

SO CALLED “LOW DESIRE”

“Low” versus High Desire

It's important to note that low desire is not a label, a permanent diagnosis, or a flaw – it's a position in the system. Every couple is a system, and in each system there is generally a low desire partner and a high desire partner. Those positions are generally pretty stable. It is rare that both partners have the same appetite for sex all the time. When one person wants sex more than the other, it's called Desire Discrepancy in sexological psychobabble. Low desire is a relational issue that causes suffering when it is at odds with the partner's higher desire and interpersonal stress is incurred.

Problem is “low desire” sounds pejorative because the term implies that there's a normative level of desire you are supposed to achieve and maintain. Not! I'm only concerned with whether or not your level of interest in sex works for you.

The former official labels of female hypoactive desire dysfunction and female arousal dysfunction are now merged into a single syndrome called sexual interest/arousal disorder. More psychobabble. For the purposes of my discussion I'm going to use variations on the term “low desire”, and look at what it might really be about. Lower desire may present as diminished sexual desire but once you rule out medical causes, it isn't really – it just looks like low desire.

Though it is an equal opportunity woe, reduced sexual desire does seem to be mostly the domain of women. I see many women with low sexual desire. Some may have been married for many years, have raised their kids, do not want to end their marriage, love their husbands dearly, but still really do not want to have sex with them - or anyone else for that matter. There's nothing wrong with these women; there are very good reasons why they have low desire. I also see older women, some in wonderful new relationships, who still don't want sex. It is a side effect of menopause that women's libido often tanks, even with the novelty of blossoming romance. However, whether or not you decide to take hormones, with all the controversy and calculated risks entailed, the middle-aged woman's interest in sex can be resuscitated, if she wishes. Factors that can help boost the menopausal woman's interest in sex, once medical causes are eliminated, include improving the dynamics of her relationship, and the communication with her partner.

Lower desire at any age, especially with a younger woman, often has to do with not knowing herself or her body well enough to know what turns her on, not being assertive enough to tell her partner what that is, or not showing her lover how to pleasure her, or a combination thereof. Women with less desire can engage in intercourse before their body is sufficiently aroused and physically ready; this can cause chronic yeast infections.

Peri-menopause, with all its varied and humbling features, can start early for some women, sometimes as early as forty. The more common features include night sweats, a short fuse (you'd have a short fuse after a few wet nights!), headaches (caused by dehydration from all that spontaneous sweating), discomfort with intercourse, weight gain, and foggy brain. Other less talked about manifestations include no longer liking red wine, difficulty with orgasms, what I call “no-reason anxiety” (which grips

you upon awakening until you realize there's nothing to be anxious about), increased vulnerability to altitude sickness, and less interest in sexual frolicking.

When a couple comes to see me for low desire problems, I tell them that I never assume that one person is holding up the show. Even if one partner's issues predate the current relationship, the dynamic of the relationship always plays a part. I never assume that one person is broken and needs to be fixed. Ever.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE WHEN YOU ARE *IN* EROTIC INTEGRITY?

For the middle-aged woman with low sexual desire, Erotic Integrity involves stepping back and looking at the larger picture of what may be at the root of her discontent and how that impact her relationship. That is not to say that she is to blame herself, not at all. I never advocate people beating themselves up. Causes may include that she's not happy with her life, that she's feeling lost as an empty nester and needs to reinvent herself, that she's gained weight and doesn't feel good about herself, that she's been complacent in her relationship and the status quo has brought sex to a grinding halt, that her hormones have shifted and she may want to find a good health practitioner to address that and other medical issues. Maybe she's depressed. Her dwindling desire may have a negative impact on her mate, such as feeling rejected, inadequate, or old. Her willingness to self-examine will inspire trust and hopefully inspire her mate to do so also.

One of the best-kept secrets of aging, in my opinion, is that it tends to correlate with self-acceptance. So your ass is sliding down the back of your thighs... and you can love yourself through it. That kind of compassion is a good foundation for Erotic Integrity.

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE WHEN YOU ARE *OUT* OF EROTIC INTEGRITY?

Being out of Erotic Integrity when faced with ebbing sexual desire usually entails ineffective strategies, such as sticking your head in the sand and hoping the problem will go away, blaming your mate for "not doing it right" (when he used to do the same things before and they worked just fine then), hiding and avoiding (throwing out the baby with the bathwater – refusing affection for fear it will lead to expectations of intercourse). And then there's that popular strategy of faking orgasms which sells everyone short and quietly breaks their heart.

