

'Chore-play'? When couples share the dishes, they're happier

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Story highlights

- Women who do most of the dishwashing report more conflict, less satisfaction and worse sex
- Completing household tasks together as a couple can be a bonding activity

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(CNN)It's Friday night, you've just enjoyed a nice meal at home with your significant other, and they're giving you signs that they want to move things to the bedroom -- but one glance at the kitchen sink dampens any desire you might have felt. It's stacked full of dirty dishes. One of you will be stuck cleaning them sooner or later on.

If this scenario resonates with you, it's no wonder: Not only can household chores be a major source of resentment and stress in many relationships, doing the dishes is the most dreaded task of all, according to [a recent study](#). Its authors found that women in heterosexual relationships believe that it's more important to share the responsibility of doing dishes than any other household chore. Women who shoulder this burden alone report having more conflict, less satisfaction and worse sex with their partners than those whose significant others lend a hand.

Why Americans are having less sex

Why is dishwashing -- or, more accurately, a lack of it -- such a trigger for women? It could have its roots in shifting gender stereotypes and our expectations of our partners, sex therapist Deborah Fox said. "Most people alive today have witnessed their moms doing more of the daily household tasks and child rearing than their dads, often while holding a job outside the house," she explained. "Women are sensitive to feeling taken for granted and their time not being as highly valued."

At the same time, we know that stress can have powerful effects on libido, so addressing those stressors can help improve sex. "Research has shown that, generally speaking, women are more likely to become sexually aroused if they feel relaxed and emotionally cared for," sex therapist Emily deAyala said. "Assuming that sex is happening some time between dinner and bedtime, it may be that the effect of their partner's effort goes longer for the task of cleaning up after dinner than for other household chores."

Of course, nagging your partner or silently stewing will only foster more resentment -- and will do nothing to spark your sex life. Instead, I recommend the following approaches.

Take a lesson from same-sex couples

As you might imagine, same-sex couples don't typically assume stereotypical relationship roles the way heterosexual couples often do.

"Although some same-sex couples do divide chores more conventionally, they tend to have higher rates of equity in how household chores are shared," sex therapist Lawrence Siegel said. "An advantage to not having traditional gender role templates in same-sex relationships is the necessity of negotiating responsibilities and feeling comfortable with how they are both shared and divided. How partners communicate about these things is one of the biggest contributors to overall relationship satisfaction."

Divide and conquer

As part of that communication, experts suggest sitting down and splitting household chores in a way that you can both agree upon, basing tasks on each other's strengths and schedules. If one of you prefers to do laundry while the other would rather do a deep clean of the kitchen on weekends, have at it.

Don't nitpick

"Let go of some of your ideas of how a particular chore should be done and accept that your partner might do it differently -- and that's OK," sex therapist Rachel Needle said. "Without the commentary, your partner is more likely to do the chore again."

Do it together

For some couples, completing household tasks can be a bonding activity.

"In working with one couple, I was surprised to find out that the male partner did not like doing chores because he got bored and lonely," sex therapist Stephanie Buehler said. "He wanted to fold laundry, do dishes and so on together, because (he said), 'then we feel more like a couple.'"

Make it sexy

"Warm sudsy water is calming for most people; hot rinse water and the movement of drying dishes can potentially activate similar kinesthetic sensations that are similar to sexual activity with a partner," sex therapist Doug Braun-Harvey said.

With that mind, chores can become "chore-play," Needle said. "Have fun with the chores and flirt with your partner, or incorporate some sexy teasing or gestures while doing them. You can increase the excitement by taking off a piece of clothing with each dish washed, for example," she suggested.

Go pro

If all else fails -- and if your budget allows -- consider hiring cleaning professionals.

"My mother famously said, 'Give up going out to dinner, give up a trip to a hairdresser, give up anything, but don't give up a cleaning service,' Buehler shared, with a laugh. "Wiser words were never spoken. I've had someone cleaning for us for more than 20 years, and it has kept peace

in our marriage."

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No matter how you manage it, a clean house that's maintained by both you and your partner can have positive effects on your relationship and your sex life. In other words, to turn a woman on, the key is to turn off stress, and that means helping her not worry about things -- including that pile of dirty dishes.