

Satisfying Sexuality

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This article is derived from a lecture I did on CTN, the community cable television station, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. It was part of a series called “**Asking New Questions, Finding New Answers--Contemporary Issues in Psychology.**” I am a licensed professional counselor in the Ann Arbor metro area, and enjoy presenting lectures on issues that people tend to seek counseling about. Sexuality is, without a doubt, one of those issues.

Being a mental health professional is a challenge sometimes. It is sometimes difficult to try and offer opinions, without coming off as having an “I am an expert and know all the answers” kind of attitude. In regards to sexuality in particular, I at times ask myself; “Do I really have any right trying to define what “good sex” and “bad sex” is? Isn’t that always a personal determination? To some degree, it is personal, but I have come to believe that, in fact, there does seem to be **some** universal wisdom that can be taught about sexuality. I don’t claim to have the “be all” and “end all” answers about sexuality, if I did, I’d be a much more famous (and richer) author than I am. However, I do think I’ve accumulated some valuable insights which I will outline in this article.

I have interviewed men and women of all ages, from many different walks of life for over thirty years. I had a lot of curiosity about the topic of sexuality long before I was a professional counselor. I was always eager to engage any willing person in conversation about sex. What I discovered again and again from my discussions with people, is that a substantial number of people are not as satisfied with their sex lives as they would like to be and some people will even openly admit to being downright unhappy with their sex lives. So I’m hoping I can offer some wisdom to help people develop more satisfying expressions of their sexuality.

I think it makes sense to start this discussion with a brief historical summary. The concept of “Satisfying Sexuality” is a relatively new concept for humanity. In centuries past, people did not spend much time and energy discussing their various options for sexual/romantic relationships and encounters. Peoples’ freedom to explore sexuality was extremely limited for a number of reasons:

- 1) Up until the late 1960’s, there was no reliable birth control: Having sex meant having children. Having sex with multiple partners would have meant lots of children with lots of different people: This was simply not feasible.
- 2) Women were economically dependent on men. The entire social and economic structure of society was built on lifelong, monogamous marriage, so women and children were guaranteed support.
- 3) There was no cure for venereal disease, and therefore venereal disease had very serious consequences including blindness, insanity and death.

For these reasons, governments and churches tried to limit sexuality to legally sanctioned marriage. Of course there were always exceptions. Prostitution has been around at least since since Biblical times. And certainly, in every century, there were people of every class who found the idea of one sexual partner in a lifetime too confining, and broke the mold. But, the risks of pregnancy and venereal disease, and women’s economic dependency on men, were enough to steer most people down the safe path of celibacy until marriage and then lifelong monogamy.

Then came the sexual and cultural revolution of the 1960's. The term "revolution" is indeed fitting. Webster's definition of "revolution" is :

"to bring about great or radical change; to alter drastically"

The sexual revolution certainly did change things!!! The 1960's brought effective birth control, economic freedom for women, and a turning away from Christianity's strict moral code regarding sexuality. The sexual revolution was mind boggling. Instead of being limited to one lifelong sexual partner we could in theory have as many lovers as we wanted in a lifetime. Talk about a quantum leap!!!

I was part of the first generation to enjoy this new found sexual freedom. I think my generation's first reaction was like a kid in a candy store. The philosophy that abounded when I was a young adult was "Have as much sex as you can with whomever you can!" I remember slogans like: "Free love", and "If it feels good, do it". People were being prompted to cast aside their Victorian values and enjoy sex for all it was worth.

Well...after a few years it became clear that "If it feels good do it" was a more complex idea than it seemed initially. I have had many people sit down and tell me this same story:

"As a young man/woman I thought the idea of having sex with a lot of different people sounded fantastic. And I did it for a few years. But it didn't turn out to be quite as much fun as I expected, once the initial thrill wore off. I finally had to ask myself, why as I doing this?"

Sexual freedom, it turned out was confusing. My generation had no elders to ask questions to about sexuality. Our parents and aunts and uncles and grandparents had no answers for us; they could not give us advice about freedoms and realities they had never experienced. My generation therefore had to thrash around ourselves and try to and answer the question:

"What kinds of choices regarding sexuality bring the most amount of happiness and satisfaction?"

So, thrash around we did, for about twenty years. Not only did my generation experiment with having lots of lovers in succession, but we checked out orgies, and group marriages/relationships; and of course it was in my generation that homosexuality came out of the closet. It was kind of an "Anything Goes" couple of decades.

Then in the mid 1980's, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome [AIDS] hit. For decades, venereal disease had been nothing to worry about – take some antibiotics and you were good to go. Now we were unexpectedly hit with a fatal sexually transmitted disease. People became panic stricken. There were many catastrophic, dooms day predictions made. The government launched a massive campaign to educate people about the risks of AIDS. Sex education bans in schools were lifted. Condoms were made readily available and free. The government began requiring AIDS tests before granting marriage licenses. The religious right began proclaiming God sent AIDS to punish us for our decades of promiscuity. It began to appear that the 1960's generation was going to be a blip in history-- the only generation to enjoy sexual freedom.

But, slowly the sensationalism began to die down. The government's premarital testing resulted in so few positive findings that it was soon discontinued. A few brave voices began to question the government's and media's statistics and dooms day predictions. Dissenting statistics began to surface. It turned out that the government had been making future AIDS projections based on past statistics; before we even knew the disease existed. Journalists like Michael Fumento began pointing out that some of the government's reaction to AIDS was a bit off-base. Mr. Fumento wrote an extremely well documented

book entitled The Myth of Heterosexual AIDS. He made a lot of excellent points. Take for instance the slogan:

“Reduce your # of partners.”

