the players and time to start investigating the rules of the game.

The Nature of Intimacy



So let's just list some of the layers of "connection" in complex, long-term, intimate relationships:

FRIENDSHIP is the most pervasive. It is the simple enjoyment of each other's company, shared interests, the giving and taking of support and comfort.

SEXUALITY is often equated with love (after all, we call it 'love making') but in reality it exists somewhat independently. It is driven by lust, curiosity, the desire for release.

ROMANCE is more compelling, but also more brittle. It is heavily reliant on fantasy and mystery for its power.

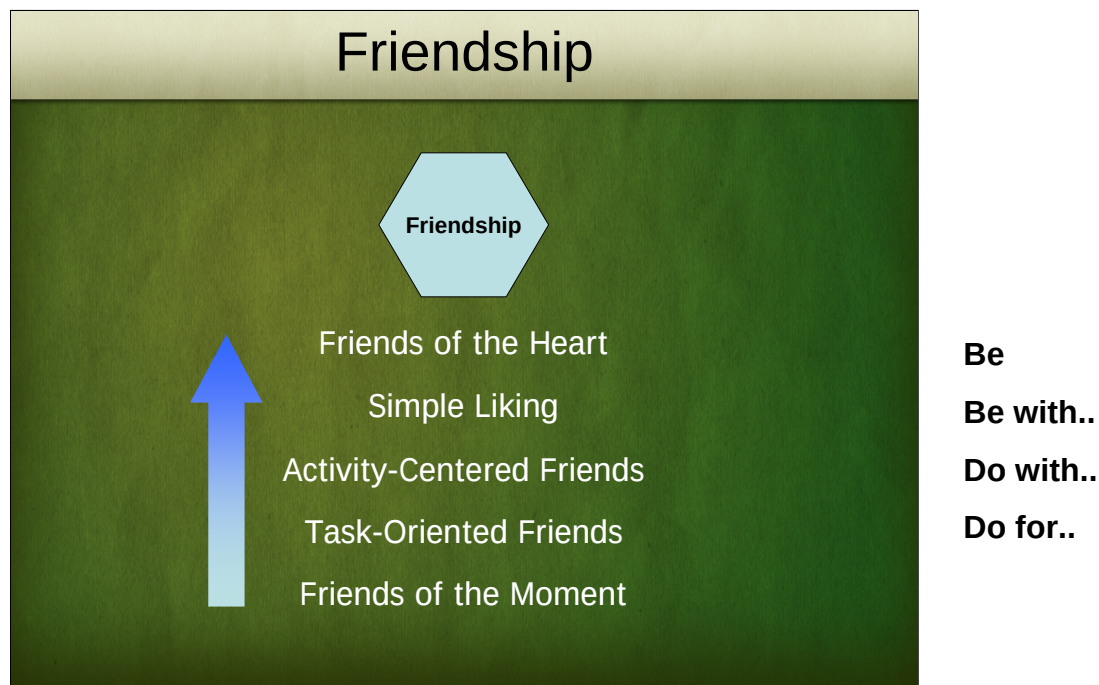
PRACTICAL INTIMACY: The blending of two lives at a very tactical level.

SOCIAL INTIMACY: Building a shared network of friends; integrating outside friends into the fabric of the relationship.

This is not an exhaustive list. Couples could look for "closeness" on other dimensions as well: spirituality, art, music, vegan lifestyle, even physical capability. I once worked with a student who would not date a man unless he could run the 100 yard dash as fast as she could; she just didn't want to bother with someone who was not into athletics as much as she.

And in the center, we have **EMOTIONAL INTIMACY**, the most elusive of all. But it is clearly "at the center" of our notion of intimacy. It is the layer that brings everything else together.

Just making these distinctions, we can name the most common mistake in building an intimate relationship: **assuming that it's only one thing**, rather than embracing the complexity of the venture. We can be wildly in love, but still not be friends. We can live together easily, but never find the comfort afforded by deeper, emotional intimacy.



Friendship is more moderate and gentle than Romance and Sex. It is about ease, comfort, safety.

Friendship comes in at least 5 different flavors. We always start out as “Friends of the Moment”, drawn together by some circumstance, such as having a friend in common, living on the same floor, belonging to the same car pool, or taking the same class. In the interest of civility, we learn to “act friendly”, although the friendship would evaporate if the bonding circumstance were to change.

One step up is friendship borne out of a shared task interest. Perhaps we belong to the same study group, support the same candidate, or belong to the same softball team. The concern for each other is directly proportional to our commitment to the task that links us, but goes no further. The other is instrumental to achieving the task.

