

This book is dedicated to Bruce, who has shown me true passion and love.

Getting the Sex You Want

Shed Inhibitions and Reach
New Heights of Passion Together

Tammy Nelson



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INTRODUCTION

In my clinical work as a psychotherapist over the past twenty years, I have discovered that couples have a greater likelihood of staying together, and for longer periods of time, when they improve their sexual communication skills.

Unfortunately, the therapeutic world has had little training in helping couples explore their sexuality and communicate their erotic needs. If therapists are inexperienced when it comes to talking about sex, how can they help their clients work on these issues in their relationships?

Using a communication method called the “Imago dialogue,” I have developed specific techniques that have helped men and women recharge their relationships, and bring passion back into their lives. It’s not unusual for couples to be relieved after learning how to talk about their fantasies and fears and discovering what can happen just from doing the exercises in these chapters. Anyone who hopes to be in a satisfying relationship can benefit from this work (and play!).

Learning ways to communicate about sex can help you become a better lover; you will bring more skills to your relationship. The intensity and eroticism will deepen, and the passion between you and your partner can connect the two of you for life.

Using the Imago dialogue is a new way of exploring your sexuality together that can bring you to new places. It provides you with a structure in which to explore your deepest fantasies and desires. It will give you the safety to talk to each other and finally experience being seen and heard. You will find a new way to ask for the sex you have always wanted. Perhaps there are parts of your sex life that you currently enjoy. There might also be some new things you would like to try. Maybe you have sexual desires that you have been afraid to talk about. Now you will have a language in which to express these desires.

Imago therapy was developed by Harville Hendrix, the author of the best-selling book, *Getting the Love You Want*. His book has helped millions of couples around the world ask for what they want and express their love for each other. Now you can use these time-tested techniques to expand your lovemaking and experience the intimacy and connection that will give you the passion you want and create a truly long-lasting partnership.

When you learn how to talk openly about sex, you will experience a greater level of intimacy and safety in your relationship. Loving feelings will then naturally increase toward your partner. A vibrant and healthy interest in sex along with a passionate curiosity for life are the ways to keep your relationship alive for a very long time.

Long-Term Passion Starts with Early Communication

“Imago: An idealized mental image of another person or the self.”

—*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

“Normal wife” closes her book and lies back on her pillows, exhausted. She listens for the kids, wondering whether they will get up for water or to use the bathroom. The night before, both children had climbed into bed with her and her husband and she wonders whether they are both coming down with colds.

She remembers that she has forgotten to check the dryer and let the cat in for the night. She thinks about getting up, but her feet are cold and she snuggles down deeper into the bed. Every muscle aches from her day—running to the grocery store, cleaning out her son’s closet, picking up her husband’s shirts at the dry cleaners, and painting the hall bathroom. She scratches her head for a moment, running her fingers through her hair and tries to remember whether she took a shower that day. Her flannel shirt and boxer shorts are warm and she closes her eyes for just a moment.

Another thought suddenly occurs to her. She wonders whether her husband will want to have sex tonight. She rolls over and pretends to sleep.

“Average husband” sits in bed with his laptop balanced on his knees. He peruses the long list of e-mails he has still not opened from work that day. He glances over at his wife as she snuggles down lower in the bed. He sees she is wearing her flannel shirt. He wonders whether this is the signal that there will be no sex again tonight.

Sighing, he turns back to his computer and flips down through his e-mails until he comes to one unfamiliar e-mail address. Unsure whether it is spam, he hesitates for a moment, and then clicks on it. It is a poorly disguised invitation to visit a porn site. He sneaks another glance at his wife, and she rolls over onto her side away from him. He clicks on the link. His computer screen immediately flashes onto a catalog of young, busty, half-clad girls promising to fulfill all of his erotic dreams. He moves his cursor over one particular girl, who looks him in the eye, and he clicks on her image. A larger shot of her, with her legs spread open, invites him to charge \$9.99 to his credit card for another peak, to go deeper into the site.

He sighs, and taking his glasses off of his face, rubs his tired eyes. What he really wants is to have sex with his wife, to feel connected to her. But he wonders where the passion and energy have gone.

Getting over the Fear of Talking about Sex

Marriage and long-term cohabitation breed familiarity, which can lead to a mundane erotic life. Marital familiarity can be comforting, but it doesn’t lend itself to intense passion and sexual connection.

