

COUPLE DISCUSSION

Prepare-Enrich Conversation Prompts

In the following questions, affection is defined as “any verbal or nonverbal expression that communicates love in a non-sexual way.” Take turns in answering the following questions:

- What does “affection” mean to you?
- How much affection was there in your families growing up (verbal or nonverbal)?
- How did you respond to the affection (or lack of affection) you received?
- How did your mother show affection?
- How did your father show affection?
- On a scale of 1-10, how much affection do you want in your marriage?
- What was the attitude toward sex in your family? Was it talked about?

- Where did you learn about sex?
- Have you fully disclosed your sexual history to your partner? If not, why not?

Section 6: Sex and Affection

(from “201 Relationship Questions” by Barrie Davenport)

1. How often would you like to have sex?
2. What sexual fantasies do you have that we can enjoy together?
3. How can we improve our sex life?
4. Do you feel comfortable talking with me about your sexual needs? If not, why?
5. How much foreplay before sex is important to you?
6. How can I make you feel more desirable and sexy?
7. How much non-sexual affection would you like?
8. What kind of affection feels loving and good to you?
9. How much affection in public are you comfortable with?
10. When do you need affection the most?

Follow-up: Are there any behavior adjustments you’d like to request from your partner related to your sex life? What specific action steps will you both take to help enhance your sex life? Write these down and determine how and when you will initiate these changes or actions.

Mindful Relationship Habit #22

(from "Mindful Relationship Habits" by Barrie Davenport & S.J. Scott)

Spice Up Your Sex Life

We probably don't need to tell you this, but sex is good for your relationship. A number of studies reinforce the obvious: the more sex you and your partner have, the higher your relationship satisfaction, regardless of your age. Having sex once a week is enough to give you a lingering happiness surge and keep you close as a couple.

In addition to making you happier and closer as a couple, sex has so many physical and emotional benefits that you may want to stop reading and just go have sex right now. Or wait 30 seconds and read the benefits below first.

According to science, an active sex life:

- Increases level of commitment and emotional intimacy
- Boosts self-esteem and makes you feel younger
- Lowers the level of the stress hormone cortisol
- Lowers feelings of insecurity
- Reinforces a more positive attitude
- Makes you calmer and less irritable
- Relieves stress and reduces depression
- Reduces the risk of physical illness
- Improves immunity and helps prevent colds and flu
- Reduces pain by increasing endorphins
- Improves overall fitness and burns about 200 calories (per 30 minutes of active sex)
- Lowers mortality rates
- Reduces the risk of prostate cancer
- Improves posture
- Reduces risk of heart disease
- Helps prevent yeast infections
- Lightens menstrual periods and cramps
- Firms stomach and buttocks
- Lowers blood pressure
- Improves sleep
- Improves digestion
- Improves sense of smell
- Improves bladder control
- Promotes healthier teeth
- Increases DHEA hormone, which makes your skin healthier
- Increases circulation
- Improves memory
- Produces brain chemicals to stimulate the growth of new dendrites
- Improves pelvic muscle tone
- Boosts libido

Remember the early days of your relationship when having amazing, mind-blowing sex wasn't something you worried about? You didn't need to be reminded of the benefits - sex happened spontaneously and with wild abandon.

Now you have a few years under your belts together (pun intended), and perhaps the sex is less frequent and less novel. If this is true for you, you aren't alone. Fully one-third of Americans 18 to 59 have sex less than once a month according to research. So what has happened over the years to throw cold water on your sex life?

For most couples, just the passion-sapping demands of modern life are enough to make your libidos limp. The time and effort involved in your careers, household chores, childrearing, and life obligations can drain you of energy. By the end of the day, one or both of you is so exhausted that sex feels more like a chore than a pleasure.

Hormonal changes, loss of desire, pornography, unresolved conflict, alcohol or drug use, and awkwardness initiating sexual encounters all can contribute to less-than-satisfying physical intimacy.

Another barrier to a healthy physical relationship is the discomfort many of us have communicating our sexual needs. Sex can be one of the most difficult topics to discuss due to embarrassment or fear of rejection. But a breakdown in communication about sex can result in some unfortunate and serious consequences for your relationship.

If you saw the movie *Hope Springs*, about a middle-aged couple whose marriage is unraveling, you can see how the inability to be open and honest about sex leads to a sad and slow drifting apart where the couple lives more like distant roommates than lovers.

Even the closest of couples have trouble talking openly and honestly about sex. Canadian researcher E. Sandra Byers found that rates of discussing sexual needs with an intimate partner, even in committed long-term relationships, were surprisingly low.

