

“THEY TWAIN SHALL BE ONE FLESH”

Marital Unity in the Sexual Relationship

Sexuality is a human condition; each of us is a divine son or daughter of God *and* as such we are sexual beings. The word *and* here is important because our sexuality does not separate us from nor stand in opposition to our divine nature. Our sexuality is embraced in our divine nature; it is fully a godlike attribute our Father has bestowed upon us so that we may be like Him. We glory in this wonderful gift He has given us.

Unfortunately, the role of sexuality has become skewed in our current culture. The world has become hyperobsessed with sex, which has degraded this special, heaven-sent gift. Elder Bednar has commented: “Never has a global society placed so much emphasis on the fulfillment of romantic and sexual desires as the highest form of personal autonomy, freedom, and self-actualization. Society has elevated sexual fulfillment to an end in itself rather than as a means to a higher end. In this confusion, millions have lost the truth that God intended sexual desire to be a *means* to the divine ends of marital unity, the procreation of children and strong families, not a selfish *end* in itself.”¹

Reflections

When I look at my husband, I wish I were more physically attracted to him. But when I take a step back and see him as more than just his specific physical features, I remember why I love him. His character, loyalty, kindness, ambition, perseverance, and so on bring out an attractiveness that cannot be faked. Those qualities will remain steady over the years, unlike physicality, which changes with time. Don't get me wrong; choosing to focus on his strengths and looking past his weaknesses is not easy. I continue to struggle at times. But it has improved as I choose to focus on his strengths and expand my definition of attraction. As I remember his positive traits and contributions to our family, I feel more attracted to him. Recently, I've caught myself looking at him—really looking at him—and thinking “I love him,” rather than pinpointing to myself the little physical features that are less than ideal. My attraction to him is growing and it is strengthening our physical relationship. Our physical intimacy deepens, and sex becomes more about connection rather than strictly physical pleasure. It is our opportunity to be completely vulnerable and have that vulnerability appreciated and returned. With selflessness and validation, unity is present. This unity restores hope and magnifies the joy in our marriage.

We underscore this message as we begin our discussion. As a contrast to the trends of the world, the purpose of this chapter is to emphasize the divine roles of sexuality in a celestial-quality eternal relationship. Sexuality is not primarily about being passionately and physically attracted to one's spouse, receiving or giving pleasure, or satisfying a strong sexual drive. We will discuss three spiritual purposes of sexual relations (going from the more concrete to the more abstract) and will explore some of the emotional and therapeutic issues that surround the role of sexuality in marriage. Research has shown that the sexual relationship is good for our physical and mental health. A wide range of physical benefits are produced from the sexual relationship, such as reduced stress and lower rates of heart disease, breast cancer, prostate cancer, and endometriosis.²

Our purpose in this chapter is to provide a how-to relative to deepening intimacy with our spouse and God through the sexual relationship rather than a how-to manual with biology lessons and information regarding various sexual positions or genital stimulation techniques.

Spiritual Purposes of Sexual Relations

Our discussion on the spiritual purposes of our sexual relationships will focus on learning about our role as creators, building unity with our spouse, and understanding more about our unity with God. We use the term *sexual relations* as a descriptor of a whole relationship of attitudes, emotions, touch, and behaviors, rather than simply the singular act of intercourse. Sexual relations have a great purpose in marriage and for marriage. They serve to unify and strengthen the marital relationship through “expressing love and strengthening emotional and spiritual ties.”³ Our discussion herein focuses on this broader understanding of the sexual relationship.

Role of Creators

The first purpose of sexual relations is to learn more about God as our Creator and to foster our role as creators. God our Father has endowed us with the power to provide a mortal body for His spirit children. Sexual intercourse is the means by which a husband and wife are able to join with God in His creative abilities and become partners with Him in His work “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life” of his children (Moses 1:39). When we understand this partnership and recognize the sober responsibility we bring upon ourselves when we take on parenthood, the decision to have children is a grand undertaking. Pregnancy and delivery are only the beginning—you then have to raise them!

