

When you and your partner have mismatched libidos

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Story highlights

- Low desire in one partner is one main reason couples seek out sex therapy
- Sexual desire changes across long-term relationships

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(CNN)About 15% of men and 34% of women say they're not really interested in sex, according to a new study, statistics that few experts find surprising. In fact, low desire in one partner is probably the top reason couples seek out sex therapy.

When one of you has more interest in sex than the other, it's easy for the person with the higher sex drive to feel rejected, bruised and undesirable and for the partner who avoids sex to feel pressure, anxious and guilty.

Any number of factors can affect sexual desire, and most of them have little to do with your partner's attractiveness. In the study I mentioned, researchers found that for both men and women, physical and mental health had an impact on libido. But they may have different motivations for avoiding sex.

When is it really time for couples therapy?

"For men, it's often the appearance of disinterest rather than actual loss of interest," sex therapist Deborah Fox said. "Men avoid sex frequently due to prior performance issues, such as erectile issues or rapid ejaculation. They may avoid it to escape the anxiety of these issues reoccurring." In women, hormonal factors and fatigue can contribute to low libido.

And sometimes, life just gets in the way. "In my practice, I see a lot of desire diminish due to interest in porn, boredom of the same sexual routine, the comfort of monogamy and relationship security, and the loss of couple time due to a focus on parenting time," sex therapist Amanda Pasciucco said.

Here are some other things to consider when you and your partner have mismatched sex drives.

Nagging and anger aren't helpful. If you're wondering why your partner isn't interested in sex, ask from a place of curiosity, sex therapist Holly Richmond said. "Instead of saying, 'I'm so frustrated that we never have sex anymore. What's going on with you?' try, 'I'm curious about why we have less sex than we used to. Is there something you need from me?' Open a window of opportunity for communication rather than shoving closed a door of criticism."

Why Americans are having less sex

You may need to take sex off the table. Sometimes, the topic of not having sex has

become so fraught that you need to start fresh with some simple forms of touch that feel nice but don't have to lead to sex. "I start by asking a couple be in the same room at the same time for about an hour at least twice a week," gynecologist and sex counselor Terri Vanderlinde said. "During that time, I have them do something fun and intimate, like playing a game or reading a book together."

Couples can connect during this window of time, but there should be a rule not to have sex. Some couples will focus on making out above the waist, taking a sensual shower together or giving each other massages. You should also think about ways to stimulate your erotic brain, particularly if you've just been going through the motions. Watch ethical porn together, read erotica, share a fantasy or even reminisce about the hot sex you used to have.

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Intercourse isn't always the destination. For most of us, intercourse is often the main entree on the sex menu. Oral sex, manual stimulation and other forms of touch and direct clitoral stimulation are relegated to being optional appetizers. Yet recent studies show that most women prefer a high degree of clitoral stimulation to climax, and prioritizing "[outercourse](#)" allows you to discover new paths to pleasure.

[Intercourse isn't everything for most women, says study -- try 'outercourse'](#)

Just do it. It's important remember that sexual desire changes across long-term relationships. In the beginning, sex is usually more spontaneous, and cues such as a look or touch from your partner make you feel aroused more quickly. But over time, spontaneous desire often evolves into responsive desire, which emerges in response to pleasure. In other words, you might not begin with sexual desire but with a willingness to generate it.

"Sometimes, we have to make a conscious effort to be intimate with our partner. If we sit around and wait to be suddenly in the mood, it may never happen," sex therapist Rachel Needle explained. "Take a chance, even if you aren't in the mood. Chances are you'll enjoy yourself once you get started."

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Sex therapist Michael A. Vigorito agrees. "It can help to schedule weekly sex," he said.

"Knowing that sex will occur may help the low-desire partner to turn themselves on in preparation, like they probably did when they were dating. It may also help reduce the high-desire partner's anxiety about the next time they will have sex."

Remember, if you're interested in sex and your partner is not, think of your interest as a precious resource. Without it, without your motivation to have sex, it's easy to get stuck in a rut. So don't give up -- just refocus your efforts.