



Repairing the Sexless Relationship

2023 TLPCA Summit

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Presenters

Michael Christian, PhD

National Board-Certified Counselor

Licensed Professional Counselor-Mental Health Service Provider

Board Certified Sex Therapist

Board Certified Sex Addiction Therapist – Supervisor

Founder-Clinical Director @ Connection Therapy Group

Associate Professor Clinical Counseling – Trevecca Nazarene University

Author, Researcher, Speaker, Therapist

Contact Information

Phone: 615.604.6853

Website:

www.connectiontherapygroup.com

Email:

michael@connectiontherapygroup.com

mchristian@trevecca.edu

Presenters

Rachel Christian Gulley, PhD

- National Board-Certified Counselor
- Licensed Professional Counselor, Mental Health Service Provider
- Board Certified Sex Therapist
- Board Certified Sexual Addiction Therapist
- Board Certified Partner Trauma Therapist

Contact Information

Phone: 615.504.2059

Email:

Rachel@ConnectionTherapyGroup.com

Websites:

www.ConnectionTherapyGroup.com

www.RachelChristian.com

Presenters

Chelsea Alexander, MS

- LPC-MHSP
- National Board-Certified Counselor
- EMDR Clinician
- Doctoral Student, Trevecca Nazarene University

Presenters

- **Emily Kucera, BA**
 - Graduate Student, Trevecca Nazarene University
 - Intern, Connection Therapy Group
- **Denny Mihalek, BS**
 - Graduate Student, Trevecca Nazarene University
 - Intern, Connection Therapy Group

Workshop Objectives

- Define the term “**sexless relationship**” and understand the contributing factors
- Identify the implications of a “**sexless relationship**” and how those involved are impacted
- Discover evidence-based treatment strategies used to repair “**sexless relationships**”



SHAUNTI FELDHAHN &
DR. MICHAEL SYTSMA

secrets of sex & marriage

8 Surprises That Make
All the Difference

"I highly recommend this insightful book to all married couples."
—Gary Chapman, PhD, author of *The 5 Love Languages*

A Great Resource



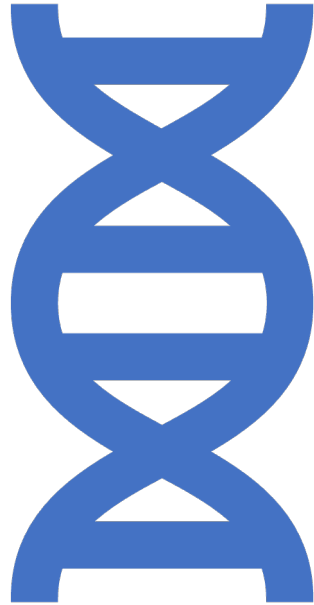
The Term “Sexless Relationship”

- The absence of any sexual activity between both members of a couple (Kim et al., 2017)
- When a couple has not been sexually intimate for at least 1 month
- No more than 2 encounters of sexual intercourse per month (Charny, 2004)
- No more than 10 encounters of sexual intercourse per year (HRF, 2014)

Sexless Relationship



There's no exact way to quantify what counts as a sexless relationship, as different people have different expectations and desires for sex.



Common Causes and Contributing Factors

Growing Older

- Menopausal changes
 - Researchers interviewed post-menopausal women to understand how their sex life had changed
 - Around 68% of those interviewed report a change in the sexual responses
 - Of these women around 58% reported engaging in sex less frequently
 - Around 39% desired sex less, around 39% had sex less frequently, and only around 11% were having sex more frequently

(Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, & Carey, 2005)

Growing Older

- Sexual dysfunction
 - Vaginal dryness associated with menopause
 - Medication can be expensive, may not always work, and create concerns about lasting effects
 - Erectile dysfunction (ED) in partners
 - Treatments may not always work, treatments can also eliminate the element of spontaneity, and men may not want to discuss the difficulties of ED
- Physical pain
 - Older women may deal with joint pain while engaging in sex making them less likely to engage in sex in the future

(Thomas et al. 2020)

Growing Older

- Older people refrain from sex for a multitude of reasons
 - Avoiding their sexual dysfunction
 - Treatment makes sex feel like a task to accomplish according to participants in research studies
 - Shame is associated with sexual dysfunction
 - Ignoring their new body
 - Body image issue, related to perceived attractiveness
 - Being unable to perform like when they were younger
 - They may not be able to climax easily

