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.

2

Your Growth Goals for Quality Sex

Real life is a journey to embrace.

Anonymous

HEALTHY SEX HAS JOYS AT EVERY AGE

Understanding the essential features of lifelong quality couple sex helps you set your sexual “growth goals.” You might already be comfortable and confident with some features; others will be a challenge to pursue and master.

Satisfying couple sex differs from one encounter to the next, and from age to age. There are special enjoyments, delights, and satisfaction at every age. Sexual quality varies throughout life; it’s different for younger, midlife, and older couples. Sexuality can play a valued part in life at whatever stage we are living. The 25-year-old couple can enjoy quality sex that emphasizes youth and vitality, while the 40-year-old and 70-year-old couples enjoy distinguishing qualities specific to their maturity and life situation. Circumstances also influence sexual quality. Sex for a single person looking for a life partner is different than for a married couple with children, an older couple with the freedom of retirement, or a lively couple in their 80s, together for 60 years.

Younger couples typically share more acrobatic sexual interactions than 80-year-old couples, although the pleasures for each
can be expansive. Sexual pleasure and satisfaction has special joys at every age.

**YOUR UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP**

There is not one path to sexual quality. Healthy and satisfying sex is something you uniquely create with your intimate partner.

Your sexual style will be similar to others but it will have special and distinctive qualities. The truth is that quality sex is not luck, a mystery, or an undeserved bonus. "Great sex" is built little by little, has its ups and downs, and deepens over time—strengthened by the vicissitudes of real life. Quality couple sex is a growth process. It is absolutely true that "sex gets better with age," like fine wine. This is not an easy concept to grasp, but when younger couples approach their sex life with this awareness, it encourages them to appreciate the quality they currently enjoy, gives vision for ensuring quality sex, and inoculates them from sex problems in the future. Viewing your sex life in this light puts you on a path for optimal sex throughout your relationship.

**QUALITY COUPLE SEXUALITY CHANGES AND GROWS**

If you are a couple who feels you have a high level of sexual satisfaction, that is great, but you cannot rest on your laurels. Life will bring you new experiences and challenges. Life does not endorse permanent stability, in spite of our longing for it. The moment you feel you’ve “arrived,” life will remind you there’s more. One hallmark of life is that “change is inevitable.” Healthy sexuality embraces this constant change, adapts to it, savorsthe moments of stability, and celebrates life’s challenges and shifting dimensions.

Most couples begin as a romantic love/passionate sex/idealized relationship. This is a very important phase because it gives you the courage to take the risk and become involved in a serious relationship. However, by its nature, this is a fragile, short-lived phase, usually lasting 6 months to a year, seldom more than 2 years. The challenge for serious couples, whether married or unmarried, is to integrate intimacy and eroticism into their relationship. The good things in life require attention and effort.

**YOUR LIFELONG SEXUAL GROWTH GOALS**

There are a number of elements or “growth goals” that characterize quality sex throughout life. Sexual quality is a developmental process. Contrary to cultural myth, sexual satisfaction does not peak in youth and is not diminished by children, careers, and other responsibilities. While the sexual quality of youth is vibrant and often quite satisfying, it is only the “first phase” of expansive quality and satisfaction. It is important for younger couples to be aware of this potential or be at risk of falling into the negative, self-fulfilling prophecy that supposes “sexual satisfaction inevitably declines.”

Lifelong sexual satisfaction is hard for most people to believe—especially couples inundated with the stereotypic impressions formed by movies, commercial promotions, and the general media.

The reality is that stable and vital relationships are characterized by enduring and satisfying sex, which deepens throughout the years. This is ensured when you work together to build a sex life that provides regular energy in your relationship and learn to stay focused on pleasure, cooperation, and mutual empathy—shaped by adapting
to life's successes and trials. Living life experiences as an intimate team **expands and deepens your sexual satisfaction.**

**TEN FEATURES OF LIFELONG SATISFYING SEX**

When you have positive, realistic "growth goals," the effort to achieve healthy and satisfying sex is not burdensome. Inspired by clear purpose, you and your partner can readily follow a growth process. Your growth goals patiently and generously become your unique relationship's "mission statement" for vital, strong couple sex.

