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"You Never Want To." "You're Insatiable." How Sex Therapists Recommend Overcoming Desire Differences

By Michael Castleman

At any age, when couples first fall in love, they often can't keep their hands off each other. The hot-and-heavy period in relationships varies, but typically lasts six months to a year, two at most. After that, sexual urgency subsides for one partner or both, and so does sexual frequency.

When both people are in synch on reducing their sexual frequency, the issue does not become a sore point. But typically, couples fall out of synch on desired sexual frequency and develop a desire difference. Differing levels of sexual desire often cause rancor in relationships. Today, desire differences are one of the leading reasons why couples consult sex therapists.

Why Time Cools Sexual Urgency

Several reasons:

- Initially people have fantasy pictures of each other—the "perfect stranger." But get to know someone, and even if they're terrific, they're not perfect. As time passes, fantasies fade, and you're left with reality. Now, that reality might be good enough for a long and happy relationship. But fantasies generally heat up libido. Reality has a way of cooling it.

- When couples first connect, they give each other undivided attention. But over time, the demands of daily life intrude: career, family, household chores, paying bills. Dealing with daily life is distracting—and often sexually distracting as well.

- People start taking their relationships for granted. Combine that with concerns about financing the kids' college educations, and planning for retirement, and sex often takes a back seat.

- Finally, novelty—that is, a new love interest—triggers release of the brain chemical (neurotransmitter) dopamine. As dopamine levels rise, people become more energized, exhilarated, and obsessed. Their hearts pound. They have difficulty sleeping. They lose their appetites. And they become persistent and tenacious. In other words, they fall in love. And as dopamine rises, so does testosterone, the hormone that fuels sexual desire in both men and women. Heightened libido is, of course, a hallmark of falling in love. But as new lovers become more familiar with each other, their dopamine levels fall, and the heat of new love cools. (But someone new can trigger another dopamine surge, which is one reason why people have affairs.)

Whatever the reason(s) for the end of the hot-and-heavy period, after a while, in almost all long-term relationships, the sexual heat cools and frequency declines. When both people are in synch on this change, then reduced sexual frequency does not become a sore point. But typically, couples fall out of synch on desired sexual frequency and develop a desire difference that often causes rancor in the relationship. Today, desire differences are one of the leading reasons why couples consult sex therapists.

The High Cost of Desire Differences

When desire differences cause chronic conflict, both lovers typically lose their sense of humor, and a grim chill descends over their sex life. Good will erodes. To the extent that the couple remains sexual, the quality of their lovemaking declines. The deterioration often extends to nonsexual aspects of the relationship, finding expression in irritability, bickering, and loss of generosity with each other.

The one who wants more sex typically feels rejected, unloved, confused, angry, unattractive, and deceived. Meanwhile, the one who wants less sex typically feels guilty, unloved, confused, and resentful of being turned into a sex object besieged by seemingly relentless sexual demands. Over time, desire differences often becomes festering sores that make both people feel miserable and estranged.

A major casualty of a desire difference is nonsexual affection, for example, cuddling while watching TV. The one who wants sex more typically initiates such affection, and interprets any positive response as a "go" sign for sex. As a result, the one who wants sex less, shrinks from nonsexual affection for fear that any reciprocation might be misinterpreted as sexual interest. The one who wants it more complains, "You're cold as ice." Meanwhile, the one who wants it less complains, "Can't you experience affection without immediately assuming it's sexual?"

As resentments deepen, what began as one problem, a desire difference, becomes *two* problems: the desire discrepancy and the hurt and resentment the situation causes.

Who Wants Sex More? And Less?

An informal survey of sex therapists suggests that the man has more libido in 60 to 70 percent of cases, while the woman wants sex more in 30 to 40 percent.

In our culture, men are assumed to be more eager for sex than women. When the man wants greater sexual frequency, the couple may experience distress, but they have a problem that feels culturally expected, therefore, "normal." However, when the woman has more libido, the problems engendered by their desire difference become compounded by the fact that both people are likely to view the situation as culturally unexpected, "abnormal," and therefore, even more distressing.

Who Controls the Sex?

When sex therapists counsel couples dealing with desire differences, they often ask, "In your relationship, who controls the sex?"

