

# **Sexuality Handouts – 2023**

## **Barry W. McCarthy, PhD**

### **Guidelines for Revitalizing and Maintaining Sexual Desire - 2023**

1. The keys to sexual desire are positive anticipation and feeling you deserve pleasure in your intimate relationship.
2. Each person is responsible for his/her desire with the couple functioning as an intimate sexual team to nurture and enhance desire. Revitalizing sexual desire is a couple challenge. Guilt, blame, and pressure subvert the change process.
3. Low desire and conflicts over desire discrepancies is the most common sexual dysfunction, effecting almost half of couples. Desire problems drain intimacy and pleasure from your relationship.
4. One in five married couples has a non-sexual marriage (being sexual less than ten times a year). One in three non-married couples who have been together two years or longer have a non-sexual relationship.
5. The initial romantic love/passionate sex/idealized relationship phase (limerence) lasts less than two years and often only six months. Desire in a married or partnered relationship is maintained by developing your couple sexual style which balances intimacy, pleasure, and eroticism.
6. The essence of sexuality is giving and receiving pleasure-oriented touching. The prescription to revitalize and maintain sexual desire is intimacy, pleasuring, and eroticism.
7. In male sexual socialization and in our culture, especially R-rated movies, spontaneous desire is the norm. A crucial concept is that for both women and men “responsive sexual desire” is more genuine and changeable. Rather than the man hoping to return to spontaneous erections or the woman hoping to feel “open and sexy,” both partners learn to value responsive desire. You might begin at neutral but as you engage in touching and being touched and are aware of positive emotions and sensations that is when you experience sexual desire. Desire is in response to touch and emotions—desire often follows touch rather than spontaneously appearing. Touching occurs both inside and outside the bedroom. Touching is valued for itself and does not always lead to intercourse but reinforces feelings of desire and desirability.
8. Couples who maintain a vital sexual relationship can use the metaphor of touching consisting of “five gears” (dimensions). First gear is clothes on, affectionate touch, including hugging, kissing, holding hands. Second gear is sensual touch, which can be clothed, semi-clothed, or nude (non-genital body massage, cuddling on the couch, holding and caressing, touching going to sleep or on awakening). Third gear is playful touch which intermixes genital and non-genital touch, clothed or unclothed, romantic or erotic dancing, touching in the bath or shower, on the couch or in bed, whole body massage, playing strip poker or Twister. Fourth gear is erotic touch (manual, oral, rubbing or vibrator stimulation) to high arousal and orgasm for one or both partners. Fifth gear integrates pleasurable and erotic touch that flows into intercourse. Intercourse is a natural continuation of the pleasuring/eroticism process: not an individual pass-fail sex test.
9. Both the man and woman value affectionate, sensual, playful, erotic, and intercourse experiences.
10. Both partners are comfortable initiating touching and intercourse. Both feel free to say “no” and suggest an alternative way to connect and share pleasure.
11. A key strategy is to develop “her,” “his,” and “our” bridges to sexual desire. This involves ways of thinking, talking, anticipating, and feeling that invite being sexual.
12. Sexuality has a number of positive functions for your relationship—a shared pleasure, a means to reinforce and deepen intimacy, and a tension reducer to deal with the vicissitudes of life and a relationship.

13. The average frequency of sexual intercourse is from four times a week to once every other week. For couples in their twenties, the average is two-three times a week, for couples in their fifties is once-twice a week, and for couples in their sixties and older between once a week and once a month.
14. Personal turn-ons (special celebrations, feeling caring and close, erotic fantasies, anniversaries or birthdays, sex with the goal of pregnancy, initiating a favorite erotic scenario, being playful or spontaneous, sexuality to celebrate a career success or sooth a personal disappointment) facilitate sexual anticipation and desire.
15. External turn-ons (R or X-rated videos, music, candles, sex toys, visual feedback from mirrors, being sexual outside the bedroom, a weekend away without the kids) facilitate anticipation and desire.
16. Non-demand pleasuring is a way to reinforce attachment, to share pleasure, and a bridge to sexual desire and intercourse.
17. Intimate coercion is not acceptable. Sexuality is neither a reward nor a punishment. Sexuality is voluntary, mutual, and pleasure-oriented.
18. Realistic, mutual expectations are crucial for maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship. It is self-defeating to demand equal desire/pleasure/eroticism and satisfaction each time. Realistically, 35-45% of experiences are very good for both partners. The best sex is mutual and synchronous, but the majority of sexual experiences are positive, but asynchronous (better for one partner than the other) to 20% percent are good for one and the other finds it okay. Fifteen to twenty percent are okay for one and the other finds it acceptable. Be aware that five to fifteen percent of sexual experiences are dissatisfying or dysfunctional. Couples who accept occasional mediocre or dysfunctional experiences without guilt or blaming and try again when they are open and responsive have a vital, resilient sexual relationship. Satisfied couples use the guideline of Good Enough Sex (GES) to promote positive, realistic sexual expectations.
19. Contrary to the myth that “horniness” occurs after not being sexual for weeks, desire is facilitated by a regular rhythm of pleasurable sexual experiences. When sex is less than twice a month, you become self-conscious and are in danger of falling into a cycle of anticipatory anxiety, tense and performance-oriented intercourse, and avoidance.
20. Healthy sexuality plays a positive, integral role (15-20%) in your relationship with the main function to energize your bond and reinforce feelings of desire and desirability. Paradoxically, conflictual, dysfunctional, or non-existent sex plays a more powerful negative role than the positive role of good sex.

