1 SEX

"Sex." The very word is loaded. After all, "everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power." This quote, which is widely but improbably attributed to Oscar Wilde, captures the sway this topic has on us. Yet, it's also a topic that is steeped in lore, misunderstanding, and ignorance. More than once, I've urged couples in my practice to engage in a course of self-education on the topic of sex because they often report wanting to know more about sex and do more with each other, but are flummoxed by the plumbing and wiring of the human body (to these couples, I recommend Paul Joannides' excellent 2012 book, titled "Guide to Getting it On," which is comprehensive and entertaining). Of course, with all of the ignorance and misinformation about sex, there are also myths.

For this chapter, I have selected four myths that are specific to intimate relationships. The first myth is about the persistent belief that women are less sexually minded than men. The second myth is about the "hook-up culture" among college students and young adults. In the third and fourth myths of this chapter, I write about marriages that haven't been consummated and intimate relationships with very little sexual activity.

There are – of course – other myths about sex in intimate relationships. For example, many are surprised to learn that more than half of men and women in their 60s, 70s, and 80s report being sexually active two or three times a month (Lindau, Schumm, et al., 2007). In fact, there are growing concerns about sexually transmitted diseases spreading among older adults (Caffrey & O'Neill, 2007; cf. Lindau, Laumann, & Levinson, 2007). In any case, the reluctance to talk about sex in the context of

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intimate relationships, even among couples therapists (B. W. McCarthy, 2001), leads to myths that need busting.

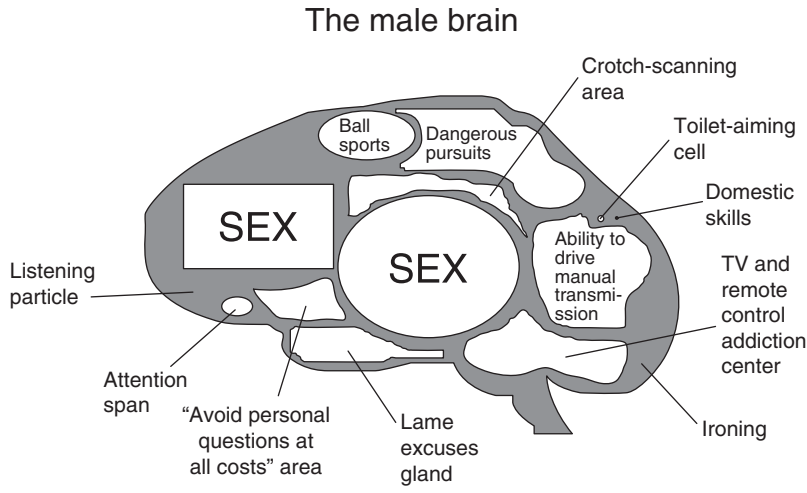
Myth #1

Men have a stronger libido than women

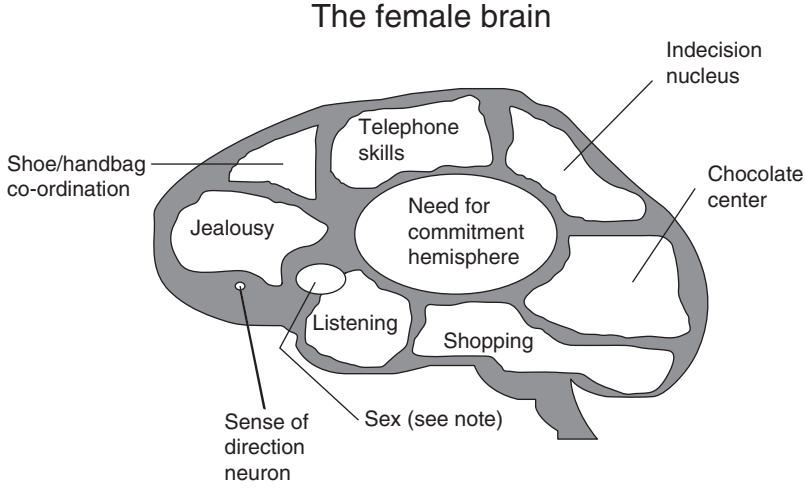
The strength of the belief that men are more libidinous than women is so ingrained that its validity is assumed (e.g., Mann, 2014). Silly cartoons showing the brain of the man thinking mostly about sex versus the brain of the woman thinking mostly about chocolate or commitment or shopping (see Figure 1) capture this sentiment (see also Myth 21). We've also all heard unsubstantiated facts, such as men think about sex every seven seconds (for a discussion of this myth, see Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2009). Of course, this is not true; however, men do think about sex more often than women and men seek out sex even when it's unwise or illegal (Baumeister, 2000; Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). Nevertheless, there are compelling data that we may be underestimating the strength of women's libidos and that our belief in this gender difference is steeped in culture (Lippa, 2009).

The repression of women's sexuality

No discussion of this topic can begin in earnest without talking about the history of women and their sexuality. Throughout history men have described women's sexuality in a way that revealed both the exciting and threatening nature of it. Because men have written most of the texts from the ancient to modern eras, the historical perspective on women's sexuality is necessarily viewed from a detached and masculine point of view. Even in historical writings that describe women as libidinous, one can detect the male perspective. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he makes the point that "the husband should fulfill his wife sexually" (1 Cor. 7:3 New Living Translation). In Greek mythology, Tiresias – who was a man but lived for seven years as a woman – settles a marital argument between Zeus and Hera about who enjoys sex more. Hera claimed it was the man and Zeus claimed it was the woman. Tiresias said that men experience only 10% of the pleasure that women experience. On a side note, Hera was so angry with Tiresias for siding with Zeus that she cursed him with blindness, and Zeus, feeling bad about that, allowed him to live for seven generations and gave him clairvoyance. So it goes with being a marital therapist.



Footnote: The "listening to children cry in the middle of the night" gland is not shown due to its small and underdeveloped nature. Best viewed under a microscope



Footnote: Note how closely connected the small sex cell is to the listening gland.

Figure 1 This drawing from an unknown source (found in many places on the internet) is perpetuating the myth about male versus female libidos, as well as several more blatantly sexist stereotypes.

