

Courageous Questions Deserve Answers

Dear Readers: It's so hard to select which questions to print from among the many fascinating e-mails I've received. Rest assured that I read all of your correspondence and answer as many as I can. I appreciate the time (and courage) it takes to write to me and I thank you for your comments, suggestions and support.

I hope my columns continue to provide helpful information, provocative perspectives on sexual health and intimacy, and ways to make your love life more satisfying and fulfilling.

Warmly,
Dr. Scantling

Where did the orgasm go?

I am a 47-year-old female. Probably about one year ago I noticed that I was having trouble having an orgasm. I never had trouble before and could always orgasm within 10-15 minutes with clitoral stimulation. Now, and over the last year, I get close, but then the clitoris sort of collapses (disappears) and the feeling of orgasm disappears.

Finally I get sort of sore and numb. If I keep trying, eventually I will orgasm, but by then I am pretty sore, too, and sometimes frustrated at having to work so hard at something that used to be so easy. What's going on?

I am in very good shape and ran a half-marathon in 1 hour 57 minutes. I run 3.5 miles several times a week. Could all this jogging be jolting things in there? I also did have a bit of nerve or muscle pain shooting down my left leg when I trained the longer distances (10 miles -plus) and I wonder if there is some sort of nerve problem that is affecting my ability to orgasm in a timely manner. I've also had a hernia since 1990. Could this be pressing on something that is affecting my ability to orgasm? And finally, my bladder isn't what it used to be. It never feels completely empty — even after I urinate. Could my bladder's position be interfering with my sex response? I don't even know who to ask about any of this. I would be mortified to ask my OB-GYN, even though she is female!

Frustrated

Dear Frustrated,

During the high arousal stage called "plateau" (just before orgasm) the clitoris retracts under the clitoral hood and sometimes becomes difficult to find. Couples and individuals sometimes wonder why the clitoris starts out fairly prominent, but then seems to "disappear." Actually,

this is part of the normal sexual response cycle. It's actually the body's way of protecting itself from over-stimulating the sensitive part of the clitoris as arousal intensifies. Continued direct stimulation can lead to oversensitivity (soreness or even numbness). Lighten up and take a more gentle indirect approach to your pleasuring. It sounds like you're working much too hard! The other question, however, is what's contributing to your pain and discomfort.

I consulted with Talli Yehuda Rosenbaum, an expert in urogenital physiotherapy from Bet Shemesh, Israel, who suggested the following:

"Tell her to balance her heavy impact exercise (schedule) with abdominal and pelvic floor strengthening. Stabilization exercises/physical therapy (may) help. (It's possible that) the leg pain results from general pelvic instability and that all that jogging is "jolting things in there." Yehuda continues to say, "(Perhaps) she has a cystocele (prolapsed bladder) accounting for the incomplete bladder emptying and her orgasms may be inhibited by the fear of urge incontinence."

Talli's comments aren't intended as a definitive answer to your specific problems. There are many other reasons for shooting pains, bladder discomfort and changes in sex response. I strongly urge you to see your physician — either your OB-GYN or primary care provider for a complete medical evaluation. If you're "mortified" to speak with your doctor, find one that you feel comfortable talking to. Changes in orgasmic response are common complaints, especially as we age, and can usually be treated once properly diagnosed. If you'd like more information on pelvic pain, check out www.physioforwomen.com

Please keep me posted and good luck!

When sex hurts...

After reading your article on vaginismus in the Courant, I was hoping you could help with some further information. I had a hysterectomy (at 42, and kept my cervix) one year ago, due to endometriosis and fibroid pain. In almost all respects I am very happy I chose to have the operation. My main complaint is pain with intercourse.

At first I thought it was just my body recovering, but after a while I consulted my doctor who eventually prescribed a gel that is essentially an anesthetic. This does make sex bearable again, but nothing like what I had prior to surgery, and thus my question. Can I expect this pain to remain as intense for the rest of time? I was wondering if you have any similar patients who could let me know if things stay the same, get worse, or get better. My doctor has confirmed there is no other problem that could possibly be

causing the pain with intercourse.

— Hurting

Dear Hurting:

Chronic vulvar pain, or vulvodynia, is more highly prevalent than we had once thought. Many women have been told that their pelvic pain is "all in their heads" because no physical reason could be detected. Vulvodynia can occur (and often does) in the absence of infection or other vaginal disease.

For some women it only becomes a problem during intercourse. For other women, the chronic pain can become so incapacitating that even the sensation of their underwear next to their skin triggers unbearable pain. There are a variety of new treatments for the treatment of vulvodynia. The National Vulvodynia Association was developed in 1994 to provide support and education for women about this condition.

You can find more information at www.nva.org. I hope this is helpful.

During the affair ...

I am in my 50s and married to the same woman for over 25 years. I am not sure why, but I have had several affairs that have lasted almost a year each throughout my marriage. We have four grown children. As much as I enjoyed the affairs, something just was not there. Had some very strong guilt feelings toward the end of each affair. I guess they made my home life bearable and took my mind off the unhappiness at home.

My dilemma now is that I have met another woman who is also married. I have neither guilt nor feelings of regret about this relationship. I feel the main difference with her is that the relationship isn't based upon sex. We simply like and enjoy each other. This relationship is completely different from the other "affairs." I want to spend my life with this woman. I feel dependent on my wife but don't wish to stay in a relationship with her any longer because she washes my clothes, cleans the house and cooks dinner. There is so much more I need.

My wife and I have been to a marriage counselor on two occasions. Things get better for a while and then go back to the way they were. I find it too easy to stay where I am and remain unhappy. I will not expect this other woman to leave her husband for me, and I will not do that either. I want a better life and I want it with this woman. Not sure what to do.

— "Caught between two worlds"

Dear Caught,

I'm not sure what your question is, since you appear to have already made up your mind. If past behavior is the best predictor

of future performance, you'll probably keep doing more of the same.

Just a few comments... You say you've been "married" for 25 years. This may be true chronologically, but not actually given your run of unfaithful behavior. You might want to ask yourself "How many faithful years?..." and "What does marriage really mean to me?" Merely sitting in a therapist's office doesn't create change. You change things by the choices you make — or don't make.

It seems you've been playing with fire for a long time. You're confused, troubled, and unhappy. I advise you to get into some serious therapy and stick with it. Dig deeply and be prepared to hear some things you may not like about your "dependency," "neediness," and fear. More than half of your life has passed — you can't unring the bell — but you could feel a lot better about yourself in the time remaining if you become an honest man. And while you're at it, you might want to learn to do your own laundry.



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**INTIMACY,
SEX &
RELATIONSHIP**
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To Ask A Question ...

Our intimate relationships and sexual health are intensely personal concerns that many people find difficult to discuss. Please think of this as a safe place to have those concerns addressed.

Write to me in confidence at: AskDrScantling@aol.com.

Feel free to ask me whatever is on your mind regarding sexual wellness, health, intimacy and relationship -- mind, body or spirit. The large volume of e-mail I receive makes answering individual letters impossible, but your questions will help me identify the subjects most important to you and other NE Magazine readers. Some readers' letters will be chosen for publication and reply in the column. They will be edited to eliminate names and other personal identifying information.

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