

ARI TUCKMAN



ADHD After Dark

Better Sex Life, Better Relationship



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Sex Makes You a Better Person

Really? Sex makes you a better person?

Absolutely. Keeping sex great over the years and decades with the same person will indeed involve the kind of personal and relationship growth that can't help but make both of you better people overall.

To have a consistently good sex life, you need to behave well before, during, and after sex and you need to work well with your partner on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with sex. This process has great rewards, but can be a lot of work, especially as the relationship deepens, gets more complicated, and stretches over the decades. The couples who are the happiest through this process are the ones who hold themselves and their partners to high but reasonable standards and strive for self-growth. They take personal responsibility and challenge themselves to work on their issues. This makes them better partners, but also indirectly pushes their partner to also bring their best and become a better person and partner. This might mean working on their own or their partner's ADHD, but it also involves everything else that the couple might be struggling with.

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What would make your sex life better for you?

If we had good communication and a deep, intimate relationship, sex would be much more enjoyable for me and less of a chore. If I felt truly seen . . . truly understood . . . and truly prioritized, I would feel more free to let go and enjoy sex, and see it as an important part of our relationship.

Non-ADHD woman, 42, married, 6–10 years

This process of individual and shared growth enables them to keep their sex life vibrant. For most people, a better sex life isn't the only, or even primary, motivator for this difficult work, but it's hard to keep your sex life humming along without doing this work. This is why I say that sex makes you a better person—it's yet another motivator to do that other personal and relationship work that is a prerequisite for a great sex life. And because sexuality can feel like such a sensitive and vulnerable topic, it takes some great communication and relationship skills to find ways to negotiate the two partners' differences and create a great sex life that meets both of their needs. So, sexuality is both a powerful motivator and also a great testing ground for those important skills that will benefit all other parts of the relationship. Even if we just want to get laid, there is so much more going on there when it happens in committed relationships.

What would make your sex life better for you?

Sex would better for me if I could relax enough to allow myself to enjoy what my partner does. If it's not the perfect touch, at the perfect time, in the perfect way. . . . I tend to dwell on the negative versus enjoying the positive. Maybe that's not an ADHD thing, but I can't help thinking that "normal people" would be able to do it better. Essentially, I'm so aware of being different, that the way I respond to anything my hubby does **MUST** be abnormal.

ADHD woman, 44, married, been together 21+ years

Peace Sometimes Requires War

Early in most relationships, everyone is polite, interested, and focused on what they like about each other, so there are few fights. Nobody is making excessive demands and both partners try to be considerate of each other. In the survey, the vast majority of respondents were quite happy with their relationship and sex life in the first year. These are fun and usually easy times. Unfortunately, this peace is partially maintained by avoiding too much honesty and disclosure, as partners feel each other out and see what the other can handle.

As the partners' differences begin to emerge and become more noticeable, a more complete picture of the other person is revealed and we don't like everything that we see. Of course, we all have things about ourselves that we wish were different, so we shouldn't expect our partner to be more perfect than we ourselves are. Not only do we begin to see more of the differences between us, warts and all, but it also matters a lot more now that the relationship has become more important. Acquaintances don't bother us as much because what they do and who they are doesn't have as much of a direct impact on our life and happiness. With a committed partner, we're caught between being bothered by their shortcomings and therefore want to push them to work on them, but we also don't want to lose this important person from our lives so we may be inclined to try to ignore the problems. Damn, that's a tough dilemma.

Sometimes these increasingly obvious differences between partners feel insurmountable and the relationship ends, which may be for the best—hopefully both partners learned some good lessons about themselves and relationships and go on to find a better match next time.

Even when the couple stays together, this process of disillusionment is normal, inevitable, and ultimately a good thing if the couple is able to hold onto each other's positive qualities while tolerating the less desirable ones as they work through the struggles that evolving relationships bring. Even when partners are really similar in all the important ways, they won't want all the same things at all the same times. This is probably the time that ADHD symptoms become

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more obvious or when they are no longer written off as interesting quirks. This is also the time when the non-ADHD partner's less productive attempts to deal with those symptoms become more noticeable (i.e., annoying). So the tug of war begins: "stop telling me what to do!" versus "stop doing those things that make me angry!"