(Gewirtz-Meydan & Ayalon, 2022)

Growing Older

No longer being interested in sexual activity

- New priorities
- Low energy

Grieving the loss of a partner

- Some chose to stay single because they do not want to get to know a new partner

Feeling judged

- Some feel their partners no longer find them attractive
- Society has strong beliefs about remarrying, having sex as an older person, and life after losing a spouse

Sexuality changes

- Couples find different ways to romantically connect
- Some come to value different forms of intimacy



Life Changes

- Changes in self-perception
 - 51% felt less attractive
 - Lower perceived attractiveness is related to lower sexual frequency
 - (Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, & Carey, 2005)
- Men reporting less frequent sex
 - Those with lower health status
 - Those in longer relationships
- Overall reports
 - Lower levels of marital happiness is related to lower sexual frequency
 - The lower levels of shared activity related to lower levels of sexual frequency



Life changes



- Post-menopausal women reported that life stressors would get in the way of having sex
 - Women reported they were too distracted to focus on sex
 - They also reported that past sexual trauma or abuse did prevent them from wanting to engage in sexual activity
- Physical separation from their partner was also related to lower sexual frequency
- A history of gynecologic surgeries or health issues were associated with lower sexual frequency
- A change in perceived attractiveness is associated with a decrease in sexual frequency
 - 21% of post-menopausal women could not identify one attractive feature of themselves
 - 51% of post-menopausal women felt less attractive than when they were younger

(Thomas et al. 2020)

(Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, & Carey, 2005)

Family

- Cultural factors associated with having a family as it relates to sex
 - Co-sleeping and being a good mother in Japan
 - Sex becomes a lower priority because women are viewed as good mothers when they prioritize families
 - Co-sleeping is very common in Japan which limits the ability for couples to have sexual encounters
 - The primary focus of parents is working and taking care of their families
- Those in relationships report
 - Having relationships involving preschool aged children report having sex less frequently
 - The more children a couple has the less likely they are to have infrequent sexual encounters

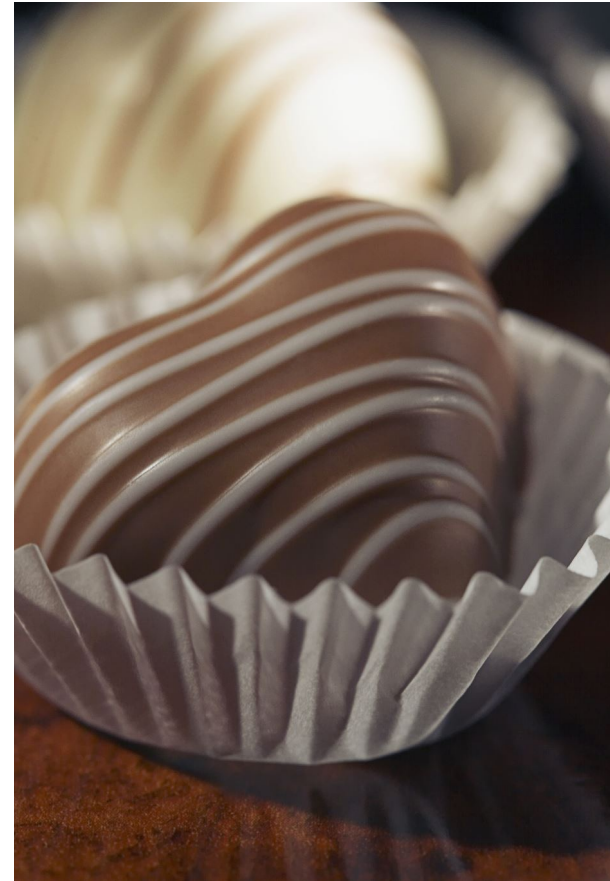
(Moriki, 2012)

(Donnelly, 1993)

Levels of Sexual Enjoyment

- Satisfaction levels
 - 46% of men and 58% of women are satisfied with their frequency of sex
 - Most men desire more sex
 - Around 33% of women desire less sex
 - Men seem to be least satisfied during middle age and when they have been in a relationship for more than six years
- (Smith et al., 2011)
 - Around 27% of post-menopausal women enjoyed sex less and around 22% enjoyed sex more

(Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, & Carey, 2005)



Common Myths about Sex

- The man should be the sexual leader
- All physical contact must lead to sex
- Gender myths on sex
- Size of genitals
- Porn increases sexual desire
- Good sex leads to an orgasm
- Masturbation is wrong
- Couples have sex several times a week

(Avasthi et al., 2017)

Implications of a Sexless Relationship





Impacts of a Sexless Relationship

Both partners experience:

- Increased anxiety and/or depression (Kim et al., 2017)
- Additional stress on the relationship (Bergeron et al., 2018)
- Diminished communication including sexual communication in the relationship (Bergeron et al., 2018)

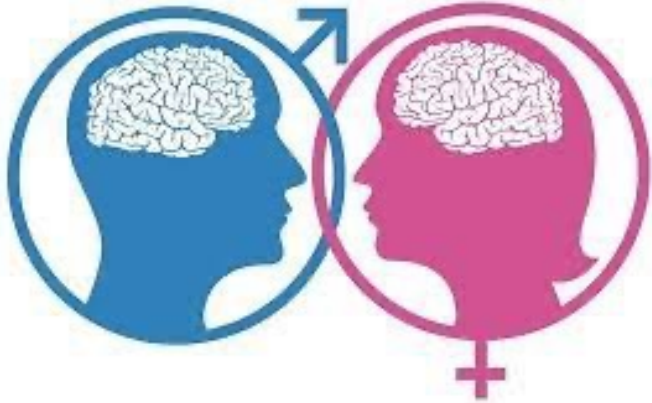
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Gender Differences



- Males sexlessness was associated with providing less than 20% of the household income
- Sexlessness is associated with low income, poor health, lower financial satisfaction, absence of children, and having conservative sexual attitudes for females
- 1 in 6 men and over 1 in 4 women in the USA did not have sex for at least one year
- Two different types of sexual activities for men: reproductive sex and sex for pleasure (Tsuji, 2018).

(Kim et al., 2017)

Racial Differences

- African Americans have lower likelihood of sexlessness among currently non-married adults
- Never-married, divorced/separated, and widowed African-American males showed lower likelihood of sexlessness as compared to their White counterparts
- African-American males had higher likelihood of sexlessness

(Kim et al., 2017)



The cover of the 'Handbook of Sexuality-Related Measures, Fourth Edition' is partially visible on the left. It features a vibrant, abstract painting with horizontal bands of red, orange, yellow, and green. The title and authors' names are printed at the bottom in white text on a black background.

Handbook of Sexuality-Related Measures Fourth Edition

Robin R. Milhausen, John K. Sokoluk, Teri D. Fisher,
Cleve M. Davis, and William L. Yarber

Measures

- Countless sexuality-related measures exist to measure facets of behavior, interest, pain, expression, beliefs, etc. and a notable many are found in the Handbook of Sexuality Related Measures (4th ed.; Milhausen et al., 2020).
- Sexual Satisfaction Index (SSI)
- 1-10 Likert scale

Sexual Satisfaction Index

(Leth-Nissen et al., 2021)

- 9 Items
- Addresses physical, emotional, and relational factors related to sexual satisfaction
- Uses a sum score of all responses
- Scores can range from 0-36
- Higher sum scores indicate higher levels of sexual satisfaction

Leth-Nissen, A. B., Fentz, H., Wellnitz, K. B., & Trillingsgaard, T. L. (2021). Development and Validation of the Assessment Inventory on Relationship Risks and Resources (AIRR). [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University.

