

7 Barriers to Resolving Sexual Problems with your companion

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1. Lack of Real or Perceived Commitment

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "Does he love me?"
- "He cares more about . . . than he cares about me."

Feelings:

- Anxious, insecure.

Actions:

- Spending less and less time doing positive things together.

GENERAL INFORMATION

If intimacy means that two people love each other and are committed and that one person's commitment is questionable, the meaning of sexual behavior can be confusing. One partner may be left wondering if sex means anything beyond the pleasure of the moment to the other partner. Confusion usually leads to misunderstanding and hurt feelings, creating an environment that is not conducive to intimacy.

Although sexual difficulty or dissatisfaction does not always suggest a lack of commitment, a lack of commitment is usually accompanied by sexual difficulty, if not in the beginning, then later on in the relationship.

Key point: A common underlying cause of sexual dissatisfaction is a real or perceived lack of commitment.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Decide you are willing to honestly evaluate how committed you are to your spouse, as compared to other relationships or activities. *Reason:* Some people are more committed than they think or communicate, while others are less committed. Only you can objectively and completely evaluate your degree of commitment.

Myth: Commitment means you are *irrevocably* trapped.

Fact: Entering into a commitment and remaining committed is a choice that you, and you alone, control.

2. List your priorities in life as they currently stand, not as you might think they *should* stand (self, God, marriage, work, etc.). A common mistake is forgetting to place yourself on your priority list.
 1. **Key Point:** If you neglect your own personal welfare, even for the sake of your marriage, you will not be at your best.
3. Consider the following questions designed to assist you in evaluating how committed you are to your spouse:

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- Do you generally prefer to be with your spouse or with work, children, friends, recreation, yourself, etc.?
- Do you consider your marriage to be your most important relationship, other than your relationship with the Lord and with yourself?
- Do your actions suggest you are committed to your spouse?

Myth: Commitment means you always feel loving toward your spouse and do what he wants you to do.

Fact: Feelings, like the waves of the sea, are constantly rising and falling. A commitment is more than how you feel. The root of a commitment is a decision you make in your mind, that when acted upon bears fruit in the form of your actions. It is something special that is within you.

4. Reevaluate your priorities. Make sure you continue doing important nonmarital things, while at the same time, putting your marriage ahead of work, children, friends, recreation, T.V., hobbies, or anything else. Then, if needed, make the most powerful and important marital decision possible: decide to put your marriage first.
 0. **Trap:** Trying to make your spouse believe you are committed. *Reason:* Like the root of a tree, your decision to be committed to your spouse is beneath the surface, within the private confines of your mind. It cannot be seen by another person with absolute certainty.

Avoid the trap: Let your actions, more than your words, be seen as the evidence or fruit of your commitment. Act out your commitment by spending quality time with your companion, keeping your word, even when it is inconvenient, etc.

Caution: If your spouse feels hurt or mistrust, it may take him weeks or months to see and taste the fruit of your commitment. Be patient.
5. **Myth:** Commitment means your spouse feels you are committed.
6. **Fact:** You and you alone--not anyone else--can determine if you are committed, and if so, to what extent. Ironically, your spouse may feel you are committed, when in fact, you are not--or vice versa.

7. Discuss with your spouse how committed you are to each other.
8. To reaffirm and strengthen your commitment: place your companion's picture where you can see it daily. Whenever you are involved with someone or something that once was, or could become, more important than your spouse,

Say to yourself:
"My marriage is more important to me than..."

9. Communicate your commitment by telling your spouse daily, if possible, that you love him and that he is more important to you than anyone or anything else, even if he does not fully believe you at first.
 10. Discuss with your spouse the types of words and behaviors that mean commitment and love to both of you. A common mistake is that you do something that means commitment to you such as bringing home a paycheck or making a meal, and your spouse does not attach the same meaning to what you did. This results in misunderstanding and hurt feelings.
0. **Caution:** Participating in sexual intimacy prior to both of you being committed may interfere with the progress of the relationship, as well as cause unnecessary pain or sexual dissatisfaction, or both.

