

# 10

## Sex & Personal Growth



### Sex and Its Different Agendas

**A**s teenagers, we first start experimenting sexually to experience the feelings. These sexual feelings are pleasurable, exciting and consuming. The adolescent is not yet capable of true love because his sexual world is an egocentric world, the purpose of which is to have pleasure. If the girl is a source of pleasure, he “loves” her; if she stops being a source of pleasure for whatever reason, he stops “loving” her. This is age appropriate and totally normal as well as a necessary developmental step. These sexual feelings lead the adolescent to take the risks and begin forging ahead with the scary endeavor of boy meets girl. It gets him to overcome his fears and connect in sensual and sexual ways with the opposite sex.

Some use sex to be respected by peers such as the boy who exaggerates his sexual achievements so that other boys look up to him. This gives him a higher role in the pecking order giving him more respect, clout and power.

Young adults also use sex for feeling a sense of adequacy. “If I am good enough, people will be attracted to me.” Also, from the very first kiss, they are looking for approval from the person they are kissing.

As a therapist, I have heard many sad stories of adults relaying their stories as adolescents and younger adults who had an absent opposite-sexed parent. In their attempt to feel secure and loved, they acted out sexually and were promiscuous. The physical contact made them feel safe and less alone in the world.

So far, I have mentioned four different “feeling states” that adolescents pursue with sexuality: pleasure, power, a sense of adequacy and a sense of security. As you are probably aware, grown up adults use sex to experience the same feelings as younger people. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. It feels good to feel secure and safe, adequate and “good enough”, powerful and in control and to experience pleasurable sensual feelings. I highly recommend it. The problem is that as human beings, we are capable of so much more.

When I talked about Nate and Corinne earlier in the book, Nate was unconsciously using sex as a way to feel close and safe. He was using sex to relieve his feelings of abandonment having lost his mother and oldest sister at such young ages. His clingy touch turned off Corinne. This led to the downward negative spiral of him feeling abandoned once more, getting angrier and clingier and turning her off even more.

The mental imagery exercise I put him through helped him create a new agenda for having sexual and sensual touch with his wife. He could use his touch as a way of expressing his love and caring for his partner. This was his sexual expression coming from the heart as he perceived himself as a source of love that could offer his wife emotional nourishment at the moment of touching her. This was not only two people rubbing their bodies together. This was a mature and significantly more satisfying way of having sex.

Do not get me wrong. Having sex for all the other agendas is great and you should embrace those aspects of yourself and your partner that want to experience those pleasant feelings. We all want to feel pleasure, power, safe

and adequate. In addition to these feeling states, you can tap into your ability to deeply care for your partner and convey this message of love through how you touch your partner. Try the imagery experience that Nate did on your own. Imagine the loving energy in the universe and breathe it in through the crown of your head, down into your heart. As you breathe out, imagine this loving energy going through your arms and hands and out your fingertips. Immerse yourself in this imagery and see your partner as a person who is loveable and needs your love. Touch her from this feeling state. I would guess that your touch may be different, softer perhaps. Your eyes would appear different to your partner and chances are that she will open up to the “vibration” you are emitting towards her.

I once saw a couple who were stuck in a sexual rut. He always wanted her to dress up sexy and naughty, getting aroused at her sexual power. Actually, they both enjoyed these role playing experiences. After a while, she started making excuses why she did not want to have sex with him. He insisted on them coming to therapy to deal with their decreasing sex. One of the statements she repeatedly said to me was that she just wanted “meat and potatoes sex.” You can take that to mean that she wanted plain old boring sex. I took it to mean that she wanted to feel loved and cherished as opposed to just feel like an object used to arouse her husband.

Role playing can be wonderful for couples. It could be fun and exciting, just like any other enjoyable activity. This kind of playfulness can bring a couple closer together and keep the relationship exciting and fresh. I suggest the following:

Pay attention to your agenda. What do you want out of your sexual experience? You may choose to just go with your agenda. For example, you may want to have a quickie with your partner. As long as this is mutually agreed upon, enjoy yourselves. However, if you realize you have not had gentle, loving slower sex the last few times, you may choose to devote more time and loving attention to each other. Vary your sexual encounters; do not get stuck in a sexual rut.

## Sex and Personal Growth

I believe we are here on earth to grow. It is obvious that babies grow, children grow and adolescents grow. They get taller, their muscles develop, and they learn how to walk, talk, dance and throw a football. They grow academically also. The 6 year old cannot grasp mathematical concepts like a 15 year old. Socially, the relationships that a 6 year old makes with peers are much different than that of a 15 year old. As you already know, we all grow physically, academically and socially.

