



## **Talking about sexual issues with your partner**

Sex is likely to be one of the most sensitive subjects you'll ever talk to your partner about.

It's ironic that you've already taken the emotional plunge of falling in love, you've shared so much together and maybe even pledged to be together for the rest of your lives, yet starting a conversation about sex can be a prospect that makes you hesitate much more than anything else in your relationship to date.

### **Talking about sex doesn't always come easily**

You're not alone. It might be good to talk. But that doesn't necessarily mean it's always easy to bring up delicate issues that are so closely intertwined with your own sense of confidence and desire for satisfaction.

If your sex life has dwindled over time, virtually ground to a halt after having a baby, or your sex drives seem mismatched, with one of you wanting more sex than the other, it may even seem easier just to let sleeping partners lie rather than explore the obvious (but often politely ignored) gap that has opened up between you.

### **Sexual issues can lead to emotional withdrawal**

Possibly even more emotional is if one of you has a sexual issue with physical symptoms — such as pain during sex, difficulties having an orgasm, problems getting an erection or premature ejaculation.

Any of these common but disconcerting experiences may create a distressing situation for both of you, that can eventually lead to emotional withdrawal.

### **Patterns of communication between the sexes**

It's an old and unfortunate cliché that women want to discuss the intimate detail of relationships, while men avoid it whenever possible. But various studies<sup>1</sup> do actually support this cliché and highlight a typical pattern in distressed relationships where the woman makes demands and the man withdraws from the discussion, especially from any negative issues that he can't solve easily.

You can probably guess where this is leading...

If you want to discuss any concerns you have about your sex life with your partner, complaining, demanding change or laying blame is not likely to lead to renewed passion and intimacy. He's more likely to start staying up late watching re-runs of Top Gear than racing you up the stairs.

### **How to talk to men about sex**

Sex therapist, Ian Kerner recommends avoiding confrontational style discussion by expressing "your desires as a positive turn-on rather than a negative turn-off"<sup>2</sup>. In other words, describe what you'd like him to do, rather than what he's doing wrong.

Kerner also explains that while women naturally prefer eye-to-eye discussions, men find this confrontational, and are more comfortable with side-to-side discussions. So instead of sitting him down to have an emotional heart-to-heart, try having a seemingly spontaneous discussion while enjoying a walk or a drive.

### **When to discuss your sex life**

Bed should be a safe place for both of you, where you can be relaxed, intimate and sensual. So if you don't want to risk drawing the battle lines down the middle of the mattress, it may be best to avoid raising any sexual issues when you're actually in bed.

Given possible sensitivities about body image and sexual performance, you may feel less vulnerable discussing your concerns when you're fully clothed and in a more neutral setting, when you have some private time to talk without being rushed or interrupted by people around you.

Once you've considered how to approach the discussion, how you overcome any sexual issues together will depend on what's worrying you.

### **If sex is painful for you**

Many women experience discomfort during sex at some point, but if it becomes a regular occurrence, it's important to get a health check to make sure there's no physical cause such as an infection or gynaecological disorder, the menopause or post-natal pain.

In most cases, pain during sex is caused by lack of sexual arousal<sup>3</sup>. As Relate, the UK's largest provider of relationship counselling and sex therapy, explains, "Many women find that they get caught in a vicious cycle. The pain that they feel, or the fear of pain stops them from becoming sexually aroused. And the lack of arousal, causes the sexual pain. And so it continues."

In this situation, Relate recommends finding ways to relax before you get into bed, then devoting more time to sensual touch before you become sexual.

## **Sex after birth**

Choosing when to have sex again after giving birth can be as nerve-wracking as having sex for the very first time. Your body has changed (probably not for the better, you fear). Perhaps you're concerned that sensations will be decreased, both for you and for him.

Psychologically everything is different too. It's likely that the birth has had such a profound impact on your lives that feeling sexy is the last thing on your mind. But rest assured that these changes — physical or psychological — are unlikely to last forever.

During these early weeks and months of parenting, being honest about your desires or lack of desires, and sensitive to each other's needs and anxieties can help to maintain your sense of intimacy, until you are ready to be sexual again.

## **Can't get no satisfaction?**

If you find it hard to achieve orgasm, you're not alone. Relate suggests that one in four women struggle to reach orgasm at some stage in their life, while some 70 percent of women never have penetrative orgasms<sup>4</sup>.

Rather than remaining frustrated by this situation, relaxing before and during sex is the most important way to reach orgasm<sup>4</sup>. Talking openly to your partner about what turns you on could not just improve your rate of orgasm, but could transform your sex life in ways you hadn't even imagined.

If like many women you need direct clitoral stimulation to achieve orgasm, guide your partner to show him how you like to be touched. As long as this is done in a sensual and encouraging way, your partner will probably be more than happy to follow your lead.

## **When it's his problem**

If your partner sometimes finds it difficult to achieve an erection, or conversely if he ejaculates prematurely, it's important to seem relaxed about it rather than raising his anxiety levels unnecessarily.

After all, approximately 30 to 40 percent of men experience premature ejaculation<sup>5</sup>, while 40 percent of men experience erection problems by the age of 40<sup>6</sup>. So these are both common conditions and most likely to be overcome in time.

## **Men are sensitive about sex too**

For men as well as women, sex is a psychologically sensitive area. The most common reason for erectile dysfunction is performance anxiety, while stress, depression, relationship problems and too much alcohol can all play their part.

Similarly, premature ejaculation can be caused by anxiety. Again this can develop into a self-fulfilling prophecy in which anxiety about the risk of ejaculating too soon makes your partner more likely to ejaculate prematurely.

### **Focus on your sensual connection**

Removing the pressure to perform and talking through any emotional issues will help to create a relaxed mood, in which you can focus on being intimate and regaining your sensual connection.

As with female sexual issues, if the root cause is psychological, rather than physiological, developing your sense of closeness and understanding will help to resolve any barriers to a full and satisfying sex life.

#### **References:**

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

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