The big three argument topics for most couples are sex, money, and parenting, all of which can be impacted by ADHD. These topics are hardest because we tend to care much more about the outcome of a disagreement when one of these is center stage, unlike discussions about what to have for dinner. In addition, these big three tend to have mutually exclusive options—sex usually requires a personal involvement from both partners, a dollar can't be spent twice, and partners need to make at least generally compatible parenting decisions. It's easier to take one for the team on other topics or to come up with an easy compromise that everyone can be happy enough about ("OK, we can watch my movie next time.").

It's these less obviously solvable impasses that require more nuanced discussions and sophisticated negotiations to come to a sustainable agreement. This requires reflection to figure out what you want and why, empathy to understand your partner's position, and probably some good self-soothing for when things get heated. The best solutions are probably not simply a 50/50 split down the middle where each partner is half unhappy; rather, find those deeper solutions that both people can feel even better about. This isn't kid stuff and isn't for the faint of heart. It requires solid self-awareness and negotiation skills and a genuine desire to create a solution that you can both be happy with.

It can be even harder to work on the big three when too much of your time, energy, and good will toward each other are constantly

The non-ADHD person really needs to move beyond taking anything personally and really just go with the flow. (However, don't compromise your self-respect and values. Don't put your self-esteem into the hands of your partner.)

Non-ADHD woman, 35, married, been together 6–10 years

chewed away by the little million—all those mundane matters of daily life, like cleaning up leaked toothpaste from the bathroom counter (and arguing about who left the cap off). Even if you lived by yourself, you would still have to deal with all these boring details of life, but when you live with someone else it adds an extra element of disagreement about which options are higher or lower priority: is organic milk worth the extra cost? Is it more important to load the dishwasher or wipe off the counters? Does it matter if shoes are left in the living room? Few of these are questions with factual answers, but rather are about personal preference (and possible value judgments, such as that only degenerates don't understand why doilies are what separates society from chaos).

It's probably safe to say that couples where one partner has ADHD are more likely than the neighbors to have more of these sorts of disagreements. Sometimes the person with ADHD genuinely has a different opinion than their partner, but sometimes they may agree (e.g., "of course it's a good idea to pay bills on time") but have trouble executing consistently. If these slips evoke strong reactions from their partner, then they may dig in as a means of self-defense ("it's only a twenty-dollar late fee, chill out!"). Hopefully no one is such a fragile flower that one of these arguments breaks the relationship bank, but constant skirmishes can trickle away positive feelings and put both partners on guard against the next disappointment. This becomes even more complicated when deeper psychological meaning is read into these events ("if you loved me more, you would just pay them on time" and "if you loved me more, you wouldn't constantly criticize me"). It's death by a thousand cuts—forget about getting around to addressing those bigger, existential, relationship issues.

Fortunately, the process of hashing through disagreements with our partner is the best education in these important life skills, even if it can often feel like trial by fire. When we first start dating as a teen or young adult, we're all pretty clueless, but the lessons begin the very first time there is a whiff of disagreement. Yay, learning! As with most learning curves, there are a bunch of failed tests and missing homework, but little by little we figure out how to do relationships better. Some people are quick studies, perhaps because they had skilled role models, whereas others really struggle to make

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progress or get stuck in old behaviors that perhaps never worked that well even in the beginning.

As much as a committed relationship can feel like a windowless prison in those dark moments, it can also be the pressure chamber where a lump of coal becomes a diamond. Committed relationships are harder to walk away from, so we are forced to address disagreements or remain unhappy. Doing that hard work of addressing the disagreement in a new and more productive way can feel almost impossible, but remaining stuck feels totally unacceptable, so we're really caught in between. As empowering as it can feel to stubbornly dig in and hold our ground, eventually most people decide that there has to be a better way. They realize that there may be more happiness to be found in changing what they themselves do, rather than holding out hope that their partner will finally make all the necessary changes. As much as these impasses can bring out the worst in each of us (and they do), they can also bring out our best—usually after we finally get sick enough of the worst.

