Tools for Intimacy

are attempts at exposing tactics and approaches to ‘practicing’ intimacy, making them accessible in all senses of the word.
abstract

We as humans seek connections and closeness, and psychology enlightens us as to why that is. Our close relationships are essential to our health, well-being, personal happiness, and even personality development. (1) These are the bonds that hold together our minds on a small scale and hold together our society on a bigger scale. For it being such an essential part of our life, why is it that so many of us feel lost when it comes to building a strong bond with a person?

Closeness and intimacy can express themselves in many ways, and these expressions differ from person to person. We get taught by things we see in the media, on the streets, in society. Like holding hands, kisses, and the giving of gifts. Then there is what we see from our parents and our family. Our personal background shapes our idea of how intimacy is expressed. Per usual the majority of what we know on how to form strong relations is experience-based knowledge, either our own or that of the people close to us. But what about all the knowledge out there scientifically captured from the wild, don’t we have access to this? And if so why are we not engaging with it?

Building on the main psychological concepts of intimacy I aim to make a bridge between the academic world and the real world. (2) As a student, I have access to certain knowledge and as a designer, I can figure out how to communicate them. I am exploring how I can make intimacy visible, tangible, and with that, more readily available. I am doing this by designing artifacts that act between two people. These artifacts aim to facilitate intimate practices that inspire trust, closeness, and self-disclosure.

Tools for intimacy

are attempts at exposing tactics and approaches to ‘practicing’ intimacy, making them accessible in all senses of the word.
I am standing knee deep in relations I care deeply about with my family, my friends, my boyfriend. I consider them intimate and full of love, but that doesn’t mean they are always easy-flowing. Somehow it feels like it should be inherent inside your body to know how to treat the people close to you, but more often then not I feel confused. Confused what is expected of me, confused of what is okay for me to expect from them. Actions and words seem to have different meanings between us. When this magical thing of deep mutual understanding doesn’t just happen “like its supposed to” we might tell ourselves its just not meant to be. What if instead we see being close to another person as a continuous process of making, of building intimacy together. Have you ever though about relationships as something you can learn, as something that you need to practice in order to become good at them. People might tell you you need to work on your relationships. That’s great, I’m all in, but...exactly how am I supposed to do that?

I am tactile. I learn through doing, through my senses. I am human. Could you just give me some **FUCKING TOOLS** to deal with my life please.

**What if, objects could help us learn, be a bridge between..., guide us, make it less scary, less like swimming in the dark.**
three objects, three poems

LISTEN CLOSELY
what if i could hear you very closely
and you would whisper at me
would i feel close to you
would i tell you my secrets
my fears
would you be willing to listen

HOLD ME TIGHT
what if i could feel safe enough
to share how i feel
what if i could make you feel safe enough
to share what you feel

SWING WITH ME
what if we had a space to talk
outside of the home
where has happened so much
what if we went on a walk
hung out in the wild
gently swinging away
the worries of everyday life
and we talk
freely, calmly, playfully
what is intimacy?

Throughout this thesis work I have been in close interaction with the book: Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy, for it describes intimacy from different views and authors. Letting it guide me in finding out what it means to come close to each other. Some central reoccurring themes include: self-disclosure, interdependence, connectedness, and mutual responsiveness but more exact definitions and understandings differ between chapters.

Berscheid and Snyder talk about closeness as two people relying heavily on each other. Their lives have become so intertwined that they depend on each other in many if not all aspects of life. (3)

Mashek and Aron talk about closeness as “including another in the self,” they say that “in a close relationship each person includes the other to some extent, the other’s resources, perspectives, and identities.” (4) The closer you get to someone the more you feel that another’s time, knowledge, resources are something available to you. Their stuff is now yours and your stuff is theirs to use (freely).

