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THE ART OF LOVE

Straight talk about sex and how to improve your relationship

BY GINA K. THORNBURG

“Four years into our relationship, my husband and I split up. The fact that we’d had sex less than a dozen times in the last year and a half of our marriage only reflected the morass of resentment and misunderstandings outside the bedroom. Unaware that we were experiencing a universal truth — that a couple needs a repertoire of communication skills to keep the spark going after the initial passion has worn off — we threw up our hands and admitted defeat. If we’d only known. . . .”

This couple isn’t unique. Relationship counselors and psychologists say many people aren’t aware that love’s vibe is *supposed* to evolve; when the first phase of electrically charged romance ends, both men and women typically start searching for faults, either in themselves or their partners. Instead, they should work on perfecting their sexual communication skills.

“The couple has no awareness that this diminishing of sexual excitement is to be expected,” says Judith Sherven, PhD, a clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles and co-author with husband Jim Sniechowski, PhD, of *The New Intimacy: Discovering the Magic at the Heart of Your Differences* (Health Communication, 1997). “Very often we see couples who had a wonderful sex life when they were dating and perhaps in the early part of their marriage, but they were not prepared for the sexuality to change once they had a solid, committed relationship in place.”

Michelle, 28, married for six years to a man she met when she was 18 and he 26, says, “In the beginning of our relationship, that’s all it was, was sex.” She says her husband still seeks the excitement and passion of those early days. The problem is, after years of unresolved “petty things” that make her

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feel resentful, Michelle withholds sex because her own emotional needs aren't being met.

"Most people relate to sex as though it's something that happens to you," says Sniechowski, director of The Menswork Center in Santa Monica, California, a group-therapy practice. "The best sex, then, as a consequence, is when you're completely out of control and overwhelmed. The idea that you could link sex and consciousness [is unusual]. They seem to be mutually exclusive."

They aren't. Imagine, for instance, sleepwalking through your training, your mind on a thousand other things. You try to avoid that, right? Your workouts shine when you focus on every

movement, motivated to make each rep count. You pay attention. The same rules apply to a successful sex life with your mate: When you pay attention, you reap the greatest rewards.

Awakening to Better Sex

Nobody is born naturally good at loving a potential partner. Lovemaking well is a learned skill, not something to absorb through the movies, pornographic videos or sixth-grade sex-education courses.

"The point of sex, aside from those rare times when people want to make a baby, is for two people who care about each other to give each other pleasure," says longtime sex therapist Bernie Zilbergeld, PhD, author of *The New Male Sexuality: The Truth About Men, Sex, and Pleasure* (Bantam, 1992).

Although this is obvious to many people, a lot of men and women often don't communicate honestly about what's happening between the sheets.

And many wonder whether sex can offer them something more. Practitioners of "tantric" sex say it can. Tantra, an ancient set of sexual practices from India, elevates sex to an art form. Without knowing it, you may already be practicing some of its techniques.

Every year, drawn by the enticement of heightened states of ecstasy with their mates, more than 1,500 people attend tantric-sex workshops (cost: \$650) at the Source School of Tantra in Paia, Maui, Hawaii. Run by Charles and Caroline Muir, authors of *Tantra: The Art of Conscious Loving* (Mercury House, 1989), these weekend seminars consist of verbal instruction and group discussion, after which initiates are sent to their rooms to engage in hands-on practice. "A passionate partnership not only needs the nourishment sexual energy provides but it also needs maintenance. *Conscious maintenance*," say the Muirs. "We believe that as much care, thoughtfulness and attention

ELECTRIFYING SEX – TANTRIC TECHNIQUES

When you make love in a conscious way, you become aware of the energies building up in your own and your partner's bodies. The following tantric techniques might help you and your lover expand your pleasure boundaries.

The Nurturing Meditation. This "physical form of communication" described in Charles and Carolyn Muir's guide can build up love's energy. Sex is not the goal of this exercise, but many couples might nevertheless want to make love afterward.

Lie with your partner in spoon fashion on your left sides. The partner on the outside wraps his or her arms around the partner on the inside, who is the one who feels most in need of nurturing at the time. Be sure that you're both comfortable; no bodypart should be strained.

Close your eyes and relax. Both of you should focus on breathing deeply, clearing your minds of any distractions. Be aware of your breath as it flows up into and down out of your nostrils. Inhale slowly together, hold your breath for a few seconds together and exhale slowly together, then wait a moment before beginning the next inhalation. The partner on the outside gives to the partner on the inside, visualizing energy pushed out with each exhalation into his or her partner's back. Practice three whole breaths as you both focus your attention at each "energy center" (called "chakras" by tantricas) in this order: the heart, the space between the eyebrows, the base of the spine, the genital area, behind the navel, the throat and the crown of the head. It's important that both of you focus on the same region at the same time.