The decision of how many children to have is solely left to couples as they seek God’s direction. Elder Neil L. Andersen said, “When to have a child and how many children to have are private decisions to be made between a husband and wife and the Lord. These are sacred decisions—decisions that should be made with sincere prayer and acted on with great faith.”⁴



Unity between Husband and Wife

The second purpose of sexual relations is to foster unity between husband and wife. Spiritual purposes of sexual relations require that sex be important in marriage beyond the procreative realm. Indeed, engaging in sexual intercourse for the purpose of reproduction will constitute a fairly small portion of the couple's sexual time together. We read in Mark 10:6–9:

But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.

For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife;

And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.

What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

Our Father in Heaven intends for sexual relations to teach us about unity: unity with each other and unity with Him. As president of Brigham Young University, Jeffrey R. Holland spoke of sexual intimacy as a symbol for the type of unity God desires of husband and wife:

Human intimacy, that sacred, physical union ordained of God for a married couple, deals with a *symbol* that demands special sanctity. Such an act of love between a man and a woman is—or certainly was ordained to be—a symbol of total union: union of their hearts, their hopes, their lives, their love, their family, their future, their everything. . . .

Physiologically we are created as men and women to fit together in such a union. In this ultimate physical expression of one man and one woman they are as nearly and as literally “one” as two separate physical bodies can ever be. It is in that act of ultimate physical intimacy we most nearly fulfill the commandment of the Lord given to Adam and Eve, living symbols for all married couples, when he invited them to cleave unto one another only, and thus become “one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)⁵

This type of physical contact is meant to create a great sense of unity and bonding in the marital relationship. Indeed, it provides a reinforcing quality to the relationship; research has shown that, across all ages, couples that reported higher frequencies of sexual relations also reported

Reflections

Our marriage has been full of difficulty and struggle, but our sexual relationship has been a source of healing and strengthening, making up for some of the deficits we have in other areas. I have often lain in bed, listening to the sound of my husband's breathing as it deepens into sleep, saying a silent prayer of thanksgiving for the immeasurably beautiful gift that God has given to husbands and wives. Such a gift seems to be greater than we could possibly deserve, more full of joy and wonder than two struggling, imperfect people could find in one another. True sexual joy springs from something much deeper than physical pleasure alone. These moments teach me about the unsurpassed love that our Father has for us and in some small way not only represent his desire for us to experience joy but also provide a window into his ability to have joy. On more than one occasion, the Spirit has borne witness to the goodness and rightness of this physical union, always when our spiritual union is strong and deepening.

higher levels of marital satisfaction.⁶ There is great power in true sexual intimacy, which expresses itself with tenderness, caring, and closeness. Christian authors Ed Wheat and Gaye Wheat described genuine sexual intimacy as a “security of belonging”⁷ with “remarkable power to heal, renew, refresh, and sustain the marriage relationship.”⁸ A truly intimate sexual relationship will be one in which the couple is enjoying quality sex together. One researcher explains, “Quality sex means orgasm equality.” This means that “both parties get the gender-specific stimulation (penis for him, clitoris for her) that most reliably results in orgasm.”⁹ Orgasm equality will strengthen bonds of unity as we lovingly care for each other while respecting our gender-specific sexual needs. These bonds of caring will increase connectivity and prove to be a strength to the marital relationship not only sexually but in all areas of our life. Ed and Gaye Wheat commented that when true sexual intimacy is achieved, even mundane and nonsexual acts, such as working together in the home or kneeling together in prayer, become acts of *lovemaking* because love is the hallmark of the relationship.¹⁰

The inverse is also true; failing to nurture the sexual relationship in marriage weakens unity. Research has found that sexual inactivity has been associated with marital unhappiness.¹¹ Research has also shown that sexual dissatisfaction is associated with increased risk of divorce.¹² Likewise, impersonal sexual relations that fail to honor the higher spiritual purposes of sexual relations will also weaken associations, for “we cannot be truly satisfied with mere physical and physiological relief in sex.”¹³

Unity with God Our Father

The third purpose of sexual relations, the most abstract, is unity with our Father in Heaven. The mandate to become one flesh within the marriage covenant is not only discussed in Genesis,



