

Why Some Women 'Won't'

Sexual difficulties in parenting couples

BY DR. MICHAL REGEV

Susan is exhausted. She has not had much sleep in the past few nights. Her 5 month old, Nia, has been teething. To make things worse, her 3 year old, Liam, has been exceptionally needy and cranky all day. It's almost 6:30 p.m., and Susan is at the end of her rope. "Why isn't Chris home yet?" she asks herself, exasperated. "Wasn't he going to be home at 5:30?" A couple of minutes later she hears the keys in the door. Chris is finally home.

Liam runs to him. Chris picks him up and kisses his cheek -- "Hey, big guy" he

too", says Chris, "And I'm starving—what's for dinner?" "Dinner?!" exclaims Susan angrily, "I haven't had lunch yet—in fact, I haven't even had my morning coffee—and where were you anyhow? You said you were gonna be here at 5:30!"

If you have kids, the above scenario may sound familiar. You can also predict the way it turned into a big argument with angry words, yelling, and even some tears.

Does this sound familiar?

Later that evening, when Susan comes into their bedroom, Chris is already in bed,

night? Doesn't she know he loves her? Doesn't she understand he has needs? And where did all her sexual desire go anyhow?

Many couples who come to my office describe a similar problem to that of Susan and Chris. In many cases, the husband (or partner) has been frustrated and hurt repeatedly by his wife's repeated refusal to have sex. He is often angry, hurt and feels helpless. "I have tried everything" he tells me.

The woman will often tell me that she has long been disinterested in sex, that sex is yet another demand that is being put on

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says as he crashes on the sofa. He turns to Susan. "And how was your day?" he asks. "Terrible", she says, "I'm exhausted." "Me

watching TV. Susan changes into her pyjamas, collapses into bed, sighs and mutters "Good night." She turns off her night-light

and turns away from Chris. She is exhausted and upset and yearning for some peace and quiet. "What, no kissing good night?" asks Chris while putting his arm around Susan. He starts stroking her shoulder and touching her breasts. "Don't even think about it!" mutters Susan resentfully. "But why, honey?" asks Chris, disappointed and rejected.

In his own mind, Chris is asking a valid question. Why? Why is it that his wife rarely wants to have sex with him? Why does she keep rejecting him night after

her already "full plate", or that she is simply too tired to even think about it. In some cases the woman will say that she has been angry with her partner for a long time for his lack of understanding, support and/or practical help. One woman said "I was made to believe that my husband and I would share house chores and child care. But right now, I'd be happy with some plain simple help from him."

The husband counters "What does she expect? I'm the one who has to go to work every day. She takes it easy in the mornings and does as she pleases. Somebody needs to provide for this family, and it happens to be me—I'm not spending my days at the bar or the beach—I'm working hard so that she can stay home with the kids."

This couple has not had sex in seven months.

So who is right and who is wrong?

Couples often seek an opinion or a judgment on these issues. When they argue, each one tries to prove that they are right while their partner is wrong. They believe that their anger is more justified than their partner's, and they want their partner to change. The truth is that they are usually both right.

Women

While each one of them may have some valid points, they are not helping themselves or progressing toward a solution by blaming one another or by trying to prove themselves “right” and their partner “wrong.” What can they do?

They can start by remembering that:

- It is normal for a woman to feel a decrease in sexual desire and interest in the first few weeks or even months after delivery.
- It is highly unlikely that a woman who has been exhausted for weeks or months would be interested in sex. Sleep is an essential and basic need, more so than sex. In simple words, there is a good chance that a woman will have some sexual desire again if you let her sleep first.
- Women who feel emotionally and/or physically unsupported by their partners and/or feel emotionally distant from their partners are unlikely to want to have sex. Even if a woman feels some sexual desire, she is more likely to masturbate than to want to have sex with a partner she feels alienated from or angry with.
- Men do not go through pregnancy and birth and therefore do not experience changes in their body, hormonal fluctuations or physical discomfort, while women do. This is likely to create a discrepancy between the partners’ interest in sex, at least for the first few months. Be patient!
- Men sometimes feel unimportant, “out of the loop” or even unloved when new mothers totally invest themselves in caring for their babies. They may want sex not only as a means to physical gratification but also as a reassurance that they are still loved and wanted by their partner. Mothers may want to try and reassure their partners of their love for them.
- Men sometimes think they are being helpful while their partners think they are not. This often happens when there is a lack of communication. A woman may need and expect a certain type of help from her partner but will not ask for it. Sometimes she may just need a listening ear or a hug while she is upset. If her partner tries to “fix the problem” rather than provide support, it may anger rather than help her.

Women need to get better at asking for what they need, and men need to get better at asking their partner what it is that they need from them, and vice versa.

Above all, couples need to listen to each other. Couples who have tried everything but still experience significant distress in their relationships may want to seek professional help, preferably from a certified couple/marital therapist. ★

This article is an excerpt from a book currently being written by Dr. Michal Regev, on the transition to parenthood. Dr. Regev is a registered marriage and family therapist and clinical counsellor with the Reproductive Mental Health Program at BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre. Dr. Regev also has a private practice in Vancouver. She can be reached at 604-261-7209 or mregev@interchange.ubc.ca