Table 2.1 presents the ten essential features of enduring quality sex—the elements of "GES." These are the features that promote lifelong quality couple sex. GES is your blueprint for quality sex. We discuss each feature in detail in the chapters that follow.

Features that promote the GES model include cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and relational factors that reinforce cohesion, cooperation, and intimacy. Examples of the cognitive dimension include developing and maintaining a positive attitude toward sex, taking personal responsibility for pursuing developmental (lifelong) sexual growth, and ensuring a deep commitment to mutual sexual health.

Emotional dimensions include accepting your honest feelings about sex and your body, and distinguishing feelings from behaviors.

Behaviorally, cultivate sexual desire and emotional self-regulation, ground your sexual pleasure on physical relaxation, and learn sensual self-entrancement and role enactment arousal.

Especially important is that you cooperate as an intimate team, prioritizing mutual emotional empathy (Jacobson & Christensen, 1998), forgiving each other for prior disappointments (Spring, 2004), and viewing your sexuality as an essential component of your relationship and a special opportunity to integrate intimacy and eroticism.

Healthy women and men intentionally foster understanding of each other, celebrate similarities, accept and adapt to differences, and integrate these into their sexual relationship throughout life.

Some of the GES guidelines offered are easy, some are surprising, and some are challenging. Some make intuitive sense, while others seem "off the wall." Your puzzlement is reasonable because if each feature were automatic, everyone would pursue healthy sex spontaneously and there would be no reason for you to grow as

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.1 Ten Growth Goals for GES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commit yourself to pursuing the following ten lifelong sexual quality goals:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Value sex as a good element in your life—an invaluable part of your individual and couple comfort, intimacy, pleasure, and confidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Commit yourself to ensuring that sex is satisfying at every age and every stage in your life. Sexuality develops, grows, and evolves throughout your life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Ground your sex satisfaction on realistic, age-appropriate sexual expectations. Accurate and reasonable knowledge about sexual physiology, psychology, and relationship health are crucial for sexual satisfaction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Remember that sexuality is inherently relational. You want to grow as an intimate team. Create your own couple sexual style—complementary, traditional, soul mate, or emotionally expressive. Sexual health and satisfaction are directly influenced by the quality of relationship identity and conflict resolution, which mold emotional and sexual intimacy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Value each other's sexual body and practice good physical and psychological health, which is vital for your sexual health. Celebrate with your bodies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Accept that there is no right or wrong way to be sexual. Respect, value, and integrate your individual and gender differences. Cooperate for sexual satisfaction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Value sensual touch and its pleasurable feelings, as well as intercourse and orgasm. Satisfied couples keep in mind that relaxation is the foundation for sensual pleasure and sexual function.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Understand that sexual and relationship quality varies. Abandon the &quot;need&quot; for perfect performance and instead value variable, flexible sexual experiences. Integrate the five basic reasons for sex, flexibly use the three sexual arousal styles, and develop flexible alternatives to intercourse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Integrate your real life into sex and sex into your real life to create and nurture your distinctively personalized, unique sexual relationship.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Personalize sex and celebrate passion. Sex can be playful, spiritual, and &quot;special.&quot; Occasional playfulness facilitates &quot;special&quot; sex, which is characterized by acceptance, trust, pleasure, and vitality.</td>
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</table>
sexual individuals and a couple. Quality sex would be a “done-deal.” Of course, this is an unrealistic expectation.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRINCIPLES FOR REAL SEX FOR HEALTHY COUPLES

Think of the items listed in Table 2.1, designed to foster your sexual relationship. When you live the GES approach, you cooperate as a couple to value sex as a genuine, intimate connection. View this as a progressive, lifelong process complete with joys and sorrows as you endeavor to adapt and grow at each stage of your lives. In following the GES guidelines, you recognize, accept, and adapt to career stresses, family crises and losses, and parenting and financial successes and worries. You integrate these life happenings into your relationship and sexual experiences.