Invariably, each spouse points at the other—and both are astonished to learn that their other half thinks *they* wield the sexual power. Meanwhile, each one feels utterly powerless. The one who wants more sex feels powerless because the less sexually inclined partner can shut sex down by saying "no." Meanwhile, the one who wants less sex feels powerless from being worn down by seemingly constant sexual demands and acquiescing to sex when not in the mood.

What Do You Really Want?

Therapists typically ask the partner who wants more sex: What do you really want? Sex? Or other things? Inevitably, the reply is: "I want sex." True enough.

But typically the higher-libido lover also wants more nonsexual affection, which has faded away because of acrimony over the desire difference. That person also usually wants more spousal attention in general, but it has faded or disappeared because of the couple's mutual resentments. Of course, it's quite possible to increase nonsexual affection and mutual attention *without sex*.

Therapists typically ask the partner who wants less sex: How often do you want sex? Is there anything else you want? The typical reply: "I don't know how much I want sex because I never get the chance to experience my own libido. I'm either fending off sexual advances or giving into them. It's never about what I want, only what he/she wants." True enough.

But typically, the lower-libido lover also wants the same things the greater-libido lover wants—more nonsexual affection and more attention in general—and doesn't get them for the same reasons, the erosion of good will in the relationship.

The realization that desire differences often mask nonsexual issues gives couples some room to negotiate. The higher-desire person might say, "I'm willing to have less sex if you pay more attention to me out of bed." The lower-desire person might say, "I'm willing to have more sex if you make me feel special out of bed."

More Things to Think About

There is no magic formula for dealing with desire differences. But here are some guidelines that often help:

- Count your blessings.
  So you want sex twice a week, and your lover would be happy with sex twice a month. That's a drag, but at least the low-desire partner wants sex *sometimes*. Many people don't want it at all— according to recent surveys, as many as one-quarter of women and 10 percent of men. In cases of desire differences, sex itself if not the issue, just frequency.

- Be flexible.
  Some people enjoy sex late at night when their lovers are tired. Some like sex under warm quilts, while others prefer it on the sofa with no covering at all. Over time, little differences can add up to big desire differences. Lovers with more libido might try to accommodate the intimate preferences of lovers with less.

- Find a friend on the opposite side of a desire difference.
  If your friends have been coupled up for a few years, it's safe to assume that they, too, have desire differences. If possible, try to find a same-sex friend who is on the *opposite* side of the difference. If you're a man who wants more sex, try to find a guy who wants less, or visa versa. Explore how that

person feels. It might give you a better understanding of that side of the issue.

- Experience your power.
  You feel that your lover controls the sex in your relationship, and by extension, controls *you*. But that's not the case. You have more power than you think. It doesn't matter whether you're the one who wants sex more or less. You have the power to make your spouse think you have *all* the sexual power in your relationship. You have the power to turn sex into a subject that makes your lover miserable. And you have the power that comes from nursing a grudge, the power to destroy good will by obsessing about your complaints.

  A desire difference is like an ancient walled city under siege. The besieging forces have not broken through, but their presence and their demands for surrender places tremendous pressure on every aspect of the city's life. That's not victory, but it *is* power. Meanwhile, the defending forces have not repelled the attackers, but their resistance keeps the besieging army pinned down and preoccupied with the city and its inhabitants. That's not victory either, but it *is* power.

- Explore underlying psychological issues.
  If the lower-desire partner has issues with self-esteem or body image, or if the higher-desire partner seems obsessively preoccupied with sex, or if either partner is dissatisfied with other aspects of the relationship or the rest of their lives, try to resolve these issues, or seek professional counseling.

- You can't change your lover's libido.
  In couples with desire differences, each person hopes the other will somehow "come around" to their position on the libido spectrum. Libido can change. But any change must come from within that person, not from a lover's demands or cajoling. In fact, pressure to "see the light" is most likely to cement intransigence.

You Have Three Choices

A chronic desire difference creates three stark choices: You can break up. You can live in misery (with the more libidinous lover possibly seeking sex outside the relationship). Or you can negotiate a mutually workable accommodation. Which

will it be? If you don't want to break up, or live in misery, you have only one choice, compromise.

