

WORKING WITH COUPLES WHO'S SEX ISN'T WORKING LIFE IN THE CONVERGENCE ZONE

Whether it's the couple in their 20's – dual earners, no kids, or the couple in their 30's single earner, small kids, or the couple in their 40's dual earners, teenagers Sex isn't working for lots of couples. What's up? And more importantly, how do we as therapists help them? I am going to propose that we are in the middle of a sexual breakdown caught in a cultural, philosophical, religious, and energy convergence zone. Here's what I mean.

Time and finite energy

This factor is an issue we as therapists are all too familiar with in the couples we see, and perhaps even in our own lives. Sexuality and intimacy are partly fueled with time and attention. In American urban culture we are often running from one event to another, with no transition. We crawl into bed our bodies exhausted, but our mind still traveling at the speed of light. To move at the pace our current culture demands is to go against our natural rhythms – there is no stillness, reflection, readiness and intention before rushing into the next thing. It's like

going from 60mph to zero in 2 seconds the sheer force of momentum has us collapsing in upon ourselves. It seems a bit crazy that we would expect ourselves to be fully present while in this state of collapse. Since we can't possibly be present when part of us is still moving – we learn to make love and not be present. This scenario is common place for many couples and though there are 'tame' levels of vulnerability, we often forfeit a sense of connection, intimacy and love. Like water off a duck's back ... but in this case our souls and our relationships need the moment to soak in and nourish our tired lives.

Sexual shame and religious ambivalence

Like water and breath, sexuality and spirituality course through our lives giving meaning and sustenance. Core to the human experience, these two forces invite our desire for intimacy with another and with the transcendent. When life cannot provide the reassurance we seek, we often find ourselves seeking comfort in one or both of these places. However in America, cultural and religious narratives around sexuality and spirituality have split body from soul/mind and thus disassociated, disembodied and diminished most people's experience of these core desires. In culture we see this through the commodification of sexuality which has reduced it to a product for purchase – a longer erection, a better orgasm, porn. We openly and unabashedly use people to sell products and justify using people to 'get ahead' or get what we want. Add to this skewed view, that the vast majority of people who grew up affiliated with a Judeo-Christian faith (85% of the current U.S. population) were covertly and in many cases, profoundly

affected by generations of an oppressive Protestant and Catholic sexual narrative. This culturally embedded ideology has encouraged most adults to cast sexuality far away from spirituality, and to silence in the public sphere any experience that would integrate the two. The inherent confusion in these two mutually contradictory messages is profound. When an adolescent or young adult is caught in the cross-fire of a sexually objectified materialistic and manipulative culture, and an 'abstinence only' silencing religious message at the very same time as desires for physical, emotional and spiritual intimacy are rising in intensity, people get caught in a double bind that leaves them feeling badly about themselves and separated from their spiritual journey. This feels crazy but it is treated as 'normal culture'. Rarely do we find people articulating this untenable, deeply disruptive and disorientating situation. Yet our practices are filled with compartmentalized and disembodied people marinated in generations of shame and confusion. Get into research on the effect of shame and you will find how fundamentally detrimental and hurtful deep cultural and religious shame is for people – and even more so in a cultural context where sex is being secularized, objectified and largely debased. When people are filled with shame and self-loathing, cut off from their spiritual center, their affected self-esteem takes precedence in interactions with others. It dominates and eclipses a person's ability to see and love another. Shame and disembodied sexuality creates distance in intimacy, sexual expression and intentional presence. In essence, objectified sexuality encased in silence and shame keeps people from intimately knowing both God and each other.

Patriarchy in the bedroom

Do you remember learning about second order change ... when the paradigm you don't know you're in becomes revealed? After listening for years to clients and students, and engaging in heady conversations about patriarchy in culture, I finally noticed that I was in fact tangled in the sheets with patriarchy! I had that, 'why didn't I see this before' feeling. "Sex" in our culture has long been defined as 'being real' if it is intercourse and if a man ejaculates. All other sexuality is relegated to 'foreplay' or simply 'not real' sexual expression. You probably see it all the time - the couple in your office complaining about not having 'enough sex', i.e. intercourse. Typically (though not always), the man is blaming the woman and she is feeling like something must be terribly wrong with her. They feel in the spotlight – if people only knew how little 'sex' they were having they are sure they would be publicly humiliated on a daytime talk show. This scenario tends to emerge sometime after the honeymoon phase (when they were *both* connected to their hearts *and* their desire), and at some point into the routine of life and living together. Most often we see this when the phase of life is complex and filled with demands on all their resources, and while still young enough not to realize that the body (and life itself) doesn't always obey our demands. When sex is seen through an intercourse orgasm focused lens alone, the enduring experience often lacks impact and fails to meet the varied levels of energy, time, wants and attention. Men are not invited to connect their heart to their penis, and women are often checked out, not invited into their passion and purpose. Sex

ends with a “thanks” and leaves no lasting sense of connection to each other or to one’s spiritual center. This type of sexual encounter in and of itself can leave people unfulfilled, uninspired and wanting. Sexual expression *of any kind* that involves the heart, soul and body and honors each person and their creator is ‘real sex’. It all counts - everything from being nose to nose breathing deeply together, gazing into each other’s eyes, and sending all the love from your life and the divine into the soul and body of your lover, to hours of intentional multi-sensory sacred sexual celebrations. The ‘goal’ (to use a patriarchal metaphor) is not orgasm, ejaculation or intercourse. It is to deeply touch and be touched, spirit, soul and body, in such an intentional way as to open up space to be a conduit of love into your heart, your lovers heart and ultimately spilling over into a world that needs healing and love.

Excerpts come from Caught Between the Sheets – in press by the author. Caught Between the Sheets guides people in correcting historical, cultural and religious narratives, reauthoring an affirming spiritually integrated sexual story, and introduces them to exercises, rituals and sacred sexual practices. For more information you may contact the author at www.tinaschermersellers.com