

Valentine's Day: Managing the pressure

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Story highlights

- Having a conversation about Valentine's ahead of time can make the day more romantic
- If you're single, take the holiday to practice a little self-love

(CNN)Americans have a love-hate relationship with Valentine's Day.

Some of us look forward to February 14 as an opportunity to enjoy our partner's company (and possibly spice things up in the bedroom). Others dread what they consider a commercialized holiday that can put unrealistic pressure on their relationships.

It's clear that the bar is high: According to one [online survey](#) of more than 2,000 respondents, more than 65% plan to show affection on Valentine's Day, almost 85% believe that having sex is an important part of the holiday, and more than 60% say they will be disappointed if they don't have sex that day.

Why Americans are having less sex

With expectations like these, it's easy to set ourselves up for disappointment. Fortunately, it's possible to enjoy the day -- and night -- without creating hurt feelings or breaking the bank.

Read: Ways to make someone feel loved, besides saying it.

"Valentine's Day can serve as a reminder that it's so important to stop and appreciate the closest relationships in your life," couples expert and sex therapist Ashley Grinonneau-Denton said. "To me, the holiday has always been a great reminder of the importance of love, attachment, affection and closeness.

"The caveat is, however, that if this special day stands in isolation, it will quickly become a distant memory and will do very little for a couples' relationship long-term."

Here's how to make the most of February 14, whether you're coupled or single.

Make a plan

It may not seem so, but having a conversation about Valentine's Day ahead of time can make the actual day much more romantic.

Your new year's sex resolution: Be less spontaneous

"Talk with your partner about what you'd like out of the holiday and whether you feel Valentine's Day is important to you," sex therapist Sari Cooper said. "By beginning the conversation a week or so beforehand, you can co-create a celebration (or not) that is a collaborative event, making compromises for both partners' desires and creating a realistic plan to ensure both of you feel heard emotionally."

And remember that the element of surprise isn't the most important part of the day.

"Don't set your partner up to fail, and don't keep desires and expectations to yourself," advised Rachel Needle, a psychotherapist and sex therapist. "Telling your partner 'I would love to go to Pier 115 for dinner,' for example, or 'I would love sunflowers' doesn't make them bringing you flowers or taking you to the restaurant any less special."

Pay attention

Surprise can be a good thing. A little insight into your partner can go a long way by showing them you've listened to them. "Consider doing something your partner has told you in the past they wanted to do: a picnic, a walk on the beach, a certain new restaurant," Needle said. "It doesn't have to cost a lot of money to be special, but rather it needs to be thoughtful."

Spice things up

According to that online survey, 55% of the participants indicated that they were willing to try something new sexually on Valentine's Day. Of course, what that means for you and your partner depends on your particular relationship. "One way to increase intimacy on this holiday is to take a different stance on things and make it all about fun," sex therapist Francie Stone said.

Are you 'normal' in bed?

"You could put together a goodie basket of things like massage oil, a feather, a sexy dice game, a blindfold and more. You can try them all or only the ones you really like, or just use the fun to get started and leave the rest to your individual imaginations." This helps make the night playful without necessarily the pressure of intercourse.

If you plan on having sex, try doing so before you go out to dinner on Valentine's Day, sex therapist Tammy Nelson said. "Lots of couples go out to dinner or cook a rich meal at home and drink wine or cocktails to celebrate February 14," she explained. "After a full meal and drinks, it is less likely that any sex -- much less hot sex -- will follow."

Or consider taking sex off the table altogether. "There are so many nerve endings in the lips that are connected to the limbic system and can help create the perfect foreplay for future intimacy encounters," sexual health counselor Aleece Fosnight said. "A good makeout session that only leads to kissing can leave partners wanting more, creating more intensity for future intimate activities."

Love yourself

If you're single, Valentine's Day can seem like a holiday for everyone else. But you don't have to feel left out if you're not in a romantic relationship. Instead, take the opportunity to practice a little self-love.

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That could mean indulging in a massage or a new sex toy, dining out with friends or even seeking out companionship. "If you're single and wouldn't mind meeting someone but

setting up a date on Valentine's Day feels too staged, Meetup is a fantastic option," sex therapist Holly Richmond said. "Hundreds of Meetup groups plan special events and activities for Valentine's Day, but they aren't necessarily geared toward singles coming together to meet other singles."

Whether you choose to celebrate Valentine's Day or ignore it, remember that expressing love and affection for your partner shouldn't be limited to one special day. Take the pressure off the holiday by celebrating your relationship every day.

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