

Ep #79: The Sexless Relationship



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Sonia Wright

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Welcome to *The Midlife Sex Coach for Women™ Podcast*, the only show that combines a fun personality, medical knowledge, sexual counseling, and life coaching together. To create unique sex coaching that helps busy women awaken their libidos, address intimacy issues, and learn how to express their sexuality for the rest of their days. Here is your host, certified life coach and sexual counselor, Dr. Sonia Wright.

Hello, Diamonds. Wow, I cannot believe it's almost episode 80. What? This is really amazing. Well, as usual, it's called here in the Midwest up in Minnesota. But I love the winter, and it's my downtime, and that's when I get my stuff done. That's when I get the things on my list taken care of. And as we get close to spring, we go through this transition where we start doing the spring cleaning type of thing.

And this week I did the spring cleaning of my teeth. I did my deep cleaning. You know that deep cleaning where you go below the gum line and you make sure that they get all the plaque and the tarter out there and you feel renewed and refreshed.

Well, I was thinking in our visitors series that we're currently doing, that it might be time for some cleaning in the garage. Yes, we are going there. We are going to be talking about the sexless marriage in this episode and actually in the next episode. It's something that I think is so important that we can't just do it all in one episode. And I wanted to break it down into two parts.

So yes, the sexless marriage, it's knocking at your door. And this week we are going to actually let it knock. We're not inviting it in quite yet. We're just going to talk about it in this episode. And next week we'll actually talk to it and find out its thoughts and feelings, and what's going on in the sexless marriage. But I think we need an introduction to the sexless marriage and a better idea of what exactly is a sexless marriage before we go on to talk to it and see what's going on in the marriage.

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So, what exactly is a sexless marriage? I looked this up and I was trying to figure out the definition and the quantity. I've heard anything from if the frequency of sexual intercourse is less than 10, I've also heard if it's less than three. And I've also heard if there's no sexual intimacy within a one year period of time then that defines a sexless marriage.

So, I'll say less than 10 episodes of sexual intimacy depending on how you define. See, that's another question, how do you define sexual intimacy? Most people in the society define sexual intimacy in terms of penetrative sex. So possible the closest definition I would have would be 10 or less sexual encounters with penetration within a one year period of time.

So basically, if you're having sex less than once a month, you are in danger of being in a sexless marriage. Now something to be aware of is that a sexless marriage is not a problem unless you or your partner or partners think that it's an issue. Let's say if you're engaged in sex less than three times a year, but you're content and there's no problem on your side. And your partner or partners are content and they're not concerned about things either, then the sexless marriage does not need to come for a visit. And it's probably not in your garage.

You don't need to compare your life and your relationship to anybody else's relationship. You don't need to say, "I'm having x amount of sex in my life compared to somebody else. Therefore, it's a problem." No, the question is, is it a problem for you? Is it a problem for your partner or partners? That is the question here.

And we all know that your partnership is more than just sex. If there's love there, if there's connection, communication, and overall intimacy, it may be that you're not missing the physical touch. And if there are no problems then we don't make any problems.

And then there are times when the frequency of sex can diminish. Maybe in illness, a health crisis can impact sex, like a diagnosis of cancer. And going through the treatment, definitely that can affect sex. If it's a stressful time in your life, maybe you're moving or getting a new job, or something's

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happening in that realm. Or maybe there is a death in the family. Those are things that can negatively impact sex. But it usually comes back, the sexual intimacy usually comes back. But if it does not, then a sexless relationship is something to consider.

Ask yourself has it been greater than a year since you've consistently been having sexual intimacy? Then let me tell you, I coach a lot of women who are dealing with sexless marriages. For those of you out there that are feeling concerned and are also feeling isolated like nobody else is dealing with this. I really want you to know and to understand there are a lot of people dealing with a sexless marriage. Some statistics say that it's up to 10%, and then it definitely increases over the age of 50.

There's a number of factors and we're going to be talking about these factors that can contribute. But a sexless marriage can be 20/30% when you're over 50 and 60 years of age. And my Diamonds tell me that there's many reasons why they ended up in a sexless marriage, but the main question that they have for me is, "How do I come back from this? How do I get the sex back into my life when I haven't had sex for like 5, 6, 10 years? How do you reintroduce it? How do you get back to consistency?" We'll talk a little bit about that as well.