2. Trying to control emotion

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "A mature adult is one who controls his emotions. If I don't control my feelings, I may do something I'll regret. I must be careful or I'll get hurt."

Feelings:

- Afraid of being hurt, losing control, or doing something unreasonable. Feeling numb.

Actions:

- Appearing unusually calm, strong, quiet, stable, or unemotional. Rarely talking about feelings.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Nobody wants to feel frightened, insecure, or hurt--especially when it comes to intimacy. Rather than risk being hurt, some people--whether consciously or unconsciously--decide not to let themselves get close. In a misguided attempt to control emotion, some people become

emotionally and sexually numb; others go through the physical motions of sex without feeling loving and intimate.

Paradoxically, the more you focus on your feelings or avoid them, the less able you are to enjoy intimacy. By permitting yourself to fully experience waves of emotion, whether pleasant or not, without any form of tampering, you are better able to learn to swim in the exciting and sometimes turbulent waters of love.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Notice times you experienced emotion without trying to control it. Especially think of times with your spouse when you were not so concerned about controlling emotion or about losing control (maybe when you played tennis, kissed good-bye, hugged, or participated in an intimate conversation).

1. **Caution:** This does not refer to times you were thinking irrationally or behaving irresponsibly. Such thoughts or behavior, obviously, invite your attention and self-control.

Example: At a restaurant with your spouse, you allowed yourself to feel anticipation and excitement about the meal, or even disappointment or frustration, without being unduly hurt or acting irresponsibly. How did you do it? You probably did not think you were "losing control." Why not?

2. **Key Point:** When you feel good, you usually do not try to control your feelings (I am referring to your internal feelings here, not your external behavior). You have learned by experience that controlling the thoughts and behavior that bring about the good feelings, rather than trying to control the feelings themselves, allows you to generally feel better and for a longer period of time. (Too many people get into denial and stuff their feelings when they try to ignore, fight, or control how they feel.)
2. Try an experiment. The next time you are feeling really good, focus on how you are feeling and try as hard as you can to control it. Try to hold on to the feeling so it does not escape you. Notice how the harder you try to directly control emotion, the worse you tend to feel.
3. Try another experiment. Select a time with your spouse when you can participate in some mutually agreeable sexual activity during which you tend to feel a little uncomfortable. In a gentle and loving way begin the activity. Instead of trying to control your emotions (trying to fight or change how you feel), monitor them on a scale of one to ten with ten being the most uncomfortable you have ever felt and one being the absence of any significant discomfort.

Notice how the feelings of discomfort tend to subside as you acknowledge, rather than fight them. Repeat the experiment on several occasions, if necessary, until you can accept rather than resist any uncomfortable feelings.

1. **Caution:** Since this is an emotional experiment, do not judge your sexual performance. Just observe your emotions and reactions.
4. For one week, whether during intimacy or your regular activities, rather than trying to control your emotions, try taking the following actions:
 - Give yourself permission to fully experience your emotions whether pleasant or unpleasant.

Say to yourself:

"It's more important to control my thoughts and actions than my emotions."

- Acknowledge and accept the existence of your emotions as you would acknowledge fluctuations of your automobile's instruments.
- Use your emotions as a key to provide valuable information about yourself and ways you can improve.
- Share your feelings within the Three Rules for Good Communication (Be Kind, Be Honest, and Have Constructive Intent).

3. Fear of Failure

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "I've got to do it right this time. But what if I can't?"

Feelings:

- Anxiety, nervousness, fear, discouragement, depression, apathy.

Actions:

- Trying too hard or avoiding trying.

GENERAL INFORMATION

One of the greatest lectures on sexual difficulties was given by Franklin D. Roosevelt: "You have nothing to fear but fear itself." Fear of failure itself "interFEARS" with learning and enjoyment. Most people have more trouble being "at their best" when under pressure to perform. Even those who seem to do well under pressure do not usually handle intimacy very well if they are afraid of failing.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Think of and discuss times when you were not afraid of failing (sexually or nonsexually). What was different about those times? Especially note what was different during the nonsexual times when you were relaxed and having a good time together.
2. Place the sexual difficulty, which may initially appear large and overwhelming, into a context and perspective that will render it more manageable by taking the following actions:

Ask yourself:

"Is the relationship itself or my sexual performance more important?"