If ADHD is part of the mix in your relationship, then getting that figured out and addressed probably makes it easier to work on the rest of your relationship. It's probably reasonable for the non-ADHD partner to expect that their partner with ADHD will take it seriously and actively work on it, especially on the ways that impact the relationship. Meanwhile, it is probably also reasonable for the ADHD partner to expect their partner to also educate themselves about ADHD, give credit for good effort, and not expect perfection (defined as the non-ADHD partner's way of doing things). There is plenty more to relationship bliss than managing ADHD, but it is definitely a good step in the right direction—relationships are hard enough without adding that fuel to the fire.

Sometimes ADHD becomes the convenient excuse to not deal with these other personal or relationship problems—e.g., “How can we work on these other issues when your ADHD/your constant criticism of my ADHD is causing so many other problems?” There may be some truth to this in that ADHD is at least a partial cause of lots of fights, but it isn't the only thing going on there. No relationship is so simple that a disagreement is about just one thing, so what else isn't being addressed there? What's the history that is coloring how you each respond to the situation of the moment?

Of course, this avoidance move isn't unique to ADHD. Couples can also get stuck in other topics, like money, and therefore not have to deal with what else is also going on in the relationship or in the deeper issues that underlie that topic. Or we can justify avoiding difficult conversations by being too busy to have the necessary time and energy. It can feel easy to justify this when work and parenting obligations really don't leave much time for anything else. It's easy to just keep chugging along, day after day, without really working on the relationship. Quality time together, sexual or otherwise, just seems to not happen often enough, even if no one has an outright agenda to avoid it.

Whether subconsciously or intentionally, all of this makes it easier to avoid having these difficult conversations. This then is the challenge: to push ourselves to carve out the time and energy to have difficult conversations about messy topics. That's a tough sales pitch, except that it's the only way that things really get better and it's worth it if you can get there. As much as I can look back over the twenty years of my relationship and wish that both of us had done a lot of things differently (as in, way better), I also know that things wouldn't be better now in our sex life and relationship overall if we hadn't slogged through some of those bad times.

Happy Couples Fight Better

Disagreements are inevitable in relationships, whether romantic, friends, coworkers, roommates, etc. Two people won't always want the same things at the same times. Happy couples don't necessarily have fewer disagreements, they're just better at handling the disagreements that do arise. To do this, they use the three rules of fighting better.

First, they fight respectfully. This means no low blows, saying things that they later regret, or winning at too high a cost. They remember that how this disagreement gets resolved will influence lots of other interactions, including some that have nothing to do with the topic at hand. For example, you may win the discussion about where to go for Thanksgiving, but then lose out for the next few days when your partner is more distant. Or maybe you give in on Thanksgiving but handled the discussion so badly that your

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partner is angry about it, even though they got what they wanted. It's not just about how the disagreement ends, but also about how you got there. Being able to manage your emotions well and to take the other person's perspective are key skills for fighting respectfully—easier said than done, but definitely worth working on. ADHD, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse can all make emotional regulation much harder, so therapy and/or medication may be an important part of improving the relationship. For ADHD specifically, stimulant medication and/or one of the alpha-2 agonists like guanfacine or clonidine can help slow down emotional reactions and help the person have some more perspective.

Fortunately, the better one person behaves, probably the easier it is for the other to behave well—and the inverse is definitely true in that bad behavior tends to evoke bad behavior. If someone struggles to behave well in these discussions (arguments), then it's worth some serious reflection on what else is getting triggered there and some major efforts to respond differently. This may require some help with a therapist who can help you find different ways of responding. It may also help to identify what the interaction pattern between the two of you is and how you each evoke certain responses from each other, with the goal of responding differently.

