

42 YEARS IN THE THERAPIST'S CHAIR: TREATING COUPLES' SEXUAL PROBLEMS

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True or False

- Handout uploaded in BTC and in GoToWebiar

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Myths About Sexual Desire

- Myths and facts about sexual desire explored to establish a framework to deal with the most common sex problem—low desire and desire discrepancies.

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Traditional Learnings about Marriage Therapy and Couple Sexuality

- Sexual dysfunction is caused by individual or relational problems. When therapy resolves these underlying issues, sex will spontaneously improve.
- The more love, communication, and intimacy, the better the sex.
- Deal with core mental health problems first—anxiety or depression, bi-polar disorder, alcoholism, trauma, family of origin issues. Then address relational issues caused by the mental health problem. It is usually unnecessary to directly address sexual problems.
- The therapeutic strategy is to deal with sex indirectly.
- With advances in the bio-medical field, a stand-alone medical intervention will resolve the great majority of sexual problems.
- Once the couple has created a healthy sexual relationship, they can proceed on their own. Except in rare cases, they do not need further help.

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Core Concepts

- Healthy couple sexuality involves desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction.
- The challenge is to integrate intimacy, non-demand pleasuring, and erotic scenarios and techniques.
- Personal responsibility/intimate sexual team model of change.
- Positive functions of couple sexuality—shared pleasure, reinforce and deepen intimacy, and sex as a tension reducer.
- Sexuality adds 15-20% to marital vitality and satisfaction. Paradoxically, a non-sexual relationship is a powerful drain, playing a 50-75% role.
- Goal of a satisfying, secure, and sexual relationship.

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Sexual Desire in Relationships

- Most couples begin with the Limerence Phase of romantic love/passionate sex/idealization.
- This is a special, motivating relational experience, but is fragile and time-limited, usually lasting 6-12 months, seldom more than 2 years
- Love, passion, and idealization is not a basis for maintaining sexual desire

Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (2015). The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. pages 20-29. New York: Harmony

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OVERVIEW OF INTEGRATIVE COGNITIVE- BEHAVIORAL COUPLE SEX THERAPY

Handout Pages 4-6

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No Sex and Low Sex Marriages

- One in five married couples are non-sexual (sex less than 10 times a year, less than once a month).
- Contrary to "common sense" beliefs the most common time couples stop being sexual is early in the marriage (the first 2-5 years).
- A low sex marriage (defined as sex less than twice a month, 11-23 times a year) causes relational problems for.

McCarthy B. & Cohn, D. (2017). Treatment of male hypoactive sexual disorder. In W. Ishak (Ed.) *The Textbook of Clinical Sexual Medicine*, pp.133-153. New York: Springer.

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The Sexual Paradox

- The Paradox: When sex is healthy in a person's life and relationship, it has a small but integral role contributing 15-20% to energizing their bond and reinforcing feelings of desire and desirability.
- Sexual paradox: dysfunctional, conflictual, or avoidant sexuality has an inordinately powerful role of demoralizing the individuals and threatening relational stability.
- Good sex cannot save a bad marriage but bad sex can destroy a good marriage.

Metz, M., Epstein, N., & McCarthy, B. (2017). Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Sexual Dysfunction. pages 61-88. New York: Routledge

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The Sexual Mantra and Desire

- In the sexual mantra of desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction, desire is the core dimension.
- Desire is not a static, bio-medical issue, but is changeable and best understood in the framework of the biopsychosocial approach to understanding, assessing, and treating sexual problems.

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Sexual Power Struggles

- Couples become stuck in the traditional male-female power struggle of "intercourse or nothing".
 - No one wins a power struggle; the relationship suffers.

A core concept in changing desire problems is to redefine sexuality as involving sensual, playful, and erotic touching in addition to intercourse.

Change includes confronting the traditional intimacy (women) and eroticism (men) split. The new model of female-male sexual equity is empowering. Recognize shared values and emphasize emotional and sexual decision-making.

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GUIDELINES FOR REVITALIZING AND MAINTAINING SEXUAL DESIRE

Handout Pages 7-8

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Core Strategy: Assessment

- For assessment , we advocate for the four-session assessment model.
- Begin with a couple session which sends a strong message that intimacy and sexuality are best addressed as a couple issue.
- The second and third sessions are individual psychological/relational/sexual histories .

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Core Strategy

- The focus is on understanding each person's sexual strengths and vulnerabilities.
- The fourth session is a 90-minute couple feedback meeting.
- Provide direct feedback to the couple about sexual issues, propose a treatment plan (the most common is a 6 month good faith effort to create a new couple sexual style focused on strong, resilient desire) , and assign the first desire psychosexual skill exercise to be done in the privacy of the couple's home.