The ancient emphasis on women's sexual pleasure was not limited to religions and mythology. The famous Greek physician Galen of Pergamum (born in 129 CE) believed that women had to have an orgasm for conception to occur. Remarkably, the medical community held this belief for 1,500 years! Stop and think about the reasonable consequences of such a line of thought. As Daniel Bergner (2013) points out, this led to the medical establishment trying to understand the "certain tremor" that women experienced during sex and how that enabled procreation. This erroneous assumption had men began thinking even more about their own genitalia. For example, there were theories that a small penis might not lead to enough pleasure for the woman to conceive. Even the discovery of the Fallopian tubes by Gabriele Falloppio in the sixteenth century didn't stop him from describing how the shape of a man's foreskin might prevent the woman's orgasm and, consequently, conception (Laqueur, 1990).

Despite these and other examples from antiquity that women enjoy sex, there are many more examples throughout history of women's sexuality being minimized or denied. Again starting with the Bible and with Greek mythology, both Eve and Pandora embody the danger of lust unleashed. Thus, it's unsurprising that over time the female Eros (i.e., libido or sexual love) was presented as permissible only in the marriage bed, and sometimes not even there. The Victorian era was a time when Eros in women was denied (Dabhoiwala, 2012). Certainly, no God-fearing Christian lady of the Victorian era would enjoy sex. Rather, the following description of sex usually attributed to Lady Hillingdon captures the sentiment regarding female Eros at that time: "When I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, open my legs and think of England." Women of the 19th century were often seen as a temperate, if prudish, counterweight to men's lustful and intemperate nature. This denial of women's sexuality can be found today in many cultures.

The point here is that even when men wrote about women experiencing Eros, it usually comes across as naive or even silly. Of course, to say that women experience ten times the pleasure of men is as daffy as saying that they take no pleasure in sex. Therefore, I have written about this myth acutely aware that I am yet another man writing about women's sexuality. As with all myths in this book, I provide links to the primary sources and urge you to read these sources on your own to see if your interpretations are similar to mine. In particular, this myth should be considered carefully because, when it comes to women's sexuality, men have been getting it wrong for as long as men have been working on it. In addition, I also urge you to consider this myth in light of the crushing

repression women have felt because of men's assumptions about their sexuality. This repression can come in the form of a jealous boyfriend who sees his girlfriend dancing with someone else and responds with violence, or it can come in the form of genital mutilation done to prevent women from enjoying sex. The research that I discuss involving women's libidos must be considered against the backdrop of both my gender and the ongoing repression of women based on their perceived sexuality (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002). With those qualifiers, let's look at the research.

The dubious nature of self-report data

One of the main ways psychologists collect data is by simply asking their study participants questions. These questions can come in many forms, but the answers to these questions are referred to as *self-report data*. There are many ways in which researchers try to ensure the validity of that self-report data. For example, we can ask the same question in multiple ways or, in relationship research, we can pose the question to both partners. Another way of measuring the validity of self-report data is to ask the questions, but also to observe the behavior in question. Meredith Chivers has done this by asking men and women what turns them on and by observing how turned on they are by various sexual stimuli. As I discuss in greater detail in Myth 11 (on the fluidity of female sexuality), the observation of sexual arousal has been measured for many years using a device that measures blood flow to the genitalia. The rapid increase in blood flow to the penis or vaginal walls indicates sexual arousal. In men, the increased blood flow is part of the physiological process leading to an erection. In women, the increased blood flow leads to increases in the secretion of moisture in the vagina that serves as a lubricant. These measurements are done with a plethysmograph, which measures changes in volume in either the vaginal walls or the penis (Burnett, 2012). So, Chivers compared how sexually aroused people said they were versus the rate of blood flow to their genitalia in response to various stimuli.

In a series of studies, Chivers showed video clips of erotic scenes to men and women (again, for more of a discussion on this line of research comparing gay and straight men and women, see Myth 11). She showed clips of men having sex with women, men having sex with men, women having sex with women, men alone masturbating, women alone masturbating. She also showed videos without sex, like videos of landscapes, of

an attractive woman walking around naked, of an attractive and well-built (in every way) naked man walking on a beach alone with a flaccid penis, and of a naked man with an erection. Then there was the kicker: she showed participants a video of bonobos (a type of primate) having sex. During each of these videos the subjects were hooked up to the plethysmograph and were asked to rate their own feelings of sexual arousal on a handheld device. Thus, she was able to compare participants' reported arousal versus their arousal as observed in the amount of blood flowing to their genitalia.

With men, the videos of landscapes and primates having sex resulted in little arousal and the scenes that you would expect – depending on the sexual orientation of the man – resulted in a substantial arousal. Furthermore, the men's ratings of their own arousal matched pretty closely to their arousal as measured by the blood pulsing through their penises.

With women, it was a very different picture. Women rated their own arousal as you might expect. For straight women, there were higher ratings when they saw a man with a woman and lower ratings when they saw men with men and women with women. For lesbians the ratings were high for women with women and lower for men with men. All of the women rated their arousal as being low for the landscapes and primates. The blood flowing to their vaginal walls told a much different story! Women – straight and lesbian – seemed to be pan sexual. The women had blood flow when watching the sexual videos regardless of who was with whom and there was a large discrepancy between their subjective ratings and their vaginal ratings. Interestingly, women even experienced moderate blood flow when watching the bonobos copulating. In fact, there was more vaginal blood flow when watching the primate sex than when watching the handsome naked man strolling on the beach with his well-endowed but limp penis swinging from side to side. Clearly, there's a large gap between the arousal that women report and the arousal they feel.

Chivers has replicated her findings repeatedly (Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers, Rieger, Latty, & Bailey, 2004; Chivers, Seto, & Blanchard, 2007; Chivers, Seto, Lalumière, Laan, & Grimbos, 2010; Chivers & Timmers, 2012; Suschinsky, Lalumière, & Chivers, 2009). In addition, research from Terri Fisher suggests that women are willfully denying their sexual arousal. In a series of studies, she demonstrated that women more than men will try to hide their sexuality. For example, women are less likely than men to report how frequently they masturbate if they think someone – even a stranger – will see their answer (e.g., Alexander & Fisher, 2003; Fisher, 2013). Therefore, it seems women experience much more arousal

than they're willing to disclose. In an interview, Fisher explained that "being a human who is sexual, who is *allowed* to be sexual, is a freedom accorded by society much more readily to males than to females" (emphasis in original; Bergner, 2013, p.17).

The downside of monogamy

If women are feeling more sexual than they are letting on, why are couples in committed relationships not having more sex? As a couple therapist, one of the chief complaints I hear involves the desire for more sexual intimacy. Even when it's not the primary reason for a couple to come into therapy, it's an issue that's raised frequently (and delicately). In my practice, I have found that it's raised about equally often by men and by women. Lack of sex has been an issue with couples in my practice whether they're in a straight, gay, or lesbian relationship (see Myth 12). Being troubled by a lack of Eros in a committed relationship seems to know no gender or orientation barriers. So, women are more libidinous than they let on and men are just as libidinous as they've said; yet, I hear quite frequently that couples would rather watch television or read than have sex.

