

Ep #82: Empowering Conversations: The Sexless Marriage



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Sonia Wright

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You are listening to *The Midlife Sex Coach for Women™ Podcast* episode 82.

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, hello, hello, Diamonds. How are you all doing today? It is Dr. Sonia and this week I have Coach Donna with me. You know how we love to have these empowering conversations. And after I did episode 81 I was like, “You know what? Donna and I need to have a conversation about the sexless marriage and everything that goes into it.” All the emotions, the feelings, the thoughts. Everything that’s led up to the sexless marriage and what is happening right now in the sexless marriage.

As I said previously if you’re not having sex at all and maybe less than 10 times a year and you’re fine with that and your partner or partners are fine with that, then there is no problem here. You don’t have to label this in any way or have negative connotations associated with it. But if it is something that you would like to improve, or change the situation, or you want more intimacy in your life and you find yourself in the sexless marriage or sexless relationship situation then let’s talk about it today.

So last week the big hairy sexless marriage and all its friends came for a visit and filled up the entire couch. And I talked a little bit about the different emotions that go on and what happens in a sexless marriage. And I just wanted to bounce ideas off of Coach Donna because she’s so smart and amazing. So, Coach Donna, welcome.

Donna: Hey, thank you. It is a delight to be here. I love, love, love having these visits with you. Thank you for having me.

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Sonia: Well, thank you for coming and talking about the hairy beast, the sexless marriage.

Donna: And by the way, that's a really big couch. I'm just saying. To have all of these big hairy beasts on there, taking up the couch, it's a big, big couch.

Sonia: I had in my mind when I was thinking about, I had the sexless marriage with the big hairy beast sitting on one side of the sofa. And then yes, all the other ones. But they're kind of little versions of the hairy beast with labels on them. So that's kind of what I was thinking of.

Donna: And I need to think about this. That's quite a visual, yeah, I can see that.

Sonia: Okay, yeah, so we had this visit from the hairy beast and friends. And just talking about the sexless marriage and all the different aspects of it. And so yeah, I was just thinking, from me, I think of the sexless marriage, it's more than the loss of sex. It's the loss of intimacy. You may have a great relationship, you may be with your best friend but you're kind of in a roommate situation.

Or the relationship could be such that you haven't talked in years. You can't stand to look at each other. And that's what you're dealing with for the relationship. So that's why I say deal and heal or actually feel, deal and heal.

Donna: True, that's really good.

Sonia: But somewhere around there you have to look at the relationship and say, "Is this worth saving? Do you want to be in this relationship?" And really get honest with yourself and honest with your partner. Because if a woman comes to me and she's saying, "We're not having sex and I'm trying to improve this relationship." And I'm like, "Okay, well, let's talk about this. How do you feel about your partner?" And they're like, "I hate their

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guts.” I’m like, “I don’t think I’m going to be able to help the situation.” You really need to look at do you want to touch and be touched with this person?

If you hate their guts, do you want to stay in this marriage? So that’s always the first question. Do you want to stay in this marriage? Is this marriage worth saving or are you better off separating, leading your own lives and finding joy and of course still working on? I talked a lot about the sexless relationship because I ended up in sexless relationships. And I realized the common denominator was myself. So even though I was out of the relationship I still felt that I needed to do the work. So, I’m not saying don’t do the work because you bring yourself into the next relationship.

But do look and see if you value the relationship to begin with. What do you think, Donna?

Donna: I agree. I think there – and actually I’ve coached individuals who interpret, and it’s fascinating when it can be either way. I think we stereotypically look at men who feel rejected because the woman in the relationship is not as interested in sex. But we have, I’m sure you do, I’ve had clients who they feel rejected. And how this all comes around is that snowballs into the disconnect, the lack of communication, the lack of connection and then that just is like a wedge that drives in and creates that divide.

And it gets interpreted as really not liking the other person, or I can’t stand to be around them, or I’m not attracted to them. And then that interpretation gets adopted as a belief. When I’ve worked with individuals we kind of got into that a little bit as to the reason they came for the session was to talk about sex and their sex life. But we have to go back several steps to figure out, what is it that has led to you not being attracted to this individual? And what drew you to them in the first place, what has changed? Absolutely I do agree.