Resources: McCarthy, B. & McCarthy, E. (2020) Rekindling Desire. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

## The Crucial Couple Sexual Dialogue: Five Dimensions of Touch - 2023

This core psychosexual skill exercise increases awareness of each partner’s preferences for gears (dimensions) of touch. The majority of couples only use two gears—affection and intercourse. They fall into the trap of believing that sex=intercourse. This results in lower levels of both touch and intercourse.

In contrast, this psychosexual skill exercise focuses on five gears of touch (based on a ten-point scale of subjective pleasure/arousal).

**First gear: Affectionate touch**—this usually involves clothes-on touching, such as holding hands, hugging, or kissing. Affectionate touch is not sexual, but it provides the foundation for intimate attachment. Subjective arousal is anchored at 1.

**Second gear: Sensual touch**—this involves non-genital pleasuring which can be clothed, semi-clothed, or nude. Sensual touch includes a head, back, or foot rub; cuddling on the couch while watching a DVD, a trust position where you feel safe and connected, cradling each other as you go to sleep or on awakening. Sensual touch is an integral part of couple sexuality. It has value in itself as well as a bridge to sexual desire at that time or later. Subjective arousal 1-3.

**Third gear: Playful touch**—this intermixes genital pleasuring with non-genital touch (usually semi-clothed or nude). Playful touch can include touching in the shower or bath, full body massage, seductive or erotic dancing, games such as strip poker or Twister. What makes playful touch inviting is the enhanced sense of pleasure and unpredictability. Playful touch is valuable in itself and/or can serve as a bridge to sexual desire. Subjective arousal 3-6.

**Fourth gear: Erotic touch**—this is the most challenging gear. Erotic, non-intercourse touch can include manual, oral, rubbing, or vibrator stimulation. Erotic scenarios and techniques are an integral part of couple sexuality providing a sense of vitality, creativity, and unpredictability. Erotic touch can be mutual or one-way, synchronous or asynchronous. It can proceed to orgasm or transition to intercourse. Subjective arousal 6-10.

**Fifth gear: Intercourse**—there are two crucial concepts in integrating intercourse into the gears of connection approach. First, intercourse is a natural continuation of the pleasuring/eroticism process, not a pass-fail sex performance test. Second, transition to intercourse at high levels of erotic flow (7 or 8) and continue multiple stimulation during intercourse. Subjective arousal 7-10.

We suggest each partner fill out this chart separately. Then discuss feelings and preferences with each other and in therapy.

<b>Touch Type</b>	<b>Current percentage of all touch</b>	<b>Percentage of touch desired</b>
Affectionate touch		
Sensual touch		
Playful touch		
Erotic touch		

Intercourse touch		
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Next, practice each touch dimension two or three times to gain comfort and confidence with each touch type. The purpose of this exercise is to facilitate dialogue with a focus on enhancing sexual desire and pleasure. Sexuality is more than intercourse. The essence of couple sexuality is sharing pleasure—oriented touch. You develop a common language to facilitate communication and embrace a variable, flexible approach to intimacy, touching, sexuality, and intercourse.

Resource: McCarthy, B. & McCarthy, E. (2019). Enhancing Couple Sexuality.

## Desire Psychosexual Skill Exercises - 2023

### *First exercise: Comfort*

A first step in healthy couple sexuality is developing a comfortable, non-demand approach to touch and sensuality. How can you enhance sexual comfort? Begin by setting aside at least two occasions for this exercise, one in your bedroom and a second time in the family or living room. Although most of the psychosexual skill exercises involve nudity, this exercise begins with clothes on.

Sensuality involves being receptive to and enjoying non-demand, non-genital touching, similar to sensate focus. Sensuality means touching for its own sake, not as a goal toward arousal, intercourse, or orgasm. Being open to the joys of slow, tender, caring, rhythmic touch is the basis of sexual response and is essential for maintaining desire.

This exercise takes place in your bedroom with clothes on and focuses on nonverbal communication. The woman is the initiator. Traditionally, women have not had permission to initiate sensual or sexual activities. You can initiate in the morning, in the late afternoon on a rainy weekend, or early in the evening. We suggest not doing it right before bed when you are tired and do not have the energy or focus to engage in sensual exploration. Begin by taking a bath or shower and playfully washing each other. Towel dry your partner in a slow, caring fashion, and proceed to the bedroom. Put on clothing you feel comfortable with; it could be pajamas or an informal outfit.

How personalized is your bedroom? Does it have valued mementos? Is it decorated the way you like? Is there sufficient light? Is it a comfortable room to be in? Orchestrate the milieu to increase sensuality. You could burn a fragrant candle or put on music to romanticize the atmosphere. Be sure you are not too warm or cold.

Touch for yourself; do not try to second-guess your partner. Give yourself permission to experiment with a variety of ways to touch, hold, and caress. Use your fingertips, palms, both hands, or only one. Do not limit yourself. Use your legs; rub your body against his; let your lips or tongue explore his body. He can take off as much or as little clothing as you prefer. Some women find they are more comfortable if initially he keeps his eyes closed; others enjoy eye contact throughout. Try it both ways. Which do you find more sensual? Explore and enjoy his body from the hairs on his head to the soles of his feet. Be aware of at least two areas you enjoy touching. Do not be surprised if there are body parts you do not like; this is not Tom Cruise made up to look perfect on a movie screen, but your live partner with a scar on his kneecap, a roll of flab on his midriff, more hair than you like on his back. Switch roles and let him explore your body to redevelop comfort and sensuality.

