

"I Hate Sex!"

There's hope for your life between the sheets.

By Dr. Juli Slattery

"I hate sex," Shelly told me. "It makes me angry to hear you even suggest that I'm supposed to be enjoying it. I've been married 23 years and have never enjoyed it. Frankly, I do it because I'm supposed to."

I hear from women like Shelly quite often. They feel ripped off, like they've been cheated out of something they're supposed to enjoy. The message that sex is a gift from God almost sounds insulting. Instead, they view sex as the gift they must continually, and begrudgingly, give to their husband.

To some degree, many years of my marriage could be described by that same sentiment. I didn't hate sex, but I certainly dreaded it. I resented the fact that my husband's pleasure had to come at the expense of my pain. But as a woman who longed to be a godly wife, I determined before the Lord that I would meet my husband's needs. While God was probably pleased with that attitude, it certainly didn't represent the true healing he wanted to do in my heart and in my marriage.

But I do believe God is able to bring healing into every woman's heart.

On this journey, God has taught me—and is still teaching me!—what true sexual intimacy can be. Every woman's story is different, so I'm not offering a simplistic formula that will guarantee a miracle in your bedroom. But I do believe God is able to bring healing into every woman's heart.

Address the Obstacles

It's important to start out by addressing some common barriers that prevent women from enjoying sex. While some men want to have sex every three hours and others may want to do so once a week, almost universally men find sex pleasurable. This is not true for most women. Female sexuality is far more complicated, and obstacles to sexual

pleasure typically fall in three categories: physical, relational, and emotional.

Physical

Sexual response is complicated. It involves many functions of the body, including the endocrine, circulatory, skeletal, muscular, and reproductive systems. That means a lot can go wrong. For example, an underactive thyroid can destroy sexual desire and response. An imbalance of hormones will do the same. Medications like antidepressants and even decongestants can impact sexual function.

Physical obstacles to sexual pleasure may also be difficult to diagnose, partly because physical pain can have a psychological root. Women who experience vaginismus (pain during intercourse) have a learned fear response to intercourse, causing the vaginal muscles to tighten. Even your OBGYN may not be able to explain why sex always hurts or why it started hurting after you had your second baby.

I recommend going beyond a simple doctor's visit. Search for the right doctor, midwife, physician's assistant, or nurse practitioner who understands sexual functions and disorders. Search until you get answers—you never know what you may find. After years of sexual pain, one woman I know discovered that her acne cream interfered with her sexual response.

Relational

You can have a great marriage and still have a rotten sex life, but the quality of your marriage is still the foundation for sexual intimacy. Ask yourself a few important questions to determine the current health of your marriage: Do you trust your husband in the bedroom? Is he sensitive to your needs? Do you communicate with each other about sex? Are there secrets, bitterness, or unresolved tensions between you?

Sara hated sex. Over the 11 years of their marriage, it was a demand her husband, Jake, made several times a week. He never asked if she would like to have sex—he assumed it was his God-given right as a married man. Sex made Sara feel like an object. She wondered if Jake even cared that it was her body he was being intimate with.

Joyce and Ben had different barriers. For one, during their 19 years of marriage, Ben had dabbled off and on with porn. Second, Ben confessed to a one-night stand on a business trip, but the repercussions were never dealt with. Instead, the matter was quickly swept under the rug as if it never happened. This left Joyce feeling like a part of her heart was dead. She consented to share her body with Ben, but kept her heart closed to intimacy.

Sexuality represents some of our greatest vulnerabilities. In the daily routine of marriage, we often don't stop to consider how we've been wounded in marriage, or why we don't trust the man who sleeps besides us every night. But until these issues are surfaced and addressed, physical pleasure and freedom is unlikely to be a reality.

Emotional

This topic would be hard to adequately cover in a book, let alone part of an article! Of all the barriers to sexual enjoyment, I believe the most common are emotional—and emotions run deep.

Some women have a history of pain that has paired sex with extremely negative and painful emotions. For them, sex equals shame. It equals guilt. It's shrouded in sin. It's made them feel exploited. For women with emotional barriers like these, the issues don't disappear on their wedding day. Putting on a ring and saying vows in a church doesn't erase those messages.

The emotional trauma connected to sexual brokenness is often so deep that you may not even be aware of it. In fact, many women don't remember the details of childhood sexual abuse until they reach adulthood. They simply carry a vague sense that "something isn't right."

These are the lies that keep women from pursuing healing. They're the lies that make women assume, "This is as good as it's going to get."

Other women have no history of sexual trauma or guilt from past mistakes, but they still can't seem to enjoy sex. I've met women who saved themselves for marriage, dreaming of the ecstasy that sex promises. But no matter how hard they try, they simply don't feel free

to enjoy sex. The idea of trying something new brings panic and waves of disgust.

Expose the Lies

Healing from physical, relational, and emotional barriers takes work and effort, starting with a commitment to identify and address those barriers. But part of working through these barriers is breaking down a few commonly held lies. These are the lies that keep women from pursuing healing. They're the lies that make women assume, "This is as good as it's going to get." If you're tired of disappointment in the bedroom, your journey toward healing may mean overcoming these lies.

- Lie #1: God created sex primarily for a man's pleasure. Because women believe this lie, they build sexual intimacy around a man's needs, having sex when and how he wants it. After years or decades of marriage, you may never have considered that your needs matter too! It is worth exploring how sex can be satisfying for you. It is worth pursuing counseling to work through the pain of the past. Don't settle!
- Lie #2: It's not right for a godly woman to be sexual. No one says this lie out loud, but a lot of women live by it. Sexual excitement is automatically linked with sexual immorality. Other women "punish" themselves for past sexual mistakes by not enjoying the sexual aspect of their marriage. They've bought the lie that to be sexual means to be sinful.

Take a Step Toward Healing

Because sex is such a private area of struggle, many women don't know where to go for help. They simply settle for frustration in this area of life. We live in a day and age when help is readily available for all kinds of issues—even sexual ones. Yet, reaching out to a counselor or even buying a book on the topic is frightening. If there's sexual trauma in your past, or events in your life marred by shame, the thought of talking through this pain may seem unbearable.

Would you be willing to take one small step? That might be calling a counselor, simply praying with your husband about your sex life, or studying Scripture. Linda Dillow and I wrote a Bible study called

Passion Pursuit to help women identify the lies they believe, and to embrace God's truth about sexuality. Through this study, we've seen women set free. Women have started enjoying sex even after decades of miserable sex lives.

As obvious as it sounds, nothing in your life will change if you change nothing in your life. Just like your kitchen won't magically clean itself, your sexual struggles and wounds won't simply disappear one day. So go ahead: address the lies. Break down the obstacles. No one can promise you that your sex drive will go from zero to 60 in 90 days. We live in a fallen world filled with disappointment and brokenness. But God is in the business of healing and redeeming our pain. Don't give up hope.

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