Collins and Mashek use a very similar definition of intimacy. Collins uses the term intimacy “to refer to a special class of social interactions in which one partner expresses self-relevant feelings and information and, as a result of the other partner’s responsiveness and positive regard, the individual comes to feel understood, validated, and cared for.” (5) And Mashek describes intimacy as “a process of an escalating reciprocity of self-disclosure in which each individual feels his or her innermost self validated, understood, and cared for by the other.” (4)

The authors in the book seem to often try to make a clear distinction between intimacy and closeness. In everyday life however, the two terms seem a lot more interchangeable. I did not adopt the aforementioned definitions of closeness and intimacy but I have let them guide me to understand a wider spectrum of intimacy and closeness that was helpful when talking to people about closeness to their partner or loved one. I have no interest in devising my own definition of intimacy or following an existing one. I decided the place where my knowledge and understanding of intimacy should stem from primarily is in the real world, not the academic one. Because of its implied privacy and ambiguity, the term will always have different meanings in different situations and for different people. Through experimentation and research, I will not attempt to clarify intimacy but rather explore it in its glorious ambiguity.

“rather than defining intimacy, Fehr draws on people’s intuitive understanding to identify commonly held beliefs about the events that precipitate intimacy… After all, if the theoretical descriptions fail to map onto lay understandings, one could question whether the theories are actually describing the human experience.” (6)

Fehr used this approach of understanding intimacy in her attempt to make a prototype model of intimacy interactions in same-sex friendships. (7) With lay understandings, she means the human (everyday) interpretation and believes about intimacy. Not how the academic world describes intimacy but how we understand it.
intimacy between who?

At this point, the concept of intimacy started to become somewhat fluid to me. It became something universal as in something that you will always practice in some way, with someone, at some point in your life. But one thing is absolutely essential for there to be intimacy, and that is the connection between one and another person. From the Handbook of Close

ness and intimacy, the authors come to this conclusion: “closeness and intimacy (a) involve the self, and (b) are fundamentally interactional in nature.” (8)

Who those people are to each other can then take many different forms. Intimacy doesn’t need to be limited to romantic relationships or relationships of a sexual nature. Beverly Fehr for example writes about her study in which she investigates the process in which people come to understand a friendship as intimate. In the study, she mentions other studies going back as far as 1987 that points into a clear conclusion: “people expect and value intimacy in their friendships ... friendships are an important source of intimacy in people’s lives.” (9)

The parent/child relationship is another example in which a need for intimacy is clear. A child needs the parent to be close, physically, for the parent to comfort the child and make it feel safe and for the parent to be a safe base from which to explore the world. In academia this is called attachment theory. To have a well-functioning relationship between parent and child, the child needs to feel nurtured and cared for.

Adults experience the same thing in romantic relationships, only now the dependency is a two (or more)-way street. When their partner is committed to them, and deeply invested in their welfare it will feel good to become interdependent with them. It will give a sense of security to be emotionally and behaviourally interdependent. A romantic relationship is more pleasant and more satisfying when intimacy plays a bigger role in it.

“Specifically individuals who engage in self-disclosure, trust, and interdependence with their partners experience greater relationship satisfaction and longer relationship longevity” (11)

It feels appropriate to adopt a less boxed-in idea of intimacy and with whom we build it. There will always be things that connect us, that bind us in a quest for deeper understanding, feeling safe, loved, welcomed, but how we get there and with whom differs.

why get close?

We as humans seek connections and closeness, and psychology enlightens us as to why that is. Our close relationships are essential to our health, well-being, personal happiness, and even personality development. (1) As humans, we need to have effective emotional bonds with other people to be healthy and if we don’t have this we fall ill, both physically and emotionally. These are the bonds that hold together our minds on a small scale and hold together our society on a bigger scale.

Depending on each other, trusting each other, daring to get close to each other, and building strong relations, these are things that are being made difficult in a society so focused and dependent on individualism. It’s not hard to imagine that the level of individual independence could have some toxic side effects. In western Europe we see loneliness increasing on a large scale and depression and suicide rates going up. (2) As humans, we need to depend, to trust, to love. We feel most comfortable practicing these actions in our closest relationships, they are the spaces in which we learn to understand how we feel and learn to act upon those feelings appropriately (from the interviews).

social climate

I would talk to my friends: they become the people that offer experience, or from their friends’ friends, but here in western culture you don’t go meddling with other peoples business. (from the interviews)

