

Let's talk about **sex**

Many couples have times when their sex life is not all they want it to be. Yet finding a shared language with which to talk about it is surprisingly hard

BY ANDREW G MARSHALL

Try to imagine a time when you and your partner were in a rut in some area of your lives – bored of the same old holiday destination, for example. Usually you would have no problem discussing it and sharing new ideas. If you were worried about something – perhaps whether your children were going to the right school – you'd sit down and talk. However, when it comes to sex, even an innocent enquiry such as 'What do you think of our love life?' might well be met by stone-walling, uncomfortable silence or, worse still, anger. There seems to be no universally understood way to discuss sex within a relationship – most couples find it awkward at best, hurtful and damaging at worst. But if you can't talk about it, how can anything change? No wonder when I asked *Psychologies* readers to keep a diary and fill out a questionnaire, many were despondent. Thirty-five per cent were not really confident about improving their sex lives and 14 per cent had no confidence at all.

As a marital therapist I've spent 25 years helping couples deal with everything from 'OK' to non-existent love lives and I understand how tricky, painful and even damaging talking can be – but it doesn't have to be. Over time, I've developed a four-step plan that I have found helps couples communicate better about sex.



«There is no universally understood way to discuss sex in a relationship – most couples find it awkward»



I Appreciative enquiry

This idea comes from business studies rather than traditional counselling. Instead of the traditional method of problem solving – focusing on what has gone wrong and looking for solutions – it concentrates on what works. This involves remembering passionate times together – maybe a holiday or when the children were staying with their grandparents –

and bringing back as much detail as possible. What did you like about yourself at that moment? What did you appreciate in your partner? What else was good? If anything negative comes up, write it down and put it to one side. It is crucial that neither of you feels criticised.

Next, I ask couples to imagine how things could be. Let your imagination roam, and avoid getting caught up with

practical problems – partly because we'll deal with these shortly but mainly because it cuts off your creativity. Give the dreams as much detail as possible.

Finally, look at delivering the dream. How can you build on past successes? What would help you reach this goal? Think about your resources, whether they be your commitment to change, or money to hire a babysitter. >>>

>>> 2 Identify your blocks

The next step is to think about potential stumbling blocks. Most people only consider practical difficulties – such as finding time or being too tired – but it's important to look deeper and understand our personal baggage, our partner's frailties and any unhelpful messages about sex that are preventing you from enjoying it.

Start by discussing a neutral topic such as how you learned where babies come from. Once again, put as much detail into these stories as possible. Who told you? What was the attitude of your parents? Did your school bring in a special teacher to cover the subject? I've had clients talk about measuring willow leaves (goodness knows why that was included) and lessons that covered human reproduction in five minutes, while another client was given an enlightened book (which covered masturbation) when she was 14 by her mother, who was horrified when she discovered her daughter had put the ideas into practice.

After telling your stories, look at what conclusions you might have drawn about sex when you were young. If you're a woman, what messages did you receive from your mother? This is important, as women are often only as comfortable with their bodies as their mothers were. If you're a man, what myths about sex did you pick up from your father? Next move on to early sexual experiences and how these might still cast a shadow today. Follow up by discussing sex in the wider culture – from tabloid newspapers and soap operas to novels and pornography. What impact does this have on your sexual relationship today, and how might it explain any personal insecurities?

What's your sex style?

Everybody has a preferred way of making love. Understanding each other's styles gives you a clearer idea of where you're both starting from, and can give you ideas for how to talk about your styles, and go on to mix things up in the bedroom. Take this test to find out your type.

**When it comes to the
ambience for love-
making, I would prefer:**

a A romantic context where my partner and I are feeling loving towards each other
b A setting close to nature – for example, a field of long grass or a beach – assuming we could be sure of not being disturbed
c A dramatic setting

– such as a New Orleans brothel, a harem or a medieval dungeon

**When it comes to
technique, I prefer:**

a Being face to face with the one I love
b Slow and rhythmic movements that allow me to enjoy the shades of pleasure during sex
c A wide variety of positions

My ideal sex is:

a An expression of love for my partner
b A trip into a world of sensory images and tingling nerve endings
c A drama that begins with attraction, develops a plot filled with intrigue and sex play and ends with a tumultuous orgasm