Mr. Fumento pointed out that, the reality is, you can have sex with 500 people, and if none of them are HIV positive, you won't get AIDS, and conversely you can have sex with one HIV positive person and you can get AIDS. As people began to realize that the risk of AIDS to non-drug-using heterosexuals was grossly exaggerated, the “Safe Sex” campaign which promoted the use of condoms for each and every sexual encounter for every sexually active person in the U.S. began to be viewed as over-zealous and oppressive, and was abandoned by many people.

AIDS is, without a doubt, a real disease, that has, and continues to kill a substantial number of people. However, when all is said and done, AIDS did not turn out to be another Bubonic Plague, and it therefore did not put and end to the sexual revolution. We are therefore back facing the question the sexual revolution prompted us to ask back in the 1960's: **“What kinds of choices regarding sexuality bring the most amount of happiness and satisfaction?”** So let me now take a stab at answering that question.

The first point I will make in tackling this question is there are two levels to sexuality; the physical and the psychological/spiritual. Let me discuss the physical level first. **I would list step one in achieving satisfying sexual relationships as learning about one's physical preferences.** I therefore believe that some amount of sexual experimentation with different partners is helpful. I think getting a life long sexual partner as a surprise package on your wedding night is absurd!! I'm not talking about “the kid in the candy store” level of sleeping around that happened in the 1960's, I'm talking about a moderate amount. In order for long term monogamy to work and feel good, it's important to have good sexual compatibility with your partner. Not that you should expect to find an A+, but settling for a “D” is not a good idea. People's physical preferences regarding sex are as different as fish in the sea. I am talking here about things like the following:

Do you like an hour of kissing before having intercourse, or two minutes?

What position do you like to have intercourse in?

Do you like to do it the same way, or do you like variety?

How do you like to be touched and caressed? Touching can feel wonderful or it can feel mechanical or irritating, depending on the touching compatibility you have with your partner.

Do you like to talk first, during, or immediately after sex, or do you prefer silence?

Do you like soft kissing or deep hard kissing?

How much cuddling do you like before or after orgasmic stimulation?

Do you like oral sex or not?

Is it important to you to have orgasms from intercourse, or are oral and manual methods equally enjoyable, or preferable?

How clean do you like your partner to be? Do you like your partner to smell squeaky clean, or do you enjoy a day's body smells?

When do you like to have sex-- mornings, before dinner, after dinner, late at night, only on weekends?

How many times a week do you desire sex?

Do you enjoy sex even if you are not in the mood for an orgasm, or do you only like sex that leads to orgasm?

Do you like to wear negligees or do you find your partner's request that you wear them annoying?

How long does it take for each partner to reach orgasm?

How many orgasms in a love-making session does each partner need to have to feel satisfied?

Most certainly, compromises can be reached about some of these things. People can do a certain amount of teaching about what they like and don't like.¹ And oftentimes this is necessary. You can be perfectly well "trained" for your current lover or spouse but find that your new lover likes totally different things in bed. So, a certain degree of sexual compatibility can be cultivated through appropriately timed feedback and discussion. But ... I firmly believe that for a sexual relationship to be good, there must be some degree of **natural compatibility** in preferences. Otherwise, so many compromises will need to be made that neither partner will find the sex very satisfying.

Obviously another way to discover what feels good to you sexually is to experiment with self-pleasuring techniques (AKA as masturbation).² The more you know about your stimulation response patterns, the easier it will be for you to communicate to your lover what feels good to you. Self pleasuring is also an important part of a satisfying sex life because it can be used to take care of your needs when no appropriate partner is available, or to meet your sexual needs in-between sexual experiences with your partner, if your sex drive is higher than his/hers.

One other physical aspect of sex I want to mention is penis/vagina size. It is obviously a subject of great interest, judging by the number of spam emails regarding penis enlargement that constantly dump into one's mailbox. The penis enlargement advertisers would have every man believing that if his penis is not nine inches long, he cannot please a woman, and should therefore buy some penis enlargement products before he is doomed to celibacy. These advertisements are wrong on two counts: a) penises cannot be enlarged and, b) only a small percentage of women would need or even desire a nine inch penis. However, I have also encountered contaminated information in the other direction. I can remember in the early 1970's, at the height of the feminist movement, reading information that claimed that a man's penis size was totally irrelevant because women could not attain orgasms from intercourse. Neither of these "facts" are true either.

Before preparing this lecture, I went to a large bookstore and perused their sexuality section. I looked up penis size in a good number of books. I was surprised to see very conflicting numbers. I therefore decided to generate some of my own numbers. I must confess, that as a "free love" child of the sixties, I've seen a lot of penises. Likewise, my girlfriends of that era saw quite a few as well. I also

¹ *If/when you do that talking about sex with your lover or spouse: don't do it in bed! Give feedback a few hours or days after you've had sex. Being asked "What would you like me to do now?" Or being told "Can you do that a little faster or slower?" or "Do this instead of that." during the actual act of sex is, for most people, a real turn off.*

² *The word masturbation seems to have so much negative energy attached to it that I like the word self-pleasuring as a substitute. I was introduced to that word by an excellent sex therapist by the name of Michael Andes.*

discussed penis size in many of my interviews through the decades. I therefore believe I used a pretty reasonable sample size to derive the following statistics--perhaps a more accurate data base than the male authors of the various books I had consulted! How did these male authors see erect male penises, I wondered, unless they were all gay. Obviously porn movies would be a skewed sample. So, with all that said, here are my statistics:

Penis/vagina size, and how it relates to sexual pleasure and orgasms:

Approximately seventy percent of men have average size penis ranging between:

4 ½ inches to 5 inches in length
4 3/8 inches to 4 ½ inches in circumference.