The following statements describe aspects of sexual life and romance in your current relationship. Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am satisfied with the amount of touching in our relationship (e.g. hugs and caresses).	(5) <input type="checkbox"/>	(4) <input type="checkbox"/>	(3) <input type="checkbox"/>	(2) <input type="checkbox"/>	(1) <input type="checkbox"/>
There is flirtation and romance between my partner and I.	(5) <input type="checkbox"/>	(4) <input type="checkbox"/>	(3) <input type="checkbox"/>	(2) <input type="checkbox"/>	(1) <input type="checkbox"/>

Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I am satisfied with the amount of time we spend on foreplay.	(5) <input type="checkbox"/>	(4) <input type="checkbox"/>	(3) <input type="checkbox"/>	(2) <input type="checkbox"/>	(1) <input type="checkbox"/>
I wish that my partner would initiate sex more often.	(1) <input type="checkbox"/>	(2) <input type="checkbox"/>	(3) <input type="checkbox"/>	(4) <input type="checkbox"/>	(5) <input type="checkbox"/>
I often feel rejected sexually by my partner.	(1) <input type="checkbox"/>	(2) <input type="checkbox"/>	(3) <input type="checkbox"/>	(4) <input type="checkbox"/>	(5) <input type="checkbox"/>
	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I long for more variation in our sex life.	(1) <input type="checkbox"/>	(2) <input type="checkbox"/>	(3) <input type="checkbox"/>	(4) <input type="checkbox"/>	(5) <input type="checkbox"/>

10-Point Likert Scale

How would you rate your current satisfaction with your sexual relationship?

Not at all satisfied

Extremely satisfied

1

10

Informal

Fast

Simple and subjective

Can be used as a stand-alone measure or in combination with formal measures

Treatments for Sexless Relationships

Individual Therapy

Couple's Therapy & Sex Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Psychoeducation

Sensate Focus

Mindfulness-Based Approaches

Attachment Theory

Emotion Focused Therapy

Communication Skills Training

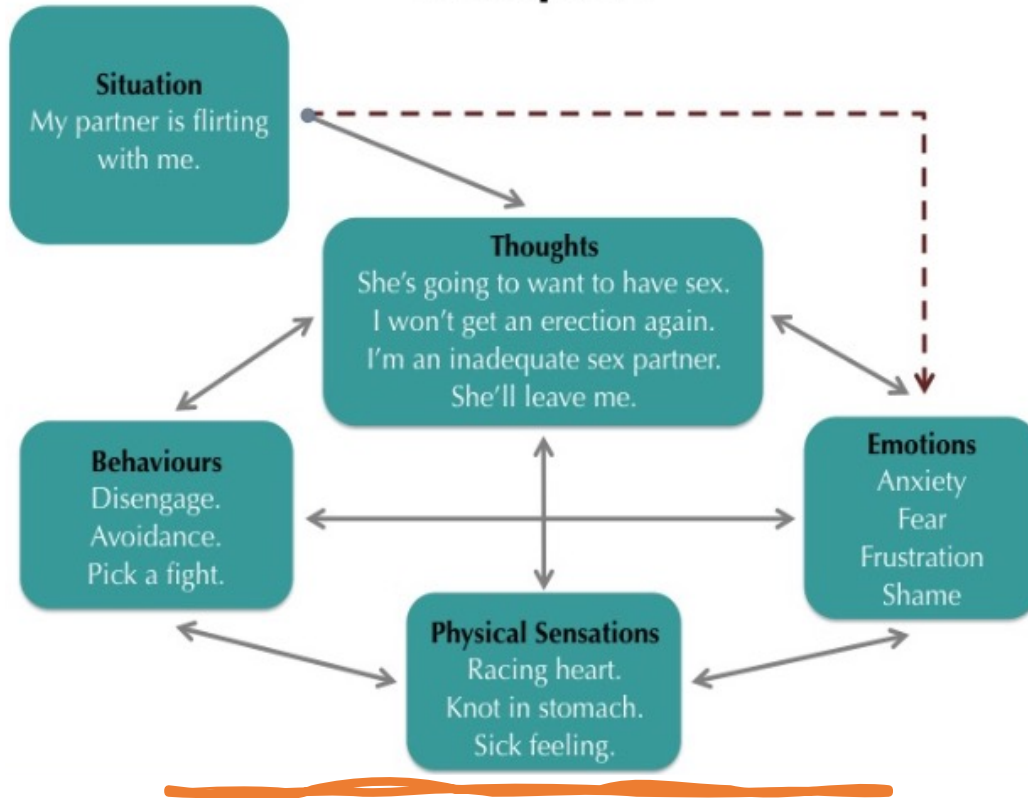
Medication



Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- Targets the thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and couple interactions (Bergeron et al., 2018)
- Helps reduce anxiety related to sex (Pereira et al., 2013)
- Improves the individual sense of self (Pereira et al., 2013)
- Techniques include sensate focus, cognitive restructuring, communication skills, and positive reinforcement (Hummel et al., 2018; Pereira et al., 2013)

