

GENERATION EX: WHAT A MAN NEEDS

Globe Life Column

Sex, or he's your ex

SARAH HAMPSON

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The penis rules.

Excuse me for being so bold, but I wanted to let readers know this is not a column about and for women only. Sure, many women feel that divorce is a particularly female rite of passage. You don't see men writing books about their personal journey following marital breakdown, do you?

But not discussing what men feel about marriage and divorce is like not discussing what's involved in the erection (sorry) of a stable building.

And a man's need for sex is what is often misunderstood. So, on the important subject of the horizontal relationship in marriage, here's what I've learned.

The penis rules. Or should, anyway. "If men don't feel respected or loved, if they don't feel like a man, if they have to walk around on eggshells when it comes to their sex drive, if their horniness is treated like an inconsiderate act of selfishness - like typical male behaviour - then they will reassert themselves with another woman," says a man I will call Mr. Multiply Divorced.

People who make coitus their career understand this. Ask Lou Paget, sex therapist and best-selling author of books about orgasms and helpful tips on giving blow jobs, among other bedroom matters. "There's no other time in a man's life when he is more connected to his masculine self than when he is making love or having sex with the woman or partner of his choice," she explains.

"And men know this. ... It's a huge part of the male psyche that he be acknowledged for what his efforts are, and he will go elsewhere to get it if his partner doesn't give it to him. He will get it through sports. He will get it through work by the accumulation of money. I can't tell you how many men I know who are massively successful but who have crappy marriages. Or they will get it from another woman."

It's children that change the sexual energy of a marriage. I remember an acquaintance of mine complaining about her husband's expectation of sex. She had two young sons at the time, and she was a wonderful hands-on and attentive mother. There were lunches to be made, laundry to finish, dinner to make, homework to help with, errands to run, and just before she passed out from

exhaustion, a husband to do. And she did, because if nothing else, she is highly responsible. (And still married, by the way.)

The whole yummy-mummy trend is really a statement of denial, if you ask me. Most young mothers will tell you that after having their bodies taken over by pregnancy, and then the demands of breastfeeding and constant monitoring of a baby, what they would really like at night is to be left alone for a bit, untouched. They've overdosed on closeness for the time being.

But husbands still want their wives to view them as the primary relationship. Another man I know - okay, we can call him Mr. Former Boyfriend - told me that in his marriage of 20 years and three children, his ex-wife, who gave up work to devote herself to the care of their offspring, denied him sex so often he had to beg for it. And when she relented, he felt it was out of pity or obligation.

Such a dynamic is common and emasculating, notes Esther Perel, a New York-based couples therapist and the best-selling author of *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic & the Domestic*, published last year.

"It's not healthy for men to feel pathetic about their urges and shame about their desire. It's not just their masculinity they are expressing through sex but also their lesser masculine qualities, their tenderness, their vulnerability, their desire to give pleasure and receive it," she explains.

"This expression through the body is often the primary language that men use to say these things. It's easy for the women to just brush it off, and say, 'All he wants is sex.' What they should be asking is, 'Why am I never interested? What happened to my own desires?' "

Ms. Perel's prescription for good marital sex is what she calls "more air." Too much intimacy, having to know everything your partner did and share every activity he or she enjoys, kills lust, she believes. "The paradox is that the pursuit of passion involves excitement, mystery, unpredictability. But the pursuit of intimacy involves wanting to be known completely and expecting predictability. And yet we want both."

The trick, she says, is allowing "a modicum of freedom in a relationship. Don't ask the other person to give up freedom so you can feel more secure."

Many men, not being the greatest communicators, resort to anger when they're not getting the intimacy they crave. They will say lack of sex makes them feel "they were sold a bill of goods," as one guy explains, since "women are much more sexually aggressive and suggestive during the courting stage, and inexperienced men can be fooled by that.

"I've come to believe firmly that people need to be honest with themselves [and

their partners] about their libidos," he continues. "If they have big ones, they should seek out partners with a matching appetite." (Yes, that's Mr. Multiply Divorced talking.)

He has a point, but married life can be stressful, what with mortgages, kids and work-life juggling; and stress, for women, is a sex-killer. For men, on the other hand, a romp in bed is stress therapy. "For us, it can be like golf or watching television," admits a source from the world of men.

Of course, for women, talking is like golf. (Confused yet?) "Women want to emotionally share and talk about their day," the man continues.

Still married to his wife of 21 years, with whom he has two children, he should be called Mr. Highly Evolved. But he didn't get there on his own. All that wisdom about how women and men think differently comes from years of couples therapy.

"For men, it's like Chinese water torture to be talking about something endlessly," he says. "Guys think, 'Just fix it.' So when the wife says she wants to be asked how she is, the man goes, 'What? We've got to have an hour and a half discussion about emotional connection before you feel like having sex? What happened to sex on the kitchen floor?' "

Mr. Highly Evolved was preparing for divorce, he confesses. "Part of the equation for me to stay in my marriage was that I care about my boys, and ultimately, I realized that if I want to live in a relationship, whether it's with my wife or someone else, I have to do this work. And as long as my wife is interested in doing it, too, which she was, then it's worth it."

On a final note, let's return to Ms. Paget, who, 51 and once married and divorced, now enjoys a live-out boyfriend and a live-in 20-pound cat called Mr. Freddie. I could hear him meowing for her attention in the background of her Los Angeles home.

"Men marry for two reasons," she states. "They're proud to be with that woman socially. Look," she adds in best-girlfriend whisper, "we both know women who have sex with men who aren't seen with them publicly. The second reason men marry is sexual compatibility."

Which brings me to a final bit of good advice. Be a lady in public and a whore in the bedroom. And help him understand that before talking dirty, the whore sometimes needs to have a cuddly chat about her day.