DESIRE VERSUS AROUSAL

DSM v DOESN'T DIFFERENTIATE BUT I DISAGREE

Definition of Terms

Let's start by defining some terms. Many people get desire and arousal confused, which causes misplaced distress when they look only to their crotch for signs of desire. Though the official diagnosis is one thing - female sexual interest/arousal disorder - I'd like to make a distinction. I define desire as the willingness to get started, to move toward your partner sexually, to engage them erotically. You can come to desire from three places. The first place is the most obvious: your crotch. This is where you feel

horny, your libido, “throbbing loins” as I call them. This is also what happens when you feel arousal. When we’re young, we have throbbing loins more often. Less so when we’re older—especially for women. Men have more testosterone, so they tend to experience more throbbing loins. There is nothing wrong with that - it’s just different biochemistry. The second place you can feel desire is a little higher up: your heart. This feels different than throbbing loins. It stems from your feelings for your lover. You want to feel close to them, experience pleasure with them, smell them, wrap your legs around them, because you feel affectionate towards them. The third place you can feel desire is higher yet; it’s your head. In fact, it’s not a feeling at all. It’s a thought: “It would be a good idea for us to have sex.” You may not feel horny, or particularly loving, but you acknowledge to yourself that it’d be good for the relationship if you and your partner were to be sexual. It would make you feel closer, more in sync, more harmonious.

It doesn’t matter if one person comes from their crotch and the other from their head. You can also come from a combination of crotch, head, and/or heart. Desire is about getting started. The crotch will usually catch up; that’s the arousal part. Many women actually are interested in sex, but are looking in the wrong places for cues that they are. They assume that if they don’t feel it in their crotch (which is a tall order when your hormones have declined), “it’s not working,” or “it’s not happening.” When I give my clients my little soapbox talk about desire versus arousal, they usually feel like a cloud has lifted. They’re not broken. There is possibility.

Sex for Non-Sexual Reasons

One of my professors in my PhD program in Clinical Sexology, the late Janice Epp, PhD, talked about how you can have sex for non-sexual reasons. And there is nothing wrong with that. It actually happens all the time, but we’re not necessarily thinking about it that way.

If your beloved has had a prolonged day of cerebral activity, needs a little help getting back into their body, and sex is preferable to going to the gym, you might offer: “You seem like you could use some help getting out of your head and back into that sexy body of yours. Wanna get it on?” You might want to have sex because it would help you sleep, and ask your spouse: “Honey, I’m tired and I’ve been having trouble sleeping. Would you be up for a quickie to help me sleep?” As long as you disclose your motivation so that the other doesn’t feel used, what’s the harm? Another reason might be to have your partner feel supported and cared for. If you know they’ve had a rough day and could use some reassurance and tender loving care, maybe some gentle lovemaking is in order: “Babe, I know you’ve had a bad day. How about I make it better?” If you know your lover is feeling fat and not so pretty that day, and that a good orgasm or two would have her feeling juicy again: “You are so beautiful, I just want to lick you up one side and down the other, and in between!”

The mercy fuck is also sex for non-sexual reasons, but for lousy reasons. Generally it’s the woman who is submitting in order to placate the man. The problematic part, as I see it, is that it comes from the worst in both of them: he’s settling for crumbs and she’s only offering crumbs.

Reasons for Lower Desire

Entire tomes have been written about desire, the lack thereof, and the causes. Some of the more

obvious physical causes include hormones, birth control repercussions, alcohol, prescription or illegal drug use, chronic pain or fatigue, chemotherapy, antidepressants, recovery from childbirth or surgery, pain with intercourse, arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, thyroid issues, fibromyalgia... Emotional causes might be a lover with poor skills, lack of self-confidence to initiate, sleep deprivation due to young children, the pressure of expectations or cultural factors, anger, a history of trauma, grief, passive aggressive withholding, depression, repercussions of affairs, work stress, grief, or poor body image. You may have heard the saying, "Men need sex to feel good. Women need to feel good to have sex." Low body image tends to interfere with sexual desire; when we don't feel good about ourselves we tend to not want to be seen or touched.

