



FROM THE EDITORS OF BOTTOM LINE

SAVE YOUR MARRIAGE FROM THE GRAY DIVORCE EPIDEMIC

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The Gray Divorce Epidemic

As a marriage therapist who helps couples avoid unnecessary divorce, I find it reassuring that the divorce rate in our country has stabilized. *But there's a notable exception:* Divorce is on the rise among people age 50 and older who have been married for 20 to 30 years.

According to data from the National Center for Health Statistics and the US Census Bureau, the number of married couples in their 50s who call it quits has doubled since the 1990s. Among couples age 65 and older, divorces have tripled since 1990. This trend to divorce later in life even has a name—the gray divorce. *Here's what you can do to save your marriage...*

Why Divorce Now?

There are many reasons why long-term marriages are breaking up...

- **Kids leaving home.** When children still are home, people who are unhappily married often choose to put aside their own unhappiness, fearing that divorce will negatively impact their children. They opt to make the best of the situation until the kids are launched. Divorces are common when the youngest child leaves home.

- **Feeling disconnected.** The early stages of marriage typically are characterized by feelings of strong physical attraction and infatuation. But over time, this mutual love affair wanes. Spouses start leading separate lives. They focus on their careers, children,

extended family, friends, hobbies and other commitments...anything but each other. Eventually, loneliness and emotional disconnection set in.

- **Remarriage.** Older people often are in second or third marriages—which, overall, have significantly higher rates of divorce than first marriages. Stressors arising from complicated stepfamily dynamics, challenging ex-spouses and overwhelming financial responsibilities often are at the root of why these marriages end.

- **Increased life expectancy.** It's not uncommon for people in their 50s or 60s to live another 20 to 30 years. Many seniors are wondering whether they really want to spend what remains of their lives with their current partners—and finding that the answer is no.

- **In search of more energetic partners.** If two partners have decidedly different levels of energy or ability or interest in engaging in activities requiring vitality—such as sex, athletics or active hobbies—the more vibrant spouse might desire a more active partner.

- **Focusing on oneself.** Some people complain that during the course of their marriages, their own needs have taken a backseat to caretaking for others—spouses, children, parents and in-laws. Believing that “time is running out,” there is a growing sense of urgency to nurture oneself instead. Divorce is viewed as an opportunity to redefine and refocus one's life.

Reasons Not to Get a Gray Divorce

Although the idea of getting a new lease on life might be appealing, there are good reasons to be cautious about ending a marriage later in life.

In their quiet moments, many people who divorce later in life—even those who are happily divorced—express sadness about not being able to reminisce together about good times,

share family holidays and other important events, or even rejoice in grandchildren together.

Furthermore, the idea that older children aren't affected by their parents' divorces simply isn't true. Research suggests that children of all ages—even adult children—often struggle tremendously when their parents divorce. They wonder, *Isn't anything permanent in life?* They worry about the viability of their own marriages.

Because mature adult children are believed to be emotionally equipped to deal with the challenges of divorce, parents often openly discuss details about their failing marriages, leaving their children feeling caught in the middle.

Although some gray divorcees yearn for the solitude that single life has to offer, others fantasize about finding new, more compatible partners with whom they can create healthier, more loving relationships. But “gray dating” isn't necessarily easy. Becoming single again after many years of marriage has its challenges.

Finally, because many gray divorcees are retired—or close to it—they may be living on fixed incomes that don't go nearly as far when split between two independent people as when shared by a couple. This can diminish the quality of life and create financial worries.

How to Prevent a Gray Divorce

Some older couples think, *We've made it this far...we don't need to do anything different now.* But if your marriage still is strong and you don't want to wake up one morning thinking, *We have nothing in common anymore,* you have to make your marriage your number-one priority.

Your marriage should take precedence over kids, careers, hobbies, extended family and any other commitments. This means spending regular time together as a couple and checking in with each other daily. *Also...*

● **Break out of communication ruts.** Couples who have been together a long time can get stuck in ineffective ways of communicating. If you're upset about something in your relationship but avoid discussing it or find conversations about it to be nonproductive or hurtful, over time it will destroy your feelings of love for your partner.