The bedroom is one thing; being comfortable in the living room or family room can be quite another. Do the second part of the exercise in the next day or two. Since this exercise is done in the nude, ensure that you will have privacy and not be interrupted by neighbors or children. An intimate relationship erodes because of lack of quality couple time. Couples discuss and problem-solve practical, external problems but take little time for personal, intimate feelings and communication.

Make this your special time. Would you rather talk in the kitchen, living room, or family room? Would you like a cup of tea or glass of wine? Would music in the background enhance or distract from communication? Sit comfortably, facing each other. Nonverbal components of communication—especially eye contact, body posture, facial response, and touch—carry a message as important as words. Is talking enhanced by holding hands, having your arm around your partner's shoulder, playfully touching your partner's hands, or caressing your partner's face and neck?

How do you talk as a sexual couple? Is it comfortable to use proper words or to employ slang? Do you have a private sexual language? Can you share emotional feelings and intimacy as easily as you make sexual requests? Discuss what pleasuring and erotic techniques increase sexual responsiveness. An intimate couple need to be able to discuss both emotional and sexual feelings and preferences.

Share your fondest sexual memory. Take the risk of being vulnerable and discuss how you felt during and after that experience. The only time couples are nude in the bedroom is while having sex. Being nude, touching, and talking comfortably in the living room, den, or kitchen can be a liberating experience. Enjoy the freedom and openness of non-demand pleasuring and talking while nude outside your bedroom.

Is it helpful to touch while clothed in the bedroom? How do you feel about touch while nude in the living room? Touching both inside and outside the bedroom is a way to nurture sexual desire. Conclude this exercise by making requests and suggestions to make your sexual relationship, especially initiating sexual encounters, comfortable and inviting.

### *Second Exercise: Couple Sexual Attraction*

Sexual attraction is not static. It is not a “magic” quality that you either have or you don’t. Sexual attraction is a dynamic process between two people that waxes and wanes. Attraction is affected by myriad factors. Physical attractiveness is but one factor; it is certainly not the only one or even the most important one. Turn-ons vary for each couple, contrary to the media myth that there is a perfect, youthful body type that turns everyone on or a sexual technique that works for everyone. You can increase sexual attraction for each other and with each other.

Start this exercise clothed in a comfortable, private setting conducive to communication. Set aside at least 45 minutes (this could extend 2 hours if you wish). Present yourself in a manner that you feel is attractive; choose an outfit you particularly like, shave, fix your hair, brush your teeth, dab on your favorite perfume or after-shave. Do the kinds of things people do to get ready for a date but usually don’t do in a relationship they unfortunately have taken for granted.

Discussing attraction can feel awkward so we suggest a semi-structured communication exercise. Let the woman begin. Tell your partner at least five (and up to 15) things you find attractive about him, being as clear and specific as possible. You might find his slightly balding head attractive or like his new glasses, the way he jogs, his arms and hands, how he looks in a suit and tie, his laugh, the tenderness he displays when putting the children to bed, how he handles a household emergency, the look in his eyes before initiating sex, how responsible he is about paying bills, the sounds he makes when he has an orgasm, his newfound skill at cooking, the muscles of his legs, how caring he was when his aunt died, how enraptured he is with classical music yet can still enjoy country, the way he orally stimulates you, how generous he can be with his time when someone needs help, his penis when he is aroused, how he puts up a tent when you go camping. Be honest in sharing what you find attractive — physically, sexually, and emotionally. He listens and acknowledges his positive qualities; he does not shrug them off or minimize them.

Now pick one, two, or at the most three things you want him to change that would increase his attractiveness for you. Do not just state the problem. Make a specific request for change. Say, “I’d like you to cut your hair one-and-a-half inches shorter and comb it at night,” rather than, “I don’t like your hair; do something about it.” Say, “When you initiate, kiss me and stroke my arms before you touch my breasts,” not, “you come on too strong.” Say, “Talk and play with each child individually,” rather than, “I get upset because you never pay attention to the kids.”

Let us suggest two guidelines regarding requests. First, request things your partner can actually change. For example, if he is 6 feet tall, you can’t say you are attracted to men over 6 feet 5 inches. You can suggest that he carry himself more positively by walking tall and forcefully. Second, frame this as a “request” not a “demand.” Your partner can agree, modify, or say no, and there will be no punishment or negative consequences. A healthy relationship is based on acceptance and a positive-influence process, not demands, ultimatums, or threats.

Switch roles and have the man share what he finds attractive about his partner. You may like the way she wakes you with a kiss, that people view her as super-organized, how she purrs when her back is scratched, that she can fix broken items, the shape of her breasts, what a good athlete she is, how wet she

becomes when she is aroused, how she sings to the children before bedtime, how seductive she looks in a see-through nightgown, how she cheers you up after a bad day, how her nipple gets erect after you lick it, the way she pads around the house in bare feet, how attractive she looks when dressed for a night out, the care she takes planning family picnics, the effort she makes in picking clothes for the children, how she moves when she is sexually aroused, how assertive she is with neighbors. What is special about your partner that you value and find attractive?

