



Nurturing Desire

to love & be loved

by Scott Johansen, PhD & Tamsen Thorpe, PhD



SOME LIKE IT HOT

In our practice as relationship therapists, we frequently hear cries for greater connection, understanding and harmony from the couples with whom we work. Modern couples are challenged by financial, career, parenting and intimacy issues. In our column we will share the secrets to conquering these challenges so you can enjoy a close relationship with your partner.

How hot is your relationship these days? If you're thinking, "what heat?" then you and your partner may be in that place called "mature love". It's that more emotionally stable and enduring place that provides comfort and security and is an evolutionary stage for most relationships.

Sexual desire is naturally influenced by the developmental stage of your relationships. In the U.S., intimate relationships typically start with romantic love, a period glamorized in Hollywood movies that is characterized by a powerful sexual attraction, fiery involvement and the heights of ecstasy. The deep joy and satisfaction of the sexual chemistry is longed for when apart and consuming when together. But the heat can disappear over time, frequently just after the couple begins to live together, leaving the couple wondering where it went. Frustration sets in when sexual needs are unmet, passion wanes, and a longing for "the way it used to be" takes over. As relationship therapists, we often see couples where one person accepts their low desire and has no inclination to change. This creates a problem because of the unmet needs of the other partner. Highly motivated partners in the romantic stage of love find it easy to actively reengage; yet those same partners may find themselves at a loss when their relationship matures.

But what happens when one partner yearns for the days of candle-lit dinners and sexy perfume? Partners interested in reviving the romantic love and reigniting the old flame may find themselves disappointed when their efforts are not reciprocated. Difficulty reigniting the flames of passion may cause some to wonder if their relationship will continue.

ABOUT SEXUAL DESIRE

So what's normal? Every day sex is not enough for some people, and once a month is more than enough for others. While some couples can feel close without sexual relations, most couples were initially brought together by sexual chemistry. Being able to express and fulfill their sexual desire together can be an important

part of a long-term relationship.

Sex can become a critical issue for many couples. Mismatched libidos can create conflicts that spin out of control leading to affairs, misunderstandings and serious emotional injury. The partner with a less than satisfying sex life often feels neglected and rejected. The partner with the lower libido feels pressured and perhaps even objectified.

Is low desire a symptom of underlying problems or the root cause of other problems? That depends. Desire is influenced by a number of factors. The causes may be physical due to stress, poor health, medication side effects or obesity. The problem may also lie in hormonal shifts associated with mid-life changes or may simply (or, not so simply) boil down to underlying trust and emotional issues. Either way, unmet sexual needs can be a painful topic leaving couples befuddled and confused as to how they've arrived at their current state.

Typical Sexual Desire Conflicts

- Frequency of sexual conflict
- Kind of contact (conventional, oral, etc.)
- Physical dysfunction (timing, arousal, pain)
- Avoiding opportunities for sex (watching TV, computer)
- Physical appearance (over weight, obesity)
- Avoidance of couple time (preoccupation with children's needs)
- Use of alcohol or work to avoid intimacy
- Coerced sexual involvement
- Attack-counter-attack argument cycle
- Failure to voice sexual needs
- Resentment over past events
- Blaming problems on extended family
- Anger over spouse's insensitivity

WE'VE GOT ISSUES

There are several patterns a dysfunctional sexual relationship may follow. An understanding of these patterns can help couples pinpoint the areas in their relationship that need work.

Inhibited desire by one partner is the most common pattern we see. While functional sex does not always enhance desire, dysfunctional sex can utterly destroy it by linking powerful fears and anger to the anticipation of sex. Generally, it's the partner with the unmet sexual needs who initiates couples therapy and by the time they do, it's usually been an issue for quite some time. Failure to address the issues and solve problems only leads to further discord.

Holding back on sex because of anger about a non-sexual conflict is also a common pattern. This is often the case when a partner sees no other way to take a stand or influence the relationship. But withholding sex frequently complicates things by stimulating anger and resentment for the partner whose sexual needs and desires are not met.

Infidelity is a third familiar pattern. It is usually the result of a prolonged period of poor sexual and/or emotional intimacy and is one of the most painful results of a marriage in poor sexual health. But infidelity can be overcome, particularly for couples who seek guidance from skilled professionals.

And then there are relationships that never had any heat. These marriages are formed primarily for social appearances or financial considerations such as when a gay person marries into a heterosexual relationship due to social pressures. In other cases, sexual or relationship trauma, such as childhood sexual abuse, may also prompt withholding.

SO WHAT DO WE DO?

If your relationship has lost its fire and you're wondering if it can be revived, read on. The vast majority of relationships can be reignited by reconnecting with each other's feelings and desires. First, recognize your turn offs and ask your partner about theirs. The following list of common turn offs may help prompt conversation with your partner:

- Resentment over prior sexual incidents
- Feeling uncomfortable about initiating sex
- Avoidance of discussing sexual topics
- Secrecy or shyness about getting turned on
- Fear of pregnancy
- Feeling unattractive
- Unresolved sexual trauma
- Avoiding intimacy through over scheduling
- Feelings of inadequacy (i.e., too old, dependent, overweight)
- Blaming spouse for withdrawing
- Fear that marriage will be torn apart if sexual desire is raised as an issue
- Easier to maintain status quo by maintaining emotional and sexual distance
- Embarrassment over sexual difficulties
- Feeling rejected



Sometimes overcoming the problem may seem insurmountable. But if you are honest with yourself and with your partner, you may find that most of the turn offs are strategies that you use to avoid sexual failures. The anxiety associated with the fear of sexual failure may actually drive you to continue poisoning your own sexual desire.

Good sex takes two. Partners need to act, think, talk and feel like an intimate team. Keeping the heat in your relationship is an active process. By reinforcing and respecting the sexual needs and desires of one another you'll be able to rebuild a bond of intimacy. You can support prolonged desire by focusing on positive events within your relationship. Try doing the following:

- Tell your partner that you love him/her
- Suggest doing something together that you both enjoy
- Try hard to actively listen to your partner so they feel understood and appreciated
- Do small things that communicate to your partner that they are wanted
- Do something special for your partner
- Compliment your partner on something they value
- Say or do something to make your partner laugh.
- Speak with your partner about making your relationship more intimate
- Plan a future joint event like a special vacation or house project
- Schedule regular date nights when you talk about your relationship
- Reach out and touch your partner, mutual massage can be healing.

Some couples can resolve low desire challenges without professional help, but problems that go beyond six months become firmly entrenched. Also, dysfunctional sexual relationships often involve one or both partners avoiding sex, making it difficult because both partners need to make big changes at the same time. But you and your partner can make meaningful changes simply by sharing a desire to improve your relationship and agreeing to an action plan that will nurture your desire.

The purpose of this column is to provide you with strategies to "nurture the desire" in your intimate relationship. Our hope is that the information in this column will deepen the love in your relationship.

If you have any questions about this topic or would like to schedule a consultation, contact Tamsen Thorpe, PhD, (licensed psychologist) or Scott Johansen, PhD (relationship mediator) at 973-425-8868. or www.directions-clc.com.

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If you have always wanted to be reincarnated as a writer, by all means email me! Unleash your hidden talents with your own column and share your views/expertise with the local community! Denise@hometownquarterly.com