Not so obvious causes take a little longer to figure out. In my Clinical Sexology practice, when an allegedly happy woman comes in and complains of low desire, I try to figure out how it makes sense - because it always makes perfect sense. Remember, nobody is broken. If she comes in with her partner, I can observe how they talk about the issue, ask how they've addressed it until then and what results that has yielded. I tell people when I start to work with them that I'm not going to pathologize either partner's desire level, or try and talk the one who is more interested in sex out of it. Reciprocally, I'm not going to try and convince the partner who is not into it, to want it. The goal is to not have their differing levels of desire create distance between them.

KELLY & TOM

Two years into a happy dating relationship, Kelly and Tom were distressed by her lack of interest in sex and inability to orgasm. She was seventy-two, he was sixty-five; they made a nice-looking couple. She described a pattern in relationships that preceded Tom whereby she fell into taking care of her lover sexually but stopping him from pleasuring her. Her focus was on him instead of herself. She wanted to address this for herself, and her current relationship with Tom was presenting her with that opportunity. She complained of a "mysterious feeling, like he's not into me. I push him away because it's not satisfying. It's just too much trouble to deal with." She was wary of developing a sense of obligation or resentment. After several assurances on his part in a short period of time that he was "mad about her," I asked him if it was a pattern in his life for him to feel that he had to convince people that he loved them: "no". When I asked if he felt he had to convince people that they should want him, his eyes teared up. His history predisposed him to feeling unwanted. Growing up, he had felt that his distant mother "didn't want to deal" with him, and his largely absent father tended to renege on promises made. During his prior twenty-five-year marriage he had felt "largely ignored." That feeling that Kelly was picking up when Tom initiated sex was his fear of not being wanted. When I asked her what feeling his insecurity triggered in her, she said that a recurring theme in her life had been the feeling that she's not good enough.

So this was not a case of low desire. Kelly had desire. It just wasn't in the form of throbbing loins. And they were getting stuck because Kelly picked up Tom's unconscious fear of not being wanted. While on the one hand he was reaching towards her sexually, part of him was also pulling back in fear at the same time. Kelly intuitively picked up this approach/avoidance vibe, and this in turn made her feel rejected and not good enough.

When we have a big reaction to a small event, we are triggered, because our unconscious beliefs about ourselves have been activated. To unconsciously protect against the pain of perceived rejection, Kelly pushed Tom away.

We spent several sessions talking about self disclosure in the face of anxiety, how becoming self aware and speaking what is true in the moment can take the charge out of it. So in the midst of sexual congress Tom might say: "You know, honey, part of me is really enjoying this, and part of me is getting anxious, wondering if you're not getting turned on because you don't want me. You don't need to fix it, I just want to call myself out, and be authentic and present with you." Obviously it may not come out that eloquently, but what we're striving for is clear, self-responsible communication. Or, he might just say: "I can feel myself pulling away," and Kelly can say: "Come back, baby. I want you." When we give each other the antidote to our faulty belief, as Kelly might do in this scenario, it soothes our tender heart and settles us down. And that is such a gift - for both people - because it brings them closer together. Every communication has the power to bring people closer together or push them farther apart. In bed, you want to be closer together.

During a later session, after further discussing how both their faulty beliefs about themselves interfered with their lovemaking and with Kelly's arousal, I suggested something that many people find rather challenging. Since Kelly was consistently successful at turning herself on and getting herself off with masturbation, and since her chief complaint was that she wasn't orgasming with Tom, I asked how it would be for her to masturbate with Tom, with him watching or participating in some way. She caught her breath: "That would be a huge stretch!" Kelly had a long history of using sex as a tool to get love from men, "but I don't know how to *be* with somebody" she confessed. Allowing Tom to witness how she pleased herself would require her to stay present, get out of her head and into her body, settle herself down, and consider the possibility that maybe she was "good enough." It wasn't what she did with her vibrator that was hard to show, it was her fear of being judged as not measuring up.

I offered a parallel stretch for Tom: for him to stay present, not shut down and pull away, and not withdraw into a protective mode when he felt unwanted. One of the hardest things to do is to stay expanded when we feel emotional pain – most people contract. I suggested that when uncomfortable feelings came up for him that he open up to Kelly, tell her what was happening for him, and expose his vulnerability. This would take the charge out of what he was feeling, allow them both to get present with what was happening in the moment, and enable him to move forward with greater authenticity. Intimacy is not a euphemism for sex; it means into-me-you-see. These two had a precious opportunity to let themselves be seen more fully, to create more intimacy and fuel their eroticism.

