Real Sex for Couples

The New Way of Thinking

Why are so many people unhappy with their sex lives? Does it seem to you that nearly everyone else has great sex compared to you? Is anyone really satisfied or is sexual satisfaction such a moving target it seems unattainable? Does anyone over 30 have great sex? And why is sex so important? Too often people chase great sex in the wrong directions and listen to the wrong sources. Great sex is not magically found in a pill, although sometimes chemistry can help. Great sex is not primarily found by making yourself “beautiful” or “handsome,” although that can help too. Great sex is not automatic or found by “fortune.”

Mark Twain’s remark many years ago seems very true today—especially about sex: “The problem isn’t that people know too little, but that people know too much that just ain’t so.” Do you “know too much that just ain’t so?” Test yourself about what you “know” about quality sex by completing the following quiz:

Quiz: What You Know About Quality Sex
to your overall enjoyment and happiness with life regardless of age. Developing positive attitudes, psychosexual skills, and emotional expressiveness is important, and varies for each couple. In a real way, molding satisfying couple sexual intimacy is a special “do-it-yourself” project that brings challenges and joys at every age and stage of your relationship.

BUILD ON WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE FOR LIFELONG SEXUAL SATISFACTION

Whether you are in your 20s, 40s, or 60s, the ten sexual growth features presented in Chapter 2 will affirm what is already healthy in your relationship and describe how to ensure optimal quality sex in the future. This includes:

- Cooperating with your partner as an “intimate team” to provide a healthy climate for quality sex;
- Optimizing your comfort and confidence with sex;
- Feeling proud of your sexual self and sexual relationship;
- Understanding your body’s need for relaxation to enhance pleasure;
- Balancing pleasure with sexual function;
- Accepting variable, flexible sexual desire and experiences;
- Ensuring comfort and confidence by realizing that sex has multiple purposes and arousal styles;
- Affirming that sex can fit into and enhance your life with playfulness and special feelings.

Understanding these features inoculates you against sexual dysfunction and other sexual problems.

HEALTHY THINKING ABOUT SEX

Of course, we want fantastic, incredible, “great” sex all the time, spontaneously and everywhere—sex that just blows your mind! We
delirious. And we want to instantly escape the humdrum pace of everyday life, feel intensely connected to that moment of ecstasy. This makes for a great sex fantasy but not real-life quality sex.

The fantasy approach to sex leads to thoughts such as:

- I must be missing out because I don’t have great sex like I see in movies. What’s wrong?
- My sex life is routine, even mediocre at times; it’s second-rate, pretty much the same all the time, uninspiring, dull.
- I feel that everybody else has much better sex than I.
- Don’t we love each other anymore?

Such thoughts are common. Accept that we all have these or a variety of other satisfaction-sapping ponderings. Our innovative way of regarding sex will help you develop healthier, realistic sexual thinking that will enhance your pleasure and satisfaction. Pursuit of “perfect sex” is natural, like the surfer who seeks the perfect wave. Yet we would do well to appreciate that riding the perfect wave is relative to riding and appreciating the ordinary waves. Without the variation, even the “perfect” wave is boring. Sex is enhanced by appreciating its healthy variability. Researchers (Kleinplatz, Menard, Paradis, Campbell, Dalgleish, Segovia, & Davis, 2005) have learned from older couples that optimal, exceptional sex experiences and lackluster ones exist in the same relationship. Mature couples can find great pleasure, solace, eroticism and intimacy with their bodies.

SEEKING QUALITY COUPLE SEX
Our new way of thinking about and approaching quality couple sex will seem peculiar at first, but read on. With our ten guidelines for sexual growth, you will develop an enduring quality of erotic sex that is gratifying, sustaining, and self- and partner-satisfying. We call this approach to real-couple sex, the “Good-Enough Sex” (GES) model, which seeks optimal sexual experiences based on a realistic appreciation that variations over time are healthy and necessary. Otherwise we set ourselves up for disappointment and disillusionment.

GOOD-ENOUGH SEX? YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

Are you thinking, “Good Enough Sex? Get out of here! You’ve gotta be joking!” We can imagine what your first reaction is since we hear it often—the incredulity of settling for sex that is “mediocre,” “boring,” “get-by,” “mechanical,” and other lackluster notions. But not so; hear us out.

This “good-enough” concept emerges from a long tradition in psychology (e.g., Winnicott, 1964), which explains that concepts of happiness, satisfaction, and contentment are built on what Dr. Paul Dormont (2009) calls “relative nirvana”—the happiness of striving for growth blended with acceptance of real-life limitations, imperfections, and the diversity of human experience.

The GES we’re talking about is realistically great sex that serves a number of purposes in your life—pleasure, tension release, self-esteem, emotional intimacy, and/or reproduction. We’re talking real people with real lives with real responsibilities and pressures, real kids, and demanding jobs. We’re talking real sex that fits into real life and, reciprocally, real life that fits into your sex life with enduring desire and satisfaction.

