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Harmony in Marriage: 5. Sex
Michigan State University
Cooperative Extension Service
Home and Family Series

University of Maine Extension Service
November 1969
4 pages

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Harmony in Marriage:

5. Sex

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Sex and Marital Happiness

According to many current novels and stories, all couples have to do to find marital happiness is to find sexual satisfaction, and both husband and wife will be "fulfilled." Most of the time this literature deals with the physical aspects of sex, but seldom does it deal with the more subtle—yet equally important—psychological and spiritual elements of sex relations. Popular literature often gives a distorted view of sex, of what constitutes deep sexual satisfaction and real marital happiness. It would have you believe that if couples find physical satisfaction, happiness is assured.

Such is simply not true. Many couples find satisfactory physical expression. But although they have come to mutual agreement about the mode and manner of their sex life, they may still find "something lacking." They may find erotic pleasure in the physical act, but they do not find real, deep, lasting satisfaction. The "something lacking" cannot be explained in physical terms. It can only be described as emotional and spiritual: oneness, tenderness, closeness, a kind of secure awareness that one is accepted and loved without limit or reservation. It is a certain assurance that the body has expressed the deepest feelings of concern, sympathy, compassion, kindness, affection, and unselfish giving of which it is capable.

There are those who would say that women want and need these emotional and spiritual components to sex, but that men do not, that a man can have sex without love, but a woman cannot. It is true that some men and women have sex without love, but to say that they don't want or need a deeper relationship

is false. *Most men have just as great a need for tenderness and deep affection as women.* Many men are attracted to warm, maternal, tender, understanding women because they seek to fulfill these emotional needs in marriage. When these needs are not satisfied in the marriage, some men feel that "something is lacking." The task of the couple, therefore, is not only to learn to express the right physical responses, but to learn to use the body as a means of expressing themselves. In this sense, sex has a sacramental function—a physical means of expressing an inward grace. When sex is lifted above the plane of physical expression and response, it is then most satisfying to human beings.

Sex alone does not insure a happy marriage, but it is hard for most people to be happily married without a satisfactory sex life. Sex is one of the strongest human drives. The drives for physical and emotional satisfaction are intense. Complete satisfaction of the physical drive can be postponed for years before marriage without harm. Although it can be partially sublimated through physical or creative activity, it cannot ordinarily be completely denied expression after marriage without disrupting the relationship between husband and wife.

Sex appetites vary greatly in both men and women. There are no set patterns or standards by which couples can judge their sex life. Each husband and each wife has to discover the needs of their mate, then make every effort to work out differences, realizing that the strongest marital bonds are created by satisfying mutual needs, not by frustrating them.

Attitudes and Sexual Harmony

The ability to respond sincerely and freely in a loving sex relationship depends as much on what has happened to a person before marriage as on what transpires after marriage. It depends a lot on sex attitudes developed while growing up. Studies show that children whose sex information is received first from parents grow up with positive attitudes toward sex that enable them to give themselves physically in marriage. When parents encourage children to ask questions about sex, and when they give children not only straight-forward, factual answers, but wholesome, mature attitudes as well, those children grow up better prepared for the sexual aspects of marriage. When parents never talk about sex with their children, when sex is made to seem wrong and dirty, these children come to marriage feeling ashamed, guilty, unclean, whenever they have sexual urges.

In our culture, women especially are negatively conditioned toward sex by wrong sex education or by a complete omission of positive sex education. This is especially true of girls from low socio-economic groups. Kinsey discovered that these women found less satisfaction in sex relations than women from middle class families. Women from poor families more frequently reported that sex in the early days of marriage was a traumatic experience. Of course, not all girls from middle-class homes get positive, wholesome sex education; but apparently many do, and this helps them in marriage.

Our society is undergoing some profound changes in its attitudes toward sex. Not all the attitude changes in the sexual revolution are good (no thinking person feels that an increase in premarital pregnancies, illegitimacy, or venereal disease is desirable), but the revolution is having some positive effects. Sex has at least been taken out of the closet. It has become a respectable topic of conversation. And, for the first time in the history of Western civilization, sex is no longer considered "a man's pleasure, and a woman's duty." Many women are discovering that they can enjoy sex as much as any man, that they have as healthy a sex appetite (once aroused) as any normal male, and they can participate in, and even initiate, sex relations in marriage without being considered unladylike or immoral.

Male and Female Differences

There are a number of differences between men and women in their sexual characteristics and responses

that should be understood if couples are to find physical harmony in marriage.

Men traditionally have been considered more sexually aggressive and active; women more receptive and passive. For years these differences were ascribed to inherent biological differences. But more recent findings indicate that these differences are partially culturally conditioned, rather than biologically determined. As has been mentioned, women have more frequently been taught to inhibit their impulses, so they have "naturally" been more inclined to play a passive role. But occasionally wives are more aggressive than their husbands. It is truer to say then that more often the husband is more sexually aggressive and active; but sometimes the wife is. These individual differences are both biologically and culturally determined.