The world of intimacy is a private one. It happens more or less behind closed doors. I can give my being a girlfriend experience as a clear example of this. When you get to the age where it is deemed appropriate to date, you can expect some basic advice from your parents, “If he hits you...if she is a slut...always wear a condom...” but none of these prepare you for the challenges of everyday life, of learning how to be and grow together. How are you supposed to be treated and what is okay and not okay? When you are 16 years young and jump fresh into a relationship somehow you are expected to know how to behave in that relationship, how to function, as an adult. Your friends are as clueless as you are and the little you do know trickles in from different sources. We get taught by things we see in the media, on the streets, in society. Like holding hands, kisses, and the giving of gifts. Then there is what we see from our parents and our family. Our personal background shapes our idea of how intimacy is expressed. Per usual the majority of what we know on how to form strong relations is experience-based knowledge, either our own or that of the people close to us. This experience-based, word-of-mouth knowledge comes with its own biases and misconceptions. Social shame is stopping us from looking into unconventional directions when it comes to practicing closeness and trust. When bringing them up in private interviews with people, those who hadn’t practised them became visibly uncomfortable. Directions like BDSM, spiritual practices, and self-help books fall out of the norms of coupling. These are things a “normal” couple does not do, has no interest in, or a need for. As a “normal” couple you are just supposed to figure it out on your own.
We can explore closeness and intimacy through design, through tools. This is a challenge. How does one reify abstract, emotion-based, intuition-based knowledges? What would tools look like that can help us strengthen our relationships, that can help us open up, teach vulnerability? Would I be able to make tools that offer some kind of support in navigating the dangerous, scary, and beautiful waters that we sail to make a stronger bond together, to come closer, emotionally, and physically? Can we make intimacy visible, tangible, and practicable? These are some questions that I am exploring by trying to design artifacts that act between two people. These artifacts aim to facilitate intimate practices that inspire trust, closeness, and self-disclosure.

Relationships are hard, regardless of our age, not just emotionally but also socially. So when trying to function in highly complex social structures, why are we expected to figure shit out on our own, when we needed at least 12 years of teaching just to be a functioning member in society? Functioning in a relationship is equally complicated, so why don’t we have access to the actual roadmaps already out there? The psychology books and academic research are at our fingertips, but hidden in academic jargon they become a student privilege. All the knowledge out there, scientifically captured from the wild, is something we don’t seem to be engaging with. I started wondering if I could not find a way to “translate” this knowledge into something more bite-sized by building on the main psychological concepts of intimacy. In doing so I attempt to make a bridge between the academic world and the real world. As a student, I have access to certain knowledge and as a designer, I can figure out how to communicate them.

When I think about intimacy in our daily lives, a word of beautiful duality keeps popping up; practice. At first glance, the meaning of the word might seem straightforward but practice can be understood in different ways. For example, we can consider intimacy as a practice. As something, you perform, habitually or regularly, almost like a ritual. We can also see intimacy as something to practice. As in a skill that you repeat or exercise in order to get better at. Like learning French.

Seeing intimacy as both a ritual and skill offers new ways of implementing its practice into our everyday life. To learn a skill, often you have some kind of tools to help you, be that training wheels or flipping cards for your French test. To perform a ritual, we humans naturally involve tools or objects that guide us in that ritual, hold meaning to us, and set a scene.

“... objects as behavioural cues for couple members, symbolic objects function in the mental world as tools do in the physical world.” (14)

This element of practice is an important reason as to why I refer to my physical explorations as tools. Closeness and intimacy seem to be process-driven phenomena, meaning they are not static, there is no final state, rather they are a continuous process of negotiation. (15) I could for example refer to my design-objects as guides, but they are not because this is not a journey. A relationship is hard work, it is commitment. It is very rare, if not unseen, for someone to take you by the hand and guide you step by step through the perfect relationship. A relationship is not a journey, it is a construction site. Building something that is never quite finished, occasionally torn down by storms or other natural disasters. As long as your foundation is strong and you are willing to put in the work, things will take shape again. By referring to my designs as tools, connotations are work, skill, and practice. Instead of the popular beliefs of “meant to be” and effortless mutual understanding.
sexual intimacy

A yet untouched interpretation of intimacy is sex, now after all of this I think it is clear that the main purpose of my tools will not be of a sexual nature, but that doesn’t mean that there is nothing to learn from how we deal with intimacy in sex as a society. The sex-toy industry is a crude example of materializing “intimacy” and has been the inspiration for me to go down the path of making design-objects. There is a very interesting dynamic between the sex toy and the body. You can see the toy as an extension of the self, acting upon the self or another, with the goal of “physical sexual pleasure”. Most sex toys act like this and are designed for this sole purpose, usually focusing on genitalia. Thus the perspective they offer us on sex is very unidimensional. The object guides our actions and perceptions of how we have sex and thus to a certain extent determines what sex can be.