Practice

Intimacy challenge: A basic strategy in the treatment of insomnia is to restrict the use of one's bed to only two activities—sleeping and sex. Just as these restrictions serve to improve one's sleep, they will also improve emotional and physical intimacy in your marriage. Keep all electronics, work projects, or other activities out of bed. Sit in a comfortable chair in your bedroom or do the activities in another room altogether. Take the TV out of the bedroom completely. Preserve the bed only for sleep and building emotional and physical intimacy with your spouse, and allow the bedroom to be sacred space for you as a couple.

in reference to Adam and Eve, but is found throughout the scriptures. Ed and Gaye Wheat state:

As a matter of fact, the sex relationship in marriage receives such emphasis in the Scriptures that we begin to see it was meant not only to be a wonderful, continuing experience for the husband and wife, but it was also intended to show us something even more wonderful about God and His relationship with us. Ephesians 5:31–32 spells it out: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.” *Thus the properly and lovingly executed and mutually satisfying sexual union is God’s way of demonstrating to us a great spiritual truth.* It speaks to us of the greatest love story ever told—of how Jesus Christ gave Himself for us and is intimately involved with and loves the Church (those who believe in Him). In this framework, the sexual relationship between two growing Christians can be intimate fellowship as well as delight.¹⁴

As BYU president, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland discussed sexual relations as symbolic of unity with God our Father, and likened sexual relations to a sacrament, which he defined as “any one of a number of gestures or acts or ordinances that unite us with God and his limitless powers.” He taught that the “sexual union is also, in its own profound way, a very real sacrament of the highest order, a union not only of a man and a woman but very much the union of that man and woman with God.” In viewing sexual relations in this symbolic

fashion, we gain a greater insight into the nature of God, which can strengthen us throughout our lives. Elder Holland further indicated, “And I submit to you that *you will never be more like God at any other time in this life than when you are expressing that particular power*. Of all the titles he has chosen for himself, Father is the one he declares, and Creation is his watchword.”¹⁵

Charity in the Bedroom

In light of these spiritual purposes of sex, we can understand the need for complete soberness and respect for our spouses in our sexual relationship. Moroni defines charity as “the pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47). This type of charity is a transformation of our very natures to the core, a process that ultimately allows us to receive His image in our countenance (see Alma 5:14). When we have adopted Christ’s charity for our own, it will be manifest in a variety of ways in our daily lives and especially visible in our sexual relationship with our spouse. Charity is critical to the process of becoming unified and creating a fulfilling sexual relationship.

Reflections

After about six months of being married, I finally mustered the courage to tell my wife about that part of me that no one knew about. I had hoped that my sexual attraction to men would go away by virtue of acting on faith to get married and becoming sexually active with my wife, but this was not the case. . . . Our marriage hasn’t always been easy, although in many ways it’s easier than we expected. Of course, there are things that we continue to work on. In any successful marriage, there needs to be a balance of romance, intimacy (all kinds—physical, emotional, and spiritual for example), and a committed attitude. Most heterosexual men with whom I have spoken find physical intimacy pretty automatic but may struggle with truly being friends with their spouses. Toward my wife, the friendship, commitment, and nearly all types of intimacy came naturally to me. While our sexual relationship was not natural for me at first, I have felt safe to figure it out, and over the first few months of marriage it became easier and more natural. Our sexuality grew as an offshoot of our friendship, an expression of a deep emotional love. As we grow older, our ongoing efforts to find time for romance and shared positive experiences has led to a stronger friendship and marriage. I truly get to come home to my best friend every day.

Reflections

My husband and I were headed for a very unhappy marriage. I grew up in a women's liberation home where I was taught that men only wanted one thing and that the best thing to do was to bring your man into submission. To make my marriage wonderful, I had to change. . . . Stepping outside of my selfish world changed everything. Sex is now no longer about me—I changed. When I don't desire sex, I desire his happiness, which means I will give myself to him. I end up with a double win because I have fulfilled his need and I feel great. Sex is no longer just about sex. It is a union between us that strengthens us. I try to give him all the physical affection that he personally needs. . . . I do not withhold myself from him. And, yes, sadly, I used to. Since I have changed myself, our marriage is a beautiful thing. My husband gives more and more to me. I then show appreciation and physical affection. Then he gives more, and it continues on and on. I cherish my marriage to him more than anything.