Learning to communicate sexual needs and desires early in a relationship can help contribute to a

easier and smoother erotic connection later on. Sometimes it's scary to talk about sex, especially in the beginning phases of a relationship. And yet, an early pattern of relating to each other in an open and honest way can make sex more rewarding later on. Consider the following example:

Girlfriend "A" lies under Boyfriend "B." It is a Saturday night, and they are having sex. Missionary style.

This feels good, she thinks, but she wonders whether she should try and tell him that she would like to make love in a different way, using a new position. They have had sex in the missionary position every Saturday night for weeks now. How can she talk to him about what she would really like?

He seems to try so hard, she thinks. Her thoughts jump around as she lies under him: "I don't want to make him think I don't appreciate how hard he

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is trying to please me. But I wonder what else there is? And I wonder if he would mind if I used my own hand to give myself an orgasm? I don't think I could ever ask him that. I wonder if I should just fake an orgasm and make him feel good?"

As Boyfriend "B" pumps into his girlfriend he worries that he might lose his erection. It has never happened before, but he has heard stories from his buddies that sometimes they have a tough time staying hard. He wonders whether she will still want to have sex with him if he can't perform like the porn stars. His performance is a large part of what makes him feel like a man. What happens if he can't always please her?

"What if I can't last?" he thinks. "What if I come too soon?"

He keeps pushing inside her, trying not to focus on how good it feels. He begins to feel more anxious. He wonders whether he can hold out until she climaxes. He wonders whether he will know when she comes.

"How long does it take her to come?" he thinks to himself.

He has never asked her, nor has she told him. He would like to know because he wants desperately to please her. He begins to feel the buildup and knows he is getting closer to ejaculating.

"Oh, boy, please let me last," he thinks. "I need to try harder not to think about what feels so good. This can't be the way it's supposed to be. Aren't I supposed to be gazing into her eyes or something? Maybe I should think about baseball."

Getting the Erotic Connection

Like the couples above, many people are not having the sex they really want and they aren't talking about it. Most couples want more sex, or better sex, and they don't know how to ask for it. How do v

get the sex we really want? And how do we tell our partner what our fantasies are?

By using a technique called the Imago dialogue, this book will teach you and your partner ways to resexualize your partnership and have the erotic connection you truly desire. Exercises will teach you how to increase passion and connection with your partner. Writing exercises will help you clarify what you need in your erotic life—you will discover what your fantasies are and what your sexual needs are all about. You'll learn better ways to communicate with one another and talk about your deepest desires.

If you practice these skills, you *will* get the sex you want!

Introducing Imago

Imago relationship therapy was created by Harville Hendrix and Helen Hunt, authors of the book *Getting the Love You Want*, a national best-seller describing a revolutionary new way to love. The development of Imago relationship therapy is based on the theory that we choose a partner, many times unconsciously, who is perfectly suited to us, based on our image, or *imago* in Latin, that we have created from all of our experiences from childhood.

These partners have the unique ability to heal our childhood wounds. They have qualities that are similar to the positive and negative qualities of our original caretakers, and cleverly, we have chosen them because they hold the special characteristics that, when combined with our own personal traits, will help us to finish all of our unfinished business from childhood. We will get the love we always wanted! It is no coincidence that we choose the mates we do based on their similarities to and differences from our childhood experiences.

Because of this amazing and uncanny ability we all have to pick our partner, we end up with someone who can also bring up all of our issues! Although our partners can heal us from our pain like no one else, they can also hurt us in some of the same places where we have leftover wounds from childhood.

This is why relationships seem like such hard work sometimes—and why they feel so painful.

We continue to be wounded again and again in the same places that have hurt since we were young. Our partners have an almost magical way of poking us in those vulnerable places like no one else can. And yet we seem determined to continue our old behaviors, hoping against hope that if we keep repeating the same thing over and over, we will somehow get our partner to stop wounding us and give us the love we really want.

On the other hand, the partner we choose often fills our needs from childhood that were left out of our parenting. Even in the best of childhoods, we sometimes don't get our needs met. Mom doesn't always hear us when we cry; Dad doesn't always come running when we are hungry. And that's okay. Having "good enough" parents enables us to grow up and take care of ourselves as independent, functioning adults.

We then fall in love with people because we love who we are when we are with them. We feel that they fulfill us in ways we cannot feel fulfilled alone. We feel safe, connected, and relaxed.

However, when they no longer complete us, or fulfill all of our needs, we no longer love ourselves when we are with them. We then withdraw from them or attack them. We are no longer quite sure how to get our needs met. We enter a power struggle or conflict stage. We either run away or settle in.

we decide to stay, we put on the old sweatpants and prepare for the long haul. This is the point where the sexual needs in the relationship begin to get split off. The sex slows down. The passion wanes. We no longer feel “in love.” Some of us split off from our sexual needs; others compartmentalize the need for sex into a box deep inside themselves.