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DESIRE SEXUAL SKILL EXERCISES

Handout Pages 10-14

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Sexual Desire in Relationships

- Desire is maintained by
 - *positive anticipation,*
 - *sense of deserving pleasure,*
 - *freedom and choice,*
 - *and a mix of sexual scenarios and techniques.*

The challenge is to develop a couple sexual style to promote sexual desire which is vital and maintains. When there are stresses and sexual disappointments desire remains resilient when the partners turn toward each other for support rather than blaming.

- Johnson, S. & Zuccarini. (2010). Integrating sex and attachment in emotionally focused couple therapy. *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*, 56, 431-445.
- McCarthy, B. & Wald, L. (2017). Psychobiosocial approach to sex therapy. In Z. Peterson (Ed.) *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Sex Therapy*. pp.190-201. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

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Sexual Skill Exercises

- There are four core desire exercises-
 - (1) *comfort*,
 - (2) *attraction*,
 - (3) *trust*,
 - and (4) *create your preferred sexual scenario*.

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The couple read about the exercise, talk about it in therapy and at home, and the most important factor is behaviorally enacting the exercise. Practicing each exercise (at least once and up to three times) promotes cognitive, behavioral, and emotional change. The couple are encouraged to do 2-4 exercises between sessions. The format is each partner takes a turn initiating and implementing the exercise. In addition, couples identify "bridges to sexual desire" and negotiate how to deal with desire discrepancies

- McCarthy, B. McCarthy, E. (2009). *Discovering Your Couple Sexual Style*. pages 33-42. New York: Routledge.
- McCarthy, B & McCarthy, E. (2018). *Finding Your Sexual Voice*. pages 59-72. New York: Routledge

Sexual Skill Exercises

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Synchronous / Asynchronous Exercises

- Couples prefer mutual, synchronous scenarios, as well as accepting asynchronous sexual scenarios.
- Asynchronous sexuality (positive, but better for one partner) is normal and healthy as long as it's not at the expense of the partner or relationship.

McCarthy, B. & McCarthy, E. (2019)
Enhancing Couple Sexuality pages 99-112.
New York : Routledge.

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Where Couples Get Stuck

- The female-male sexual equity model is the opposite of the traditional male-female double standard.
- Sexual equity reinforces women and men as intimate and erotic allies who recognize the multiple roles, meaning, and outcomes of couple desire and sexuality. In an intimate relationship there are many more sexual similarities than differences between women and men.

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Realistic Expectations

- Positive, realistic expectations is a core issue in dealing with desire problems.
- A majority of sexual encounters are asynchronous .
- Couples celebrate mutual experiences with desire, pleasure, and eroticism. It is critical that they turn toward each other when the sexual encounter is mediocre, dissatisfying, or dysfunctional.
 - *It is normal for 5-15% of sexual encounters to be disappointing or negative.*

Apologizing or blaming is anti-erotic. Remain intimate and erotic allies whether the encounter was exceptional or problematic. You build confidence that emotionally and sexually "my partner has my back".

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Core Strategy

- In addressing low sexual desire, a comprehensive couple approach addresses
 - *changes in attitudes,*
 - *behaviors,*
 - *and emotions.*

A core strategy is to focus directly on desire utilizing psychosexual skill exercises.

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WHAT IS THE RIGHT COUPLE SEXUAL STYLE FOR YOU?

Handout Pages 41-42

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Couple Sexual Styles

- A core issue is to decide on a couple sexual style which promotes desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction.
- Your couple sexual style is usually different than your relational style.
- Relational style involves how the couple deal with differences and conflicts.
- The couple sexual style focuses on two factors. First, the balance between one's "sexual voice" (autonomy) and being an intimate sexual team. Second, how you balance intimacy and eroticism to promote desire.

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Couple Sexual Styles

- There are four primary couple sexual styles. In order of frequency they are: (1) Complementary, (2) Traditional, (3) Best Friend, (4) Emotionally Expressive.

Sexually, one size never fits all, but deciding on the right fit for you is crucial. Unfortunately, most couples do not consider the issue of their sexual style or they assume that sexual style should be the same as relational style. Each couple sexual style has its strengths and vulnerabilities, especially in terms of sexual desire.

McCarthy, B. & Ross L. (2019). Relational style and couple sexual style. The Family Journal, 27, 245-249.

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The Best Friend Relational Style

- Couple researchers and clinicians agree that the Best Friend relational style is the best fit for most couples.
- The Best Friend couple sexual style is "socially desirable" in emphasizing intimacy and mutuality but is prone to de-eroticizing the relationship. Too much intimacy and mutuality reduces sexual frequency and vitality.

