

Sexual Intimacy

Vital and satisfying sexual experiences are an extremely important part of most intimate relationships. This chapter will discuss the key elements involved in achieving and maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship. Remember as you read this chapter the central thesis of the book: **“Communication is the pathway to intimacy.”** Satisfying sex and intimacy go hand in hand. Thus, **high quality communication is one of the primary pathways to achieving and maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship.** Without high quality communication, true intimacy does not exist. In such relationships, sexual experience tends primarily toward erotic exchanges instead of intimate exchanges between true lovers. **Real sexual intimacy involves passionate, tender, affectionate, and erotic exchanges between two people who are deeply joined, or connected in a truly loving relationship.** By far and away, sex is most satisfying in relationships bearing these characteristics.

In order, then, let’s look at the key elements of a satisfying sexual relationship.

Testosterone and Sex

Testosterone is the hormone that drives sexual interest. Without testosterone, there would be no sexual exchanges, and our species would probably diminish and eventually become extinct. Male or female, if you want to enjoy good sex you must have testosterone in adequate amounts in your body.

On average, men have ten to one hundred times as much testosterone as do women. Consequently, men think about sex far more than women. In her book, The Female Brain, Dr. Louann Brizendine cites research indicating that men think about sex often throughout most days, while women, on their most sexual days, think about sex a maximum of four times during the day. The dramatic differences in testosterone levels between men and women cause most men to be more erotically focused than most women. Men cannot help the fact that they think about sex a lot. Preoccupation with sexual thoughts and fantasies are part of the biological programming of the male body. It is a normal and inescapable part of the male experience.

In simple terms, women who don’t have enough testosterone don’t want to have sex. Consider, for example, the following case history described by Dr. Brizendine.

Jill, a forty-two-year-old premenopausal schoolteacher, had come to me complaining of no libido—which was causing marital problems. Her blood level of testosterone was very low, so I began treating her with testosterone therapy. To track

her response to the hormone, I asked her to record how many sexual fantasies or dreams she had and how much she masturbated or was interested in masturbating. If we'd tracked only the number of times she had intercourse, that would most likely have given us a measure of her husband's libido. I asked her to come back in three weeks to assess her progress. During the time between appointments, Jill mistakenly doubled her dose of testosterone. Her face was blushing bright red when she came into the clinic. She sheepishly told me of her mistake and said her sexual urges were now so strong that she was running into the bathroom between classes to masturbate. She said, "This is becoming a real bother, but now I know what it must feel like to be a nineteen-year-old boy!" (Brizendine, p. 90)

In this case history, Jill was able to understand through her own experience part of what it is like to be male. Albeit embarrassing and painful, what a valuable experience! If each of us could exchange hormones with the opposite sex, even for one day, we would have a deep and abiding appreciation of our differences.

Frequently, women complain about a lack of interest in sex. Again, Brizendine notes:

Complaints about women's sexual interest and performance are extremely common at all ages. Four in ten American women—nearly half—are unhappy with some aspects of their sexual lives, and between the ages of forty and fifty, that number climbs to six in ten. Some of the most widespread complaints in women during and after the perimenopause are diminished sex interest and arousal, difficulty achieving orgasms, weaker orgasms, and aversion to physical or sexual touch (Brizendine, p 177).

The main point to be gleaned here is that, **if you are a woman and have no libido, find a physician who will measure your testosterone and where it is too low, help you find an appropriate remedy.** Dr. Brizendine, among others, is a strong advocate of testosterone replacement therapy for women. (Brizendine, pp. 178-180). Without adequate levels of testosterone, you and your sexual partner will be fighting a losing battle!

Foreplay, Foreplay, Foreplay!

Men with normal amounts of testosterone can be ready for sexual intercourse in a relatively short amount of time. They just need a little bit of stimulation, preferably applied directly to the genitals, and they'll be ready. Women, on the other hand, require foreplay to become erotically stimulated. Most people understand this general fact about heterosexual relationships.

However, most men do not understand that, for women, foreplay is not something that occurs only within close proximity to sex. **Foreplay, for women, is something that potentially happens all day.** Again, Brizendine says it well.