**I'm most likely to be
in the mood for
passionate sex when:**

a I'm feeling really loving towards my partner
b I'm physically relaxed and mentally receptive
c I'm feeling playful and adventurous

**The perfect place for
making love would be:**

a Somewhere that has special meaning for me

and my partner

b Somewhere that ensures total privacy
c A semi-public place to make secret love

**When it comes to
foreplay, my first choice
would be:**

a Kissing the face and the lips and the neck
b Anything where the pacing and repetition allows us to become absorbed in the moment
c Plenty of accomplished oral sex

3 Work out what sex means to you

Just like money, sex means different things to different people. For some it is about unwinding and reducing stress, for others it's a way to feel good about yourself or to measure your attractiveness. Sex can also be about having children, an expression of love or feeling close to your partner.

For some, sex is right at the centre of their lives. For others, it is a pleasant extra. There is no right or wrong answer,

and for most people it is probably a shifting combination. Unfortunately, most individuals blindly assume they view sex in the same way as their partner or, worse still, imagine the gap is so great that it can't be bridged. Often I see couples where a woman asks, 'How can we have sex if we've not been close?' while her partner asks, 'How can we be close if don't make love?'

To reach a better understanding of your and your partner's attitudes and expectations about sex, step three

What your answers say about you

Mostly a You enjoy partner-focused sex.

There is lots of affectionate sweet talk and intimate conversations before, during and after sex. You enjoy love songs, romance and closeness. This style involves keeping eyes open, lots of kissing, cuddling and full body contact. For you, sex is a loving merger.

Mostly b You enjoy trance-style sex.

The focus is inward looking and centred on either giving or receiving pleasure, and you will often drift into your own private world.

Sex is an altered state of consciousness with little talking and any fantasies are normally without a script but full of sensual images, colours and shapes. You like lots of patterned touching and a steady rhythm to help you sink further into the trance.

Mostly c You enjoy creative sex.

The mood is playful, fun and dramatic with a whole range of practices to keep your sex life vital and adventurous. While for many couples fantasy is something only whispered (or more probably kept private), creative couples share

and act out their desires. These might include dressing up, role plays, props and toys.

How to use these results

Compare your preferred style with your partner's. If they are different, could you be generous and offer something that would increase his or her enjoyment? Look at your own second preferred style, would you like to develop these tastes further?

involves doing a simple test together. Look at these questions and write down your thoughts. Only after you've both completed the test should you compare your answers.

- When you think of love what three words come to mind?
- When you think of sex what three words come to mind?
- In a typical month, how often would you like to have sex?
- In a typical month, how often do you think your partner would like to have sex?

4 Talk about what you really want

By now, you should be ready to focus on what needs to change. So the final stage is to be as detailed as possible about what you'd like. It is tempting to talk in generalities, as these seem less critical. For example, 'I'd like longer cuddles'. The problem with phrases like this is that they're open to multiple interpretations – 'She wants hours of foreplay,' or 'Don't we cuddle on the sofa already?' Instead, tie down what you mean: 'I'd like at least

five minutes of general touching in bed before we move onto sexual touching,' and explain why. 'It takes me a while to unwind and be ready to be turned on.' Instead of general requests such as 'I wish you'd make more of an effort,' try asking for what you really want. 'Can you wear that lingerie I bought you because you look really nice in it?'

As you become more explicit about your desires, you may find another hurdle – how to name parts of the body and sexual acts without reverting to playground words, or being too euphemistic. How do you bridge linguistic differences if one partner feels uncomfortable with frank terms or hates pet names and words? To overcome this, take a piece of paper and write down as many words for the male and female genitals as possible. Start with the clean ones and move through to words used in pornography. Next, go through the major sex acts and give their slang and medical names. It will be funny and should help you settle on a common language to talk about sex.

Each of these steps will help you and your partner change how you talk about sex, eliminating some misunderstandings and opening up new avenues for discussion. Talking about sex can be difficult, but in my experience most couples find more similarities than differences and, once over their fears, lay the foundations for becoming a loving team in the bedroom. Ultimately, their only regret is 'Why didn't we do this years ago?'

Andrew G Marshall is a marital therapist and the author of 'Make Love Like A Prairie Vole: Six Steps To Passionate, Plentiful And Monogamous Sex' (Bloomsbury)