

## MAKING THE SHIFT FROM PERFORMANCE TO PLEASURE

Treating Couples with Sexual Concerns

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Our culture has been hampered by the focus on sexual performance for a very long time. Somewhere in the 1970s, we emerged from the sex negative, procreative view of sex into an era of seeking sexual “functioning” and everyone now feels that burden of “adequacy” especially in long-term relationships. This is what I call the Performance Model and it can be summed up as:

Sex equals intercourse

The goal of sex is orgasm

Great sex is a great performance

Unfortunately, this model raises unrealistic expectations because it is concerned with performance evaluations and optimal numbers for intercourse per week. It also lends itself to easy media sound bites and articles published by sex experts who will give us the latest and greatest tricks, novel positions and how to please our partners in never before experienced ways.

There is an underlying anxiety that is stirred up in all of us, something like “if I don’t please my partner with a great performance, he/she may leave me for someone better.” Orgasms have become scrutinized; was it the best, longest, strongest? And now we must extend or have multiple ones. All this angst takes a lot of the pleasure out of it, even when we “achieve” our climaxes.

The truth is that most people fall short of some aspect of this performance model. Since one third of all men are rapid ejaculators (Kinsey established that 75% of men ejaculate within 2 minutes). 40% of men over 40 and 70% of men over 70 have erectile dysfunction, 43% of women have female sexual dysfunction sometime in their lives and approximately 70% of women do not orgasm through intercourse alone.

Add these statistics to the large numbers of couples that report desire discrepancy and sexless marriages become the headlines of magazine articles and Oprah shows. Often when sex occurs, it is constricted by performance anxiety and negative cognitions that surround the whole process. Many men and women have lost access to unbound orgasmic energy because of misunderstandings and misperceptions which have at their heart the lack of permission to truly enjoy pleasure without a measurable goal. That goal has been presented too often in the popular culture as pleasing the partner.

For the last decade, I have been working from an organizing principle that expands the conventional view of sexuality. This view is the opposite of the performance model so prevalent in the advice articles read by the public and is effective for couples who are stuck with desire impasses in their sex lives. The alternative, which I call the Pleasure Model, radically differs because it shifts our thinking away from performance and away from the medicalizing trend that presents sex as a plumbing problem that needs fixing or a system of hormones that can be tinkered with to produce the right physical response.

In my book, *Reclaiming Goddess Sexuality*, I explored an alternative model, gained from my search for a way to express what was missing for so many women in

long term relationships. Since then, I have expanded my approach to include both genders because all of us have been burdened with the performance model of sex. Over the years, I have discovered interventions that help men and women shift out of the performance box and into the expanded potential for pleasure, free of judgment and specific outcomes. The basic premises of the Pleasure Model are:

- Pleasure rather than orgasm is central to an erotic encounter
- Sensual touch is the vehicle rather than genital performance
- Orgasm is perceived as multidimensional and energetic

Reclaiming erotic pleasure begins with an understanding of sexuality as life force energy. This truth about sexual energy is at the core of the pleasure model. Sexuality is fundamentally an erotic energy within the body-mind. This view eliminates pressure on genital performance and over focus on pleasing the partner.

I tell my couples “Sex is energy; it is not an act that you do solo or with someone else.” This truth has been distorted as a result of centuries of repressive cultural norms as well as our current cultural narrative about sex as performance. I find that left brain dominant partners have more difficulty grasping this concept at first, since they are more prone to viewing sex as an act with specific finite activities that should be performed well.

Here, I’ll briefly review the differences between the two brain hemispheres because many of my interventions enhance the ability of partners to integrate them. The left hemisphere function is linear, literal, logical and later to develop in the fetus. The right hemisphere on the other hand, is responsible for affect regulation (emotions) is able to detect subtle meaning (intuition), creates holistic maps of the body (kinesthetic) and responds to imagery. When a couple is able to experience that “swept away” feeling in a sexual encounter, the left brain is quiet, time disappears and there is only the sensation of the moment. However, it is not possible to simply toss the left hemisphere a bone and have it go away, so we must appeal to both hemispheres when we are working with couples.

In my years of researching both Western science and Eastern concepts of sexuality, I have come to understand that there are three levels of sexual experience. **I Genital Pleasuring** is mutual, consensual pleasure and relaxation, including playful self-expression. It is tension release through genital orgasm.

