MY SPOUSE WON'T HAVE SEX!
Paul H. Byerly

Elsewhere we discuss why it is wrong to refuse sex , but what do you do if your spouse chooses to say no? We get several private letters a month from men *and women* living in a sexless or near sexless marriages against their will. These individuals are demographically diverse - they are young, middle aged and senior, some have kids, some don't; the problem may have existed all along, may have gradually gotten worse, or may have occurred very suddenly. What these folks do have in common is frustration, pain, no idea what to do, and most often a spouse who refuses to discuss the issue or even admit there is a problem. It is our prayer that the following information will help those in this situation find a starting place for change.

The first thing to do is to try to determine the reason your spouse is refusing sex. This is difficult as there are a variety of sexual *and non-sexual* issues that can cause sexual refusal. It's also possible that previous sexual behaviour was mostly or completely an act, meaning what appears to be a sudden problem may have always existed, and was only hidden before. The problem can be a combination of things, and a person who tends towards negative feelings about sex may only need a very small "push" to stop wanting to have sex. It is also possible that the original trigger issue has ended, and the non-sexual behaviour remains. Additionally, a lack of willingness to have sex does not always mean a lack of sex drive. Finally, the onset of the problem and the change in sexual behaviour can be separated by months or years; don't assume the clue to a sexual change can be found in the recent past.

Some people seem to have a never-ending supply of "good reasons" for saying no. Individually each reason seems fair, but taken as a whole it's obvious something is wrong. When a constant stream of reasons for not having sex continues for very long, there is some underlying reason for the lack of sex; the reasons given are merely convenient or concocted excuses that hide the real problem. We make time and energy for the things that are most important to us, so when we are routinely too busy or too tired for something it suggests that the real issue is more about priorities than time.

Use the following list to see if you can identify problem areas that may be causing or aggravating anti-sex feelings.

Non-sexual Factors:

- **Stress**: Stress attacks the desire for sex, the ability to become aroused, and the ability to climax. Both sudden high levels of stress and lower prolonged levels of stress can interfere with sex.
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Exhaustion/too busy: Being tired, either physically or emotionally, takes a toll. As with stress, these things can be sudden, or long-term chronic conditions that have reached a point where they cause a problem. People who don't have enough time are forced to cut things out, and sex may be cut because it was never really a high priority.

- **Depression**: Even mild depression can destroy sex drive and/or sexual function. Individuals with mild depression may be able to function with apparent normalcy in some aspects of sexuality, but be non-functional in other areas.
- **Relational**: Good sex requires a good relationship. Unsettled issues, feeling unloved, feeling unimportant, and lack of respect can all cause a person to avoid sex.

- **Intimacy**: If non-sexual intimacy is lacking, sexual intimacy may feel awkward or even wrong. There can be a lag of many years between the loss of non-sexual intimacy and the refusal of sex.
- **Over committed emotionally**: We can become so close to other people that we no longer see our marriage relationship as special. When a person starts to see their spouse as "just another friend," it's difficult to see them as sexual.
- **Anger/Resentment**: Often a person knowingly or unknowingly refuses sex as a way to retaliate for real or imagined wrongs. Another version of this is the spouse who says yes to sex, but rarely or never allows them self to enjoy it. These kind of passive/aggressive issues are difficult to deal with as the person doing them will deny they are doing anything.

- **Control/manipulation**: A spouse may use sex as a carrot to encourage wanted actions, or sexual refusal as a stick to punish unwanted actions. If the person who is supposed to be controlled "refuses to play," sex may stop all together.

- **Habit**: If not having sex, or having very little sex, goes on for a long time, it can become a bad habit. Being sexual no longer feels natural and other things usurp the time and energy that should go into sex.
- **Young Children**: Babies and young children are a major drain on parents, and particularly on mothers. A drop in interest is normal after a woman gives birth, and in some cases, it takes years for her desire and interest to return to what is was before she became pregnant.
- **Sex is for babies:** Some women (and a very few men) have the idea that sex is only acceptable when it's about making babies – or at least could make babies. Others see sex as okay in general as long as they want more children; even if they are currently using birth control. Either way, when the family is complete, sex is no longer acceptable.
- **Sexual Anorexia**: This stems from the feeling that one has little or no control over one's life. As with the eating disorder, the sexual anorexic gains a sense of self-control by denying them self something their body desires. As with the eating disorder, the sexual anorexic may so lose contact with their body that they no longer feel sexual urges. A sexual anorexic could be highly aroused but not feel a thing. Sexual anorexia is far more common in women than men, but some men seem to do this as well. There also seems to be sexual bulimia in which the person vacillates between not being able to get enough sex (and possibly seeking it outside of the marriage) and wanting absolutely nothing to do with sex in any way. (Please note that these issues are well beyond the scope of self-help.)

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Medication: A number of medications can reduce sex drive and or sexual response. Anti-depressants are big culprits. See Are your medicines disrupting your sex life? (off site link) for more information.

Sexual Factors:

- **Pain**: Sex can become uncomfortable or painful for a variety of reasons. If a person has tried to ignore the pain, and it's gotten worse, he or she may not want to admit how long the situation has gone on. Fear of what the pain could mean, or of what medical treatment might entail, can also result in wanting to hide the true reason for saying no to sex. (Sometimes a good lubricant is all that is necessary to deal with painful sex.

Also, see our article Painful Intercourse for more information.)

- **Embarrassment**: Physical problems such as impotence , premature ejaculation , difficulty getting aroused , and orgasm problems can be very embarrassing. Men in particular may choose saying no to sex, or masturbating privately, over revealing or discussing sexual difficulties.

- **Guilt**: Guilt, a major destroyer of sex, comes in several forms:

- **Sexual abuse**: It is very common for sexually abused individuals to feel guilt, even if they were children when the abuse occurred. This guilt may be suppressed for a time (especially early in marriage), then seem to come on suddenly.
- **Sex prior to being with spouse**: This is particularly destructive if the sin has never been confessed; hidden sin just keeps eating at us. Because we tend to see things differently as we become parents ourselves, feelings of guilt may develop as our children reach the age we were when we entered into sexual sin.

- **Sex with spouse before marriage**: This is a common cause of sexual problems in marriage, and an issue often overlooked. Getting married does not retroactively sanctify premarital sex, and the anger, guilt and shame related to sex before marriage may slowly eat away at your spouse. This is particularly problematic when one spouse feels bad about the sex, and the other sees it as "no big deal." *If you had any kind of sexual contact before marriage* (even if it was well short of intercourse), assume that this is a part of the problem.

- **Sinful behaviour with spouse since marriage**: If you engaged in sinful behaviour together after marriage (use of pornography, group sex, swinging), guilt may continue to build after the sin has stopped. This is particularly a problem if you stopped "for" your spouse, and have never agreed/confessed that your actions were wrong. This also happens over things that are not actually sin (such as oral sex) if one spouse felt, or no feels, that those acts are sin. For them it was wrong, so deal with it on that level.

- **Adultery, porn, masturbation**: Guilt over current or past hidden sexual behaviour can cause a person to refuse sex. Even an "emotional affair" or lustful thoughts never acted on can cause this to happen.
- **Nothing left for spousal sex**: Some men masturbate so frequently that they have nothing left for their wife. A man can come into marriage with this problem, or it can develop later. When a man is young, he may be able to keep up his habitual masturbation and have sex, but as he ages this becomes more and more difficult, leading to saying no to sex more and more often.
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