For women, it appears that they're sexually bored. When married women think about sex with someone other than their partner, they can become quite aroused. Researchers who study the role of female orgasm believe that it may have developed to encourage sex with multiple partners. The theory put forward by Blaffer Hrdy, as described by Bergner (2013), is that men reach orgasm much faster than women. The fact that women tend to need protracted stimulation from their partner means that women are ideally suited to having multiple partners, even within one session of sex. Although this contradicts the perspective of some prominent evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993), Hrdy posits that it makes evolutionary sense and can be seen in other species, both close to (Wallen, 1982) and far from (Erskine, 1989; McClintock & Anisko, 1982) humans on the phylogenetic tree. In several primate species, females have sex with multiple males and they're the initiators of sex (Wallen, 1995). There are also scorpions in which the female will not have sex with the same male again within 48 hours, but will have sex with another male within an hour of the last copulation. As Bergner points out, there are several explanations for this and researchers haven't coalesced around the primary function of this behavior, but scientists have speculated about the advantages of this type of mating strategy. Nevertheless, you may be asking, are there data about *human* females?

Figure 2 In the scene pictured above, the characters Claire (Julie Bowen) and Phil (Ty Burrell) from the ABC television show *Modern Family* (season 2, episode titled "Bixby's Back") are role-playing two strangers who are meeting for the first time in a hotel bar in an effort to spice up their sex life on Valentine's Day. ©American Broadcasting Companies, Inc./Karen Neal.

Research into the sexual fantasies of women – or to put it more bluntly – what they think about while they masturbate has provided additional insight. Women fantasize about sex with strangers quite often and tend to find it especially arousing. Indeed, even fantasies about taboo, coerced, or violent sex tend to be quite common among women (Critelli & Bivona, 2008). At this point, I must emphasize the word "fantasy" here. A fantasy is not the same as an actual desire and most certainly not the same as permission. Nevertheless, many women in long-term relationships talk about the ways in which the familiar aspects of their partners are no longer a turn on and that their fantasies about new partners who feel a strong attraction to them is arousing.

Conclusion

So, does this mean it's time to chuck monogamy out the door? Does it mean that for the sake of increasing the sexuality in your marriage you should join a swingers club or invite the neighbor over for a threesome?

Nobody is suggesting this. Rather, it's worth noting that a waning libido in a committed relationship is normal (see Myth 4), even among couples who had frequent and satisfying sex early in their relationship. It may be liberating to know that it's not necessarily you or your partner who is at fault. If you're waiting for the key to rebuilding the Eros in your relationship while keeping it monogamous, I am afraid I have no easy answers. Some couples have suggested treating sex like exercise. Just do it. Even when you don't feel like doing it, you will feel better afterward and be glad that you did. Other couples talk about ways to see their partner as a stranger, whether by role playing (as the characters Phil and Claire Dunphy are doing in Figure 2) or simply arriving separately when meeting at a restaurant.

In any case, two things seem clear: most people overestimate the sex-drive gender difference (Hyde, 2005; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Petersen & Hyde, 2010) and women's attraction to "strange" (to borrow a colloquialism) seems to be at least as strong as that of men. For further reading, see Bergner (2013); Baumeister, Catanese, and Vohs (2001); Hite (2004); and Hrdy (1999). For somewhat different perspectives on this issue, read Meston and Buss (2009) and Thornhill and Gangestad (2008).

Myth #2 Hooking up in college is bad for women

She got the text a little after midnight: "Want to hang out?" She knew what that meant. It was from her friend (with benefits), Jim. There was only one reason that he would be texting her late on a weekday during midterms. She and Jim were both majoring in tough disciplines and took their classes seriously. The hard work was paying off because they both had good grades. Unlike a lot of their classmates, they had their plans in place and knew what it would take to get into graduate school. So, there was no way that Jim wanted to go to one of the bars or fraternity parties. He had the same test she had in about 12 hours. She looked at the text again and noticed that her eyes were blurry from studying without a break for the last three hours. She was tired and needed sleep, but she also knew that she was keyed up and anxious about the test.

She liked Jim. He was smart and occasionally funny. He was thin in the way that some people are thin despite horrible eating habits. Overall, she liked the way he looked. She knew that she was better looking than he – not to mention smarter and wittier – and that she could do better.

However, Mr. Better-than-Jim wasn't texting her, Jim was. She thought that hooking up with Jim might be the perfect way to wind down. It would be fun and she would probably be asleep faster than if she just went home alone. So, she wrote back: "In library. Are you home?" She liked her phrasing because it made her intentions clear: There will be sex, and I will not be spending part of tomorrow washing sheets. His response was quick: "Come over." So she did.

Quite a bit has been written about the hook-up culture among young adults and how it has replaced more traditional forms of courtship. This culture is especially prevalent on college campuses. I first realized the extent of the college hook-up scene from the students in my undergraduate seminar. I was not so naive as to think that they were still using terms like "courtship" or "date." Nevertheless, I had assumed that the change was one of semantics more than actual behavior. I asked my students to tell me the modern term for going on a date. Blank stares followed. So, I tried again.

> OK, I said, "What words would you use to describe a young man asking a young woman to dinner and a movie?"
> This led the students to ask follow up questions. "Are they meeting friends there?"
> "No," I said "it's just the two of them."
> "Are they in an exclusive relationship?"
> "No, this would be what we used to call a 'first date.'"
> "Have they already hooked up?"
> Now I was the one with questions. "What?! No! This would be their first time together. For goodness sakes, he's simply asking her to go to dinner and a movie. What does your generation call that?"

It was beginning to dawn on all of us that we were shouting to each other across a wide generation gap. As far as they were concerned, I may as well have been talking about "goin' a courtin' with a sword and pistol by my side" (from the 16th-century song, "Frog Went A-Courtin;" Wedderburn, 1549/1979). So it was that – for neither the first nor the last time – my students patiently explained the way things are to me, their professor.