Maybe it's because we know that anything we reveal about our sexual needs and desires has the potential to scare, offend, and unsettle our partner. We fear that saying the wrong thing about our own sexual tastes or assumptions might expose us as foolish, ignorant, or even deprived.

However, in the face of any discomfort, embarrassment, and anxiety--you need to be able to say, "I like this, I prefer this over that, I fantasize about this." You need to find each other's bodies familiar and comfortable territory that you explore without shame or embarrassment.

You also need to be able to discuss why there might be a loss of interest and frequency in sex or why there might be a performance issue. According to many experts, a loss of sexual desire is often a symptom of deeper issues in the relationship, like a breakdown in communication in general. Unraveling issues with your sex life can help you address these problems if you both remain open to exploring your emotions.

There are so many compelling reasons to be having sex regularly. So don't allow this vital part of your relationship fizzle out or limp along on autopilot. Of all habits you can practice as a couple, this one has the most potential for fun and pleasure!

How to Develop This Habit

Hopefully, you're convinced that communicating about sex is necessary in order to improve your physical intimacy and make it more exciting. Knowing this is true, you have to make time to discuss it.

If you haven't talked about sex much in the past, you may need one initial conversation to discuss your current feelings about your sex life in general. Discuss your discomfort with talking about sex and try to be more open about your attitudes and beliefs about sex.

During this conversation, schedule a regular time to talk about your sex life and each other's needs, desires, and fantasies. Maybe it's once a week or once a month, but put it on the calendar until you both get more comfortable naturally initiating the conversation.

Be sure you talk in a space that is comfortable and free of distractions and interruptions. Also, make sure you talk when you are both in a good frame of mind, rather than choosing a time when you're tired or irritated.

To help you with this conversation, answer the following questions about your sexual relationship with your spouse or partner. For any item in which you answered "somewhat true," make notes about why you don't feel the statement is true for you.

Discuss your answers and comments with your partner and identify areas you both feel you need to improve. Devise a plan for having regular conversations about your sexual intimacy and the efforts you are making together.

Here are 17 statements you could consider:

1. In general, I am satisfied with our sexual relationship.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true
2. I am happy with the frequency of sex between us.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true
3. I am happy with the amount and kind of foreplay before sex.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true
4. I am happy with the amount of nonsexual touch and affection with my partner.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true
5. I feel my partner and I have the same level of sexual desire.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true
6. I feel safe and comfortable initiating sex with my partner.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true
7. I feel safe and comfortable turning down sex with my partner.
 Very true Mostly true Somewhat true Not true

8. I feel safe and secure when my partner turns down sex with me.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
9. I feel desired by my partner.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
10. I feel comfortable telling my partner my partner my sexual desires and fantasies.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
11. My partner knows what turns me on sexually.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
12. I feel like we can work through our sexual differences and find compromise.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
13. I feel emotionally connected to my partner during sex.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
14. I feel completely at ease during sexual encounters with my partner.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
15. I am in touch with my own sexual needs.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
16. I am comfortable with my body and desirability.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true
17. I am comfortable talking with my partner about our sex life.
___ Very true ___ Mostly true ___ Somewhat true ___ Not true

Also, here are some questions to help you clarify and communicate your sexual needs:

- What might make talking about sex with your partner more comfortable?
- How often would you and your partner like to have conversations about your sex life together? Daily? Weekly? Monthly?
- What is one sexual fantasy you'd like to share with your partner?
- What are your sexual boundaries? Are there sexual activities you won't participate in?
- What are three things you find sexually attractive about your partner?
- If you have lost sexual desire, or if your sex life has take a nosedive, what do you think is the bigger issue behind this problem?
- What do you think needs to happen to address this bigger issue?

Be positive and gentle with your words.

We all feel vulnerable about our sexual attractiveness, and the last thing you want to do is to criticize or shame your partner. As you discuss your answers to the previous questions, remember your goal is to improve your sex life and intimacy as a couple.

Frame all of your concerns, desires, and needs in positive and loving language. So rather than saying, “You never kiss me during lovemaking,” say something like, “I love the way you kiss and would really like more kissing when we make love.”

As the old saying goes, “You catch more flies with honey than vinegar,” and the same holds true with your partner. Reinforce what you like, and ask for something different in a kind and gentle way. Don’t say, “I don’t like when you touch me there,” but say something like, “Can we explore touching me in different places during foreplay?”

Talk through differing sexual needs and how to reach compromise.