But first of all, let's look at the reasons why you might end up in a sexless marriage. The first one I think, and I think it's always the most important one is communication issues. The lack of communication. First it starts off as a little thing. Maybe you're tired of talking about a specific issue so you just don't mention it anymore. Or maybe there's some underlying problem that's happened in terms of sex and sexual intimacy. Maybe you're not enjoying yourself. Maybe you think it's taking too long.

Maybe something that you really need to talk to your partner about but you don't necessarily bring it up. And then after a while you just kind of don't mention it at all and the intimacy starts to be affected and you two kind of separate. And it gets to this point where you turn around and you're leading these parallel lives and you have a roommate instead of a lover in your house. And you're wondering how you got there. And it may be the case

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that you still have a lot of love for each other. Or it may be the case that you can't stand each other and looking at each other makes you want to vomit.

But if there's a lack of communication I always say that communication is really the foundation of intimacy, and then overall intimacy is the foundation for sexual intimacy. So, if you've gotten to the place where the communication is not there then I'm a 100% betting that the sexual intimacy is not there either. So definitely communication is a part and a big factor in this. And then also usually if that's the case there's usually some passive aggressive feelings going on, resentment, anger. It's under the surface and people are not necessarily talking about it.

So that's why I'll spend time talking about having the hard conversations because I see the results of people not having the hard conversations, people thinking, I don't want to hurt my partner's feelings. I don't really want to have this conversation because it's uncomfortable. The discomfort that you choose not to have right now may determine if you have a sexless marriage in the future, so please take that into consideration.

Another factor that I see from my Diamonds that are in their 30s and 40s is children. When children come into the situation it definitely affects things especially after the first pregnancy there may be postpartum issues, physically or emotionally that play a factor. Everybody's exhausted because there's this new baby in the house. And then the sex goes by wayside especially if women have concepts of kind of the Madonna complex when it comes to being a mother, and they think that a mother cannot be sexual in nature.

These are the type of things that contribute, being touched out, being a new mom or having a baby, or maybe having three kids under the age of four or something like that. You're definitely being touched all over by these children constantly, and the last thing you need is a partner that's touching you as well. This is where the communication becomes important because if there's not a discussion and an expectation that this is going to possibly

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be an issue, then people stop talking. And once again, once you stop talking then there's more problems here.

So, if children are coming into the mix, then it's going to be important to understand that date time, even if date night is in the house right now, but spending some special time with touch. If you're having pelvic floor dysfunction, secondary to birth, that's fine, but keep the touch in there. It doesn't necessarily have to be penetrative sex. But the touch is there even if you ask for a massage.

I've had Diamonds think that they start feeling really guilty that they're not providing the sex for their partner that they should be providing and they're really exhausted. So, they're beating themselves up. The basic self-care is not there. And then on top of that they're telling themselves they're not a good wife and they're beating themselves up. But all those things serve to do is to just make you feel bad about the situation, less likely to talk about it and more likely to avoid intimacy. So be aware of that.

Sexual pain. Sexual pain I've talked about this before, up to 75% of women at some point in time will experience sexual pain. And then an additional 15% of women will have persistent sexual pain which continues. And sexual pain is definitely one of those things that can negatively impact sex and lead to a sexless relationship. But it doesn't have to. Part of it is defining what sex and sexual relationship actually looks like.

And instead of avoiding all touch because it triggers anxiety and stress around pain, figure out how to have that sexual intimacy, figure out what needs to happen. And it does not mean that you kind of bear the pain and just have sex anyway. No, that's not what I'm saying. Definitely talk to your gynecologist, get with a pelvic floor or physical therapist because that is probably part of what's going to be needed. And then get creative with the sexual intimacy because that's going to be an important factor to maintain the relationship.

Libido shifts. This is another thing that I see. And mismatched libido, I'll also put in here. When we're at the beginning of a relationship it seems like

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you have matched libido, everybody is bunny fucking everywhere, like you just want to get it on. You're just like this is so amazing, this is wonderful. That's also called New Relationship Energy, NRE. And at some point in time, it shifts and you and your partner may shift into your more usual libido. And yours may be higher than your partners or lower than your partners. And that's fine, the majority of people don't have equally matched libido.