As adults, we do not grow any taller, but social/emotional growth continues nonetheless. We are destined to grow. Marriages demand that we grow. Without growth, marriages die. I joke often how people call mental health clinicians “shrinks,” but the truth is clients come in “shrunk”; they need to expand and grow beyond their self limitations. For example, the whole process of becoming a good listener requires expanding. Most of us childishly react to partner’s negative feelings or feedback. In order to become good listeners, we need to learn to manage our impulse to cut in and correct. We need to develop patience to let our partner finish speaking and sensitivity to be in rapport with our expressing partner. As we practice the discipline and skill of listening we are growing emotionally and developing personally.

Your sexual relationship holds many opportunities for growth. Use your touch to convey love and deep caring. What follows are ways to use your sexual life to develop your spiritual qualities and reach your relationship potential.

### *Qualities You Can Develop in Your Sex Life with Your Spouse*

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#### Patience

1. Your partner will not always want to have sex when you want to. You need to accept your partner’s differences. On the other

hand, your partner needs to be patient with your sexual needs as well.

2. Lovemaking is not always the fluid, seamless dance that we see in fantasies or read about in romance novels. There can be misreads, requested changes in the kinds of touch, erection problems, interruptions from the kids, and other human “bumps in your sexual road.” As an example, the man loses his erection for the first time and they both roll over and go to sleep, disappointed and frustrated. I have helped many of these couples just by suggesting that they do not end their lovemaking session after he loses an erection. They can enjoy the process of arousing the man after he has lost his erection so that he may gain his erection again. They can repeat this process many times if need be or if they want to. They learn to challenge the unconscious rule that everything works perfectly the first time. The focus can be more on being in the moment than performance.

## Courage

As thinking humans, we are more complex than other living creatures. More primitive creatures have fears regarding their physical survival whereas in addition to physical survival fears, we have fears that threaten our psychological well being as well. We fear such emotional experiences as:

1. rejection
2. being inadequate/not pleasing
3. abandonment
4. being out of control
5. losing our individuality/freedom

The sexual arena tests every individual in some or all of these areas. Rejection is always possible when you risk getting closer to another human

being. There is always the possibility that you may not please your partner. Nobody can guarantee you that your partner will always be with you and will never leave or abandon you. There are many aspects about sex that are not in your control such as how your body will respond sexually; how your partner feels; if the kids are going to knock on the door, etc. As you get closer to your partner, it is true that you lose some of your individuality in a sense. As you merge physically with another, boundaries do blur. Also, as you get literally and metaphorically naked with your partner, you expose yourself; not just your outer body, but your inner world, including your desires, fears and needs.

Of course, as maturity deepens and you develop a sense of self, you can face these fears and develop more emotional muscle. Actually, due to the nature of sex with your partner, it may be the best arena to learn, become more self-aware, develop and grow. Relationships are not for cowards. Cowards stay in their self protective worlds unwilling to risk emotionally. The result of staying in your comfort zone is having relationships that lack passion. Courage opens the relationship to opportunities for creativity, pleasure and aliveness.

### *Fear of Rejection*

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In reality, rejection is an illusion. If your partner “rejects” you, she is expressing something about herself. In his book, “The Four Agreements, Carlos Ruiz states that people are living in their own dream whether they are asleep or awake. You are a character in your partner’s dream. One of Ruiz’s four healthy agreements is, “Don’t take anything personally.” Rather than take things personally and withdraw into a self-pitying emotional state, it will serve you better to get curious about what is behind your partner’s “rejection.” What is going on emotionally with her? What is making your partner say or do that particular thing that rejects you? What is she afraid of? The more you are willing to get rejected, and talk about the reason for the rejection, the more you will be able to stay connected to your

partner and overcome whatever resistance there may be to getting close to each other.

*Fear of being inadequate or not pleasing*

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If your partner is not pleased with something you do or do not do sexually, it is an opportunity to learn. Why do you think that you should know what pleases your partner without any mutual communication? Would you expect to dance a phenomenal salsa with your partner the first time? Or would you make mistakes like crazy, trip over each other, miss your connections and gradually get closer to a flow? Do not overrate adequacy and smoothness. Usually the couple who never gets frustrated, disappointed or flustered; who never has an awkward moment is a couple who lives far too safely and is headed for sexual boredom. Be courageous, create some awkwardness and have a sense of humor about yourself and you will have a juicy, passionate sexual relationship.

