f 0 REACH 0 I H F R**Sharing Sexual Intimacy**

ONNIE BARBACH, PH.D.

FOR EACH OTHER

Sharing Sexual Intimacy

LONNIE BARBACH, Ph.D.



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To all my clients who, in sharing themselves, were my greatest teachers.

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FOR EACH OTHER

Contents

Introduction	1
Section I	
BASIC PREMISES: Preparing for the Journey	7
Chapter 1	
THE WAY WE ARE: Role Scripting and	
Female Sexual Problems	9
CULTURAL ROLE SCRIPTS	10
SEX IS LEARNED	33
Chapter 2	
LOVE IS NOT ENOUGH: The Nature of Relationships	34
THE POWER STRUGGLE	36
INTERDEPENDENCY	41
SENSE OF ADEQUACY	43
ROLE SCRIPTING AND RELATIONSHIPS	46
RESOLVING CONFLICT	47
Chapter 3	
LEARNING ABOUT YOURSELF: The Sexual	
Arousal Process	51
The Genital Drawing Exercise	52

viii CONTENTS

GENITAL SENSITIVITY	54
The Genital Touching Exercise	59
THE SEXUAL PROCESS	59
MASTURBATION	69
The Masturbation Exercise	73
Section II	
THE FIRST STEP: Starting the Journey	77
Chapter 4	
OBSERVATION AND RISK TAKING	79
The Journal Exercise	80
RISK TAKING	84
TAKING THE FIRST STEP	87
Chapter 5	
COMMUNICATION	92
SHOW AND TELL	92
NEW RELATIONSHIPS	94
OLD RELATIONSHIPS	96
COMMUNICATION SKILLS	97
The Fantasy Rehearsal Exercise	99
The Communication Exercise	100
THE NATURE OF CHANGE	102
Section III	
LACK OF ORGASM	105
Chapter 6	
BLOCKS TO ORGASM	107
WOMEN WHO ARE ORGASMIC WITH MASTURBATION	
BUT NEVER WITH A PARTNER	107
The Masturbation Observation Exercise	110
WOMEN WHO HAVE BEEN ORGASMIC WITH A PREVIOUS	
PARTNER BUT ARE NOT WITH THEIR CURRENT PARTNER	116

	CONTENTS	ix
WOMEN WHO USED TO BE ORGASMIC WITH		ř.
THEIR GURRENT PARTNER		118
The Sleuthing Exercise		118
WOMEN WHO ARE INCONSISTENTLY ORGASMIC		
WITH THEIR PARTNER		122
WOMEN WHO ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THEIR ORGASM	мſ	125
CONTINUING THE JOURNEY		126
Chapter 7		
EXPANDING ORGASMIC POTENTIAL		128
BODY ACCEPTANCE		128
The Body-Looking Exercise		129
The Body-Exploration Exercise		130
The Self-Stimulation Exercise		130
The Slowing-Down Exercise		131
WIDENING YOUR HORIZONS		133
The Enlarging Options Exercise		134
EXPANDING SENSITIVITY		136
The Breaking-the-Pattern Exercise		136
The Subtle Sensations Exercise		137
The Body-Movement Exercise		138
INTENSIFYING ORGASM		139
The Intensifying Orgasm Exercise		139
INCREASING VAGINAL SENSITIVITY		140
The Kegel Exercises		141
The Locating the G-Spot Exercise		144
The Increasing Vaginal Sensitivity Exercises		145
The Fantasy Rehearsal Exercise Revisited		147
Chapter 8		
ORGASM WITH A PARTNER		150
PROVIDING SEXUAL INFORMATION		151
The Anatomy Lesson Exercise		155
BAN ON INTERCOURSE		156
PREPARATION FOR THE PARTNER EXERCISES		159
The Body Rub Exercise		161

X CONTENTS

A CORPORATION IN PACKING	167
ACCEPTING PLEASURE	168
The Second Request Eversion	171
The Sexual Request Exercise The His and Her Exercise	171
The His and Her Exercise	173
Chapter 9	
MODIFYING LOVEMAKING	176
The Sexual Assertiveness Exercise	176
CLITORAL STIMULATION	177
The Self Clitoral Stimulation Exercise	179
The Partner Clitoral Stimulation Exercise	181
VAGINAL STIMULATION	183
The G-Spot Stimulation Exercise	183
The Intercourse Exercise	183
The Expanding Pleasure Exercise	184
PRACTICE AND ORGASM	186
BLOCKING	187
The Fantasy Enhancement Exercise	187
Section IV	
SEXUAL DISCOMFORT	193
Chapter 10	
PAINFUL SEX	195
CLITORAL PAIN	196
VAGINAL PAIN	198
The Vaginismus Exercise	201
SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION	207
Section V	
SEXUAL INTEREST	209
Chapter 11	
WHAT IS NORMAL SEXUAL DESIRE?	211
EXPECTATIONS AND THE MEDIA	212
DESIRE DISCREPANCIES	213
DETERMINING WHAT IS NORMAL	217
The Sexual Interest Evaluation Exercise	217