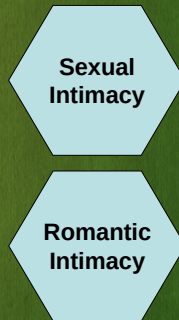
Activity-centered friendships look similar on the surface, but the concern for the other person is deeper. The activity is merely the skeleton which structures the encounter. The Friday lunch time basketball game, golf buddies, or couples meeting to play bridge would be examples. In fact, there are often norms about getting “too involved” with the activity to the detriment of the relationships woven through it.

Simple liking surfaces when the desire to spend time together needs no pretense of structure. It is understood that I simply want the other’s company because I just like them (not their competence or their utilitarian value).

Friends of the Heart emerge when someone becomes “like family” to us. We cannot imagine *not* having them as a close friend. The bond can survive long periods of separation and even years of negative feeling. The bottom line is that even friendship has a complex structure; it is easy to get lost. It is more durable. It is the most frequent – even if not the most dramatic – element in a complex relationship.

Sexuality & Romance

- Associated in our hopes, but separate in reality
- Non-rational (unlike friendship)
- Sudden (unlike friendship)
- Brittle (unlike friendship)
- Short half-life (unlike friendship)
- Dangerous (unlike friendship)



Sex could be the expression of love ... or not!

“Making love” is far different than “getting fucked”, and we often worry about which it was.

We often link sex and romance together – at least in our hopes. In reality, of course, they are separate and only joined together by choice, and only then with a certain level of skill and insight.

Sex and romance are non-rational. They are timeless; we imagine “our love will last forever”. They can distort our values or preferences. It can turn our knees to rubber and our tummies to mush.

Sexuality and romance are quite different in rhythm and flow from friendship. Both can be sudden, even explosive.

Both of these processes can be brittle, easy shattered, evaporating just as quickly as they appeared. They do not seem to be naturally renewing. Romance – all by itself – seems to have a half-life of 6-9 months.

Friendship seems to ripen with time, but couples often struggle to keep the passion and the romance alive after just the first few years.

Sexuality and romance are also dangerous. We rightfully worry about the sexual distractions our partner may find in other friends, co-workers. And sexual jealousy can bring out the worst in all of us. Romance can overrule “commitment”. Illicit lovers often say “We didn’t mean it to happen”, “one thing led to another”, or some other dismissal of responsibility. The forbidden is often tempting. Falling in love with the “bad boy” or the “bad girl” is a common affliction.

Emotional Intimacy

- Anchors the relationship
- Less frequent, but powerful
- Not even understood by many
- We are aware of it often through its painful absence

Emotional Intimacy

- First need to pose a classic question:

What separates humans from all other species?

- *Language?*
- *Tool use?*

Emotional intimacy is the most enigmatic. It is about being known, not about being liked. It is about being authentic and present, even if it means not being a “good lover” or “good friend” or “good partner”.

It requires courage in self-expression. It is not about comfort and ease; it often feels scary.

It is the ability to characterize and articulate our internal state, the courage to share who we really are, even at the risk of rejection. It means shedding the common self-presentation that we build through every facet of our lives. It means forever giving up the illusion that other people “make us feel” any certain way, and embracing fully our role in shaping our own perceptions and feelings.

It is less evident in a relationship, but it tends to define the boundaries, the limits of the relationship. That is, we often recall moments of our most intense sharing as the defining features of the relationship; those moments set our expectations for what might happen and what might be beyond our range.

We have found the place where “a little discipline” is to be located!

To unravel the structure of this layer of intimacy, we have to first ask a long-standing question about humans.

The Essence of Emotional Intimacy

We have thoughts and
feelings ***about*** our
thoughts and feelings.

This capacity to reflect on our experience is both the source of culture and the genesis of insanity. It is a blessing and a curse. It is, nonetheless, the essence of our humanity.

It is also the starting point to understanding the nature of emotional intimacy. This most elusive of the relationship dimensions requires more than simply “spilling our guts” or “saying what’s on the tip of your tongue”. Unvarnished honesty can be cruel and selfish. Emotional intimacy is neither.