Approximately thirteen percent of men have small penises ranging between:

3 ½ inches to 4 inches in length
3 ¾ inches to 4 ¼ inches in circumference

Approximately 2 percent of men have extra small penises:

Less than 3 ¼ inches in length
Less than 3 ½ inches in circumference

Approximately thirteen percent men have large penises ranging between:

5 5/8 inches to 6 ¼ inches in length
4 ¾ inches to 5 ¼ inches in circumference

Approximately two percent of men have extra large penises:

Over 6 ½ inches in length
Over 5 5/8 inches in circumference

Please note there are small gaps in these penis size categories to communicate that there really are not exact cut off points for each category.

Vagina size (from extensive interviews with men) breaks down as follows:

Approximately seventy percent of women have average sized vaginas.

Approximately fifteen percent of women have large vaginas.

Approximately fifteen percent of women have small vaginas.

So--the majority of people (70%) will have a perfectly acceptable average-to-average penis/vagina fit, and both partners will have no problem achieving orgasm from intercourse, if the women is able to achieve orgasm from intercourse (more about this in a minute). A woman with an average vagina can also accommodate and have orgasms from a large penis and in some cases can have orgasms from a small penis.

Therefore, it is only when a man with a small penis encounters a woman with a large vagina or sometimes a medium vagina that there will be size problems. In this case, there may not be enough friction for either partner to have an orgasm from intercourse. Likewise, if a man with a large penis has intercourse with a woman with a small vagina, it can be painful for the woman and sometimes the man.

One can conclude from these statistics that WAY TOO MUCH ENERGY AND FOCUS is being spent on the issue of penis/vagina size, as the majority of people have average sized genitals and will not have problems attaining orgasms. This obsession is even more unwarranted by the fact that only fifty percent of women can have orgasms from intercourse anyway, no matter how big a man's penis is, or how long he can sustain an erection. Therefore, any man who has a small penis can quite easily find a woman who could care less, out of the fifty percent who achieve orgasms from manual stimulation or oral stimulation. Some women with large or medium sized vaginas who are able to climax from intercourse, and prefer to have orgasms that way, may reject a man with a small penis as a long term monogamous partner. It's all about compatibility, as I was discussing earlier. Again, a healthy reaction for a man with a small penis who gets a rejection or two should be: "Why obsess about a few rejections, when there are still fifty percent of women out there who do not have orgasms from intercourse and don't care what size a man's penis is?"

There are several other points I will throw out on the issue of penis/vagina size: I have had some women report to me that if they are very strongly attracted to a man emotionally, intellectually, and visually, their vagina grips the man's penis more strongly and that they therefore find they can have orgasms with a man with a small penis when under normal circumstances they could not. In addition, if a man with a small penis uses his hand to stimulate a woman during intercourse, that sometimes can create enough additional stimulation for her to achieve orgasm. Obviously, this intercourse/hand combination can be used to help any woman achieve orgasm if intercourse alone is not working for her. Women have also reported to me that different positions or movements may also increase the likelihood of them achieving an orgasm from intercourse even if a man's penis is small. A woman once related to me that her philosophy regarding penis size was "It's not the size of the ship, it's the motion of the ocean." So men with small penises should not automatically assume whether or not a given woman can or cannot reach an orgasm from intercourse with him until they do some experimenting.

Likewise, women with large vaginas shouldn't feel inadequate. There are plenty of men out there who absolutely love oral sex –love it as much, or more, than intercourse. So, if you are a woman who has a large vagina, find a man who appreciates a good "blow job"; there are plenty of them out there. Or find a man with a large penis.

The next physical component of sexual satisfaction I will discuss is physical appearance. I believe that it is important that you find your lover visually appealing. I don't mean this in the sense that we should all expect/require that our sexual partners look like Hollywood movie stars. However, we do have physical tastes. We have different taste in artwork, cars, clothing, furniture, what colors we paint our walls, how we landscape our yards, what kind of dog breeds we find appealing, etc., etc., etc. I remember back in my college days that I was surprised to discover that when my girlfriends and I went out to dance bars to meet men, we rarely ended up fighting over the men we were interested in pursuing. We all just naturally had different physical tastes, and tended to gravitate towards different men when we viewed them across the room. I think it is important to tune into what physical attributes are a significant "turn on" or "turn off" for you and figure out which ones are irrelevant. I have therefore devised the following two lists to assist people in rating the visual attractiveness of potential partners. You may be thinking as you read these lists: "Why on earth would anybody need a list like this to help them figure out if a man/woman is attractive to them?" As a therapist, I can tell you that people do (for a variety of reasons I will discuss later in this article) sometimes get out of touch with what they find physically attractive in a visual sense.

Women should ask themselves the following questions if they want to find a partner who is a really good fit for them in terms of visual attractiveness:

Does a man's race matter to me?

How tall do I want a man to be?