	CONTENTS	xi
The Ban on Sex Exercise		218
The Sexual Readiness Scale Exercise		219
The No Exercise		221
		224
ALTERNATIVES TO SEX		
Chapter 12		
LACK OF SEXUAL INTEREST		227
CHRONIC LACK OF INTEREST		227
SPORADIC SEXUAL DESIRE		229
WOMEN WHO ARE NO LONGER INTERESTED IN SEX		231
Chapter 13		
RECONNECTING		241
THE MOTIVATION PROBLEM		243
STORED ANGER AND LACK OF COMMUNICATION		243
The Past Hurts Exercise		245
The Active Listening Exercise		247
The Caring Days Exercise		250
CREATING THE MOOD		252
The Sexual Daydream Exercise		253
The Erotica Exercise		253
The Erotic Film Exercise		254
The Anticipation Exercise		254
The Teasing Touch Exercise		255
BREAKING THE AVOIDANCE HABIT		255
The Journal Observation Exercise		255
UNBLOCKING THE BLOCKS		257
The Thought Stopping Exercise		259
THE FIRST TIME		260
The It's Not Really Happening Exercise		261
The Setup Exercise		263
MAINTAINING SEXUAL ACTIVITY		263
Chapter 14		
ENHANCING YOUR SEXUAL RELATIONS	HIP	264
The Time Exercise		264
The Stress Exercise		265

xii contents

BOREDOM	267
Suggestions for Sexual Enhancement	268
The Oral Sex Exercises	271
COMMUNICATION AND PLANNING	272
Section VI	
SEXUALITY: An Ongoing Journey	275
Chapter 15	
WHAT IS PROGRESS?	277
BACKSLIDING	277
RELAPSES	278
LACK OF IMPROVEMENT	279
MOVING FORWARD	281
Notes	285
Index	291

Introduction

Almost all American women face a sexual problem at some point in their lives. The most recent polls show that between 30 and 50 percent of women have problems with orgasm. And a University of Pittsburgh study found that your relationship does not have to have serious problems for you to experience a sexual problem. Sixty-three percent of the female partners in couples who defined themselves as happily married reported arousal or orgasmic difficulties.

Sexual problems have many causes. Some are the result of communication problems, stored-up resentment, and unresolved power struggles in a relationship. Others result from cultural attitudes which have taught women to be anything but sexually comfortable.

Recent changes have had an impact on a woman's expression of her sexuality. Never before have so many women been aware of orgasm, aware of their clitoris, aware of their right to pleasure. With effective contraception, sex is no longer inextricably tied to reproduction and women are freer to enjoy sexual fulfillment. More lesbians are willing to speak out about their sexual preference without guilt or shame. Still, many women cannot entirely shed the effects of religious and family backgrounds which taught them that sex is sinful or at least unbecoming.

As a result, many women have not developed the sexual aspects of their intimate relationships as fully as they have developed their roles as mother, homemaker, and co-supporter. While they may have intellectually rejected their negative attitudes toward sex, the ability to express sexual feeling has not always followed. Many women still worry about their partner loving them, respecting them, and staying with them if they become less inhibited. Ironically, most men long for female partners who are sexually responsive. Women who obviously enjoy sex not only make their partner feel adept as a lover, but increase their partner's sexual enjoyment by providing additional sexual energy and input.

Today both men and women express longing for greater satisfaction from their intimate relationships. As the technological society reduces the emotional fulfillment derived from work, and distance separates people from their extended families, more nurturing is required from intimate relationships. A satisfying and loving sexual relationship is one way to meet this need. This is not to say that sex cannot be enjoyed without love. But for most people, good sex is a part of a close and caring relationship.³ The more trust a woman has in her partner, the more likely she is to be able to relax and fully enjoy sex. Problems in nonsexual areas of a couple's relationship can affect the sexual relationship and reduce the satisfaction experienced.

For Each Other has been conceived of as a guide to help negotiate the complex aspects of a relationship that can affect sexual satisfaction. It is based on nine years' experience working directly with hundreds of women in group, individual, and couple sex therapy, and supervising therapists counseling hundreds more. Originally I worked with women who had never experienced orgasm through any means. Out of this work came For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality, which taught women about their own bodies and orgasm largely through the process of self-stimulation. Since then I have broadened the program to include women who are orgasmic with masturbation but not with their partners, women who rarely desire sex, and women who find sex painful.

These sexual problems were discussed among small groups of six or seven women over a period of ten sessions. The women varied in age and background. They were involved in committed relationships—both long and short term—as well as in casual sexual relationships. They were largely heterosexual, but about 10 percent

were in lesbian relationships. It was through leading these groups that I learned the necessary approaches and steps required for women to gain sexual satisfaction with a partner.*

The exercises the women carried out at home included both talking exercises that reduce anger and improve communication and physical touching homework assignments designed to break unsatisfying lovemaking patterns and pave the way for more fulfilling sexual experiences. As these women experimented with various homework assignments, I learned which exercises were most effective in helping women improve their sexual relationships.

Some of the women participating in the groups had partners who were aware of the problem and were willing to participate in homework. Others were involved in casual sexual relationships and preferred to carry out assignments without informing their partners about their sexual problem—particularly when it concerned orgasm. While it is most likely to be successful for women who have partners willing to participate actively in the exercises, the program outlined in this book can also be helpful for women who have a partner who is unaware of the problem or the process. However, this would mean that the entire responsibility would be placed on her shoulders to initiate and monitor the assignments. Obviously, the involvement and support of a partner improves the chances of success.

If you have a partner with whom you can talk openly and carry out the exercises, your partner should read this book before you begin. Sometimes couples read the chapters aloud together and sometimes they read them separately, underlining the sentences or paragraphs that seem to describe their particular concern or situation, as well as the exercises which seem relevant.

Exploring our sexuality is a journey that begins at birth and continues throughout life. Our ideas of sexual fulfillment change as we grow, opening different avenues of exploration. It is important to hold goals, not final destinations; reaching one goal simply frees us to move toward the next. Like an adventure in a new and exotic land, our sexual journey provides us with unending opportunities to add richness to our lives. The longer we explore

^{*} If you are a therapist and interested in learning to run preorgasmic groups, please read Women Discover Orgasm: A Therapist's Guide to a New Treatment Approach, which I wrote specifically for this purpose.