

MINI REVIEW

Emotional and Physical Intimacy in Couples: Implications for Psychological and Physical Health

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Abstract

Introduction: Rising divorce rates globally represent a significant social concern. Among many reasons, the most important are poor communication, accounting for 38% of divorces, while sexual dissatisfaction represents a very high critical contributing factor.

Aim: We examined the role of emotional and physical intimacy in marital stability and the physical and psychological advantages of affectionate communication, physical touch, and intimacy.

Methods: Literature was reviewed to explore reasons for increasing divorce rates, the relationships between intimacy, communication, and successful marital relationships, and the psychological and physical benefits of couples' intimacy. The review also highlights how healthy sexual and emotional relationships contribute to physical well-being, stable mental health, and overall quality of life.

Results: Evidence shows strong beneficial health effects of intimate behaviors between partners, related to neurochemical responses such as oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins, with cortisol reduction. These effects help improve health, reduce cardiovascular disease risk, enhance immune function, improve mental health, reduce anxiety and depression, act as natural analgesia, and improve sleep quality.

Conclusion: Emotional and physical intimacy are essential for marital stability through measurable physiological mechanisms. Physical affection has effects similar to pharmacological interventions. Sexual intimacy significantly affects psychological, emotional, and physical health, contributing to long-term satisfaction and family stability.

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Introduction

Marriage has always been more than just a legal contract; it is an emotional, spiritual, and physical partnership that binds two people together. Across cultures and religions, it has been considered a sacred action, but at its core, marriage is about building a life together based on mutual understanding and companionship. When marriages dissolve, the damage radiates outward to the entire family unit and society, particularly affecting children. Divorce rates worldwide are climbing, raising the question: what keeps marriages together?

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy reports that roughly 20% of marriages worldwide end in divorce or separation [1]. Up to one-third of couples who remain married report dissatisfaction with their relationships [2].

Divorce rates in Arab states show an increasing trend. Among young couples in the Gulf, divorce rates have reached nearly 47%. Kuwait's divorce rate is 48%, the UAE's 40%, Saudi Arabia's 35%, and Iran's 30% [3]. Egypt shows particularly alarming statistics, with a marriage ending every 117 seconds [4]. These breakups also have economic implications; for instance, the UAE spends approximately \$220 million annually due to divorces [5,6].

While marriages fail for countless reasons, sexual dissatisfaction is among the most significant, and poor communication accounts for many divorces, a pattern recurring throughout the Gulf region [7]. This raises an essential question: what distinguishes thriving marriages from those that merely survive?

Marital longevity depends on psychological compatibility, good relations, proper communication, emotional connection, and physical intimacy—three interconnected dimensions that influence each other, creating either a virtuous cycle of satisfaction or a

downward spiral toward disconnection. This paper focuses on intimacy as the critical factor linking these dimensions.

Love Words

Exchanging affectionate words between spouses strengthens relationships and helps marriages endure [8]. In Kuwait, 92% of marital problems stem from poor communication, and 28% of divorces result from a lack of dialogue and understanding [9]. Loving language strengthens emotional bonds, fosters safety, manages conflicts, rekindles passion, and builds trust [10,11].

Affectionate conversation triggers several hormones that improve mood and physical health. Oxytocin promotes feelings of connection, confidence, and security [12]. Dopamine, activated during sexual desire and activity, mediates pleasure, motivation, reinforcement of intimacy behaviors, and emotional salience [13]. Endorphins act as natural pain relievers, while reduced cortisol lowers stress, blood pressure, cardiovascular risk, and improves mental health [14].

Touches and Hugs

Touch conveys feelings and love without words. In moments of conflict or sadness, a warm hug or gentle touch can soothe souls. Touch is essential across species; animals seek tactile reassurance, and even plants respond to mechanical stimuli for growth [15].

The skin, weighing ~5.4 kg [5-10% of body weight], requires stimulation to maintain vitality [16]. Touch, the first sense to develop, is the most potent form of nonverbal communication [17,18]. Touch transfers love, care, empathy, reassurance, and comfort, building emotional security, trust, and reducing tension [19,20].

Different touches convey distinct meanings: holding hands indicates intimacy, stroking the

head shows appreciation, placing a hand on the shoulder offers reassurance, patting conveys encouragement, and hugging conveys romantic love and affection [21].

C. Hugging and Cuddling

Hugging and cuddling can be more potent than words, sometimes more effective than sex, in maintaining marital strength [22]. Couples who hug regularly report greater happiness and more stable marriages. Physical affection elicits hormonal responses that sustain passion, reduce stress, and promote emotional stability:

- Oxytocin enhances attachment, trust, and pair bonding [12].
- Dopamine elicits euphoria, enhancing desire and intimacy [14].
- Serotonin stabilizes mood and promotes tranquility.
- Endorphins relieve stress and pain [23-25].

Cuddling improves sleep quality, increases relaxation and security, and supports cardiovascular health [26]. Couples should engage in hugging from early in the relationship to stimulate organs and increase feelings of love.

D. Kissing

Kissing bridges partners' hearts, souls, and emotions. Regular kissing strengthens closeness and has physical, psychological, and emotional benefits:

- Strengthens immunity and protects against cytomegalovirus [27].
- Improves dental health by increasing saliva [28].
- Reduces allergic reactions in atopic individuals [29].
- Lowers stress, increases well-being,

lowers blood pressure, improves circulation, alleviates menstrual cramps, and positively affects lipid profiles [30].

- Burns calories, exercises facial muscles, and improves complexion [31,32].
- Releases happiness hormones and strengthens marital satisfaction [33-35].

E. Physical Intimacy

Sexual intimacy is a complex interplay of psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, profoundly shaping the relationship. The Quran describes wives and husbands as "clothing" for one another, emphasizing inalienable intimacy [35].

Sexual activity strengthens the bond, improves family well-being, reduces conflict, and enhances mental and physical health [36-40]. It lowers blood pressure, cardiovascular risk, boosts immunity, improves sleep, and produces oxytocin [41]. Sexual activity also relieves migraines and headaches, burns calories, strengthens pelvic muscles, reduces prostate cancer risk, and delays facial aging [42-46].

Regular sexual activity reduces infidelity risk and divorce rates, building harmonious marriages while fulfilling natural desires [47,48].

Conclusion

Emotional and physical intimacy are fundamental pillars of marital stability, supported by neurochemical and physiological mechanisms. Affectionate communication, touch, kissing, hugging, and sexual intimacy produce measurable health outcomes, including cardiovascular protection, enhanced immunity, analgesia, and improved mental health. Given that poor communication and sexual dissatisfaction increase divorce rates, healthcare providers and counselors should recognize



that promoting intimacy is evidence-based for strengthening marriages. Islamic perspectives align with scientific evidence, reinforcing the importance of marital intimacy for thriving families and healthy societies.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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