The sexual desires of most men are more easily aroused than are those of most women. Many men can be aroused quite easily through audio or visual stimuli, or by the physical presence and appearance of their wives. Fewer women become sexually excited through these means. They more frequently are aroused by bodily contact through embracing and love play, and then—after intercourse—some additional love making while their feelings subside.

The woman's sex feelings usually are more diffuse, distributed over various erogenous zones of her body. But the fact that a woman's feelings are more diffuse means that she requires a period of caressing and love play before she is physically and emotionally ready for intercourse. This means the husband must learn to be patient and gentle, to exercise control over his feelings, and to learn how best to prepare his wife for copulation.

Also important is how the husband feels toward his wife, and to what extent he considers her feelings and desires. The husband's whole attitude is a key to satisfactory relations. If he is truly considerate, this helps her to give herself to him.

There is a marked difference in sex drive between men and women according to age. According to Kinsey's findings, the average male reaches his greatest capacity for sexual activity while still in his teens. This capacity then declines steadily as he grows older. By age 70, though, only 30 per cent of males are sexually inactive, indicating that sexual capacity continues throughout life for most men. The average female has little capacity for sexual response while she is in her early teens, but she reaches her peak at about 30 years of age and remains near this level until past 50. At 60 her capacity remains almost as high as it was when she was 20 years old.

Common Difficulties

Sexual frigidity is a common difficulty in marriage. Frigidity is a lack of desire or a lack of pleasure in sex relations. It is found in both men and women, but more commonly in women. Usually it manifests itself in a lack of sexual appetite, or, if sex relations are entered into, in a lack of satisfaction and pleasure. A small minority finds positive distaste in any form of sexual activity. Absolute and permanent frigidity is very rare. Most people can be helped through re-education and counseling to alleviate fears or inhibitions. Husbands can help their wives through patience and understanding. An inconsiderate husband may cause his wife to develop an aversion to sex which she did not have in the beginning of marriage.

Orgasm incapacity is the most common complaint of women who are otherwise quite normal. Here, desire is normal, sensation intense, but a climax is never or seldom reached. This may be due to a number of causes: lack of proper preparation prior to intercourse, lack of consideration by the husband who is insensitive to his wife's feelings, and psychological factors such as aversion to sex, fear of pregnancy, or feelings or attitudes toward one's mate which makes one withdraw from complete participation in the relationship.

Impotency is not an uncommon sexual difficulty in men. Usually such a difficulty is rarely permanent and rarely due to physical reasons. Psychological factors such as fear, anxiety, or guilt may more often cause temporary impotency. Of course such physical factors as physical condition, age, or fatigue all have an influence. Dietary deficiencies in prisoners of war have caused temporary impotency. Occasionally, in the case of hormone deficiencies, hormonal supplements may be given to treat the difficulty. Whenever impotency occurs, medical help and sometimes psychological help should be sought.

Differences in sexual appetite is the most common problem which couples face. It is not uncommon for husbands and wives to have marked differences in how frequently they desire intercourse. According to studies by Terman, 53 per cent of wives and 54 per cent of husbands feel that they have just about the right amount of sex relations. Twenty-four per cent of wives and only three per cent of the husbands said they had too frequent intercourse, but 23 per cent of the wives and 44 per cent of the husbands felt they had too little intercourse. These figures suggest that husbands more frequently feel sexually frustrated than wives do, al-

though one out of five wives indicated sexual frustration because of too little intercourse. It is important too that almost one out of four wives felt dissatisfied because of too frequent sex relations.*

Complete marital satisfaction is impossible if there is frequent frustration. Neither is the most harmonious relationship possible if a wife or husband feels used by the other without regard for the other's feelings. It is therefore important for both the husband and wife to be sensitive to one another's feelings and needs.

When Difficulties Arise

Many of these problems can be solved if couples recognize the importance to their marriage of working out problems.

One of the biggest aids, as has been indicated, is to try to develop the right attitudes toward sex by realizing that sex is intended to be used for good in marriage as a means of procreation and as an expression of love.

Premarital physical examinations, education and counselling help to alleviate fears and anxieties and better prepare couples for marriage. Blood tests for venereal disease are required by law, but couples should get a complete physical checkup, including a pelvic examination for the bride, to assure themselves that they are normal and healthy.

Reading professional literature helps to clear up misunderstandings and answer questions about the anatomy, physiology, and psychology of sex. Factual knowledge alone does not solve all problems, but it helps minimize difficulties in adjustment by providing information on human anatomy and on sex technique.

Husbands and wives should learn to talk about sex, to exchange points of view, desires and feelings, anxieties and fears. Husbands and wife should feel free to indicate their desires to each other, to talk over problems. Talking helps clear up misunderstandings and minimize anxieties or frustrations.

A couple should seek the advice of physicians or professional counselors when difficulties arise, and before problems become acute. The longer troubles persist, the harder it is to clear them up. Problems often are solved after many years of marriage, once professional help is sought.

* The percentages are rounded out to the nearest whole number.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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