

Scott Blair: Desire Discrepancies in a Relationship, this is Stay Happily Married, episode number 303.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott Blair: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Do you and your spouse have the same desires? Sometimes in life it is hard for us to understand or even acknowledge our needs and wants, whether it be regarding our everyday needs, emotional needs or health needs. When these needs are not met, our lives may not feel as fulfilled as we want or need them to be. When it comes to relationships, we have emotional needs as well as sexual needs, but what if these needs are not met. Do we become unfulfilled in our relationship? Are there ways that we can share out needs and find a way to meet them so that both partners are happy in the relationship? What if our needs differ? Is there a way that we can compromise or fulfill each of the differing needs of both partners? Earning her Master's degree in social work from the University of South Carolina, Glenise Parrott who goes by "Lenny" practices at Cameron Valley Psychotherapy and Counseling which is a private practice in Charlotte, North Carolina. Lenny is a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in working with couples. She also has a certificate in sex therapy from the University of Michigan. Welcome to the show, Lenny. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Lenny Parrott: Thank you, Scott. I'm very happy to be here.

Scott Blair: Well, what problems do you see couples experience in their relationships when there is a desire discrepancy in couples?

Lenny Parrott: Okay, well, as a sex therapist I have many couples coming into me about differing desire levels when it comes to sex. Desire discrepancy is, in fact, the most common sexual problem that couples face and one that can be difficult to treat. It can look like the stereotypical "She always has a headache" or "All he thinks about is sex" and suddenly, traditionally it is seen the women are more likely to have less interest in sex or to lose interest in sex in marriage. Part of the reason it seems this way is because it's much more socially acceptable for a women to express feelings of low sexual desire. The reality is, however, that many men also experience low sexual desire. Unfortunately for them, though, it's not okay to talk about it. Men are supposed to want sex and to admit they often actually don't, are not in the mood, goes against society's idea of what a man is supposed to be. It goes against what a man thinks he's supposed to be, too, and men's identity is often tied up in the sexuality.

In her book, "The Sex-Starved Marriage," Michele Weiner-Davis talks at length about this. That book is an excellent resource for anyone in a relationship who's struggling with this issue, by the way. This isn't just an issue that heterosexual couples face. The same sex couples also struggle with differences in desire levels.

And a person's level of desire isn't a fixed thing. It can change depending on many things. For example, if we have external stresses, we can be affected. And if there are other issues in the relationship, in order to be sexual with one other we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable. So any issues of trust can often impact our interest in sex with our partner. And I'm not talking necessarily about trust from the point of view of fidelity, just trust in general. I've had women clients tell me things like, "Once I found he's not good with money, I found myself less and less attractive to him. And then I had a male client who was completely turned off by the way his wife spoke to his mom. So trust, respect, belief in your partner's integrity and loyalty, all of those things can affect how desirable they are to you.

Scott Blair:

Well, in a long-term relationship, let's say, that they don't really touch these issues. The man's afraid to bring it up or the woman or the significant other is, and it's left unresolved with time. What are some of the effects that you're seeing on those couples, short term and long-term?

Lenny Parrott:

Well, the difference in desire when it comes to sex affects many areas of a relationship. Sex is a very powerful thing, and people have many feelings tied up around the idea of being sexual. But as important a topic as sex is, it's also one of the things that's most difficult to talk about. So instead of being able to communicate effectively about a problem they're having in this area, couples will typically blame each other and try to convince each other that they are right and their partner is wrong. Often when I meet with couples, one or other of the couple will say something like, "Isn't it normal to have sex twice a week? Or can you please tell him that now we're married, it's normal for us to have sex less often. Couples try to persuade their partner rather than do, of course, what's much harder which is to listen and understand where the partner is coming from. And there can be many reasons for someone to have low sexual desire, but sadly the person who wants sex more frequently will often assume that their partner no longer finds them attractive or doesn't love them or is interested in someone else.

And then the other side of that coin is that the person who is less interested feels that all their partner is interested in is sex. As clients they feel like they're a booty call and that their partner doesn't actually care about them. Both sides have this distorted view of the other, and suddenly don't see the whole picture. And without being able to talk about it, that just doesn't change. The long-term effect is inability to have honest communication. There can be that there's this huge distance between partners. They can find themselves living more like roommates than romantic partners, and often that's exactly what couples tell me when they come into my office. This is what they'll complain of. They'll say, "We're more like roommates than anything." So for some couples, this just seems like an insolvable issue. Each person feels like they're on a different page and maybe even a different book from their partner and that they would just never see eye to eye. But one thing that I think is important to understand is that there is a difference between desire and arousal.