Second, happy couples resolve problems productively. This requires sticking through to the end to create a solution that can actually be employed and is sustainable. Rushing too quickly to resolution, or just pulling the ripcord on an argument to get out of it, can create solutions that seem OK at the time, but don't really

Sex would be better for my partner if I could be able to be more focused on him and not blurt out totally unrelated comments during sex. Some of these have become jokes now, and sometimes he jokingly says things I've said during sex back to me, and then we both laugh. So even though it would be better if I didn't blurt things out, we've been able to use it to build our relationship.

ADHD man, 31, married, been together 3–5 years

resolve the bigger issues or take the complexities into account. Then it's just a matter of time before the same problem comes up. Or perhaps it's a reasonable solution that could work, but one person decides later that they aren't happy about it and goes against what was decided without bringing it up for another discussion.

If you find that you keep having the same arguments on the same topics, then it probably means that you haven't yet figured out how to resolve it and that both of you need to try to understand the problem more deeply, clarify your own perspective on it, understand the barriers for your partner, and then come up with a new solution that takes enough of it all into account. Then you need to commit to that solution, even when it's hard to do and you don't feel like it. This can be a real process, but you will both understand yourselves and each other better for it—which may make it easier to know how to handle whatever else comes up later.

Finally, happy couples are better able to move on after a disagreement. Of course, this is easier to do if you both behaved respectfully (mostly), even in the heat of the moment, and have faith that you came to a positive resolution. There will be new disagreements, so you want to build some good feelings between you to be able to better handle what comes next. And to enjoy each other meanwhile.

It's probably easier to move on from a disagreement if you can be flexible about what the solution is or how it is carried out. This is especially true if you and your partner have different ways of handling things—while we all prefer our way, it may be that neither one is inherently better than the other, as long as both work. And when things occasionally don't work out as we initially hoped, some picking of battles or being flexible about process or outcomes can avoid a lot of fights. There is a balance to be struck of knowing what is most important to you and pushing for that, while also recognizing which battles are best left unfought. There are no rules for which way to lean, so much as that the happier couples tend to find that right balance.

Couples who are able to handle anger well are then better able to share passion. It's hard to lose yourself to the vulnerability of passion if unresolved anger is lingering. The couples who are able to keep sex hot over the decades are the ones who are able to deal with conflicts in a friendly (or friendly-ish) way and come to

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resolutions that neither sell themselves short nor trample their partner's desires.

Good partners push each other to be better people—and lead by example.

The Double-Edged Sword of Desire

Wanting drives us to pursue what we desire. This can be a good thing if we are able to (eventually) get what we want. If we have sharpened some skills or grown in some way for that effort, then all the better. For example, wanting more peace in your relationship can push you to work on how you and your partner solve disagreements. Progress here will likely come from some personal growth on both of your parts. If you really want more peace, then you will be more willing to overcome some significant discomfort to achieve it, meaning really working at controlling your part of those angry interactions, holding your partner to that same high standard, and maybe even investing time and money to see a therapist.

How motivated we are to work at something depends on how much we want it, how much effort and discomfort it will take, and how likely we think it is to be successful. This gives us three points of intervention to work on if we want to increase our own or someone else's motivation.

The survey found that there is a big overlap between respondents' overall relationship satisfaction and their sexual satisfaction. This has been well documented elsewhere. What this tells us is that working on one will benefit the other (but since it isn't a total overlap, there are also other factors that influence people's satisfaction in each of these two areas). I also asked respondents how important their sexual satisfaction is to their overall relationship satisfaction, looking at one direction of that bidirectional relationship. Most people felt that it was indeed pretty important, with the men rating it a little higher than the women but ADHD status having no effect. This runs counter to the cliché that men are a bunch of hornball idiots who can be motivated to do just about anything if it increases their odds of getting laid and that women don't care that much about sex. Awesome—I love research that teaches us something new.

Having a strong desire can be a double-edged sword. On the plus side, if we get what we want, whether we have to work at it or not, we will likely be quite happy about that. Unfortunately, thwarted desire can cause great unhappiness. Having a strong desire for a better relationship or sex life that you have not yet achieved can be a driver to do the work to get there. It may spur a lot of fights and may not always be pretty or graceful or even useful, but it can eventually move mountains. And if there is a general sense that things are in motion, even if it isn't entirely clear what is happening or how long it will take, then we may remain optimistic about eventually getting somewhere that we want to be and hang in there, doing the work. These couples may have occasional fireworks, but that may just be what it takes to come to a better place, if the relationship survives the process. Growth is sometimes born of struggle.