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And even as a person of faith, I can imagine people might even kind of be blown away a bit. But I agree that you need to assess the relationship and figure out if this is something that is serving you and serving the other person well. I am in favor of doing the work to be the best version of yourself and then decide if it's still not working for you. Because just like you described, you're going to take you into every relationship after that.

And the downfall of thinking that the results I'm getting are because somebody else is a certain way or is not a certain way and I just need a different person who is a different way is, I think, generally a myth. And just sets us up for repeating the same process always within the framework of safety. If somebody is abusive that's a whole different ballgame. Run, don't walk.

Sonia: Yeah. And you can still do the work and decide to leave. But I think that that is an important point, when you say that you do take yourself with you. And if you blame other people for the issues, when you lose your power, then say it's because of that person's problem and blah, blah, blah, that we're not having any sexual intimacy. And so, you're losing your power. So even in that context you can be like, "Well, what is it that I do have control over? What are my values? What do I want with this situation?"

But you're right that a lot of times there's a sexless marriage and it does involve two people but it may be the case of mismatched libido and things like that. But I have, I'd say 20% of women come to me and they're saying, "I would like more sex. I'm not getting intimacy in my relationship from my partner." And it's almost like that, the partner has checked out. And if it's a male partner, obviously the testosterone levels and things like that. But erectile dysfunction could be a part of it, stress.

There's a lot of reasons under there but it is interesting that I'd say about one in five of my clients does in fact come to me and say that they want sex for some reason. And very often it's hard to pin down if they happen to

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have a male partner, a partner that has a penis, it's hard to get them to talk about it and to find out exactly what's going on. And they resort to a lot of anger as opposed to having a discussion as to why sex is not happening.

Because I think that for people that identify as male and are penis owners, and/or are penis owners. There's a lot of identity tied up in sexuality for men. The way our society says that men have to be around sex and sexuality, and erections, and penis, it's almost like they are their sex.

Donna: They are their penis.

Sonia: They are their penis.

Donna: And if the penis is them they are their penis.

Sonia: Yeah, or they're having sexual difficulties. It's really a hit to their manhood to who they are.

Donna: Identity.

Sonia: Their identity, exactly. And so, I think that it's even harder for them to discuss the issues than it is for people that identify as being a woman. Alright, so we have this list. So, the door opens and in comes the hairy beast. And we actually are going to talk about it. And I have mentioned that I have helped several women and couples with this situation to get back to, and if you go back to one of my earlier episodes, interviews with Didi. She was actually in a sexless relationship for five years and with her in her 70s and got that back up and running.

So, it doesn't matter about your age, your race, how long you've been in a relationship. It doesn't matter, sexual orientation, for lesbians, they call it the lesbian deathbed. Everybody has a different name for it. But the sexless relationship is what we're talking about. So, in comes the hairy beast, I haven't had sex at all in the last 12 months or maybe a couple of

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times in the last 12 months. But then you're surprised that there's all these other friends that come in with them.

So, shame, let's talk a little bit about shame because I think that shame is the hardest thing for people to admit to and to deal with in order to get the help that they need.

Donna: I agree. And the thing about this list is it is what we make the lack of sex mean. I think it's important to pre-frame that because then we can also, we have control over what we make it mean. And about shame, the beautiful thing about shame is it can't live in the light. Shame requires silence, and darkness, and pushing things under the rug. And so, if you follow the suggestions even from podcast 79, the sexless relationship and the many reasons why. And you start out with communication.

So, if you will communicate, start talking about it then the shame will fall away. It can fall away by bringing it out into the light. And as you then you realize why it exists, what gave it life to begin with. And then we could stop feeding that.

Sonia: Right. And also, we had a separate episode where shame just came for a visit. And talking to shame realized that it was a form of protecting us. It's an extreme form of protecting us. It was kind of yelling louder, and louder, and louder trying to get us to understand that something wasn't right, and to be aware of it, and to try to protect ourselves. And when we are able to listen to what shame said, it's just like you said, it comes into the light. We listen to what it has to tell us and then it calms down and then we can actually deal with the situation overall.

Donna: Yeah. Literally step one, you were talking about deal and heal and you touched base on that. And so, dealing with it, acknowledging that it's there. Acknowledging that sex has left the relationship, left the marriage. And so, as you acknowledge then you bring it to light. And you can then start processing it. I get the mental image of a turtle withdrawing into its

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shell because it's about protection. But honestly, then the wall that we build with shame also keeps a lot of what we want out.