1. **Key Point:** For a healthy, long-lasting relationship, it is essential that individuals consider their overall relationship as more important than any single aspect of the relationship.
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 - Whenever you think about intimacy not going as well as you would like, remind yourself and your partner that your love for each other is more important than the present concern.
 - Imagine that you or your spouse have a medical problem interfering with or preventing sexual satisfaction. Would you still love him? Discuss why you love each other through storms of medical problems or even sexual difficulties. When sex is not the most important part of the relationship, sexual difficulties are more readily resolved because they are more of a discomfort or inconvenience than a problem to be feared.
 - Notice some of the things each of you do to show the relationship is more important than sexual performance. For example, you may verbally reassure each other that this difficulty is small compared to your love and commitment to each other. You may also convey your love by continuing to enjoy doing a variety of things together, as well as simply being kind and respectful to each other, even though sexual activity is not yet as good as you would like.
3. Redefine the meaning of success and failure in a way to encourage success and discourage the likelihood of failure, by taking the following actions:
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 - Divide success in intimacy into two categories--primary and secondary success:
 - Primary Success:* That which is essential for building a great relationship (love, commitment, giving and receiving nonsexual affection, willingness to work together to solve any marital difficulties).
 - Secondary Success:* That which is desirable, like the frosting on a cake, though less important than the cake itself (erection, orgasm, having the kinds of feelings during intimacy you prefer, etc.).
 - **Caution:** Since secondary success cannot be as directly or immediately controlled as primary success, trying too hard to obtain secondary success actually interferes with achieving it.
 - Draw a vertical line down the center of a piece of paper. Write Primary Success on the top of one side of the line and Secondary Success on the top of the other side. Privately consider factors pertaining to overall intimacy as well as sexual intimacy and place them in either the Primary or Secondary Success category.
 - Before you share your paper with your spouse, agree with each other that although secondary success is important, primary success is even more important and will generally precede secondary success. Also, agree that failure will only occur when someone permanently gives up hope and stops trying. Then respectfully and honestly share and discuss your paper.
 - **Key Point:** By placing primary success first, you build the foundation from which you can learn to achieve secondary success without the interference of fear.

- Practice focusing more of your attention and efforts on what you define as your primary success. As your primary successes increase in quantity and quality, there is greater likelihood of secondary success.
4. Utilize fear to help build a better and more loving relationship, by taking the following actions:
- - Think about what you are specifically afraid of failing to achieve during intimacy (such as erection, orgasm, or having the kinds of feelings you prefer).
 - Whenever you think of or experience something you used to fear, or consider a failure, connect it with something positive. For instance, if orgasm does not occur, give each other a reward for trying and for achieving some primary success.

Examples:

Give a back rub, listen to some favorite music, spend time talking about something light, plan a night out, etc.). *Result:* Instead of resisting the fear, inadvertently making things worse, you are using it to help strengthen your relationship.

- Notice and discuss how much love and effort was shown by each person in the process of giving and receiving love, regardless of the results. Afterwards, you can strengthen and reinforce the foundation of the relationship by saying something nice, giving a hug, or sending a little note of thanks.
- Allow yourself to ride out the wave of fear, knowing that in time it will pass. Meanwhile, give each other extra consideration and reassurance. Do not fight or resist the fear.

4. Attaching Undue Meaning to Sexual Performance or Activity

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "Does he love me?" "If he loved me, he would . . ."

Feelings:

- Frequent or prolonged agitation concerning sexual activity.

Actions:

- Excessive avoidance of, or interest in, sexual activity.

GENERAL INFORMATION

In every healthy marriage, there are times when one person wants to be sexually intimate and the other is not interested. Just as your desire to go

out to dinner may not always coincide with your spouse's desire to eat out, so it is with sexual desire. You may feel like going out one night, while he is not the least bit interested, or vice versa. You probably would not think, "If he loves me, he will feel like going out the same time I feel like going out." You would just think he does not feel like it tonight and not think any more about it.