They told me that many college relationships begin with sexual behavior prior to getting to know the other person. Not necessarily sex, but anything from kissing to coitus. The sexual experiences may or may not be followed up with conversation and getting to know each other. Thus, my assumption that someone would ask another person to dinner and a movie seemed to

reverse the order of current college courtship operations. Even if they know each other first, they will most likely move their relationship to a more intimate level first through sexual experiences and later through more emotional connections and nonsexual shared experiences. My students were quick to make three points. First, many of them, including both men and women (gay and straight), indicated that they didn't like the change from (what I will call) dating culture to hook-up culture. They seemed to like the idea of taking someone to dinner and a movie as a way to get to know the other person and to decide whether to engage in sexual activities together. The second thing that they wanted me to know was that they themselves didn't engage in hook-ups. Whether they were all lying or whether my class on intimate relationships drew more students who eschewed hooking up, I cannot say. Interestingly, they didn't seem concerned about their own reputation or what their classmates (or I) thought of them. They seemed to be making the point that many students did *not* hook up on a regular basis and that the ones who were engaging in frequent casual sexual encounters were a particularly visible minority. Furthermore, they argued that the perception of the hook-up culture was making it harder for those who longed for meaningful intimate relationships. Finally, the third point that the students made was that the hook-up culture seemed to be good for some heterosexual men and not-so-good for heterosexual women. Since my students educated me, much more has been written about hooking up and what it means for men and women. So, let's look at the data.

Prevalence of sex in college

Others have noticed the cultural changes that my students told me about. These changes have led to a great deal of attention from journalists and commentators who are writing about the prevalence and dangers of hooking up – especially for women. For example, Laura Sessions Stepp, author of *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both* (2007), wrote about the dangers that women expose themselves to when they engage in casual sex. In another example, Jill Weber, author of *Having Sex, Wanting Intimacy: Why Women Settle for One-Sided Relationships* (2013), coins a new term, *sextimacy*, and defines it as "the effort to find emotional intimacy through sex" (p. ix). Several other journalists and authors have also written about the dangers of casual sex. Others have indicated that the problem is not that women are having casual sex; rather, the problems is the reaction of older

generations to the apparent prevalence of casual sex (e.g., Valenti, 2009). A third group of authors has taken a different approach by writing about the shift in women appearing to be more and more interested in pleasing men than in worrying about their own sexual fulfillment. For example, Ariel Levy has written about this in *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (2005), noting that young women seem too concerned with how men view them than with concerns about themselves. As you can imagine, stories about the hook-up culture on college campuses and other places where you find young men and women have garnered a great deal of media attention. This has led to some myths involving the prevalence of sex among young adults.

Much of the reporting about the hook-up culture has led, as Elizabeth Armstrong, Laura Hamilton, and Paula England (2010) put it, to the impression that "young people are having more sex at earlier ages in more casual contexts than their Baby Boomer parents" (p. 23). Using data from the best resource for information on the sexual practices of Americans, the National Health and Social Life Survey, they note that Baby Boomers (those born after 1942) did have more sex and at younger ages than their parents' generation. However, those born between 1963 and 1972 showed no increases in sexual activity and even a little decrease. Other data back the conclusion that the amount of sexual activity among adolescents and young adults is either stable or decreasing. However, it seems that the handwringing in the media is not because sexual activity is increasing or that adolescents are starting to become sexually active at younger ages. Rather, it seems that the consternation of older generations is caused by the apparent casual nature of sexual behavior in this generation.

Indeed, the rate of casual sex among college students has increased. Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer, and Alison Fogarty (2008) conducted a study of college students at more than 19 universities and found that 72% of both men and women reported having had at least one hook-up by their senior year. This number is reasonably consistent with smaller samples (e.g., Garcia & Reiber, 2008). What may be lost in these raw numbers are the frequency and intensity of these hook-ups. The large survey data revealed that college students don't hook up as much as older generations think they do. By their senior year, when college students who indicated that they had hooked up were asked how often, 40% said they had done so three or fewer times, 40% said between four and nine times, and 20% said ten or more times; and 80% of students said they had done it less than once a semester. Therefore, it seems that some of the more provocative images and headlines that portray casual sex among college students as ubiquitous are off the mark.

Beyond the frequency of casual sexual activity, the college students that England and colleagues surveyed indicated that the intensity of their experiences was less than what has been portrayed in the media. The respondents indicated that in their last hook-up, one third of them had intercourse, one third didn't go beyond oral sex, and one third didn't go beyond kissing and non-genital touching. In addition, hooking up with strangers was uncommon compared with repeated hook-ups with the same person. These types of hook-ups have various labels, such as "friends with benefits" or "fuck buddies,"[1] and often involve socializing before or after sexual encounters. In all of this discussion about rates and descriptions of casual sexual experiences in college, it's important to remember that 20% of college seniors report having never had penile–vaginal intercourse (Armstrong et al., 2010). In other words, for all of the handwringing about sexual behavior in college, the rates, frequency, and intensity of college sexual experiences is flat or declining, and a sizable minority of college students have eschewed sex outside of marriage altogether (see Myths 3 and 4 for rates of married couples who don't have sex).

Before getting to whether hooking up is bad for women, here are three other facts to keep in mind as you watch or read breathless stories about the hook-up culture. First, casual sex isn't new. The sexual revolution of the late 1960s, advances in the availability and effectiveness of birth control, and the decline of the paternalistic nature of college administrators (known as *in loco parentis*) all led to an increase in casual sex (Armstrong et al., 2010). The second point to remember is that hook-ups haven't replaced relationships. By their senior year, 69% of heterosexual college students reported having been in a relationship that lasted at least six months. Although there appears to be some fluidity between referring to someone as a boyfriend/girlfriend and a hook-up – with some relationships preceding or following hook-up-type relationships – it's clear that college students are still engaging in relationships (England et al., 2008). Third, the tendency for women to engage in hook-ups is somewhat stronger for White women and wealthier women. All of this seems to confirm that the students in my class were fairly typical of college students around the country, because many of them emphasized their desire for relationships, their distress about navigating the current social landscape, and they seemed to deemphasize the importance of multiple sexual experiences. That being said, my students and I agreed that something fundamental about the nature of intimate relationships had changed during the 20-year gap between our collegiate experiences.

What's bad about hooking up for women?

Having established what the hook-up culture in college does and doesn't entail, the question remains whether it's good or bad for women. I focus on women because there are more potentially negative consequences for women compared to men, and because I haven't seen or read books about the negative consequences of casual sex for men in college, as I have for women (see Stepp, 2007; Weber, 2013). As with some of the other myths in this book, this one is partially true. There are clearly some downsides for women hooking up.