By contrast, those who have a strong but thwarted desire and have stopped fighting for it may be at risk in a quieter way, both for personal unhappiness and other relationship problems. They are at risk for giving up, for settling for something significantly less than they want. They may hang in there, maybe for the kids, maybe because they don't want to be divorced, but they aren't happy about it (and their partner probably isn't either) and that unhappiness is probably spilling into other parts of the relationship. They may resign themselves to their fate and no longer try to improve things. Granted, none of us get everything that we want in life and growing up involves being able to accept that some dreams will remain unfulfilled. (I'm still waiting for that call that Iron Maiden needs me

I've grown resentful that by the time he notices, I'm unhappy. I've always wanted more sex than him. But the lack of intimacy, the thing that makes you want that person and hold them in your thoughts and create opportunities to hold each other, that's worse. I feel invisible and am shocked when others notice me. I'm starting to forget I'm sexual at all. I'm at high risk for an affair. I'm not needy or insecure. I'm lonely.

Non-ADHD woman, 47, married, been together 11–20 years

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to take over vocals.) This may be a smart judgment call if this really is an irreconcilable issue and they have decided to focus on and enjoy the parts of their relationship and sex life that are working well. However, settling may be less helpful if this dissatisfaction continues to interfere with enjoying the rest of the relationship, but they haven't yet decided to either accept it as unchangeable or do the hard work to change it. Peace is often found in that midway point of knowing that they have changed what they can and accept what they can't, and are focusing on enjoying the parts that they do like.

Those who suffer the most are those who still really want what they know they won't get. The desire remains, but the door is closed. They feel acutely the absence of what they can't have. They can't figure out how to make the right things happen, but they can't imagine forsaking the thwarted desires either. This can feel torturous, as if they are being torn in two. Those who feel that a good sex life is really important to their overall relationship satisfaction and maybe overall life satisfaction and feel really disappointed with their sex life will likely not be suffering silently, or at least invisibly, and their partner will probably be aware of that dissatisfaction—they probably feel a lot of pressure about it, in addition to whatever their own dissatisfactions are. These are the individuals and couples who haven't yet figured out what they want to do. Can they really come to accept that their sex life (or whatever) will not become what they want it to be, but find ways to enjoy the rest of their sex life and relationship? Or is it an untenable situation that eventually breaks the relationship—or possibly leads to infidelity which perhaps then breaks the relationship? The horns of this dilemma can be a really tough place to be.

Life involves hard choices. The Declaration of Independence guarantees Americans the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but remains wisely silent on what it will take to attain that happiness and the likelihood of success. Happiness can be achieved by doing the work to get what we want, as well as by accepting that something is either unattainable or that it isn't worth what it will take. (Having no singing ability nor any band experience makes that call from Iron Maiden pretty unlikely.) The challenge then for all of us is to decide what to fight for and what to accept.

Maximizing happiness involves ongoing judgment calls about this important balance. Striving risks disappointment, but settling risks less fulfillment. We all have to make our own choice, at this time in our lives, under these circumstances, about what will bring us the most happiness.

Self-Esteem, Self-Acceptance, and Other-Acceptance

ADHD may be a neurological condition, but it drives a lot of psychology, including in the romantic partner. ADHD influences the kinds of experiences that both partners have which then influences how they both feel about themselves and each other. This then influences how they continue to interact with each other. This effect will probably be much greater when ADHD hasn't been diagnosed or treated, making it easier to make incorrect assumptions about what ADHD behaviors mean (e.g., "If I was smarter, then. . . ." or "If you loved me more, then. . . ."). All of this can affect both partners' self-esteem.

We all look to our romantic partners to make us feel better—sometimes in small, practical ways and sometimes in large, existential ways. We want a partner who will make us feel better about ourselves, by loving us despite our flaws and shortcomings. This emotional support is one of the great benefits of romantic relationships.

