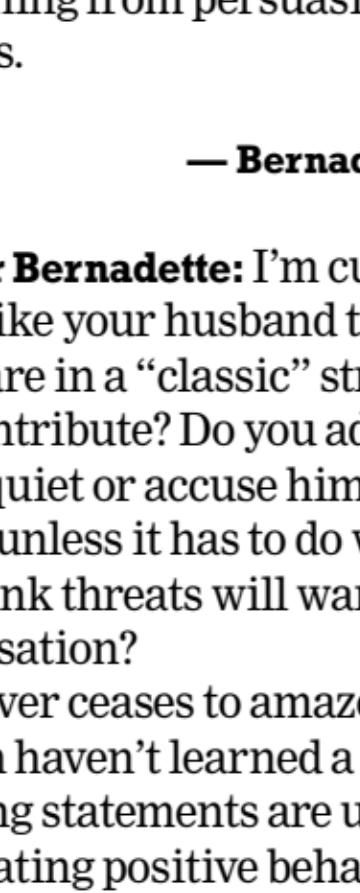


INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

Struggles To Talk Openly And Honestly



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING

Dear Dr. Scantling: Therapists often suggest that couples share their feelings, but every time I try to talk to my husband, he just clams up or gives me one-word answers. He's never the one to initiate conversations, unless it's about why we don't have sex more often. I feel like we're in a classic man-woman power struggle. How do I get some intimate communication going in our relationship and get him to open up to me? I've tried everything from persuasion to threats. Thanks.

— Bernadette, New Hartford

Dear Bernadette: I'm curious about what you'd like your husband to open up about?

If you are in a "classic" struggle, how do you contribute? Do you admonish him for being quiet or accuse him of never wanting to talk unless it has to do with sex?

How do you think threats will warm him up to conversation?

It never ceases to amaze me that so many women haven't learned a simple fact.

Blaming statements are useless in stimulating positive behavioral change.

When we act like nagging critical mothers,

why are we surprised when all we get in return is anger, resentment or the cold-shoulder?

There are many partners (men and women) who just aren't big talkers and won't talk regardless of your approach. I suspect you knew that (or should have known it) when you were dating.

You probably fell in love with him because he was a great listener and an adoring audience.

But if you're serious about improving communication, pick a time when there won't be any interruptions and say something like . . . "You know honey, I was just wondering . . . how do you think I could become a better wife or a more satisfying lover?" and then really listen to what he says.

Don't defend yourself or interrupt mid-sentence (this is the hard part). And don't top his reply — this isn't a competition.

Once you have his feedback, give it some serious thought.

Communication is a two way street. We need to be ready to hear both sides.

Dear Dr. Scantling: I'm in my 40s and I've just gotten married for the second time to a woman I had an affair with. Her first husband was mentally and physically cruel to her, so I understood why she cheated on him. My wife was a good mother to our kids, but we lost the spark after 12 years.

My problem is that I just don't trust my new wife. She's a beautiful woman and I've started having problems with my erection because I'm so nervous that I'm not pleasing her in bed. I'm afraid if I don't satisfy her sexually she may find someone else. I haven't told her any of this, because I don't want to give her any ideas. I'd appreciate your help.

— Nate, Hartford

Dear Nate: Your logic escapes me. How does mental or physical abuse justify cheating? I can see how your new wife would want to get away from her ex, but that's why we have protective orders and divorce. And you cheated why? Because you lost the spark? Obviously neither of you has been trustworthy. No wonder trust is a problem.

If you're going to salvage this marriage, you both have your work cut out for you.

Absolute honesty is essential. It's high time you share your fears about your erectile difficulties, along with any other misapprehensions you might have. Unless she's clueless, she must have suspicions.

Find a good therapist who has experience with infidelity and remarriage. Withholding your feelings because you don't want to "give her ideas" is frankly a bad idea.

» Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist and certified sex therapist in Farmington. You can e-mail her at AskDrScantling@aol.com; her website is www.drsandy.com. This column is not intended as a substitute for professional advice. Case material used here is not intended to represent any actual individuals.