The same way in which a sex toy can guide us in sex, newly found tools could guide us in practicing intimacy. Tools acting between people dictating the possibilities of actions or encouraging certain actions, and with that expanding on the ways of how we know to practice intimacy. We need sex toys to reflect intimacy not only lust, and we need objects strictly for intimacy like we do and have ones for sex.

I would like to get back to what I said earlier on about the lack of education on relationships outside of sexual relationships. In conversations with my collaborators, there was a general feeling that the knowledge on how to build strong relationships was something that should have been taught at schools, like sex-educa-tion is. In Sweden, there is a big organization called RSFU, which is the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education. They provide a curric-ulum for both grade schools and high schools and they also offer workshops mostly aimed at younger people. There is a curriculum on their website, called method-banken, (16) in which they touch upon relationships but mostly in relation to sex. Since relationships are indeed as hard as fucking, a platform like this seems like a good place to integrate teachings about inti-macy. If any Tools for Intimacy would be devel-oped properly, their sister-site, which is a shop for sex-related products, would be a provoking but fitting place for them to be sold.

“My sex life was, this far on in the relationship, more a reflection of the closeness and intimacy with my partner, than the rather one-dimensional type of sex I had before. It was sex based on lust, on wants and needs, not on connection, understanding and vulnerability. I realized that even though sex was heavily represented in design objects, this kind of true intimacy was not. We have tools to help us with sex, but not any kind of representation of intimacy that goes beyond romantic gestures as flowers and chocolates.”
accessibility

Accessibility has been one of the main themes throughout this making process. Intimacy and closeness are not something for the lucky few, nor is it a phenomenon to be solely studied. Intimacy is something that needs to be seen, talked about, and practiced. This is also why this thesis-work may not read especially academic, as I have tried to stay loyal to this concept of accessibility.

Crafting tools started from the idea to make building intimacy understandable, practicable, and with that accessible, but it should not stop there. The communication of these tools is equally important. What are the looks of these tools telling us in terms of how they are to be used, how they make us feel, and what their purpose is? Besides the interpretation of their looks, their affordance, the looks need to also be appealing. The tools need to be nicely crafted with intention so that people feel like they should value both the objects and the topic of intimacy. (17)

To get inspiration for how to transform the academic language from my research to easily understandable language I looked into some self-help books, since they are widely popular and seem to be able to capture the interest of the reader. The 5 Love Languages is one of those books, a rather successful one at that, but some fundamental things bother me about it, for example, the unnecessary references of a religious nature, a type of know-it-all attitude, gender-stereotyping and the setting of unrealistic expectations. (18) At times the set-up of his book series feels exploitative of human needs rather than helpful, with it having at least 19 spin-offs (I counted) of the same book and a carefully planned media campaign.

Yet, he actually reaches people and talks in a way that resonates with his audience. I should not let my biases get in the way of me learning from him. He knows the tricks of the trade, of approaching people in a way that makes them feel welcome, safe, not talked down on, understood, unlike the world of academia I have been submerged in.

The book itself also offers an interesting perspective in relation to my tools: it talks about 5 ways in which we communicate care to each other. These are: Words of affirmation, Quality time, Receiving gifts, Acts of service, and Physical touch. He refers to these acts as Love Languages.

In this light, the practices that my tools aim to facilitate can also be seen as a form of communication, making my tools talking tools. If gestures, touches, other things can be communicative, then my tools are something to support this kind of communication or create a situation in which a specific form of communication can flow.

**cuddling**

I am already in a bad place and now she wants my fucking attention as well, can’t she see I have nothing more to give right now. I can see he is in a bad place, so I will cuddle him, make him feel safe, so he knows he can talk to me.

interview

Reading about intimacy in a book is different from hearing someone’s personal experiences. As a result, I decided to hold interviews continuously throughout this process. The interviews are in-depth and one-on-one with me, in a space discussed beforehand between me and the person who I am interviewing. Somewhere where we both feel comfortable talking. The conversations are free-flowing and I ask questions relating to the stage I am at in my design-process and several core interests I am trying to relate to:

- How do you express closeness with your partner? How do you show it? How do you act it out?
- When / where do you feel emotionally and/or physically close to them?
- What does intimacy mean to you personally?
- What does intimacy mean with the person closest to you?
- Who is the person you feel most intimate with?