The price tag for this support and the challenge for all of us is to return the favor and love our partner despite their flaws and shortcomings, including all that really annoying stuff they do. This can feel easy to do in the bliss of new love, but can begin to feel like a bait and switch when their real self comes out ("I can't believe how irresponsible/controlling you really are!"). This is when the real

After 12 years, our sex is more fulfilling and carefree than ever. It took me a long time to feel confident in what I wanted and be focused in bed. It's like meditation. I have to be present in my body.

ADHD man, 36, living together, been together 11–20 years

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work of relationships begins—how do you hold on to your sense of integrity by continuing to be supportive while also tolerating those parts of your partner that are different from you? How do you muscle up the courage to disclose your most sensitive thoughts and feelings and also respond well when your partner reveals theirs?

Given that our sexuality can feel like one of our most sensitive areas, it can be tempting to stick with the obvious activities that are least likely to evoke a negative response from our partner. This does tend to avoid fights except that it eventually tends to make sex less interesting. Playing it safe like this can lead to what is called left-over sex: after eliminating all those activities that one of you isn't into, you have the kinds of sex that are left over. This may be all you need, but it may also get repetitive over time and leave you unfulfilled.

The eventual itch for more challenges us to reveal more of ourselves and express some desires that our partner may not be so into—and challenges us to stand true to our desires even if our partner has a bad reaction (“You want to try *what?*!”). Our partner’s opinion matters, so it can be tempting to back away from that revealed desire to lessen the conflict and/or judgment (“Umm, just kidding. I don’t really want to do that. Never mind.”). On the flip-side, it can feel threatening when our partner reveals a desire that we aren’t into. What does this mean about them? What does it mean about me? What does it mean if we do it, or if we don’t? We then

What would make your sex life better for you?

Vanilla [sex] is under-stimulating and frustrating to me. I seek out better experiences all the time and don’t want to suppress my desires. As a submissive ADHD person, I get off on being told what to do and prefer physical intensity. BDSM provides the external reinforcement, structure, and stimulation I crave. I feel stifled and self-conscious with my partner, as he doesn’t understand why anyone would need this.

*ADHD woman, 27, dating, living separately,
been together 6–10 years*

need to be the one to manage our response and strive to understand why our partner might be interested in this.

In these sensitive moments, we watch each other closely for signs about how this is all going over—is it OK? Can I reveal more? Should I backtrack? Do I want you to share more or to recant? Some of this communication is verbal, but a lot can be nonverbal and happen really quickly based on very small signs—and therefore be easily misread. If we ourselves are kind of uncertain about something, it's easy to read judgment into our partner's expression or response, even if they don't necessarily feel what we are assuming they do. And yet, if we believe that they do, then we may go with that and not try again later. This may put a limit on how fulfilling our sex life will become, especially if there are too many of these roadblocks and dead ends. If we rely too much on our partner's approval of our sexual desires, we won't want to risk revealing more than we know they will accept—nor challenge them to understand why something turns us on.

This desire for a better sex life is then one of the drivers that pushes us to figure out what we really want, sexually and otherwise, and to find a way to tell our partner directly and honestly—and to tolerate their disagreeing, wanting something different, and maybe even responding badly. Meanwhile, we need to do the same for them—find a way to tolerate what they reveal to us without getting judgmental or overwhelmed by it. We need to stand by what is true for us without getting offensive and we need to be able to hear what is true for them without getting defensive. Neither of these is an easy task, especially when bigger differences arise or even when small differences arise on really important topics. But this ability to keep our heads on is crucial if we are to have a productive discussion and negotiation about what we are actually going to do.

This is especially true when that discussion requires some deeper exploration of what is behind each person's preferences—why is that interesting to you? Why is it important to you that we add that to our sex life? What if we didn't? And on the other side, some exploration of why this new activity feels threatening or isn't of interest. What would it mean about you, your partner, or your relationship if you did add this to your repertoire? How would you feel about yourself if you agreed to your partner's request versus if you didn't?