The GES approach is based on the nearly 70 years of professional sex therapy, serious relationship and sex research, and the clinical experience of seasoned marital and sex therapists. We developed the GES model as a positive set of principles for long-term, committed couples who experience sex dysfunction. This model guides therapists in their creative design of sex therapy interventions to help distressed couples and facilitates couple reflection on the meaning and value of their sexual relationship. We soon discovered that these positive principles have wide appeal and are
relevant to healthy couples who want to enhance intimacy and sexuality.

The GES approach is consistent with and supported by recent research advances in the area of well-being known as “Positive Psychology” (e.g., Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006; Lent, 2004). The GES model emphasizes how positive dimensions of couple sexuality can promote aspects of happiness (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005). This research corroborates that when you are (1) realistic and genuine; and (2) constructive and affirmative about life’s experiences, including sex, you are happier. This research proposes that we have a lot to say about our own happiness. Do you think your happiness is in your power? A choice you make? We do, and we want you and your partner to be happy and satisfied with your relationship, including sex.

In the GES model, self-understanding and sexual meaning are crucial. Sex is not viewed as an isolated fragment of your life; rather, it is integrated into your individual and couple daily life, as daily life is integrated into your sex life. Your daily life provides the opportunity to enrich sexual interactions in a subtle yet distinctively personalized way.

KEEP PERSPECTIVE

Do not get hijacked by words that over-promise and set up impossible and self-defeating expectations for sex. Don’t fall victim to marketing hype like “orgasms that last for hours” or “ecstasy every time.” To think you can have perfect sex every time in any circumstances is pure hype. No one has a perfect sex life. Hype sets you up for self-defeating performance demands and disappointment. Get real! Instead think: really good sex, enduring desire, realistically satisfying, high-quality, and genuine couple sex—sex that provides a positive energy and that most days gives support to your daily life. Sex provides a buffet of experiences: at times, sex is enthusiastic, cheerful, erotic, gratifying and at other times uninspiring.

Real sex can be experienced as pleasing, eager, impulsive, affectionate, tender, passionate, mechanical, intimate, warm, reassuring, distracted, joyful, enchanting, amusing, gleeful, lackluster, fulfilling, comforting, delightful, thrilling, affirming, contented, harmonious, playful. “Great” sex, especially in a committed relationship, is uneven and variable. What the best research suggests is that regular frequency and variable, flexible couple sex that is fully integrated into your real life is the best quality, most satisfying, wonderful sex for you as a couple.

IS GES RIGHT FOR YOU?

We’ll help you to think in a sexually healthy manner throughout the stages and adaptations in your life. We’ll show you how to act in a sexually healthy way to build a lasting and satisfying couple sexual bond. We’ll guide you to feel sexually satisfied, not in a fantasy world but in real life.

We don’t want to sound like we’re dispensing more hype, but judge for yourself whether our GES approach for enduring desire and sexual satisfaction is right for you. Consider what we’ve learned from our many years of combined experience as relationship and sex therapists, researchers, teachers, and group facilitators. By embracing the ideas laid out in our book, you have little to lose and a lifetime of solid sexual satisfaction to gain.

We explore how real couple sex works and how to have smile-on-your-face sex that is honest and wonderfully satisfying. We’ll explain how great sex actually grows and matures, and how to
fashion an “intimate team” with your partner to integrate sexual pleasure and security into your real lives. Fast-moving, intense, demanding lives are not barriers to healthy sex, but rather situations in which you can find exquisite pleasures, joys, affirmation, acceptance, fun—even when distracted and exhausted from the responsibilities of contemporary living.

WE OFFER YOU REALISTIC CONFIDENCE
Our new model of exceptional sexual quality is relevant for women, men, and couples, whether married or in a serious relationship. Age is irrelevant. We write about sexuality for real-life couples, not for the perfect, beautiful, stereotyped couples who are portrayed in movies and music videos. Throughout this book, we will confront “sexual hype” that supposedly liberates you but instead intimidates you and makes sex a performance test in which you have to prove something to your partner or to yourself.

This book aims not to intimidate you but to empower you as individuals and as a couple. The cultural hype about sex creates dysfunction, dissatisfaction, and disillusionment. For example, R-rated movies show young, beautiful couples either in a new relationship or an extra-marital affair. They are in a highly desirous state before any touching begins. Arousal is extremely rapid and high, and everyone is multi-orgasmic. Great fantasy and entertainment, but exactly the wrong model for real-life couples. We tell our sex therapy couples that if you have Hollywood-type sex once a month you are doing better than 95% of the population.

