

COUPLE TALK *Communicating with Your Partner*

Let's Talk S-E-X

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In their book, *Empowering Couples* (www.lifeinnovations.com), David and Amy Olsen point out that a couple's sexual relationship acts as an emotional barometer, reflecting their satisfaction with other aspects of the relationship. In fact, a good sexual relationship is often the outcome of a good emotional relationship. For these couples, sexuality flows from emotional intimacy based on open and honest communication.

Sex can also suppress the expression of deeper concerns and issues. Some couples may use sex to "smooth over" disputes. While this may seem to be an easier alternative to actually talking about and working through issues, it is never more than a temporary solution. When a committed relationship lacks trust, is stressed with financial concerns, or is plagued with destructive conflict, neither partner experiences true sexual satisfaction.

The process of talking about sex and feelings about sex can be very difficult, even for married couples. In fact, over half of all married couples find it difficult to discuss sexual issues. One reason for this is that we rarely have had models for talking about sex. Sex was most likely something you did not frequently discuss with your parents, or even your friends, while growing up. Because of this, sexual issues acquire a "taboo-like" quality.

The ability to communicate about sex is important in developing and maintaining both sexual and relationship satisfaction. Here are some things to consider and discuss with your partner:

- Are you both interested in sex for the same reason? Among married couples, the most common sexual concern stems from differing interests in sex. Studies have shown that, for the majority of men, sex can be easily separated from the relationship. But women tend to view sex from a relational perspective. Feelings of emotional intimacy in the relationship usually precede sexual expression for

women, whereas males often view sex as a way to increase intimacy.

- Don't assume your partner knows what you like! Do you believe that it isn't romantic or exciting if you have to tell your partner what you want? "She/he should know." This is an unreasonable expectation. As your relationship grows, your partner's needs and interests may change. Talk together about what you each enjoy—clearly communicate what feels pleasurable to you. Checking-in with each other about desires and expectations is valuable for having a great sexual relationship.
- Take some risks. According to the authors of *Fighting for Your Marriage* (www.prepinc.com), unless you feel safe and take emotional risks sharing your feelings with your partner, your relationship will not be all it can be. Try some new ideas to break out of ruts. Read a book on massage or sex together. Try something new, even if just once.

Most important, make time for your sexual relationship. Unfortunately, over the years, most couples take less and less time for this important kind of bonding. Like everything else that matters to you in life, you have to set aside special time to be together.

Adapted from *Common Stumbling Blocks to a Satisfying Sexual Relationship* by David Olson, Ph.D. for Family Information Services, Minneapolis, MN © 2002. Used with permission.

ACTIVITY

Discuss strengths and weaknesses in your sexual relationship. Commit to talk about how you can turn areas of disagreement or dissatisfaction into positives. Here are some questions to start you off:

- Are you satisfied with the amount of affection you give each other?
- Do you have similar sexual interests and expectations?
- Do you use or refuse sex in an unfair way?
- Do you have difficulty keeping your sexual relationship interesting and enjoyable?