You and your loved one communicate on three different levels with this meditation, say the Muirs: skin to skin, breath to breath, and energy center to energy center. The purpose of this practice is to sustain love's energy in the relationship and to create harmony.

Kissing. Tantricas employ five different ways of kissing: lipping, in which partners contact both the inner and outer sides of the lips; tonguing, in which the tongue is used to lick the lips, touch the inner cheek or palate, or caress the tongue; biting or nibbling, gently on the inside and outside of the other's upper and lower lips; and sucking or blowing kisses, a kind of inhalation and exhalation against lips or any other area of skin.



Touching. Tantric lovers consider the whole body accessible to kissing and touching. Five different ways of touching are also part of the repertoire: static touch, in which your hands rest upon your lover, not moving at all, while you consciously direct energy from your right hand into and through your lover, and then accept it back into your left hand; moving touch, which travels in short or long strokes across the skin in specific patterns; squeezing, which includes kneading and gentle pinching; scratching softly with the fingernails or tips of the fingers; and tapping or slapping, especially on the buttocks, paying attention to your lover's level of tolerance and never causing pain.

'Tantra, an ancient set of sexual practices from India, elevates sex to an art form.

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should be paid to a relationship as to a career, a family or a cause."

All Day Long

Don't think of love as separate from the rest of your day, as just a few quick minutes together. "Foreplay should go on continuously, although I don't like the word foreplay," says Zilbergeld. "Make sexual contact many times every day, give each other reminders that part of what you share is sexual: loving touches, general compliments, sexual compliments and tokens of appreciation that should just be constant."

Sherven and Sniechowski and other experts recommend scheduling touching time, instead of habitually falling into a bout of lovemaking at the end of the day when both partners are tired and are possibly bringing outside stresses into bed.

"Your sex life is influenced by your overall mood," says Santa Monica, California, graphic designer Lynn,* 30. "Since I'm self-employed, I have a lot of deadline pressure and a lot of projects I'm juggling. I find that a lot of times I won't get enough sleep and I'll be very stressed out, so I won't feel like pulling out all the stops or doing things that would encourage a good sex life."

With Eyes Wide Open

Tantra requires that you mindfully participate in giving and receiving pleasure, not having sex with your eyes closed the whole time. "If your eyes are closed . . . sex is often a solo experience with a partner, and that isn't as fulfilling," says Charles Muir, a tantra instructor for 18 years.

Zilbergeld says: "Eyes-open sex is different from the Western model. When you're being physically intimate with each other and are looking at each other, that can be really scary . . . because you feel the other person can see right into your soul."



"It takes a lot to open up to everything," says Brian Brown, 28, a bookstore assistant manager in Reseda, California, who has had a steady girlfriend for almost three years. "There's a fear that somebody knows you so well, better than you know yourself."

Indeed, for people who often equate good sex with orgasm, tantric sexual practices may be frightening because they require lovers to be fully present, to slow down, to pay attention to every kiss, touch, taste, sound and movement. It means designating a special time and place for lovemaking and learning ways to reveal yourself as you may never have before, including

speaking up if you're afraid, nervous or uncomfortable.

Prolong the Pleasure

Typically, those who attend the Southern California sex seminars led for 15 years by David and Ellen Ramsdale are people in long-term relationships, "Women classically still seeking how to have an orgasm, and the men still seeking how not to have an orgasm," says Ellen, co-author with David (now her ex-husband and "best friend") of *Sexual Energy Ecstasy: A Practical Guide to Lovemaking Secrets of the East and West* (Bantam, 1993).

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"Ejaculation ruins sex," opines Brown. "It shortens the pleasure and it's a hindrance to closeness." Tantrikas knew this aeons ago and so stressed the importance of choosing when to ejaculate, so that a man may do it voluntarily. Contrary to popular belief, orgasm and ejaculation are not the same thing.

"Ejaculation is the physical reflex when the [semen] comes out," explains Zilbergeld. "Orgasm is the peak feeling associated with sex."

Men can learn how to "last longer" with a little practice and by engaging in regular sex exercises. One such exer-

cise involves strengthening the pelvic-floor muscle. Locate it by stopping your urine mid-flow the next time you urinate. When you're familiar with this muscle contraction, you can practice it any time, sitting, standing or lying down. In *The New Male Sexuality*, Zilbergeld recommends squeezing and releasing the muscles 15 times, twice a day. Squeeze the muscle and let go. Gradually increase the number of contractions until you do about 75, twice a day. Zilbergeld writes: "Squeezing your pelvic muscles when you're having an erotic fantasy, when you're being sexually stimulated and when you're having intercourse can increase pelvic sensation and help turn you on."