THE JOURNEY TO EROTIC INTEGRITY

Self- examination

This couple was well matched in that neither of them had much appetite for emotional discomfort. We always pick a partner who has the same tolerance for intimacy as we do – that's how it works. When Kelly and Tom got close to experiencing emotional pain their brain did this nifty trick of bypassing the feeling and going to a thought, or their mind went blank. Thus they didn't have to feel too vulnerable

with each other. But it was shutting down their eroticism. Tom's frequent response to a question, sometimes after a pause, was "I don't know." He didn't know how he felt about having had little contact with his father throughout his life, nor how he felt about his first love in high school breaking up with him, nor about having a mediocre relationship with his own kids. In other words, he couldn't afford to feel the pain. His Erotic Integrity started with wondering why it was that he answered "I don't know" so much, and dipping his toe into the pain.

Kelly also didn't spend a whole lot of time feeling uncomfortable emotions. When her father drank too much on holidays and verbally abused her mother, when she was bullied at school, when she accidentally got pregnant because she knew nothing about birth control and had to quit her ambitious college plans, desperation and a strong sense of practicality helped her to survive and rise from her circumstances. "I can be scared, not like what is happening, but I'll take 100 percent responsibility for my life and do whatever it takes." But the price she paid for her stoicism was not fully feeling. Her first step to Erotic Integrity was to allow herself to feel all her emotions, good and bad. Part of her wanted change, and part of her didn't. Humans are ambivalent creatures. Often part of us wants more intimacy, sex, eroticism, romance, while part of us is also afraid of it.

Self-acceptance

In addition to not feeling good enough, Kelly also had a trigger around not feeling seen. Part of her really wanted to be known and seen. But in order to be seen, we have to show up. She had a long history of opening her legs but not opening her heart at the same time. "I'm great at performance. I look like I have it all together but I don't." Kelly needed to step into more acceptance of who she was and trust that she was good enough. Then she could let herself be seen. "I've been more authentic the past few years than when I was younger." This new relationship offered her an opportunity to bring more of herself to bed.

Tom was grappling with the new realization that not feeling wanted had had a pervasive impact on his life and his relationships. Accepting this part of his psyche took a lot of courage. He started noticing when the faulty belief came up and when it made decisions for him, causing him to withdraw or give mixed signals - this was part of his Erotic Integrity. Once he had the awareness, he could make different choices, and not approach Kelly sexually while also pulling away from her.

Self-actualization

Once Kelly got a little braver, she was willing to show herself more, be more vulnerable, and take risks from the best in herself. She showed Tom how she masturbated, allowing him to see her turned on, the look of arousal and pleasure in her eyes, in all her glory. One thing led to another and she allowed him to pleasure her and look into her open eyes while she orgasmed, letting herself be seen and trusting that she was "good enough." She said, "The most important thing is that I want my heart to be open."

Tom was gradually able to trust that he was wanted, speak his truth in the moment if he felt insecure and was thus able to be more fully present with Kelly. It's hard to be turned on when you're not there. Increased emotional presence allows for greater arousal. And typically there is a feedback loop: when one partner is really turned on, the other tends to ride that wave and get more turned on. Similarly,

when one partner is anxious, consciously or not, the other gets anxious too. So when these two good people were able to settle down their nervousness and doubts about their self-worth, they were more available to each other, and to their own desire and arousal.

The beauty of this work for me is seeing that one's sexuality is never etched in stone, and that people can learn new things about themselves even into their sixties and seventies.

THE MEANING IN LOW SEXUAL DESIRE

Something to consider when thinking about desire and what contributes to it is the meaning we attach to behaviors and feelings during sex. Sometimes the meaning changes. For example, at the beginning of the relationship a man construed his lover's enthusiastic wet kisses with her tongue to mean that she found him uncontrollably desirable and wanted to devour him. Now he makes it mean that she suffocates him and wants to control him. The only thing that has changed is the meaning he attributes to it. The gal is still kissing him the same way. Or the way he slaps her butt during doggie style used to be kind of kinky to her, and now it means that she's just a piece of ass and doesn't feel seen. It's the same behavior but it has a different meaning. It is the meaning we attribute to something that contributes to our arousal, or lack thereof. Some people find stockings arousing, others find them a hindrance. Nipple clamps may be a turn-on for some, and repulsively painful for others. How something is perceived inside our heads is a large contributor to what happens in our genitals. Sexual arousal isn't just a matter of friction and fantasy. If a man loves meatloaf and knows that's his wife's cue for initiating sex, when he comes home from work and finds that she has made meatloaf for dinner, he's a happy guy. Meatloaf may not have the same meaning in the neighbor's house.