The most direct and dangerous consequences of hooking up are the increased likelihood of contracting a lifelong or life-threatening disease and becoming a victim of violence. College men and women often feel invincible, and this includes discounting their chances of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). This partially explains why a quarter of all new HIV diagnoses are among women under age 25 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), and nearly half of the newly diagnosed sexually transmitted diseases are among men and women under age 25 (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004). In addition to increasing vulnerability to disease, hooking up increases women's chances of being victims of violence. In fact, women between the ages of 20 and 24 experience nonfatal intimate partner violence more than any other group, and casual sexual encounters create additional opportunities for such assaults (Catalano, 2007). These statistics were brought home for me in a discussion I had with a gynecologist who has a lot of college students as patients. She noted that she treats a lot of students for sexually transmitted diseases (mostly herpes, chlamydia, and gonorrhea as well as syphilis and HIV); moreover, she was shocked by how much violence her patients have experienced – both reported and unreported as well as acknowledged and unacknowledged (for more on intimate partner violence, see Myth 22). While increasing the likelihood of illness and violence may be direct consequences of sexual encounters, there are also indirect and psychological consequences.

Armstrong et al. (2010) argue that the pervasiveness of the sexual double standard is behind some of the most commonly cited negative consequences for women engaging in casual sex. One of the women interviewed for their article noted that "guys can have sex with all the girls and it makes them more of a man, but if a girl does then all of a sudden she's a 'ho' and she's not as quality of a person" (p. 25). In addition, they note that the social stigma and labeling that comes with hook-ups is often predicated on the erroneous assumption that most hook-ups involve intercourse, with

one of the women interviewed noting that she was called a "slut" when she was still a virgin. In addition to social stigma, many researchers have described the dangers of college campuses on which fraternities represent the primary venue for college students (especially underage ones) to access alcohol. This access provides the members of the fraternity with many opportunities for undermining women's ability to provide consent for sexual activities, ranging from spiking drinks, to blocking exits, to refusing safe transportation upon departure; therefore, it's no surprise that sexual assault is one of the risk factors associated with college hook-up culture (see also Flanagan, 2014). To their credit, student activists, campus administrators, policy-makers, researchers, and journalists are now paying attention to how the culture of a campus may further endanger women.

Despite the serious potential consequences I've already outlined, in interviews of college women (for methodological details, see Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009), women's biggest complaint about hook-ups was that the sex wasn't very good compared to sex in relationships. Indeed, follow-up studies have demonstrated that women aren't enjoying sex in hook-ups as much as sex in relationships because men in hook-ups are far less likely to sexually perform so as to pleasure the women. For example, in hook-ups, women are more likely to perform oral sex than to receive it. As a result, women having relationship sex report enjoying sex more and having more orgasms than women having hook-up sex (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012). This state of affairs (no pun intended) is also confirmed when men are interviewed. They report having much more concern about the sexual pleasure of their relationship partner than their hook-up partner (Armstrong et al., 2010). Thus, it seems that one of the most common downsides of casual sex for women is that the sex is simply not as good as sex in a relationship.

What is good about hooking up for women?

So, if hook-up sex is not as good as relationship sex, what's in it for women? The answer seems to lie in the downside of relationships. Many of the women interviewed in the studies cited above and in an article for the *New York Times* (K. Taylor, 2013) talked about the costs and benefits of having a relationship in college and decided that the costs outweigh the benefits. In extensive interviews, women talked about the fact that relationships tend to be time sinks that they can't afford. For example, one woman at the University of Pennsylvania interviewed in the *New York Times* said "I positioned myself in college in such a way that I can't

have a meaningful romantic relationship, because I'm always busy and the people that I am interested in are always busy, too" (p. 1).

In addition to time, there are other dark sides of relationships. Some women Hamilton and Armstrong interviewed indicated that they viewed college as a time to meet a diverse group of people, and they feared that being a relationship would detract from that goal. Other women complained about relationships having a negative impact on schoolwork and how their boyfriends were unsupportive of their work ethic in college. Still other women talked about the jealousy and abuse that can take place in relationships. Abuse in college relationships is far more common than many people realize, with one study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting that 10% of students were hit or worse by their boyfriend or girlfriend in the last 12 months (see Myth 22 on violence in intimate relationships). Qualitative interviews with women in college who experienced abuse revealed that such abuse had profound consequences for their academic performance, their social and familial relationships, as well as their careers. To quote Armstrong, Hamilton, and England (Armstrong et al., 2010, p. 26): "The costs of bad hook-ups tend to be less than the costs of bad relationships: bad hook-ups are isolated events, but bad relationships wreak havoc with whole lives."

Given the costs of relationships to women in college, it's easier to understand why it doesn't seem to be the case that men are the only ones pressing for a culture of casual sex in college. In addition, there are now significantly more women in college than men, and that means that there are also women who wanted to have a relationship in college, but who haven't done so. Some of these women talked about adapting to this reality and thinking that if they aren't going to have a relationship in college, at least they can have some fun. After all, whereas hook-up sex is not as good as relationship sex, 50% of women said they enjoyed the sexual aspects of their most recent hook-up "very much." That number jumped to 59% if their most recent hook-up involved intercourse (Armstrong et al., 2012).

Conclusion

In the end, the change in the norms of sexual activity among college students has been significant in terms of a greater willingness to have casual sex and at least some of this change seems to be the result of women initiating hook-ups. This shift appears to be a consequence of the cost of relationships to young women, both in terms of time and risk. Therefore, a portion of college women have decided that the benefits

of hooking up are preferable to the alternatives (despite the fact that sex in relationships is more pleasurable for women than sex in hook-ups). Nevertheless, it's important to remember that for all of the media attention that the hook-up culture has received, nearly one-third of college seniors have never hooked up, and 40% report either never having had intercourse or only having had one partner.

Myth #3

All marriages have been consummated

For a marriage to be considered legitimate by many faith and cultural traditions, it must be consecrated by an official in a public ceremony and consummated through sexual intercourse. For example, a marriage may be annulled by the Pope if the marriage is *ratum et non consummatum* (Code of Canon Law, n.d.) and can be voided by many governments if it's not consummated (e.g., in the United Kingdom; Matrimonial Causes Act, 1973). As you can imagine, there's often a deep sense of shame, anxiety, and alienation for couples who haven't consummated their marriage. Thus, it's difficult to estimate how many couples haven't consummated their marriages, but it's believed that approximately 1.5% of marriages aren't consummated within a year of the wedding and 0.75% of marriages remain unconsummated for the remainder of the marriage (B. W. McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003).

