



'Everyone who works with couples knows it's just as often the man who withholds sex, or isn't interested'

AUTHOR AND THERAPIST ESTHER PEREL TALKS TO KATE FILLION ABOUT DESIRE, SEPARATENESS, AND HOW INTIMACY CAN KILL EROTICISM

Q *You're a couples' therapist as well as an author. Who usually pushes for counselling when a couple's sex life is in decline?*

A: The person who longs for it most. Every therapist who works with couples knows that it's just as often the man who withholds sex, or is no longer interested. In popular culture this is a female issue, but that's not what we see in our offices.

Q: *You say the problem is often too much intimacy.*

A: The paradox is that greater intimacy doesn't necessarily lead to better sex. Desire needs separateness, a certain space in order to thrive. We seek security and predictability in our long-term relationships, but eroticism thrives on mystery, novelty and risk.

Q: *But a lot of other therapists say intimacy is the key to a good relationship, that if you are able to talk to each other, you will have better sex.*

A: There is a need to expand the definition of intimacy so it goes beyond simply talking or self-disclosure. Defining intimacy solely in terms of verbal language is to disregard the language of the body as an equally important language of expression, to disregard companionship or just building a bookshelf for the other person or other acts of attention and bids for connection that are all part of the intimate. Women, sometimes, because of their discomfort with the body and the fact that they wield words better, seek refuge

in a closeness that is primarily verbal. For many men, because often the verbal language has been drained out of them at a fairly young age, the body provides a language for expressing their feelings and their vulnerability. It's an aspect of male physicality that is not highlighted because we spend much more time looking at male physical aggression than at how men express vulnerability through the body.

Q: *The stereotype is that women give sex to get love, and men give love to get sex. But you're saying many men, at least married ones, have sex to get love.*

A Exactly. But the distinction, that one is intimacy and one is sex, or one is love and one is sex, is actually a false distinction that doesn't help many people. A woman who hasn't been touched becomes irritable, depressed, explosive sometimes. Men too. We just need that physical connection.

Q: *Is sexual boredom in marriage a particularly North American problem?*

A: I'm from Belgium, and when you look at European society, there is still a certain idea of separateness—and it is separateness between the genders that comes maybe out of a different conception of equality and egalitarianism—that creates a different way of looking at intimacy. So we don't necessarily see talking and sharing everything and trying to do everything with one person as

the norm. I think the idea that marriage is everything, that you can have with one person the economic support, the companionship, the family life, and then on top of it want that person to be your best friend, your confidant, and your passionate lover—that's a large burden of expectations.

Q: *Well, is the problem really too much intimacy or, rather, too much familiarity because your husband doesn't close the bathroom door?*

A: Put him on the line! I think one reason intimacy has become blurred with familiarity is the nuclear family model. We are much more isolated than we used to be, we end up sharing everything with fewer people, and trying to have our partner fulfill all the needs that used to be met by our extended families, our communities, our churches, and so on. With one person, we are trying to create both a sense of family life, which often implies a lack of boundaries, and a relationship of lovers. Often those require different behaviours. In many couples, intimacy goes even further than familiarity and takes the form of surveillance, a very close monitoring of the other person's comings and goings, all for the purpose of experiencing a greater sense of security. Unfortunately, I don't believe that's how it works. On a certain level, the security remains an illusion. No matter how much we try to create a certain kind of captivity for each other, it doesn't make us feel any safer. Often people confuse intimacy with merging, and merging kills desire.

Q: *Is feminism implicated in all of the bad or non-existent sex married people are having?*

A: Feminism was and still is invaluable in challenging the abuses of power, and the differentials of power that exist between men and women. But for a long time, it was less interested in women's pleasure than in women's power. There were different strands inside the feminist movement, with some who saw *all* sex as a manoeuvre of power that actually demeans women, and some who saw the power in women actually owning the desire and owning the pleasure they can experience sexually. An unanticipated consequence is that when it comes to desire, when it comes to sexuality, it is not really possible to neutralize power completely. Certain elements of aggression and hostility are intrinsic to erotic desire.