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There's nothing like disclosing a secret desire to a partner to challenge us to really think about what we want and why—except for maybe hearing our partner's disclosures. It can feel scary to risk judgment or even rejection but it can feel incredibly empowering to realize that we can survive that judgment—as individuals and as a couple. Being able to be OK with, and maybe even appreciative of, the differences between you allows a lot more honesty between you which gives you a lot more options about what you do together. This tends to keep passion alive over the long term.

If we tie our feelings of desirability or attractiveness to our partner's level of interest in us, it puts a lot of pressure on them to always show that interest. This may be easy to do in the early days of the relationship, but what about when real life starts to intrude on that white-hot passion? And what about when aging or busy schedules change our bodies and we don't look the same naked as we used to? All of this is a set-up for resentment from the partner who gets tired of needing to give all those reassurances and therefore a set-up for disappointment in the receiver when the partner eventually falls short. It also puts a lot of performance pressure on both partners to really look like they are all fired up, even when sometimes they are tired or preoccupied with other things. Being able to feel good about yourself, warts and all, is an important life skill that makes for much less relationship drama.

In a similar vein, tying your sexual self-esteem to your partner's response to what you're doing to them (e.g., how hard or wet they get, how quickly they orgasm, etc.) will tend to make sex into work. Rather than a shared and relaxing experience with the goal of enjoyment, it becomes a stressful performance test, probably for both of you. How much pleasure your partner is getting from having sex with you depends not only on what you are doing, but also on what they are doing for themselves (e.g., allowing themselves to get lost in the sensations of the moment, asking for what they want, etc.). Sometimes the magic happens more reliably than others. Being confident enough in one's sexual abilities makes it easier to enjoy spending the time together, regardless of speed or number of orgasms or other metrics. This also makes it easier to take suggestions and feedback. All of this ironically makes sexual experiences

more likely to meet those performance standards, even if those standards are actually less important. The more pressure, the easier it is to get psyched out, which makes various performance problems (like erectile disorder) more likely. Being confident in your sexual abilities makes sex much more about the pleasure than the performance.

Between the Hammer and the Anvil

Creating and then maintaining a great sex life is no easy task. Same goes for relationships overall. The good news and bad news of committed relationships is that they are hard to get out of. This can increase the suffering when we feel trapped, but it also motivates us to do the hard work to make things better. For many people, a crummy or nonexistent sex life is too hard to tolerate, so they feel pushed to address what is getting in the way because they want to keep the relationship. Crappy sex with this partner is unacceptable, but so is ending the relationship to seek out better sex with someone new. The only option that is left is to find a way to have a good sex life and relationship with this partner. This is how sex makes us into better people—that unfulfilled desire pushes us to be a better partner and person which then also pushes our partner to do the same. Both partners benefit. And so do the kids, if you’ve got them.

Sex may seem like it’s just a good time and hopefully it mostly is. The dirty little secret of sex is that playful sex requires work before, during, and after to keep it fun.

I love my husband. It can be difficult to balance my need for space with his hyperfocus on intimacy. In the end though his ability to hyperfocus and enthusiasm for everything in life is what I am most attracted to. The balance is something I struggle with, but having him in my life is worth every moment!

ADHD woman, 41, married, been together 11–20 years

Take Away Lessons

- Great sex and a great relationship require individual and relationship work that will make both of you better people in lots of other ways. It isn't fun, but it is worth it.
- Disagreements, and even arguments, are normal and to be expected. The challenge is to handle those disagreements respectfully and to (eventually) get to a resolution that both partners can feel OK about.
- Sex can be a double-edged sword. It can make us miserable when our sex life and relationship are tanking, but can be a powerful motivator to do that hard work to do what it takes to keep sex passionate and the relationship exciting.
- Keeping sex hot may mean finding a way to be OK with what turns us on—and our partner. Passion isn't always PC.
- All the emotional, legal, and financial entanglements of committed relationships make them harder to get out of and thereby motivate us to find ways to make it worth staying. This may cause us to be miserable at times, but hopefully it also pushes us to work on what we would rather not.