Gina Ogden, a sex-therapy educator and researcher, encourages an exercise in which she asks clients to evaluate how they exhibit true love in their sexual relationship. She has clients write an advertisement seeking “the perfect lover—for you—a lover who will fill your desires of body, mind, heart, and spirit.”¹⁶ She then encourages clients to take the ad they have generated and apply it to themselves to become the lover they have just written about. For example, if they have written about finding someone who is sensitive and generous, they may then recognize at times their tendency to be insensitive, withholding, or even cruel in their sexual relationship with their spouse. This can be a powerful way to reappraise our approach to our sexual relationship. As a counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, Linda Reeves taught, “The intimate marriage relationship between a man and a woman that brings children into mortality is also meant to be a beautiful, loving experience that binds together two devoted hearts, unites both spirit and body, and brings a fullness of joy and happiness as we learn to put each other first.”¹⁷

As genuine charity reigns in the bedroom, couples may find that sexual encounters become more enjoyable and more emotionally and physically fulfilling. One of the major findings from a study conducted by Ogden was that sex-

ual satisfaction increases with age; respondents over fifty reported “more sexual pleasure, vitality, eye-contact, sharing, and ecstasy” than did the respondents in their twenties and thirties.¹⁸ The author described this relative to the sharing that occurs over the years of a couple’s sexual relationship: “Those in long-term relationships were able to revel in the years of emotional and physical sharing that deepened their sense of erotic connection.”¹⁹

So it may be said that by being serviceable and charitable in the sexual relationship, one actually becomes most likely to be successful at securing for themselves their greatest *selfish* desires as well as their most charitable ones. Waite and Gallagher commented, “This selfless approach to sex, paradoxically, is far more likely to bring sexual satisfaction to both men and women.”²⁰

Yet service in the bedroom can be a conundrum. To feel sexual pleasure a person largely focuses on themselves—their own thoughts, their own physical sensations, and their own desires. By nature this may become a selfish process, and indeed in many marriages it is so, as the purposes of sex, the needs and desires of one’s spouse, and the general principles of Christianity may be overlooked

Reflections

My husband and I have always had a passionate, healthy sex life. A year or so after our last child was born, I started to experience intense pain during and after sex. I went to my gynecologist and he referred me to a specialist; I had blisters in my vagina. The specialist gave me some hormone creams and sent me home. I tried the creams, but they didn’t seem to work for me. I became very discouraged. I felt like I was broken and that I was impacting our marriage so that my husband wasn’t getting everything he needed. However, my husband was a tremendous support during this difficult time. We continued to have a very passionate and loving sex life that focused on a variety of things that were enjoyable and satisfying but also kept me from feeling pain. I started to feel like we would never have a “typical” sex life again because my condition never seemed to improve over a number of years. My husband was the key to resolving this issue. He didn’t just feel like this was “my” problem, but he approached it as “our” problem. He learned about my disorder, found out about a new treatment, and helped me with it. Over the course of a few weeks, I began to see progress. We were finally able to work through this physical challenge and have grown closer because of my husband’s patience and deep love for me.

Reflections

My wife and I have been married for almost fifteen years. We were not too far into our marriage when we discovered that our sex drives were not the same. There were a few years when things were a little frustrating for me; she didn't feel a desire to have sex very often and I did. But I didn't want to have sex if she didn't want to have sex. It left me feeling rejected at times and anxious. Those feelings sometimes led to tensions in our home outside of the bedroom. About five years ago, we had a very open conversation about sex. I expressed that I would like to have sex more than we do. She explained that she really enjoys sex about once a week but has a hard time being in the right mental and emotional place more than once a week to really enjoy it. She then proposed that when I wanted to have sex and she wasn't feeling up to a full-scale interaction that she was completely okay with a shorter sexual exchange that was focused on me. In a perfect world, we would both want to have sex the same amount, and it would be a mutual experience every time. But things are definitely better than they were, and I'm much happier and less frustrated than I used to be.

