

**One's hot one's not
...uh oh, now what?**

Libido imbalance affects most couples.
Here's how to get back on track

By Gabrielle Bauer

Imagine if you and your partner had to eat the same foods every day, in the same quantities. If he has bacon and eggs for breakfast, you have bacon and eggs for breakfast. If you grab Thai curry for lunch, he has to do the same, even though he dislikes coriander. Substitute "sex" for "food" and that's, in fact, what often happens in a relationship: you have the same amount and type of sex with him as he has with you. Same place, same time, same positions.

When you think in such terms, it's hardly surprising that libido imbalance, or desire discrepancy, is such a common problem in long-term alliances. How common? "It probably affects the majority of couples at some point and to some degree," says Dr. Rosemary Basson, sexual medicine consultant at the Vancouver General Hospital, and professor, Department of Psychiatry and Ob/Gyn at the University of British Columbia (UBC). "We need to take the stigma out of this very normal experience."

Take Alice Wong* and her husband, Richard Blair, for example. When they first had sex, Wong, an art teacher in Vancouver, was coming out of a 10-year sexual drought and was "raring to go." It took a few months for the differences in their level and pattern of desire to emerge: he was hot to trot in the morning when she would rather be doing her taxes. She, meanwhile, preferred the wee hours of the night, when he'd rather be snoring. And, while she was certainly no sexual wallflower, Wong noticed that Richard tended to initiate sex more often than she did.

The greatest difference between them, says Wong, is in their need for orgasm. "The only time Richard won't come is if he's so exhausted that he falls asleep during sex, which has happened maybe twice," she explains. "But I often enjoy sex without coming. Orgasm is great, too, but it takes energy to build yourself up to a climax and I'm not always in the mood for that." Wong says Blair has trouble understanding this aspect of her sexuality. "He tells me, 'You're lubricated, you're obviously enjoying yourself, don't you have a need to come?'"

Dr. Basson, on the other hand, has no trouble understanding what Wong describes. When women are given a chance to relate their own experiences, their sexual response cycle tends to fall into a number of categories, she says. In a recent article in the *Journal of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC)*, Dr. Basson depicted these categories as give graphs. Significantly, one of the graphs looks more like a rolling hill than a craggy peak – in other words, there's no orgasm on the horizon. The point here, says Dr. Basson, is that "Not all women need or want orgasm all the time. A sizeable group of women enjoy sex in a physiologically quieter way."

Dr. Basson also explains that men get arousal cues from within their own bodies, reinforcing external cues and triggers seemingly independent of external stimuli, while women respond more to setting and circumstance. In the beginning of a relationship this difference is masked by novelty and excitement, but when the relationship settles, men continue to get arousal cues from within, whereas many women, in the absence of external cues that jump-start their arousal, are quite comfortable having less sex or fewer orgasms and may begin to resent their partner's persistent desires.

The man, meanwhile, may feel cheated out of what he considers the biggest perk of marriage, namely readily available sex, says Dr. Michael Myers, director of the marital therapy clinic at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver. "He wonders why sex, which was so mutual during courtship, has become such a one-sided affair. From his perspective, the woman he thought he was sexually compatible with has turned out to be 'cold' and he feels duped."

Of course, it's not always the man who tips the libido scales. When Valerie Gatenby, a Calgary homemaker, first met her husband, Bruce Carr, she says he viewed sex as "something like money in a savings account, to be used very carefully." Gatenby, on the other hand, recalls being "one horny young woman" and feeling rejected by Carr's sexual conservation policy. "I took it personally, as a criticism of my attractiveness. We had lots of fights about it."

As Gatenby's case illustrates, desire discrepancy, while common, is not a problem you can sweep under the rug. According to Dr. Patricia Love, co-author of the book *Hot Monogamy* (Penguin, 1995), a libido gap that's left unattended is likely to widen—a phenomenon she calls polarization. "Tiny differences get exaggerated over time," she writes. "If someone consistently approaches you for sex before you experience any desire, you eventually lose your sexual appetite."

A similar situation can arise when couples hit middle age, says Toronto psychiatrist and sex therapist Dr. Frank Sommers. "The male sex drive wanes predictably in middle age. Many women also experience a lessening of desire, but it tends to be less dramatic. And some women find their libido really takes off at this stage of their lives. So, couples who were initially well matched can go out of sync."

To couples experiencing it, desire discrepancy can seem an insurmountable obstacle—people don't change their basic sexual natures, after all. Fortunately, there are several strategies you can use to prevent a libido imbalance from eroding your relationship.

- **Stop blaming each other for your biology.** The man whose partner wants less sex than he does needs to understand that she's not abnormal, says Dr. Basson. In the same vein, the woman who resents her partner's push for more sex needs to allow that most men have a biological drive that causes sexual stimuli to register easily.
- **Redefine sex.** If you reframe sex as physical intimacy, rather than penetration plus orgasm, you de-emphasize the performance aspect of sex. "One of the reasons people reject sexual advances is that they don't want to be put to a test," says Dr. Sommers. "Take away their performance anxiety and they have less reason to avoid sex."
- **Invite masturbation into your sex life.** If you think masturbation has no place in a steady relationship, think again, says Dr. Myers. If one of his patients argues that he shouldn't have to masturbate when he has a flesh-and-blood sex partner, Dr. Myers suggests he view masturbation as "a valve that equalizes the sexual pressure between the partners." Alice Wong says both she and her husband are relaxed about masturbating, sometimes in front of each other. "I'll masturbate if he's very tired and it's late. He masturbates during my period, when I'm generally not in the mood, or when I'm away."
- **Adjust your level of mental desire.** If you have a higher libido than your partner does, Dr. Love advises cutting back on activities (such as fantasizing or reading erotic material) that stoke your desire. If yours is the lower libido, she suggests you choose an evening to come to bed already aroused. To get yourself in the mood, you could read or watch erotic material, close your eyes and focus on sexual imagery, dress in sexy clothes, stimulate yourself in the bath or shower, or talk seductively with your partner.

• **Be willing to start lovemaking from a sexually neutral state.** This concept is especially important for women, writes Dr. Basson, because “many, perhaps the majority of women in longer-term relationships, would argue that reasons other than their own sexual hunger motivate them on a consistent basis.” If you count yourself among these women, you need to cultivate a willingness to say yes to sex for reasons other than spontaneous interest. As Dr. Basson puts it, “You have to be prepared to start from neutral, at least sometimes.” You can teach your partner to recognize those times and ease you into a more receptive frame of mind, she adds. “Tell him what relaxes but also arouses you, like having a shower together or getting a foot rub.”

Today, Valerie Gatenby says she and her husband almost never refuse each other’s sexual advances, even if they’re not in the mood. “We used to say no to each other more often,” she recalls. “But, somewhere along the way, we decided that sex is more important to our marriage than reading mystery novels or sleeping.

** Names have been changed to protect privacy*