

## **DIFFERENCES IN SEXUAL DESIRE**

A common complaint in relationships is that one partner wants sex more than the other. Many people are able to reach some kind of compromise and make a satisfactory sexual adjustment. For others, however, the differences in desire continue to be a troublesome aspect of their relationship and can often cause or lead to other distresses. It is practically impossible to state what "normal" desire is. We each have different appetites for sex, just as we do for food. Individuals have different needs for intimacy and for romance as well as for sexual contact. Differences in sexual desire can sometimes be serious in that anger and resentment can occur and carry over into other areas of a couple's life.

For many couples, the early stage of a relationship contains a lot of sexual novelty and discovery. Once the "honeymoon comes to an end, couples are forced, to confront each other on a wide variety of issues. The novelty wears off and people discover imperfections in each other as well as annoying habits and attitudes. The media, particularly television and men's and women's magazines, tend to present relationships in an extremely unrealistic manner. Conflict is rarely seen in any form that is comparable to people's personal experiences, and it is easy for disappointment and unhappiness to result when problems occur for which there is no effective resolution. It is not surprising that disappointment, disillusionment, and unhappiness often end up in a lack of desire for sex with one's partner. Imbalance of power in a relationship can also have a negative influence on sexual functioning. If one partner has all the power or makes all the decisions, the other partner may feel that the only power he or she has is not to want sex. One of the biggest stumbling blocks to a close sexual relationship is a lack of trust. People have to be willing to become vulnerable with one another in order to enjoy sex together.

For other individuals, low desire has nothing to do with the partner in particular, but is just a general state. Perhaps the individual has had some negative experiences or had been brought up believing that sex or pleasure in general was wrong. Others who just have a lower appetite for sex are perfectly happy when they do have sex, but just do not want it very often. While this is not a problem for them, it may become a problem for their partner.

## **SEXUAL DESIRE AND HEALTH**

While your sexual desire may have nothing at all to do with the state of your health, there are some cases where health does affect sexual desire. Particularly if your desire has dropped off after a period of higher desire, and if you cannot attribute this to any significant changes in your life, you should consider a full physical check-up to determine if the change in desire is due to physical factors. Some health conditions and some medications have a detrimental effect on sexual desire. Depression can also cause a drop in desire, as can extreme fatigue or tension. Endocrinological problems, such as changes in the flow of particular hormones, can also affect your sexual desire.

It is important to tell your doctor about the change in your desire so that you can be checked out for any possible medical problems.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE THE HIGHER DESIRE PARTNER**

The suggestions and questions below are **not** meant to imply that you are at **fault** for your partner's more infrequent desire for sex. In fact, blame is not the issue at all. Rather, it is important for both partners to cooperate in finding ways to make the overall and sexual relationship more comfortable and enjoyable. Some people are able to leave their individual and relationship problems outside the bedroom door, while others cannot do this, and find it difficult or impossible to want and enjoy sex if things are not going well in other aspects of their lives. Some people can use sex to make up after a fight, while others can only enjoy sex if they are feeling good about themselves and their partner. Ask yourself the following questions. Do I let my partner know that I care for him or her at times other than when I want sex? Am I affectionate to my partner in a nonsexual way? Do I give my partner a hug, kiss, and hold his or her hand without expecting to have sex follow? Do I share my thoughts and feelings with my partner? Do I help my partner feel comfortable and safe with me so that he or she knows that it is okay to relax and enjoy things with me? If your answer to any of these questions is no, you may want to consider doing whatever you can to change the answer to yes in order to help your partner feel more comfortable and more intimate with you.

Choose the times that you initiate sex carefully. If either of you is excessively tired or rushed, it is difficult for sex to be a relaxed and enjoyable experience. It is important to make time for the two of you to be together for other activities as well as for sex, and for your sexual time to be relaxed, warm, romantic, and intimate. You might consider preparing for sex by putting on some soft music, lighting candles, or some other romantic gesture that will show your partner that you are truly thinking about and planning your time together.

Communication during sex is also extremely important. Not only is it important for you to communicate what you like to your partner, but it is important to try to get him or her to tell you what feels good. Be a considerate, gentle lover. When sex is placed within the context of a romantic setting, is leisurely, and has some imagination and variety associated with it, it often becomes more enjoyable for both partners. Be sure to focus on your partner's pleasure as well as your own. Frequently, people are so concerned with having an orgasm that they do not take the time to enjoy and experience the other activities that precede the orgasm. It is something like being on a train and spending so much time thinking about when and how you will arrive at your destination, you forget to look out of the window and enjoy the scenery along the way. How you like to be touched and stimulated does not necessarily coincide with your partner's desires. Be sure to find out what gives him or her the most pleasure and to spend at least some of your sexual time together doing those activities.

If your partner has a lot of worries and stresses in other areas of his or her life, it is often difficult to take time to relax and enjoy sex. You can help by providing an environment

that is calm and relaxing and letting your partner know that your time together can be a haven from the stresses of everyday life. Finally, if your relationship is generally poor, if you cannot communicate, and if you frequently argue and disagree about important issues, it may be necessary to alleviate some of these problems before your partner can feel confident and relaxed enough to be sexual with you.