Masters & Johnson who did groundbreaking work in the '60s in the area of sexuality and what actually happens to our bodies during sex believe that desire came first. But we would, for example, think about sex and just find ourselves becoming aroused. And that certainly does happen, but we also now know, thanks to the work of Rosemary Basson, that arousal can come before desire. In other words, you can think you are not interested in the slightest in having sex, but the right touch and the willingness to be open to the possibility that you might change your mind can result in you becoming aroused sexually and then the desire to continue to engage in sex is there. And this can be very encouraging information for people with low sexual desire. You think that because they just don't feel desire, that they're not capable of enjoying sex. It can also be a relief to the higher desire partner. Often the low desire partner has felt pushed and shamed by their higher desire partner. So both partners have to be willing to make changes in the way they approach sex and accusing their partner of being abnormal in some way when it comes to sex and sexual desire does not make for good communication, no matter which side it's coming from.

Scott Blair: Sure. I can imagine shaming them would probably lower their desire even more.

Lenny Parrott: Right.

Scott Blair: Well, you're talking about words like frustration or being on different pages or even different books, and a very common word that I hear on this podcast is "roommate". They're feeling like they've become roommates. But at what point in time do you see that couples are becoming aware that they're different sexual desires is actually hurting the relationship?

Lenny Parrott: Well, Scott, it's not so much the difference of desires that hurts a relationship, but it's more the difficulty that couples have in being able to talk about how each feel and to understand each other. The difficulty to communicate and understand can be like a wedge between the couple pushing them further and further apart. They blame each other for the problem, and often rather than thinking this problem is hurting us, it's more of a case of you are hurting me. Couples will often get into arguments about what is normal and sometimes take the position that it's their partner's problem, but my thoughts on that is that if either of the partners think that there is a problem then there is a problem. And it's a problem for the couple, not just one of the partners. Sometimes it takes a long time for couples to realize how much they are damaging their relationship by not addressing this issue. There are those couples who realize very quickly that they need to do something or their relationship is going to suffer and others who seem not to. Sometimes couples say that everything changed once the honeymoon was over, and then for others there seems to be this gradual deterioration over time. Never negating and negotiating differences in sexual desires are the work involved in a relationship.

So often though feelings of disappointment, anger, resentment, and even shame becomes a selling point that communication about the problem becomes

impossible. A partner can feel that their other half has been dishonest about how much or how little they want sex, especially if this has changed over time which often it does. When the couple considers their sex life to be good, they see it at 10% of their whole relationship. But when there are problems, it becomes 80 or 90% of their relationship. It can be like the elephant in the room. It's always present but nobody's talking about it.

Scott Blair:

You pointed out that this doesn't affect just heterosexual couples, and you were kind of talking about timeframes just now about when the honeymoon phase is over some. Are there any patterns that you're seeing among the type of couples that are having issues with desire discrepancies?

Lenny Parrott:

Well, certainly there is the pattern of blame and guilt, especially for the person who has the lower sexual desire. The person with the higher level of desire feels completely misunderstood. Often men are seen as wanting sex just for the physical release, and their partners don't understand that this is a way that they feel close to their partners. Men feel the need to be wanted by their partner and can feel very rejected if their partner doesn't want sex. And then sometimes men find hard to understand that in many women a lot of things have to be in place before they can feel sexual. For example, if there's a sink full of dishes and the kids' lunches need to be made and the woman is feeling like she has to do it, [inaudible 00:11:31] then she just might not be interested in sex. Women need to feel close first and having a partner willing to understand and help them in their world is a turn-on to women.

So men and women have to be able to understand what matters to their partner, but all too often we give people what we would want instead of what they want or need. For some people, both men and women, engaging in a physical way is needed for them to feel closer to their partner, and for others they have to feel closer to their partner before they can engage physically. So the person who wants and needs to express their love in a physical way feels rejected and unloved, and the person who needs to feel close in order to be physical feels guilty. And then when a relationship is new, hormones are raging, and we tend to feel much more sexual during that time. You're typically in love. We are very focused on pleasing our partner, and the newness of it all can make things feel very exciting. But as we get to know each other and time passes, it's normal for the intensity of these feelings to diminish. So after the honeymoon when life settles down into a routine and reality sets in, it's not uncommon for the frequency of sex to go down. And then another typical time is after the birth of a child. For some women, becoming a mother changes how they feel about themselves as a sexual being. And then, of course, there's the impact that aging has. The way we felt in our 20s and 30s and the way our bodies worked then is not the same in our 40s, 50s, 60s, or even older. Now that's not to say older couples can't have sexual fulfilling lives. They most certainly can, but it will be different than when they were younger. Health issues, menopause, and changes in our body, gaining weight, a whole host of things can affect our levels of desire.

Scott Blair: Well, Lenny, a couple struggling with this, it's like you said. It can be 90% of the problem in their marriage. It's the elephant in the room. They're ashamed. There's frustration. They don't want to talk about it. So help us. What do you suggest that couples do to get through this issue in the relationship?

