

Different desires in long term relationships

Guest: Holly Wood

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Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Holly Wood, a marriage and family therapist, EMDR trained trauma specialist and clinical sexologist specializing in trauma, sex and intimacy concerns. She's currently pursuing her PhD in human sexuality, focusing on sexual trauma and social justice.

Holly works with couples and individuals to sort things out, let go of what does not serve them and develop the necessary skills to achieve lifelong change to improve their quality of life.

Thank you so much for joining me Holly.

Holly Wood

Thank you so much for having me here today.

Meagen Gibson

So let's begin by just talking about what the common reasons are that couples seek out sex therapy?

Holly Wood

Sure. So as a sex therapist, I see folks for a whole gamut of things from sexual anxiety, trauma, erectile disorders, different things like that. But the most common reason that I see couples is for what we call sexual desire discrepancy.

And basically, that means where one partner wants sex more frequently than the other. And so a lot of times we'll have a couple come in and they will say, like, I'm at a level 10, I can have sex two times a day if my partner would allow me, but my partner is at a level 2. So how can we either, how can I dim mine down a little bit, or how can we get my level 2 to come up a little bit higher to my level 10?

Meagen Gibson

And what are the factors that are impacting people's sexual desires? And how do these mismatches happen?

Holly Wood

Sure. So a lot of times when people come in with this conception of there's a certain number of times that they should be having sex is because they've done a Google search and they're trying to look for what is normal.

So they see, okay, happy couples have sex X amount of times a week, according to some blog or something like that. And so when they see that they're not meeting that mark, they say, uh-oh something must be wrong here. Not realizing that lack of desire or desire, changes throughout the lifespan, where sometimes it's higher, sometimes lower, it can change.

So some different things that impact desire discrepancy is number one, a lack of understanding due to what we see in the media, what we see portrayed in movies, romantic comedies, and other things like that. As well as cultural factors, our friends talking, we hear our friends talking about how much sex they're having, so we think, uh-oh we're not having sex that much maybe there's something wrong here.

So that's a big part of it. I think it's also important to understand that sexual desire, there's different levels of sexual desire. So a lot of times I get folks who come in and go, oh, I have a low libido and my partner has high libido. How do I get mine up to meet my partner's or vice versa?

So I think it's important to understand that there are three types of sexual desire. So Emily Nagoski describes three in her book *Come as You Are*, one of which is spontaneous desire. So spontaneous desire, exactly what it sounds like, right. You get that spontaneous feeling. Some folks call it horniness. They say, I don't know the right word to say, so I'm just going to call it horny. Okay, well, that makes sense.

So some folks do experience what we call a spontaneous desire that instant, without stimulation, feeling of wanting to have sex. Unfortunately for women, men are the lucky ones who get to experience that more frequently. So research shows that close to 75% of men experience the spontaneous desire as well as 15% of women.

However, where does that leave everybody else? So there's two other types of desire that I think are really important to understand.

One of which is responsive. So responsive, again, is responding to a stimulus. A lot of times I talk to folks about rubbing the engine. What do we do to get you to a place of feeling desire? And especially for women, 30% of women experience what we call responsive desire we're responding to a physical or a mental stimulus that turns us on and gets us in the mood to say, okay, now I'm ready. I want to have sex.

And yet there's still some folks left out. So that other portion of desire is what we call contextual sexual desire. So where our desire is dependent on the context.

A lot of times when I meet folks, I ask about the sexiest times they've had together, and they'll say, oh, we went on this vacation. We were in Hawaii or Cabo and we were in this new place. It was just the two of us. The kids weren't around. And those are the context in which the really spicy stuff happened.

So for myself, I always go back to deadlines, diapers and dishes. And so most of us, when we think about sexual desire, I know for myself, for a lot of folks, if I have a work deadline, if I have a sink full of dirty dishes and my kids needs a diaper change, the last thing on my mind is going to be sex.

Meagen Gibson - [00:05:32]

Absolutely.

Holly Wood

So thinking about those contexts. So a lot of folks also experience what we call contextual sexual desire, whereas it depends on the context. And there are different things that can either damper our sexual desire, if your kids are in the next room or you're really full because you just had a really good meal, versus other things that can increase our level of desire, like being in a beautiful hotel alone. No kids, no stresses of regular work life when you're on vacation.