The other thing that can occur is that maybe you do have more of a matched libido but there's outside issues that are going on. Something like stress with your job, or a move, or a death in the family. All these factors that affect your libido and suddenly you may have a temporary mismatched libido or it could persist. But the important thing is to look at that and to deal with that situation.

And I think I have a podcast on mismatched libido, but basically this concept is that there's your libido, there's your partner's libido, and then there's the relationship libido. And this is something very important to understand, that you two work at it, or more, and have a conversation, and continue to have conversations. Because it's not just one conversation, and you're going to hear me say this again, and again, and again. It's not just one conversation, it's not just one attempt. It's going to take a little while to figure it out and that's okay.

There's going to be mistakes and sometimes there's going to be hurt feelings and that is also okay because the alternative may be a sexless relationship down the road. And what we're trying to do is to prevent that. So, if you have mismatched libido, or your libido is shifting, if you have more of a responsive libido and you had previously a spontaneous libido, those are all things that can happen and it's okay.

We just work with what we have as opposed to thinking it should be something else, or thinking that your libido needs to match your partner's, or thinking that you need to go back to spontaneous libido. It doesn't necessarily have to be that. What it does need to be is basically recognizing the issue and working with what we've got.

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Okay, let's talk about infidelity. Infidelity, it's one of those things that based on society says that we should all be monogamous and that we should all have only one sexual partner. Now, I don't necessarily adhere to monogamy, or polyamory, or whatever, you get to decide what it is that you want. But I think this is more having to do with a trust that has been broken. I think that this is the main issue. Society puts a lot of judgment on other aspects of it.

But I think really this is not about if you're a good person or you're a bad person, but this is a trust issue. And this is like a contract, at least a verbal contract the two of you have had together. And you've come to this place where there's an expectation that it would be a monogamous type of situation. And somewhere along the line that was changed or broken without your permission. So, this has to do with consent and trust. And this will break down the relationship extremely quickly. And this I definitely say, go and get a therapist involved.

There's a lot of resentment, and anger, and feelings of inadequacy on the one side. And then on the other person's side there's a lot of guilt, and fear. And so, everybody shuts down. And you'll notice that there's this theme that no matter what is going on as an underlying issue, communication becomes the ultimate problem. So, this needs to be such that there is a safe place to discuss this, and usually that ends up being in a therapist's office. So, if infidelity is an issue, having affairs and such, then it is definitely something to consider going to see a therapist about.

Okay, let's talk about another cause of a sexless marriage, menopause. And I really want to express this idea, do not believe the hype that as soon as you hit menopause that sex is all over. It's not. There will be an adjustment. And this adjustment can go on for a number of years, let me tell you, definitely. But also, sex after menopause can be some of the best sex in your life because you've had to work at it, if you find that you have to work at it. Anything that you're willing to put effort into you're going to have a better result. So, you can think of it that way.

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But there is so much more upkeep of the body and sexuality after menopause. There's estrogen, you may need to go to a sexual medicine clinic. There might be pelvic floor PT that needs to be involved. I've spoken in the past about Genital Urinary Syndrome of Menopause, GSM. And this is very important, be aware of it, be aware of the symptoms and the situation. Look it up, GSM, Genital Urinary Syndrome of Medicine.

Recognize you'll probably be taking vitamin E estrogen at least locally in the vagina and cream. Make sure you have the cream for your vulva for life. So, things have – things will change I should say. Things will change, but it does not necessarily mean that it's the end of sexual intimacy for you and your partner but there will be a change usually involved.

History of sexual abuse. This is definitely, definitely an important factor and we'll be addressing this more in April. But a history of sexual abuse, I do end up coaching a lot of women that have had sexual abuse in their past. And it's very interesting that I have an intake form and I always ask, was there any sexual trauma or sexual abuse in your past? And it's interesting that a lot of women will type 'no'. And then they will say, "Well, there was this experience when I was a child and I was felt up by somebody." Or they'll say, "There was this experience where I was on a date and I was forced to have sex."