Of course, the idea of a marriage not being consummated is not new. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831) describes one of the briefest fictional marriages that wasn't consummated. Victor and Elizabeth are unable to consummate their marriage because the monster apparently rapes and definitely murders Elizabeth on their wedding night honeymoon in the Alps. In *Middlemarch* (1872), George Eliot captured the sadness, frustration, and anger that can occur when the hopeful expectations of a Roman honeymoon are met with the disappointment of being in a sexless marriage. In the novel, Eliot describes the bride, Dorothea, alone in Rome trying to understand what this means for her marriage and her life:

> However, Dorothea was crying, and if she had been required to state the cause, she could only have done so in some such general words as I have already used: to have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows; for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr [*sic*] Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream. (p. 144)

We'll not dwell on the fact that a visitor who interrupted her crying would become her next husband.

In real life, George Eliot was no stranger to the unconsummated marriage. At the age of 60, she married John Cross, who was 20 years her junior. The story goes that when it came time to consummate their marriage, while honeymooning in Venice, the groom leaped from their hotel room into a canal rather than have sex with his bride. The story that he preferred to jump into a canal (and asked the passing gondoliers not save him from drowning) because he wasn't up to the sexual demands Eliot placed on him makes for a better – if apocryphal – story than that he was suffering from depression. We may never know his real reasons for jumping off their balcony. In any case, scholars seem to agree that their marriage remained unconsummated for the entirety of their six-month marriage, which ended with Eliot's death (Maddox, 2009).

Setting aside the infamous leap into the canal, the prize for most famous unconsummated marriage goes to John Ruskin and Effie Gray, who were married on April 10, 1848. Following their wedding, they went to honeymoon in the Scottish Highlands. As Gray noted in a letter to her father, "I had never been told of the duties of married persons to each other and knew little or nothing about their relations in the closest union on earth" (James, 1947, p. 220). However, as Helena Michie (2006) noted, it was one thing for a lady of this time to be ignorant of the mechanics of sex, but Ruskin was more worldly. So, what caused him to refuse to consummate their marriage? As it happens, there's a surprisingly large literature on their marriage and the reasons Ruskin gave Gray for not consummating it. These included, the fact that, as an art critic, Ruskin was used to the idealization of women's bodies, including most representations of nude women having no pubic hair (this could also be said of representations of women's bodies today, e.g., Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011). Gray described Ruskin's reaction to her body on their wedding night in the same letter to her father:

> For days John talked about this relation to me but avowed no intention of making me his Wife [by consummating their marriage]. He alleged various reasons, hatred to children, religious reasons, a desire to preserve my beauty, and finally this last year told me the true reason (and to me this is as villainous as all the rest) that he had imagined women were quite different to what he saw I was, and that the reason he did not make me his Wife was because he was disgusted with my person [on our wedding night].

Scholars have debated the six-year marriage between Ruskin and Gray that ended in divorce in 1854. Some have argued that he was put off by

her pubic hair and other features of sexual maturity that were inconsistent with the perfect and pubescent forms that Ruskin studied in his scholarship of fine art, while others felt he simply didn't want to have children (Lutyens, 1972). While it's tempting to spend more time understanding the reasons why a couple in Victorian times might have an unconsummated marriage (for a detailed account of the Ruskin–Gray honeymoon as well as that of another Victorian couple, see Michie, 2006), let's move on to the present.

Reasons for unconsummated marriages

As with Victorian times, there are still marriages that remain unconsummated. One of the earliest studies I could find on the reasons for unconsummated marriages was from a book with a title that reflected a focus on finding fault with wives rather than husbands: *Virgin Wives: A Study of Unconsummated Marriages* (Friedman, 1962). Two years later, another study with almost the same name (Blazer, 1964) was conducted in which 1,000 married women who reported being virgins (corroborated by a gynecological exam and their husbands) and who were physically capable of vaginal intercourse were asked "Why are you still a virgin?" The most common answer was fear that intercourse would be painful (see Figure 3 for all of the answers displayed proportionally). The fear of pain during intercourse (known as *dyspareunia*) is consistently ranked as the primary reason for unconsummated marriages in other studies (C. Ellison, 1968), including in studies conducted in other cultures (Al Sughayir, 2004; Bayer & Shunaigat, 2001; Özdemir, Şimşek, Özkardeş, İncesu, & Karakoç, 2008). For many women this fear is based on their suffering from *vaginismus*, which is when vaginal penetration is painful or impossible. For some women, this occurs exclusively during sex, but other women can't insert tampons or have vaginal examination (for more on the diagnosis of vaginismus, see Reissing, Binik, Khalifé, Cohen, & Amsel, 2004). The good news is that there are empirically supported treatments for vaginismus and dyspareunia (e.g., Gindin & Resnicoff, 2002; Van Lankveld et al., 2006).

Although fear of vaginal pain is the primary reason cited for not consummating marriages, men aren't off the hook. Erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation are also cited in nearly all of the studies of unconsummated marriages (e.g., Ribner & Rosenbaum, 2005). In fact, prior to the "married virgin" studies, one researcher in India concluded that problems with the men accounted for nearly all of the cases in which the

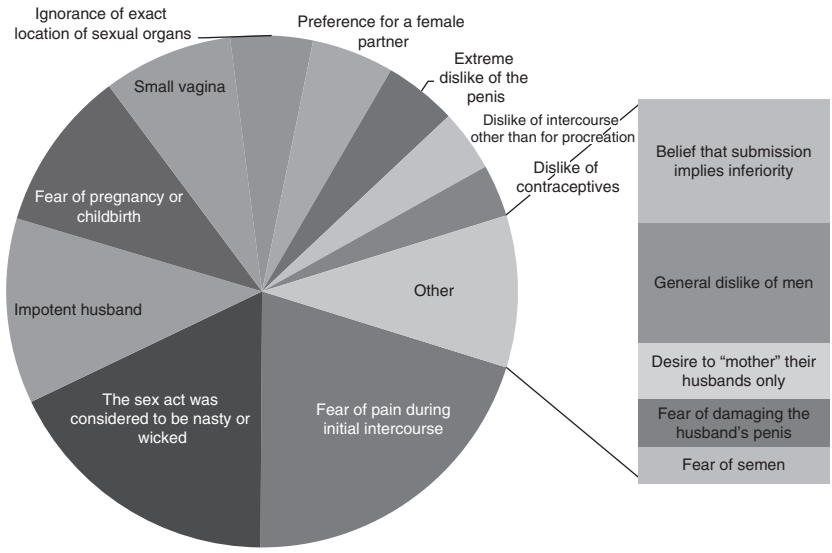


Figure 3 The reasons 1,000 wives stated for not consummating their marriage (adapted from Blazer, 1964, p. 214).

lack of sex was unintentional (Pillay, 1955). Again, here the news is good. There are effective treatments for both erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation (Metz & McCarthy, 2003, 2004).