The core of quality couple sexuality is a biopsychosocial (body, mind, relationship), multidimensional (thoughts, feelings, behaviors), comprehensive (multiple perspectives) understanding of the roles, functions, and meanings of couple sexuality, as well as the value of vital passion, intercourse, and orgasm. The new mantra for healthy, lifelong couple sexuality is desire, pleasure, eroticism, and satisfaction as an intimate team.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TO DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN QUALITY COUPLE SEX
Your role is to actively and calmly engage in setting personally relevant goals and work as an intimate team to promote lifelong quality couple sexuality. First, you need to realize that long-term satisfying sex is built and vitalized in a healthy cooperative relationship, what we call your “intimate team.” Second, you need to know that sex is not simple or automatic—unless maybe for procreation. Quality sex and satisfaction are growth processes. We develop physical, psychological, and relationship satisfaction gradually and progressively. If you are a younger person, look ahead with confidence to enjoying integrated sexual pleasures and satisfaction in your future. With dedication, sex can become qualitatively better and lasting. Research studies report the best quality sex occurs in couples who have been in a committed relationship for 15 years or longer (Laumann et al., 1994). Yes, hard to believe, but accurate. And an example of how prevailing hype and misinformation that sex is best among young couples give us misdirected, even toxic, advice.

BASIC INGREDIENTS OF SEXUAL SATISFACTION
In the chapters that follow, we explain the ten GES growth goals for lifelong sexual satisfaction. This approach to better understanding the dimensions of quality couple sex is known professionally as an “integrative” approach (see Figure 1.1). This means that for thorough understanding, you continuously blend the five dimensions of yourselves and your relationship. You appreciate (1) that sex is a lifelong growth process “developmental,” (2) the importance of your body (“biological”), (3) your thoughts, behaviors, and feelings (“psychological”), (4) your interactions (“social/relational”), and (5) the skills involved for sexual satisfaction (“psychosexual”).
ENDURING DESIRE

This integrative understanding guides you to appreciate the complexity of sexual desire and satisfaction. Too many believe that over the lifecycle, sexual desire and satisfaction are diminished. The reality is that sexuality becomes more integrated for healthy couples.

When younger couples believe that desire for and quality of sex will inevitably decline, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This results from viewing sex as one-dimensional, as being merely physical and that sex inevitably declines after we reach our physical peak (ages 18–25). This notion itself is a trap. Realize that while your body may developmentally mellow, your psychological and relational desires and joys mature and deepen. Quality sex is physical but, more significant, it is also psychological and interpersonal. Adult couples do appreciate this, but are reserved. They don’t get on TV and proclaim, “We have wonderful experiences of sex; it is better than ever.” Enduring Desire is your guide to sexual satisfaction throughout your relationship. Appreciate that your sexuality will develop and ripen when you commit to the features of our GES approach.

THE GES APPROACH: COGNITIVE, BEHAVIORAL, EMOTIONAL, AND COUPLE FEATURES

Features that characterize the GES model include cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and relational factors that promote couple cohesion, cooperation, and intimacy. Examples of cognitive dimensions include a positive attitude toward sex, taking personal responsibility for pursuing developmental (“lifelong”) sexual growth, and a commitment to mutual sexual health. Emotional features include accepting and caringly expressing your honest feelings about sex.
and distinguishing feelings from behaviors. Behaviorally, as a couple you cultivate cooperation to ground your sexual pleasure on physical relaxation. You also learn healthy psychosexual skills such as flexibility, regularity, as well as partner interaction, sensual self-entrancement, and role enactment arousal styles. Crucially important is that you function as an "intimate team," prioritize emotional empathy, forgive each other for prior disappointments, and view your sexuality as an essential relationship forum and opportunity for cohesion.

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE IMPORTANT FOR SATISFACTION

When it comes to understanding sexual satisfaction, the psychological dimensions—how we think (cognitions), what we do (behaviors), and how we feel (emotions)—are all essential, intertwined ingredients (Figure 1.2).

Your cognitions or thoughts are premier (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). They facilitate your emotions, and these feelings tell you how satisfied you are with your sex life. The thoughts, feelings, and experiences in your extended, nonsexual lives are powerful influences, but it is your sexual cognitions that are crucial. This is why we emphasize accurate and reasonable expectations.

If you think sex should always be exceptional and do not realize the normal variability of couple sex, you set up unattainable goals. When sex falters, you make negative attributions such as, "Our sex life is poor so we're in trouble." "We're falling out of love." "Our relationship is flawed." Or, we hold unreasonable beliefs like "I should always excite him." "A real man always has automatic erections." Then when ordinary erectile problems occur, he misattributes it: "Because I can't perform, I've failed my partner." Or, consider the unreasonable belief that "the woman should have an orgasm every time," so that when she doesn't, it sets up common misattributions such as "I'm a failure." Or "she's frigid."