Although all marriages have their ups and downs, when resentment, hurt and anger are ever-present, it is essential to address and resolve underlying issues. If communication problems are at the root of destructive interactions, it's easy to think that you're both so set in your ways after being married for so long that change isn't possible. But this simply isn't true. When motivated, people can make life-altering changes that profoundly improve the quality of relationships.

Learning new relationship skills is one way to achieve these fundamental changes. Marriage-education classes offered by mental health professionals, religious organizations and universities can be extremely helpful. Simply Google "marriage education" in your area to find a local class. Also, self-help books outlining how to have successful relationships can be useful.

● **Don't give up on compliments.** Science tells us that our brains have a negativity bias—that is, we're most likely to notice things that are problematic. Although this vigilance serves us in terms of survival, it's extremely detrimental in marriage. Constantly focusing on what your spouse does wrong creates resentment, anger and hurt, which in turn leads to emotional distance.

Instead, couples in healthy relationships focus most on what their spouses do right. They are diligent about expressing appreciation and gratitude. Older couples sometimes stop giving each other compliments in the mistaken belief that they're not necessary. But making a habit of complimenting your spouse a few times a day is a powerful way to build goodwill and friendship—an important foundation for a lasting marriage.

● **Keep it sexy.** Reaching midlife does not mean giving up on staying fit and having a satisfying sexual relationship. In fact, many couples in their 50s and 60s (and beyond) report having active sex lives. As people age, however, what they find sexually arousing changes. What “worked” in their 20s may be quite different from what “works” in their 50s or 60s. That’s why ongoing open communication about sexual preferences is imperative.

Often one spouse is more interested in sex than the other. In itself, this is not a problem—as long as the couple finds a way to bridge this desire gap so that they both can be happy. When the lower-desire spouse consistently rejects his/her partner’s sexual advances, it causes deep resentment, hurt and, eventually, anger. For the lower-desire spouse, anger is a big turnoff, making sex even less likely. For more on how to address this, see “The Sex Starved Marriage” on page 20.

● **Break the routine.** Older couples can get stuck in routines. But happily married couples continually reinvent themselves. They are creative. They have a passion for breaking out of the mold. Novelty keeps relationships fresh...and that freshness keeps people interested.

What to do: Do some of the things your spouse loves to do even if you’re not crazy about those things. Experiment with new hobbies that you can do together. Travel to new places. Try new kinds of recipes and restaurants. Even if you have two left feet, take a dance class together. Having more time available in later life makes engaging in new activities more feasible.

● **Get help.** If you’ve tried the steps in this article and still are thinking of getting a divorce, seek qualified professional help. Look for a therapist who specializes in marriage therapy and understands the issues you are facing as you age. The website of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT.org) offers a helpful “therapist locator” tool.

How to Prevent Marriage Burnout

If your marriage is approaching the burnout stage, you can still do something about it—if you act soon enough.

Here are the warning signs of a troubled marriage—and how to reverse negative patterns and restore the love you once felt toward each other.

Warning Signs

- **Chronic resentment.** When unhappy couples argue, they make up on the surface, but angry feelings linger.

- **Lack of humor.** Happy couples laugh a lot. They're able to see the ridiculousness in tense situations and defuse them. Unhappy couples reserve laughter for everyone but their mates.

- **Significant change in the way you interact.** For one unhappy couple, a sign of impending burnout might be that they're arguing more often—or more angrily—than normal.

For another couple, the fact that they never argue when they used to discuss everything intensely might be a sign of marriage burnout.

- **Cynicism.** In a healthy marriage, spouses give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Examples: If one person comes home late without calling first, the other might think, *Traffic must have been terrible.*

In a burned-out marriage, when one spouse brings the other flowers, the person receiving them will likely suspect the other of feeling guilty about something.

Stopping Marriage Burnout

- **Make the relationship a priority.** It's easy to let marriage take a backseat to work, kids, hobbies or community obligations. Couples grow comfortable in marriage and automatically assume a spouse will always be there. Many busy people nurture their marriages only after they take care of everything else, which is a mistake.

Allotting prime time for your marriage must not be an afterthought. Pencil appointments into your date book if that's what it takes to meet your spouse for lunch or dinner during the week.

