

## Sexual Desire Discrepancy

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Many couples struggle with sexual dissatisfaction that stems in part from one partner desiring sex more or less frequently than the other. In the past, this problem has primarily been identified as “sexual dysfunction” in one of the two partners. The most common conclusion, and therefore diagnosis, has been to see the partner desiring sex less often as suffering from “hypoactive sexual desire” or low sex drive. Within heterosexual couples, this is especially true when the partner desiring sex less often is female, and the one wanting sex more often is male. On occasion, the partner desiring sex more often will be identified as having “too strong or frequent” a sex drive, clinically referred to as “hyperactive sexual desire” and more commonly referred to as being “oversexed” or in the recent past as “nymphomania”.

Although a number of individual/personal factors can contribute to sexually “shutting-down” or compulsively engaging in sexual behaviors, for many couples it is a relational dynamic that contributes to not “being on the same page” sexually. For this reason, the concept of a “sexual desire discrepancy” is particularly important, as it allows for the “couple” and the interactions between them to be the focus of treatment versus one individual being the identified patient.

I have found that when a couple comes in for sex therapy dealing with problems of desire, they have often already concluded that one of the two is the problem and want him or her to “be fixed”. After the bumpy transition to a new way of looking at things, most couples find it very enlightening, refreshing and hopeful to see that they are both contributing to the problem, and more importantly, can both contribute to the healing of the sexual relationship and a return to (or in some cases first experience of) sexual satisfaction and fulfillment.

The most common relational dynamic contributing to sexual desire discrepancy problems is polarization. Polarization occurs when small differences between two people in an intimate relationship become amplified as each person reacts to the other. One such polarization is often referred to as the “distancer-pursuer dynamic”. This dynamic often begins with the differences between the two partners being a source of attraction. The one takes more initiative and reaches out to the other, finding pleasure in helping to “open the other one up”. Likewise, the pursued partner loves feeling desired, and being able to respond in kind.

Over time, however, the distancer can feel overwhelmed by the “neediness” of the other person, while the pursuer can feel frustrated and afraid by the lack of openness and reciprocity in the relationship. While the one withdraws in reactivity, the other increases the intensity of pursuit. This polarization can continue to the point where “you always” and “you never” become common phrases thrown out in arguments. Within the sexual relationship, that often sounds like “he always wants sex, it drives me crazy” and “she is so sexually repressed, please fix her”. What appears to be a problem of either raging or

dormant hormones is far too often the result of a frustrating yet readily reversible cycle of polarized reactivity within the relationship.

Indeed, there is hope and healing for couples stuck in this cycle! Even when only one partner chooses to make a shift, the dynamic can be positively impacted. When both work to stay in a more balanced place, even better! As the person withholding or avoiding sexual intimacy steps up to the plate and initiates more, and the pursuer patiently backs off, a couple is often able to find a workable balance. If the polarization is successfully decreased and yet the differences in sexual desire still exist, each individual may need to look at intrapersonal factors that may be keeping them from more often being on the same page sexually. Indeed, by working through both the relational dynamic of polarization *and* one's own baggage resulting in repressing and/or over-relying on sex, a fulfilling sexual relationship can emerge.