The Muirs stress the importance of stimulating what tantricas call the sacred spot in the vagina. For Westerners, the term "g-spot" (named after the man who "discovered" what had existed in women's bodies since time immemorial) is the familiar word for this area. In their popular video "Secrets of Female Sexual Ecstasy," the Muirs give explicit instruction on how to find the spot.

Building Your Love Nest


Preparation of your body and the space you choose for intimate interludes is important, experts say. Shower or bathe beforehand. Make sex a ritual that you approach with respect. Tantric lovers believe that no part of the body should be off limits (unless you're uncomfortable with being touched somewhere). That's why you want to meet your partner with a body he or she can revel in and trust to be good-smelling, ready to be explored with tongue and fingertips.

Before preparing your body, dress up an inviting space suitable for passion, keeping in mind these tips from the experts:

1) Most likely the space will be your bed, or perhaps a pile of soft blankets and pillows in front of the fireplace. Don't make a habit of bringing work papers or discussing "issues" in these spaces at any time — reserve them solely for acts of pleasure.


2) Choose flattering lighting, suggest the Ramsdales. Candles, of course, bring a warm glow to the skin, making you and your lover seem vibrant. If you

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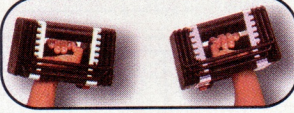


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'Tantric sexual practices require lovers to pay attention to every kiss, touch, taste, sound and movement. It means designating a special time and place for lovemaking and learning ways to reveal yourself as you may never have before.'

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ose to use light bulbs, try colored es, such as amber, green and blue, es that can increase the erotic arge you feel. Avoid red, since it gives tones an artificial appearance and overstimulate the emotions.

5) Prior verbal communication is ical. "As you enter that space, you st speak the truth," says Sherven. if the truth is 'I'm nervous,' you say t." Or, adds Sniechowski: "You may 'I feel awkward tonight, I'm not ily here.' Both people honor their n reality and each other's reality, d that opens the door to intimacy." e adds that a couple should avoid ng into that kind of situation with a t of expectations that must be ful- ed. The act of sexual intercourse esn't need to occur, and neither rner should merely go along with e other's desires if it doesn't feel t to him or her.

6) Contrary to romance-novel depic- ns, it's best to make love when re calm and relaxed and full of

energy, not when you're excited, angry or agitated in any way, says Ramsdale.

5) Avoid alcohol and marijuana beforehand. Alcohol can dull the senses, and chronic use of marijuana can give you anorgasmia, an inability to orgasm. If you regularly take prescription medications, you might want to ask your doctor whether they affect sexual responses.

6) Decorate the borders of the space with incense, scented candles, cherished objects, richly colored silks or velvets and pillows. Bring all supplies you may need, such as massage oils or lotions, condoms, diaphragm or spermicide, a towel, glasses of water. You want the experience to flow as seamlessly as possible without interruptions. **M&F**

**Name changed to protect her privacy.*

Gina Thornburg is a free-lance writer based in Los Angeles.

For more articles on sexual fitness, go to www.muscle-fitness.com and click on Sex.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Tantra: The Art of Conscious Loving*, by Charles and Caroline Muir (Mercury House, 1989)
- Sexual Energy Ecstasy: A Practical Guide to Lovemaking Secrets of the East and West*, by David and Ellen Ramsdale (Bantam, 1993)
- The New Intimacy: Discovering the Magic at the Heart of Your Differences*, by Judith Sherven, PhD, and James Sniechowski, PhD (Health Communication, 1997)
- The Tao of Sexual Massage*, by Stephen Russell and Juergen Kolb (Fireside, Gaia Books Ltd., 1992)
- The Yin-Yang Butterfly: Ancient Chinese Sexual Secrets for Western Lovers*, by Valentin Chu (Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1994)
- "Secrets of Female Sexual Ecstasy," videotape by Charles and Caroline Muir; call (800) 572-8364 to order
- The Better Sex Video Series, Sinclair Institute, (800) 955-0888

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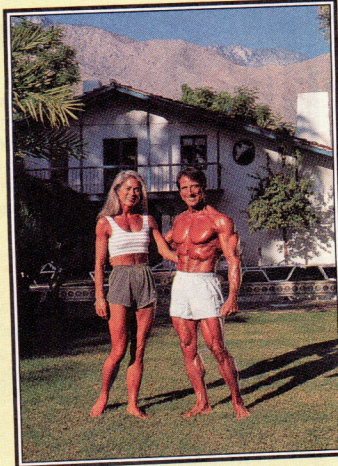
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