Sometimes, however, it can be tempting to take "no" to intimacy as a personal rejection or statement about your personal worth, thinking "I must not be very desirable." Usually it means nothing of the sort. Often it simply means he is tired, preoccupied, stressed, or emotionally drained. Sometimes one person reacts to stress by desiring to be physically close, while the other responds by preferring to be alone. If you attach a meaning to his "no" that says you are not worthwhile or that he does not love you, you may be creating a problem that does not exist.

If your spouse feels pressure to make you feel worthwhile or loved by initiating sexual activity, he may lose his desire. Or he may sincerely try to please you, only to discover that no matter how hard he tries, you still feel down. He may then feel that he is failing--and consequently feel frustrated or inadequate. When you see his lack of desire or frustration, you may mistakenly think his feelings mean you are not worthwhile or loved. This creates a vicious, escalating cycle.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Think of times when the lack of sexual intimacy did not significantly affect your feelings of worth, happiness, or love. What was different then? How did you do it?

Example: Keith and Shauna often became embroiled in conflict when she said, "No." I asked them to think of a time when they did *not* have a problem with "no." At first, they could not think of any exceptions to their problem. Then they recalled one time.

After a romantic night out, Keith had been looking forward with excited anticipation to being intimate with his wife. Just as he began to give her a passionate kiss, she said "Not tonight, dear." Then she added, "I love you and enjoyed our evening together. I just don't feel up to it now. How about a rain check?" Keith was disappointed to say the least. His natural reaction was to object, but this time he thought more of her than of himself. He did not want her to feel like it was the worst thing in the world that ever happened to him, so he did something

unusual. He said, "Shauna, although I am disappointed, I too love you very much, and it's okay."

As we discussed that night, they began to discover some solutions to their problem.

2. Think about what sexual intimacy means to you. Does it mean "I love you" or does it just mean physical pleasure? Do you view it as the frosting on the marital cake or the cake itself? Is your love for each other communicated in many ways, with sexual intimacy just being one special way to express it? Or is sex the primary or only way of expressing love?
3. Gently invite your spouse to discuss the meanings both of you attach to intimacy. This will result in increased understanding which will create a more supportive environment for constructively dealing with any sexual difficulties.
 1. **Key Point:** It is initially more important to understand and respect each other's way of thinking than it is to think the same way.
Caution: Many people have never stopped to think about the meaning of sex, so be patient if it takes awhile to identify and share how you or your spouse feels.
4. Do not assume you know what your companion's behavior means, especially when there is some difficulty, unless he has clearly explained it to you. It would be better to say to yourself, "I don't know what this means." Then, if you are still interested, ask your spouse. You might say something like, "I love you very much and would like to know what our current sexual situation means."
5. Each time you discuss such a personal and intimate matter, preface your discussion by verbally reaffirming your love and commitment to each other. Say to each other something like, "I love you--and our relationship is more important to me than our current concerns."
 1. **Key Point:** Before you work on discussing and improving the sexual aspect of your relationship, make sure you are both rested, relaxed, and in somewhat of a good mood.
Common trap: Treating a sexual difficulty as if it were more important than the relationship itself, even though you know it is not. **Solution:** Compare how much of your time is spent thinking about and discussing your sexual concerns, as compared to other aspects of your relationship. Strive to spend the vast majority of your time working on enjoying or improving the overall relationship, as opposed to focusing on just one part of it.
6. Do you tend to think that your identity or self-worth is associated with sexual activity or performance? If so, please see Core Principle 5: "Self-Worth".
7. Do you tend to think your happiness or personal sense of security is associated with sexual activity or performance? If so, please see Core Principle 6: "Personal Security".

5. Missing Ingredient(s) in the Relationship

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "Something is missing in our relationship. If things were going better sexually, everything else would be fine."

Feelings:

- Tension, hurt, numbness, etc.

Actions:

- Over involvement in one area of life (sex, work, children, recreation, hobbies, etc.)

GENERAL INFORMATION

If an essential ingredient is missing in a marriage, the delicate balance between psychological, physiological, emotional, and spiritual factors necessary for sexual intimacy will be disrupted. Sexual difficulties can be a healthy warning signal that something in the relationship requires attention and correction before satisfactory intimacy can be resumed or obtained.