We all have different preferences about how often we want sex, what time of day and where we want it, how much foreplay we need, how much nonsexual touch we need before sex, and how much cuddling we need after sex.

Men and women tend to be different in these needs, and these differences can lead to conflict and frustration if they aren’t addressed. Be open with one another about your differing needs, and then talk about how to resolve these differences through compromise and negotiation.

Devise a ritual for initiating sex that works for both of you. Maybe it’s as straightforward as saying, “I want to make love.” Or it could be a physical gesture or a written invitation.

More importantly, find a way to refuse a sexual encounter that doesn’t make your partner feel rejected or unattractive. If you are totally not in the mood, then say something like, “I love making love to you, and you are so sexy, but right now I’m really not in the mood. Can I take a rain check?”

As you get more comfortable talking about sex, discuss your fantasies or specific sexual desires.

It may be hard to look your partner in the eye and tell him or her your secret desire to have sex while tied to the bedpost or to explain in graphic detail exactly where you want to be stimulated and how. But having these conversations can definitely spice up your sex life and empower your partner to please you in ways he or she may not have considered.

If you can’t verbalize these fantasies at first, write them down and share them with your partner that way. Just discussing your fantasies, whether or not you act them out, can be a form of foreplay or intimacy.

If you are both game for whatever is brought forward, that’s great. But there may be times when one of you doesn’t feel comfortable with the fantasy of the other. You need to respect your partner’s boundaries without pressuring him or her, just as you should be able to share your fantasies without your partner shaming or judging you.

Make sex a priority.

If your lives are so busy that you can't seem to find time for sex, or you always feel too exhausted, you need to address these issues first. If you value sexual intimacy as an important part of your relationship you need to prioritize it.

One way to do this is by scheduling a day and time for sex, just as you set aside time for meals and other activities. This may not feel very romantic or spontaneous, but it ensures that sex happens and doesn't get pushed aside in favor of the latest Netflix series or football game.

Set aside a time for sex when you know you won't be stressed, overly tired, or potentially interrupted by kids or anyone else. Hire a babysitter to take the kids out of the house if necessary. Try to keep the hours before making love calm and free of conflict so you don't have any lingering irritations between you.

Develop a special ritual around your encounters with candles, music, lingerie, and lotions. Or surprise one another with something different--a fantasy acted out, a long sexy shower together, using toys, or even a heated quickie.

Advance your sex education.

Couples often get stuck in a rut with their sexual encounters. They begin the same way, they happen in the same room, and they unfold with the same positions and mechanics. When there's little creativity and novelty, sex becomes mundane.

You may need some inspiration and even education to spice up your physical encounters. There are hundreds of books, videos, and toys you can purchase at the touch of a button (and in the privacy of your home) to enlighten you on new ways to explore and expand your sexual encounters.

Try to view this experimentation as a way to enhance your overall intimacy--not just as a way to achieve a better orgasm. Allow your sexual encounters to be close and pleasurable rituals from beginning to end where you aren't trying to achieve anything except to connect and explore each other's bodies.

Divide chores equally for better sex.

Yes, you read that correctly. Dividing your chores is the new aphrodisiac. A recent study shows that when partners feel there is a more equal division of household chores, sexual intimacy improves.

"Feelings and fairness and satisfaction with the division of housework are central to a couples' relationship satisfaction, which is strongly related to sexual intimacy," says the authors of the study, Daniel L. Carlson, Amanda J. Miller, Sharon Sassler, and Sarah Hanson.

If one partner is handling more of the load, he or she will begin to feel resentful and overwhelmed, emotions that don't inspire romantic desire.

If you want to improve your sex life, work together to negotiate a fair and equal division of labor around the house and with child-rearing, based on your work schedules and other obligations.

Talk about the issues that may be behind a lack of desire.

If your sex life has taken a nosedive, and it's lasted for a while, there might be a deeper emotional reason. It could be that you are angry or you feel wounded by your partner. Maybe you feel insecure about your attractiveness or desirability. There might be something about your partner (like weight gain, for example) making him or her less desirable to you.

Some of these issues are less emotionally charged than others. Saying, "I don't feel like making love until we work through last week's argument," is a lot easier to express than, "I don't feel like making love because you've gained so much weight."

But unless these issues are addressed, they will fester and slowly erode your close bond. If there's a problem related to sex or your sexual desire that you fear might wound your partner or that you're afraid to address, then go meet with a relationship counselor together. A trained counselor can help you navigate the situation and find solutions. Don't let discomfort or anxiety keep you from having a satisfying sexual relationship.