

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

If Husband Says 'No,' It's Not Always About Sex



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING

Dear Dr. Scantling: I'm 56 years old and I've been married for 27 years. My problem is that my 59-year-old husband is never interested in sex. I've tried everything, but I'm tired of always being the initiator. We have sex maybe twice a year and it's like "let's get this over." I'd give anything to feel wanted by this man.

— Kristine, Avon

Does Kristine's story sound familiar? After nearly 30 years as a sex therapist, I've treated thousands of couples with similar complaints. Although this notion of "men who say no" is becoming more popularized, it's still not considered socially "cool" for men to admit to a flagging sexual desire.

Can you imagine this conversation between a group of male golf-buddies at the 19th hole: "My wife is only interested in one thing," one remarks. "All she ever wants to do is get me in the sack. She treats me like I'm a sex object!" How much empathy do you think this guy would get from his pals (after they stopped laughing, of course)?

Women who live with low-sexual-desire men tell me they feel painfully alone and unlovable. Like a freak of nature. Listening to friend's stories about husbands who chase them around the kitchen for sex makes them jealous. "What's wrong with me?" they wonder. Tired of their own nagging, complaining and initiating, they may even consider having an affair. But they don't want an affair. They want the man they married to "want them."

But what happened to that man? How did the passionate lover who couldn't wait to rip your clothes off when your first met, become the glassy-eyed guy on the sofa with the remote who wouldn't notice you if you walked by stark naked?

It didn't happen overnight, even if you think it did. Male partners are equally sensitive; they may just express themselves differently. Most men need to be wanted and affirmed as much as any woman. When they discover they can't do their job of satisfying their partner as well as they'd like (or should) they may withdraw.

Embarrassment, humiliation and self-blame are just some of the reasons men disconnect from their engines of desire. Some find that choosing the immediate gratification and ease of porn-stimulated sexual release is less complicated than having partner sex: no demands and no expectations and no criticisms (self or other) to erode the relationship's pleasure.

Sexual desire is a sensitive barometer. It's composed of a host of interacting factors, physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational. Intimate relationships usually start out fairly "hot," but sooner or later, life gets in the way: pregnancy or infertility, financial stresses, multiple job moves, family responsibilities, medications, fluctuating hormones, illness, you name it.

When one partner is hot and one is not, the most important advice I can give you to bridge your desire discrepancy is for each of you to take a momentary step backward. Stop the action. Reflect on how your current behaviors contribute to the maintenance of your shared problem and ask yourselves if this is the outcome you're seeking.

Instead of blaming him or her, find a more loving way to get your intimacy back on track. If you haven't already done so, see a doctor to evaluate any physical or emotional problems. If you're holding on to some long-standing resentment — maybe he won't forgive you for an affair you had 10 years ago, or she's still holding a grudge against you for being out of town during the birth of your first child — dump the baggage.

When partners say they want more sex, we assume they want intercourse. But what they may long for is a different kind of connection. For men with performance concerns, it's often easier to forget the whole thing than to start something you can't finish. If feeling wanted, appreciated, and loved is what we desire, surely we can start some of that.

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