Interesting Note: Approximately 90% of sexual problems clear up spontaneously when missing personal or marital ingredients are taken care of.

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Make a list of the satisfactory aspects of your marriage.
2. Examine your list to see if you are missing anything you would consider absolutely essential for a good marriage. Examples: Respect, kindness, commitment, communication, responsibility, hygiene, problem solving skills.
 1. **Caution:** Having some sexual difficulty does not necessarily mean an essential ingredient is missing. If you do not find any missing ingredients, see other barriers.
3. If you do find a missing ingredient, ask yourself some important questions. Do you really consider that ingredient to be an absolute necessity for you to have a good marriage or are you willing to learn to get along without it?
 1. **Key Point:** If you consider a particular ingredient an essential requirement for your marriage, it must be corrected before sexual intimacy can be mutually satisfactory.
4. Utilize sexual difficulty as a healthy warning signal reminding you to examine yourself and the relationship, looking for essential areas in which to make corrections or improvements.
 1. **Caution:** Ongoing sexual activity or disagreements about sexual matters can unintentionally prevent the identification and correction of missing marital ingredients.
5. If, for some reason, you feel obligated to make love, consider whether you can honestly and sincerely do so as long as that important ingredient is missing.

Ask yourself:

"How long can you continue to make love out of obligation and still respect yourself and your spouse?"

6. Decide that adding the essential missing ingredient is more basic and important to your marriage than the current sexual concerns. Agree with your spouse that both of you will initially work harder on providing the missing ingredient than on trying to correct the sexual difficulties.

7. If, however, he insists on continuing sexual activity without acknowledging and working on providing the missing ingredient(s), you have an important decision to make. Do you wish to participate in frosting the cake while a basic essential ingredient is missing?
 8. If you decide to temporarily postpone sexual activities until progress is made in working toward providing the missing ingredient(s), write a brief note to your spouse. Include:
 - What you appreciate about your spouse.
 - Your concern about the missing ingredient(s).
 - Your specific hopes for a better relationship.
 - What actions you are currently going to take.
 5. **Caution:** If your intent is genuinely respectful and constructive, as opposed to manipulative, you can proceed, even if your spouse does not understand at first. However, if your intent is to postpone sex to get your spouse to make some changes, you are out of line. Your intent, as much as your actions, determines whether you are being respectful and constructive or whether you are being manipulative.
 9. Frequently reassure your spouse of your love and of your desire to strengthen and build the relationship. Repeatedly let him know you expect the sexual difficulties will be resolved after taking care of the missing ingredient(s).

Reason: When one person makes a change in sexual behavior, it is very easy for the other person to interpret the change as being manipulative, even if it is not, or to misunderstand the message and think he is not worthwhile or lovable.
 10. If, however, after a few weeks you and your spouse are not working together or making progress, consider seeking professional help.
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6. Basing Your Security or Happiness On Your Companion

COMMON INDICATORS

Thoughts:

- "How can I feel secure when he spends more time with work, church, recreation, etc., than he does with me?" "I cannot be happy unless he . . ."

Feelings:

- Insecure, easily upset.

Actions:

- Walking on eggs so as not to displease him. Nagging.

GENERAL INFORMATION

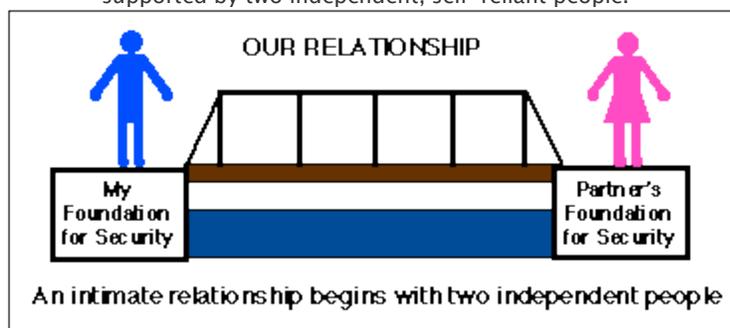
In a close personal or family relationship the natural inclination toward self-reliance can deteriorate. There can be a tendency for one or both

parties to lean a little too much on the other. This can begin a slow, almost imperceptible, erosion of a healthy sense of independence and self-reliance. Without self-reliance, it is difficult to effectively communicate in an independent *and* intimate manner.