or forgotten. Yet both spouses are faced with the challenge to discipline this natural, selfish tendency within themselves and set aside their focus on their own pleasures to focus on the pleasures of their spouse. In the Book of Mormon, Alma's counsel to his son Shiblon includes "See that ye bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love" (Alma 38:12). Indeed, "charity serves as the ruling virtue in our effort to bless one another."²¹

Due to biological differences relative to the sexual response cycle, it is incumbent upon men to be particularly sensitive to this issue of sexual charity. Generally speaking, women take longer than do men to reach adequate levels of arousal and climax to experience orgasm. Before their marriage, John Bytheway and his wife, Kimberly, were given counsel relative to what they should expect from this sexual dynamic, including this one-liner: "Men are like microwaves, and women are like crock-pots."²² Issues that affect hormones, such as menopause, taking birth control pills, or physical difficulties with reproductive organs, can also cause sex-drive difficulties in women. Thus, the husband may need to patiently serve until his wife has her opportunity for sexual fulfillment. The scripture 1 Corin-

thians 7:3–4 states, “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.” Ed and Gaye Wheat have counseled, “*Every wife should be given the opportunity to experience orgasm in every intercourse.* The relationship may be very loving and warm, but this is not enough.”²³

Timing and Frequency of Sexual Relations

The sexual relationship is fully for both husband and wife. Yet it is frequently the case that men and women have varying levels of sexual interest. For example, research on sexual activity has shown that, overall, men are more likely to be interested in sex, more likely to be sexually active, and more likely to be satisfied with their sexual experiences.²⁴ Thus, just negotiating how often or when to have sexual relations may become a very complex marital issue relative to seeking unity. Couples must be willing to talk together about these issues frequently, openly sharing their honest thoughts and feelings. Each individual and couple is different, so no general standards should be imposed from external sources regarding how frequently couples should have sexual relations. Even within the course of marriage, life circumstances change; and with those changes, the frequency of sexual encounters will likely change too. For example, during pregnancy many women report satisfactory levels of interest and sexual response in the second trimester but poor levels of interest and sexual response in the first and third trimesters.²⁵ After delivering the baby, physical complaints due to the recovery process and simple fatigue also create difficulties.

Age and health are also factors that affect the frequency of sexual relations. Researchers studying those in their elder years found that men and women reporting very good or excellent health were more likely to be sexually active compared with

their peers in poor or fair health.²⁶ However, those with health concerns generally have sexual relations less frequently. Poor health such as reduced mobility, disease processes, effects of medications, and vasocongestive processes (blood flow) that are important for sexual response contributed to decreased sexual activity in these elder years.²⁷

As we are considerate of our life circumstances and sensitive to the context around our spouse's ability to participate in sexual activity (as well as being mindful of the spiritual purposes of sex), we should never feel used, cheated, or left out. Alma's counsel to his son Corianton in Alma 39:9 states, "Go no more after the lusts of your eyes, but cross yourself in all these things; for except ye do this ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God." If a spouse is feeling used, cheated, or disregarded in your sexual relationship together, then that is a clue that the role of sexuality in the relationship has become skewed.

Unfortunately, some spouses use sexual relations as a bartering tool in marriage. For example, a wife may control the sexual relationship with her husband and only engage in sex if her husband has satisfied her prerequisites, such as first washing the dishes, folding the laundry, helping with the children, or performing some emotional task. On the other hand, a husband may withhold these or other types of services or other needs his wife may have in order to control the sexual relationship. Regardless of the prerequisite established, the overall tone communicates, "You're not doing the things to please me, so I am not going to please you." This type of arrangement is not of an eternal quality and reduces the marital sexual relationship to exploitation.