So, their initial thing is no. And then they explain situations which involve sexual trauma and sexual abuse. So, it's definitely being underreported, but it does affect sex in your relationships. And if it's something that hasn't been dealt with it definitely needs to be dealt with, and definitely needs to be dealt with, with a therapist. I am trauma informed, but I am not one that specifically will do the initial work around sexual abuse or sexual trauma in some way.

But if somebody has gone for therapy for an extended period of time or they're working with a therapist at the time. Then I will help them and I will work on the sexual intimacy issues in terms of setting goals and working on them, things like that. But it is definitely important to be talking to a counsellor and a therapist when it comes to history of sexual abuse.

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But that can definitely impact the here and the now. It can impact how you relate to sex, how you think about sex. And it could be just something that is triggering you. And so, you're not necessarily able to be in your body, you're not necessarily able to connect with your partner on that level. And that is definitely one of the things that can also lead to a sexless marriage. As I said, we'll be talking more about that in April.

Body image. Body image is important as well. And especially as we age because this society says that women of a certain age and a certain body type should not be engaging in sexual intimacy. That it's only for the women in their 20s and 30s with the size 4 body. And that's not the case. But if we're internalizing this information, if we're believing that this is who has permission to engage in sexual intimacy then that impacts us. And we may get to the point where we don't really want to show our body, and we feel really bad about our body in terms of it being sexual in nature.

And so, we don't necessarily, we get to this place where we stop having sex because of it.

Health challenges especially if we have had a heart attack, or cancer, or something that's happened that's really made a radical shift in our health, we get to this place, especially if you have cancer, and you're post treatment, say you've had breast cancer and you're post treatment. It may be the case that you and your partner had shifted into a caregiver role, your partner being the caregiver, you being more of the patient or vice versa. And it's hard to shift back out of that role.

When you shift into being the caretaker, it's like you let go of the sexual intimacy or the person as a sexual being. And you're focused on their health. But when the health challenge is over you may not know how to shift back. And if it's the case, I know I have coached several women around the issue of breast cancer and early menopause because of treatments. And no matter what the cancer is, chemotherapy can put you into an early menopause.

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So that being the case there is a lot that has to be unboxed and looked at around roles in the relationship, around body image, around health concerns, all those things can lead to the end of the sexual relationship but it can come back, definitely.

And while we're talking about health challenges, might as well talk about erectile dysfunction. If your partner happens to have a penis then erectile dysfunction as you get older may actually be an issue and a concern. And nothing shuts down sex for penis owners faster than erectile dysfunction. There's a lot that's going on now to help and so definitely go and talk to a urologist and see what the different options are. There is definitely a lot of options out there. And so erectile dysfunction does not need to be the end of your relationship either.

Internalized sexual stigma. If you still have these concepts about good girl and bad girl, and if you're engaging in sex then you're a bad person, that there's slut shaming. If you've had a lot of information given to you from the time you were a child, that sex is wrong and that sex is bad, that can be something that's difficult to come back from. That might be something where it contributes to not engaging in sexual intimacy. So definitely it's about weeding out those thoughts that are not helpful especially if you've come from a relatively conservative background.

And now you're in a position where you're engaging in sexual intimacy, but those thoughts don't leave as quickly as we would think that they would. And it's about giving ourselves permission to engage in sexual intimacy and to enjoy it. And to look at those thoughts, weed out the ones that are not helpful and then to go from there.

Mental illness, depression, medications, these are also things that can contribute to decreased libido, decreased sexual intimacy and also may put the relationship at risk for becoming a sexless relationship. So, there are many, many, many reasons why people end up in a sexless relationship.

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And then I'm going to switch to part two and just talk a little bit about this. And then next week we're going to get into really thoughts and emotions around the sexless relationship.

So how do you fix a sexless relationship? I like to say it's a matter of dealing and healing, dealing with the situation and then getting back to healing. So, if I were to break this down into steps. Step one is always going to be dealing with the reality of the situation without blaming each other, without blaming anyone. Acknowledging that the situation has occurred and the fact that the sexual intimacy has left the marriage. That's going to be step one.