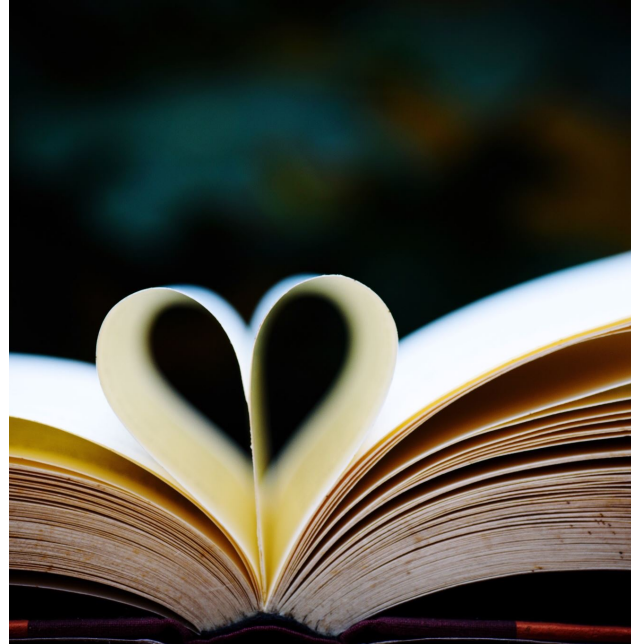
Example 2



(Winters, 2015)

Psychoeducational Books

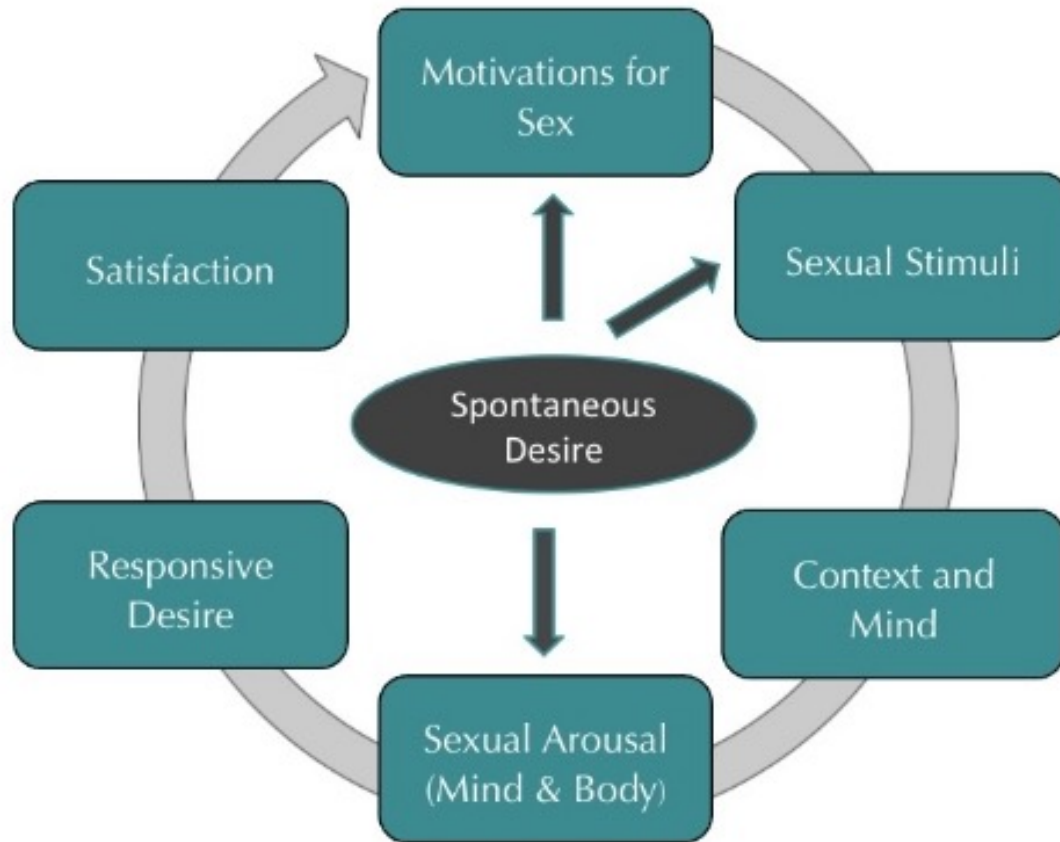
- *Mating in Captivity*- Esther Perel
- *The Art of Loving*- Erich Fromm
- *Attached*- Amir Levine, MD and Rachel S.F. Heller
- *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide For Couples*- Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph.D.
- *Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment*- Gay Henricks, Ph.D. and Kathlyn Hendricks, Ph.D.
- *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*- John M. Gottman, Ph.D. and Nan Silver