Scheduling as an Option to Enhance Unity

If the sexual relationship between you and your spouse is a source of interpersonal pain because you continue to struggle relative to finding balance to meet both of your needs or because you

struggle in a chronically difficult interpersonal relationship, working toward unity may require additional care and patience. In a study of sexual desire of LDS women by psychologist Jennifer Finlayson-Fife, participants shared ways they found balance in their sexual relationships when there was a discrepancy in sexual desire. One participant indicated:

Again, it is the timing issue. I mean for a while we would alternate. You know, he wanted sex in the morning and I wanted sex at night, so we would alternate that way. . . . Though, what we would find, even though he is more desiring in the mornings, we clearly do not have as much time as we do at night. So, not only do I not look forward to that because it is in the morning and I am not a morning person, but also because I know it probably won't be as pleasurable for me because it takes me awhile to get excited and always has. . . . So, I mean, we have said, you know, the morning is your time and the night is my time and that has seemed to work pretty well.²⁸

This person's experience illustrates the types of arrangements some couples make in order to try to

Reflections

When my wife and I have consistent intimate time together, we get along so much better. When we had these times together, we would always say to each other, "We need to do this more often; it's fun and we get along better." Then life would set in, we would get busy, time would go by, we'd have disagreements, and then we'd finally find ourselves being intimate again. Sometimes the disagreements became pretty big blowups, likely from the strain of neglecting our intimate relationship. It was a horrible cycle and really made no sense. Finally, we decided to schedule our intimate time together. It seemed so contrived and unromantic to set a time to have sex, but we did it anyway. As it turned out, we loved it! Rather than being contrived and unromantic, planned intimacy gave us something to look forward to and a time to hold each other accountable . . . and seriously, who doesn't want to be held accountable to having intimate times with the one they love?! We aren't perfect in our consistency, but we do make sure we're together at least twice a week. It should come as no surprise that our disagreements and blowups are now very few and very far between, and I'm more in love with my sweetheart than ever.

meet the needs of both parties. These negotiations can be helpful in finding balance.

For those not satisfied by this type of arrangement, a temporary arrangement may include creating a monthly or weekly schedule for sexual encounters. Scheduling sexual relations can allow one to feel less anxiety on non-sex days and frees spouses to be affectionate or cuddle without any pressure or expectation of sexual activity. This strategy allows both of you to look forward to sexual activity and plan, and will help you avoid stress and anxiety that may occur on non-sex days due to apprehensions or anxieties about possible misunderstandings or unmet expectations.

Thus, this simple strategy can prevent resentment or even arguments and can actually allow a more relaxed and even romantic experience when you do come together for sexual activity. In that spirit of cooperative caring, arrangements can be reevaluated and adjustments can be made more easily in an effort to more closely meet the needs of each partner.

Scheduling sexual activity can also be a great solution for couples who do not struggle with differing sexual needs or other issues but whose sexual relationship gets neglected because of busy schedules with family, professions, or Church callings. Scheduling the day or days of the week or month that you will have sexual relations may, on the surface, sound unappealing, unromantic, or lacking in spontaneity. Yet scheduling tends to have a paradoxical effect by enhancing the positive experiences of the sexual relationship as partners can look forward to and plan to spend intimate time together. The consistent time together, as opposed to inconsistent encounters, can greatly enhance marital unity.

Working Together to Find Solutions

For some couples, scheduling arrangements such as these may be woefully inadequate in finding and building unity in their sex-

ual relationship. If you and your spouse are in this type of painful situation, unable to find a workable sexual balance, it may be helpful to at least find a *temporary* arrangement that takes into account both of your needs as best as possible. With large discrepancies in sexual desires, this will likely not be a permanent solution, but it will be a start. When couples are at a stalemate, they often disengage. Avoidance of these types of discussions can contribute to the pain of sexual discrepancies; avoidance causes greater pressure and works against you.

So just reengaging in the sexual conversation is a significant success. When the commitment to work on the sexual relationship is made explicit, each spouse then has permission to bring the topic up for discussion as frequently as needed. Frequently addressing the issue with a tone of problem-solving and charity can diffuse a lot of negative energy.

If you are unsure of how to negotiate this discussion because of the deep pain and seeming impossibility of satisfying both of you, please see our discussion on navigating perpetual issues at the end of chapter 7 for a step-by-step guide on how you can have this conversation without hurting each other.