*Fear of abandonment*

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There are many rewards for facing your fear of abandonment. There is not a person alive who has been loved perfectly or has never been abandoned in some way. It feels terrible to get hurt, abandoned or betrayed by someone who is important to you. If you take it personally and let it affect your own self-esteem or project the “abandoner” onto your partner, you can increase the chances of being abandoned. The self-fulfilling prophecy can work both positively and negatively. If you continue to act on your fear of abandonment, you will push your partner away in your attempt to protect yourself. You may say no to sex frequently or, during sex, you may not fully enjoy the present moment intimate experience. Your partner will inevitably get frustrated and tire of this behavior and there is a chance

that he will pull away from you as well, whether it is emotionally or physically.

Ask yourself if there is any fear of abandonment holding you back from participating fully with your partner. If you notice any of this fear, take a few full relaxation breaths and allow your heart area to relax. Be willing to soften any bodily tension you feel. Say to yourself, "I am open to giving and receiving sexual energy with my partner." There are no guarantees in love and relationships; however the more courageous you are, the more you will be free to fully give of yourself to your partner. Your partner will feel more accepted and loved by you. Common sense says that if your partner feels this unabashed love and sexual energy, he will probably never want to leave. There are many paradoxes when discovering the nature of relationships and here is one of them: *The less you act on feeling abandoned, the less chance you will be abandoned.*

### *Fear of being out of control*

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Here is another paradox: *The more you can tolerate the feeling of being out of control, the more in control you are.* In the sexual arena of your relationship, you need to learn the art of letting go. Letting go involves letting go of all possible outcomes, fears, etc. and focusing on the pleasure of the moment. It means letting go of listening to the inner critic as was discussed in Chapter 9. It means risking showing your emotions and intensity. It may even mean yelling with pleasure! It may mean letting your body move in new, pleasurable ways. It may mean trying new positions or role playing just for fun. It may mean showing to your partner a part of yourself that he has not seen. If you are the type of person who tends to hold yourself in control, try going just a little past your edge of comfort. Possibly you can use the next sexual opportunity to let go a little more than before. I remember working with a man who did not allow himself to show his wife he was having pleasure even though he insisted he was. The wife mentioned that he did not even make a sound during roller coaster rides

## *The Long, Hot Marriage*

even though just like in sex, he claimed he was having a good time. Their homework assignment was to go to an amusement park and he was to get on a roller coaster with his wife just to practice hollering “Yeeeeehah!” as he went down the track. He did that and said that it felt good to give himself permission to sound on the outside how he felt on the inside. They began transferring that experience to the bedroom and had a lot of fun doing it.

## *Fear of losing one’s individuality*

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We all have the need to be individuals and be our own unique selves. We need the freedom to express our inner feelings, desires, etc. A person who gives up his identity to accommodate another will feel empty, depressed and full of self-loathing. It is necessary and healthy to have boundaries, saying “Yes” to the things in life that nourish us and “No” to the things in life that are harmful or toxic to us. There are many people who do not have good boundaries and allow themselves to be abused or taken advantage of.

Whenever I have a man who has the symptoms of a low sexual drive, I look at the possible factors including physical factors such as medications and hormones that may be the reason for his lack of sexual desire. Also, I always ask about the relationship he had/has with his mother and more times than not, he has had an overbearing mother. The overbearing mother usually had no boundaries herself depending upon her son to take care of her emotional needs in some way. She also did not honor and respect the boundaries of her son. She did not treat him as an individual who had needs of his own, different than his mother. He was not allowed to disagree with his mother and go through the healthy defiance that children and adolescents usually go through. She needed her son to meet her emotional needs and be compliant to all her wishes.

The case already mentioned of Roger and Sarah illustrated this dynamic. Roger avoided sex because at an unconscious level, sex meant merging with

another person. Roger's skin crawled when Sarah touched him because it triggered the smothering affect his mother's overbearing needs had on him. He saw his wife as his mother, needy and draining. His "crawling skin," as well as his years of avoiding sex with Sarah, were both symptoms to protect his individuality. He needed to find healthier, more mature ways to set boundaries and experiencing his own feelings, desires and sexuality. He needed to recognize that merging with his partner was not a threat to his individuality. You will read more on this subject in the next chapter.

## Sensitivity

It is a given that some people are more sensitive than others. These people naturally tune in to people's needs and provide them with what they need. On the extreme end, these sensitive people may ignore their own needs and desires as they compulsively meet the needs of others. Some people are far less sensitive to the needs of others. Their ability to sense what others are experiencing and need is low. On the extreme end, these people are totally self-involved, trying to get their own needs met without compromise.

