

# Reintegrating sex into relationship is difficult

By ELLEN McCARTHY, The Washington Post | Posted: Saturday, December 12, 2009 | [0 comments](#)

WASHINGTON - People walk into Barry McCarthy's office, often after a stint in couples therapy. They've made some good progress, perhaps, but there is one looming issue they can't seem to resolve: sex. They come and sit before the slight, bespectacled man in his 60s and tell him it's been two years, or four, or 10. And never mind sex, they're not getting so much as a friendly elbow-nudge with any regularity these days.

The paradox about sex, the one that's put so much traffic on the path to his Chevy Chase, Md., office, is that when it works, it's not such a big deal, he says. When it doesn't, "it plays an inordinately powerful negative role in people's lives. ... It does destabilize marriages."

McCarthy first tells that prototypical couple, often referred by another therapist, is that there's no need to be embarrassed. One in five couples, he says, have a sexless marriage (having sex 10 or fewer times per year) and that if they want to get out of this painful rut, they'll have to work together. "You're either going to conquer this problem as a team or you're going to lose as a team," he says.

Couples are often locked in a power struggle when they come to see McCarthy, going round after round in the same fight. "The man says, 'Why don't we have more sex?' And the woman says, 'Why don't we have more intimacy?'" he explains.

McCarthy sees both parties individually to suss out all the issues on the table - sometimes it's affairs or a history of sexual trauma or erectile dysfunction or porn addiction or infertility struggles. Most often, he says, the problem is much more mundane: "The sexual charge no longer is there."

"The great majority of couples start off on this sexual high. A lot of sex ... and it's really fun. It's really validating, but it's not what allows people to be sexual in ongoing relationships," he says. McCarthy says many of the couples who come to him never made what he considers a "crucial transition into figuring out how to integrate intimacy and eroticism in an ongoing relationship ... into dealing with jobs and kids and dogs and lousy traffic and ugly weather. Real life."

What gets lost in all that real life is desire. And that component, he says, "is truly the big deal - feeling desired and desirable."

McCarthy often leads couples on a series of exercises designed to re-establish their comfort with touching each other, not just sexually, but in playful, affectionate ways. The idea, he says, is that "desire comes from the interaction - physical and emotional interaction between the two of them ... it's this combination of anticipation and touch."

The psychologist says it's still humbling, after 40 years, to see up close how complicated relationships are, and how confounding a role sex can play in people's lives.

But the positive bottom line he impresses on clients is that it might take time and some significant work, but "the majority of couples who are motivated can rebuild sexual desire."

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