What's Inside			
	Reactions to the world	Reactions to our reactions to the world	Reactions to our reactions to our reactions to the world
Feelings	A	N	N
Perceptions			
Fantasies			
Links			
Preferences			
Judgments			

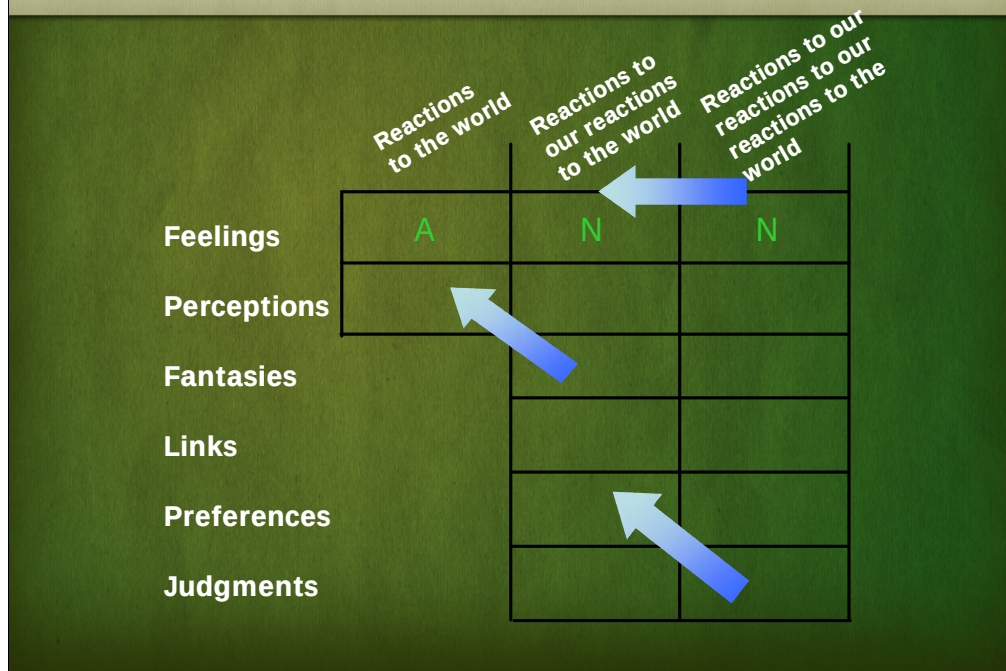
There are a variety of ways to characterize our internal, psychic life. But this listing will suffice. The important point is that our ongoing, subjective experience is a jumble of different elements. And they flow freely back and forth. **And they are generative.** Given our capacity to have thoughts and feelings about our thoughts and feelings, **any subjective event can be a catalyst for a whole flood of additional events.** Only a small portion of our psychic life is a direct response to the outside world. Most of the time we are responding to ourselves.

There are numerous expressions that pass for emotional expression, one of the supposed contributors to an intimate relationship. If we look at them more carefully, we find that they do not reveal emotions, they are some combination of judgment, fantasy, and subsequent emotional arousal (typically unnamed). They only borrow the legitimacy of emotion to add credence to our demands or our views.

- I feel like you don't care (my fantasy of your feeling)
- I feel like you're holding back (my judgment of your behavior)
- I feel like you never share your feelings (more judgment; no statement of feeling)
- I feel that you're not listening
- I feel betrayed (judgment of your behavior against some unstated standard of loyalty)
- I feel guilty (my imagined judgment from you of my behavior)
- I feel jealous (lots of fantasies and self-judgment)
- I feel second-rate with you (judgment from self or other)

So the work of being emotionally present is not simple. It requires that you respect the distinctions between feeling and other psychic events, and that you understand the distinction between first-order and second- or third-order "feelings". **The work of emotional intimacy is not simply spontaneous expression; that would lead to sharing only the last event in some cognitive string. Rather it is a willingness to sort yourself out, hopefully with the support of a caring partner.** And eventually finding the first events in the sequence. It is a process of self-discovery, not just self-revelation. **The anxiety we feel about being emotionally intimate is not so much how our partners will feel about us when they know the truth. It is more likely our fear of finding out what our truth is.**

The *Work* in Intimacy



The challenge in emotional intimacy is multifaceted, but some of the most critical are the following:

- Acknowledging our higher-order reactions (as in admitting that you're angry because of a fantasy you had about your partner's feelings) and working our way back to lower-order reactions (such as "this is what I saw" and "this was my immediate feeling")
- Acknowledging that much of what we think we know or saw is actually our fantasy (such as imagining that your partner worked so hard on her chem assignment because she's attracted to the TA)
- Moving from our higher order judgments back to lower-order preferences (such as saying "I want your undivided attention for a few minutes" rather than "If you really loved me you'd want to know what I'm going through right now")

Some Counseling Strategies

Help your client sort their experience of friendship vs. romance vs. sexuality vs. emotional intimacy

- Don't confuse one for the other
- Point them to the separate work required for each domain

Help your client work back to 1st and 2nd order experience

- Honor their experience, but distinguish between fantasy, judgment, perception, and feeling
- Find ways to test out fantasies
- Help them restate judgments as requests

These strategies are different from the classical peer counseling approach; they go beyond reflecting feelings and encouraging more self-expression. So use them with some caution; they will take you into new territory as a counselor. They involve a subtle way of guiding without being intrusive.