Step two, evaluate the marriage, the relationship and decide if it's worth it, if it's worth doing this work. Now, if you cannot stand each other, you can't stand to look or even talk at each other, you'll have to decide if this is work, worth doing this work because there will be a lot of work involved to get back to this place, intimacy, the trust will need to be restored. The communication will need to be restored. The overall intimacy will need to be restored. And then you put the sexual intimacy on top of that.

If there's no sex in the marriage because you can't stand the bastard, or the person in the relationship then really ask yourself if this is worth it or if it's time to be respectful and decide that it's time to separate and end this. So, it's important, evaluate the relationship and decide if it's worth it. Check and see if this is the main problem. And usually, it's not. Usually, sex has left the house after intimacy and communication have also left the house.

There's probably a lot of resentment and anger under the surface and that's going to need to be addressed. So, ask yourself, is it worth it? Set a goal, you two or more decide a goal and set that goal and decide what you want in terms of sexual intimacy. The frequency if that's important to you, the type of sexual intimacy. So definitely deciding what you want, what the goal is going to be in the relationship is going to be very important.

And then step four is going to be working on the communication. Working on the communication is definitely going to be an important aspect of it.

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And you have to be willing to say the words. You have to be willing to possibly hurt somebody's feelings. Always remember, their interpretation of what you're saying that leads to them being hurt, but there may be hurt feelings on both sides and being willing to address that and identify it, and admit that there's feelings.

Reintroducing the touch is going to be an important aspect and that's step five, reintroducing the touch. There is things like sensate focus, that can help reintroduce the touch. It's going to be important to, while you're introducing the touch, to make sure that there's a zone of sexual safety so that the touch can be reintroduced.

What would you need in order to be vulnerable, and handle, and deal with the situation, that's going to become an important question? And also, what are your thoughts while you're going through this process of reintroducing the touch? That's going to be important as well. And then of course get help, if you've been in a sexless relationship for a period of time, get help from either a sex therapist, or a sex coach, a sex counsellor. It's okay to need help to reintroduce the sexual intimacy back into your relationship.

Okay, Diamonds, that is all I have for you for this week. And next week we are going to let the sexless marriage into the house and we are going to have a conversation. Okay, Diamonds, till next week, have a great week. I will talk to you soon. Dr. Sonia out.

Hey Diamonds, do you want to reignite the passion that's gone missing from your life? Do you want to want to want it again? You know I'm on a mission to end the emotional pain and isolation that women experience associated with sexual difficulties. And many of you also know that I was once in that place where I was experiencing little to no sexual intimacy in my life. And I kept thinking that there was something that was wrong with me, that I wasn't enough, I wasn't attractive enough, I wasn't good enough, I wasn't smart enough to fix this problem.

And I was worried all the time that my relationship was too far gone because of this lack of intimacy. Well, you know what? I was right about

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one thing, the relationship didn't last. But even though the relationship didn't last I committed to doing the work that I needed to do to own my sexuality. And now I have this amazing sex life and it's everything that I wanted it to be. And I'm also committed to helping my Diamonds by teaching them the same strategies that I figured out in order to revitalize the intimacy in their life.

So, if you want to stop feeling broken, if you want to stop feeling shame and guilt about sexuality, if you want to feel more comfortable with your sexuality and tap into that pleasure then I'm here for you, Diamonds. First of all, know that there's nothing that's gone wrong with you. You're not broken. And you know what? You can solve your intimacy issues. You can let go of that shame and guilt, and you can tap into that passionate person that's just waiting to come out. Let's get on a strategy call together and let's discuss how we can work together and how I can help you.

And know that a strategy call, it's 100% a safe place, there is no judgment. We'll talk about your intimacy situation, which is what's going on right now. We're also going to talk about your intimacy goals, what you would like your intimacy to look like in the future. And then we'll talk about how we could possibly work together to come up with a personalized strategy plan for you so you can get the results that you need. So, Diamonds, I'm here for you, don't wait another minute. Book that consultation call with me today and I can't wait to talk to you.

You can get that consultation call by going to soniawrightmd.as.me. And the link is also in the show notes. Okay, have a great day. I can't wait to talk to you. Take care.