

INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

The Courage Of Patients To Face Their Hopes, Fears



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Years ago, when I was a novice therapist, Karen, a 36-year-old married obstetrician/gynecologist and her 40-year-old pediatrician husband, Vance, came to see me to discuss their long-standing sexual problem.

Before the session, I fretted about what I could possibly offer two physicians — one of them an expert in female anatomy and physiology. But one look at their anxious faces as they sat in my waiting room revealed they were just like any other couple in distress.

Karen grew up in Jamaica and never knew her father. At the age of 7, she came to the States with her mother and two younger sisters. Her mom worked two jobs to support the family. Karen was determined to study hard to “become somebody” and make her family proud.

So she did. She did little else. No dating, no proms. She graduated summa cum laude and was valedictorian of her high school class.

But when it came to her sexual development, Karen was unprepared and ignorant of the facts. All she knew was her mom got pregnant at 15 and she was not going to make the same mistake. Naturally curvaceous, Karen wore baggy clothing to camouflage her breasts and hips. She discouraged sexual attention in all forms.

But fate had other plans. One evening, at the age of 16 while she was baby-sitting, an older male cousin came over and forced her to submit to digital vaginal penetration. She bled for some time, but told no one. She still struggles with vivid nightmares that wake her in a sweat — flooding her in shades of red and brown.

Karen met her husband during their residency. She was comforted by his soft-spoken manner. They married the following summer. Vance was equally inexperienced sexually, but both of them believed things would “work out” when the time was right.

That was eight years ago. Each time they try to have intercourse, Karen still has unbearable pain.

They have tried everything they know: lubrication, varying positions, muscular relaxation, dilators and ruling out anatomical problems or infection, all to no avail.

Today is a big day as they prepare to reveal their most intimate problems to a sex therapist.

After the preliminary pleasantries each takes a seat across from me. Vance looks to Karen who begins tentatively . . .

“This isn’t easy for me — for us,” she stammers, “It’s harder sitting on this side of the desk,” she laughs a nervous little laugh. “We’re taught that sex should be natural . . . but for us it hasn’t been.” I nod.

Karen describes her history of feeling disconnected from her body. She discloses the abuse with an abundance of tears. Vance moves close to her and lovingly takes her hand. “Honey, I’m so sorry. . . I didn’t know.”

“I wanted to try to put it behind me,” she says softly.

Over the next month the office discussions continue. They discover that the sexual pain is not an arbitrary symptom or sign of a lack of love — as they feared — but an unconscious protective response to a traumatic memory. As they develop this new perspective, they move from pathology to pleasure and a more satisfying sexual connection.

As I reflect on this courageous couple and so many other couples since that time, I remember the wisdom offered by my sex-therapy supervisor.

“Regardless of your patient’s background or education,” he said, “each couple will enter your office with hopes and fears. They honor you by sharing deeply personal parts of themselves. Tread lightly and approach your work with gratitude.”

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