THE LOW-DESIRE PARTNER IS IN CONTROL

The low desire partner is in control: this is the inherent dynamic. Whether it's about going to Hawaii on vacation, buying the patio set, having a child, or having sex, the low desire person controls the outcome. The high desire partner is in the uncomfortable position of not having control. There is no best position to be in. The high desire partner feels powerless, which is an accurate perception on their part. The low desire partner feels pressured. I remind them that pressure is an inside job. In other words, someone can behave in a certain way to try and influence us to do something, but ultimately we make the decision whether to buy into that or not. Nobody can *make* us do anything. We decide whether we want to succumb to their efforts to sway us, or not. The decision to give into pressure comes from within us, not from outside. Feeling pressured and giving in to it are two different things. People often prefer to fight than self-examine. That is not being accountable. That is not conducive to Erotic Integrity.

One of my mentors, the late Jim Maddock, PhD, described power as the ability to influence, and control as the ability to restrict. The lower desire partner restricts their partner's access to sex...with them, anyway.

UNILATERAL DECISIONS

I've seen many a man in a quandary because he wants sex and she doesn't. He wants to stay married to his wife, sometimes out of love, loyalty or wanting to preserve the family unit, other times out of fear of

being alone. In other words, sometimes out of the best in himself, sometimes from the worst in himself. His wife may have decided that she doesn't want to have sex with him, but she doesn't want him to have sex with anyone else either. She has made a unilateral decision about who gets to play with his genitals, other than him alone. His bind, as he sees it, is how he is going to get laid and keep his marriage. When I see a man like this in my office, I ask him how he is going to keep his Erotic Integrity. He could have sex with others, amateur or professional. But then that brings up the dilemma of either lying about it, which is out of Erotic Integrity, or negotiating for an open relationship, which he has no confidence his wife will support. He could take matters into his own hands, so to speak, and settle for a regular diet of masturbation, but that leaves him lacking. He could settle for the occasional mercy fuck. All of these options may provide short-term gratification, but none prove satisfactory for Erotic Integrity. There is no magic solution. But asking "will we have sex or not?" is asking the wrong question. The sexual stalemate puts people up against their most growing edge. It puts them in a position to examine what desire means to them, what sex represents, what they deeply want, and how they most need to develop themselves in order to have a satisfying sex life. These are not easy questions, but they pave the path of Erotic Integrity.

AARON & DEBRA

Aaron and Debra were referred to me by a psychotherapist with whom Debra was doing some individual exploration into her anxiety and lack of interest in sex with Aaron, her husband of twenty-five years. Both aged fifty, they described having "a good marriage", seemed cooperative and well intentioned toward each other, and they had a solid, loving vibe about them. During our individual history taking session, Debra tearfully confessed a fear that Aaron would leave her if he knew how much she didn't want sex, and that it would be easier to fix if she knew why she wasn't interested. She felt "pushed and guilty" and confused about her level of desire. During his history taking session he confessed to a desire for receiving more oral sex, more novelty such as watching porn together, sex outside, staying in bed all day pleasuring each other - nothing crazy. Seeing me was not a last-ditch effort to save the marriage; it was relationship enrichment and personal growth. He felt very "blessed" in his life and his marriage and what turned him on the most was "connection and reciprocity."

Debra felt guilty for not wanting or having sex with Aaron. And if she did have it, she felt guilty for enjoying it (so she had arousal). She could still hear the "sex isn't okay" message from her parents who had insisted that she and Aaron have separate bedrooms when they were engaged and came to visit. She had it set up in her head so that she couldn't win. Sometimes she felt "fully enrolled" in sex, and other times it was "one more thing that needed to get done" when she felt stretched thin. Aaron was very tactile and affectionate while Debra tended to want space. In an effort to not crowd her, he had been suppressing his eroticism, even holding back when they were sexual, though not always succeeding in dampening his ardor and desire for his wife. This was not a typical way of being for him; he was a man who knew what he wanted and made it happen. She grew up in a family where if she did express a preference for something her mother or emotionally needy twin sister would override her. "If I don't commit to what I want, I won't be disappointed, as I was as a child." When she was in kindergarten, Debra masturbated. When her parents discovered this, they hit her with a belt and

threatened to take her to a psychiatrist. She'd had a long history of being a sexual creature. Aaron stated that at the beginning of their relationship he'd never learned so much about pleasing a woman as he had with Debra. Clearly arousal was not her issue; desire was. She got turned on when she let herself get into it. She just didn't want to get started. She didn't *want* sex. When I asked her if she *wanted to want* sex, she said: "Yes, but I want to come to it of my own accord!" She wanted this for herself – not just to please Aaron.

