

Desire in long-term relationships

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Discrepancies in desire is a common issue that brings couples to our office. It is not uncommon for one person to have a higher desire for physical/sexual intimacy than the other. Another issue may be low desire in both couples.

One of the first things we do is normalize differences in desire. We might point out that two people rarely have the same desire for anything; whether it is for food or purchasing something new. It is usually the lower desire person who controls the speed. We might ask, "So what do you do when one of you is hungry and the other one isn't?" We typically get responses like, "We'll go ahead and eat together anyway," or "One person will have a snack that will tide them over." We say that this is not that different from a discrepancy in desire.

We then go on to explore with them the meanings they make of dissimilarities in desire. We often hear about stories of rejection, abandonment, mistrust, entitlement, self-sacrifice, or defectiveness.

In this article we want to explore, the role that willingness plays in desire. People get stuck thinking that desire is something they can't control, that they are at the effect of whether it is present or not. They think that desire has to be present for there to be a sexual relationship. This concept of desire is linked to a young person's response, which we might call lust. It is hormonally driven. It is also driven by dopamine, the hormone that is released when the relationship is new. Inevitably, in long term relationships, hormonally driven desire lessens.

That is when willingness becomes important. Are you willing or interested in exploring the possibilities even if at first you don't feel like it? Many of us have had the experience of not feeling hungry, but when seeing, smelling or tasting a delicious meal someone has made, we realize we are hungry after all. The same is true for physical and sexual intimacy. I may be caught up in the busyness of my life, and not feel desire. But when I get willing, I realize it is exactly what I need right now. I create space for this new possibility.

Unwillingness is often connected to anger or fear. Making friends with your discomfort, your own anger or fear, your partner's anger or fear, and communicating clearly about these, can open the door.

So, rather than waiting for desire to come, we invite you to ask yourself the following question: Am I willing to make space in my life to pursue emotional and/or sexual connection with my partner?