- **Don't hide your feelings.** For some couples, keeping anger to themselves or resorting to snide comments seems less threatening than coming right out and clearly saying what is bothering them.

Partners aren't mind readers—and disappointment is inevitable if feelings aren't discussed openly.

However, it is also essential to choose your battles and avoid making issues out of every irritant.

- **Share positive experiences.** When spouses drift apart, it may seem impossible to come up with things they will enjoy doing together.

- **Exercise.** Think back to a time when you both felt more passion, energy and involvement. Ask yourself what you enjoyed doing together in those days.

Start by doing some of those things again. Don't feel you have to make a big production out of the event. In fact, an expensive vacation to Paris to relive good times is probably less productive over the long run than rediscovering simple, everyday pleasures.

Examples: A couple I know took walks after dinner. Another hired a sitter and just went for drives together. Getting out of the house helped them relate to one another like adults in love rather than parents struggling to control their children.

Don't get discouraged if your spouse doesn't immediately get excited about the idea. He/she may not believe you are sincere—or may not want to snap out of a funk right away. Expect some resistance, but persist in a calm, friendly way.

Or simply surprise your spouse with theater or sports tickets for a weekend when you both are available. Once you're out together, both your personalities will change.

● **Behave as if positive change has already occurred.** Many couples try to put their relationships back on track, only to have the efforts derailed shortly afterward.

A major reason for such false starts is that the person who initiates the change feels rejected and becomes even angrier.

Repairing a frayed marriage has a better chance of success if the person who makes the first move behaves as if the change has already taken place—no matter how his spouse responds.

This strategy is easier than you might think. I suggest to couples that they simply start doing the things they would do if the other person had already made the changes they are hoping for.

Example: One woman I know was upset because her husband was spending most of his free time with his friends and neglecting her and their child. I asked her, "What did he do in the days when he was more attentive?" She replied that he used to pay her more compliments, tell her he loved her and make a point of spending time with her.

Then I asked, "How were you different when he was like that?" She remembered all the things she used to do for her husband that she had stopped doing as her resentment grew. They included waking up early so they could have breakfast together, dropping love notes in his lunch and initiating sex.

I asked her to try to act from that day on as if he were that same old nice guy and to do all the pampering things she used to do for him.

Within days, he had become more attentive...and over time his attitude improved even more.

● **Don't keep score.** If you expect every gesture of yours to be met with an equivalent gesture from your partner, you will put the relationship in a straitjacket.

There is never an excuse for dysfunctional behavior—physical or emotional abuse. But the ability to get along with a partner is largely based on deciding to make it happen—and renewing that decision daily.

Couples: Stop Having the Same Fight Over and Over!

Research suggests that more than two-thirds of what couples argue about actually is unresolvable. Whether it's differences in parenting styles or how money is spent, couples will never see eye-to-eye on some issues. But that doesn't stop us from relentlessly trying to persuade our partners that we're right. I call these interactions "More of the Same" fights. Everyone engages in these automatic-pilot tiffs from time to time. They're a waste of time and energy, and they're completely avoidable. *Here's how...*

Change the Pattern

To break free from unproductive patterns, you have to change your steps in the dance. When you do, the dance will change.

The next time you find yourself in an old familiar triggering situation, start by taking a deep breath and asking yourself, *What's my goal right now? Is what I'm about to do or say going to bring me closer to that goal?* If the answer is, No, it will push me further away, or It simply will be another round of the same old fight, then don't do it! No matter how justified you feel, refrain from doing the same old thing. Instead, promise yourself that you will do something different—because anything different can change the outcome.

Example: Sally and Bob have been married for 35 years. Sally, an easygoing woman, was repeatedly upset by her husband's tendency to anger easily when he felt frustrated. They had frequent

arguments about this. Each time Bob got irritated, Sally tried to calm him down, which had the unintended effect of infuriating him. Eventually, rather than blame Bob for his behavior, she decided to try a different approach—change how she was handling Bob’s anger.