What kind of body type do I prefer: thin, average, stocky, extra big and stocky?

Am I more attracted to a particular hair color? Is baldness acceptable or not?

Am I more drawn to blue or green eyes, or brown, or is eye color irrelevant?

How physically fit do I need a man to be? Strong muscle definition? Average? A little overweight and out of shape not a problem? Considerably overweight ok if I like him?

Skin tone: Do I care whether a man is fair versus more bronze skinned?

How handsome does a man's face need to be to turn me on?

Do I like moustaches, short beards, full beards, or only clean shaven?

Do I care about how much body hair he has? Do I prefer hairy, not hairy, or don't care?

Do I care if a man dresses very casually, very fashionably?

Is it important to me that a man has nice teeth?

Are tattoos/ body piercings a turn off or a turn on?

Is there a particular body part that I like to look a certain way on a man: legs, chest, biceps, hands, feet, butt?

Men should ask themselves the following questions if they want to find a partner who is a really good fit for them in terms of visual attractiveness:

Does a woman's race matter to me?

How tall/short do I like a woman to be?

What kind of body type do I prefer? Extra petite, petite, average, curvy, "Queen size"?

Is there a particular body part that I like to look a certain way on a woman: breasts, legs, butt, hands, feet?

Am I more attracted to a particular hair color, length, type, (i.e. straight or curly, highly styled ?

Am I more drawn to blue or green eyes, or brown, or is eye color irrelevant?

How physically fit do I need a woman to be: Strong muscle definition? Average? A little overweight and out of shape not a problem? Considerably overweight ok if I like her?

Skin tone: Do I care whether a woman is fair versus more bronze skinned?

How pretty/beautiful does a woman's face need to be to turn me on?

Do I have a strong preference about whether a woman wears makeup or not?

Do I care if a woman shaves or not?

Do I care if a woman dresses very casually, very fashionably?

Is it important to me that a woman has nice teeth?

I believe these physical preferences are, to some degree, an innate part of your sexuality, and therefore you need to pay attention to them. This is especially true if you are trying to select a lifelong, monogamous sexual partner; do not try to force yourself to feel physically attracted to someone because you like and respect him/her; hold out for someone who you click with on all levels; physical, emotional and intellectual (more about this later in this article). This is particularly important when you are in your 20's or 30's trying to choose what will hopefully be a lifelong husband/wife. Now I am not meaning to imply that you can expect to find everything you desire visually in a partner. If you find a B- on the visual, you're doing great because the person obviously has to also match you in a lot of other different ways such as values, hobbies, temperament, and living logistics. But the visual factor is important. In later decades of your life, if you are choosing a partner (due to widowhood or divorce), your sex drive may be lower so sexual attraction and chemistry may be less important.

I also think that in healthy people, there is a kind of "Water seeks its own level." phenomenon that happens regarding physical attraction. What I mean by this is, the attractiveness level between the two people should be fairly comparable. We are not all "10's" on the scale of physical beauty. And--we do not need to be; we just need to find someone with a similar beauty scale rating as ourselves. Whether we are "8's" or "2's", there are plenty of people out there who match us (give or take a little). Now it is also true that this proverbial 1-10 beauty rating scale is impacted by other factors than pure physical beauty. For instance, if a woman has a real bubbly persona, a real sexy voice or mannerisms, is particularly witty or brilliant, or has an exceptional sweetness about her, she may be perceived as more physically beautiful. If a man has strong charisma, a sexy voice, commands a strong presence due to his wealth, status, or power, or is particularly witty or brilliant, he likewise may be perceived as more physically handsome or sexy than he actually is. However, what I'm getting at is that a normal human sexual response is to seek out partners whom we feel are roughly equivalent to ourselves on the visual plane. This "attractiveness equality" creates a feeling of what might be best described as sexual contentment-- like the baby bear's porridge that feels "just right". I have observed that when people accept partners who are significantly below them in attractiveness (for reasons I will discuss later in this article) they often end up unhappy with their choice in the long run.

I think some people try to fight against accepting wherever they might fall on this scale of beauty, and become obsessed with trying to somehow pole vault themselves up the scale of attractiveness. People (both men and women these days) are spending ridiculous amounts of money and energy dying, cutting, curling and straightening their hair, buying designer clothes and eyeglasses, getting their nails painted, going to tanning booths etc. etc. etc. To me, this constant, extravagant spending on beauty products and services stems from people not being able to accept that only a small percentage of people are really physically beautiful. It's just a genetic fact of life. Being physically beautiful is not a requirement to have a satisfying sex life. It's fine to spend a reasonable amount of time and money on hair care, clothes, etc., to make yourself look physically appealing. But when it becomes an obsession, and eats up a lot of your money, time and energy, it actually decreases rather than increases your sexual satisfaction. People who have reached a level of comfort and acceptance regarding their looks have much more satisfying sex lives than those who spend more time at the mall or salon than they do in bed.

I want to address one last question before moving on to the psychological and spiritual components of sexuality because I think it is a frequently asked question.