So one factor that contributes to desire discrepancy is people have different levels of desire. So if a couple is experiencing different levels of libido or sex drive, it could be because one person in the couple has more of a spontaneous desire, where they just feel it on a whim, whereas another person maybe needs some sort of stimulus to respond to or needs all the stars to align as far as contextual desire is concerned.

Meagen Gibson - [00:06:40]

I love that you just named all those very explicitly because in the background I'm thinking to myself, I'm like, I know I have spontaneous desire, but then my, and responsiveness as well. But then the context chips away at that all day long. And I can't be the only person watching this that feels the same way.

So even if you're firing at all cylinders, for lack of a better analogy, life just tends to be a taxing. And my partner loves to say that I am at my most desiring at 2pm, which is not a great time. And then the entire evening transpires, and by the time we're finally alone and the opportunity presents itself, I'm like, you are the last person I need right now. Like, please do not come at me.

So these are some of the simple desire discrepancies that we're talking about, on the simplest level. There can also just be, as you said, like actual drive and libido mismatching. And if you could expand a little bit on that. Is that the spontaneous and responsive and contextual play into libido as well? Or is that more of a biological and physical?

Holly Wood

Libido is more of a medicalized term. So when I look at libido like physiological arousal, I think about other factors that play a role. For example, I mostly, as a clinician, get folks who are experiencing what they present to me with is, I have low libido. And this is somebody coming to me off the street who's coming to me as an expert, as a sex therapist, basically self diagnosing. Well, I don't want to have sex, so it must be that I have low libido. That could be the case.

There are physiological and biological factors that impact low libido, such as medications, different types of antidepressants, especially. But I think it's also to really take a look at those three different types of desire and see is it really a biological concern, or is it the fact that my kids are in the room next door? And I'm also dealing with the stress that is a global pandemic? There's other stressors outside of the physiological.

The other thing might be the ability to manage stress in response to stressors. So certain things like the kids are probably always going to be there, at least until they're 18 and sometimes passed that, and that's okay. But they're a constant stressor. They also provide lots of other great things in our lives, but as far as sex is concerned, they're a block.

I also work with clients, okay, how are you managing your response to certain stressors that are going to be there continuously? They're always going to be kids in your house, or there are going to be kids in your house for a long period of time. How do you work around that? How do you still have a close, loving, sexually connected relationship with your spouse? Despite that you both have children.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Because you can't just wait it out. We can't wait 25 years till the youngest one's out the house.

Holly Wood

Exactly.

Some other things I think about when it comes to desire discrepancy, in addition to some of the physiological factors, I always check what kind of medications are people on, what types of stress

they're experiencing, external factors. I think about chronic negative interaction patterns between those involved in a couple.

So, in a relationship context, every couple experiences conflict across the board. Nearly every couple is going to experience that. But what makes a difference is how folks recover from conflict. So I'm a firm believer that sex begins way before the two of you, or more, enter the bedroom. And so if we are fighting all day long, and then at the end of the day we're expected to have sex with our partner, that's going to bleed into things.

So sometimes it goes back, if a couple presents to me with, we have mismatched desire and I found out, well, they're also not agreeing on parenting styles, or also not agreeing on household division of labor. Those are some other things that need to be addressed so that way you two can better communicate and create more positive interactions. So that way this is somebody that, at the end of the day, you both want to connect with on a sexually intimate level.

Meagen Gibson - [00:11:26]

And as you're talking, the thing that I keep, I actually just wrote it down, because the thing that keeps coming up when we're talking about managing stress, we're talking about conflict and communication is safety. And sex is such an intimate, vulnerable, or can be a vulnerable, experience and if your fundamental sense of your safety is not met or is not being secure, then that's going to put up blocks in your body, in your heart, in your mind, right?

Holly Wood

Right. And it starts with not just physical safety, but like, emotional safety, if you don't feel like you can express yourself emotionally to your partner in a way that feels safe, how are you then going to be able to translate to a space like sex, which is very vulnerable? How are you going to feel safe both emotionally and physically, intellectually, in a sexual space if you guys can't do that outside the bedroom?