One day, while Bob was working in the den, Sally heard him complaining loudly, “I wasn’t at the training. I can’t believe my boss expects me to do this assignment. I don’t know how!” Although tempted to do the usual—rush into the den to demand that he calm down, which would typically spark an argument—she stormed into the den and shouted, “You weren’t at the training, and it’s unbelievable that your boss would expect you to know what to do. That’s ridiculous!” Dead silence. After several moments, with a stunned look on his face, Bob said to Sally in a reassuring manner, “Don’t worry. I’ll figure it out. It will be OK.” It was the first time Sally realized how her lifelong efforts to calm Bob had actually fueled his fire. In other words, her old solution had become the problem.

When It’s Not Worth Fighting

Although sweeping things under the carpet when you have lingering feelings of resentment isn’t healthful for any relationship, neither is making a mountain out of a molehill. Your spouse is who your spouse is. And as much as you would like to change certain things about each other, it’s not realistic.

Example: My husband believes that only he holds the key to the correct way to load a dishwasher. No amount of discussion over the years has changed his thinking on this. Long ago, I decided that when he corrected me or reorganized the dishes in the dishwasher, instead of standing my ground, I would simply tell myself, *It’s not about me*. It’s not that I agree with what I see as his “OCD” tendencies, it’s just that I’ve decided not to sweat the small stuff. And we’re both better off because of it.

The key to this strategy lies in knowing the difference between issues that arise that warrant your going to the mat, such as being treated with respect and kindness, versus disliking your partner's style or quirks.

Example: You got married knowing about a difference in tidiness thresholds, but you assumed that it would change. When it didn't, it became a source of frustration. Switching your perspective about those quirks or style differences may put an end to arguments. Ask yourself, *How important is this issue really? Can I let it drop because she's never going to change on this point?* In spite of the popular marital maxim that you should always "speak your truth," in reality, sometimes silence is golden.

Talk Less, Listen More

Human beings have a universal need to be heard, understood and validated. Unfortunately, we're often too busy stating our positions to genuinely hear or be curious about our partners' thoughts or feelings. Then, because they feel unheard, they up the ante and more zealously reiterate their opinions.

The key to neutralizing any escalating argument is to stop talking, stop focusing on your retort and instead deeply listen to what the other person has been saying and acknowledge his/her feelings. Agreement is not necessary.

Example: Say, "I honestly see your point. My perspective is different, but I do understand why you feel the way you do. Here's what I hear you saying." And then repeat back what you've heard. It's astonishing how readily people become more conciliatory when they feel that their messages have gotten through.

Short-Circuit Unproductive Interactions with a Time-Out

There are times when even the simplest disagreement spins out of control, and before you know it, you're fuming. At this point,

it's best to pause the debate. When you're agitated, you're far less likely to have constructive conversation and far more likely to do or say something hurtful. *Some signs that you or your partner has reached this boiling point...*

- **Negative body language.** Is one of you sitting with crossed arms, piercing eyes or no eye contact at all? That's a signal that listening has stopped and that further conversation will be fruitless.

- **Feeling hopeless.** You find yourself saying, "Here we go again," or thinking, *You always have to be right. There's no point talking to you.*

- **Tensing up.** You feel it in your body. Some people describe a tightness in their chests. Others say their stomachs are in knots. Still others say their faces feel flushed, or they experience adrenaline rushes that create extreme emotional states.

These are all signs of a dead-end debate or an argument that can spin out of control. The key to de-escalating lies in your ability to spot these signs early on, before you become emotionally hijacked. Instead, take an agreed-upon time-out.

What is an agreed-upon time-out? It means that the two of you have decided—in advance—that some arguments should be put on pause. Choose a signal such as forming a "T" with both hands, or pick a word that is your "safe" word. Then both partners must honor the request and take a break from each other for 30 minutes. Take a walk. Read a book. Listen to music.

Warning: With emotions riding high, it can take a lot of self-control to pause the conversation. Remember past experiences when taking a break has been successful to break the cycle of anger. If you haven't tried it yet, then remind yourself how not taking a break has only escalated the disagreement up until now.

After 30 minutes, reconvene and decide whether or not you need to revisit the conversation. If one partner feels "unfinished," it's important to re-up the discussion. If, however, both partners

wish to drop the issue, that's perfectly acceptable. Or if emotions still are running high, agree to a time later when the conversation can be completed.