Q: *Wait a second. Hostility can make your sex life better?*

A: I don't know if I would say better, but there are a number of feelings that fuel desire that are not necessarily gentle, positive feelings. Desire can be instigated by small doses of anxiety, the right amount of guilt, the violation of prohibitions, a slight transgression, and an element of aggression, even the desire to conquer. Those feelings, in the right amounts, are powerful aphrodisiacs and they are intrinsic to desire.

Q *Most people believe passion fades over time, this is a natural occurrence and even in some respects desirable if we're going to be productive members of society who aren't swooning all over the place. Why do you think it's undesirable?*

A: Every civilization has dealt out prohibitions and incentives when it comes to regulating passion, because passion is indeed very unproductive and unruly. You can't rule a society of passionate people, you need compliant citizens. When I talk about passion and the erotic, I'm really talking about a sense of aliveness, vitality and exuberance that people long to have in their lives. They sometimes find it in their work, or art, or religion. But sex has always been one avenue where people can experience enchantment and transcendence. For many couples, though, there is this narrative of passion fading and being replaced by a kind of cozy comfort. They want to recapture the sense of renewal and playfulness that sex afforded them. This is a dilemma I don't think necessarily has a solution. It's more a problem to manage than a problem to solve. And the idea that you can live with problems that don't necessarily have a solution is not a very American idea, it's tolerated better abroad. North American society likes hard facts, bluntness,

direct speech, results. It's not a place where people flirt that much, because flirting is playing with the possibility, it's not about making it happen.

Q: *It's also increasingly impermissible because of concerns, legitimate ones, about sexual harassment.*

A Yes. But desire is not necessarily politically correct. What is sexually exciting does not necessarily play by the same rules as good citizenship, even in our intimate relationships. I think there is a better understanding of this in European countries. What's very interesting in the United States is that despite certain couples seemingly knowing so much about each other, the one area of many people's lives that remains sealed and unspoken is their sexuality—not so much what they do, but what they think about while they do it. Monogamy, even monogamy of the mind, is the sacred cow of the romantic ideal. The idea that one's partner is interested in or even notices other people can be experienced as a sense of betrayal: "If you're interested in someone else, you can't be interested in me." It becomes an indication that you are insufficient to inhabit the other person's entire sexual self. Well, how could one person inhabit the entire erotic realm of another person?

Q: *Do you think legalization of marriage will do to gay sex what it has done to heterosexual sex?*

A: By introducing marriage, there probably will be more similarities with the heterosexual model. But gay couples are the only couples, in my office at least, who understand that monogamy is a negotiation, not an assumption.

Q: *But when there's an affair, you don't think that telling the other person about it is always a good idea. Right?*

A: Right. In the American context, there's this idea that working through an affair necessitates full disclosure of all the details. But for some people, to live with the consequences of knowing all the details is much more painful. I see some couples where there's been an affair, it's never disclosed, they've moved past it, and it's not my moral obligation to reveal it. This is a thorny issue for therapists, and there seems to be a distinction in the thinking of American and foreign therapists—not about the fact that affairs hurt, and not about the fact that nobody goes around advising people to have affairs. The debate is about how to go about working through the affair, the importance of revelation, whether disclosure is necessary. In some cultures, helping your partner maintain face, not embarrassing them, is an im-

portant consideration. Nobody condones affairs in Europe, that's a bit of a myth. But there is a sense that certain things happen, and they don't necessarily warrant the dissolution of the entire family. What often surprises foreign therapists working here is that this society is willing to endorse multiple marriages and divorces, with the dissolution of all the family bonds that entails, but it would never openly discuss the question of monogamy.

Q: *How much of your work is informed by your own marriage?*

A: We've had three different marriages with each other over the course of a 25-year relationship. At each stage, we renegotiated our relationship and the degrees of interdependence between the two of us. At some point I understood, partly because of our



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struggles, that longing and anticipation are essential ingredients of desire. At some point I understood that I should have my best girlfriends and there are certain things I should share with them and not necessarily with my husband, and that sometimes I should keep the trivial to myself and just bring the sublime to him. I understood that if I wanted to maintain a certain edge, I would have to curb a little bit what could easily become a cozy, comfortable familiarity that would be very affectionate and companionate but not necessarily exciting. And so, I began to close the bathroom door, you could say. **M**