

Inside People: Keeping the home fires burning

by Jane Clifford

Many of us can recall that giddy feeling of new love and passion. But something happens between the time two people start dating and celebrating years together. Relationship experts says that "something" is usually familiarity settling in, along with financial pressures, busy schedules, family demands. Any of these things can fizzle the sizzle in a relationship.

HOME FIRES BURNING - Part of a strong healthy relationship, experts say, is a strong, healthy sexual relationship. CNS Photo by Nadia Borowski Scott.

But they don't have to, say Sallie Hildebrandt and Steven Solomon. They are San Diego licensed psychologists who specialize in relationship counseling. Hildebrandt studied with Roger and the late Theresa Crenshaw, physicians who were trained in sex therapy by the famed Masters and Johnson team of human sexuality researchers.

Solomon, who specializes in couples therapy, is co-author with psychologist Lorie Teagno, of the new book, "Intimacy After Infidelity: How to Rebuild and Affair Proof Your Relationship."

Part of a strong healthy relationship is a strong, healthy sexual relationship. Hildebrandt and Solomon know, from their private practices, how the latter easily eludes a lot of couples. So, the two therapists were asked to cite the five top complaints men and women have about each other, the issues that get in the way of that strong, healthy relationship.

Both also caution that these are generalizations and, while not applying to every relationship, do apply to the majority. So, too, does their advice for couples looking to rekindle the romance.

WHAT MEN WISH WOMEN UNDERSTOOD- Women want sex to be more mushy and romantic, but, sometimes, men just want sexual satisfaction.- Men don't think they get enough sex in their relationship. They want women to be more available.- Men believe they have to work too hard for sex in their relationship.- Men feel their partner is not adventurous enough.- Men want women to be more spontaneous, more flirtatious, more available - willing to drop what she's doing to make time for him, for their relationship.

WHAT WOMEN WISH MEN UNDERSTOOD- Women want men to initiate sexual activity in a more romantic way.- Women don't like feeling like objects: "He never touches me unless he wants sex."- Women feel under siege: "He's always thinking about sex, always wants sex."- Men aren't very romantic.- Women do not feel like equal partners, do not feel that men are taking on a fair share of the child care and home care responsibilities, which can allow resentment - and fatigue - to build and replace passion.

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Survey says This time last year, Elle magazine and MSNBC.com released the results of their joint Sex and Love Survey. Local relationship experts agree that most of what was revealed then still holds true today.

First, some information on the 77,895 people who participated in the online survey:- Average age: women,

34; men, 40- Age range: 18-85- Gender: women, 50 percent; men, 50 percent- Married: 56 percent- Heterosexual: 95 percent- Nine out of 10 respondents were in a monogamous relationship

Now here is how those folks answered some of the more than two dozen questions about their relationship:

Q: How often do you have sex?A: Most men and women said they have sex once or twice a week. Yet, taking all their answers into account, men think they're having less sex than women: Men said they have sex a median of 5.5 times a month while women said 8.4 times. Two percent of respondents in a relationship said they were not having sex, and another 2 percent said they have sex more than once a day.

Q: Who wants more sex?A: Sixty-six percent of men said that they want more sex than their partner, yet only 38 percent of women said their male partner wants more sex than they do.

Q: How satisfied are you with your sex life?A: Forty-six percent of women but only 32 percent of men said they're "very satisfied" with their sex life. Twenty-three percent of men compared with only 13 percent of women said they're "very dissatisfied." As many women (right up to the age of 65) - as men ages 18 to 24 - said they're "very satisfied."

Q: Are you satisfied with the variety of sex?A: Three-quarters of women yet just half of men are satisfied with the variety of positions and activities in their lovemaking. Overall, 68 percent of respondents said their sex life is predictable.

Q: Do you feel desired by your partner?A: Fifty-three percent of men versus 37 percent of women said they felt more desired by their partner in the earlier days of their relationship.

Q: Do you have as much passion in your sex life now as when you first started having sex with your partner?A: Seventy percent of those together one year said they have retained their passion, compared with 58 percent of those together two years, 45 percent of those together three to five years, and 34 percent of those together six or more years.

Q: Was the TV on the last time you were in the sack?A: Yes, said one in five respondents.

Q: What are some reasons why you didn't have sex in the last month?A: Among women, 42 percent said they were too busy or stressed, 34 percent cited different bed times than their partner, 35 percent said they weren't interested, and 23 percent said feelings about their body made them less interested. Among men, 53 percent said their partner wasn't interested, 47 percent said they themselves were too busy or stressed, and 38 percent cited different bed times.