So what had changed since they originally got together? A year into their courtship, Aaron had taken a job in another state. They thought they could maintain a long-distance relationship while Debra finished graduate school. But Aaron missed her and felt that he really needed them to be together in order for the relationship to survive and for them to stay connected. So he strongly requested that she move to be with him. Though she conceded and switched graduate schools, she felt resentful of him forcing her hand. Shortly thereafter she accidentally got pregnant. Though Aaron did not push for an abortion, and encouraged Debra to choose what was best for her, she opted to end the pregnancy. This emotional upheaval on the tails of her reluctant move fed a resentment in her which remained underground.

An additional possible component of her low desire may be that at the beginning of the relationship she was on her best behavior, putting her inhibitions aside to be sexually free with Aaron. Once the relationship was stable, he became too precious to her and she could not afford to lose him, so she put away the sexually free part of herself in favor of the responsible, safe part of herself. This is a popular strategy: the more important the other becomes to us, the more attached we feel, and the more we hide the more vulnerable parts of ourselves out of fear of rejection. The other becomes more important to us than our authenticity. We play it safe. This tends to lead to a drop in intimacy and desire. Add to that the birth of children and the attendant shift of focus, and sex became less of a priority for Debra. Now their kids were almost all grown, some having left for college, and this couple was re-prioritizing their marriage and sex life.

One factor that we could rule out was that her hot flashes and vaginal dryness from menopause were being successfully addressed with hormone replacement therapy, and she felt good in her body.

Through our joint sessions and her individual therapy, Debra came to realize just how impactful her underground resentment had been. She had been unconsciously withholding herself sexually in an attempt to feel some sense of control. She also paid increasing attention to what she was feeling and needing rather than prioritizing what others needed to her detriment, as many women do. She reported having had an imaginary conversation with her parents, by her own initiative, where she scolded them for instilling shameful views of sex, and where she claimed her right to pleasure: "You did me a huge disservice. That's enough! And now I'm going to have sex with Aaron." All these pieces of the puzzle led her to feel more sexually open to her husband. Aaron learned just how reactive she had been to his more enthusiastic approach which she experienced as predatory. Since she had a long history of feeling overruled and dominated in her family of origin, it was important that she feel that she had room to come towards him and meet him sexually rather than feel invaded by him.

As our work progressed they both reported that she was “more interested, open, and desirous.” She had initiated sex several times, even trying a new position they had never done before of her own accord, where she was on top and facing him. She was claiming her right to her pleasure and her eroticism. When he had initiated once in the middle of the night, she readily spread her legs and opened herself up to him. Other times he had spooned her upon awaking, kissed her neck, stroked her butt, played with her nipples, gradually easing into touching her clitoris, and she had responded to his caresses, moved her body against his, breathing more lustily. She didn’t feel pushed so she didn’t pull back.

When I suggested that as a next step she open her eyes during sex, she balked at the idea. Sex in the dark with her eyes closed was easier, and this is the case for many people.

THE JOURNEY TO EROTIC INTEGRITY

Self-examination

Aaron had to take stock of the fact that when his approach to Debra was so direct that she experienced it as abrupt and invasive, it didn’t serve his purpose. Though he was a skilled lover, he needed to settle down a little and give Debra room to want him. This was one area of his life where he could not just make it happen.

Debra got clear about the various components that created her lack of desire: feeling overruled, not having a voice, not claiming what she needed, her parents’ negative messages. She also took a good look at her reluctance to open her eyes during sex. She thought it was out of fear of owning that she was being sexual and enjoying it.

Self-acceptance

Aaron not feeling desired by Debra caused him to come on a little strong, compensating for her lack of interest by meeting her more than halfway. Accepting that about himself and having compassion for how he had been coping with feeling rejected enabled him to settle himself down and not push.