In order to get a more material understanding of intimacy in every-day life, I asked my participants to draw 3 things with me:

1. A scene in which you feel especially close to a loved one.
2. An object that represents or is linked to feelings of closeness to your loved one.
3. An action by you, your loved one, or both of you that made you feel close.
The topic is sensitive, my questions are sensitive and require a great deal of disclosure but also self-reflection as these are questions are not usually asked or talked about. The participants note this as well, commenting on the fact that it is tricky but also pleasant to talk and think about these things. Verbalization is hard but also makes one think about things in a different way. I notice actual enthusiasm from most of my collaborators being able to talk freely about these otherwise almost inappropriate topics.

I put effort into taking my participants with me in my design process. I considered the feel of the invitation, the way in which I asked questions, and the space in which I would hold the interviews. All of which needed to feel safe, comfortable, explorative, and personal. This is why the invitation was handwritten, my questions were open-ended and as simple as possible, and the space was chosen together with my participant.

I figured I would be able to go deeper into the topics and conversations with people if I would take the approach that whoever shows up is the right person. Because those who would eagerly participate would have more of a reason or willingness to disclose intimate details about their life with me. When surveying people about intimacy whoever participates and shares, whoever came to me with insights, is who I worked with, because they were actively involving themselves, almost like an active partnership rather than a target group. I would like to help the people who need it the most, but since I don’t know who that is, they had to decide for themselves to get involved or not, whether they believed they were the target group. Who but you can decide to want more intimacy in your life?

The interviews have allowed me to keep my feet on the ground throughout the process, as to not lose myself in my designing. The stories and experiences my collaborators have shared with me heavily affected the design-decisions made, but you will not hear them quoted, nor will I take the liberty of telling their stories that have inspired the objects, (unless specifically asked for permission) for the sake of their privacy and my respect towards their willingness to share with me. Based on these interviews and conversations I started designing tools.

**Note**

The second half of this design-project was performed during (what I hope will be) the peak of the coronavirus outbreak. Plans I had about group exercises had to be aborted. A form of collective making, of fostering creativity in the making of intimacy objects together was forced to remain in the world of speculation. The interviews continued, but with more care for distance. The drawing was no longer done together and some conversations got postponed in the hope of a change in the situation.
Radical ways of nurturing intimacy are already being explored in some areas of fetishes and for example in BDSM. This may sound a bit strange since most people know BDSM as being leathery, dominant, often violent, and don’t necessarily relate that to intimacy, but in reality, we can learn a lot from the BDSM community when it comes to dependence on, surrender to and reliance on another person. It is about how we can relate to each other and come closer to each other in a safe, explorative way.

The BDSM-community holds a more physical and perhaps more experimental approach to intimacy, but their values and techniques are built on the same principles books say intimacy is built on, principles of care, trust, and self-disclosure. As such BDSM-practice is an interesting take on it. The practice often has some bad connotations to outsiders, but the people that properly practice it see it as loving, nurturing, and intimate. It’s a constant negotiation between two people and it’s about the emotional connection that they share. Willing, consensual vulnerability, and creating trust lay at the heart of responsible BDSM-practice. This intimacy is allowing yourself to be vulnerable with someone that you know you can trust.

Joseph Magliano talks about the outcomes of a study that he was involved in about the states of consciousness during BDSM practices, in an article in Psychology Today (19):

“[In a BDSM scene, the person who is bound, receiving stimulation and/or following orders is called the bottom. The person providing the stimulation, orders, or structure is called the top. ... Both bottoms and tops reported increases in relationship closeness and decreases in psychological stress from before to after their scenes ... ” (20)
“Although intimate interactions often involve verbal self-disclosure, physical forms of intimacy (e.g., touching, hugging, sexual contact) provide an equally important channel through which individuals can express their true selves, and through which partners can communicate acceptance and caring.” (21)

accessibility
The “B” in “BDSM” stands for bondage. Bondage, in the BDSM subculture, is the practice of consensually tying, binding, or restraining a partner for erotic, aesthetic, or somatosensory stimulation. Even though derived from a term for slavery, Bondage does not need to be about possessing the other person. To many being bound by someone is an ultimate comfort, like being a swaddled baby or a tight hug.

