

# *Improving Sexual Communication in Marriage*

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What guidelines can we use to improve our sexual intimacy? First, whether we are newly married or have years of experience, we need to know that this relationship will require patience, understanding, and a willingness to communicate together about this sacred aspect of our marriage. It will require frequent monitoring, for there must be a sharing of our own sexual feelings, preferences, and responses. Sexual intimacy, after all, is a new venture for brides and grooms who will need to cooperate, assist, and provide gentle, clear instruction to each other. We must be good teachers and humble students, for we much to learn together. As the life cycle adds years, the complexities of our lives and physical changes may affect our sexual responses. Feelings and reactions are usually different during pregnancy, after child-birth, or in our later years. Sexual interest is not always static. Aging may affect hormonal levels. We may need more time for sexual arousal, or more physical stimulation for arousal--but there is no reason why healthy individuals should not find satisfaction in their sexual relations their entire lives.

Second, it is clear that sexual fulfillment begins with the quality of life in the non-sexual areas of marriage. It is difficult for either spouse to give freely and fully, without fear of being hurt when the companion is upset, angry, or moody. The sexual expression is a barometer of a couple's total marriage experience. Dating and courting--in marriage-- are part of a life-long activity where romantic validation between partners is frequent and creative and sets the stage for heightened sexual pleasure and intimacy.

Third, in general, men may have a greater interest in sex because orgasm is more predictable for them. If that is true in your marriage (and in some marriages the woman would like more intimacy than the husband) it will require mutual understanding. A husband will need to

exercise self-control, restraint, charity and sensitivity in meeting his wife's needs, desires, and interests. On the other hand, it is validating to a husband when a wife initiates this time together. Charity must always be the ruling virtue for both. Mutual consideration will allow each spouse to be comfortable in initiating intimate contact and realizing there are occasions when sexual relations ought to be deferred.

Knowing that husbands are sexually aroused by erotic messages and that women enjoy a romantic approach is important for both to understand. Of course, holding and touching, and genuine expressions of love and endearment, are important elements for both.

Fourth, both spouses should be aware that a number of factors may hinder their sexual satisfaction. If either one is unsympathetic to the pressures and worries of the spouse, or if physical factors interfere--weight, hygiene, poor technique--may detract from their responses. There will be times when neither spouse feels "sexy," or sexually aroused. Both will need to be mature enough to realize there are no performance standards, no one to please except each other. Both must share their own honest feelings about sexual pleasure realizing that respect and love for each may override personal preferences at times.

Fifth, because of strong pre-marital sexual standards and pre-marital abstinence, married couples may not be quite sure of how to be loving partners. Each must realize that the best source of help is the companion. The spouse is the one who can best provide feedback and instruction on sexual technique. Some couples go for years without sharing how they would prefer to be loved. A sincere desire to learn and please each other, coupled with a sense of humor--neither one embarrassing the other--can do much to increase sexual fulfillment. Both must help each other to an arousal of sexual passion and be interested in the spouse's sexual satisfaction.

Marriage is not just for sexual relations, of course, but it is a profound means of expressing love and commitment. It is designed to be a physical, emotional, and spiritual union; hence a form of marital "validation." Just as a good marriage increases sexual interest, so satisfactory sexual relations adds soul-binding emotional strength to the marriage. There are few ways as powerful as the sexual union of a man and woman that are so expressive of mutual love. In shutting out the world, a couple, in the privacy of their own space, renew mutual commitments. Feelings of love and appreciation, a willingness to cooperate, to share in the joys and challenges of mortality, to be therapeutic, are sown in the sacred union of a couple whose love is centered in charity and eternal covenants. Both can be raised to a greater level of spirituality by an act of love which expresses their emotional feelings so aptly. I have seen couples who have gone years without sharing sexual intimacy. What a tremendous loss it has been to their souls. How consoling, how refreshing, how relaxing and wholesome physical intimacy should be for marrieds who live in a world of stress and who are in need of frequent reassurance that they are desirable and loved by their eternal companion.

When we meet each other's sexual needs, trust is strengthened and our ability to function as a team increases. Our relationship is eternal. That means we can afford to be patient with our sexual feelings before marriage, and we can be patient with our sexual progress and the processes that will develop between the two of us. The media myth of the perfect (and instant)

orgasm is just that--a myth. In most marriages it will take some time before a couple can establish the psychological and emotional climate where our expression of love for each other ripens and matures. Much stress in our society is put on the mechanics, techniques, and skills of intimate contact that it is easy to view a sexual encounter as an athletic performance! It's not a game and no one should be keeping score.

Another gentle reminder is that you're in this together. No one has a problem alone. If the husband is troubled with sexual difficulties, it is a problem for both companions. If a wife is unable to respond well to romantic and sexual stimuli, the problem can best be solved by both partners. The sexual relationship is part of the total relationship. The husband who treats his wife with little respect is not likely to find a warm reception when he sends out amorous signals after an evening of insensitive treatment of his wife!

Here are some simple reminders:

1. Develop a vocabulary so that you can discuss intimacy comfortably--and often.
2. As you discover what pleases you and what you enjoy--share that with your spouse. It's your responsibility to assist your companion in meeting your needs--after all, you are the expert on you. You may wish that your partner could read your mind and your body--and eventually, in a good sexual relationship, you will be so in tune with each other that you may be able to, but that will probably come much later.
3. Learn what constitutes a good experience for your partner. It means that you must learn from your spouse about moods, timing, and what is relaxing, stimulating, and pleasurable. Both of you should be able to answer these questions: What situations make love-making the best experience for me? for you? What is really needed and wanted in the way of techniques for me? for you? What aspects of love-making are the most pleasurable for me? for you? What about frequency? environment? And even if I know what the answers have been in the past, how about this time. Phrases such as "I really enjoy it when you..." or "How do you feel about..." Phrases such as "I really enjoy it when you ..." or "How do you feel about . . ." Or, "I think the thing I enjoy most about our intimacy is..." may help.
4. For "old marrieds" part of the process is realizing that a series of steps exist between the first physical touch and the most passionate embrace. What are those steps in your marriage? Some couples tend to skip these steps after they have been married for awhile and focus only on the final stages of sexual expression. Generally the greatest tenderness and romance is expressed either before or after our intimate time together.