To work out a desire difference, use the same negotiation skills involved in resolving any difference of opinion. State your own feelings as clearly as possible. Listen to the other person respectfully. Work to separate your love for the person from your disagreement over the frequency issue. Avoid name-calling and other signs of contempt. Try to maintain a sense of humor. Try to view the other person as a teammate, not as a player on an opposing team. With any luck, you'll be able to thrash out a compromise you can both live with.

But remember, compromise does not produce happiness. It merely reduces unhappiness to acceptable levels. If one person wants sex two or three times a week, while the other would be happy with once or twice a month, a reasonable compromise might be once every week or 10 days. Agreeing to, say, weekly sex means that neither of you gets what you truly want. It also acknowledges that you'll probably *never* get what you really want. But by compromising, you show flexibility and good faith, and a willingness to invest in the happiness and longevity of your relationship.

No negotiated frequency is set in stone. You might agree to weekly sex for, say, four months, and then agree to re-evaluate. Your compromise should also be flexible. Weekly lovemaking doesn't mean sex *absolutely* once every seven days. People get sick. Obligations arise. Adjustments become necessary. Try to be kind and understanding.

Of course, it's no fun to compromise. But if you don't want to break up, and you don't want misery (and possibly affairs), then compromise is the *only* alternative—and the sooner you negotiate a compromise sexual frequency, the better off you are.

The Solution Sex Therapists Recommend: Scheduled Sex Dates.

One of the most maddening aspects of a desire difference is the feeling that you're constantly arguing about sex. One begs, pleads, and grovels: "Tonight?" "Tonight?" "Tonight?" The other says, "No," "I have a headache." "I'm not in the mood." Or the worst response, "Maybe."

"Maybe" is worst because it drives the more libidinous partner crazy: "Well, what'll it be? Sex? Or no sex?" That person becomes even more miserable and

plaintive, which makes the lower-desire partner feel even more miserable and defensive.

These battles cease when you get out your calendars and schedule sex. Many people think the "best sex" is spontaneous. Perhaps that's true in new relationships, but in established relationships, sex therapists agree that couples' best chance for long-term sexual happiness comes from scheduling sex.

Scheduling means you both know exactly when you'll be making love. That's usually a tremendous relief for both lovers. Evenings become calmer, conversations less strained, resentments less stinging. Sexual uncertainty and accompanying resentments get replaced by sexual certainty and, over time, usually by grudging acceptance of the scheduled compromise solution. The one who wants more sex knows it will happen on specified dates and can look forward to it. The one who wants less knows sex will happen *only* when it's scheduled, and gets a welcome break from fending off advances.

What If I'm Not In The Mood?

A pervasive myth holds that sex should "just happen" when lovers are "in the mood." But by the time people have been together long enough for a desire difference to become a festering sore, sex *never* "just happens" because one person always seems to be in the mood while the other rarely, if ever, is.

In the classic formulation, libido precedes sex. That's true for many people. But not all, especially women. University of British Columbia psychiatrist Rosemary Basson, M.D., has discovered that many women say they experience no particular desire for sex before it begins, but warm up to it as they make love. For these women, sexual desire is not the cause of sex, but the *result of enjoyable lovemaking*. Basson's research has focused only on women. But it's not much of a leap to extend her findings to low-desire men.

If these women (and presumably men) don't experience a drive for sex, why do they do it? For other reasons. Psychologists Cindy Meston and David Buss, of the University of Texas, at Austin, asked 442 people, aged 17 to 52, just one question: "Please list all the reasons you can think of why you or someone you have known has engaged in sexual intercourse." They 237 reasons why people have sex.

Here are women's top five reasons (from most to least frequently expressed):

1. I felt attracted to the person.

2. I wanted to experience the physical pleasure.
3. It feels good.
4. I wanted to show my affection for my partner.
5. I wanted to express my love for my partner.

Here are men's top five:

1. I was attracted to the person.
2. It feels good.
3. I wanted to experience the physical pleasure.
4. It's fun.
5. I wanted to show my affection for the person.

Note that in addition to experiencing the physical pleasure of sex, both men and women often have sex for reasons that are not strictly sexual—wanting to express love and affection.