Often these negative thoughts automatically operate in the background of our minds as self-evident "truths," reinforced by the social hype about sex. The GES principles help you to challenge such cognitive mistakes, which create feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, inadequacy, and low self-esteem—all based on unreasonable expectations. The way you think about sex itself, its role in your lives and relationship, and your expectations are crucial. While thoughts, behaviors, and feelings automatically interact, your cognitions or thoughts are most important in determining the meaning sex has for you. The meaning to you and your partner is at the core of your relationship and sexual satisfaction.

CHOOSE WHAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU AND YOUR RELATIONSHIP

To understand quality couple sex, you cannot compare yourself to some idealistic model. There is no simple formula that applies to all couples. Rather, GES offers the core features that make up realistic quality couple sex that you integrate into your unique relationship. This allows you to discuss and choose what is right
for you as a unique couple. What would support your couple sexuality so it is comfortable, functional, vibrant, erotic, and satisfying? We can’t say it often enough: Knowledge is power. You want to make wise choices that work emotionally and practically, both short and long term.

CRUCIAL POINTS FOR SATISFYING SEX

Sexual satisfaction involves how you think about sex, how you feel about your body and your lovemaking, and the quality of your intimate relationship:

- Sex is important at any age. Don’t let yourself think otherwise. You are a sexual person, capable of satisfying sex until you die. Biologically, what benefits your physical body also benefits your sexual body. The good news is that illness does not stop you from being sexual. You can enjoy sex into your 60s, 70s, and 80s. Being healthy—especially following good sleep patterns, exercising regularly, and eating well—promotes sexual health.
- A common feature of couples who have a strong, vibrant, and pleasurable sex life is that they maintain a “regular” sexual connection. This means a steady pattern of sex regardless of what barriers may arise. Research verifies the value of regularity, whether twice a week or three times a month. When you know your pattern, good things happen.
- Satisfaction with your sexual life is fundamentally grounded on accurate knowledge—realistic physical, psychological, and relationship expectations. Unrealistic expectations precipitate frustration, distress, and a sense of failure.
- A very valuable guideline is to define sexuality as mutual pleasure rather than intercourse. Too many couples get into the pattern of “intercourse or nothing.” Defining sex as intercourse is an extremely risky, self-defeating approach because ultimately you will have ignored the all-important mind-body element of sexuality.
- Appreciate the importance of promoting desire as a core component in healthy sexuality. Biological factors (with the exception of hormonal disorders) seldom directly affect desire. What does affect desire is illness, medication side-effects, fatigue, and unresolved couple conflict. These increase anticipatory anxiety, performance anxiety, self-consciousness, and resentment, which interfere with positive anticipation—the core element in sexual desire.
- Psychosexual skills refer to your comfort and skill with scenarios and techniques to build sexual anticipation and receptivity. These include playfulness, relaxation, pleasing, erotic scenarios, cooperative intercourse, and comfort with afterplay scenarios that enhance sexual satisfaction. Among the topics we’ll explore are the three basic styles of sexual arousal and their importance for lifelong sexual function and satisfaction.
- Adopt the new mantra of quality couple sexuality: desire, pleasure, eroticism, and satisfaction.

ACCEPTANCE FOR SEXUAL SATISFACTION

These core principles support sexual satisfaction. Satisfaction involves feeling happiness or pleasure: “I feel good” or “I feel satisfied with my relationship.” Dissatisfaction feels disappointed, sad, or alienated. Many believe that their feelings are “automatic” and result directly from the situation. In fact, it is crucial to understand the interconnection between our feelings, behaviors, and thoughts. Ultimately our relationship and sexual satisfaction rests on the emotional dimension (i.e., feeling good, satisfied) that is grounded in the cognitive dimension (i.e., positive thoughts) and played out in the behavioral dimension (such as how well we cooperate, function, share as individuals and as a couple).
How we think is the crucial feature in sexual desire and satisfaction. Satisfaction involves acknowledging great erotic experiences, pleasurable and functional sexual encounters, sex encounters that are good for one partner but not the other, encounters that are more intimate than sexual, functional but mediocre encounters, and even dysfunctional encounters. A crucial dimension of the GES model is to stay on the same intimate team whether the encounter is fabulous or a “bomb.” Couples grounded in reality accept variability and enjoy the entire range of desire, pleasure, eroticism, and satisfaction.

SUMMARY
The GES approach introduces a new way of thinking about, experiencing, and emotionally valuing quality couple sexuality. The new mantra for quality couple sexuality, whether married or in a serious relationship, whether you are 20 or 80, is to develop a mutually comfortable level of intimacy, value pleasuring, integrate erotic scenarios and techniques, and establish positive, realistic sexual expectations as an intimate team. In the following chapters we will be describing in detail the variable, flexible GES model, which emphasizes desire, pleasure, eroticism, and satisfaction. We will present exercises, case studies, and a tool-box of skills to help you integrate these concepts into your couple sexual style.