Mistake: Confusing an agreed-upon time-out with a walk-out. Some of my clients say, “Oh, I do that by leaving the room, but my spouse follows me and keeps on arguing.” It's important for you to realize that a unilateral decision to end a discussion by leaving the room or shutting down emotionally is entirely different from having a prearranged mutual agreement to take a breather. Unilateral decisions to exit a conversation, although perhaps helpful to the “leaver,” often feel like abandonment to the spouse who wants to resolve matters. Agreeing to reconnect and re-up the conversation, if necessary, after the break makes honoring a time-out much more feasible.

A Reminder

Although “circuit-breaker” skills minimize the damage of pointless fighting, they're no substitute for intentionally investing time and energy into maintaining the love and passion you share. In today's high-pressured and heads-to-the-screen society, it's increasingly common for couples to feel disconnected even when they are in the same physical space. A foundation based on shared positive experiences—having date nights, engaging in meaningful conversations and a satisfying sexual relationship—creates strong bonds that, in turn, help couples weather rocky times, and remember, This too shall pass.

4 Warning Signs Your Marriage Is in Trouble

Is your marriage in trouble? It might be. Research shows that couples in unhappy marriages wait an average of six years before seeking professional help. By then, problems often have become deeply entrenched, making it more challenging to break free from hurtful ways of interacting.

No matter how long you've been married, it makes much more sense to nip relationship problems in the bud before problems get out of hand.

But how can you tell early on when your marriage is headed for trouble? *Here are four warning signs that it's time to be proactive about a less-than-satisfying relationship...*

The Absence of Fighting

Although most people know that constant fighting is a marital risk factor, the opposite also is true—the absence of fighting doesn't bode well for relationships.

The worrisome pattern goes like this: One spouse—let's say the wife—has serious misgivings about something her husband does. In the early years of marriage, she tells him about it, but he becomes defensive. They fight about their differences often. Over time, he fails to change his actions or be responsive to her needs.

Eventually, she stops complaining and temporarily resigns herself to the situation. Based on her silence, he assumes that she has

finally accepted his idiosyncrasies and that she is no longer unhappy. But unfortunately, he's dead wrong. She is more unhappy than ever and is secretly planning her escape.

As counterintuitive as it might seem, when your spouse is complaining, it often is a sign of caring and emotional involvement. "Nagging" or "criticizing" might feel off-putting, but the absence of these behaviors, coupled with emotional distance, might be indicative of an emotional shutdown that is hard to overcome.

To avoid creating insurmountable emotional obstacles, it's important to express feelings openly and honestly when something truly bothers you. Although it's not advisable to focus on every little relationship annoyance, pushing aside important feelings to avert immediate conflict will only create bigger problems.

Conversely, if your spouse sounds "like a broken record," it means that you're not listening to something important that is being said. You need to heed your partner's comments so that feelings of resentment don't fester. Showing that you care and that you are willing to change, even if it's not your first choice, is what good marriages are all about.

Exception: If you're in a marriage where you both have very easygoing, laid-back personalities and can happily give up on your individual preferences in many areas of your life—and therefore never fight—no worries. That can work, too.

Little or No Touching

Although the need to be physically close varies from person to person, touch is a tie that binds. Typically, couples can think back to times early in their relationships when just the sight of each other gave them butterflies in their stomachs. They have fond memories of walking hand-in-hand, exchanging back rubs, kissing passionately and engaging in extended foreplay and lovemaking, all of which felt incredibly good and defined the relationship as different from all others.

But then something happened. Touch seemed to disappear. They stopped sitting next to each other on the couch. No more hand-holding. Never a reassuring arm around a shoulder. The passionate kisses turned into occasional perfunctory pecks on the cheek. Physical affection, passion and eroticism vanished.

If you and your partner used to be physically affectionate and felt good about your sexual relationship but this is no longer the case, it's time to talk about it with each other. Although there may be extenuating circumstances—such as a medical condition or busy travel schedules—going for a long time physically disconnected is a red flag for a marriage. It can be a symptom of unexpressed unhappiness...and can be a powerful factor leading to infidelity or divorce.

When you have this important conversation with your spouse, describe in loving, positive and actionable terms what you've been missing and what you would like to do about it.