What about new relationships when lovers can't keep their hands off each other? Basson's model still holds. People who feel a classic sex drive revel in their libido as they fall in love and enjoy hot sex. Meanwhile, people who feel more interested in physical and emotional closeness know that sex opens a door to them, so early in relationships, when they feel hungry for closeness, they, too, are up for lots of sex. But as the relationship develops, and the lovers settle into life together, needs for physical and emotional closeness become less intensely felt, and people for whom those needs are primary feel less interest in sex.

It's important for those who want more sex *not* to pressure their lovers by saying, "If desire doesn't precede sex for you, then your desire doesn't really matter. Just have sex with me whenever I want, and you'll get in the mood as we make love." This misconstrues Basson's research. Imagine a situation where your partner loves to socialize with certain friends. You like them, sort of, and usually come away from get-togethers having enjoyed yourself. But those friends are not entirely your cup of tea. How would you feel if your partner said: "It doesn't matter that you don't really care for them. Just play along and you'll have a good time by the end of the visit." That may be true once a month—but not twice a week. The key here is to negotiate a compromise sexual frequency you both consider *workable*. Sex should *never* feel coerced.

But in the context of resolving a desire difference, it's equally important for those who want less sex to let go of the idea that they must feel "in the mood" before it's okay to become sexual. If you're feeling neutral about sex, and you have a sex date

scheduled, there's nothing wrong with psyching yourself up for it. That's part of your frequency agreement. It's for the good of your relationship. You've been freed from the constant fights about doing it. Chances are you'll ultimately feel good about the experience.

Embrace Your Schedule In Good Faith

Once you've negotiated a compromise frequency, accept it. You're not getting what you truly want, of course. But both of you gain a frequency you can live with. Try to see the glass as half full. Stop making snide, sarcastic remarks that remind your lover that you've made a huge sacrifice by accepting the compromise. Your lover already knows this—and has made a similar sacrifice. Do your best to put the bickering and divisiveness of your desire difference behind you.

Enjoy More Nonsexual Affection

Once you have regular sex dates, you both earn an immediate dividend—the freedom to give and receive nonsexual affection without it being misconstrued as a sexual invitation.

Being touched, held, and cuddled are among life's most satisfying little pleasures. Affectionate touch gives physical expression to the emotional connection you and your lover share. It's a tremendous boon to relationships. Once your sex is scheduled, affectionate touch loses its sexual charge. Both of you can initiate hugging and cuddling secure in the knowledge that all you're doing is sharing nonsexual physical affection. That's usually a relief—and it allows affectionate touch to resume its important place in the relationship. (Note to the more libidinous partner: Don't misinterpret spontaneous affection as a sexual invitation. Your sex dates are scheduled. Stick to your schedule.)

Work to Restore Good Will

Desire differences can poison a relationship, making both people feel frustrated, angry, misunderstood, isolated, abandoned, and betrayed. A compromise frequency regulates your sexual frequency, but it doesn't automatically provide an antidote to the poison. You must create that antidote yourselves with acts of love, kindness, tenderness, and compassion. When lovers have chronic conflict, they often look for signals that *the other person* has declared a truce. They want the other person to start being nicer. But you don't control your lover. The only person you control is yourself. If you want to declare a truce, if you want to begin to restore good will in

your relationship *start being nicer yourself*. Try to perform at least one act of loving kindness a day, preferably more.

Savor Your Solution

When couples negotiate a compromise sexual frequency with scheduled sex, at first, both feel wary. That's reasonable. Good will has eroded. Trust has been damaged. And both people may focus more on what they've given up than what they've gained.

But over time, assuming you both honor your agreement, return to nonsexual affection, and restore good will, tension subsides. You probably still have your desire difference, but the resentments slowly fade, and the quality of the relationship improves. As this happens, your sex usually improves as well. Over time, you both realize you've weathered a hard time and enhanced your relationship. You still probably have your differences, but you've negotiated a resolution you can both live with comfortably. Congratulations.

For individualized help coping with desire differences, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit aasect.org, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or sstarnet.org, the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

Reference:

Clement, U. "Sex in Long-Term Relationships: A Systemic Approach to Sexual Desire Problems," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2002) 31:241.

