

Intimate Desire

By Laurie Watson

Sexual desire beats like a heart through a healthy marriage, pumping life into the mundane, day-to-day repetitions of running a household to the extraordinary moments of the perfect romantic dinner. Through this powerful life-force, we are drawn to one unique person from the sea of all possible mates to create an unparalleled match with the dual potential for sweet wholeness and terrible destruction.

Why is it, then, that nearly every woman's magazine cover splashes exclusives on restoring pizzazz to sex? Every month!

Intimacy of all sorts takes hard, hard work. Sex is no exception. The waning of sexual desire is a signal about the relationship as a whole.

Whether by luck, fate or God's plan, we don't crash into this reality until we're sitting down, strapped in and on the forced, self-development march of marriage. When desire diminishes, as it universally does after some period of time together, couples often choose either to grit their teeth in the face of a lifetime of small and great disappointments or think that the missing lust is proof that the commitment was a mistake. For the partner with lower desire, the slowing of sexual activity provides relief; unfortunately, it also shatters the couple's original dream for both passion and friendship.

Hoping to escape the necessary hard work with an entirely understandable excuse, exhausted couples sigh. "I'm too tired, honey." Certainly, raising young families, full and part-time work, and community commitments leave couples depleted, but deeper dynamics stop them from negotiating an equitable division of labor, keeping them stuck in an intimacy-avoidance cycle. Other struggles like medical problems, drug side-effects, previous abuse and life-stage changes add static as well. Most marriages struggling with decreased desire point to easily identifiable rationalizations. The deeper causes are harder to see and harder to fix. In our instantaneous age, we balk at the slow, complicated answer that great lifetime sex requires courage, vulnerability, and intimacy.

When we fall in love, we submerge our individuality into a state of symbiotic union. We share our well-rehearsed secrets with our spouse early in the marriage and are satisfied with the apparent reciprocal vulnerability. We listen carefully and are listened to. With consistent approval for our revelations, we feel more alive and often more loved than ever. During hot early sex, partners reveal more of what they know about making love than who they are and, for a while, nature takes her course.

Cloaking differences though can't last forever. Most often partners split the resulting emotional distance between them by taking opposing sides in a pursuer-distancer dance. The pursuing partner brings vulnerability to the relationship but also relies on the positive feedback to continue. The distancing partner, enjoying the chase at first, feels hopeful of developing more emotional initiation. Over time, however, the distancer becomes burdened by the pursuer's demand for validation and begins to close down. The thwarted pursuer continues the hunt but risks less and less emotional openness. Couples despair at this stage and believe marriage to be the great letdown sometimes fantasizing a flight from the growing canyon between them through

a divorce or an affair. Locked in a frustrating cycle of dwindling connection, sexuality in the marriage becomes the fragile breakpoint.

In a system stuck like this, neither partner dares revealing intimate information which might increase emotional contact. In *Passionate Marriage*, Dr. David Schnarch suggests that sexual monotony springs not from a lack of creativity but from the partners' lack of courage. Sexual excitement in marriage results from both partners revealing their sexual selves, their eroticism. To disclose their longing for intimate sex risks rejection, recalling the loss much earlier of skin-to-skin contact as a baby. Sometimes, the internal turn-off is so profound that the partner no longer even wants to want.

Rather than sounding the death knell of the relationship, low sexual desire can both make sense and offer the opportunity to examine B and change B how the marriage is working. The pursuer must harness their urge to run after their partner and learn how to self-contain their emotions relying on a network of relationships and interests to provide comfort and affirmation. The distancer must courageously confront their inner self and bravely initiate contact. Rather than playing "hide and seek" with each other, the couple narrows their emotional gap. Highly erotic passion becomes a possibility that might be enduring. Desire grounded in intimacy grows and cements the couples' closeness in place.