Example: “It seems to me that we haven't been physically affectionate lately. I miss cuddling in bed and giving foot rubs, massages and hugs. I also would like to make love more often. Once a month isn't enough for me. It would be great if we could have sex at least once or twice a week. Plus, I want to feel that you're into it. I'd love it if you would initiate sex more often and if you'd be willing to try new things.”

Perhaps the two of you have been so busy that you simply have overlooked the importance of connecting sexually. You have inadvertently been neglecting this aspect of your marriage. If so, consider scheduling times to have sex. Then, once you've placed sex on your calendar, allow your creativity to make sex special.

Not Focusing on “Us”

Healthy relationships consist of three parts—you, me and us. Yes, it's important to feel good about yourself and your life separate from your spouse. You must have interests and activities that feed

your soul. But balance between individual pursuits and togetherness is essential if a relationship is to thrive.

One of the common reasons for a relationship breakdown is that the two partners have developed independent lives that rarely intersect. They have separate responsibilities. They don't have hobbies in common. They don't take pleasure in each other's accomplishments, interests, hopes and dreams. They become little more than roommates. Although some people resign themselves to this separate lifestyle, they often are married to spouses who eventually tire of the loneliness and decide to strike out on their own to find new, more loving relationships.

If you and your partner have become increasingly independent and no longer share your lives in a meaningful way, it's time to make a change. Ask yourselves, "What enjoyable activities did we do together in the past that we can re-create now?" Maybe you used to cook meals together or go for evening walks or take exercise classes. Or what about new hobbies? You could take up birding or take a wine-tasting course or start a couples' book group.

For that matter, what about something as simple as going to the grocery store together? Time together, no matter what you choose to do, is the healing factor.

Kids Taking Center Stage

Most parents agree that having children is one of life's greatest gifts. In our quest to give them the best in life, we often put more energy into their well-being than into the health of our marriages. We chauffeur them to after-school lessons and weekend sports. We overspend on their electronic gadgets and clothes. We forgo date nights so that they can have friends sleep over. And an uninterrupted adult conversation? What's that?

Here's the warning: If you've neglected your marriage because your kids are your top priority, you are playing with fire. When

kids leave home, you won't have a real marital relationship. Many divorces occur after the youngest child leaves home.

To prevent that, no matter how busy you are raising your children, have a scheduled date night once every week or two. If your kids are young enough to need a babysitter, get one—and then leave the house. What you do together is less important than the fact that you're making time for each other. Additionally, you should try to spend 10 to 15 minutes every night “checking in,” asking about your spouse's day. Unless the children are very young, see to it that they occupy themselves during this check-in time to give the two of you a chance to reconnect without interruption.

If you worry that prioritizing your marriage is “selfish,” keep in mind that outwardly valuing your spouse is a gift for your kids. Children learn about intimate adult relationships by watching their parents interact. When kids observe their parents modeling loving relationships—being physically affectionate, calmly resolving conflict, demonstrating respect, appreciation and kindness, and being good friends—it paves the way for them to create healthy adult relationships in the future.

The Sex-Starved Marriage: How to Make Both of You Happier

It has been two months since Janet and Mark have had sex. They're hardly speaking to each other. If you asked Janet about this, she would say that their home has become a battle zone—they fight about every little thing. Janet goes out of her way to avoid Mark to protect herself from his wrath.

Mark tells a different story. His anger, he believes, is justified. He is fed up with Janet's lack of interest in their sexual relationship. "She never initiates sex. She recoils when I try to kiss or hug her. I'm tired of being rejected." To cope with his unhappiness, Mark spends longer hours at work and busies himself on his computer at night, deepening the chasm between them.

Both Mark and Janet think that the other one is to blame for the problems between them. They have hit an impasse.

The result: A sex-starved marriage. And sex-starved marriages are surprisingly common. In fact, in about one in three marriages, one spouse has a considerably larger sexual appetite than the other. This in and of itself is not a problem—it's how couples handle their differences that matters.

Here's what you need to know to fix a sex-starved marriage and make you both happier...

Yearning for Contact

In a sex-starved marriage, one partner is longing for more touch—both sexual and nonsexual—and the other spouse isn't interested

and doesn't understand why such a fuss is being made about sex. The less interested spouse thinks, *Is this just about having an orgasm?* That's not such a big deal. But the spouse yearning for more physical contact sees it differently. Being close physically is more than a physical release—it's about feeling wanted and connected emotionally.