Sometimes we have a fantasy that if we trade in our partners for someone new, we might be happier. And sometimes we do. And for a while that new relationship feels better because we get to experience the romantic phase again, and all is well. However, slowly we slide back into conflict and out come the sweatpants, and we find ourselves back in that power struggle place where sex becomes maintenance sex and sometimes even part of the power struggle.

To avoid this scenario and to stay connected and experience romance and passion over the long term, communicating is the first step. But communicating is not the only step. Having a safe way to talk will increase the passion in your partnership, and many times that passion will improve your communication. Taking the first step toward communicating means sitting down together and starting with exercises like the one described below, exchanging appreciation the Imago way.

The Difference between Dialogue and Conversation

Often when we are talking with our partners—particularly when it’s over a conflict—we don’t really listen. We have a tendency to prepare our “rebuttal” before they even finish their sentence. We respond and cut them off before they say what they wanted to say. They then don’t feel heard. And they don’t feel seen for who they are.

Using the Imago dialogue, couples can practice really listening to each other and asking for what they need in the relationship. This way of communicating can go a long way toward healing our unmet needs. It can also bring us the love we truly want.

Participating in a conversation is different than being in a dialogue. Being in a dialogue means you are each totally present and in the moment, that is, you are focused solely on what your partner is saying and not on what your response is going to be. When we listen intently to what our partners are saying, we are more available to hear what they are trying to tell us. They experience us differently in those moments. They feel our presence, and not our distraction.

We can use the Imago process to reconnect sexually and improve our intimacy. The beginning steps of creating long-term, passionate partnerships involve working on the erotic connection as well as the companionship piece of our relationships. This includes learning to talk about sexual needs. The way to do this is to feel safe enough to share our desires and fantasies with our partner. Using the structure of the Imago dialogue, this sometimes difficult conversation becomes an experience of being deeply held and listened to by our partner.

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Beginning the Imago Dialogue

The Imago dialogue process involves two people—the person doing the talking—the **sender**—and the other person who is listening—the **receiver**.

For our partners to hear us, or “receive” the information we want to “send” them, we have to somehow pave the way. In other words, we have to make it safe. Most of us get defensive right away when our partners are trying to have a “serious” conversation with us. We are afraid of being criticized or that we will have to defend ourselves from something we may have done wrong. We also want to make sure they are able to hear what we are saying.

The best way to create safety for them is to start off all of our dialogues with an **appreciation**. Most of us respond well when we hear positive feedback about ourselves. So, we always start a dialogue with something we appreciate about our partner. An appreciation is something that we like about our partner. Perhaps it is an action that he has taken, or something he has done that has meaning for you. Perhaps it is a part of her personality that you love.

For instance, telling your partner that you appreciate him can mean recognizing something he does. Perhaps you normally wouldn't take the time to mention it. These can be simple things, such as “How nice he remembered that I like my coffee with sugar instead of cream.” Or “I really appreciate that she came to therapy with me.” Or “I am so appreciative that he mowed the lawn.”

Appreciations are a way of getting more of what we want, and also a way of softening our relationship with our partner. Often our partners do things in our daily life that we appreciate but neglect to mention, when a few words from us could mean so much to them. Our relationship becomes softer when there is less tension and criticism and more positive feedback.

Try this exercise with your partner. Remember there is no right or wrong way to do this. This is the beginning of practicing a new way of talking and relating to your partner. It may feel awkward at first. That's fine. Try it anyway! Fumbling around is one way we learn how to do something that we haven't mastered yet.

EXERCISE

Exchanging Appreciations the Imago Way

For this first exercise, you will need at least fifteen minutes of uninterrupted private time together. Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably facing each other in chairs, on the floor, or on a bed, and maintain eye contact for the entire exercise.

You are beginning the process of a new form of communication, the Imago dialogue. You will build on this format throughout the book, creating a safe structure to talk about your relationship, and later your erotic needs and fantasies. Let's start by sharing some appreciations, and learning how to **mirror** each other. This is a basic dialogue skill, explained below, and one we will use for many of the more advanced exercises to come.

This exercise will feel awkward and even a little corny in the beginning. The words may feel stilted and forced at first. Don't worry about that yet. Let the exercise feel awkward for now. Later it will feel more comfortable and you will use the technique effortlessly while talking about more erotic topics.