And again, safety, I think about attachment bonds, when you interact with somebody sexually, it increases those attachment factors based on hormones, based on all those feel good hormones that cause us to attach, like oxytocin and vasopressin. So if you don't feel like you can safely do that outside of the bedroom, how are you going to be able to do that within the bedroom?

Meagen Gibson

And actually, I've been listening to a podcast lately, and they had a sex episode, and the women that were talking were talking about how they make their livings' talking. And they talk all the time, and they're constantly expressing themselves and that they've discovered that when they're in bed with their partner that they are completely incapable of any talking at all, whatsoever. They can't say what they don't want, they can't say what they do want, they can't express pleasure, pain, like, impossible.

So there can be such a disconnect when it comes to that intimate act and being able to say what you want. So I imagine when it comes to something like a desire discrepancy, that act of talking it out and actually bringing it to your partner often, I'm sure when you see couples that all they're able to say is that we have a problem. And that they don't know all these things that you just named, and they don't even know how to have the conversations to lead to more intimacy.

Holly Wood

Right. And so communication is such a big factor across different areas of relationships, but in sex as well. And when we talk about communicating sexually, again, sex can be a taboo topic. It's something that's especially vulnerable. And so people can find it difficult to even talk about sex and talk about those body parts.

So what I found a lot of times in therapy is that the most helpful thing is that they dedicate an hour or 90 minutes a week to talk about stuff that's hard to talk about.

And so, in doing so, you're able to create that bond, increase safety, so that eventually you get to a point of being able to do the act. But if you're wanting to do it without being able to talk about it, there's a disconnect there.

And a lot of times I'll talk to folks and they'll feel uncomfortable about talking about certain things, and I'm like, well, if you're adult enough to do it, why aren't you adult enough to talk about it? It seems so simple. But also, it's understandable that it's a difficult thing to talk about something we don't go around talking about with our friends maybe as much as we could or in other social spaces because it can still be seen as quite taboo.

But being able to be assertive about things that you notice in the bedroom that could be done differently are also ways to increase connectedness that you have with your partner.

Meagen Gibson - [00:15:17]

Absolutely. And going back to just what we've all had the shared experience of in different ways, but we've all had this pandemic shared experience. There's massive social issues and distress happening. And I know it's not down straight gender or sex lines that this happens for females more than men, this is just as prevalent, I know for a portion of men, but it feels like women in general, I'm overgeneralizing, need that talking connection and need to have that verbal intimacy before we can disengage our brains and get into bed intimately with their partner or wherever it happens to happen.

Holly Wood

And I think what you're saying is somewhat of a generalization, but also this research's got to be true. When you think about the socialization of women, women are socialized to be the carers and to be the caretakers of social interactions. Like when you think about it's time to plan the holiday meal for that year. Generally, it's in heterosexual relationships, we're talking about heterosexually, in those types of relationships it's the woman identified partner who takes it upon herself or is socially given the role to plan those things and to be the talker. So that definitely plays a role.

I think it's also, a lot of times what I'll get is people want to say something to their partner and they don't know how to say it without hurting their partners feelings, hurting their partners ego. Because on the flip side, too, if we're talking, for example, we said heterosexual couples, I think men tend to be socialized to be the person who provides the pleasure. People talk about, is he doing it right? Is he doing X Y Z right? There's all different euphemisms we have for is the male partner able to please you? And that's a lot of pressure.

Meagen Gibson

It is a lot of pressure. Statistically speaking of research, and just circling back to what you said earlier about how we've been socialized to think about sex and we've been socialized to think about sex as a penis in a vagina. To be just explicitly clear. And that's such an incredibly narrow and limited scope of what actually sex is and what's possible for what sex is.

And so to put the pressure on the penis, in this example, to satisfy someone when that's not how the majority, statistically, of women are able to reach climax. That's a lot. That's like a set up for disaster it feels like.

Holly Wood - [00:18:03]

And so I always encourage everyone to be in control of their own orgasm. There's also something really powerful about that. Like, why are you letting somebody else be in control of your orgasm? You take control of your orgasm. Figure out what you like on your own. Explore, play around, male, female body it doesn't matter. Non-binary it doesn't matter. But figure out what you like individually, so that way you get to a place to be able to share that with your partner.