“When is it normal, healthy and satisfying to have purely physical sex, that is, sex that has no psychological or spiritual component”

My answer to that question is an old standby answer to difficult questions: “It depends”. I believe there are periods in life when fairly casual, physical sex can be a positive experience, and there are likewise times when casual sex will feel totally inadequate and empty. Let me give some examples of when I think that sex that is basically physical in nature can be satisfying:

1) As I mentioned earlier, I think young people need a little experience with sex that is purely physical. In my parents’ generation it was called “sowing your wild oats”, my generation referred to it as “having a few good flings” and I’ve been told by my younger generation friends that it is now called “your slut stage” or “your hooking up period”. This dabbling in purely physical sex, by whatever name, accomplishes three things:

a) It helps people discover what they like and don’t like sexually.

b) It enables people to affirm their attractiveness and desirability.

c) It enables people to have a couple “peak experiences” with partners who are more close to their physical fantasy man/woman than they will be able to find in a long-term partner. [Because when you are choosing a long-term mate you need to find good OVERALL compatibility so you usually have to compromise a little on the visual/physical.] I think when people have a couple opportunities to connect with a “fantasy-class” partner, it satisfies that craving, and makes people better able to settle into a contented long-term monogamous sexual relationship with a realistically attractive partner.*

2) After a divorce, or ending a long term relationship, it is normal for people to want to just casually date for a bit so that they can kind of test the waters both sexually and emotionally and rediscover and redefine what they want in a sexual/romantic partner.

HOWEVER, there is an important stipulation for any of the above circumstances: For purely physical sex to be a positive experience, the motivation(s) for BOTH people in the encounter(s) need to be simply physical.

Physical motivations include the following:

1) To experience the physical pleasure of orgasm and to relieve the physiological tension of sexual urges.

2) To experience the sensual and tactile pleasure of touching and being touched.

**The movie “10” with Bo Derek, Dudley Moore, and Julie Andrews demonstrates this point quite well.*

- 3) To enjoy the pleasure of physically connecting with someone whom you find visually appealing /beautiful/ attractive etc. and affirming that he/she finds you appealing as well.
- 4) To satisfy a curiosity about what other people are like sexually, and better define what you like and don't like sexually.
- 5) To enjoy a different tactile/physical experience (like sampling a different flavor of ice cream).

Problems come into play when one person's motivation is one of the above but the other person is hoping to experience something deeper. If one person is initiating the sexual encounter for basically physical reasons i.e. to enjoy a different flavor of sex for a few dates, and the other person is viewing the sexual encounter as a catalyst for deep sharing and intimacy, or as the kick off to a serious love relationship, hearts get broken, people feel "used", and sex becomes a destructive rather than enriching experiencing. So--it is crucial before initiating any sexual encounter to thoroughly examine your own motives and inquire about the motives of the other person.

For the above stated reasons, I am extremely opposed to a "Don't ask, don't tell" approach to sexual encounters. Rather I support a "Tell and Ask" format. Honestly share your motives, expectations, and feelings with the person you are considering having sex with. Honesty is more than just not lying when someone asks you a question. True honesty means sharing with the other person anything you believe he or she would want to know before deciding whether to initiate a sexual connection with you. Lying by omission is just as wrong as blatant lies. Sexuality is an extremely powerful experience and everyone deserves to enter into a sexual encounter with all the cards on the table.

You can still get hurt within an honest encounter; because it is impossible to predict your the emotional response to even a one night sexual connection with another person.* But we all should have the right to decide what risks we want to take.

I'd like to talk a little further about sexual ethics. Most people are familiar with the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace. Sex should only happen between two consenting people, and whenever one person holds power over the other, free consent cannot be given. Thus it is unethical in an employment situation for any person who has any kind of supervisory power over another to make sexual advances. There are other kinds of unethical or inappropriate sexual advances besides the employer/employee arena.

An obvious unethical situation is when one person initiates sex with another in order to gain a sense of conquest or ego gratification. No one wants to be a notch on a belt or a feather in cap. But there are less obvious situations too. **I believe it is inappropriate to make sexual advances whenever there is significant unequal vulnerability.** If you want to experience sex within an ethical framework, you should not have sex with someone who for reasons of maturity level, status, or emotional state, is more vulnerable to you than you are to them. Sex can be very wounding when there are these kinds of gaps between the two people. An example of a likely problematic gap, would be the college professor who asks the uneducated, cute woman at the donut shop out. He may well be the most profound experience of her life, while she may be nothing more than this month's "crush" for him. And she will probably end up feeling seriously hurt when his short lived infatuation fizzles out. It's not ethical to use someone for temporary fun; oblivious to what kind of searing effect the encounter may have on him/her. I believe there are enough opportunities for mutually positive sexual encounters that it is well worth it to avoid these kinds of "lopsided", "unequal vulnerability" situations that have negative aftermaths. In order for

* The movie "Indecent Proposal" with Robert Redford, Demi Moore, & Woody Harrelson demonstrates this point extremely well.

sex to be truly satisfying, it needs to feel good on all levels. Sex with unequal power or vulnerability does not feel good on a spiritual level. It does not feel good to be hurt, and it does not feel good to hurt someone unnecessarily.

Let me now move on to the emotional/intellectual and spiritual dimensions of sex. Though the act of sex is physical, most of the time a person's mind and heart also participate! From the hundreds and hundreds of interviews I have conducted, and from my own admittedly extensive sexual experience, I can tell you that all the savvy sexual techniques in the world will not result in great sex, if there is not also a strong emotional/spiritual connection. Casual physical sex can be enjoyable for young people exploring their sexuality; and for people re-entering the dating world after a long-term monogamous relationship for a short period of time. **However, in general mature adults want, and need, to have a deep emotional and spiritual bond with their sexual partner.** What does this mean to have a deep spiritual and emotional bond with your lover?

