

It takes two to nurture couplehood

By Jane Clifford
FAMILY EDITOR

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OK, now that women and men know what the other wants – and doesn't want – when it comes to intimacy, how do couples get there?

We asked our experts for their advice on how men can address women's complaints and vice versa.

Sallie Hildebrandt and Steven Solomon, San Diego licensed psychologists who specialize in relationship counseling, both say that the first step is for a couple to assess their sexual relationship, make a commitment to giving it as much attention as any other part of the relationship, and nurture it accordingly.

In other words, any couple can have a great sex life if both partners want it and are willing to work at it.

Listen up, guys

■ Women want men to be more romantic, more sensitive.

“If you and your partner haven't had sex in a while,” Hildebrandt says, “the correct approach is not 'Do you want to have sex tonight?' That's not a turn-on for a woman.”

Solomon adds, “The fact of the matter is, for women by and large, making love is much more preferable than 'having sex.' The difference is that making love has an intimate, loving component to it . . . but men are so more often interested in sex for the physical, sexual charge of it.”

■ The way to passion for women is feeling respected and cared for.

“I tell people sex does not start in the bedroom, it starts in the kitchen, it's how you treat your partner,” Hildebrandt says.

“A big complaint that affects the relationship is being equally partnered and responsible about what happens in the relationship. If women are

angry that men aren't sharing the load at home, it's real hard for women to get turned on. They're mad as hell.”

She adds: “Men need to say, 'I love you,' regularly. They need to touch without it having to go on to sex. They need to show appreciation, saying 'That's a great dinner you cooked,' 'Thank you for picking up the dry cleaning.' It's amazing how far things like that will go for a woman.”

Says Solomon: “Guys have to learn that they're not going to get lucky if they're letting resentments lie there in between them and their partner and be unaddressed. All the jokes about makeup sex are true. If a guy works at overcoming the problem, apologizes, it creates intimacy in the relationship.”

■ **Learn to express love and affection in nonsexual ways.**

“There are four way to express affection – sexually, verbally, through our actions by doing things for our partner and nonsexual physical affection – hugging, kissing, holding hands,” Solomon says. “Guys neglect that part of the affection in a relationship, and if guys are good at that, they're much more likely to have a fulfilling sex life with their partner.”

Adds Hildebrandt: “One thing I say when I'm working with a couple is that the most important sex organ is the brain and the biggest is the skin. That's why touch is so important . . . Women become averse to a man's touch if they think, 'He's touching me because he wants sex, not because he finds me alluring or he wants to snuggle.' ”

Pay attention, ladies

■ **Remember your partner.**

“We live in a culture that is child-focused, and children come first, and I think men often have a valid complaint that they're last on the list,” Hildebrandt says. “Kids are in soccer and baseball, shuttled to all kinds of places and then an hour for homework. That doesn't leave any quality time for couples.”

Adds Solomon: “The best sexual partnerships are the ones where the sex is, sometimes, the way one partner wants it and, sometimes, the way the other partner wants it. It's when one partner can say, 'Even though I'm not really in the mood right now, I know he loves me, and I'm going to take care of him now.' ”

■ **Don't leave lovemaking to the end of the day.**

Hildebrandt and Solomon both know how busy families and couples are. As professionals, they advocate couples making dates to feed their relationship.

“They need not only to make sex dates but to find a way to get away, for a few hours or a weekend or even just send the kids away and enjoy yourselves at home,” Hildebrandt says.

Women may be reluctant to do that, she says, but she reminds women that it's no different than when they were dating. They looked forward to a date night, carefully picking out what they wore, how they did their hair, the perfume they chose. They can still do that, and they're likely to find that the evening can be just as exciting now as it was then.

▪ **Relax and enjoy yourself.**

Says Hildebrandt: “I think one thing that gets in the way for women are all the social messages you get growing up . . . 'Don't do this because you're going to get pregnant.'”

“We don't feel comfortable having sex just for the sake of having sex,” she says. “Women begin to see sex as just one more thing they have to do for him. A lot of women are not able to access easily their sexual feelings and, on a daily basis, are not nurturing their sexual feelings. . . . Women need to fantasize regularly.”