Appropriate Sexual Behavior

In a highly sexualized culture in which anything goes, it does us well to consider what type of sexual behavior is appropriate relative to honoring the eternal purposes of sex in marriage. To do this, we first look at the official Church policy, which states: “The Lord’s law of chastity is abstinence from sexual relations outside of lawful marriage and fidelity within marriage. Sexual relations are proper only between a man and a woman who are legally and lawfully wedded as husband and wife. Adultery, fornication, homosexual or lesbian relations, and every other unholy, unnatural, or impure practice are sinful.”²⁹

Disorders

A sexual difficulty can arise in the desire, arousal, or orgasm phases of the sexual-response cycle. Common problems include:

- Male erectile disorder is characterized by difficulty achieving and maintaining an erection during sexual contact.³⁵ This is the main sexual disorder for which men seek treatment.³⁶
- Female orgasmic disorder is characterized by marked delay in, marked infrequency of, or absence of orgasm in almost all or all occasions of sexual activity.³⁷
- Premature (early) ejaculation is characterized by a persistent pattern of ejaculation during intercourse within approximately one minute following vaginal penetration and before the individual wishes it.³⁸ This is the most prevalent male sexual difficulty (21 percent).³⁹

The phrase “every other unholy, unnatural, or impure practice” is the guiding principle for appropriate sexual activity in an eternal marriage. Specific sexual practices are defined relative to this standard by each couple with the guidance of the Holy Ghost. If a couple feels by the guidance of the Spirit that certain sexual behaviors are unholy, unnatural, or impure, they should avoid such behavior.

The Church and prophets have offered some additional guidance. To be sure, pornography use in marriage constitutes an “unholy practice” and is unacceptable. The Church defines pornography as “any material depicting or describing the human body or sexual conduct in a way that arouses sexual feelings.”³⁰ Viewing pornography ourselves or encouraging our spouse to view it with us in the belief that it would enhance our sexual relationship is inaccurate, inappropriate, and sinful. Relative to other sexual practices, President Howard W. Hunter counseled:

Tenderness and respect—never selfishness—must be the guiding principles in the intimate relationship between husband and wife. Each partner must be considerate and sensitive to the

other's needs and desires. Any domineering, indecent, or uncontrolled behavior in the intimate relationship between husband and wife is condemned by the Lord.³¹

Couples should consider such counsel when questions about the acceptability of sexual practices arise. Speaking about the importance of unselfishness, Elder Neil A. Anderson taught, "The happiness of our spouse is more important than our own pleasure."³²

Each partner's personal feelings should be considered, keeping in mind the eternal purposes of sex as we have discussed them here and seeking the guiding influence of the Holy Ghost. If you have differing opinions—so that one spouse feels a certain sexual practice is acceptable, while the other spouse feels it is not appropriate—the more conservative spouse's opinion should be honored in respect of their spiritual feelings. A summary of this principle is found in a book discussing the presidency of President Spencer W. Kimball: "Dr. Homer Ellsworth once asked what sexual conduct was acceptable for a married couple. Spencer replied that in his view anything mutually pleasurable and satisfying was acceptable, but neither should ask for conduct the other found offensive."³³

Reflections

My wife has orgasm problems. We have sought out several avenues for help over the years, such as medications and therapy, but to no avail. It is discouraging for both of us. There are times when she will turn away and cry after sex because her needs are not met. I am sure I lack in my efforts, but I do my best to comfort and soothe her. It has been a tricky balance. I have curbed my sexual desires so that we are not having sex as often. I naturally want to be fulfilled, but I have a strong desire to see that she is also fulfilled. She feels guilty for not having sex with me as often as I would prefer, but this has helped relieve her of some of her emotional pain of continually feeling discouraged and unsatisfied sexually. Yet if I do this too much, I have noticed that she can also feel unwanted if I don't approach her for sex. So right now we just do our awkward best to work with and be sensitive to each other. To be honest, her attitude and continual efforts to still please me and make sure that my sexual desires are not neglected is a testimony to me of how amazing and selfless she is.