Sometimes it’s not the action that is aggressive but our connotations to the object with which the action is performed. So instead of using rope to tie someone, I am exploring a more low-key form of bondage using for example a sweater.

Bondage doesn’t just need a kinder image, it also needs to be more practically accessible, if done incorrectly it can be quite dangerous.

I’m exploring how to apply the principles of bondage to a product or instructions that are easier to use, require less skill, and don’t hold the same negative connotations BDSM bondage holds. On these pages, you can see explorations of more accessible and less scary forms of bondage. These explorations are to be further developed and put to the test at a later stage.

HOLD ME TIGHT, accessibility

These are yet to be fired ceramic (stone-ware) bondage rings. The sizes differ from fitting to: wrist, elbow, ankles/legs.
listen closely

The “listen closely” is a bridge between body and mind. When we talk with the person close to us especially about things that might be hard, we don’t always do this in the best way. The listen closely offers a moment in your day that you can share intimately, making sure that the other person is available and willing and that it is a safe time to talk. A moment to reconnect, to hear and to be heard. The tool promotes closeness, in a quite literal sense of the word. Not only do you need to be physically close in order to use it, its main attraction is how intensely close the other person’s voice sounds, creating a different sense of distance. I tried to facilitate an intimate setting for self-disclosure, because of the medium you might talk in a different tone, listen more carefully, or feel like the conversation is more private. Only one person can talk at a time and naturally you keep your voice down. These are things that make it easier to not interrupt each other and to express yourself, about things that might be hard for you. It gives a space and time to hear and to be heard.

“Good communication starts with your closest relationship, friend, lover, family” (22)

“Self-disclosure is the primary route through which people develop intimacy in their relationships” (23)

phone call

The object is inspired by a chapter in Language and Desire that talks about how phone-conversations in romantic relationships are being conducted. It compares real phone-calls and explores the change in how we talk about and express romantic and sexual desire. In short: How do couples express love and desire, and what is the effect of the telephone on their talk?

The transformative effect that the phone has on the conversation inspired me to make use of this effect, recreate it in a different setting. Rather then the phone being a bit of a clumsy barrier for true expression I figured its qualities could be used to create a setting for a different form of conversation, a conversation more audibly intimate and stimulating. (24)

materials and design

The Listen Closely is a sketch. Its an object representing a continuous process of making, unfinished. Its an object open for adaption and experimentation, low-tech and low-key. The benefit of something not perfectly “designed” is that you can feel comfortable adding to or changing it. (25) It is meant to be something that anyone can put their stamp on, and no two of them will be the same.

LISTEN CLOSELY, phone call, materials and design
The magic of this object lies in two things. First is the vacuum cleaner tube, an everyday object which gives an amazingly close and intense sound experience, and second is the way in which the tube is handled. The hiding/softening of the look and feel of the tube with other materials makes you approach it with more care and sensitivity. If I were to present just a vacuum cleaner tube I can expect some funny faces, but by treating the tube with a new exterior it becomes a rather special object, something that communicates a different purpose, something of importance.

When working on the communication and design of this tool I speculated for it to be “sold” on the RSFU website amidst their sex-toy collection. (16) The product would be free. Instead of a “pay here” button, there would be a “download PDF here” button. The PDF holds an instruction manual containing:

1. Guidelines in how to make the tool.
2. Guidelines in how to use the tool.
3. Notes of advice as to where to scavenge for the materials.

You can see the instruction manual to the right.

What happens when you feel the whispers of a person dear to you tingling in your ear? Would you feel comfortable or not? Think about who you would like to use this tool with. Your partner, a parent, a friend? Who would you like to listen to and be heard by? Maybe you can make the tool together and think about what an intimate conversation means to you. Pick up your materials thoughtfully. Consider the touch, the texture and the smell. What do these things mean to you? Every listening tool will have its own feel, and character. A tool that is unique and dedicated to the relation the two of you have to each other. And then when you are finished, you can place it on your ear and on your mouth. You can relax and softly inform each other of your innermost thoughts.

