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Turning up the Heat

I began to be aware of the ugly truth as far back as the late seventies, when my private practice in psychotherapy consisted almost entirely of lesbian individuals and couples. Joanne Loulan termed it "LBD" - Lesbian Bed Death. But it's not confined to lesbians. In fact, many sex research studies show that low sexual desire in couples and individuals is by far the most common complaint sex therapists deal with, regardless of sexual orientation.

It seems to start earlier in women than men - women often start to lose interest in sex in their late twenties, while men's desire doesn't start to wane until mid-forties. But the fact is it can and does happen to anybody: love may conquer all, but it doesn't necessarily keep sex hot, and you and your long-term honey may have a great relationship out of bed with little or no action between the sheets.

But the good news is you can do something about it. If you are like many people, and find yourself in a long-term relationship where sex has gotten dull, infrequent, or even non-existent, don't give up hope. If it bothers you, you can change it. And often, your lack of sexual spark is unrelated to the quality of your relationship. In other words, just because you have little sex with your significant other doesn't mean one of you or the partnership is psychologically disturbed. It's more likely to be that you're doing it wrong! That's because most of us, no matter how many partners we have had, are ignorant when it comes to sex. And I'm not just talking about those of us who still believe that masturbation makes you go blind or that homosexuality is sinful. Even those of us who pride ourselves on having conquered internalized homophobia and Roman Catholicism usually unwillingly subscribe to many of the following myths about sex:

MYTH 1: SEX IS A NATURAL DRIVE LIKE HUNGER OR THIRST. We assume that when we need it our body will tell us (sort of like when your stomach rumbles because you're hungry). We also assume that if we "use it up" - like by masturbating - there won't be anything left for our partner. **IN FACT**, the experience of "horniness" usually doesn't last much longer than the infatuation stage of a relationship, anywhere from two weeks to two years. After that, sexual desire is more like a hobby or cultivated interest - if you set aside time for it, plan for it, prioritize it, you'll be rewarded.

A few years ago a sex therapist studied couples who still had good and frequent sex after fifteen or twenty years together and found that they all planned for sex - they made sure to set aside weekend afternoons, for example, or entire evenings, just to be alone and intimate with each other. Moreover, it's not really true that abstaining makes you horny. It can actually have the opposite effect. The principle that applies with sex is "use it or lose it," so masturbating can sometimes make you more desirous of your partner, not less.

MYTH 2: SEX SHOULD BE SPONTANEOUS. As in, we should be able to fall into bed at eleven at night after a day of working, taking care of household tasks, and the evening news, and somehow we're going to just spontaneously jump our partner's bones. Don't count on it. We fondly think of the "spontaneity" of sex when we were first dating, forgetting that we planned for that sex for days, fantasizing about what we were going to wear, do, say, the setting, etc. **FACT IS:** we should act more like that with our long-time companion; the sex therapist Lonnie Barback calls it "simmering". Thinking long in advance of anticipated sexual encounters revs our engines for the actual encounter.

There is one way spontaneity helps, though. Long-term couples who still have good sex are willing to take advantage of unexpected situations when one partner makes

a sexual overture. Ask yourself the following question: If you're at the stove cooking dinner and your sweetheart comes behind you suggestively and starts to fondle your erogenous zones, do you push her/him away - or do you let dinner burn? If dinner is more important than a stolen moment, you may need to change your priorities.

MYTH 3: IF WE LOVE EACH OTHER, WE'LL ALWAYS BE HOT FOR EACH OTHER/IF WE'RE NOT HOT FOR EACH OTHER, WE DON'T LOVE EACH OTHER/IF WE LOVE EACH OTHER WE WON'T BE HOT FOR ANYONE ELSE. It's one of Mother Nature's crueler jokes that love and sex don't go hand and hand. THE REALITY IS: they are only partly related, and while familiarity does not necessarily breed contempt it can certainly diminish lust. Face it: novelty and excitement foster sexual arousal, and after you've seen that same beloved body hundreds of times and done the same thing in bed with it over and over things can get dull. Not feeling arousal for your partner of long-standing may mean nothing more than that you need to change the act - dress it up, shake it up, do something different.

MYTH 4: SINCE WE'RE BOTH MEN/WOMEN, WE'LL BOTH LIKE SEX THE SAME WAY AND S/HE WILL KNOW WHAT I WANT WITHOUT MY HAVING TO SAY IT. This is crippling to lesbian and gay relationships. In a mixed sex relationship you wouldn't expect to 'naturally' know what your partner wants; you'd know you had to rush out and buy one of the dozens of books on the market to tell you, or perhaps do something radical like ask. Just because you're the same gender doesn't mean you are the same. THE RULE here is: if you don't tell her/him, she/he won't know, and if you don't ask, you won't know. Some like it rough, some tender; some fast, some slow; one person's erogenous zones leave another cold or irritated.

MYTH 5: SOME SEXUAL ACTS ARE 'OKAY' AND OTHERS ARE 'SICK'/IF WE HAVE TO USE A PROP IT'S ARTIFICIAL. You would think that having conquered the myths about sexual orientation we'd know better, but actually most of us have our own private laundry lists of Dos and Don'ts about sex that leave our sexual repertoires very narrow and confined. And the problem goes back to the fact that sexual arousal requires novelty and excitement to keep going. If your sexual script is very limited, it's going to get boring fast. Either you change partners to get novelty or you change scripts; it's as simple as that. A MORE REALISTIC ATTITUDE is: If it feels good (and it's not blatantly self-destructive or coercive to someone else) do it. A corollary of this is: Don't say you don't like it until you've tried it at least twice (the first time you'll probably be too nervous).

So what can you do to turn up the heat? First, talk to your partner. If there's not enough sex in the relationship, or if the sex that exists is ho-hum, get the problem out in the open - but without blame. It doesn't matter who lost interest first or who wants it more - loss of sexual desire isn't something someone did on purpose, and anger, pressure, and blame just make it worse. Make sure there are no heavy underlying problems in the relationship that are causing the lackluster sex. And make an agreement that you can tell each other honestly what you like and don't like about your sex lives, without hurt feelings and personalizing. Next, agree to set aside some time to be close and intimate with each other on a regular basis. Not every evening alone will end in sex, but at least create a space for it to happen. Make these times a priority in your lives.

And pay attention to the setting and mood. Act like you're dating again: candles, music, incense, a special dinner can all get the juices flowing. Make an effort to look your best and dress for romance. Your partner may still love you if you gain fifty pounds and shuffle around the house in bunny slippers and a stained t-shirt, but

he/she may not get wet or hard for you. Just as important, you are more likely to feel sexual when you look good. Finally, put some energy - and communication - into varying your sexual routine. Buy one of the several lesbian or gay sex manuals out to get ideas, or read pornography or watch videos. Better yet, do these things together. Take some risks - make out in an elevator, put your hand in your lover's crotch under a restaurant table, do it while visiting your parents. Use props or toys - anything from lotions to dildos to vibrators to blindfolds, scarves, ropes, paddles, saran wrap, or ice cubes. Dress up in costumes and/or play roles. The key to successfully expanding one's sexual repertoire is attitude; be playful, adventurous, and keep a sense of humor - if it doesn't work, laugh about it, don't take it as a failure.

And above all, don't stop talking to each other, about your likes, dislikes, what works well and what doesn't. Any fool can have a good time in bed with a new lover - sheer chemical attraction will see to that. But if you make your sexual relationship a priority, some time, energy, and creativity will insure that you and your significant other keep the heat turned up high for years to come.