

Rekindling Non-sexual Marriages

Approximately 20% of married couples have a non-sexual relationship if one uses the criteria of ten or less sexual experiences per year. This equates to about forty million Americans trapped in no or low sex marriages. In addition, 40% of nonmarried couples in relationships for more than 2 years have a non-sexual relationship. This presents a major issue for the vitality of a relationship and the well being of the spouses involved

A well functioning sexual relationship is a vital component to a marriage or nonmarried couple. Sex functions by providing shared pleasure, a deepening and reinforcing of intimacy and as a tension reducer from the stresses of living, marriage and family life. A good sexual relationship is not integral to overall satisfaction of a relationship but when it is absent all together it plays a powerful role in draining good feelings, connection and intimacy. Estimates suggest that an absent sexual relationship contributes to as much as 50 to 70 % to the lack of good feeling in a couple. This differs significantly from the smaller role (15-20%) that a good sexual relationship plays. The fact of the matter is that good sex provides a significant contribution to the marital bond. It energizes a couple and makes the bond between them exceptionally special.

For spouses in non-sexual relationships, the experience of approaching sex is like going to the dentist to have a major procedure done. The experience is approached with dread and trepidation. Consequently, most sexual opportunities are avoided setting a pattern of distance and reduced affection that may become chronic. The longer a couple avoids contact, the more awkward, uncomfortable and self conscious each partner may feel. The hiatus could last for many years. I have had couples who have requested help for their non-sexual relationship after as many as 15 to 20 years. The alienation between partners is often fostered by a spoken or an unspoken guilt-blame pattern. The chronic pattern of these relationships becomes disrupted usually when a crisis occurs in the relationship resulting in one partner demanding change. Non-sexual relationships of married couples of less than three years are particularly vulnerable and often end in divorce. Problems of infertility, sexual orientation and sexual trauma are the other sexual concerns that contribute to divorce in young marriages.

Sexual interest waxes and wanes throughout the life span. It is not uncommon for most couples to experience disinterest and less sex during difficulty times in their lives. Consider the spouse caring for an aging or terminally ill parent, the unemployed spouse struggling with self esteem or an ill spouse recovering from a life threatening or life changing medical condition. Most couples resume sexual activity as their interest returns. The popular belief that dual career couples have less sex due to the stress and fatigue of jobs, parenting, and household duties is not true (Time magazine devoted a cover story about this last June). This has been largely attributed to overworked women

with husbands who refuse to help out at home. Most women who enjoy work and are vitalized by their career continue to be interested in sex. The women who resent working and who are overburdened at home are more likely to withdraw from their spouses with feelings of resentment.

Couples with a long history of non-sexual relating stem from a variety of initial factors. These factors can be problems with sexual functioning that include difficulties with arousal, erection and orgasm. Related sexual issues of compulsive sexuality, affairs, sexual orientation and pregnancy/abortion/sterilization issues can divide a couple. Also non-sexual issues that contribute to frequent and long lasting anger/resentment diminish sexual desire. While these initial factors douse desire and promote withdrawal, it is the chronic pattern described above that perpetuates the difficulties.

Rekindling sexual desire is a relationship or couple issue. The non-sexual relationship pattern between spouses is the focus of intervention. Each spouse must take personal responsibility for their sexuality as a first step in treatment. Doing so works against the blame/guilt pattern so often evident and promotes the opportunity for the rebuilding of intimacy. Approaching sex with nondemand pleasuring reacquaints the couple with the lost good feeling and promotes a bond for the development of erotic stimulation. Once a couple recaptures desire, it becomes important to maintain it. Interventions to prevent the relapse of desire are a crucial final step in the process.

Resources for this newsletter

Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies and Techniques for Revitalizing Non-sexual Marriages

APA Convention, Barry McCarthy, Ph.D.

Dr. Luz presented *The Road to Resilience* on September 7, 2003 at Lutheran Church of the Master in Troy, Michigan. Dr. Luz is available for this free presentation to your community group sponsored by the American Psychological Association on the development of resilience.

Guidelines for Revitalizing and Maintaining Sexual Arousal are available by calling my office at 248-540-8243.