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The Complimentary Style

- For most, the Complementary couple sexual style is the best decision.
- The Complementary style reinforces that each person is responsible for yourself sexually, but that ultimately sexuality is a couple process. The concept of her, his, and our bridges to sexual desire allows you to initiate in a variety of ways.
- The Complementary sexual style is compatible with the female-male sexual equity model and the Good Enough Sex (GES) model. Both partners value intimacy and eroticism rather than the traditional gender split. Complementary requires mindfulness and balance. As circumstances change (for example, birth of a child), you have to adapt.

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The Traditional Style

- The strength of the Traditional Couple Sexual Style is that it is organized around traditional gender roles.
- There is no need for negotiation and it promotes a stable relationship.
- Vulnerabilities include rigid roles which with aging subvert sex function and cause resentment, especially for women.

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The Emotionally Expressive Style

- The Emotionally Expressive sexual style is the most erotic, emphasizing taking sexual risks and using role enactment arousal.
- The problem is the couple focus on sexual drama and intensity at the expense of intimacy and security.

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The Best Decision

- For most couples the best decision is the Complementary couple sexual style and the Best Friend relational style.

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- Strategies to revitalize sexual desire based on the couple sexual style is clinically empowering.
- Different sexual styles require different interventions to rekindle sexual desire.

Strategies To Revitalize

McCarthy, B. & McCarthy, E. (2019). Rekindling Desire. (3rd.edition. pages 101-112. New York: Routledge.

McCarthy, B. & Ross, L. (2017). Integrating sexual concepts and interventions into couple therapy. In J. Fitzgerald (Ed.) Foundations for Couple Therapy, pp.355-364. New York: Routledge.

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Revitalizing the Complementary Style Couple

- The Complementary couple sexual style fits the therapeutic model of personal responsibility/intimate sexual team.
- Each person expresses their authentic sexual self and emphasize sharing intimacy, pleasuring, and eroticism.
- In addition to the desire psychosexual skill exercises, Complementary couples honor each partner's right to veto a scenario so they are free to embrace sexually inviting scenarios.
 - *Play out each partner's preferred manner of initiation,*
 - pleasuring.
 - eroticism,
 - how and when to transition to intercourse, and enjoy afterplay scenarios.

Complementary style couples enjoy variable, flexible sexuality in their 60's, 70's, and 80's.

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Revitalizing Traditional Style Couples

- The challenge for Traditional style couples is to spice up gender roles.
- Have the man initiate a sexual date with a prohibition on intercourse and orgasm.
- The woman initiates a playful or erotic scenario and it is her decision whether to transition to intercourse.

The challenge is to respect traditional gender roles but keep desire alive by introducing new inputs.

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Revitalizing Best Friend Style Couples

- The challenge for Best Friend style couples is to take sexual risks to ensure that playful and erotic scenarios promote desire. This includes welcoming asynchronous sexual experiences. Not all sex has to be mutual, intimate, and equal. Accept the value of playful, asynchronous, and erotic sexuality.

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Revitalizing Emotionally Expressive Couples

- The challenge for Emotionally Expressive style couples is different.
- Create boundaries so that the couple are not overwhelmed by drama.
- Each partner identifies 1, 2, or 3 "sexual atomic bomb" issues with a commitment that no matter how angry, hurt, or drunk you do not use these bombs.
- Reinforce unpredictability and risk-taking but honor the boundary so that the relationship is not negated. Reinforce intimacy and security

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- Sexual desire is surprisingly easy to undermine or kill. Couples decide on a sexual style which is congruent with their attitudes and values.
- Based on their sexual style they develop sexual strategies and techniques to maintain strong, resilient desire.

How Not To Kill Sexual Desire

McCarthy, B. & Oppliger, T. (2019). Treatment of desire discrepancy. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 10.1080.0092623x.2019.1594475.

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Fatally Flawed Marriages

Hidden Agenda

Negative Reasons to
Marry

Core Incompatibility

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- Sexual abuse incidents
- Dealt with at time or kept secret
- Proud Survivor vs. Shameful / Anxious

Resource: Maltz, W. (2012). The Sexual Healing Journey (3rd edition).

Sexual Trauma: Levels of Victimization

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**GUIDELINES FOR
SEX AFTER 60
HANDOUT PAGES
50-51**

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**RELAPSE
PREVENTION
HANDOUT PAGES
51-53**

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Relapse Prevention Plan

- An individualized relapse prevention plan is crucial in comprehensive couple sex therapy.
- The couple chooses 2-4 guidelines which serve as the basis for their relapse prevention plan. By its nature couple sexuality is variable and flexible with a range of roles, meanings, and outcomes.

An individualized relapse prevention plan involves a check-in every 6 months for 2 years to ensure therapeutic gains are maintained and generalized.