Example: Prior to marriage, Dawn was considerate of her family and friends' feelings; nevertheless, she made independent decisions based on what she thought was best. She was successful in several leadership positions at school and at church, where she demonstrated the ability to negotiate and make reasonable decisions even if everyone did not always agree. Yet in marriage she adopted the misguided notion that her happiness and security somehow depended more on her husband than upon herself. Peace at any price became her motto.

Result: She became overly hesitant to communicate clearly, and she avoided taking any firm stands. Her ability to confidently discuss issues and to contribute to making mutually agreeable decisions became paralyzed.

Key point: Like two pillars, independently yet jointly supporting a bridge, a healthy relationship is likewise supported by two independent, self-reliant people.



STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Ask yourself which is more important: good communication with your companion or managing yourself in a healthy, well-balanced manner. Obviously both are important, but if you put communication ahead of taking care of yourself, you will inadvertently create a barrier to better communication.
2. Think of a time in your life when you were particularly independent and self-reliant. You might even write a brief description of a poignant event during that time in your life. For the next month, review and try to relive that event for a few minutes, three times a day. This will encourage you to stand up straight and not lose your balance when he gets off balance or withdrawn.

Result: As you become more independent and self-reliant, like a pillar of a bridge, you will be in a better position to promote good communication.

3. Whenever you observe your companion behaving in a way you do not like, remind yourself that your first priority is to manage your own life in a well-balanced and reasonable way. Although managing yourself better will not cause your companion to communicate better, you will begin to feel better about yourself and create an environment more conducive to good communication.
4. When you are frustrated by the lack of good communication, A.C.T.:
 1. Acknowledge your feelings and the facts of the situation ("I am feeling frustrated" and "It is the way it is: he is unable or unwilling to communicate any better for the time being.")
 2. Consider the available choices. Broaden your range of activities, develop more friends, take a class, exercise, read a book, develop a hobby, or get involved in church or community activities so you are not so dependent on your companion for happiness.
 3. Take constructive action.

Caution: If he decides to communicate better (and hopefully he will), be prepared to reevaluate your schedule of activities to provide enough time to work on improving communication.

7. Basing Your Security or Happiness On Your Companion

STEPS TO REMOVING THE BARRIER

1. Take time to go to the doctor and get a complete physical if you have not had one in the last year--just to be on the safe side.
2. Review how you spent your time during the last week. Take a piece of paper and make seven columns, one for each day of the week. On the left side of the paper write various times of the day, beginning with the earliest time you might arise, to the latest time you would go to sleep (not just go to bed). Fill in the columns with your activities during the last week.
3. Evaluate how well you balanced your life between work, marital, family, and personal activities. Are you getting enough rest, exercise, and nutrition?
 1. **Caution:** If your life is out-of-balance in any of these areas, intimacy is not likely to be satisfactory except perhaps in a brief physical sense.
4. Consider how much time you spent last week with your spouse in a pleasant, relaxed, enjoyable, and uplifting manner, independent of any sexual activity. How much time did you spend just talking in a friendly, unrushed manner?
 1. **Key Point:** Unless you both agree that you have shared some quality time together, intimacy is not likely to be very intimate.
5. Discuss what can be done to increase the quality time you share together. Ideas: have a weekly or monthly business-like lunch, have a daily or weekly telephone conversation, take a regular walk, go out on a weekly date, write each other a weekly letter.

Result: Just spending time together, regardless of what you do, provides an opportunity to revitalize the relationship, relieve stress, prevent or solve problems, and create an environment where love can be more fully and satisfactorily expressed.