And again, a lot of times just the communication with your partner's the hardest part because we're scared of making someone feel bad or hurting somebody's ego, something like that.

But I see all these opportunities for communication sexually very similar to a lot of other issues that happen in relationships, whereas these are growth opportunities.

Again, it's not about having conflict, it's about how you resolve conflict and how you confront a problem. I think a lot of folks think confrontation is a bad word, but really it means to face a problem head on.

And so I encourage people to think about if something is happening sexually, that is really important that they want to share with their partner, to think about a few things. Thinking about, is what I'm saying honest? Is what I'm saying kind? And is what I'm saying going to be helpful for the relationship? And to turn it on themselves. People are afraid of saying, oh, you do this thing that doesn't make me feel great because we don't want to hurt the other person. But if we can turn it on ourselves and say, you know what? I feel uncomfortable when this happens, can we try it like this? It kind of turns it on yourself.

And I think the other thing I always encourage people to do is to speak from the heart, because at the end of the day, if you are willing to have such a difficult conversation with somebody, that means to me that this is something really important to you, and you want to, as uncomfortable as it is, go through this conversation and efforts to make a relationship with this partner stronger and closer. And so approaching from that angle, as opposed to not wanting to hurt someone's feelings, or actually some folks, intentionally will say you do X Y and Z wrong. But from a place of I feel this. This is really important to me, and I want us to get better at it. How can we do it differently? Is a really good place to start.

Meagen Gibson

And it's such a great context, too, because as of anything else, whether it be how you deal with finances or how you establish rules for your children and how you raise them, or how you're going to navigate your careers, especially if you're a dual career couple. It's like we're on the same team, and we want the same thing, which is for both of us to have a satisfying, fulfilling life in any of those areas, for us to create a sense of calm and connection in our home.

And so this is just another one of the things that we're going to talk about in order to do that, and having those tough conversations to get to the other side, but having established we're both on the same team. Ultimately we both want the same thing, which is for one another to be happy and fulfilled. Right?

Holly Wood

Right. And it makes me think about communication styles. I always say just to speak assertively, but what does assertive even mean? And when I think of communication styles, I think about whose needs are being met. And when you're speaking assertively. Whereas passive aggressive, passive you're honoring the other person, aggressive, you're honoring just yourself. When you're being assertive you're honoring both people's needs.

And so I love how you said that we're in this as a team. Look, I understand that you like this. I kind of like this, I would like to try this. How can we meet in the middle? So that way both people's sexual needs are being met.

And bring it back to the desire discrepancy, an example might be, I get that you want to have sex every day, right. For myself, I can't do that when again, I have deadlines, dirty dishes, and my baby needs a diaper change, but I want to be closer to you. Are there ways we can work through this? Can you help more with the dishes? And then I'd probably be more inclined to have sex more frequently, this is just an example, and if that works for you, great, and if not there might be other ways to honor both people's needs.

Meagen Gibson - [00:22:31]

Absolutely.

So I want to talk definitely about how sexual needs, desires change over the course of a lifetime, because it's definitely not something that people talk about. We all know about the beginning stages and the fiery desire and intimacy that helps people fall in love in the first place. And then the first years, and everybody's familiar with the rough spots that can happen when you bring a baby home. But nobody talks about the rest of your life. And so many things happen throughout the course of a life that can affect your desire and the desire that you have for and with your partner.

Holly Wood

Right. So just thinking as far as the life stages, what you said is very true. A lot of times couples come in and they say, well, at the beginning, we were having sex on the counter tops, doing it everywhere all the time, and it was so hot and fiery. And, right, because it's a new situation you two are, the sparks are flying. You two are getting to know each other, doing exciting things, exploring things together for the first time, which makes sense.

So if you think about how sex changes throughout the life span, on top of other factors that happen throughout the lifespan, it becomes more clear, well, no wonder things aren't the same in your late 40s, early 50s that they were in your early 20s.

So I think it's really important also that folks know that that change is normal and that there are ways to work with it.

So research shows most folks are serial monogamous, where we're in long-term relationship followed by long-term relationship. For those of us who want, and are lucky enough, we're in one relationship for a very long time. But for the most part, we're what we consider a serial monogamous.

And so if you look at some research by Fisher in particular, you can see that there's generally three stages of falling in love and then eventually parting ways until you're done with one relationship to move on to the next monogamous relationship.

