



FLM-FS-1-03-R09

# Closeness in a Couple Relationship

**Cindy Bond-Zielinski, M.A.**, Family and Consumer Sciences and Community Development Educator,  
Guernsey County, Ohio State University Extension, The Ohio State University

*“Do you feel emotionally connected with a significant person in your life?”*

Whether you were raised in a small or large family or by one or two parents, your family was unique in its makeup and functioning. When you consider all the facets of families and the complex, interconnected relationships within them, you will realize that no two are alike. The fact that families are so diverse can add to the challenge of merging individuals from two families into a cohesive couple relationship.

## **How close are you with your partner?**

Closeness refers to how emotionally connected you feel to another person. It involves how you balance separateness—your private space—and togetherness—your intimate connection. It is essential for couples to balance the “I” and “We” by maintaining their own individuality and their closeness.

Having a very low or a very high level of closeness can eventually lead to problems. When a relationship is disconnected, or not close, the individuals tend to focus more on themselves than on each other. They tend to have too much separateness and to be highly independent. They may feel that they cannot count on their relationship to give them support when they need it.

An overly connected relationship that has an extreme amount of closeness is not ideal. In these relationships, members have too much togetherness,

demand loyalty, are too dependent on one another, and have little private time or space. The needs of the relationship often come before the needs of the individuals, and it may be difficult for some couple relationships to accept people outside of the family in interpersonal relationships with others.

It is normal for couple relationships to shift back and forth between togetherness and separateness depending on what is happening in the relationship, with each member developing both dependence on the relationship and some independence from it.

## **How flexible is your relationship?**

Balancing flexibility between too much closeness and independence is important. Flexibility in a couple relationship reflects a capacity to change and adapt when necessary. For example, a relationship should not always have the same person as the leader but rather the relationship should focus on sharing responsibilities and negotiating rules.

Since change is inevitable, individual relationships must be open to change. At the same time, people want and need stability. Over time, couples must balance flexibility and stability. Flexibility is vital in times of crisis. In an inflexible relationship, rules rarely change, even to accommodate special situations and normal life changes. In these relationships, people rarely negotiate, roles are very stable, and rules are strictly adhered to. At the other extreme is an overly

flexible relationship. Excessive change is disruptive and leads to feelings of insecurity. When rules and roles frequently change, things do not get done, and the lack of order limits the productivity within the relationship.

Try these ideas for improving the balance between separateness and togetherness:

1. If you are not happy with the ***closeness*** in your relationship, talk with your partner about how you can achieve a more satisfying balance of separateness and togetherness. Make a list of things you like to do together and a list of things that you like to do by yourself or with other people.
2. If you are not happy with the ***flexibility*** of your relationship, discuss with your partner how you can achieve a more satisfying balance of stability and change. Make a list of things that you would like to remain the same in the relationship and new things that you would like to try.

### Perfectionism

In the past decade there has been an increase in research on perfectionism in a relationship. Perfectionism can be in different forms. It can be requiring the self to be perfect, other oriented (that is, expecting perfection in someone else), or expecting the relationship

to be perfect. Perfectionism is an unachievable goal for any of the three and is detrimental to developing closeness in a relationship. Unrealistic expectations for one's self, one's partner, or for the relationship have been implicated in the development of relationship problems (Haring, Hewitt, & Flett, 2003).

Remember that communication is the facilitating factor for negotiating and making changes in the relationship. Be aware that you often repeat patterns of communication learned from your family of origin.

### References

- Gottman, J., Ph.D., & Silver, N. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. Three Rivers Press.
- Halford, W. K., Markman, H. J., Kling, G. H., & Stanley, S. S. (2007). Best practice in couple relationship education. [Electronic version]. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy* 29, 385–406.
- Haring, M., Hewitt, P. L., & Flett, G. L. (2003). Perfectionism, coping, and quality of intimate relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 55, 143–158.
- Olson, D. H., & Olson, A. K. (2000). *Empowering couples*. Minnesota: Life Innovations Inc.

***It is normal for couple relationships to shift back and forth between togetherness and separateness depending on what is happening in the relationship.***

This fact sheet was originally published as part of the Family Tapestries Packet 2003.

## EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA.

Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension

TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868