- Paramount to satisfaction at every stage is grounding your relationship and sexual expectations on reality. Consciously defy the hype and imbalanced commercial marketing of sex. Search out honest, scientifically valid information about sexuality. Value and trust your sexual experiences, read scientifically grounded books and trusted articles on sexuality, and adjust your expectations of sexual function and practices based on accurate knowledge and your own comfort and preferences.

- Appreciate that your sexuality is inherently relational. While retaining your individual sexuality, strive to become an “intimate team.” Your overall relationship is energized by your team identity, cooperation to resolve conflicts, and emotional intimacy. Sexual intimacy is energized by desire, arousal, orgasm, and satisfaction—qualities that warrant your ongoing attention and cooperation.

- For lifelong sexual vitality, practice good physical and psychological health, especially in regard to adequate sleep, exercise, and diet. Value each other’s sexual bodies as sources for pleasure and eroticism, as well as comfort and acceptance.

- A hallmark of sexually healthy couples is respect for your partner’s individual differences. The man comes to deeply appreciate the woman’s personal and sexual feelings. The woman comes to deeply respect the man’s personal and sexual feelings. Celebrate your differences, and tolerate what is less positive. For example, a man affirms and generously accommodates the woman’s experience of her menstrual cycle and menopause, while the woman affirms and generously accommodates his sexual drive. Couples who blend gender differences feel respected, accepted, and proud of their relationship.

- The psychosexual skills involved in GES form the foundation for exceptionally satisfying sexual quality. These features ensure sexual pleasure, immunize the partners against sexual dysfunction, invite deepening emotional intimacy, and increase sexual desire, passion, and vitality. At the core of sexual function—as counterintuitive as it appears—is physical relaxation. Two basic features influence sexual function: physiological relaxation and sufficient physical and psychological stimulation. Satisfied couples value sensual touch and emotional connection as well as sexual function and orgasm.

- Couples not only accept, but also affirm that sexual quality varies from one experience to another. It is normal and healthy that on occasion a sexual encounter is better for one partner than the other. Sometimes an encounter is emotionally satisfying, but not erotically satisfying, and vice versa. Some encounters are very special and others are unremarkable. Even dissatisfying or dysfunctional encounters can have some level of satisfaction if you are able to shrug them off as normal couple variability and make a date to be sexual in the next few days. You can enjoy the peaks and smile at the valleys of sexual function/
dysfunction and satisfaction/dissatisfaction. This understanding provides a “bigger picture” of your intimate life, rather than allowing satisfaction to ride solely on this one encounter. While affirming sexual variability, you can embrace the GES approach and adopt several tools to understand and influence couple sex. For example, realizing there are multiple reasons to be sexual and that there are three basic arousal styles can help you adapt to the unpredictability of sexual experiences. Such knowledge helps you comfortably cooperate as an “intimate team.”

- Sexually healthy couples personalize their passion and lovemaking. Ensure that your sexual connections are “regular.” That is, you can count on sex not in a hit-or-miss fashion, but as an integral part of your relationship. This is one of the features that distinguishes quality sex and ensures enduring satisfaction. This aspect is very important because when challenging circumstances occur in your life, you must bring sex into your real life, come “hell or high water.” Personalize your sex, making it a consoling pleasure amid crises, playfulness at another time, and as a transcendent or spiritual experience at other times. Healthy sex is characterized by emotional trust, pleasure, acceptance of real life, and vitality.

Use the next exercises to examine priorities in your relationship, as well as define your sexual growth goals in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

* * * * * *

EXERCISE 2.1 AFFIRMING YOUR STRENGTHS AND SETTING YOUR GES GROWTH GOALS

Individually review the 10 guidelines in Table 2.1 and rate your strengths. Rate the power of your “Current Strength” for each dimension by assessing each on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 meaning a “very strong strength” and 1 meaning a “very fragile strength.”

Then rate “Your Desired Priority for Growth” for each dimension by assessing each on a scale of 1-10, with 10 meaning “very strong desire” and 1 meaning “very low desire.”