Sonia: Yeah. And it's interesting that there's this connection between different things. The shame and then there's embarrassment. Embarrassment I kind of think of a lighter version of shame. If we don't deal with the embarrassment then it goes into this deeper layer of shame. And maybe it started initially with confusion, and rejection, and those type of things. And so, what we are talking about with these people that are coming to visit or these feelings that are coming to visit are just layers.

If we continue to ignore things and that's part of the avoidance tactic. And the buffering tactic when we're off buying stuff online, or eating donuts. I don't know why I always put buffering with eating donuts but I do.

Donna: [Inaudible] buffering. I don't know, the voice just comes out.

Sonia: At the time that we're recording this you haven't heard episode 81 yet. But I use all these different voices for the difficult things. I don't know if it's just crazy and silly. [Crosstalk]. So, there's the donut that we're eating. There's the shopping online. There's the binge watching Netflix. There's so many ways in our society in this day and age to be able to do the avoidance thing. But with avoidance we need to recognize that when we're choosing avoidance we're also choosing that we are on a path to making something a more serious problem than it has been.

Donna: When I looked at these visitors, if you will, and their friends I thought about dominos, not pizza, or buffering with pizza. No. I thought about dominos and not even the game but how do you set them up so you can push one and the rest fall. These are connected. They touch each other.

Sonia: You're so smart. How did you get so smart?

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Donna: I don't know. I hang around with really brilliant friends. They say, the five people you hang out with, so I'm doing something right today. I would be curious about the questions we ask ourselves and what the answers lead us to. So, you touched on embarrassment kind of being a lighter form of shame. What question are we asking ourselves that would lead to embarrassment or shame such as are we asking ourselves things like, what is wrong with me? What am I not doing? What do I need to be so he or she would be attracted to me?

Yeah, again, what have I done wrong? What do I need to do better? All of those things will lead you to criticism and judgment. And now the dominos are falling. It just takes the flick of the first one and they go.

Sonia: It's kind of interesting, when you say that I have this vision of the dominos falling. And maybe confusion, embarrassment leading to shame. But it's on this path that's paved with the criticism and the judgment.

Donna: Exactly.

Sonia: Yeah. It's that path that it needs to take in order to get there. And I like that you say one of the questions that I'm asking myself. I am also drawn to, what are the questions that I'm not asking myself to go from that place of just embarrassment to shame. As opposed to, okay, what would make this better? How can I have a better understanding of what's happening? Okay, I'm feeling embarrassment, what do I need to do to address this issue now so it doesn't become shame?

Those type of things. What do I need to forgive myself for? What do I need to communicate and talk about? Those are the questions that are not being asked that are also leading to the shame because we're going into the avoidance mode.

Donna: Yeah. And the thing, I'll start with a little psychology here which I am not a psychologist or a psychiatrist, just a disclaimer. But the concept of a gestalt, meaning early in life we had an initial experience that created a

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particular type of response and a particular type of sensation in our body. And we may have named that shame, or embarrassment, or whatever. And then when you go on to have subsequent events that have a similar sensation or response we tend to group them by that significant emotional response that we have.

So now we are 30s, 40s, 60s, 70s in a sexless relationship dealing with embarrassment and shame which for many might be of the same gestalt. But you're not dealing with the emotional response of the embarrassment or the shame that you're in that moment. You pull with it all the other experiences that have a similar emotional response from as long as you – and that's another conversation. But along that entire gestalt, let's say that, along that entire gestalt which began before you even could consciously process it.

Sonia: Yeah. And I usually say, if it's the case that you're having a severe reaction to something, a severe emotional reaction to something that then happened you are probably pulling in a lot of stuff from the past and it's not just what's happening right now. It may be your body saying, "I am not safe, I am really not safe here."

So, if you're having a startled reaction in some way recognize that you are probably reliving or something that happened in the past. And that you may need to revisit that and find out where the lack of safety began and how it's impacting what's happening right now. So yeah, that's really good. Alright, let's go back to our list and see what we've got on this list.

Okay, so let's see, I have this kind of. Okay, so we talked about when intimacy goes communication and connection also go. And so, I've put communication as the moderator for the panel discussion in my last episode. Because I feel it is necessary for everything. It's the glue that holds it all together, the communication has to be there. So, before the touch can come back the communication has to be there. And I always say

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that if you're looking for sexual intimacy it's built on intimacy, overall intimacy in the relationship.

