

The Sexual Diversion Game



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Do you play sexual games with your partner? I'm not talking about playing strip poker or sharing your favorite fantasy. Quite the contrary. I'm referring to the repetitive games couples unconsciously play that confuse, fatigue and suck the life out of love.

Some couples have one primary game they play over and over. Others have a broader repertoire and may play two or more games simultaneously. The common denominator of all of these "games" is that they sap vital energy from your relationship and block intimacy.

Isabelle and Alan have been married for five years and have always enjoyed good sex. Alan says that for the past year, Isabelle has put on nearly 25 pounds and "has really let herself go." He'd like to start a family but is worried that he's losing his sexual attraction for his wife.

In an individual therapy session, Isabelle cautiously reveals a secret: She's terrified about being a mother. Isabelle grew up in a home with four younger brothers. When she was only 5, her mother died of a heart attack, leaving her without a female caretaker. Her dad never remarried.

Although she "mothered" her brothers, she lacked confidence as a woman. One would think she'd share this with her husband, but she feels too guilty and ashamed. She has even begun to wake with nightmares about dying in childbirth. To soothe herself, she sneaks into the kitchen and devours an entire pint of Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey.

"I was a perfect Size 6 on our wedding day, and now I can barely squeeze into a 14," she says, sobbing. "I don't understand how Alan could want to have sex with me looking like this."

So what "game" are Isabelle and Alan playing? I call it "The Sexual Diversion Game." Surface issues of diminished attractiveness or lack of desire serve to conceal and protect the more serious underlying conflicts. To end this game, both partners need the courage to share and hear each other's truths.

Tony, 49, and Tara, 46, have sex about once a year, when one of them "breaks down and gives in." They're trapped in a game I call "Sexual Payback." It could begin anywhere, but one example is when Tony playfully pinches Tara on the rear while she's standing at the kitchen sink.

They've been married 23 years, and this "habit" has been ongoing. "I've told him a million times that I hate it when he does that, but he keeps it up anyway. . . . Later, when we're in the bedroom, he thinks it's OK to just reach between my legs to fool around. What's this man thinking?"

I turn to Tony, who appears bemused.

"Guilty as charged," he says. "I love my wife's body, so shoot me."

"And what usually happens after you make your move?" I ask him.

"Nothing. She rejects me, and there's no sex," he says, laughing nervously. "You've got to help this woman loosen up."

There are many versions of sexual payback, but it's basically a game of rebellion and sexual avoidance to cover the unspoken issues of performance anxiety (erectile dysfunction, rapid ejaculation, orgasmic difficulties and a host of other problems). The struggle and payback become the focus of day-to-day interactions. Each partner fights to be the victim who was wronged. This is often followed by "The Interminable Waiting Game" with long periods of sexual avoidance.

The list of games is endless. Games like "If You Really Loved Me, I'd Turn You On," a game of insecurity and excessive need for reassurance. Hallmarks of this game are questions like, "Why don't you have an erection anymore when you look at me naked" or "How was it [I] tonight?"

"The Whine (not Wine) Game": Punctuated by statements such as "you always" or "you never," is structured around criticism. It is often played along with the "Mind-Reading Game," or "How Many Times Do I Need To Tell You I Don't Like To Be Touched There" game.

Then there's "Egg Timer Sex," or "A Watched Pot Never Boils Sex Game": The rules of this game are to get your partner to climax as quickly as possible so you can get to sleep. This is different from "The Quickie," a fun, satisfying alternative on a limited time budget.

"Kiss Like You're An Aunt/Brother Game": Perfunctory pecks on the cheek and absentminded hugs to meet the "letter of the law" are the principal rules of this game.

Have you found some familiar game(s) on this list? Reflecting on your ritualized patterns will begin to make the unconscious conscious. Be honest about the moves you make to keep the games going. Acknowledge your respective payoffs and how the games usually end.

When you'd like to "play with" deepening your intimacy, just slip into something less comfortable, and "laissez les bon temps roulez!"

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