Lenny Parrott: Right. Well, having an open and honest dialogue is the most important thing a couple can do. But, of course, this can be very difficult. And so some couples need the help of a trained therapist to help them navigate this. My job as a sex therapist is to help couples who have this issue be able to talk to each other in a safe environment and gain a better understanding of their partner because until they're both understood, it's very difficult to develop a time for change. Now, of course, just understanding is not enough. Both partners have to be willing to do something differently, but they have to understand each other before they can be open to discussing what those things might be. So setting up time with a therapist is helped greatly when it comes to learning how to communicate effectively. And it's really important to remember why you got together in the first place and to understand that very rarely are issues with sex only about sex. Having a willingness to look at your relationship and see your part in it, not just your partners. And, of course, that's the easy part to look at.

Scott Blair: Sure.

Lenny Parrott: And then you take responsibility for things that you may be doing or not doing that are not in the best interests of the relationship. And then making a commitment to work on them.

Scott Blair: You kind of touched on a couple ideas there, but you mentioned developing a plan. Can you go just a little bit further with that? Are there any specific items that you usually have couples work on that help resolve some of those negative effects that we were talking about earlier?

Lenny Parrott: Sure. Well, one thing that a couple can do is working on having realistic expectations. Things are unlikely to be the same as they were when they were dating. When we're dating, we're only seeing and only showing the very best parts of ourselves to each other. And that's never the whole picture. And once we're married or in a committed relationship, we have to deal with the not so good parts of each other, too. So living life day to day with the stresses that we all have to face can impact relationships. Instead of home being our safe place which it needs to be and our relationship being our haven away from the rest of the world, we allow in the stresses and don't protect our relationship as well as we should. Some couples seem to think that their relationship will just take care of itself. You know, this idea that we're all just going to live happily ever after, but relationships take work, and they need to be made a priority. We have to carve out time for each other no matter how big a schedule we have. So many couples will say to me, "We don't have time for date night or vacation or a weekend away." But my

question is typically, "So what do you expect will happen to your relationship if you don't take care of it?" Relationships are a very precious thing. It has to be taken care of.

Another thing that couples can do is to be open to the resources that are available, such as the book that I mentioned, "The Sex Starved Marriage." Another excellent book, especially for women, that addresses all areas of sexual health is "Sex Matters for Women" by [inaudible 00:17:07]. I totally recommend that to my clients. There's a lot of good information out there for both couples. Scheduling time with a sex therapist to work through sexual issues can be very helpful, and sometimes couples tell me that one of the things they like about coming to see me is they are forced to focus their time and energy on their relationship, even if it's only for that 50 minutes a week. I think that says a lot about how over committed we are nowadays actually.

Scott Blair:

Well, with couples approaching their desire discrepancies in this way and they're communicating better, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and interactions of those relationships?

Lenny Parrott:

When couples can learn to listen to each other and understood where each are coming from, issues like this, indeed, most issues can be managed. And having a rewarding sex life in spite of desire discrepancy is obtainable and good communication helps couples feel close and a strong sexual relationship. I'm not talking about a particular frequency here. I'm talking about a relationship that both partners are happy with creates feelings of closeness and intimacy. And feeling close and intimate creates a good sexual relationship. Certain chemicals are released when we have sex that makes us feel good and feel closer to our partner. And feeling closer to our partner makes us more interested in sex. So as you can see, it's a circular thing, but it just doesn't happen on its own. It takes time and commitment. Making your relationship a priority is important, and by the way if you have children, it's one of the very best gifts that you can give them. Couples that are willing to do what it takes to work together on their sex life are just much happier in general. Sex is one of the three big ones, as we say as therapists, when it comes to issues that affect couples. The other two are children and finances. So the sexual relationship might be like it was when they were first together, but it actually might even be better.

Scott Blair:

Well, Lenny, you've offered some advice today. You've mentioned a couple, sounds like great books. Is there anything else that you think our listeners should know?

Lenny Parrott:

Yes, I would like listeners, the ones who are struggling in their relationship with differences in levels of desire for sex to know that they are not alone. I mean, it would be really great if we marry people with desire levels the same as us, but so often we don't. So this is a very common issue. I would especially like to stress again that low level of desire is not just an issue that women suffer with, men

suffer with this too. And to know that there is help working with a therapist who is trained in John Gottman's techniques is also something that I highly recommend for couples who are dealing with any type of relational discord. John Gottman's research that began back in the '70s has given us a lot of information about what makes a relationship successful, his methods of outcome data. And that's not the case for every theoretical method out there. The interventions that John Gottman's therapists use have a high level of success. So that's a really great resource.

Scott Blair: Lenny, thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Lenny Parrott: Thank you, Scott, so much for having me. It was my pleasure.

Scott Blair: To find out more about Lenny Parrott and her practice, Cameron Valley Psychotherapy and Counseling, you can visit their website at www.CamValley.com or call 704-364-4333 for an appointment. Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at StayHappilyMarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at StayHappilyMarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at Comments@StayHappilyMarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.