And so, the first relationship is called being in love. And so that relationship is characterized by that high energy, that emotion, that passion and a little bit of stress because it's something new and we want to make sure we're doing things right.

Whereas the next stage, the next stage only lasts, like, what, six months? Right?

Meagen Gibson

Right.

Holly Wood - [00:25:02]

So then we go to the next stage, which is passionate love. So we still have that high passion, but our stress is minimized a little bit going back to the biological basis of now we've known this person for six plus months. We've had those experiences to build attachment. We've built closeness through release of those biological hormones, like oxytocin, vasopressin, all those good feeling hormones that make us feel connected and safe with somebody.

And then we moved to stage three of a relationship, which we call companionate love. And so a lot of times I'll get folks who've been married for 20 years and they've said, we're like roommates now. Or like friends. I like him, we're friends, but we're not, it's not as fiery as it used to be.

And so this is because, again, those hormones have had more time to sink in place for safety. Something that happens at the beginning it's a little risky, which can cause an increase in the feelings of eroticism because it's like, oh, something new. It's exciting. It's risky. Whereas when we feel really close and safe with somebody, we know that they're not going to go anywhere. We feel secure in the relationship that we have. We've had a long period of time for those good feeling hormones to set in and make us feel securely attached.

So these are the three main stages that happen in relationships, which makes sense when you think about sex. So what happens when you go from stage one, stage two to stage three?

Generally, when we're moving from being in love to the passionate love, so when we first start to really say, okay, we're a couple now, this is it, we're committed to each other. And then we go to companionate love, a lot of times in couples, like you said, we focus on raising families. We focus on financial stability, we focus on emotional stability, we're making sure that our kids are going off to school and meeting their development milestones, that they're well taken care of. But then that excitement kind of tapers down. So how do we maintain passion in domesticity?

So what we do is, I think the first part is naming these things, right. That it's natural. Biologically, you're biologically geared to go through these changes. So it is normal in every sense of the word normal. I try to stay away from normal and tell folks that normal is a setting on the washing machine. But as far as, realistically, realistically, your body is biologically geared...

Meagen Gibson

It's common, it's typical right?

Holly Wood

Typical is the word, exactly. Typical for that to happen.

So I think a lot of times folks find comfort in realizing that this is a typical thing. We all experience this throughout the lifespan, we all go through those stages. So then once we're in the space of companionate love and we're in a more domestic environment how do we create passion?

Part of it is to prioritize the time that you have together relationally. So when we're in that companionate love stage, where a lot of times we're focused on getting the kids to school on time, making sure everybody's fed and putting money into our 401k. Which are all very important things, but it leaves things like, what were happening in the beginning stages, that dating, that passion, that prioritization.

Meagen Gibson

Anticipation and excitement, all those things.

Holly Wood - [00:28:44]

So part of it is to plan those things. I know it might seem silly to some folks to plan those things. I'll also say if you have a concert, going back to when we could go to concerts.

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say it's gotten so much more challenging now.

Holly Wood

Right.

Meagen Gibson

It's so hard to plan a date when you can't go anywhere and nothing feels safe.

Holly Wood

Exactly. But it's a prioritization. So even if you think about those times when we were young and broke, like financially you couldn't do things.

Meagen Gibson

Had to be more creative.

Holly Wood

Exactly, you had to be more creative. It shows that you prioritize the relationship.

So sometimes it might be something that's less expensive, also more safe in the midst of a global pandemic, like a picnic on the balcony of your own home. But it shows that you're prioritizing those things. I said concerts because it'd be like some people are versed to scheduling sex or date nights, but if you're planning, if you bought tickets to a concert and the concert is not until six months away, when the concert comes it does it make it any less exciting that you bought a ticket six months ago?

Meagen Gibson

Right.

Holly Wood

Not really. But it's about prioritizing the relationship.

So some of it might need to bring awareness or consideration and creation of opportunities to where you can get away from the domestic tedium and into a place of eroticism. Planning when the kids are going to be away at summer camp or this is happening, how can we really utilize this moment that we have together to prioritize our time in our relationship?

Aside from scheduling sex, couples can engage in novel activities outside of the bedroom that remind you of those exciting times.

