

Sex and Intimacy

The Marital Sexual Relationship

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Sustaining physical attraction requires setting one's spouse as the priority.

The Situation

Bob and Mary have been married nine years and have two small children, ages eight and six. Each have demanding full-time jobs and they pride themselves on being involved in their children's school and social activities.

What initially began as a positive and rewarding sexual relationship in this committed modern couple's marriage has slowly diminished in sexual desire and frequency. While they continue to profess to love one another, Bob complains they each are too busy and over-stressed, while Mary often says she's too tired for sex. Bob also sees himself as taking a back seat to Mary's involvement with their children.

While not wishing to complain, Bob thinks their marriage is in trouble. He wants to make their lack-luster marriage more satisfying. Mary can't see a way for her to regain the old desire that was present in the earlier years – B.C. (before children).

A Response

Marriage is a call to on-going intimacy – not only sexual intimacy, but also the intentional develop of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual intimacy. Each dimension of Bob and Mary's intimacy connects with the others. So, if they neglect emotional bonding or don't pay ongoing attention to each other, all parts of the relationship suffer, including the physical expression of love.

Although sexual intimacy is pleasurable, its importance in marriage is not just to have fun; it also strengthens the couple's bond, helping them to face the many challenges of their life together. Studies report that couples who are passionate about each other can more easily solve problems, including such things as dealing with children, extended family, and financial issues.

Sexual intimacy may have come easily in Bob and Mary's earlier stages of marriage – a period likely laced with kissing and holding, loving words and deeds, romantic dinners, walks, and sharing of thoughts and feelings – that, later may suffer given the rigors of a growing family. In time, couples like Bob and Mary may settle for security and certainty at the cost of playfulness and passion in marriage.

Sustaining physical attraction, however, often takes a conscious decision to put time and effort into a dimension of the relationship that used to come effortlessly. It requires setting one's spouse as the priority – before work, before cleaning, and even before kids. For Bob and Mary this may mean finding babysitters, having occasional dinners alone (without children), going on dates, and bringing to their relationship new ways of connecting.

For Mary and Bob, focusing on intimacy may require making the effort to break out of a routine and investing energy into cultivating creativity in their lovemaking. Part of what makes a relationship romantic is the excitement that comes with discovering a new person and noticing that that person cares about you. Of course, this doesn't mean marrying a new person but rather, courting your spouse as though you are still bent on winning his or her love. Basically, it means re-tooling those very things that were a part of your earlier relationship but without the threat of rejection or loss.

One dimension of masculine/feminine sexuality worth exploring is how spouses complement each other. Just as magnets are drawn to each other from different poles, so too men and women are drawn to each other, not only because of similarities, but also for the differences.

For example, men more often show passion by pursuing and initiating lovemaking, focusing on purpose, protection and commitment; while women playfully tend to provoke and entice, focusing on vulnerability and feelings. Exaggerating these two polarities can stimulate passion. In our culture these gender energies often are judged to be too narrow.

For example, women may hesitate to appear "too feminine" for fear of being viewed as unintelligent or manipulative. Men face the possibility of coming across as insensitive. Equality and mutuality can get confused with sameness. But sameness is not very exciting. Within marriage, couples need to cultivate a healthy balance of both certainty and excitement. But therein lies the basic problem: Love seeks closeness while desire needs distance. Too much distance, however, might cause a lack of connection, while too much sameness destroys the attraction of two unique individuals. This is the essential paradox of intimacy and sex.

Love enjoys knowing everything about the other, while desire needs mystery. If love grows by repetition and familiarity, eroticism is numbed by repetition. It thrives on mystery, the novel, and the unexpected. Love is about having; desire is about wanting. Desire benefits from ongoing elusiveness. But too often, as couples settle into the comforts of love, they cease to fan the flame of desire.

In sacramental marriage the couple's call to love and be loved shows the world a glimpse of God's unconditional, exquisite, and passionate love for each of us. Scripture uses passionate images of married love to describe God's unimaginable love for us all.

In Catholic marriage the bride and groom are the ministers of the sacrament while the priest is the official witness of the church. As ministers, it is each spouse's task to give the other an experience of being loved. In simple language this means that one's spouse must know he or she is loved and comes first in the other's life. It is in making each other number one that intimacy can blossom into an ever-deepening love. The call to be lover and beloved is a deeply spiritual call. Marital partners are challenged to cultivate marital eroticism. By doing so they embody marriage's mystical meaning, both as a source of aliveness, and a pathway to salvation.

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