

# When libidos collide

You want it, he wants it, just not at the same time or maybe not as often. How do you resolve a clash of libidos without clashing heads?

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Sex. It's not necessarily the be all and end all of a relationship, but quality time between the sheets is a high riding factor in any healthy relationship. In the first flushes of love, you seemed completely in sync (ie you both wanted it all the time). Now, not so much. And in the worst case scenario not at all. But a little understanding can go a long way to getting back to sexual satisfaction.

## YOU'RE NOT ALONE

Film and media would have us believe that the ideal coupling is two people who have identical libidos and chemistry worthy of a Nicholas Sparks novel but the reality is a new couple's libidos will seem aligned at the start because that is when the sexual energy is highest. Dublin-based sex and relationship therapist, Teresa Bergin says, "At first, both are invested in being sexual when they are together, so it can seem like the planets have aligned and they are very well matched. They won't be living together so they won't have constant access to each other." As time moves on, life stuff happens – living together, children, health issues, career – and the differences become more obvious. "I think it's really important for couples to understand that there is going to be that mismatch, but it's how you manage it which makes for a satisfying sex life."

## THE EVOLUTION OF SEX

Bergin explains that sexuality begins developing in early childhood. How comfortable we are with sex as an adult depends on the encouragement we experienced in our younger years to explore or talk about sexuality. All of that is going to be very different from our partner's experience. "It's about helping the couple open up to discuss their own sexual histories and helping them to understand their own sexuality as well as their partner's sexuality," explains Bergin. "You understand what each other's intrinsic libido is like and how it got to that point." Understanding it from that perspective is actually quite powerful as it allows you to strip away the conflict, frustration and resentment and replace them with empathy. "Couples get to the stage where they can say, 'Yes, it might have been similar at the start, but intrinsically it's different', so then you can go on to working on solutions."

## GIVE ME A REASON

Because sexual desire is very fluid, it is easily impacted by the challenges of life. Work and kids are the obvious desire dampeners but there are other conditions that also feed into our libidos. As our bodies change as we get older, body image becomes a big factor that sometimes leads to a

dip in confidence. Health problems, both mental and physical, can take a toll and if someone is experiencing erectile dysfunction or pain during intercourse, that is going to be a major disincentive to be sexual. "If a couple finds it hard to talk about the sexual side of the relationship, they can find themselves fighting about something else unrelated," explains Bergin. "In that instance the decrease in sexual desire is actually a symptom of a relationship issue, and it's pointing to a distance opening up within the relationship. The couple is growing apart and not communicating, and because they feel that distance emotionally, the desire to be intimate also dwindles because there's not enough non-sexual activity going on, such as hugging and kissing. That's going to have an impact on desire because the distance between nothing and sex widens, and couples will find it very difficult to get back to sexual intimacy."

## THE CONFIDENCE KICK

Time to bust myth number two. Men want sex more than women. Simply. Not. True. A study at the Ohio State University of over 200 students showed the men reported they thought about sex almost twice as much as the women in the study, however they also thought about food and sleep more than the women over the course of the average week. Men are simply more likely to think about their physical needs than women. "It's a myth that men naturally have a higher sex drive or are more likely to be seeking sexual encounters," says Bergin. "I see equally as many men who have lower sexual desire as women in my practice. The problem is it's probably not talked about as much." The most important thing to remember is that both parties can experience negative feelings. "If you are the person inviting your partner for a sexual encounter and they turn you down, almost always you'll feel rejected and take it personally," says Bergin. As for the other partner declining sex: "They'll often feel under pressure, followed by guilt, which can turn into resentment, all of which becomes quite toxic in the relationship."

## DESIRE VS AROUSAL

Most people think physical desire is the first step in any sexual encounter, but how many times has a partner planted a kiss on your neck and suddenly

you're in the mood when you didn't think you were? Therefore it can actually be the case that physical desire can follow arousal. "We think that if the desire isn't there then sex can't happen. Increasing the amount of non-sexual physical intimacy such as touches and hugs helps and that will make it more likely that they will be more comfortable and sexual contact will actually happen then." Bergin also says that even if you're not in the mood, you can share sexual pleasure with your partner as part of the give and take of a relationship. "We do this all the time with different things. We might go someplace we initially didn't want to go, but our partner wants to, and end up really enjoying ourselves. We're adverse to thinking about sex in that way but actually, we can. You can put yourselves in a situation, maybe through massage or a shower together, where

arousal can happen and that can create responsive desire, so you then feel turned on by something that your partner is doing or saying, allowing you to get into the sexual encounter."

## RIGHT ON TIME

Scheduling sex in your diary might not seem like the most romantic idea but Bergin says that it actually works. "When I make this suggestion, at first couples tend to balk at the idea, as it's not very spontaneous. I ask them to think about the start of a relationship. You are effectively scheduling sex then because you're going out on dates. You contextualise that as romantic and spontaneous but it's not really. When couples start to do it they say it actually works." The reason it does is because the couple

is agreeing to prioritise sex. "They're saying, 'We acknowledge that this is a problem, so we will do something different.' Scheduling means that there is an opportunity to be sexual, rather than a whole month going by and nothing happening." Redefining sex as something other than intercourse can also be very positive. "This can open lots of possibilities into who gives and who gets pleasure and in what way. It could be oral sex, phone sex – the possibilities are only as limited as your imagination, because it's all about having fun again." ■

## SENSITIVE ISSUE

Articulating what you want or don't want sexually can be a huge challenge because we're not taught to do it as part of sex education. Feelings of embarrassment, self-consciousness and anxiety about offending a partner can affect us. However, that can mean you're not getting what you need, meaning sex isn't a pleasurable experience so there isn't much incentive to have it. Here are tips to better communication about sex.

- Take responsibility for your own needs but be sensitive and mindful of your partner's feelings.
- Use 'I' statements, such as 'I feel that...' which is the same rule for having a discussion about any sensitive issue.
- Avoid blame. Don't say things like, 'You never...' or 'You always...'
- Feedback can be better received if you include something positive, such as, 'That's really nice and can we try this...?' Then your partner is hearing something positive too.

If you are seeking sex therapy help, choose a licenced member from the College of Sexual and Relationship therapists, listed on Cosrt.org. This is the official licensing body and the only way you can be sure you are seeing a licensed sex therapist.