In addressing the one to three requests for change, feel free to make them either sexual or nonsexual. What will increase your partner's attractiveness for you? Remember, it is a request, not a demand. Say, "I want you to sit with me once a month and plan big purchases," not, "You don't care anything about money except spending it." Say, "I want you to try orally stimulating me when I'm standing," not, "Stop being so hung up about oral sex." Say, "I wish you would initiate by stroking my chest when you wake up on a weekend morning," rather than, "You never initiate." Remember, these are requests for things your partner can change, not things your partner can't change. In terms of response to requests, she can accept, modify, or say no. A request connotes acceptance without a threat of negative consequences. A demand says I don't accept you and if you don't agree to these changes there will be a negative reaction. This is especially important in terms of sexual scenarios and techniques. There is no place for "intimate coercion" in your couple sexuality.

After discussing the process of maintaining and enhancing attraction you can end the exercise or engage in touching, which could lead to intercourse.

### *Third Exercise: Trust and Intimacy*

A major value of your intimate relationship is trusting that your partner is on your side, has your best interest in mind, and would not do anything intentionally to hurt you. Trust is a central ingredient in your intimate relationship. Communicate how you feel about the level of trust in your relationship, both in the past and at present. If it is not as high as you want, what can you do to increase trust? What "trust vulnerabilities" does your partner need to be aware of? What can each of you do to increase trust? Trust is not something that occurs automatically; it takes time to allow feelings of trust to develop and be expressed both verbally and physically.

You can establish a "trust" or "safe" position where you feel cared for and secure. This involves being nude in the privacy of your bedroom. Personalize your bedroom. Have a special light that gives a warm glow, a favorite erotic book or love poem by the bed-stand, thick curtains so there is privacy, a full-length mirror to increase visual stimuli. Do you enjoy hanging out and talking in your bedroom? Caress your partner's face and recall a time when you felt vulnerable and your partner was there for you.

You have experimented with non-demand positions to increase receptivity, sensuality, and responsiveness. Develop a safe (trust) position that facilitates feelings of intimacy and attachment. You might lie side by side holding each other, your bodies touching from the tips of your toes to your forehead. Try a position where he is sitting up with his back supported and you are lying with your head on his lap while he strokes your hair. Another trust position is lying next to each other, holding hands and being silent. Some couples use a "spoon" position where you lie with your chest against his back, put your arms around him, and breathe in unison with his rhythm. In another position, he lies on his back and you nestle your head against his shoulder, your faces close so that you can maintain eye contact. A trust position some couples value is sitting facing each other, keeping eye contact, putting one hand on your partner's heart. What adds to your sense of trust? Body contact, eye contact, feeling secure, being enveloped, talking, silence? Find at least one position where you feel intimate and trusting. Develop your unique trust position that establishes a solid base of physical security and connection.

In subsequent sexual experiences, when you become anxious, agitated, frustrated, or angry, utilize this trust position as a "port in the storm." Rather than ending a sexual experience on an anxious or frustrated note, switch to your trust position as a way of anchoring yourself. You can choose whether to continue the exercise or end the experience from your trust position. This helps you remain connected

and realize you can depend on each other. You trust you are an intimate team and your partner “has your back.”

#### *Fourth Exercise: Create Your Valued Sexual Scenario*

When a relationship is new, there is strong anticipation of being sexual even if the quality of sex is not particularly good. Sex serves as an affirmation of your desirability and desire to be a couple. Romantic love and passionate sex energize a new relationship and make it “magical”. It is the thrill of sexual exploration as well as energy that goes into making your relationship vital and erotic.

After the initial romantic love, passionate sex phase has dissipated, it takes most couples 3-6 months to develop a couple sexual style that balances intimacy, pleasure, and eroticism. Part of the process is creating couple sexual scenarios which are intimate and satisfying, the focus of this exercise. As a reminder, you are not a machine, so it is normal in the best of couples to occasionally have mediocre or negative sexual experiences. A sign of a healthy couple is your ability to accept and not overreact to negative experiences and to turn toward each other as intimate and erotic friends.

What do you value most in a sexual experience? Each individual develops their unique sexual scenario. Let the women introduce her scenario first. At another time the man can develop his.

When is your best time to be sexual? When waking up? After the morning paper? A “nooner”? Before or after a nap? Before dinner (sex as an appetizer) or after dinner (sex as dessert)? In the evening? Most couples have sex late at night; but few people say this is their favorite time.

How do you set your preferred sensual and sexual mood? Do you listen to music, go for a walk, talk, light candles, drink wine, take a bath, have 15 minutes of time alone and then come together, meet your partner at the door and lure him into the bedroom? As a prelude to being sexual some couples enjoy doing together things like shopping, working in the garden, going for a run, or sharing feelings. Many couples start touching and playing in the living room or den and do not move to the bedroom until both are turned on. Others prefer to start in the privacy of your bedroom. What is your favorite way to begin a sexual scenario? Remember, there is no right or wrong; it is your preference.

Once the scenario is under way, what is your favorite script? Do you like to take turns, or do you prefer mutual stimulation? Do you verbally express sexual feelings, or would you rather let your fingers do the talking? Do you prefer a slow build-up or do you begin intercourse as soon as you are aroused? Do you like multiple stimulation or one erotic focus at a time? Do you make use of all your senses—touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight—or does one element (observing your partner’s arousal, hearing soft moans, smelling sexy perfume, feeling sexual movement) turn you on? Develop the sexual scenario the way you want. Your partner is open to your guidance.

How do you transition from pleasuring and eroticism to intercourse? Some people prefer to begin intercourse at moderate levels of arousal, but many prefer not transitioning to intercourse until they are highly aroused. Do you want to initiate the transition or do you want your partner to? Who guides intromission? Do you prefer multiple stimulation during intercourse rather than a sole focus on thrusting? What is your preferred intercourse rhythm and type of thrusting (short, rapid thrusting; slow up-and-down thrusting; circular thrusting; changing intercourse positions)? Do you prefer being orgasmic during intercourse, or do you feel greater pleasure being orgasmic during erotic sex?