- 1) First and foremost, you and your partner have an abiding respect for one another. Not that you see eye to eye on every issue but you have an overall respect for one another in terms of values, and the everyday choices, decisions, and lifestyle that come out of those values.
- 2) Having a deep emotional and spiritual bond with your lover/partner also means your interactions with your lover help you to grow and evolve into a happier, healthier, and wiser person on a regular basis. You serve as a mirror to one another so that you continually learn new things about yourself. The relationship is a vehicle for self discovery. There is some dynamic interplay between your two minds that results in being able to reach "aha" thoughts."
- 3) You "get" one another on an emotional level. You really understand and empathize with one another's feelings. You give one another emotional support and nurturing, and celebrate one another's triumphs.
- 4) You push one another to continually reexamine and update your vision of truth and right and wrong.

When you have this intellectual and spiritual connection, combined with a physical chemistry, you are what you would call "passionately in love". Passionate love is when the various dimensions of sexuality come together. When you make love with a partner whom you have this multi-layered connection, the physical chemistry, and the psychological and spiritual bond, the touching and orgasms take on an amazing power and beauty. Sex becomes not only an intensely satisfying physical sensation, but a joyful celebration of a loving relationship.

I wish I could say: "And this is the happy ending to sexual development in human beings. After having several years of sexual exploration in their twenties, everyone finds a partner with whom they have a good physical sexual chemistry as well as a deep emotional and spiritual bond and they fall passionately in love and "live happily ever after."

As we all know, it isn't quite that simple. I would venture to say that most people at one time or another in their lives have fallen passionately in love. But the sad fact is, a large percentage of people are not able to sustain a very high level of sexual/romantic passion in their relationships over the long term. There seems to be an awful lot of passionless relationships or marriages out there; not to mention the sky high divorce rate. Why, when there is nothing we desire more than to spend our lives being passionately in love, do most of us spend so little of our lives feeling this way? How do you stay passionately in love?

There are three reasons people are unable to sustain a passionate, loving relationship:

- 1) They choose an inappropriate person.
- 2) They have or develop mental health problems that negatively impact their relationship.
- 3) They have unhealthy relationship attitudes and/or lousy relationship skills.

Let me discuss choosing the wrong person first. If you haven't worked through the baggage from your childhood, you will make poor relationship and marriage choices; you will subconsciously gravitate towards inappropriate lovers in an attempt to heal old wounds. The people you choose may not actually be good choices for you in terms of physical attractiveness, values, hobbies, temperament, lifestyle, etc., but you will be intensely drawn to them. People can mistakenly think they have found passionate love, when actually they have found a person who fulfills a mothering or fathering need they did not have met as a child, or in some other way helps them reenact childhood traumas in an attempt to resolve them. Likewise, some people marry the first person who shows an interest in them because they lack self confidence. To successfully love another person, you need to love yourself first, otherwise you will continually pick partners who are not enough of an equal. If you grew up in a dysfunctional or abusive family, you should work out the emotional wounds you have from those experiences in therapy before getting into a serious relationship.

Some people choose inappropriate partners simply out of impulsiveness or impatience; they feel a strong physical attraction to someone and do not patiently explore (never marry anyone you have not dated a full year) whether the person is a good match on all the other levels that are necessary to build a successful, happy, long term relationship. Sometimes, people pick a partner hastily because they hate being alone. You have to be able to tolerate periods of aloneness in order to hold out for an appropriate partner. Being alone does not mean you sit in your house and do nothing because you aren't in a relationship. You can use your periods of aloneness to really enjoy your favorite hobbies, see your friends more, get caught up on house projects, and for some introspection about what you want out of your life and a relationship. Choosing an inappropriate person can also happen when you choose a marriage partner at too young an age. There is no magic age to get married but I believe twenty-three is, in general, a good minimum age. Often, before that age, a young person's adult personality and values have not really "jelled", so picking a long term marriage partner is risky.

Choosing the wrong person can also encompass choosing to stay with a partner with whom you are no longer compatible. I believe that, given our long lifespan, sometimes people do in fact, grow apart over time in such significant ways that they truly develop irreconcilable differences. Sometimes people just change so much, (through no fault of their own but rather just as part of their life journeys), that they can no longer meet one another's needs as husband and wife. If/when this happens no amount of hard work and commitment will make the relationship satisfying. In this case, even if children are involved, divorce may be the best option, all things considered. A happy home can be as important as an intact home.

So sometimes the reason a marriage becomes passionless is because people are staying in a marriage that really needs to end. People have a lot of fears about divorce. People are particularly afraid of divorce in middle age; they dread the idea of going back out into the dating world. They worry that no one will want them for a long list of reasons: they are too out of shape or overweight, have sagging boobs, are bald, have wrinkled skin, may not be able to "get it up" etc., etc., etc. They convince themselves that sexuality is no longer important to them, and stay in unhappy and sexless marriages. The reality is, no middle-aged person looks like they did when they were twenty, so it's easy to find people at the same attractiveness level as yourself when you go out into the middle-age dating world. Many middle aged people fall passionately in love and find out they had a lot more sexual vitality left in them than they ever dreamed possible. I've seen people rediscover their sexuality at forty, fifty, or sixty after living for years in almost sexless marriages. So sometimes you need to divorce in order to have passion in the later

decades of your life. But before you move towards divorce, make sure the passion in your marriage can't be re-kindled by doing some good hard work on your relationship, because if that is possible, it is the happiest choice.