**II Conscious Loving** is the enhancement of partner commitment through conscious, loving communion. It includes the experience of the “valley orgasm” of continuing waves of energy through the body. It is the heart level of sexuality.

**III Spiritual Union** is the cultivation of sexual energy to attain ecstatic, altered states of consciousness. It encompasses the experience of orgasm through multiple energy centers.

Much of what we know of Level III has been gleaned from esoteric sexuality practices that view sexual energy as a path of union leading to expanded awareness and ecstatic experiences. These practices have common threads such as preparation rituals, creation of sacred space, breathing techniques, visualization, and the sensing the body’s energetic fields. There are simple ways to teach the basics of these practices to mainstream couples.

The possibility of Level III experiences offers a tremendous opportunity for exploration into new and somewhat uncharted territories for western oriented couples. It

also gives them much hope for continuing to enjoy sexual pleasure life-long because spiritual sex can be practiced at any age and within any functioning limitations.

Many couples are thrilled when I speak of the possibility of having more options from which they can choose, beyond sex as rote release through the genitals. Fresh pathways begin to open up in their awareness. My challenge as a sex therapist is to help mainstream couples understand and practice these additional levels of sexual experience in their lives. To begin with, simply shifting out of the performance model into one of pleasurable erotic encounters is very uplifting. It allows couples to release projections and expectations that have been clouding their sexual experience.

The following schema is helpful in charting progression in treatment. It moves from healing old wounds and the ways individuals feel they have “failed” in performance into heart connected sex and towards expanded sexuality. It is meant to be inclusive: most interventions, many that you already use, will fit into the following areas.

1. Permission: Healing the Cultural Wounding
2. Trust: Securing the attachment
3. Self Empowerment: Ensuring healthy boundaries
4. Communion: Love without fear
5. Truth: Staying open and curious without judgment
6. Perception: Shaping the experience
7. Transcendence: Openness to ecstatic states of consciousness

What follows is a review of the first four areas with some of my favorite techniques for healing and enhancing couples’ sexual experience. The final three areas are more advanced and will be presented as part of the 6 hour training on May 17<sup>th</sup> in San Diego, co-sponsored by the North County San Diego chapter and the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists.

### **Permission: Healing the Cultural Wounding**

As therapists we challenge the negative messages that are the source of our cultural wounding: wounding that nearly everyone has to some degree. By reframing the internal messages to include the right to enjoy sexuality and to make healthy personal choices, we make a difference in the lives of those who seek help.

Harville Hendrix stated that “all cultures are the governing of relationships.” That is especially true for the governing of sexual relationships. Our culture is bound by fear of sexuality in many ways. Therapists offer a safe therapeutic container which allows individuals to move beyond negative cultural conditioning into positive, healthy attitudes. This is the function of giving information and accurate, scientifically based education, aimed at rooting out the internalized shame and blame messages. Careful history taking is a crucial first step. What follows is shifting their perspective and reframing the goals; from specific acts such as intercourse and achieving orgasms to simple, pleasurable touch rather than genital performance. This is Level I of sexual expression: pleasuring in a relaxed, mutually enjoyable and even playful sexuality.

One of my favorite techniques for healing the cultural wounding is a handout inspired by Marty Klein, called “Busting the Top Five Myths about Sex” which is a way to dispel common misinformation.

### **Myth # 1 Couples who love each other should automatically have good sex**

There is an assumption that intimacy and sex always go together. I give couples the classic definition of intimacy: “The desire to know and be known by another,” which means intimacy is not synonymous with sex. I also talk about gender based traditional intimacy differences, summarized from cross cultural studies. Males typically learn side by side intimacy from early male bonding which is activity based. It leads to viewing sex as something one does to feel bonded, whereas females naturally seek face to face ways of bonding which leads to the need for connecting before any specific sexual touching.

### **Myth # 2 Other couples are having more and better sex than we are**

I explain the statistics that appear in the fourth paragraph of this article and especially the common phenomenon of the desire discrepancy stalemate which may effect over 75% of couples in long term relationships at some point in their lives. I also present the Pleasure Model.