Share these ratings with your partner: Discuss similarities and differences for your “Current Strength” ratings and “Desired Priority for Growth” ratings. Items that you agree on are your valued strengths, which reinforce your sexual relationship. Those on which you have discord are potential growth areas to set as goals for your future.

Finally, together rank order “Your Priority Decisions as a Couple” for the three most important growth goals, with 1 representing your top priority, 2 your second priority, and 3 your third priority. Clarifying these three areas is important in enhancing your relationship and sexual satisfaction and working as an intimate team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Ten GES Lifelong Growth Goals</th>
<th>Rate Your Current Strengths (1-10)</th>
<th>Your Desired Priorities for Growth (1-10)</th>
<th>Your Priority Decisions as a Couple (up to 3)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Value sex as a good and positive element in your life.</td>
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<td>2. Commit to sex being satisfying at every age.</td>
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<td>3. Ground your sexual satisfaction on realistic, age-appropriate relationship and sexual expectations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Commit to creating your own couple sexual style.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Celebrate each other’s sexual body; engage in good physical health practices.</td>
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<td>6. Respect, value, and integrate your individual and gender differences.</td>
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<td>7. Value sensual touch for pleasure as well as sexual function.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Accept that sexual and relationship quality varies.</td>
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(Continued)
Exercise 2.2 helps you set specific sexual growth goals.

EXERCISE 2.2 CLARIFYING YOUR GOALS FOR SEXUAL SATISFACTION

You are unique in your sexuality as a couple. This exercise asks you to assess your current sexual relationship and establish specific sexual growth goals. You can implement growth goals as you explore concepts, strategies, and techniques throughout this book. We ask you to first do this separately and then discuss your ratings with your partner. Assess four dimensions of sexuality and utilize two time frames. The four dimensions are:

1. Desire: This means anticipation of being sexual and feeling that you deserve to have sexuality be a positive force in your relationship.
2. Arousal: How objectively aroused (in terms of vaginal lubrication and erection) as well as subjectively aroused (feeling "turned on") are you?
3. Orgasm: Does high arousal naturally flow to orgasm (climax) that is neither premature nor inhibited? How often do you want to experience climax?
4. Satisfaction: At the end of a sexual encounter, do you feel better about yourself, and more bonded and energized as a couple?

Assess each of these four dimensions in two time frames: (a) when it was most satisfying and (b) how each dimension functions and feels at present.

Remember, don't try to impress your partner, "fake it," or judge yourself by a perfect sex performance standard. Be honest with yourself and your partner about sexual strengths and vulnerabilities.

From this base of honest assessment of sexual function and feelings, set positive, realistic individual and couple sexual growth goals for the next year. Be clear with yourself and your partner in setting personally relevant goals, rather than "hype" goals. For example, a personally relevant goal would be to increase pleasure and enjoy being the giving partner; a "hype" goal would be to be the sexiest couple in your community. A personally relevant goal for the woman might be to increase subjective arousal and on occasion request afterplay stimulation to orgasm; the "hype" goal would be to have "G-spot" orgasms or be multi-orgasmic each time. A realistic goal for the man would be to ask his partner's help with psychosexual skill exercises to improve ejaculatory control so that intercourse lasts between 2 and 7 minutes; the "hype" goal would be for intercourse to last 20 minutes so your partner is orgasmic each time.

In terms of sexual growth goals, remember the mantra of GES: desire, pleasure, and satisfaction.

Appreciate your strengths as a couple and learn how to promote your individual and relationship growth goals to increase sexual satisfaction.

SUMMARY

Quality couple sex is totally different than the hyped sex seen in R-rated movies or porn videos. The prime emphasis is on individual and couple acceptance and setting positive, realistic sexual expectations based on biological, psychological, and relational realities.

As you consider personally relevant couple growth goals, you have an opportunity to incorporate the variable, flexible GES features with their emphasis on positive, realistic expectations and to build your unique couple style to serve as the basis for lifelong quality couple sexuality.