How would you like to end the scenario? Afterplay is the most neglected element of the sexual experience. Your needs and desires are important here, too. Do you like to lie and hold, sleep in your partner’s arms, engage in playful tickling, have a warm kiss, take a walk, read poetry, nap and start again, talk and come down together?

Then it is his turn to create a sexual scenario. He is free to design his own, which could be similar to or totally different from hers. Men fall into the trap of trying to outdo their partner. Sex is neither a competition nor a performance. You are not clones of each other. Be yourself-develop an initiation, script, and afterplay scenario that is special and satisfying for you.

## **Exercises that Act as Bridges to Desire - 2023**

### *First Exercise: Sexual Dates*

You make dates to go to a movie, play bridge, go to dinner. What about sexual dates? Setting times for a sexual date need not be formal or awkward. It can be romantic and fun. A sexual date allows you to anticipate being sexual as you would anticipate a sporting event or a play.

As with other exercises, we suggest taking turns. Divide the week into two parts – for example, Saturday at 5 p.m. until Wednesday at 9 a.m. for the woman to initiate and Wednesday at 10 a.m. until Saturday at 4 p.m. for the man. This is the “ping-pong” system of initiation. After your partner initiates, it is your turn. If your partner did not initiate during this time, it becomes your prerogative to do so. The commitment is for each person to make at least one initiation per week.

When it is your “ping,” set the time, place and sexual scenario. Do it your way. Do not try to second-guess your partner or compare your way with theirs. Make the initiation as inviting as possible. Be creative in your invitations. Examples include cooking a special dinner with sex as dessert, cuddling for half an hour in front of the fireplace before starting genital stimulation, calling before you leave work to suggest a sexual date, surprising your spouse by joining him in the shower, putting on your favorite music, bringing lotion to bed and spending 15 minutes giving your partner a sexual massage. Men can and do initiate creative sexual dates, contrary to the myth that romantic, seductive initiation is the woman’s domain.

The woman becomes comfortable with her ability to initiate. If you want sexuality to remain a vital part of your relationship, be open to creating and crossing bridges to sexual desire. Initiations could include waking your partner in the morning ( or from a nap or in the middle of the night) by sucking on his penis and putting him inside you. You can share old pictures or letters to set the mood, use your favorite R or X-rated movie and fast-forward to the sexiest parts, ask your partner to put the children to bed and meet him in the bedroom where a scented candle is burning and you are wearing his favorite corduroy shirt, get a babysitter and plan a hotel weekend in the city to roam through art museums, eat Italian food, and have sex without worrying about interruptions.

We cannot stress enough that sex does not just spontaneously happen. It requires thought, planning, and setting aside couple time. Approximately 80% of sexual encounters are planned or semi-planned. Enjoy spontaneous sexual experiences when they occur, but don’t fall into the trap of believing that spontaneous sex is more genuine than responsive sexual desire. Sexual dates are important bridges to desire.

### *Second Exercise: Overcoming Discrepancies in Sexual Desire*

If couples had to wait until both partners were equally desirous, frequency of sex would decrease by at least half. It is the norm, not the exception, for one partner to desire and

initiate sex more than the other. What poisons sexual desire is anger about nonsexual issues (which need to be dealt with outside the bedroom) and resentment over feeling sexually pressured. Under no circumstances is it acceptable to physically force or verbally coerce your partner to engage in sex. “Intimate coercion” has no place in your relationship. Sex is best when it is voluntary and pleasure oriented. Pressure and coercion lead to alienation and anger, and the ensuing resentment poisons sexual desire.

What can you do when one wants to have intercourse and the other does not? This exercise uses the “yes/no” technique to deal with desire discrepancy. Our culture socializes men to always say yes to sex, so the woman is stuck in the role of sexual gatekeeper. In fact, it is perfectly natural, normal, and healthy for men to say no to sex, and on occasion more than 80% have.

In this exercise, each partner has to say at least one “no.” The focus is on expanding your repertoire of what is acceptable when there is a desire discrepancy. The quality of the intimate experience is more important than frequency of intercourse. Sexual intimacy is reinforced by caring about each other’s feelings and sharing pleasure rather than perceiving sex as a goal-oriented power play.

This exercise involves a number of cycles rather than one structured experience. Each person will have several initiations. The initiator speaks from an awareness of what she wants – to feel desirable, attractive, and valued; unpredictability and playfulness; orgasm; time to be alone before erotic contact; multiple stimulation before and during intercourse; affectionate touch. Ask for and initiate activities you enjoy. The woman is aware that her partner will say no at least once (preferably more than once). This allows them to practice negotiating sensual and sexual alternatives. He will not just say no but will offer an alternative that suits his fancy and addresses her needs. For example, if she wants a whole body massage as a way of meeting her needs for sensuous time before erotic contact and he is lukewarm toward giving a body massage, he offers to draw a bubble bath or suggests building a fire and talking and touching in front of the fireplace. If her initiations have been co-opted because he is action oriented, she can offer a number of feeling-oriented, non-intercourse ways to intimately connect.