Q: Do you make date nights for sex?A: Half said they do.

Q: Do you engage in "verbal foreplay"?A: One in three respondents said they call or send an e-mail or text message to tease their partner.

Q: Do you read magazine articles or books that promise to put the spark back in your sex life?A: Yes, said 52 percent of women and 41 percent of men.

It takes 2 OK, now that women and men know what the other wants - and doesn't want - when it comes to intimacy, how do couples get there?

We asked our experts for their advice on how men can address women's complaints and vice versa.

Sallie Hildebrandt and Steven Solomon, San Diego licensed psychologists who specialize in relationship counseling, both say that the first step is for a couple to assess their sexual relationship, make a commitment to giving it as much attention as any other part of the relationship, and nurture it accordingly.

In other words, any couple can have a great sex life if both partners want it and are willing to work at it.

LISTEN UP, GUYS- Women want men to be more romantic, more sensitive.

"If you and your partner haven't had sex in a while," Hildebrandt says, "the correct approach is not 'Do you want to have sex tonight?' That's not a turn-on for a woman."

Solomon adds, "The fact of the matter is, for women by and large, making love is much more preferable than 'having sex.' The difference is that making love has an intimate, loving component to it ... but men are so

more often interested in sex for the physical, sexual charge of it."

- The way to passion for women is feeling respected and cared for.

"I tell people sex does not start in the bedroom, it starts in the kitchen, it's how you treat your partner," Hildebrandt says.

"A big complaint that affects the relationship is being equally partnered and responsible about what happens in the relationship. If women are angry that men aren't sharing the load at home, it's real hard for women to get turned on. They're mad as hell."

She adds: "Men need to say, 'I love you,' regularly. They need to touch without it having to go on to sex. They need to show appreciation, saying 'That's a great dinner you cooked,' 'Thank you for picking up the dry cleaning.' It's amazing how far things like that will go for a woman."

Says Solomon: "Guys have to learn that they're not going to get lucky if they're letting resentments lie there in between them and their partner and be unaddressed. All the jokes about makeup sex are true. If a guy works at overcoming the problem, apologizes, it creates intimacy in the relationship."

- Learn to express love and affection in nonsexual ways.

"There are four way to express affection - sexually, verbally, through our actions by doing things for our partner and nonsexual physical affection - hugging, kissing, holding hands," Solomon says. "Guys neglect that part of the affection in a relationship, and if guys are good at that, they're much more likely to have a fulfilling sex life with their partner."

Adds Hildebrandt: "One thing I say when I'm working with a couple is that the most important sex organ is the brain and the biggest is the skin. That's why touch is so important ... Women become averse to a man's touch if they think, 'He's touching me because he wants sex, not because he finds me alluring or he wants to snuggle.'"

PAY ATTENTION, LADIES- Remember your partner.

"We live in a culture that is child-focused, and children come first, and I think men often have a valid complaint that they're last on the list," Hildebrandt says. "Kids are in soccer and baseball, shuttled to all kinds of places and then an hour for homework. That doesn't leave any quality time for couples."

Adds Solomon: "The best sexual partnerships are the ones where the sex is, sometimes, the way one partner wants it and, sometimes, the way the other partner wants it. It's when one partner can say, 'Even though I'm not really in the mood right now, I know he loves me, and I'm going to take care of him now.'"

- Don't leave lovemaking to the end of the day.

Hildebrandt and Solomon both know how busy families and couples are. As professionals, they advocate couples making dates to feed their relationship.

"They need not only to make sex dates but to find a way to get away, for a few hours or a weekend or even just send the kids away and enjoy yourselves at home," Hildebrandt says.

Women might be reluctant to do that, she says, but she reminds women that it's no different than when they were dating. They looked forward to a date night, carefully picking out what they wore, how they did their hair, the perfume they chose. They can still do that, and they're likely to find that the evening can be just as exciting now as it was then.

- Relax and enjoy yourself.

Says Hildebrandt: "I think one thing that gets in the way for women are all the social messages you get growing up ... 'Don't do this because you're going to get pregnant.'"

"We don't feel comfortable having sex just for the sake of having sex," she says.

"Women begin to see sex as just one more thing they have to do for him. A lot of women are not able to access easily their sexual feelings and, on a daily basis, are not nurturing their sexual feelings. ... Women need to fantasize regularly."

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