Sexual Psychoeducation

- Discuss anatomy of sex organs
- Discuss pregnancy, menopause, menstrual cycle
- Timing of sex
- Communicate sex messages
- How to refuse sex
- Manual stimulation
- Learn to initiate sex more
- Sexual desires fluctuate over the life span
- Encourage discussion on stimulation likes or dislikes

(Avasthi et al., 2017)





Sensate Focus Technique


- Developed by Masters and Johnson
- Behavioral technique couples learn to focus on pleasurable sensations brought on by touch
- Assess the current sexual and intimacy needs in the relationship
- Revealing roadblocks to to lack of fulfillment in sexual outlet

(Schwartz & Southern, 2018)

Sensate Focus

- Help each partner become more aware of his or her own sensations
- Focus on one's needs for pleasure; worry less about problem or partner
- Communicate sensual and sexual needs
- Increase awareness of the partner's sensual and sexual needs
- Expand the repertoire of intimate, sensual behaviors
- Learn to appreciate foreplay as a goal
- Create positive relational experiences
- Build sexual desire
- Enhance the level of love, caring, commitment, intimacy, cooperation, and sexual interest in the relationship

(Schwartz & Southern, 2018)



Mindfulness-Based Approaches

- Present moment, nonjudgmental awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1979)
- Lack of mindfulness may threaten the ability to experience sexual pleasure (Velten et al., 2020)
- Exercises include guided meditations related to focusing on genitals (Velten et al., 2020)
- Treat anxious or other negative thoughts during arousal as “mental events” that does not need to be believed and pursued (Brotto & Basson, 2014)

Love Map

- Template in the mind that depicts the idealized lover (Money, 1986)
- Traumatized = “vandalized” love maps (Money & Lamacz, 1989)
- Imago formed during attachment helps form who the individual is attracted to (Hendrix & Hunt, 2013; Schwartz & Southern, 2018)
- Genuine intimacy between couples can not be sustained (Schwartz & Southern, 2018)



Love Map

“Another man might require the image of his ‘executive assistant’ or a scene from pornography to maintain distance and not become too intimate. Eventually, the imagery alone satiates, undermining any sexual interaction with the partner.”

(Money, 1986; Schwartz & Southern, 2018)

THE 5 Basic Moves of EFT

Repeat these 5 moves again and again, as you move through the steps and stages of EFT.



Emotion Focused Therapy

- Romantic love is an emotional bond
- Restructure negative patterns and address unmet needs for secure connection
- Couple problem not viewed as lack of communication; inability to negotiate differences
- “How does your body feel as you talk about this?”
- Increases partners sexual satisfaction (Elliot et al., 2016; Johnson, 2017)
- Use structured enactments to move couple towards a secure bond

(Johnson, 2017)

Communication Training



- Focuses on active and passive listening, verbalization of feelings, reflective listening, conflict resolution and assertive behavior (Pereira et al., 2013)
- Communication skills training had an increase in intimacy and marital adjustment among married women (Babae & Ghahari, 2016)
- Conflict resolution is important for communication (Meana & Steiner, 2014)

Communication Intervention

- Each partner privately draw anything they want on a piece of paper
- While one partner is describing what he/she/they drew, the other partner tries to draw based on what is being communicated
- Toward the end, each party shows the other her their pictures
- Open dialogue on communication, frustrations, etc.



Medical Treatments in Sexless Marriages/Partnership

Varies based on
gender

Male Issues:
Erectile dysfunction;
premature
ejaculation

Female Issues:
Desire and arousal;
pain

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