Mostly they suggest new ways to phrase questions.

They are NOT a license to be directive or intrusive.

Some Useful Questions

- What did you actually see? What happened that anyone would have seen?
- What did you imagine was going on “between the lines”? Behind the scenes?
- What was your initial reaction to all that?
- What meaning did you make of it in your own head?
- What do you tell yourself about people who behave that way?
- What do you wish had happened instead?

ACTUALLY SEE: Bring them back to actual perceptions, facts, real events

BETWEEN THE LINE: Acknowledge their fantasies as real, but as real *fantasies* (i.e., emotionally powerful, but still not facts).

INITIAL REACTION: What did they make of it?

What LINKS did they make? What JUDGMENTS did they come to?

TELL YOURSELF: More about their judgements.

WISH: What are their preferences? Has that been articulated or voiced?

193P Student Questions on Relationships:

There are several questions that all relate to **having relationships while in college**.

- What is the most common relationship problem people experience at Stanford? In your view, what aspects of student life or attitudes might aggravate relationship problems?
- How do you balance your time in relationships when you're at such a busy time in your life at Stanford?
- If you experience a bad break-up, how can you make sure to deal with it healthily while still putting time into academics?
- Which relationships should a college student focus most of their energy on: parents, friends, siblings, romantic partners etc?
- The myth is that Stanford students don't date, is there any validity in that? If so, why?
- What about relationships in college? Are they more positive or more negative?
- What percentage of Stanford is in a relationship vs. just hooking up?
- What do you think contributes to the "hook up culture" of Stanford?
- How often do Stanford students come to couples counseling and what for?

There is a prevalent myth among college students that their time in college is somehow more full or more stressed than it will be later and serious relationships are, for that reason, somewhat foolish. It makes more sense, it seems, to wait until there is more structure and more certainty in your life; in the interim "hooking up" offers some of the benefits of relationships but avoids unnecessary stresses.

In my opinion, the reality is quite different. You will probably never have as much time as you do now for relationships. Time pressures that come with graduate school, your first job, or your maturing career (not to mention starting a family) will be more severe...not less. In short, there will always be a tension between finding time for relationships and time for the task at hand. It's a good idea to start practicing now with managing that tension creatively. And sometimes that will mean finding the time for a relationship in a full academic schedule, and sometimes it will mean finding time for the emotional turmoil of new relationships and lost relationships. If all you practice is "hooking up", that may turn out to be all you're really good at.

What's very true about relationships in college is that you seldom know where you'll be after graduation. Your boyfriend or girlfriend could find themselves drawn to another part of the country as they pursue their graduate studies or first employment. But those issues pose just as much stress for married couples as they do for dating couples. So again, wading in seems a more sensible approach than avoiding the issue and pretending that it won't be a problem later on. What will you do when your spouse gets a promotion that involves moving to Chicago? Or what if one of you realizes you need to get another degree? Better to practice in a simpler relationship than face it for the first time in a more complex one.

There were several questions about **how to make relationships work**, and where do they most commonly stumble:

- What are the main relationship issues that people come into the Bridge to talk about? (Best to ask Alejandro about this one.)
- What are the biggest causes of problems in relationships?
- What are the secrets for a successful long-term relationship?
- What changes can you make to better a relationship that's beginning to fail?

The stresses of intimate relationships can show up in a myriad of ways. Symptoms can range from irritability, poor sleep patterns, skin irritations, suppressed sexual desire, depression, retreat into moral absolutes, you name it! And any given symptom – such as lowered desire – can stem from a myriad of possible sources. What presents as a relationship problem could be an echo of earlier individual childhood traumas. In short, there's no simplifying things. At some point you have to embrace the complexity, both as a counselor and as a participant.

Despite all the complexity, I will offer one simplistic maxim: Relationships are not problems to be solved, or tasks to be mastered. And “success” is not the absence of friction or hostility. Relationships are about being intimate with another person, and **not** treating their feelings and issues as problems to be solved. It's not the solutions you offer or the problems you avoid that are the hallmarks of a strong relationship; it is the process you establish with your partner in dealing with life together. Even your total failures can contribute to relationship success if you come to them together with authenticity and compassion. In intimate relationships, the process is the only important outcome.