And overall intimacy in the relationship is built on communication. If it's the case that you are living with your best friend like a roommate, do not despair because that means the communication is still there. And the intimacy overall, the relationship is there. And now it's the time to add back in the touch. And that definitely will require communication but at least the foundation of the communication and the overall intimacy in the relationship have been preserved. And so that's a really good place to start. If you find that it's all broken down then focus on the communication first.

You can't, if you don't have the communication you can't expect to add in touch and it to go very well.

Donna: Yeah. I think the connection, I encourage people to rebuild, revisit the connection that they have. And connection can just be synonymous with intimacy. But the connection that they have outside of sexual intimacy is going to be reflected, I believe, largely within the sexual intimacy, the sexual relationship. And so, if they're not well connected, if they're avoiding, if they're kind of barely talking and barely connecting then you're going to barely touch.

And so, it's difficult to expect, and I think it's an unrealistic expectation that we're going to go from kind of, I don't even want to look at this person to, okay, now let's get it on. A man's mind might be able to do that. But I think at least stereotypically a woman's mind doesn't make that leap very well at all to go from we're more crackpot, we want more relationship, we want more connection. And so, to not be very well connected, to not have much emotional intimacy outside of the bedroom can make it difficult inside the bedroom.

Sonia: Yeah. And I was going to say, so in terms of stereotypical men versus women we also have to look at how society has trained us. Society

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had said to men that it's okay to have sex and that's your major form of connection and communication with people. So that's why I will find that men may or may not need as much of a connection there. Whereas society has put a lot of label on women that choose to just have sex. And it has to be because you're in love, that there's connection and stuff like that.

So, when we look and we say women need more connection that is probably true overall. But that also is something that society has said that is the context in which women are less sexual.

Donna: It's not a must.

Sonia: Yeah. But it is definitely there. So, I think that that's good about the communication and then when it's not there and leading to resentment, and frustration, and ultimately anger. There's this frustration that leads to this resentment. And then the resentment is kind of brewing. And then it's blowing up in anger. So, if you find yourself in anger, definitely communication. And if you need to check in with a counselor to process a lot of these emotions as well. I think that that's very true.

What do you think about frustration, resentment and anger? Because I kind of put them together.

Donna: And they would. It would not be unreasonable at all to expect and just throw back in that gestalt idea. That those all would have a similar emotional response, that they might be on a gestalt together. And so, it makes sense that they get loved together because we often would interpret them similarly and have a similar response. Anger is commonly a secondary response to fear. And so, what are we afraid of? What loss? Is it lack of acceptance? Is there some loss? Is it an identity thing?

We're back to asking ourselves, learning to ask ourselves really good questions. Letting the emotion, the sensation, the feeling that we're experiencing be a clue to us that something is going on. And then to ask ourselves really good questions in response to that sensation, emotion,

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feeling because I think they're breadcrumbs. They're going to lead to behaviors. So let the behaviors be your breadcrumbs. The result can be your breadcrumb.

Whatever is going on externally, the emotion that you're experiencing, the behaviors that you're experiencing, what the results are in your life. They are a clue back to what's going on up here between your ears. And so, ask yourself, slow down, ask yourself really good questions to help get to the root of that. And especially understanding that anger can be an often commonly, a secondary emotion to fear, then what is the fear? A great question is, what do I not want to be true that is true?

Sonia: Yeah. And that, I like that because it brings up this concept, the deep pain, you're talking about deep emotion. Usually, I find underneath all that anger and frustration, resentment is just a lot of deep pain. And then having to deal with rejection, having to deal with that you have thoughts that your partner thinks you're not sexy enough, or whatever it is. In some way there's rejection, there's loss, there's pain, there's fear, of more emotions that you don't want to handle and feeling overwhelmed.

So that's when I talk about the deep pain. What exactly is the deep pain for you? What is it that you're masking and covering up with the anger, the resentment, or the apathy? So, there's the deep pain. And usually, I see at some point the deep pain and the hopelessness eventually lead into this place. It's too much for people to handle. Eventually they get to this place of numbing out then apathy kicks in because it's a way of protecting yourself. And I just wanted to check in with you what your thoughts are around apathy?