### **Myth # 3 Sex should be natural and spontaneous (the way it used to be).**

This idea is one that many of us secretly return to, the sort of “gold standard” to which all of our sexual interactions are compared. The recent discoveries by Helen Fisher that reveal the difference in brain functioning in the early stages of love help dispel this myth, since it is a real killer for enjoying encounters with our long term partners. I offer my couples a clear definition of healthy sexuality:

- The ability to receive pleasure and feel good about your own erotic sensations
- The ability to give pleasure and enjoy your partner’s responses and pay attention to what the partner wants without losing self
- The openness to new experiences and sexual possibilities rather than rigid routines

To help couples let go of this myth, I teach them to see themselves as creating a seductive setting together as a team—no blame. No one is responsible to make it happen for the other.

### **Myth # 4 It’s easy to tell who has more desire and who has less desire in a relationship**

I teach couples the difference between arousal (physical signs) and desire (a complex interweaving of mind, body and emotions). Gender differences in hormones are important to understand. Appetite sex is driven by testosterone, 10 times more abundant in men, whereas connected sex is often, but not always, more desired by women. The intent of a sexual encounter may differ between partners, since the desire to simply have an orgasm is very different than the desire to make love. Either partner may be interested in a more “gourmet” variety of sex whereas the other may be more into a “basic food group” approach to sex. Communication skills are crucial to help couples let go of prejudices and actively listen to their partner’s desires without judgment or reactivity.

### Myth # 5 **Low desire indicates some sexual abuse/high desire indicates addiction**

Our culture is very quick to judge anyone else's sexual interests as outside of the norm, which can be very narrowly defined. Most of the time this myth is not true. However, if you uncover clear evidence of one of these problems, refer the couple to a certified and licensed professional in sex therapy. Two excellent sources of such therapists located in your area are the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists ([www.aasect.org](http://www.aasect.org)) and the Society of the Scientific Study of Sexuality ([www.sexscience.org](http://www.sexscience.org))

### **Trust: Securing the Attachment**

The second area of work is helping the couple develop a secure bond with a mature attachment. Here we are working towards healing the relational wounding from families of origin. Author and therapist Terry Real points out that all wounds are, in fact, relational. There have been controversies about which is more important for healthy sexuality in couples: increasing the security of the bond or developing more differentiation, and my position is that you need both. Part of the work is uncovering early attachment styles, still operating when the individual is under stress. For the sake of simplicity I've divided them into two types:

"I feel anxious that people won't love me enough," which is the **anxious attachment** where the partner experiences overwhelming flooding during arguments and "I feel crowded around people and often need space," which is the **avoidant attachment** style where the partner becomes disengaged and emotionally shuts down during conflict.

For both styles, we must teach healthy methods of anxiety regulation by helping the individual recognize and calm the underlying fear that occurs under duress. Keep in mind that the tendency to either pursue or distance in a relationship is an attempt to handle the anxiety in the only way the person instinctively knows.

The foundational technique I use to establish trust is Active Listening, which at Level I, simply creates a safe container in which they hear each other and develop empathy, an essential skill for mature attachment. Recently I have used another technique:

*When flooded, the couple is to stay in each other's presence rather than take the traditional "time out", but they are to stop talking and simply breathe together for two minutes. Then they are to open their eyes and say only positive things for another two minutes. Once they feel calm, they can go back to active listening. I make a point to help them understand that anything said in a neuroceptive state of fear is useless. In a secure bond, new neurons can grow.*

The foundational sexual technique that reduces anxiety is Sensate Focus, a non-demand, non sexual touch experience. Here, each is learning to feel good about both pure giving and pure receiving touch without raising unmanageable anxiety. This is why it is important that no sexual touching is allowed. A second level of learning with sensate focus is to develop the awareness of readiness by staying behind the arousal curve rather than pushing for more specific sexual activity. For avoidant women this is critical and for men with rapid ejaculation it is very important as well.

### **Self-empowerment: Ensuring Good Boundaries**

Couples must have clear individual boundaries and ways to establish healthy differentiation. Each must be both *protected* and *connected* to have a healthy sexual identity, much like Robert Frost's famous quote: "Good fences make good neighbors." Especially with regard to sexual relationships, people often forget that "your partner is not you" and that having empathy for your partner is not the same as fusion. Many individuals assume their partner should know what they want at a particular moment and that he or she should fulfill this need effortlessly.