Tools needed
- A simple tool including:
  - A simple tool
  - A simple tool
  - A simple tool

Step-by-step guide
1. Cut out the desired shape from nylon or other material. Outline let the turh be clear and make sure there is no need for perfection here.
2. Insert the tool into the skin, then roll the tube and pin it in place. Notice how the tool will have its own feel and character.
3. Place it on your ear and listen. You can relax and let your partner know your innermost thoughts.

The “listen closely” was borrowed to two couples. It also included a letter, in which some instructions were written.
swim with me

Intimacy itself is comfortable, but talking about intimacy or building intimacy may not be. This is why it is important to have a setting and a space in which you can feel free in your expression. Home is not always a comfortable space to talk, it is filled with memories. Good and bad. Now there is a tire-swing hanging on the edge of campus, a place for two people to hang out together outside of the daily pressures of life. The surrounding nature has a calming effect and the swing gives your body something to do while your minds wander and your conversations flow.

public and private

Working on this tool I really tried to lay and push the boundaries of my project. Exploring an even broader sense of intimacy. Questioning to what extend intimacy is bound to space and setting. I discussed with my collaborators:

- Where do we feel the safest into exploring intimacy?
- Where do we feel most intimate with our partner?

There were some double feelings about these questions, but everybody made a clear distinction between public space and private space. They said it was possible in both spaces to experience intimacy but a different type of connection was felt and the intimacies were expressed differently. They did however all agree that the safest space for exploring intimacy and experimenting with it was the home, just the two of them.

I decided to experiment with a space outside, accessible from where people lived but still with a hidden sense of privacy, a nice little retreat. A space that is inviting and where nature calms you down and relaxes you. I made
a swing hanging underneath a birdwatching tower close to student buildings, and added a message-box with some basic instructions on the side.

I had problems expressing to the user what the intentions of this swing were, in both the swings visual design as its written explanation. The drawing on the tires were the ones made together with my collaborators. The aesthetics of the swing are more inspired by guerrilla-style modifications to public spaces (26) and I think this threw people off. It could have been a different experience if I had played with the drawings of what my collaborators made in a different way. The instructions were rather poetic and open-ended and to some respondents, too abstract. The space I had created could almost be called neutral.

But then something beautiful happened, people started to give the swings purpose of their own. The swing in combination with the message-box became a place both for romance, for leaving messages for expressing love, for seeing the sunrise with friends, for saying goodbye, and for bringing the kids to connect. I would call that an intimate space, an outside space where all kinds of intimacies are possible, an open space for anyone wandering in, a space to be vulnerable with each other.
Swing with me.

"To understand, agree with, or support someone or something."

This is a fine swing for two. Home is not always a comfortable space to talk, it is filled with memories. Good and bad. This swing, hanging on the edge of campus, is a piece for you and your swinging buddy to hang out together outside of the daily pressures of life. For example after a long day of quarantine. The nature has a calming effect and the swing gives your body something to do while your mind roams and your conversations flow.

How to use it
Take this time to laugh together, to have fun. This is a neutral space without negative energy, allow yourself to be distracted and to be in the moment.

Be patient, listen to each other, take interest. The setting and the movements of the swing may make it easier for you to talk about things, and process new information.

Reactions
This swing is part of my bachelor thesis, and it would help me a lot if you could leave me a note in the comment box, or send me an email via nynkebrandon@gmail.com. And if you wouldn’t mind answering a few questions after having swung, please leave your contact info in the box, or send it to me via email. Thank you so much!

Disclaimer
This is an explorative design object still in the making. The instructions and object have not been reviewed by a psychologist or psychiatrist neither has the swing been approved by authorities. The following of the instructions is at your own risk.

I am writing this because of your swing project.

I found the swing, because I was going to the wooden look-out stage. I often go into the forest when I need to be by myself. I want to just hang up a swing, when I want to be away. I think the instructions are not unique (there are many) and it is easy. Swing is really connected to my childhood, because I had a lot of swings in my garden when I was a child. I was really amazed that someone had the idea to install a swing in that place. Anyway, I came back to the place where I was because I had a lot of memories there. And it was a good experience to see how people reacted to it.

I wanted to tell you about my experiences, because it might be helpful for your thesis and I wanted to thank you. It is really nice design and I appreciate it a lot. It would be so nice if you could leave it there for a longer time, because I need it.

So, thank you for good work with your thesis.