When a misunderstanding of this magnitude happens and the less interested spouse continues to avoid sex, marriages start to unravel. Couples stop spending time together. They quit putting effort into the relationship. They become more like two distant roommates. Intimacy on all levels ends, which puts the marriage at risk for infidelity or divorce.

Typically, the spouse with the smaller sexual appetite controls the frequency of sex. If she/he (contrary to popular belief, men also can have low sexual desire) doesn't want it, it generally doesn't happen. This is not due to a desire to control the relationship—it just seems unthinkable to be sexual if one is not in the mood.

Furthermore, the lower-desire spouse has the expectation that the higher-desire spouse must accept the no-sex verdict and remain monogamous. The higher-desire spouse feels rejected, resentful and miserable.

How do two people with differing sexual appetites begin to bridge the desire gap? Regardless of where you stand on the sexual-desire spectrum, it's important to keep in mind that loving marriages are built on mutual caretaking. Don't wait for your spouse to change first. Be the catalyst for change in your marriage. *Here's how...*

If You Are the Lower-Desire Spouse

Just do it—and you may be surprised. Over the years, countless clients in my counseling practice have said, “I wasn't in the mood to have sex when my spouse approached me, but once we got

going, it felt really good. I had an orgasm, and my spouse's mood really improved afterward."

Why would that be? For many people, the human sexual response cycle consists of four stages that occur in a certain order—desire (out of the blue, you have a sexy thought)...arousal (you and your partner touch, and your body becomes aroused)...orgasm...and resolution (your body returns to its normal resting state).

But for millions of people, stages one and two actually are reversed. In other words, desire doesn't come until after arousal. These people must feel turned on physically before they realize that they actually desire sex. Therefore, being receptive to your partner's advances even from a neutral starting place—when you do not feel desire—makes sense because chances are that sex will be enjoyable for both of you.

- **Give a "gift."** Let's face it, there are times when people—even people with the typical desire/arousal pattern—simply don't feel like having sex. It's perfectly acceptable to decline your partner's offer from time to time. But when "no" substantially outweighs "yes," you are creating deep feelings of frustration and rejection—guaranteed.

What's the solution to an "I'm not really in the mood for sex" moment? Give a gift—a sexual gift—or to be more blunt about it, pleasure your spouse to orgasm if that's what he wants, even if you're not in the mood for the same. This is an act of love and caring and completely appropriate within a marriage.

If You Are the Higher-Desire Spouse

- **Speak from your heart.** If you're feeling frustrated that your spouse hasn't understood your need to be close physically, chances are you've been irritable and angry. Anger is not an aphrodisiac—it pushes your spouse further away. Press your mental-reset button, and approach your spouse differently. Speak from your heart—ex-

press your vulnerability (yes, you are vulnerable, no matter how “tough” you are!) and your hurt.

Example: Instead of saying, “I’m angry that we haven’t had sex in so long,” it’s better to say, “When we don’t have sex for this long, I miss being close to you. I feel disconnected. It hurts my feelings that you don’t seem interested in me sexually.”

● **Rather than complain, ask for what you want.** Complaining, even when it’s justified, leads to defensiveness. Instead, ask for what you want in a positive way.

Example: Instead of saying, “You never initiate sex,” say, “I’d really love it if once in a while, you threw your arms around me and said, ‘Do you want to make love?’ That would make me feel great.”

● **Figure out what turns your spouse on.** If buying sex toys or downloading X-rated videos has failed to entice your spouse to nurture your sexual relationship, there’s probably a reason. Your spouse might need to feel courted by you first. You might be married to someone who feels more connected to you when you have meaningful conversations...spend enjoyable, uninterrupted time together other than having sex...are more affirming and complimentary...or when you participate in family activities together. This is how your partner feels loved—and the truth is, there are many people who want sexual intimacy only when they feel loved first.

● **If you’re uncertain about your spouse’s way of feeling cherished by you, ask.** Say, “What can I do to make you feel loved?” Believe it or not, meeting your partner’s needs, though different from your own, may be a turn-on for him. Try it.



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