This illustrates the major struggle in desire discrepancy. The woman had a right to request a range of sensual and erotic experiences without him contending that only intercourse is real sex. She can suggest manually pleasuring him to orgasm, that they engage in non-genital pleasuring, that he pleasure her and she’ll decide if she wants a mutual sexual experience, that they have oral sex, that they share an activity (going for a walk, playing golf, going shopping) before being sexual, that he stimulate himself while she holds him. He can say no to suggestions he is not comfortable with, but he needs to say yes to at least one of her alternatives. There are many emotional, sensual, playful, and erotic ways to connect that may or may not evolve into intercourse.

A common male trap is using sex to meet nonsexual needs. Some men use sex like alcoholics use alcohol – to deal with emotions from anger to boredom, from excitement to emptiness, from celebration to depression. You can learn emotional coping strategies to deal with nonsexual problems. Sharing feelings is a better way to deal with sadness

than having intercourse. Celebrating a merit bonus with couple friends can make more sense than using sex as a reward when your partner is not feeling sexual.

The most common issue is low sexual desire. At the other extreme, some people use sex compulsively to avoid dealing with problems and emotions. Hyperactive sexual desire results in an alienated relationship. Sexual bridges are meant to encourage pleasure and intimacy. Couple sexuality is subverted when sexual initiations carry negative emotions and compulsive sex demands.

The man is urged to personalize his sexual invitations. He is less likely to be distracted by nonsexual factors such as fatigue, hunger, anger, alienation, and anxiety about children. This can be a sexual strength, but it can also be a source of misunderstanding and strife. She complains he wants sex, not her. Making your sexual invitations and requests personal and caring will avert this problem. Sex is good, but not when it's at the expense of your partner or relationship.

Will the experience of saying no to intercourse and yes to sensual and erotic alternatives resolve all desire discrepancies? Of course not, but it will allow you to stay intimate friends and provide greater flexibility and degrees of freedom in expressing your needs for intimacy and sexuality.

## **Dimensions of Good Enough Sex (GES) Model - 2023**

1. Sex is a positive dimension in life, an invaluable part of individual and couple desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction.
2. Relationship and sexual satisfaction are the ultimate focus and are essentially intertwined. You are an “intimate sexual team.” Sexuality involves a couple process of sharing pleasure, not an individual performance.
3. Realistic psychological, biomedical, and relational expectation are essential for sexual satisfaction.
4. Good physical health and positive behavioral habits are vital for sexual health. Value your sexual body and your partner’s sexual body.
5. Relaxation (psychological and physical) is the foundation for sexual pleasure and response.
6. Desire and satisfaction are more important than arousal and orgasm.
7. Valuing variable, flexible sexual experiences (the 85% approach) and abandoning the “need” for perfect individual sex performance inoculates you against sex dysfunction by reducing performance pressure, fear of failure, and partner rejection.
8. The five purposes for sex (pleasure, intimacy, tension reduction, self-esteem, reproduction) are integrated into your sexual relationship.
9. Be aware of and flexibly use the three sexual arousal styles (partner interaction, self-entrancement, role enactment).
10. Gender differences are respectfully valued and similarities mutually accepted.
11. Sex is integrated into real life and real life is integrated into sex. Sexuality is developing, growing, and evolving throughout your life. You can be sexual in your 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s.
12. Sexuality is personalized. Sex can be playful, energizing, spiritual, and special.

Resource: Metz, M., Epstein, N., and McCarthy, B. (2018). *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Sexual Dysfunction*.

## What is the Right Couple Sexual Style for You? - 2023

Most people begin as a romantic love/passionate sex/idealized couple. This very special phase (limerence (also called new relationship sex) lasts between 6 months and if you're lucky 2 years. The challenge is to create a couple sexual style which will enhance desire/pleasure/eroticism/ satisfaction. Couples whether married or cohabitating straight or gay, decide how to integrate intimacy and eroticism into your relationship, and how to balance your "sexual voice" (autonomy) with being an "intimate sexual team". Develop a mutually comfortable level of intimacy, share pleasure, value erotic scenarios and techniques, and maintain positive, realistic sexual expectations.

The four most common couple sexual styles (by order of frequency) are:

- Complementary—mine and ours
- Traditional—conflict-minimizing
- Best Friend—soul-mate
- Emotionally Expressive—fun, erotic, adventuresome

Contrary to "pop psych" there is not a "right" style which is best for all couples. Be aware that usually your couple sexual style is different than your relational style. Relational style means how you deal with differences and conflicts. The most common relational style is Best Friend. Each partner needs to be aware of your preferences, feelings, and values and choose the balance of intimacy/eroticism and autonomy/coupleness which enhance sexual desire and satisfaction. Be aware of strengths and vulnerabilities of each couple sexual style. Choose which is right for you.

### **Complementary Couple Sexual Style**

Complementary is the most common couple style because it balances each person's sexual voice with being a securely bonded team. Each partner has the freedom to initiate a sexual encounter, say no, offer an alternative way to connect, value both intimacy and eroticism, and play out your preferred erotic and intercourse scenarios. What are the vulnerabilities (traps) for this sexual style? The major trap is treating sex with "benign neglect"—sex falls into a routine pattern. The second trap is that when life changes, for example, having a baby, rather than valuing couple time, you fall into traditional parenting roles and lose erotic playfulness.

### **Traditional Couple Sexual Style**

These couples follow traditional gender roles where sexual initiation and intercourse is the man's domain while intimacy and affection is the woman's domain. This is the most stable couple style, high on clarity and security, and low on drama and the need to negotiate sexual issues. A vulnerability is role rigidity and with aging the man finds it difficult to function sexually without her sexual involvement. Another trap is not dealing with sexual problems until they are chronic. The woman feels her needs for intimate connection and validation are ignored and overwhelmed by his sexual agenda.