This must seem like a confusing statement. On the one hand, I'm suggesting that knowledge, skills, and expertise are irrelevant. And yet I still argue that there are skills to learn to support better relationships. The difference is that the skills needed for a successful relationship are not those of financial management, sexual technique, parenting strategies, career planning, or whatever. The secret of a successful relationship is more in your ability to be honest in the face of difficult feelings, to listen without immediately becoming defensive, to be ruthlessly honest while still being compassionate, and to fight while always making room for reconciling. It's knowing how to reach out while still respecting boundaries, to explore differences without feeling threatened by them.

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- Can you tell that a relationship is **bad** from the start?

Sure. Are you uncomfortable around your new partner? Are you anxious about whether you're “doing it right”? Does your partner seem oblivious to whether they make you uncomfortable or guilty or anxious? Does it seem like you have to fight for “air time”, for shared influence? Are you being pressured into doing things that you wouldn't do otherwise? Is the relationship all about romance or sex with no time to just be good friends? Is your new partner exciting precisely because they are the complete opposite of you? Are all your friends telling you to look out, or move on?

If you answer to some of these is “Yes”, then you’ve got every reason to leave. Ask your friends who know you both, and they’ll probably tell you it hasn’t got a chance in hell.

- How do we know when we should treat a case where someone has relationship troubles as an **interpersonal conflict** or a **intrapersonal conflict**? (“my girl/boyfriend dumped me” might be more of an intrapersonal conflict, whereas having a fight is more interpersonal)

The answer to this question is an unequivocal “Yes”! There is almost never a clean dividing line between *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal*. We all carry ghosts from our pasts into our relationships. And when those old hurts are triggered, is it intrapersonal or interpersonal. Yes, it’s both! My partner’s soft spots and triggers are part and parcel of who they are, of who they will be in the relationship.

- Where do **boundaries** arise in relationships, either implicit or explicit, and what happens when relationships are undefined?

We often focus on getting closer in new relationships, yet when relationships collapse we often hear “I felt smothered” or “I couldn’t breathe”. Holding your partner at arm’s length is just as dangerous as dropping all your defenses unilaterally. As much as we look for intimacy, we all need to feel our own individuality. In fact, intimacy is sharing across boundaries; and the boundaries are just as important as the sharing. A successful relationship should support the growth of each individual as well as the growth of the relationship, with neither compromising the other.

Obviously another important boundary is the one you draw *around* the relationship. Are we exclusive? And at what level? Is it OK for my partner to have close friends of the opposite sex? At what point should I broach the question of exclusivity? If my partner cheats on me, should I let it go? Or let them go? There’s no universal answers, but the one universal truth is that a healthy relationship should allow for open exploration of the feelings and values and fantasies that shape these preferences. The boundaries assumed but not discussed are more likely to create problems than the ones you address directly.

- How many relationships can we sensibly expect to sustain at any point?

If you mean how many friendships, I’d say as many as you possibly can. Some of us will opt for a very few very close friends, some will favor lots of more casual friends, and some will be somewhere in the middle. Find your own rhythm and learn to enjoy and lean on your friends; in the end, they’ll be the most important contributor to your mental and even physical health.

If you mean romantic relationships, I’d suggest a different answer. Having one intimate partner is a pretty tough gig. Some people manage to add a 2nd romantic partner, but often that then becomes the dominant issue in the relationship(s) and other issues get pushed aside. Polyamory may have its place in today’s sexual terrain, but I’d suggest it’s

best taken up by very mature people in established relationships. It's a pretty overwhelming practice for nascent relationships among novices.

- Is there a way to "save" a relationship?

This may sound strange, but the best way to "save" a relationship is to not try to save the relationship. When we go into "save" mode we often try to keep things comfortable, not rock the boat, avoid any tense topics, act as if things are OK. In short, we do all the things that guarantee the relationship will fail. Relationships are saved by honesty, not by tact. They're saved by courage, not by courtesy. They're saved by facing the uncomfortable reality, not by pretending everything is fine.

And sometimes all that courage and honesty only drives it over the edge. In other words, it's not appropriate to try and "save" a relationship at any cost. Your commitment should be not to each other, but to being authentic and courageous, to acting with the highest integrity. If the relationship flies apart, the only way you could have kept it alive is by compromising that integrity. That kind of relationship should be allowed to die.

Courage, however, is not a license to be cruel. We can be honest about difficult realities and still be compassionate. We can challenge our partner to deal with things without being confrontational or accusatory. Part of integrity is acknowledging that you played your part, you contributed in some way. So courage often means facing your own personal truth as well as pushing your partner to confront theirs.