Again, you think about the beginning stages and trying new restaurants together or trying new activities together. And they're new because, even if you've done them before, you haven't done them with this person before. So it goes to your notion of creativity. Finding things outside of the bedroom to build excitement and increase that closeness and anticipatory excitement for things

within the bedroom, like trying new restaurants, taking romantic trips, again just prioritizing the relationship itself.

And doing those things, you go back to the biological basis of raising that oxytocin, raising those dopamine levels, all those things that are associated with security, rewards and excitement, which again, play into why sex was so good in the beginning.

Meagen Gibson - [00:31:28]

Right. And as you were talking, I was thinking about, even the very, very tiny, simplest things, because it's been 18 months of us all trying to carve out our own time and things. And my kids have learned, and my kids are middle school age, and they've learned that after a certain hour, unless it's urgent, like an emergency, that they just don't bother us. We're like this is our time, and they're not going to catch us in an intimate moment or anything. But it's more of like, this is our time together without you guys.

And to them, it just looks like we're watching TV, but we're rubbing each other's feet, or we're talking about our day or doing all of these connective activities that are just important to us. Because when we're all home 24 hours a day for 900 days in a row, it's hard to create, we're all a mesh. We're all in each other's space. So it's so hard to create that.

So that's been our thing, it's just been like after 9pm we don't care if you go to sleep, but we're not on the clock anymore. We punch out. This is our time. And it's easier to do once your children are a little bit older, obviously, just kind of preserving that.

Holly Wood

Yeah. And I think that's so important. I think a lot of people get, especially moms, they'll feel guilty for not being present for their kid for a certain period of time. But I think about eventually, if you've done your job right, that eventually the kids are going to leave the nest and then you're back at home with just your spouse.

Like, doing little things like that is modeling to your child about how to have an appropriate adult relationship beyond having kids.

My stepdaughter is 18, so she's a little bit older than yours, but there's still times where I say, hey, do you mind if I take your dad out on a date tonight? Because I want to prioritize the time that we have, but also show respect for my stepdaughter. And so there are ways to do those things. And for me that's showing her and modeling to her that my relationship with her dad is very important, but also my relationship to her is important and I want to honor that, too. And for some reason, she needed me tonight, we can maybe figure out something else, but also honoring the relationship I have with her father.

So I think that's really, really important that I love hearing how you do that with your kids.

Meagen Gibson

And we kind of talked about chemically what's going on but there's also just, and beyond the connective and beginning hormones of relationship, there's also literally just hormone issues. Like estrogen and progesterone and testosterone and all of the changes that women and men go through as they age. Not to mention the body changes that we go through from giving birth and etc. It's a lot. And of course, there's going to be periods of change.

And I love to tell people when my son was really young, he had colic and it was the first time that I was very aware of my tendency to catastrophize in forever stuff. This is my life forever now. I'm doomed to the purgatory of a screaming infant.

So it's easy for us to, when we're encountering difficulty because of the stress load, is to just be like, oh, we're never having sex again, or we're never going to get that intimacy back or the fire is gone or that thing is gone. I just love to encourage people to just be like, no, this is now, and we're going to actively work to get it back, or we're going to address some of those hormonal issues that we might be going through or experiencing. We're going to make sure our bodies are being taken care of, etc.

Holly Wood - [00:35:17]

Right. It makes me think about this, I hate the name, but it's called the *Good-Enough Sex model*, and I think there's a lot of value to it. The name sounds scary, but I think there's a lot of value to it and normalizing that things are different. You mentioned the hormone changes, but there's also life stuff that happens, whether it's because you are pregnant or you just had a child or God forbid, you lose a family member or you're dealing with financial stress because one of you lost a job. There are all these different environmental factors that play a role in our experience of sexual intimacy.

And so I encourage folks to think about, okay, well, you're not 20 years old with not a lot of responsibility and no kids around, so there's a difference. But what is good enough for you now? What would be reasonable for you now with children in the home and dealing with the stress that you have? What is good for now?

So I think a lot of times we look to this pedestal of what we had when we were in those states of less stress and more excitement, but things change. And so I think normalizing that plays a huge role in people feeling uncomfortable with changes in sex throughout their lifespan.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Looking at your life and your intimacy as kind of like seasons. It's like, okay, so this is the way we're riding now.