### **Best Friend Couple Sexual Style**

Best Friend is the cultural ideal—the most intimate relationship. Sharing intimacy and eroticism with the same person, feeling accepted and loved for who you really are (warts and all), and maintaining a secure bond, are powerfully validating emotionally and sexually. However, this is a very risky sexual choice. You feel so close that you de-eroticize your partner. The woman feels disappointed in the man and relationship because he fails to meet unrealistically high expectations. There is so much emphasis on

mutuality that you don't take sexual risks and thus have low sexual frequency. The Best Friend sexual style is unable to be resilient when dealing with difficult issues such as an affair.

### **Emotionally Expressive Couple Sexual Style**

Emotionally Expressive is the stuff of movies and love songs—vibrant, playful, erotic, high-energy sex. These couples use sex to heal emotional conflicts. Value sexual experimentation and risk taking, enjoy sexual fun and intensity. The traps are too much emotional and sexual drama drain your bond and threaten relationship stability, overemphasize sexual experimentation and eroticism at the expense of intimacy and security, use sex to avoid dealing with problems, and this level of intensity wears the partners out.

### **Choosing the Right Style for You**

A “wise” choice of a couple sexual style challenges you to weigh both emotional and practical factors, choosing not just for the short term but what brings sexual satisfaction over the long term. Choose a mutually acceptable sexual style which facilitates desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction. You want sexuality to play a 15-20% role in enhancing relationship vitality and satisfaction. Emphasize the strengths of your chosen couple sexual style and be mindful of traps/vulnerabilities so these don't subvert sexuality. You want to celebrate yourself as a sexual person and experience bonding as a sexual couple. Usually the relational and sexual styles are different. For most couples, the Best Friend relational style and the Complementary sexual style is the best decision.

Resource: McCarthy, B. & McCarthy, E. (2009). Developing Your Couple Sexual Style.

## Three Styles of Arousal/Eroticism - 2023

Arousal/eroticism is an integral component in the desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction mantra. There are three sexual arousal/eroticism styles (by frequency): (1) partner interaction arousal, (2) self-entrancement arousal, (3) role enactment arousal.

Partner interaction arousal is based on the principle that the major aphrodisiac is an involved, aroused partner. This arousal type is portrayed in R-rated movies; each partner's arousal enhances the other's. Partner interaction arousal is like a sexual dance where each partner has an integral role. It is an example of the "give to get" pleasure guideline. Almost all couples utilize partner interaction arousal.

Self-entrancement arousal is the second most common arousal/eroticism pattern. It is best illustrated by the traditional sensate focus exercises. The giving partner touches for himself rather than trying to second guess the preferences of the receiving partner.

The receiving partner is focused on her pleasure. She is active not passive, aware of her receptivity/responsivity pattern. As couples age, they are likely to increasingly utilize self-entrancement arousal. The couple are open to asynchronous scenarios, realizing that not all sex needs to be mutual.

Role Enactment arousal/eroticism is the most advocated (especially on the internet and in self-help articles) and contentious style. Role enactment arousal involves external resources to heighten the erotic charge including X-rated videos, sex toys, playing out erotic fantasies, and using kink and BDSM scenarios. Clinically, the issue is whether role enactment arousal is the right fit for the couple. It is a good fit for the

Emotionally Expressive couple sexual style, and a poor fit for the Best Friend and Traditional couple sexual styles. Many couples find role enactment arousal scenarios are intimidating rather than empowering. It raises self-consciousness, and there is nothing more anti-erotic than self-consciousness.

A majority of married men and women use erotic fantasies as a bridge to desire and to build erotic flow to orgasm. A common misunderstanding is the belief that fantasy is an indicator of what the person really wants. In the great majority of cases, fantasy and behavior are very different domains. Commonly, acting out an erotic fantasy results in a "sexual dud", and can rob the fantasy of its erotic charge.

The key is making a wise decision of what arousal/eroticism style (s) is the best fit for you. Some couples use all three styles. Commonly, couples use partner interaction arousal and augment that with self-entrancement arousal. On occasion some couples use role enactment arousal, but others are uncomfortable with that arousal style. Choose what enhances eroticism for your relationship.

Resource: Metz, M., Epstein, N., & McCarthy, B. (2018). Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Sexual Dysfunction.