As Debra grew to own her needs and preferences, she found a voice to express them too. When people don’t feel heard, it may be because they don’t speak up. At first it was a stretch for her to tell Aaron that she preferred to keep her eyes closed so that she could fantasize. He was fine with that, which helped her to feel trust. She gradually forgave herself for all those years of feeling shameful and not allowing her eroticism to blossom.

Self-actualization

Aaron grew more trusting of Debra desiring him and opening herself to him. He was chomping at the bit less, and when I suggested that they discuss some of the novelty he had mentioned to me that he was seeking, he started small with a suggestion that they read erotica out loud in bed to each other. He was owning what he wanted and had the wisdom to pace himself, and accommodate her needs. He was in his Erotic Integrity.

Debra eventually grew brave enough to open her eyes during sex and orgasm with Aaron, letting him truly see into her soul. That is intimacy, and that takes Erotic Integrity - to be willing to be seen deeply. It also helped her to stay present on those occasions when her mind wandered a little. Having her eyes open, seeing and focusing on what was happening, and looking into her lovers' eyes brought her back into the room and into her body when she went off into her head.

Menopause

Both the cases in this chapter have the woman as the low desire partner. That is not to say this is always the case, though it is more common for the female in a heterosexual couple to be the one to exhibit lower desire. When menopause occurs, problematic symptoms do not define a woman's sexuality. After I have made sure that a woman has an attentive gynecologist to address those issues, I look at the bigger picture of who she is in the world, how she feels about her life, what the dynamics at play in her relationship are, and whether she is happy with who she is. Menopause is typically a time for a woman to take stock of her life...and of her Erotic Integrity. As she becomes older and wiser she is capable of so much more emotionally than when her body was firm, her breasts higher, and she didn't know herself nearly as well.

HOPE: WANTING TO WANT

When I have a client who exhibits diminished sexual desire - purports to not want sex - I ask whether they want to want it. Because that determines our path. If the lower desire partner doesn't want sex with the other, and doesn't want to want it, they've probably got at least one foot out of the relationship. They may have come to therapy to figure out how to extricate themselves from the marriage. Maybe they want my help in getting them to tell their partner. If the reduced desire partner *does* want to want, we have to ascertain what gets in the way of that. I see the people who want change things, however there are plenty of couples who are content with a companionate relationship.

Since we pick a partner who has a similar appetite for intimacy to ours, a common dynamic among couples with a low tolerance for intimacy (into-me-you-see) is the pursuer-distancer dance: one person pursues while the other distances. One is chasing while the other is running away. Until they switch roles and then the distancer pursues. The thing is, in this dynamic, it is only safe to pursue as long as the other is distancing. It is only safe to want the other when they don't want you. And vice versa, you can only afford to not want them when they do want you. This can go on for years, and does. It's not an indication that people don't care about each other. On the contrary, they care but they can't settle themselves down in the face of the vulnerability they'd feel if the other wanted them at the same time they want the other, and the possibility of real into-me-you-see intimacy were in front of them. When people can confront that, they're on the path towards their Erotic Integrity and mutual desire.

Another thing to bear in mind is that the person who exhibits the least interest in sex in the current relationship may well have been the high desire partner in a preceding relationship. One is not terminally a high or low desire partner; it is contingent on the dynamics of each relationship. It may be humbling for a high desire partner who has self-appointed as the sex expert in the relationship, to consider that their currently lower desire mate got it on easily and frequently with others.

Low sexual desire is an opportunity for growth, and for Erotic Integrity.

QUESTIONS TO THE READER

-Have you been the low desire partner in a relationship, and the high desire partner in another?

-Do you know what caused that?

-Did you let your lover take the blame for your low desire?

-Did you try to hide your low desire, pretending to be enrolled in sex when you weren't?

-Have you faked an orgasm? Many?

-How do you contribute to your low desire?

-Have you neglected yourself to the point where you don't like yourself and don't want another to truly see you?

-Are you withholding sexually because you are angry?

-Do you use sex to try and control your partner, as a bartering tool?

-Have you let a lack of sexual self-confidence masquerade as lower desire?

-Have you retreated into masturbation rather than engage your partner because it's easier?

-Are you afraid to start something that you're not confident you'll get turned on enough to finish, so rather than have sex you avoid anything to do with it?

-Have you let your lover feel inadequate because of your reduced desire?

-Have you refused to have sex with your beloved and refused to 'let them' have sex with anyone else too?

-Have you given your partner a mercy fuck to get them off your back?