Once you've chosen an appropriate person, you need to make sure that both you and your partner are and remain mentally healthy. Serious mental health problems like alcoholism, drug addiction, depression, explosive tempers, attention deficit disorder, irresponsible money management, obesity, etc., will destroy even the most passionate of relationships. Actually, to build or maintain a truly satisfying relationship you need to go beyond this. Both people need to strive to be psychologically HEALTHY!! Both people in a relationship need to have their own meaning and purpose in life; their own relationship with the universe, and not expect the relationship itself to provide this. People often complain of feeling bored in their relationships/marriages. As a therapist, I can tell you that this boredom is often really the person's own personal boredom manifesting within his/her relationship. People need to engage in intellectually and spiritually enriching endeavors throughout their lives. When people grow, their growth enriches their relationship, and when they allow themselves to stagnate, that stagnation permeates the relationship. Each person also needs some close friends so they are not looking to their partner to meet all their social needs.

So now, let's assume you've chosen an appropriate person, and both of you are reasonably mentally healthy. You can still ruin your passionate, happy relationship if you do not nurture your love by practicing good relationship skills, and healthy relationship attitudes. One of the most important relationship skills is appreciation. One way to destroy the sexual passion in your relationship or marriage is to start taking your partner for granted and losing your sense of appreciation for him/her. Another way of saying this is, don't throw out all your dating manners when you settle into a relationship. There should not be a huge difference between the level of attentiveness, consideration, and appreciation you show your partner in the dating stage verses after you have an established relationship.

This philosophy was demonstrated to me quite well by the following two stories related to me many years ago. A professional couple who had been married for about ten years had to live separately for about six weeks in order to pursue some mandatory training seminars. After the six week interval, the wife was picking up the husband at the airport. She decided, just to show how happy she was to have him home, to arrive at the airport in a black dress and high heels (she was normally a real jeans and tee shirts kind of gal.) He, spontaneously arrived at the airport with a huge bouquet of roses; when they saw one another, they had a wonderful laugh. These kind of little things are what keep the passion in a marriage alive. This second story is also interesting. A single friend went out shopping with her married sister, who was six years her senior, on a Saturday afternoon. After several hours of shopping, they arrived back at the elder sister's house. Before they got out of the car, the elder married sister pulled out her hairbrush and gave her hair a quick brush. Her younger sister asked her "Why are you brushing your hair?" The elder sister replied: "Because I like to look attractive for my husband. I used to primp for an hour for my dates with him when we were courting, so I figure he's still entitled to a minute of hair brushing!!!" This was a great lesson for the younger sister in relationship appreciation skills. So, if you want to keep your passion alive, demonstrate that you value you partner by not gaining a bunch of weight or dressing dumpy 365 days a year, and continue to do small romantic things like you did when you were in dating mode. Things like remembering birthdays, an affectionate note once in awhile, a special candlelight dinner, or unexpected dinner out, etc., are very important for maintaining passionate love.

Another crucial relationship skill is having good communication skills. An important communication skill to have is to be able to use constructive rather than destructive forms of criticism. Constructive criticism is a necessary part of an on-going relationship. BUT--If there's one thing that extinguishes sexual desire it's DESTRUCTIVE criticism. Constructive criticism is given in a tone of voice that has no nasty, belittling, insulting or sarcastic edge to it. Constructive criticism is phrased in ways that make it clear you are criticizing specific behaviors but not questioning the basic worth, okayness, or overall

competency of the person. Constructive criticism also needs to be doled out in digestible size servings, and given at a reasonable frequency.

When expressing anger in general, do it in healthy ways. (there are numerous books on expressing anger and general relationship communication skills you can read, I'm just glossing over this in this article) State what you are angry about, and why, and what you want. Then be able to let it go, and forgive. Try combining a little humor with your anger sometimes for example: "If you expect to get laid tonight, I suggest you don't leave those dirty socks there."

Another crucial relationship communication skill is to clearly and openly communicate what you want and don't want; Express your needs and desires so your partner does not have to try and guess what you want. This should include teaching your partner about the sensitivities you have as a result of your experiences in your family of origin, or from previous relationships. We all have these sensitivities, and if you can teach your partner what pushes your "buttons" a lot of hurt, anger, and confusion can be avoided. Secondly, LISTEN to what your partner is telling you about what he/she wants and needs. A classic statement people make who finally decide to divorce is "I tried over and over to explain to him/her what I needed or wanted, but he/she did not listen and now it's too late." Sometimes in relationships people misuse the old saying "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That can result in people treating their partners in ways that are completely off base, though well intentioned. A better rule for relationships is "Do unto your partner as he/she teaches you he/she wants and needs to be treated!"

Another important relationship skill is making sure you reserve adequate time and energy for your relationship. This is a big problem these days. To maintain close emotional bonding and sexual desire, you need to just have some "hang out together as a couple" time at home. One reason people have a shortage of down time is they live beyond their means financially so that they have to work a lot of overtime or a second job to support their lifestyle. These days people also tend to overextend themselves by getting involved in too many activities resulting in a life that is lived at too maniac a pace to foster much sexuality. It does not work to try and schedule sex at the end of fifteen hour days. Arranging enough couple time also requires being flexible on who does what around the house. With dual career families, we have long outgrown the concept of women's work and men's work. If, as a couple, you want to have quality time together at the end of a work day, both people need to pitch in on cooking and dishes and childcare.

