Building a Sexual Relationship around Mismatched Libidos

Libido is another term for sex drive, which is the passionate desire for sex. Libido can be classified as high or low but it is actually more complex than how often a person desires sex. It has elements including what triggers arousal and what dampens it, the importance of sex compared to other parts of a relationship, the meaning of sex for each individual, what is pleasurable during sexual activity. Mismatched libidos used to refer to partners who differed in how often they wanted sex; mismatched partners were either high or low libido. Certainly some people are aware of a regular need for sex whereas others feel they wouldn’t care if they didn’t have sex again. However, two people can want sex at the same frequency but can differ in the meaning of sex (e.g., is it about emotional intimacy or hot activities) or what is pleasurable. This mismatch in wants and needs can lead to one partner gradually withdrawing from sex.

Concept of Libido Types

Although we acknowledge that there is a wide range of individual differences in human sexuality, we don’t seem to talk about them very much. We tend to expect our partner to be like us and to enjoy sex in the same way we do, yet logic says that just as there are, for example, personality differences, there must great diversity in sexuality as well. How often you are interested in sex (once every month? once a day? more often than that, or less often?). Then add in what activities you enjoy: are you comfortable with a usual routine or do you crave variety and long sessions of passionate sex? Is your sexual desire strong and persistent or subdued and easily lost? Is the main satisfaction you get from sex the emotional intimacy or the physical release? We don’t have to continue any further with this exercise to conclude that all the possible combinations of the range of sexual characteristics give us an incredible variety in normal sexual individuality. These different combinations create libido types; two common types are the sensual libido type who values emotional connection above sexual performance, and the erotic libido type who wants sex to be intense, varied and passionate, if not every time then at least some of the time. Some individuals may be a mix of types, so that a sensual libido type may want hot passionate sex some of the time, but may not be concerned if it doesn’t happen very often, or an erotic libido type may still need emotional connection at least some of the time for sex to be satisfying.
When Mismatched Libidos is a Problem

When a couple differs in ways that have significance to one or both partners, confusion and distress can begin to undermine their relationship. A good example of that is the importance of who initiates sex, how often, and in what way. While some couples are quite comfortable if one partner mostly initiates, some people feel unattractive or unloved if their partner does not initiate sex at least half of the time in a hot, *can’t keep my hands off you* way. The hurt and frustration that is caused by such misinterpretations gets in the way of the couple finding other ways of getting their needs met that are acceptable to both.

Working Together on the Mismatch

While there is no therapy program that can guarantee that every couple with mismatched libidos will resolve their differences so that they get the sex life they really want, there is much you and your partner can do together to develop a good enough, mutually satisfying sex
1. Recognize that you are different but equal: the differences in wants and needs do not make one person right and the other wrong.

2. Be respectful, courteous, and encourage each other with generosity and gentleness to say what is true for each of you. Don’t be surprised or defensive when your partner says something that you disagree with: listening to another point of view doesn’t mean that you have to agree with it.

3. Describe, don’t judge. Using words such as cold or selfish, or insisting your partner has a problem, leads to defensiveness which blocks
communication. State the problem in objective terms: I would like to have sex more/less often; I would like more/less variety in our sex life.

4. Be willing to really listen to your partner. Ask about your partner’s opinion: What do you think about this? What do you think would help here? What would you like to do? I would like to solve our problem in this way. What’s your view on this? If you are asking because you genuinely want to know the answers and are not merely using these questions as a form of attack, you will encourage an open and frank atmosphere that might reveal previously hidden solutions.

5. Challenge your interpretations. Misinterpretations are common in cases of mismatched
libidos. You may think that your partner is selfish, or controlling, or doesn’t love you, but there is a good chance your partner thinks the same thing of you, with the result that you both feel hurt and lonely. Can you ask your partner questions like, What do you think it means when I say no to sex so often?, or What do you think it means that I try for sex so often? And then, without criticism, talk through these issues: if your partner is feeling as bad as you are, try comforting each other, acknowledging how sad it is that your mismatched libidos has caused you both such distress but that neither of you intended that. Typically in cases of mismatched libidos, neither partner is the “bad guy” so support each other as you try to find solutions.

Taking Action
1. Identify what you would like your partner to do to achieve a more satisfying sex life for you. Keep your requests in line with your hopes for a good enough sex life rather than your ideal sex life, and start with what your partner is likely to be able to do. There is no point in expecting your partner to suddenly increase sexual frequency or initiate sex in a passionate way if you know he or she has a lower sexual desire than you. What first step would you like your partner to take that demonstrates he or she is willing to work on your problems?

2. Now comes the point where you have to take responsibility for your part in developing a mutually satisfying sex life: What are you prepared to do now and over the coming weeks that goes toward meeting your partner’s needs, as described? Can you make that first change your partner has requested? Don’t wait to see what your partner does; you can only change
your own behaviour. If you both take responsibility for change, and your focus is on meeting your partner’s needs rather than concentrating on yourself, ultimately your sex life should move toward your mutual wants and needs.

What typically happens as you follow this process is that instead of working against each other and feeling hurt and let down, as you each put yourself out to please the other person, you feel more loved, secure and empowered. As you accept your partner is a different libido type, and you develop your ability to give your partner more of what makes them feel good, your confidence as a lover and partner grows. A good lover is first and foremost a sensitive person who can be flexible and reasonably adapt to the wants and needs of the partner, and the realities of life circumstances. This is not always a simple
process to achieve the changes you have both agreed upon, but couples discover by working together to solve challenging sexual problems, they experience new depths and strengths in the relationship that make the struggle worthwhile.

Sandra Pertot PhD
Clinical Psychologist
(visit www.sandrapertot.com for more information)