A woman needs to be put in the mood. Before sex, there has to be a soothing and smoothing of the relationship, and she has to be able to stop being annoyed with him. Anger at one's partner is one of the most common reasons for sexual problems. Many sex therapists say that, for women, foreplay is everything that happens in the twenty-four hours preceding penile insertion. For men, it's everything that happens three minutes before. Since many parts of a woman's brain are active at once, she must get into the mood by first relaxing and reconnecting positively with her partner. This is why she needs a good twenty-four hours to get in the mood, and why going on vacations is such an intense aphrodisiac. It allows her to unplug from daily life stress. (Brizendine, p. 82)

Years ago Lillian Reuben, in her classic field study of sex differences between intimates, Intimate Strangers, concluded that **women get to their erotic feelings through their tender feelings**, while men are just the opposite. **Men get to their tender feelings through erotic experience**. If Reuben is correct, as she now appears to be, how then do women become satisfyingly sexual partners? **Women become satisfying sexual partners by engaging, on an ongoing basis, in playful, tender, and satisfying communication experiences with their intimate other.**

Reuben's conclusion leads us to the last vital element of satisfying sexual relationships.

Sexual Intimacy Requires High Quality Communication

Communication is the pathway to intimacy. Without high-quality communication, intimacy cannot be established or maintained. Given that men, with high testosterone levels experience their erotic side foremost, and women, with lower testosterone levels need all-day foreplay, or tenderness, to become erotically toned, the conclusion is inescapable. Given adequate amounts of testosterone, **the quality of interpersonal communication is the primary determinate of the quality and frequency of sexual intimacy in relationships between men and women.**

Emphatically, we can then conclude this chapter by referring back to chapters one through six. **If you have done the exercises and integrated good communication practices into your relationship, and if you both have adequate testosterone levels, you will find your way to enjoyable, high quality sexual experiences.**

High Quality Communication Includes Communication About Sex

Sex is often a very touchy subject. Our ability to satisfy our partner taps some of our most emotionally vulnerable places. Thus, we often avoid talking with our partner about how he/she approaches and participates with us when we are sexual. Instead, we participate in the establishment and maintenance of secrets concerning what we like and don't like. Women, for instance, sometimes fake orgasms, or pretend to like sex, when, in reality, their male partner approaches them in a manner that turns them off, or makes sex less satisfying. Men, on the other hand, are sometimes reticent to share their erotic desires with their mate for fear that they will be shamed or rejected.

Conspiracies of sexual silence produce smoke and mirrors that establish and maintain false sexual experiences. Couples who do not really share their true sexual responses create confusion and distance in their relationships.

Take the plunge. Be honest. Banish confusion in your sexual relationship. Do Exercise One as a start. But don't allow this one exercise in sharing to be your only such experience. Make Exercise One a part of your ongoing relationship. In so doing, you will learn to satisfy each other fully, and begin to reap the joy, comfort, and emotional security that comes from maintaining a truly satisfying sexual relationship with the one you love.

Exercise One

1. Sit down with you partner in a quiet, undisturbed setting.
2. Decide which of you will begin.
3. The beginning speaker tells the other first, what he/she likes the most about your sexual experiences.
4. Second, the beginning speaker tells his/her partner any areas that present difficulty.
5. During this part of the exercise, the non-beginning partner simply listens, paraphrases, and gives feedback to let the other partner know that he/she understands what the beginning speaker is saying. Be careful not to judge or react defensively, even though you may be feeling very uncomfortable. Your task is not to criticize or qualify what your partner is saying, but merely to understand, and communicate your understanding to your partner.
6. Once the beginning speaker has completed steps one through 5, the beginning speaker then states a simple request to his/her partner. The listening partner considers the request(s). In response, the listener makes a statement or promise that he or she will do their best to do the following. The listener essentially states what he/she believes that can comfortably do to better satisfy their partner's needs.
7. Reverse the process, letting the beginning speaker become the listener, and the beginning listener become the speaker. Take your time. Don't rush. Make sure you both complete the entire process.