A flourishing sexual relationship requires reciprocity and mutuality. Assess yourself. Where are you on the continuum of sensitivity to others? Do you get easily affected by the pain of another to the point of you forget your own needs? Sexually, are you so tuned in to the needs of your partner that you do not ask yourself what you want or how you want to have sex with your partner even if it is different than your partner's preferences? If you answer yes to this question, get curious about your sexuality. Do you want to change or add something to your sexuality? Be willing to assert yourself even if your partner is not totally in favor of your request. "What am I feeling? What do I need from him? If I stopped worrying about his needs, what would I discover about myself?" You may have to experiment, asking him to try different types of touching, positions, kissing, etc. to see what feels the best to you. I encourage you to endure the initial discomfort

of becoming more tuned in to yourself since it is so new and different than before. Simply put, it is taking your attention away from your partner and concentrating more on yourself.

If you are an under-sensitive person you need to take attention off you and onto your partner. This requires asking yourself questions such as, “What do I sense she is feeling right now?” “What do I think she wants right now?” Of course you can always ask her, which is a sensitive act in itself because the attention is on her. This can feel awkward and strange at first to the person who is not used to thinking about others. Thinking about the needs of others is a positive habit that can be cultivated over time. Write notes to yourself that remind you to get curious about your partner. Ask her how she would like to be touched. Forget about getting your needs met at least for now. As you practice this habit of focusing on her, you probably will be rewarded with a happy and loving spouse who would love nothing more than to please you as well.

There is no better classroom for learning to be sensitive than in the bedroom with your partner. Here are some ways to increase your sensitivity with your partner in the bedroom.

## MEN

1. Look into your partner’s eyes. Turn your thoughts away from yourself and notice your partner.
2. For the moment, relax all your strivings and stop trying to get anything from your partner. Just be with her.
3. Remember that she has feelings and desires just like you and many of them may be different than yours at this moment. Imagine what she might want from you right now. Of course you can always ask her.
4. Give her what she needs that is possible for you to give to her right now. See her needs as important as your own.

5. Change your touch, slow down, experience your hands as conduits of sexual love. Change how you touch; notice her verbal and nonverbal signals. Is it more pleasurable, less pleasurable? If it seems less pleasurable, adjust your touch again. Ask her how it feels and how she would like to be touched.

## WOMEN

1. Look into your partner's eyes. Turn your thoughts away from yourself and notice your partner.
2. Remember that he has feelings and desires just like you and many of them may be different than yours at the moment. Imagine what he wants from you. Ask or listen to your intuition about this.
3. Give him what he needs that is possible for you to give. See his needs as important as your own.
4. Notice what arouses him. Be as willing as possible to stretch outside your comfort zone to pleasure your man.

## Creativity

Sex with your mate is not unlike any other creative pursuit. What is wonderful about any creative pursuit is that you have many choices and can make an impact by bringing your involvement, energy and intention to the creative process. Of course, if you want beautiful results, there are guidelines. In music, you cannot just play any notes you want; the notes have to come together in some harmonic, systematic way. However, within that chordal system, whether it is jazz, rock and roll, or classical music, there are an infinite number of choices. In painting, the artist needs to have some structure with the brushstrokes to create the beauty and/or the emotional

impact he wants to create. Usually, the artist or musician has already learned his craft and realizes that the more skill he has, the more unlimited his ability will be to create.

Likewise, sexuality with your partner has to follow guidelines of sensitivity. You cannot just do whatever you want. However, the more sensitive you are, and the more you learn about your partner's sexual and emotional needs, the more uninhibited you both can be in creating "beautiful music together." There are so many ways to touch, kiss, embrace, rub, talk, imagine, thrust, penetrate and receive in the bedroom with your partner. As in music and art, the advantage often goes to the couple who has spent the most time attending to the sexually creative process. This is why older couples often report that they have far better sex now than when they were younger. Of course these are the couples who have done their sexual homework devoting time and attention to each other throughout their relationship.

In summary, sex with your partner is a rich arena for personal growth. There is much fodder here to develop your patience, courage, sensitivity and creativity. Why not make your sex life a vehicle to develop these qualities? There are two great benefits to this. One is that these developing qualities transfer to other areas of your life and you can have more of what you want in those areas as well. Secondly, as you develop these qualities, you can continue experiencing greater levels of your sexual potential and thereby leading to greater pleasure and emotional connection between you and your mate. An upward movement is created that can continue for the rest of your married life.

