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(Adapted from *When Your Sex Drives Don't Match: Discover Your Libido Types to Create a Mutually Satisfying Sex Life.* Marlowe & Co, 2007)

Below are a series of exercises designed to get you started on understanding the conflict you and your partner are experiencing in your sexual relationship. Print off a copy for each of you, and take your time to fill them out independently. Before you discuss your answers, make sure you read the next section, The Talk, which outlines "the rules" for sharing your discoveries.

If you want to follow up on this process, there are more exercises in my book, "When Your Sex Drives Don't Match".

[Note: To make it easier to read, often instead of using he/she, him/her etc, only one gender is mentioned, but in all instances the situation could apply to either men or women.]

Exercise 1: What are the important elements in a good relationship for you?

The following is a list of relationship characteristics: rank them from the most important (number 1) to the least important (number 13). I've left one item open so that you can add a characteristic you would like to mention; add more if you wish.

Then redo the list in the next column, ranking the list according to what you think are the important elements of a good relationship for your partner.

	Your preferences of your partner's preferences	Your ranking
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companionship	_____	_____
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children	_____	_____
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non-sexual affection

financial security

time together as a couple

time together as a family

friendship

sex

shared interests

shared decision-making _____

easy every-day communication _____

calm problem-solving communication _____

other? (please state) _____

Place a circle on the following scale to indicate the importance of sex to you in a relationship:

very important
important

important

a little important

not at all

X
X

X

X

Exercise 2: Areas of disappointment or conflict

1. I feel loved when . . .

I feel unloved when . . .

To feel loved by my partner, I would like more of . . .

and I would like less of . . .

2. I express my love by . . .

My partner recognizes these expressions of love . . .

but not these . . .

I would like my partner to acknowledge my expressions of love by . . .

3. I feel rejected when . . .

I believe my partner feels rejected when I . . .

I would like to work on this together by . . .

4. I need my partner to do more of . . .

I need my partner to do less of . . .

5. What is missing from my relationship is . . .

What I would like less of in my relationship is . .

.

6. What distresses me about my relationship . . .

I would like this to be addressed by . . .

7. What I most need my partner to understand about my emotional needs is . . .

What I most need my partner to understand about my sexuality is . . .

8. What I most want my partner to change to make our sex life better for me is . . .

What I want to understand about my partner's sexuality is . . .

9. Other aspects of our relationship I would like

addressed are . . .

How do you think your partner's answers would differ from yours?

Exercise 3: Differences in expectations

What were your expectations when you began your relationship? One way to identify these are by listing what you believe your relationship *shoul*

d be
like: what
should
be happening in your relationship, what your
partner
should
do to be a good partner for you, what you
should
you feel and do to have a sound and happy
relationship. When and how did you become
aware that you and your partnered differed in
your expectations? What do you believe your
partner's
shoulds
are? What are the differences that have caused
you grief?

One way to identify your expectations is to finish
the following sentences:

If I really loved my partner, I would

If my partner really loved me, he/she would

If we had a really good relationship, we would

Exercise 4: Communication

How do you each react to the differences that arise in your relationship: understanding and encouraging, or annoyed and critical? What issues are most likely to lead to an argument?

Can you talk with knowledge and confidence about the differences in wants and needs? Do you find it easier to say negative things, to be critical and irritated with your partner, than to give compliments or express approval, happiness, love and affection?

How much of your communication is warm and positive, how much is critical and negative?

Exercise 5: Misinterpretations

Many couples misinterpret their partner's attitudes and actions; for example, if you believe that if he/she loved you, your partner would be affectionate every day, you can interpret your partner's minimal affection as a sign that he or she doesn't really care about you. It can be hard to recognize a misinterpretation because what you believe is likely to feel absolutely true. What do you believe it means when your partner behaves in a way you don't like? Do you worry he/she doesn't love you? Do you believe he/she is selfish? Do you believe your partner is a "control freak"?

In what way do you feel your partner misinterprets you?

Exercise 6: Strengths Analysis

When couples are caught up in any major disagreement in their relationship, whether it is about sex, money, how the kids are raised, or whatever, the bad feelings generated by this conflict can overshadow what is worthwhile between them. Some couples I see appear to be so hostile to each other when they begin to describe their problems that I wonder if we will be able to make any progress, but then when I ask them what is right in their relationship and why they want to work on their problems they are easily able to identify many good things between them. Sometimes they are surprised when they get in touch with these feelings, because it puts their disagreement in a new perspective.

You may be able to list these positives easily, but if you have lost sight of them, the following

prompts may help you remember them:

This is what I admire about my partner:

These are my strengths:

These are the things we do right in our relationship:

I want this relationship to work out because:

Despite our current problems, these are the things I would miss if our relationship ended:

Are there other strengths that you can acknowledge?

Exercise 7: Deal breakers

Sadly, though, the converse situation also occurs, where a couple work hard to bridge their differences because each believes there are reasons to stay together, but for at least one partner, the problem is causing such distress that the relationship is seriously under threat.

Given what you know about yourself, and taking into account all the worthwhile aspects of your

relationship, are there some things that you recognize will ultimately destroy the relationship with your partner? Your answer is not meant put pressure on your partner to give in to what you want, but to help him or her understand what is making you so sad or distressed that it is difficult to see a future together if this issue isn't addressed. Write these answers down as if you are speaking to your partner directly. Speak from your heart, be gentle and kind, because criticism and anger will detract from what you are trying to say.

What do you worry your partner's deal breakers might be?

Exercise 8: Commitment to Change

What are the changes you would like to make in the relationship so that you feel loved, secure, and hopeful about the future? Try to be flexible about the solutions, because realistically you may not get exactly what you would like.

Think about possible solutions that:

1. *you* can put into practice to improve the relationship:

2. *your partner* can do :

3. *what you can do together* to build a better relationship:

Exercise 9: What happens if things don't change?

One possibility that can't be overlooked is that, despite your best efforts, nothing much changes in your relationship. Perhaps the gap between you is too wide to bridge, maybe only one of you is prepared to work on the issues, but either way it might be that after all this work, disappointment, tension or conflict continues to dominate your life together. What do you think will happen when it becomes clear that your issues seem unresolvable?

Although you might assume that all will be doom and gloom in this case, in my experience of asking couples this question, there can be some surprising answers. Some couples have been so focused on the problem, so intent on trying to find a solution to a specific problem, that they have lost sight of the fact that overall they are really quite happy together. These couples are quite shocked when I ask them if they are close to relationship breakdown! The answers to this question range from a surprised, "Well I love my partner so this certainly won't break us up," to "There are other considerations—children, finances, security—that are more important so I'd be disappointed and upset but we would survive," to "Our relationship won't survive if nothing changes."

Your final exercise, then, is to give this question, "What happens if things don't change?" serious thought and answer it with complete and heartfelt honesty. Write out your likely thoughts and

feelings if nothing changes, because your partner will need to know them. If you would be okay about it, your partner needs to be reassured; if you are considering ending the relationship, your partner may not realize the situation is that serious; and, as we saw in the deal breaker exercise, you each need to know what you stand to lose if you won't or can't achieve a mutually satisfying outcome.