

Married Couples' Sex Needn't Be 'All Or Nothing'



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Do you remember when you first fell in love? Maybe you'd both sleep in a single bed, like spoons, unable to get close enough. What a pleasure, to just feel each other's warmth and not want to go or be

anywhere else in the universe.

Unfortunately, for many couples, that feeling is short-lived.

At some point, you might notice that you have a problem falling asleep with someone "touching you" and you need "more space" to be comfortable. So, you buy a bigger bed. But again, because one person "snores" or gets up to pee, or something else, it doesn't work. So, maybe one of you decides to sleep in the other bedroom (to get a good rest) or even on the sofa. It's a far cry from those days tucked under each other's arms.

How did you become one of those couples? And while we're on the subject, when is the last time you enjoyed some physical passion with your partner? I didn't say perfunctory or obligatory release-driven sex. I said "passion." OK, forget passion. How about sensuality? You'd be

surprised how many presumed-to-be-happy couples haven't been intimately involved with one another in years.

I've always been puzzled why so many couples choose "no" sex rather than "some" sex. Imagine you couldn't have dessert for health reasons — would you refuse the rest of a delicious meal? Or if you missed the top bonus at work, would you turn away the second place offer? If something is always better than nothing, why do many of us choose nothing when it comes to intimacy?

Carla and Troy are one of these couples. They're married, in their early 40s, with one child, but haven't had sex in almost three years. Yes, they cuddle occasionally or exchange a brief peck on the lips, but that's about it. Like many couples, they tell me about their busy lives, their friendship and their respect for one another, and then complain that the closeness has "evaporated."

"We live in an emotional desert," says Troy, a car mechanic. "I love Carla, but I don't know how to turn her engine on! I guess you'd say that I'm searching for the starter switch. When I do try something, I'm left high and dry, so I've stopped trying."

Carla uncomfortably squirms and is not amused by Troy's car metaphors. "It's not that I don't

want sex," she says, irritated. "I just feel that whenever we start to kiss a little, it always has to lead somewhere else — why can't kissing be enough sometimes? The last time we had intercourse, he was upset because I didn't say anything. What am I supposed to say? That's just not me. I'm more of the quiet type. It's just not worth the hassle."

Carla and Troy illustrate the classic

A-Z phenomenon that can derail intimacy — sometimes per-

manently. It goes this way: If kissing must always lead to breast touching, and breast touching must always lead to genital touching, and genital touching must finish with intercourse, then all intimacy may become avoided. Whatever the reasons, many of which are out of conscious awareness, abstinence begins. This may have nothing to do with a lack of sexual desire, per se; the couple has simply become trapped in the struggle of "all or nothing sex."

The basic problem with "all or nothing sex" is definitional. If you're like most people, you think of sex as synonymous with penis-vagina penetration — doing "it."

Everything that precedes "it" is "foreplay" and all that follows is "afterplay." Without "it" it's not really sex — or is it? The requirements to have "it," are a hard enough erection, sufficient lubrication, enthusiastic participation, performance that is occasionally medal-worthy (not necessarily gold, but at least bronze) and considerable stamina that culminates in orgasm for

both partners. If this is your mindset, and it is the mind-

set for many couples, then it is understandable how easy it is to fail.

Being a culture that likes money-back guarantees, unless we have reasonable certainty that things will go well from the outset, we're hesitant to buy in. "Why prime the pump and get all hot and bothered, if it's not going to go anywhere?" one man asked. A practical enough approach — waste not, want not.

But sex isn't about practicality. It's supposed to be fun. When you set up impossible standards for yourself or your lover, it's often easier to avoid the whole thing.

So how do we find our way out of the "all or nothing trap?" First

of all, understand that there is no right or wrong when it comes to sex. We haven't been able to define sexually "normalcy" other than to say, if you're an adult having consensual intimacy with another adult and it's not hurting either of you — don't worry about it. Sexuality defies definition and begs to be experienced.

So, if you're one of those couples who believe you shouldn't start something you can't finish, I can help you with that right now — sex has no precise start or finish. So-called foreplay may begin with a hug at breakfast that you warmly remember throughout the day. Sex is circular with continual ebbs and flows — and is much more inclusive than intercourse alone. Like all aspects of nature, sex is a dynamic expression of who we are, together and alone — changing over time. It connects us, fills us and challenges our vulnerability, if we let it.

All genital touching or penetration isn't sexual (think about your last ob-gyn or prostate exam). If you reflect on your most intimate memories, you might recall a moment resting against your lover's chest, listening to his heart beat, or absorbing the fragrance of her hair as you caress the softness of her neck.

Sex can change shape, meaning and impact. It can transform a

prior experience of spontaneous joy into an enormous and unpleasant ordeal. It contains our fears of failure and our anxieties about success — and represents our naked selves at our most disclosing. Sex is a challenge and a blessing. But when couples face its truths openly, and together, they can step outside the linear confines of orgasm-only driven sex to discover a vast array of untapped sensual pleasures.

Instead of avoiding closeness, and settling for nothing, let's admit that intimacy is difficult and choose to share something — together.

This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.

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