6. Discuss what usually occurs during the hour preceding lovemaking. Consider whether those activities are relaxing, refreshing, romantic, etc.
 1. **Key Point:** Although you can rush through fast-food restaurants, making love is more like enjoying dessert after a fine meal.
7. Discuss the preparations and conditions necessary for you and your spouse to enjoy a fine dinner and dessert together. **Reason:** Many of the principles and practices associated with a successful meal are similar to those necessary for successful intimacy. Notice the importance of not being rushed, overly stressed, or more concerned with the meal than with each other. Consider how you treat each other before, during, and after the meal.
 1. **Key Point:** Notice how you give the entire meal your attention and enjoyment, rather than focusing mainly on the dessert.
8. Plan a special dinner out together and see what you can learn about intimacy.

9. If you do not seem to be finding sufficient opportunities to make love, consider providing regular periods of time where you can privately enjoy being together, whether or not you become physically intimate.

Example: Go to bed an hour early a few times a week to talk, read, or just be together--without any pressure to make love. *Result:* By providing the opportunity to be intimate, without any pressure or demand to do so, you will increase the likelihood of mutually desirable and satisfactory intimacy.

10. Observe how you convey your love to each other immediately after being physically intimate. Do you hug, kiss, hold hands, quietly talk, say something loving, etc.? If you almost immediately roll over and go to sleep, consider what message you may inadvertently be sending your spouse.

SUCCESS STORY

Although Brian and Mary Lou loved each other very much, the sexual aspect of their marriage was deteriorating. For quite some time, Mary Lou's interest in making love had been decreasing. She seemed to be more and more going through the motions without the emotions.

Brian was a good man, but there were a few things that really bothered Mary Lou. It seemed like the only time he wanted to be physically close was when he wanted sex. Mary Lou hesitated to tell me the other thing that bothered her because it seemed so trivial. I reassured her it is often the accumulation of the small things that slowly erode intimacy in a marriage. Mary Lou finally told me that Brian sometimes had bad breath.

Even though there were many times she wanted to say, "No," to having sex or ask him to use a mouthwash, she did not because she believed his needs were more important than her feelings. When she did muster up the courage to say "No," Brian, though not abusive, was obviously upset. For quite awhile, Brian did not realize anything was wrong, but, when he did become aware, he suggested Mary Lou see a counselor. He was certain he did not have any "sexual problems."

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Mary Lou came alone to my office, as do about half of those with marital concerns, seeking help for what she was afraid was her problem. As Mary Lou explained their situation, I did not try to figure out who was to blame

or who had the "problem," rather I wanted to determine what resources were available to create a solution. It did not take long to determine each of them had important responsibilities for obtaining a solution. Mary Lou quickly caught on to my message that we were going to shift from her problem-oriented approach, which asked a lot of "whys?" and tended to point fingers, to a solution-oriented approach, which looked to each spouse as having experiences, ideas, and skills that will contribute to a solution. The result was a lot of relief and hope.

REDISCOVERING HER RIGHTS

When I asked Mary Lou about her rights relative to intimacy, she seemed a little confused because she thought mainly of her husband's rights and her duties. We discussed her rights in other aspects of her life, and she realized her thinking was clear and she generally stood up for what she believed. "Do you have the right to say `Yes' or `No' to intimacy?" I asked. She was unclear of where the line was between her rights and his needs. I explained, "Unless you have the right and the skill to say `No,' you are not truly free to say `Yes.'" Nor was she free to fully enjoy intimacy. Intellectually she knew she had such rights, but she was afraid that by exercising her rights she might deny Brian of something he needed.

I explained that sexual desire is a powerful passion and appetite, rather than a "need" like food or water. Whether Brian knew it or not, he was quite capable of rationally postponing sexual satisfaction, if necessary, in order to make a few important personal and relationship adjustments. Then they would be able to more fully enjoy their relationship, as well as the frosting on the cake.

Mary Lou was still hesitant about saying "No" and upsetting Brian until she realized he only had the *tendency* to become upset--he did not have to become upset. It was up to him. Even if he initially was upset, he was

quite capable of later understanding that she still loved him and was simply doing a few things differently so they could have a better marriage.