Sexual Dysfunction

As we've been discussing, the sexual relationship is complex, with varying contextual issues contributing to its function or dysfunction. In its complexity, the experience does not occur as our modern media would care to script it; it doesn't always go smoothly and it doesn't always create orgasm or sense of pleasurable ecstasy for each spouse every time. A classic study from the 1970s examined one hundred well-educated, happily married couples and found that more than 80 percent of the couples reported happy and satisfying sexual relations; yet 40 percent of the men reported occasional erectile and ejaculatory difficulties, and 63 percent of women reported occasional difficulties surrounding arousal and orgasm. This study found that in spite of these occasional difficulties, the overall sexual satisfaction of the couples studied was not reduced.³⁴

Yet for some couples, difficulties with the sexual relationship go beyond normal, occasional setbacks. In these cases the sexual difficulties may cause impairment in the sexual relationship or create a great deal of distress.

Indeed, sexual dysfunction constitutes the most prevalent class of psychological disorders in the US. Most disorders discussed in abnormal-psychology courses have a prevalence rate of about 1 percent (i.e., 1 of every 100 people will have the disorder); whereas, among sexual disorders the prevalence rates are estimated at 31 percent for men and 43 percent for women.⁴⁰ In other words, many couples find that they will struggle with one or more sexual difficulties at various points in their marriage, with about 3 out of every 10 men and 4 out of every 10 women meeting diagnostic criteria for a sexual disorder. In some cases, penile-vaginal intercourse may not be possible for some couples, most common in those struggling with vaginismus or dyspareunia, thus requiring alternative scripts for their sexual activity.

These sexual difficulties can impact the marital relationship. For example, researchers examining women with orgasmic disorder found that when couples discussed intercourse with each other, men and women both reported feeling greater responsibility for the sexual problem (compared to control groups that did not struggle with sexual dysfunction). When these same couples discussed the topic of direct genital stimulation of the women, the men manifested greater blame, assigning responsibility for their wives' orgasmic problems to themselves. The researchers also found that women tended to be less receptive during these discussions—they were less likely to engage in listening behaviors (such as attentiveness and eye contact) and offer verbal indicators (such as acceptance and acknowledgment of their partner's viewpoint and incorporation of their partner's perspective into their own communication).⁴¹ Blame and a failure to be open and receptive during sexual discussions will most certainly create negativity in the relationship and are likely to undermine efforts to resolve the sexual problem.

However, open communication about these issues, without blame, can mitigate some difficulties by addressing critical issues and honoring the expression of feelings. Researchers studying patients struggling with prostate cancer found that those couples who reported high levels of mutual constructive communication reported better marital adjustment than those with less healthy communication, regardless of their level of sexual dysfunction.⁴²

Seeking treatment for a sexual difficulty is important, just as is seeking treatment for any other psychological disorder, such as anxiety or depression. When we seek treatment for problems with our knee, shoulder, or other such problem, the doctor does an assessment and then suggests treatment. We have found in our experience that since we go to the doctor in recognition of our ignorance and need for help, and in recognition of their expertise on the issue, we usually accept the treatment recommendations the doctor prescribes. However, we advise thoughtful prayer

and consideration of all treatments prescribed relative to sexual difficulties, and if you feel it necessary, counsel with priesthood leaders.

Treatments such as education about basic sexual response, couple-reinforcing activities or exercises, or medications are commonly used in sex therapy with great success. However, be advised that some treatments prescribed by therapists may not always be in line with one's personal religious views about sexuality or with the general doctrines of the Church. For example, with sexual difficulty in areas of desire or arousal, the current psychological treatments often include the viewing of pornography. Likewise, one of the most common treatment recommendations for women experiencing difficulty achieving orgasm is masturbatory training. Counsel from Church leaders prohibiting the viewing of pornography and masturbation may make these treatments areas of concern. Thus, thoughtful and prayerful consideration would be appropriate.

Conclusion

The sexual relationship in marriage has been given to us by a loving Father in Heaven to enjoy physical pleasure, procreate, express love, and learn deeper spiritual truths. We learn more about His role as Creator and are able to gain greater unity with Him. We are able to more fully come to understand Christ's relationship with the Church, a relationship that also teaches us about how we should interact with our spouse. These great truths are available to us if we seek them, and by so doing we learn more about charity and service in meeting the needs and desires of our spouse. Through the sexual relationship we can therefore gain greater unity and intimacy with our spouse. The paradoxical truth is that as we are willing to forget ourselves in the true spirit of love, we are actually blessed with the satisfying of our own sexual pleasures.

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