Donna: So, in my experience with certain clients where they have a partner who seems to be – well, they're just not asking. They're not initiating anymore. Over time as we worked together what was interesting is they tried to work on themselves from a mental health standpoint, from a physical standpoint. And then they finally just said, "I'm through asking."

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And I was a little saddened by that. I could feel for her, the tone in her voice, the frustration.

That's one thing why I love what you do so much is that there is a place for these individuals to come when they finally just don't know where to go, what to do anymore and they just give up. And the risk of then just having a roommate I think is so much greater, or turning to the other things in their life that they have an identity with whether that's kids, grandkids, career, hobbies. And so again we see how there's a wedge that is creating a big divide and nobody even has to hate each other. It's just there is this thing missing. There's no real communication about it.

And one partner has just decided through asking and in their mind, yeah, I'm being rejected and I'm just going to move on.

Sonia: Yeah. Honestly I have this theory that that is the origin of scrapbooking. Honestly I can spend hours cutting out little doilies and sticking them in books. It will take up every minute of your time if you let it. And you're making pretty pictures and you're so happy. You don't have to deal with the fact that your partner has checked out or both of you have checked out.

And I'm actually going to do one more on open relationship visiting and non-monogamy visiting. Because sometimes a partner checks out and they will not check back in. And what do you do if you want to be in that relationship still? And just because there's not a sexual component to it, you get to have conversations with your partner. It doesn't necessarily mean you need to give up the relationship if everything's working well but you still want a sexual output, then let's explore non-monogamy.

So, I will be doing one more on when non-monogamy or open relationships come to visit. But yeah, it is very true, when apathy is there. I think apathy is a joy killer. It affects all different aspects of your life. It doesn't stay in one little confined area. So, I think it's something that's very important to look at

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what's happening with this apathy and how it's affecting the sexual part of the relationship, but all aspects of your lives as well, [crosstalk] apathy.

Donna: And I think it's not because you don't feel. It's because you feel it all.

Sonia: You feel it all and yeah, you just get to a place where you can't take it any longer. So, as we said, I'll just mention, so the deal and heal. Deal, identify what's going on, decide if it's worth keeping the relationship. Work on the communication to get to the healing. That's the way it goes. And there's different ways that it looks. The healing part looks a lot of different ways. And you get to choose what's right for you and your relationship.

And if you need help, definitely reach out to a sex coach, a sex therapist, individual counselling, group counselling, do it all. Couples counselling versus individual counselling, there is a lot of different ways to do this. In my Own Your Sexuality Now intimate group it's so fabulous because you're with a group of other women that are dealing with this. So, we have one person in there that is just making – well, there's a lot of people making miraculous transformations. But one person in particular is just doing some amazing things. Actually, so many of them are.

But a lot of the sexless marriage and the apathy thing and deciding that she wants a different future for herself. So, we get to make that choice to have a different future. Okay, Donna, I don't want to keep you forever because I could talk about this for a really long time. So, any last words that you want to put in before we finish up?

Donna: I think one thing that came to mind and you mention this often but it deserves being reiterated over and over is that ultimately our sexual pleasure is our responsibility. And so, we can be angry, and resentful, and eventually become apathic, that somebody else is not showing up to the party. And I'm speaking very general on purpose because that can fit any member in a relationship. So, we can put it on them but then we lose our

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power. And so, accepting that my sexual wellness and my sexual health and satisfaction is my responsibility.

Then that opens the door to a lot of possibilities for you. You're not stuck. And ultimately you have the reins to create your sexual experience. And so, you can still enjoy a roommate if that's the direction your relationship's going. And you still have a good relationship, just not the sexual component there are alternatives for you getting what you want but ultimately recognizing that your sexual health, your sexual wellness, your sexual experience is your responsibility. Then that's very empowering I think.

Sonia: Yeah. And definitely I don't want to end the note to make people think that their only choice now is eventually to go to non-monogamy. That is just one of the choices. There are, I have seen many marriages and relationships come back from this place doing the work. But it does require a lot of communication and willingness to listen and not blame. And to get vulnerable and to deal with the emotions that you've been avoiding. And to be open and creative to different concepts of sexuality and to be okay with adding the touch back in.

Alright, thank you so much, Coach Donna. And I look forward again next month probably as we talk about something else. I love you so much.

Donna: I love you. Always so fun. Thank you. Thank you.

Sonia: Thank you. Thank you, Diamonds, see you next week.

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

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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 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.