Caution: If Mary Lou said, "No" nicely and her intent was manipulative, her actions would be disrespectful and counterproductive. She assured me she was not trying to use sex as leverage to make Brian change. She just wanted to have the right to say "Yes" or "No," depending on how she felt at the time.

SETTING MINIMUM STANDARDS

Mary Lou's next step was to see that she had a basic right to determine for herself the conditions under which she was willing to be intimate. At first she thought I was suggesting she try to dictate to Brian how he had to behave--that she was going to try to make him do what she wanted. I reassured Mary Lou that any such intent on my part or her part would be disrespectful, manipulative, and simply wrong.

I asked, "If Brian wanted to make love on the front lawn, would you do it?"

"Certainly not," she immediately replied. She was able to respond so quickly because of her personal standards or prerequisites for intimacy. Her requirement had nothing to do with trying to dictate or control Brian; it was simply her intention to exercise her right to be intimate under conditions she found acceptable.

One of her homework assignments was to make a list of her minimum standards or requirements for intimacy. Mary Lou asked if she could put something as simple as clean breath on her list. I assured her that was certainly her choice, and besides, it seemed to be a reasonable requirement.

SHARING HER INTENTIONS

I asked Mary Lou to return home and gently explain to Brian what we talked about and how she believed they would soon be able to have more enjoyable intimacy now that she better understood that they both had

certain rights. I asked her to invite Brian to write up his own list of minimum standards for intimacy before she shared hers with him.

Even though her explanations to Brian were kind and her intentions were respectful, he still misinterpreted her independence as being manipulative and threatening. He was hurt and angry. He thought because they loved each other, making love should just occur naturally without any demands placed on him.

I asked Mary Lou to write a loving letter explaining (1) her appreciation for Brian; (2) her concerns about their deteriorating love life, and (3) her thoughts of what they could do about it. She explained she wanted to have more times when they talked, shared feelings, held hands, hugged, or kissed without any pressure or expectation to have sex. She added that a little bit of breath freshener or mouthwash would also be helpful. Mary Lou closed the letter by reassuring Brian of her love for him and that she had absolutely no desire to withhold something from him that he enjoyed, nor any desire to force him to change. She too wanted things to be closer and better for both of them.

RESPONDING TO THE CHANGES

After a few weeks on an emotional roller coaster ride, Brian came in to see me, as most reluctant companions eventually do. He had seen Mary Lou become stronger and realized, too, that she loved him very much, even though she was indicating a few things needed to be changed. He admitted he was not very comfortable with being close except in bed, but he wanted to learn. As Brian learned to express affection in nonsexual ways, they both became happier as they drew closer together. The irony for this couple was that Brian was so happy and satisfied with their newfound closeness, there were even a few times when he was the one who said, "No."

SUMMARY

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Sex is easy. Intimacy, though, is more involved.
- The central feature of intimacy is not emotional or physical; it is commitment.
- When intimacy is fully developed or restored, sexual difficulties tend to disappear.
- Emotional discomfort, whether fear or dissatisfaction, is usually a healthy indicator suggesting that something with you, your spouse, and your relationship would benefit from some attention and improvement.
- Although problems with intimacy can affect feelings of self-worth, the fact of your inherent, God-given worth remains unchanged.
- Sexual intimacy is like the frosting on a well-baked cake, with all the essential ingredients in it. If an essential ingredient of the cake is missing, sexual intimacy is unlikely to be satisfying.

KEY ACTIONS

- If your marriage is not more important to you than any other relationship, activity or possession (except your relationship with the Lord), reevaluate your priorities.
- Rather than attempting to control feelings, including sexual desire, work on controlling your thoughts and actions, thereby affecting how you feel.
- Respectfully discuss with your spouse the meaning that each of you attaches to sexual intimacy.
- Be careful not to base your self-esteem or personal security on sexual activity or the lack thereof.
- Make a list of the satisfactory aspects of your marriage. See if anything you consider absolutely essential is missing. If so, examine yourself, and if appropriate, discuss it with your spouse.
- Make sure you are getting sufficient food, exercise, and sleep--otherwise, you will not have enough energy for intimacy.
- Only participate in sexual intimacy when both of you feel good about it.