## Relapse Prevention Strategies and Guidelines - 2023

1. Set aside quality couple time and discuss what you need to do individually and as a couple to maintain a satisfying and secure sexual relationship.
2. Every 6 months have a formal follow-up meeting either by yourselves or with a therapist to ensure you remain aware and do not slip back into unhealthy sexual attitudes, behaviors, or feelings. Set a new couple sexual goal for the next 6 months.
3. Every 4-8 weeks plan a nondemand pleasuring, playful, or erotic date where there is a prohibition on intercourse. This allows you to experiment with sensual stimuli (alternative pleasuring position, body lotion, or new setting), a playful scenario (sex play in the shower or a silly sexual game), or an erotic scenario (a different oral sex position or engaging in an asynchronous scenario rather than mutual sex). This reminds you of the value of sharing pleasure and developing a broad-based, flexible sexual relationship rather than focusing on intercourse as an individual pass-fail performance test.
4. Five to fifteen percent of sexual experiences are mediocre, dissatisfying or dysfunctional. That is normal, not a reason to panic or feel like a failure. Maintaining positive, realistic expectations about couple sexuality is a major relapse prevention resource.
5. Accept occasional lapses, but do not allow a lapse to become a relapse. Treat a dysfunctional sexual experience as a normal variation which can provide an important learning. Remember, you are a sexual couple, not a perfectly functioning sex machine. Whether once every 10 times, once a month, or once a year, you will have a lapse and experience dysfunction or dissatisfaction. Laugh or shrug off the experience and make a date in the next 1-3 days when you have the time and energy for an intimate, pleasurable, erotic experience. A relapse means giving up and reverting to the cycle of anticipatory anxiety, pass-fail intercourse performance, leading to frustration, embarrassment, and avoidance.
6. The importance of setting aside quality couple time—especially intimacy dates and a weekend away without children—cannot be over emphasized. Couples report better sex on vacation, validating the importance of getting away, even if only for an afternoon.
7. There is not “one right way” to be sexual. Each couple develops a unique style of initiation, pleasuring, eroticism, intercourse, and afterplay. Do not treat your couple sexual style with benign neglect, be open to modifying or adding something new each year.
8. Good Enough Sex (GES) has a range from great to disappointing. The single most important technique in relapse prevention is to accept and not overreact to experiences that are mediocre, dissatisfying, or dysfunctional. Take pride in being sexually accepting and having a resilient couple sexual style.
9. Develop a range of intimate, pleasurable, and erotic ways to connect, reconnect, and maintain connection. These include five gears (dimensions) of touch.
  1. Affectionate touch (clothes on)—kissing, hand-holding, hugging.
  2. Non-genital sensual touch (clothed, semi-clothed, or nude)—massage, cuddling on the couch, touching before going to sleep or on awakening.

3. Playful touch (semi-clothed or nude)—mixing non-genital and genital touch—romantic or erotic dancing, enjoying a “French kiss”, touching while showering or bathing, “making out” on the couch, whole body massage.
  4. Erotic, non-intercourse touch—using manual, oral, rubbing, or vibrator stimulation for high arousal and/or orgasm for one or both partners.
  5. Intercourse—View intercourse as a natural continuation of the pleasuring/eroticism process, not a pass-fail individual performance. Transition to intercourse at high levels of erotic flow and utilize multiple stimulation before and during intercourse.
10. Keep your sexual relationship vital. Continue to make sexual requests and be open to exploring erotic scenarios. Maintain a flexible sexual relationship that energizes your bond and facilitates desire and desirability. Couples who share intimacy, pleasure, erotic scenarios and planned as well as spontaneous sexual encounters, have a vital sexual relationship. The more ways you maintain an intimate connection, the easier it is to avoid relapse.

Resource: McCarthy, B. (2015). Sex Made Simple.

## Resources - 2023

- I. Professional Books:
  1. Hall, Kathryn & Binik, Irv (2020). Principles and Practice of Sex Therapy. (6<sup>th</sup> edition). Guilford.
  2. Metz, Michael, Epstein, Norm, & McCarthy, Barry (2018). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Sexual Dysfunction. Routledge.
  3. McCarthy, Barry (2015). Sex Made Simple. Pesi Publications.
- II. Journals:
  1. Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy
  2. Sexual and Relationship Therapy
- III. Professional Organizations and Referrals to Sex Therapists:
  1. American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists  
<http://www.aasect.org>
  2. Society for Sex Therapy and Research  
<http://www.starnet.org>
- IV. Lay Public Books:
  1. Brotto, L. (2018). *Better Sex Through Mindfulness*. Greystone.
  2. Castleman, M. (2021). *Sizzling Sex for Life*. New York: Skyhorse Press.
  3. Foley, Sallie, Kope, Sally, & Sugrue, Dennis (2012). *Sex Matters for Women*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Guilford.
  4. Kleinplatz Peggy & Menard, A. Dana (2020). *Magnificent Sex*. Routledge.
  5. Maltz, Wendy (2012). *The Sexual Healing Journey*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). William Morrow.
  6. McCarthy, Barry & McCarthy, Emily (2012). *Sexual Awareness*. (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Routledge.
  7. McCarthy, Barry & McCarthy, Emily (2018). *Finding Your Sexual Voice*. Routledge.
  8. McCarthy, Barry & McCarthy, Emily (2019). *Enhancing Couple Sexuality*. Routledge.
  9. McCarthy, Barry & McCarthy, Emily (2020). *Rekindling Desire*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). Routledge.
  10. McCarthy, Barry & McCarthy, Emily (2021). *Contemporary Male Sexuality* (2021). Routledge.
  11. McCarthy, Barry. & McCarthy, Emily. *Couple Sexuality After 60*. Routledge.
  12. Metz, Michael & McCarthy, Barry (2003). *Coping with Premature Ejaculation*. New Harbinger.
  13. Metz, Michael & McCarthy, Barry (2004). *Coping with Erectile Dysfunction*. New Harbinger.
  14. Mintz, Laurie (2018). *Becoming Cliterate*. Harper.
  15. Nagoski, Emily (2015). *Come as You Are*. Simon and Schuster.
  16. Perel, Esther (2006). *Mating in Captivity*. Harper-Collins.
  17. Snyder, Doug, Baucom, Don, & Gordon, Kristi (2023). *Getting Past the Affair*. (2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition). New York: Guilford.
  18. Gordon, Kristi (2023). *Getting Past the Affair*. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Guilford.
  19. Snyder, Stephen (2018). *Love Worth Making*. St. Martin's.
  20. Weiner, Linda & Avery-Clark, Constance (2017). *Sensate Focus in Sex Therapy*. Routledge.