

KEEPING THE SPARK ALIVE



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Has the spark gone out of your love life? Has the flame that once burned brightly between you and your lover turned to embers, or even to ashes? Although people sometimes joke about this subject, it is not a laughing matter. For many people, this can be a serious and painful situation!

The couples most vulnerable for developing this problem are in long-term marriages or relationships. When clients come into our office with the request for us to "fix it," they are often feeling confused, frustrated, helpless and hopeless about their relationship. Additionally, the partner who has the lower sexual desire worries, not only about the relationship, but also that he or

she is "abnormal" in some way and personally at fault!

If the fire has started to fizzle in YOUR relationship, you are not alone. Low sexual desire, clinically known as Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD) or Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD), is the most common complaint that we and other sex therapists and counselors hear in our offices today. There are MANY causes of low sexual desire, too many to discuss in this article. For now, however, we will suggest some HINTS loving couples can use to boost and restore dwindling desire so that they might sustain desire for each other throughout their lives, if that is their choice.

1. DON'T COUNT ON LIMERENCE FOREVER--

Early in a relationship, people commonly experience intense emotional and sexual feelings toward their new partner. These feelings stir our

hormones and release chemicals in our brains, making our hearts pound in our chests and our knees weak. We feel "alive" and "intoxicated" as if we are "walking on air." During this phase of a relationship, almost everything and anything a couple does sexually "works" for them. This is what we call the "novelty effect," and it is a wonderful and very reliable aphrodisiac. Another name for these feelings is "limerence."

Limerence is a term coined by Dorothy Tennov in her book Love and Limerence to describe "the experience of being in love." According to Tennov, "Limerence is all of a sudden knowing that only one person can satisfy your passionate desire. Limerence is thinking that person, who is called "the limerent object," is wonderful, despite faults and weakness that are still readily apparent." Actually, it is a blind preoccupation with a newly found partner. In most couples, limerence declines with time. This phenomenon of the timely decline of limerence can be fortunate and unfortunate for many lovers. It is

fortunate that limerence eventually declines because most people can not function at an optimum level in the heightened state of emotional and sexual arousal that often accompanies the state of limerence. It can also bring misfortune to couples if the change in feelings causes couples to worry that something has gone wrong between them because the fire has "died down." It is important to realize that the level of sexual intensity and the frequency of sexual encounters should NOT be used as a barometer for the level of love. It is sad when relationships end because of this false assumption.

2. DO COUNT ON INTIMACY AND LOVE--

What post-limerent couples need to count on to sustain desire is the development of greater mutual intimacy and, hence, love. Intimacy should never be equated ONLY with sex! It has a physical component, which could also be hugging, snuggling or caressing in place of sex. It also has an emotional component. The latter involves the willingness to be totally self-disclosing,

at the risk of being vulnerable, and in exchange, the ability to be accepting and respectful of a partner's honest disclosure. As well as keeping the lines of communication open and clear, intimacy involves spending time and doing things together. The neat thing about intimacy is, the more intimacy a couple achieves, the better their sex life will become. Remember, it is especially important for most women (also for men) to feel emotionally connected to their partner before they can feel sexually interested in him or her.

Sex therapist David M. Schnarch, PhD tells couples that to achieve sexual growth in marriage, we need to move past our (intimacy) fears of self-disclosure that compel us to turn off the lights during sex and avoid eye contact. He advises couples to witness each other's eroticism by having "open-eye" sex and to risk trying something new.

3. DON'T COUNT ON SPONTANEITY: DE-EMPHASIZE GOALS--

Spontaneity may be the name of the game during limerence but, like

limerence, it decreases with time. There are many reasons for the decline of spontaneity in marriages, one being the busy lifestyle of a contemporary couple. As a matter of fact, many modern couples are now called "DINS," which is an acronym for "Double Income, No Sex!"

What can the "DINS" (and others like them) do to rekindle their fires? Foremost, they must make being together a high priority on their busy schedules. This means **PLANNING** for their physical intimacies and **PROTECTING** that time, otherwise it probably won't happen. We often tell people, "to make time for(e) play, and omit the (e)!" This means setting aside time to kiss, caress and cuddle, and above all, communicating desires and needs. It also mean de-emphasizing intercourse and concentrating on the "experience" rather than the "goal" (of intercourse). The paradox is, the more intercourse is de-emphasized, the more likely it is to occur as a natural outgrowth

of relaxation, comfort and physical pleasure between partners.

4. GO BEYOND TECHNIQUES--

Going along with our suggestion to de-emphasize goals is the suggestion to "Move Beyond Techniques". This does not mean that techniques should be discounted. If a man is "off the mark" in stimulating his partner's genitals, she probably won't orgasm! What it means is not to always follow a set pattern while making love, which makes sex boring and stale. "Break the requirement of X minutes of foreplay, followed by Y minutes of sex, to result in Z number of orgasms," says Sheldon Kule, D.O., producer of Loving Better videotapes. This means, focus on touching and on the senses rather than on sex, and make intercourse optional.

5. USE EROTIC ADVENTURES AND FANTASIES

In her book, How to Make Love to the Same Person for the Rest of Your Life and Still Love It, sex therapist, Dagmar O'Connor tells couples to "spend one day a week just sexing out." She

encourages people to start feeling sexy the minute they wake up and to carry this feeling throughout the day by fantasizing. She also encourages erotic adventures that are only boundaried by a couple's imagination and needs. Likewise, sex researcher Mark Meshorer tells women to "start on warm" by visualizing sexual images prior to having sex, thereby stimulating oneself mentally. He also reports that highly orgasmic women increase arousal during sex by using mental images of watching themselves making love or picturing particular body parts.

It is a challenge to keep the erotic flame kindled in a long-term marriage or relationship. We hope these suggestions are helpful in stimulating some sparks in our reader's minds and relationships. A couple's erotic flame can burn a lifetime if fueled with intimacy, love, good communication, good health, and a willingness to make time for play.