Dan Siegel in [The Mindful Brain](#) offers us a definition of integration, an important concept for healthy sexuality: it is the linking of separate things that operate as a whole in a given moment. This is the essence of differentiation. Terry Real teaches a simple hand exercise that I've found useful.

*Have each person hold one hand around their middle (this is the internal boundary that maintains a sense of self) and the other is held out, straight armed and palm up towards you. Ask them to listen to the words you say and either hold their outstretched hand firm, indicating that they do not accept what you are saying or give a "come in" motion, when what you say is acceptable. Give them a demonstration and then pick something, perhaps a bit exaggerated, that you know they would find acceptable and then one that you know would be unacceptable. Then talk about how to apply this to boundaries in the relationship.*

Another self empowerment technique is one-way active listening, called the Inquirer/Expresser exercise by Ellen Bader and Peter Pearson. One partner will share their experience and the other will purely listen, reflecting what they hear without judgment and asking open ended questions such as "can you say more about this." Healthy differentiation is the ability to stay in the tension of differing, continuing to practice self calming while staying connected. It is the beginning of true self disclosure, learning to tell truth about self (# 5 in the schema) within the presence of the other.

I often assign a guided imagery exercise called My Secret Garden which allows a partner with particularly diffuse boundaries to develop what I call The Internal Guardian Self. This helps create the "protected" part of the equation. It is like the hand in the previous exercise that is holding onto ones' middle. [The text is available to download from my website [www.goddesstherapy.com](http://www.goddesstherapy.com)]

Another helpful technique is to have each partner separately list what they consider seductive and then share them at the next meeting. Since the impasse they bring to therapy is a "your way, my way" approach, finding the "our way" starts with brainstorming. When they are able to stay open and curious, they can create the integration with some coaching help from you. I tell them that this is not a formula but a starting point and the integration will emerge differently in any particular encounter.

### **Communion: Love without Fear (of abandonment or engulfment)**

This is the beginning of Level II, where couple sexuality is practiced as conscious loving. It is heart opening in a psychological as well as energetic sense. The couple is creating the container to become conduits of loving energy. These concepts are taught in the esoteric traditions of sacred sexuality. It requires partners to shift into loving the

essence or the spirit of their partner, not the outer layers of everyday, ordinary life. To begin with they learn to create sacred space together.

This exercise I call **Touching Hearts**

*After creating a safe and beautiful setting, the couple sits opposite each other in chairs, on cushions, or on the floor. For a few moments they may choose to simply breathe deeply and make eye contact, or to say a few words of appreciation for their partner. Once they feel completely relaxed, each partner places their right hand on the other's heart, and then places their left hand over their partners' hand, closing their eyes. With relaxed breathing, they are to focus on the warm feeling in the heart region. They are to imagine a warm sun, expanding to encompass their whole body and their partners' body, and the whole space they occupy. This will take a few moments. When they are ready, they will open their eyes and look into their partner's eyes and repeat the following words. First one partner will say the first phrase and then the other repeats the same phrase, until all three have been spoken.*

*"May you be safe,"*

*"May you be happy,"*

*"May your heart be filled with joy."*

*After breathing deeply for a few moments, the couple may move into holding each other.*

It is my intention to expand our awareness of the deeper options available to us around sexuality. The Pleasure Model allows couples to move into a way of honoring each other, experiencing anxiety free sensual pleasure in a life-long connection that renews the body, mind and spirit. When couples are able to enliven their relationships sexually, it is magic, and their sense of joy translates into happier families, positive community involvement and transformative social action.

**Bio:** Dr. Savage is an AASECT certified sex educator, MFT and licensed psychologist. She has specialized in sex therapy for over 25 years. She is the author of *Reclaiming Goddess Sexuality*, which presents the pleasure model of sexuality and blends ancient wisdom with current clinical knowledge. For more information about the May 17<sup>th</sup> 6 hour CEU training in San Diego, go to [www.ncsd-camft.org](http://www.ncsd-camft.org) or email Linda Savage at [lindasavagephd@goddesstherapy.com](mailto:lindasavagephd@goddesstherapy.com).

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