### **WHAT YOU CAN DO IF YOU ARE THE LOWER DESIRE PARTNER**

The suggestions below do **not** imply that there is anything **wrong** with you because you have less sexual desire than your partner does. However, these suggestions may be helpful if you would like to resolve your different needs, have sex more frequently, or want to increase your desire. An important first step is to spend some time thinking about how you really feel about sex in general, and sex with your partner in particular. Is sex a neutral experience that you can take or leave, or is it something that you find aversive? Do you find that you rarely think about or desire sex at all, or is your low desire specific to your partner?

If most of your difficulties are partner specific, then give some thought to what would make sex better and more enjoyable with your partner. Communication is the key to any good relationship in general, and to good sex in particular. Tell your partner what you want, what you would like, what would make sex more relaxing and more enjoyable for you. Sex is a lot more than intercourse and orgasm, and if you and your partner can communicate and share other sexual activities and other ways of being intimate, you may find your desire increasing. Be assertive. Do not use sex as a way of expressing your anger, but make sure to express your feelings to your partner more directly. If you have difficulty trusting and being intimate with your partner, tell him or her, and see if you both can work out ways of increasing trust and intimacy. Ask for what you want sexually. If you would like your partner to be a better lover, you must help this come about by giving your partner feedback on what feels good and what is most arousing. It is important to focus on the positive rather than on the negative when engaging in sexual activity. It is easy to focus on the unattractive aspects of your partner. This can be reversed. For example, rather than focusing on the "pimple on his or her back," focus instead on "his or her beautiful blue eyes." The choice of what you focus on will help determine the amount of sexual desire you have.

You may find that your desire is low in general, and not directly related to sex with your partner. There are several questions you can ask yourself to help explore the role of sex in your life. Are you under a good deal of stress? Are you willing and able to take time for yourself and look towards your own needs and pleasures? Are there things in your life that are making you feel depressed? When you do engage in sexual activity, do you enjoy it and wonder why you do not pursue it more often, but yet find yourself reluctant to initiate or accept your partner's initiation? Life stress and depression are frequently incompatible with sexual desire, and if these are problems for you, it may explain why your desire is lower than your partner's. Taking time for yourself, your own pleasure, and your own sensations, is an important component in the enjoyment of sexual activity. Sometimes, "old messages" intrude and keep us from enjoying our own sexuality. For

example, if you learned that sex was wrong, dirty, or immoral when you were young, it may be difficult for you to give up the feelings associated with those messages, even though you no longer hold those beliefs. Reminding yourself that those "old messages" need not currently influence your life can often have a strong impact on changing your sexual desire. Sex should be fun, and not a chore. Try giving yourself permission to have fun and to play, and then start treating sex as a playful activity. You may find this makes a difference.

### **WHAT YOU BOTH CAN DO**

It is unfair to assume that the lower desire partner has to make all the changes in the relationship. Compromise, with both partners making changes, is necessary to make any relationship work. Frequently, it seems as if the higher desire partner wants sex all the time. However, in many cases, if sex occurred more frequently, the higher desire partner would lower the number of requests. The actual frequency of sex will determine who has to make the most changes. Clearly, if one partner wants sex once a week while the other wants it every day, it should be possible to compromise on two or three times per week. However, if one partner wants sex once a week and the other partner wants it once a year, compromise may be more difficult.

Working together, a couple can increase their communication and try to resolve other issues in their relationship so that sexual activity is not used to act out power struggles, control, and anger. Frequently, who initiates sex and how sex is initiated and refused is an issue for many couples. If you tend to turn down sex because of the way it is initiated, give your partner feedback. When refusing an invitation for sex, it is important to let your partner know that it is not a rejection of him or her, but simply a statement about how you are feeling at the time. Making another date for sexual activity or making a point to initiate sex yourself at some later time will often prevent feelings of anger and frustration that go along with being turned down. Communication and compromise can go a long way towards improving a couple's sexual relationship. It is important to focus on what you can do to make things better, rather than on what your partner should do.

Sometimes sexual desire disappears because of other issues in the relationship. For example, if there is conflict over having or not having children, or over contraception, sexual desire may decrease. Again, if these issues can be discussed openly and compromise reached, sexual desire may return.

### **WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP**

If you have tried the suggestions above, but have found that they have not helped resolve the problems caused by the differences in your sexual desire, then it may be necessary for you to have professional assistance. If your relationship is so distressed that communication is impossible, you may need professional help to improve your overall relationship before your sexual relationship can improve. If you have a long history of negative attitudes towards sex or if you find that, rather than a difference of sexual appetite, one partner has strong negative reactions or an aversion to sex, then

professional help is recommended to find out why this aversion exists and to help overcome it. Professional help is most beneficial if both partners agree to attend the therapy sessions. It will not be very beneficial unless both partners are motivated to make changes. You certainly may wish to have a consultation with a therapist to discuss the problem and to see what he or she can offer. Based on this consultation, you can make a decision about pursuing or not pursuing a course of psychotherapy.

This information was prepared by Jerry M. Friedman, Ph.D. Reproduced from: *Innovations in Clinical Practice: A Source Book* (Vol. ) pp. 464-467, by L. VandeCreek and T.L.Jackson (Eds.), Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press. Copyright © 1999 by the Professional Resource Exchange, Inc., P.O. Box 15560, Sarasota, FL 34277-1560.