Although I have broken down the reasons for unconsummated marriages into female and male sexual problems, it's a fool's bargain to treat sexual problems in intimate relationships as either his problem or her problem. It's clear that the effective approaches to working with couples who haven't consummated their marriage is to treat it as an issue within the couple, not one partner or the other (B. W. McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003; Rosenbaum, 2009).

Finally, it's also worth noting that there are cultural and contextual influences at work here. Growing up in a culture that is strident in prohibiting premarital physical contact or even communication between genders appears to put people more at risk of being in an unconsummated marriage. Such cultures are also likely to reinforce perceptions of sex as dirty and sinful. Similarly, conservative cultures are less likely to have comprehensive sex education and more likely to have arranged marriages. People in conservative cultures also tend to marry at a younger age. All of these factors can produce spouses with little or no idea as to what to expect sexually from marriage. The anxiety and psychologically

wrought experience of having sex with a spouse for the first time becomes all the more intense in situations when one or both of the partners lack the knowledge and experience to make sex an enjoyable experience. The problem can be even more intense for adolescent girls who end up in arranged marriages to older men. Worse still, there are some cultures that require some evidence that the marriage has been consummated (Bayer & Shunaigat, 2001). So the pressure on young brides and grooms in these cultures is enormous. In many conservative and religious cultures, a couple having difficulty consummating their marriage for more than a few weeks are encouraged to seek help from a member of the clergy, who may not have the expertise to deal with these issues. Thus, while not new, the problem of unconsummated marriages in conservative cultures has begun to receive more attention and been labeled a "crisis" by some (Al Sughayir, 2004; Özdemir et al., 2008; Ribner & Rosenbaum, 2005).

Conclusion

Although there are relatively few unconsummated marriages, there are more than most people realize. What are the factors that lead a minority of couples to fail to consummate their marriages? Couples who marry young, whose marriages were arranged, who had little or no contact prior to their wedding, who have genital pain or other physical impairments, who have little sexual knowledge, and whose communities require proof of consummation are more likely to delay consummation for weeks or permanently. The internal and external pressure of being in an unconsummated marriage can lead to anxiety, anger, and shame. This type of pressure is perhaps what prompted George Eliot's groom to leap from their honeymoon suite into a Venetian canal rather than consummating his new marriage with his famous wife.

Myth #4

All marriages are sexually active

Marriages in which the couple's sex life has withered are much more common than unconsummated marriages (see the previous myth). Couples who have ceased being sexual altogether are referred to as being in "no-sex" intimate relationships, and couples who have sex once or twice a month at most are referred to as having a "low-sex" relationship. If this describes your relationship, you have a lot of company. It's estimated that there are more than 20 million marriages in the United States

that meet the criteria of being no- or low-sex marriages. Yet one would not be able to tell this from the media. Just spend a little time watching television and you will see married couples being sexually active, no matter how "sexually repellent" the husband may be (Hollywood still rarely puts sexually repellent women on television; M. Feeney, 2005).

For some people, being in a no- or low-sex marriage isn't a problem – or at least not a problem that they feel needs to be addressed in a forthright manner. Consider the following account from a woman who responded to a questionnaire for the *Hite Report*:

> Having sex isn't very important to me for the most part. I lived with one man for most of seven and a half years; our sexual relationship was only active for about the first two and a half of those years. After that it dissolved almost completely – I don't think we fucked more than twice in the last year of it. During all that time I never had or actively desired an affair with another man (or woman), and the relationship with this one man was otherwise sufficiently satisfying and nourishing that I was able to imagine living with him for the rest of my life quite sexlessly. We were not unsensual – we did kiss and hug, and this physical contact was (I now understand) exceedingly important to me. I didn't relish the idea of no sex forever, but it seemed quite livable-with, given the importance of the rest of the relationship, to me. (Hite, 2004, p. 391)

I have heard many of my clients talk about their relationships in similar terms. Many of the couples who are seeing me for problems in their relationship will tell me that they want to work on other issues.

For other couples, experiencing a loss of intimacy and vitality because of the lack of sex or sexuality in relationship is of primary importance to them. They talk wistfully about their sex life when they were dating or before they had children. They use terms that evoke a longing to rekindle a fire that they fear is down to the last embers. Partners who are especially open and willing to be vulnerable will talk about the impact the decreasing intimacy is having on them. These partners use terms like "lonely," "hurt," and "unloved." Other partners speak in more angry terms, even threatening to have an affair or revealing that they have had some one-night-stands because of their frustration with the lack of sex in the relationship.

Working with problems of sexual desire is difficult because there are no easy answers and often those who turn to pills, potions, or lotions as a solution end up disappointed and more frustrated than before. My work with these couples is guided by the work of Barry McCarthy who developed a program for integrating sexual therapy into couples therapy (B. W. McCarthy, 2001). For those couples who seem ready to

address the issue of desire directly, I recommend the book *Rekindling Desire: A Step-by-Step Program to Help Low-Sex and No-Sex Marriages* by McCarthy and his wife Emily McCarthy (2003). In their excellent book, they write about the four components of sexual functioning as being (1) desire, (2) arousal, (3) orgasm, and (4) satisfaction. While each of these components influences the others, all of them play a role in how couples can end up in a low- or no-sex relationship.

Desire

When thinking about sexual desire in a committed relationship, people often see a contradiction in the idea that one can maintain sexual desire for the same person over the course of a long relationship. George Bernard Shaw describes the vow of marriage as follows: "When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part" (Shaw, 1920, p. 25). While Shaw was writing about marriage more generally, his words can easily be applied to sexuality in marriage more specifically. In her book, *Mating in Captivity*, Esther Perel (2006) writes about the difficulty of maintaining sexual desire when a couple has deep affection for one another. As couples become more caring for each other, their love becomes safe, affectionate, and comfortable, or as Perel puts it, "like a flannel nightgown" (p. 32). Others have colorfully described sex in committed relationships as having the "flaccid safety of permanent coziness" (Goldner, 2004, p. 388), whereas in essence eroticism is about "otherness" and the need for distance to distinguish that your partner is someone "other" than you (de Beauvoir, 1953; see also Myth 20).

