

# WHAT MAKES SEX GOOD ENOUGH?

**W**hen it comes to passion, many couples struggle with a string of baffling questions — they don't know where their sexual pleasure went or how to get it back. They wonder if their sex lives are "normal" and where they fit in on the scale, and they agonize about how to make sex more exciting.

Western society teaches us that excitement comes from the outside — not the inside. Pop in a video, pop a pill. The sexual marketing that surrounds us has created a population of disgruntled couples who don't feel as good as — or, at any rate, not having as much fun as — everybody else.



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## INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

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Francesca and Hugh, happily married but sexually stymied, watch silently as the hard-bodied couple on the screen moans in ecstasy. This was the first time in their 20 years of marriage that they'd gotten the courage to view an explicit video together. They sat next to one another in the dark — leaning against the headboard of their bed — the glare of the screen casting a shadow on the wall.

The couple in the film moved from position to position with remarkable flexibility until finally reaching their professionally choreographed simultaneous climaxes. No sooner had they finished, before they started a second round.

"They're doing it again?" asked Francesca in amazement.

"Seems that way," replied Hugh unenthusiastically, thinking, "I need at least a week between sexual episodes to regroup." He watched the action closely for any signs of fatigue or reduced arousal in the male, but sadly saw none.

She was fixated on the female's ability to "perform" oral sex for what seemed like an eternity (unaware that the segment had been edited in a continuous loop to simulate real time).

Francesca and Hugh recognized this video was only a fantasy. It's doubtful that the couple on the screen has a baby asleep in the next room — or the stretch marks to prove it. They're probably not going through menopause or waking up in the middle of the night because of an enlarged prostate gland. They're just actors — not real people in real relationships. Nevertheless, it was difficult not to feel discouraged when they considered their own lackluster sexual relationship.

Francesca and Hugh are not an actual couple, but they highlight a real problem that faces many of us — feeling like an abysmal failure in one's sex life. Everyone wants to be sexually normal. We know that normal blood pressure is 120/80 and that normal body temperature is 98.6, but defining sexual normalcy is a more complex task. We search books, videos and magazine articles for clues about what others do in bed. We take quizzes on how we "rate" as lovers that may be written by free-lance journalists with negligible qualifications in sex education. We examine statistics on sexual frequency and variation — but statistics can be misleading. When there is a difference in sexual desire between partners, the

lower desire person is usually labeled as the "abnormal" partner and pressured to change. We have a slew of advice books telling people how to make our sex lives sizzle, but we've yet to come to an understanding of what makes sex just plain "good enough."

Couples speculate that their lack of sexual satisfaction may be due to inexperience. They privately confess their regret at being virgins when they got married (as if one or even 10 more partners would have given them more sexual self-confidence). More is not necessarily better. Although experience can teach you to feel more comfortable about genital anatomy and sexual response, the passionate fit between each couple in each situation is unique. Sexual connection isn't something that can be mastered and transferred from one relationship to the next in template form. Consider your own past relationships for proof.

There is no one-size-fits-all definition for normal or "good-enough" sexual functioning, but there are ingredients for enhancing the mind-body and spiritual connection of sexual passion. From my research I discovered that couples who describe themselves as highly satisfied sexually share one

important quality — the ability to deeply immerse themselves in pleasure of all kinds — from savoring the taste of one exquisite truffle to appreciating the fragrance of fall approaching at the end of our always-too-brief New England summers. These "pleasure experts" feel secure, accepted and comfortable with their partners. They open courageously to life and let the moment lead them. They stay connected to what they love and they recognize that pleasure doesn't leave us, we leave our pleasure.

We all know people who are "pleasure experts." They don't try to break the world record for multiple orgasms or length of time before ejaculating. They make love because it feels good to be close — not because they have something to prove about their own adequacy or desirability. They have learned to absorb themselves in joy and block out all distractions without comparing themselves to any external standard. Pleasure experts live in the "in between" moments — between vacations, weekends, holidays and other so called special times.

We also know people who think they can buy pleasure by accumulating stuff. They are externally focused and have difficulty feeling full. They're the ones with the bumper stickers that read "The one who dies with the most toys wins." They spend their time looking in their rear view mirror to see who might be trying to pass them instead of enjoying the scenery.

If you're feeling sexually bereft, you may have lost your internal erotic focus. Perhaps you've stopped paying attention to what matters — what's inside — inside yourself and your intimate relationship. The quest for novelty, excitement and variety creates its own competitive trap as you attempt to outdo your own best.

Satisfying sex has less to do with positions, camera tricks, or physical stamina. It is about cultivating the simple deep intimate moments of playfulness, joy and appreciation. Instead of adding more and more — deepen what you have.

It's not the mechanism; it's the meaning that makes sex "good enough."

## 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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reprinted here are from real people, but, in order to protect their privacy, some information that might identify the writers has been omitted or changed. Case material used in Dr. Scantling's columns are composites and not intended to represent any actual couple or individual. Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist, advanced practice registered nurse and certified sex therapist. She practices in Farmington. Her website is [www.dr.sandy.com](http://www.dr.sandy.com). Her archived columns for NE are available at [www.courant.com/ne](http://www.courant.com/ne).