Best,

[Signature]
conclusion

We can start to understand intimacy as an unpredictable force of human nature. We are universally looking for intimacy in all types of relationships but a definition is hard to obtain. Our experiences of “intimate moments” differ from person to person and are affected by many external factors. Because of these differences, I held interviews continuously to keep my understanding of intimacy grounded in the real world instead of the world of academia.

At my ripe 21 years of age, I feel still very unequipped talking about these topics and maybe more importantly, equally unequipped in practising what I preach. Relationships are hard, we will all struggle with them in some way. The majority of what we know on how to form strong relations is experience-based knowledge, either our own or that of the people close to us. Inevitably our experiences differ from each other resulting in different ways of interpreting and expressing intimacy. This would not be so much of a problem if we were taught how to deal with those differences and find common ground. In academia closeness and intimacy have been carefully mapped and researched. In this thesis work, I explored ways in which we can hack academia and provide access to the insights it provides us with. Things that might seem impossible now, can turn out to be easy once you have the right tools in your arsenal to approach the problem with.

There are three “tools” I designed and use as examples in this thesis work. The tools are artifacts that aim to facilitate intimate practices that inspire trust, closeness and self-disclosure. They explore different aspects of intimacy. A swing set explores intimacies in relation to space and the difference between private and public. A talking tube explores the transformative effect of sound manipulation on our expressions of intimacy. And gentle bondage techniques and objects explore what there is to learn from BDSM related practices.

The tools made during this project are attempts at exposing tactics and approaches to practicing intimacy, making them accessible in all senses of the word. The tools are not finished products. They are directions, which we can consider if we want to learn or teach practicing Intimacy. Practice being both the performance of a ritual and the repetition of skill in order to improve.

We try.

endnotes

14. ibid, page 297


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bibliography

Ambler, Lee; Klement, Loewald; Comber; Hanson, B. Cutler, N. Cutler and Sagarin. "consensual BDSM Facilitates Role-Specific Altered States of Consciousness: A Preliminary Study." Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice 4, no. 1 (September 2016)


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This thesis work was exhibited on the website: https://2020.designportfoliolnu.se/student-work/tools-for-intimacy/ Due to the corona virus a physical exhibition had to be transformed to a digital one. To the right you can see a still from the websitepage.

### Design research - "Tools for Intimacy"

Somewhere in the article it is stated that "tools for intimacy" could be a way to build intimacy. Actions and words seem to have different meanings between us. When this magical thing of deep mutual understanding doesn't just happen "like it's supposed to" we might tell ourselves it's just not meant to be. What if instead, we see being close to another person as a continuous process of making, of building intimacy together.

What if we see intimacy as a **process**. As something you perform, habitually or regularly, almost like a ritual. We can also see intimacy as something to **practice**. As in a skill that you repeat or exercise in order to get better at. Like learning French. To learn a skill, often you have some kind of tools to help you, be that training wheels or flipping cards for your French test. To perform a ritual, we humans naturally involve tools or objects that guide us in that ritual, hold meaning to us and set a scene. By referring to my designs as tools, conversations are work, skill and practice. Instead of the popular beliefs of “meant to be”, and effortless mutual understanding.

“Listen closely” is an example of how a tool for intimacy could work. It tackles communication, self-disclosure, and closeness. When we talk with the person close to us we don’t always do this in the best way. This tool offers a moment in your day that you can share intimately, making sure that the other person is available and that it is a safe time to talk. A moment to reconnect, to hear, and to be heard.

To look at the image on the left: click on it. To come back here press the "return to previous page" button.

### Instruction manual

The listen closely is a sketch. Its an object open for adaption and experimentation, low tech, and low key. The benefit of something not perfectly "designed" is that you can feel comfortable adding to or changing it. It is meant to be something that anyone can put their stamp on, and no two of them will be the same. With its low-cost materials and simple DIY instructions it is easily made as your own home. The manual shows the process of making in 4 easy steps. You do not need to be a crafty person to make this. There is of course an unillustrated step 5 and that is: Put it to use!

Click on the moving images below to enlarge them and read their caption.

Click here for a printable pdf of the instruction manual.

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**We are building our relations,**
**it’s a labour with no end.**
**We are building our relations,**
**but our hands are bare and weak.**
**We are building our relations,**
**give me tools, so that our resources may be strong.**