I remember, probably two or three years ago, the moment, I remember the day, I remember what the light was like outside, I remember the temperature when I realized that my sons were not like, I didn't have to watch them in my yard anymore. They weren't going to dart into the street anymore. They were actually autonomously, safe, objectively, and a load of stress that lifted from my person of, and I have sons, and this is not a male or female thing but my experience is that boys are actively trying to end their lives constantly, over and over again, just through their experience and exploration of the world. And so just the stress that lifted. And I looked at my partner, I said, oh, my gosh, we're in a different season now. We've arrived. We can let go of some of this.

Holly Wood

And so I think about again, how can you prioritize yourself as a couple, whatever season you're in?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Absolutely.

So, how do couples fix these desire discrepancies? I know we've talked a little bit about it, but let's say somebody is watching this video, and they've acknowledged it to themselves, maybe while they're watching this, but they're at the beginning stages of trying to talk through it with their partner. What would you recommend as for steps? And then what do you see as their plan?

Holly Wood

Sure. I think it's a big question, but the short answer is understanding. Right. So some of that we've talked about understanding that there is no normal, that there are a lot of factors that influence desire. And then it's like this has changed throughout your lifespan. Understanding that changes in the lifespan are rooted in biology. And so that there is that factor as well. It's not necessarily something

about you that is problematic, but it's that your body is reacting in the way that it's supposed to do biologically.

And the other part is understanding your partner. So I always say my therapeutic remedy is to generate compassion for each partner's position. So, for example, the low desire partner might feel guilty for not engaging in sex as much as the higher desire partner might. And then the higher desire partner might feel unwanted because their partner isn't willing to engage as often or doesn't want to connect in that way as often. But once you are able to address those things and effectively communicate about what's going on, a lot of times, you'll see that that's not the case.

For example, the higher desire partner who feels not wanted might not see, oh, wow, well, they've also been doing X, Y, and Z or they're really stressed right now, and it has nothing to do with me. Being able to communicate about those things and where you're at and then understand from your partner is crucial. That is the most important thing. So having these difficult conversations.

And I go back to the ways that we can communicate to our partners about these things. For a lot of folks, communicating about sex as the hardest part. So being comfortable with the uncomfortable, using things like I statements, I feel X, Y and Z. I'm the higher desire partner, I feel like you don't want me because X, Y and Z happens. What can we do? That turns it on you as opposed to you're not having sex with me there's something wrong.

Meagen Gibson - [00:40:13]

Questioning your own stories. My story about the fact that we're not having sex is this. And when you were talking what occurred to me is that in both of the examples that you gave where one partner has large desire, and the other one doesn't, is that they might have in common a feeling of shame. They both might feel ashamed. I feel ashamed because I don't want to, the other partner feels ashamed because of the level of their desire, because now they feel like they're unwanted. And so you both have the same feeling for different reasons and how connecting and unifying it might feel to discover, like, oh, wait, we're both feeling the same. Let's figure out how we can move through that.

Holly Wood

And we counteract shame by living in our truth and being authentic with what's coming up. And so who better to do that with than your partner?

So, again, be inquisitive, ask questions, don't assume. Use those I statements. I tell folks to be honest, be gentle, be empathetic and speak from the heart. Because, again, I think if you're at the point where you want to have such a difficult conversation, and for everyone who's tuning into the conference today that tells me that their relationships are probably really important in their lives and they want to work on those.

And so coming from that place of, this is important to me. I know it's really hard to talk about, but I want us to get better at this. How can we work together collaboratively so that both of our needs are met?

I mean, it lets your partner know that you're willing to move through the discomfort, you're willing to be vulnerable, and that the motivation is because you want our relationship to be better.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Same team, right?

Holly Wood

Yes.

Meagen Gibson - [00:42:08]

Well, thank you so much for being with us today. If people want to hear more about you and your work, where can they find you?

Holly Wood

So they can find me at hollywoodmft.com

They can also find me at Instagram on [@thehollywoodsexologist](https://www.instagram.com/thehollywoodsexologist). Those are probably the best ways to contact me for therapy services or anything else.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thanks so much for being with us today.

Holly Wood

No problem. Thank you so much for having me.