So, how can couples overcome this and keep the romance alive? The process begins by owning the problem. By the time many couples have arrived at the point where they want to work on the sexual desire in their relationship, there's usually been some blaming. It's not always spoken aloud. In fact, it's often difficult to talk about it. Most people would like to be seen as sexually alive, including by their partner. To talk openly about one's lack of desire or wanting to be more desirable puts one in a vulnerable position. It can also be difficult to talk about it out of fear of making matters worse or hurting the partner's feelings. Think of all of the one-liners about the fragile male ego or endless jokes about women being sensitive about their looks. These bits of comedy hit home because one's sexual self-image is as delicate as a Fabergé egg. Nevertheless, the

blaming – even if it's self-blame – starts early for no- and low-sex couples. Barry and Emily McCarthy (2003) make the point that it's not his problem or her problem, but it's "our" problem. By this, they mean that even if the problem appears obvious, for example erectile dysfunction or vaginismus, it's still a problem for the couple to work on together. Framing the sexual issues in a relationship as a couple problem is likely to lead to a better understanding and prognosis.

To give an example of how this can work, I will describe a couple I treated. Andy and Erin were in their mid-sixties. Erin had been retired from her job as a hospital nurse for about a year. Andy still worked as a partner in a successful accounting firm. As always, I asked about their family (they were empty-nesters), their stresses outside the marriage (his job required long hours and lots of stress), and what initially attracted them to each other (they both seemed stable and caring). They didn't seem to be in serious distress, but they said they were arguing more. Erin was the more upset of the two, while Andy seemed shocked that, after nearly 40 good years of marriage, he found himself in my office. After successfully launching their children and seeing their parents through terminal illnesses, he thought things were now settling down, so why was Erin upset? After a few sessions discussing some seemingly minor incidents, Erin started talking about how much she missed "being intimate" with Andy.

"By intimate, you mean …" I asked, knowing the answer but wanting her to say it rather than me.

"I mean sex," she answered. "I go to bed while he's still watching TV – or more likely while he's sleeping in front of the TV – and I lay there thinking about when we used to have sex. I miss it." She started crying, paused, and continued softly. "I miss Andy."

Andy looked distraught and bewildered. He was clearly a loving husband, a good father, a pillar of his community who went to church and volunteered his time. Now he was realizing that he had been hurting his wife. Worse still, he was hurting her by relaxing in the evening after a long day of work. During the silence, he seemed to be working on how to understand it all. If he was angry or sad, those were secondary to a feeling of confusion and helplessness. Finally, as my gaze told him it was time for him to say something, the accountant in him reviewed the books:

"It has been a long time since we had sex." I could almost see him sifting through the ledger in his mind to see how he ended up in debt to his wife. "We really haven't had much of a sex life since the kids were born."

"I know," Erin said softly. "Let's change that."

Over the course of the session, we came to realize that Erin, having retired from her hospital job, discovered what it was like to not feel fatigued all the time. In the last year, she started sleeping normal hours; consequently, she regained her energy and, with it, her interests in new activities. She wanted one of those new activities to be sex with her husband. The problem was Andy was still working as hard as ever. They both felt he should be able to pull back at work, but it never seemed to happen. In addition, they had developed different sleep schedules over the years, so they had little time in bed together when they were both awake.

By looking at the problem from the perspective of it being "our" problem, not Andy's because he falls asleep watching TV and comes to bed after Erin is asleep and not Erin's because she was the one who changed, it became their issue to work on together. Happily for them, they were in good health and had no physiological challenges to overcome.

Arousal and orgasm

Although it was not the case with Andy and Erin, many couples experience problems with arousal and orgasm. As discussed in the previous myth, there are a variety of treatments for particular issues of arousal and orgasm that have demonstrated efficacy. Whether the treatments include working with a therapist, a medication and a therapist, or just a self-help book, they usually will involve tackling the issue as a team. In my experience, the couples who are the most successful are the ones able to approach sexual challenges with an open mind and a lot of humor. There is a lot that can be awkward in working on sexual problems with a partner. Accepting that and being ready to laugh and have fun with lowered expectations seems to be how couples are able to stick with programs to treat issues like erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, and vaginismus.

Satisfaction

Barry and Emily McCarthy (2003) talk about finding bridges to sexual desire. In the case of Andy and Erin, I learned that they had a standing date night on Saturday nights. They both enjoyed that time together. It was often the only night of the week that they went to bed at the same time. They used that as a bridge to include time in bed to reacquaint themselves with each other's bodies. I made a point of forbidding sexual touching. At this point they were to simply get used to the feeling of being together and attending to each other. While my motive was genuine, I had an alternative motive as well. I wanted to take the pressure off. Nothing

ramps up performance anxiety like saying "OK, on Saturday at 10:35 p.m. you need to engage in coitus." Rather, I wanted there to be no pressure so I forbade sexual touching. It's not that having your therapist forbid sex turns you into Mr. and Mrs. Casanova, but it allows space to begin the process of feeling less awkward and having more fun. If the couple doesn't break the rules by having sex (they often do – making my job easier), I will work through the stages of change in McCarthy and McCarthy's book in an effort to improve their sexual satisfaction.

Erin and Andy's date nights started to include sex on a regular basis. This feeling of closeness permeated their relationship, which led to more shared interests and joint activities. They seemed to remember that they not only loved each other, but that they really liked each other too. Eventually, they were planning for Andy's retirement and discussing their shared goals. They both seemed hopeful and happy.

Conclusion

There is an adage that a good sex life can add 15–20% to relationship satisfaction and a bad sex life can detract 50–70% from relationship satisfaction (B. W. McCarthy & McCarthy, 2003). I've not found that to be quite true in my practice. Instead, I've found that sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are moderately correlated (e.g., Sprecher & Cate, 2004, found a correlation of .45). A moderate correlation means that for some couples an unhappy sex life goes hand-in-hand with an unhappy marriage, but for other couples there may be dissatisfaction with their sex life while being generally happy in the relationship (I've also known couples who seemed deeply distressed and dysfunctional while enjoying an active and satisfying sex life). In any case, there are effective treatment options available to those who want to improve their sexual functioning.

Note

1 For a detailed description of the nuances of various terms used to describe sexual partners not in a committed relationship, see Shannon Claxton and Manfred van Dulmen's (2013) article titled "Casual Sexual Relationships and Experiences in Emerging Adulthood."