Speaking of childcare, to keep sexual passion alive in a partnership with children, you have to schedule time away from your kids. You should not think of your couple time as taking away from your children. Children benefit from a strong, vibrant marriage. If you neglect your emotional bonding and sex life as a couple, you stand a higher chance of divorce, which will be a lot more detrimental to your children than a few hours with a babysitter every other week. If you can't afford childcare, work out an exchange arrangement with another couple. You should get away for a three hour date every other week if possible.

Let me now move on to crucial relationship attitudes. The most important attitude is a realistic attitude of how exciting a relationship can feel day in and day out over the long haul. Though I firmly believe that sexual passion is sustainable in a long term relationship, this does not mean it feels like a fireworks show every day. Marriage is not a soft porn movie, or Hollywood sail into the sunset flick. In regards to sex, you most certainly can continue to have "hot sex" but it will be mixed in with ok sex. It's also mixed in with lots of mundane things like fixing toilets and washing dishes!!!

If you cultivate unrealistic expectations of what a good marriage/partnership should feel like, you will probably be led to have an affair. Though the new affair will provide you with fireworks for a couple of months it will burn out. It is therefore a real shame to lose all the history and deep connection of your marriage because you didn't have the wisdom to ride out the lulls. One thing I notice over and over again when I interview happily married couples is that they they're not happy because they've found a person who is more perfect for them than the rest of us have. It's just that they are better able to rejoice in good days and ride out the mediocre and bad ones.

In fact, some people are such “relationship fireworks” addicts that they never even marry!!! They move from relationship to relationship. On the surface they may appear to be having great sex with all these partners. The problem with this kind of love and sex is it’s not real!! They are basically projecting their fantasy onto a new face and body and making love with the fantasy!! When the fantasy crumbles, off they go to lay the fantasy on a new person. They never really experience true passionate love.

Before closing, I want to comment on the radical edges of sexuality. In an overall sense, I am very, very, rarely classified as a conservative. But considering the whole continuum that exists today in regards to sexuality, perhaps I’m going to have to accept the label of conservative in the arena of sexuality. I simply do not agree with “Whatever two consenting adults do together in their bedroom is okay.” I classify the following types of sexuality as mentally unhealthy: Cybersex, phone sex, swinging, orgies, voyeurism, any form of sado-masochism, hard pornography (or excessive amounts of soft pornography, regular attendance at strip joints, picking up a new sex partner every weekend at bars or public restrooms, and casual sex in general on any kind of sustained basis. I believe desires for these kinds of sex is caused by emotional wounds. I recommend people seek therapy to heal the emotional wounds that cause them to gravitate towards these kinds of sex. If you are passionately in love, as I have described in this article, you do not need, or desire, these kinds of deviant sexual behaviors.

My opinion of open relationships and group marriage is that likewise, oftentimes people who have emotional wounds from childhood are attracted to these unusual relationships in order to avoid deep intimacy. Again, I think therapy to work on the fears is a healthier option. However, I do also think that some perfectly healthy people explore the idea of open relationships for healthy, “Are human beings capable of transcending jealousy?” kinds of motivations. I have tried it numerous times, but admit neither I, nor any of the people involved, could really overcome feelings of jealousy and possessiveness. I do not conclude that it is impossible, I’ve just not seen many successes. I also have seen over and over that when it is a married couple pursuing single people as an addition to their marriage, it is not really a very rewarding situation for the auxiliary lovers. It may sound workable initially, but within a short period of time, most auxiliary lovers begin to feel like it’s a lot more fun for the married people than it is for the auxiliary. Maybe open relationships could work if it was all married people, kind of like the concept of swinging but with a deep emotional component as well. However, the issue of time and energy comes into play too. Are there really enough hours in a week for career, housework, community involvement, alone time, extended family, friendships, and several deep emotional/sexually relationships? I have not found that there is. So I will leave further experimentation on this matter to the next generation.

In summary, the sexual and cultural revolution of the 1960’s brought unprecedented freedom in regards to sexuality. It is not always clear what to do with this new found sexual freedom. There has been lots of experimentation in the last several decades and I’m sure that will continue to be true. Hopefully, our collective experiences are teaching us what feels good and what doesn’t. Human sexuality is very complex and very powerful. There is an emotional/intellectual/spiritual dimension to sexuality in addition to the physical. We can choose to turn off those deeper dimensions and engage in purely physical sex. There are times in life when this can be fun, interesting, and beneficial. However, I firmly believe that mentally healthy people have a natural inclination to spend the majority of their lives engaged in “integrated” sexuality, that is, sexuality that is part of a deep, loving relationship. Though integrated sexuality is the most rewarding kind of sex, it is also the most difficult. I have tried to share the insights I have reached about how to maintain satisfying the long term sexual/romantic relationships. I believe the recipe for success to be a combination of:

- 1) Picking an appropriate person physically, intellectually, and emotionally.
- 2) Each person maintaining his/her own mental health and personal growth.
- 3) Maintaining healthy relationship attitudes, and practicing good relationship skills.

All of these are of course easier said than done. I think that open discussions about sexuality such as this one, are very valuable to help us continue to refine our answers to the question the sexual evolution prompted us to tackle: “What kinds of choices regarding sexuality bring the most amount of happiness and satisfaction?” I am very appreciative towards all the people I have interviewed over the years who have so willingly shared the intimate details of their lives with me.