You may find yourself giggling or breaking eye contact. That's fine. You may feel the urge to get up and look in the refrigerator or make a phone call or check your e-mail. Try to stay focused on the exercise for the duration of both sending and receiving. The sender is the first one to talk, and the receiver is the first one to listen.

Step One

First, choose who will be the sender and who will be the receiver. The sender will talk, and the receiver's only job is to listen and

mirror exactly what the sender says. **Mirroring means saying back what the sender has said with no other comments.**

Step Two

Senders will say or “send” over three things they appreciate about their partner. An example might be the following:

Sender: “I appreciate that you are having a dialogue with me tonight.”

Step Three

After each appreciation, receivers will simply repeat, or mirror, what the sender has said. Continuing the example above, the receiver will simply say back while maintaining eye contact, “You appreciate that I am having a dialogue with you tonight.”

In all Imago dialogues, there are only two responses a receiver might have:

1. “Please send that again” if they didn’t understand or remember what they heard. Then the sender would simply repeat it and the receiver would try mirroring again.
2. Receivers mirror back what the sender says and then ask, “Is there more?”

The sender can say “yes” and send more or “no” and stop there. After three appreciations, the sender switches and becomes the receiver.

Exploring Sexual Curiosity with Empathy

The possibility of waking up a partnership and experiencing that erotic charge again sometimes feels impossible. And yet, throughout our life cycle, we continue to have erotic needs and crave intimacy through sex.

The way to increasing the erotic connection in a relationship is to begin talking to each other and empathizing with your partner. Mirroring is the first step in using these exercises, where you will practice sharing and listening.

You will, through this book, come to understand normal erotic curiosity. Erotic curiosity is simply a way to define our thoughts, fantasies, and sexual desires. We all have curiosity about things that are sexual, and we explore erotic thoughts and fantasies in our minds all the time, even if we don’t share these thoughts with our partner. Understanding our partners’ erotic fantasy life will help us understand what will make them happy and give us clues about what will give them a passionate, loving partnership.

In our relationship, sexual empathy needs to be present to make exploring fantasies safe. Sexual empathy means feeling connected to your partner so that you can share your fantasies. If you know that you will not be judged or dismissed by your lover for having erotic curiosity, then you will be more likely to share those thoughts.

Sexual empathy does not mean your partner will agree with your thoughts and fantasies or want to act them out with you. Sexual empathy instead means that you understand that these are your partner’s erotic thoughts, and not your own. Empathy also includes being happy that your partner feels safe enough to share them with you. Feeling safe enough in a relationship to share your fantasies is a big step toward finding passion and connection.

However, we can only share our fantasies when we feel safe and respected. If we know that our partner will listen and mirror back what we are saying without judgment, then we will be more likely to share our thoughts and desires.

The Imago dialogue process is a great way to make this happen. If we can share our erotic thoughts and fantasies in a dialogue, our partner simply mirrors back what we are saying and doesn’t have to respond. We then feel listened to and heard. We can talk without fear that there will be any response at all, either positive or negative. This creates a space for the fantasy to be expressed.

Sexual empathy means your partner will listen to your erotic thoughts and hold that space. We will talk more about how to be a more sexually empathetic partner later on in this book.

The Risk of Revealing Yourself

Talking about sex can be hard, even with a partner you have known for years. We think that the longer we are in a relationship with a partner, the easier it will be to communicate what we really want in bed. It’s not. It actually becomes more difficult, because in the beginning of a relationship there is less to lose.

We take different risks in our sexuality. In the beginning of a relationship, we are able to share parts of ourselves in ways that we later repress. As we begin to feel safe with our partner, our sex becomes “safer,” and we shut down the more wild parts of us for fear of hurting our partner or hurting the safety of our connection. If our relationship is to remain safe, we strive to keep the sex safe.

One of the ways that couples can begin to share their fantasies is through this next exercise, in which we will build and expand upon the first exercise. Using the appreciation dialogue outlined above, we will add to what we’ve learned, creating a safe space to begin to talk about sex. This is a great way for couples to create an opening in which an erotic conversation can happen. Remember, appreciation is the way to create that opening. If you want to get your needs met, appreciation is the doorway in.

EXERCISE

Starting to Talk about Sex

For this exercise, you will need at least twenty-five minutes of uninterrupted private time together. Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably facing each other in chairs, on the floor, or on a bed to maintain eye contact for the entire exercise.

You may want to turn down the lights, put on soft music, light some candles, and put on comfortable and sexy clothes. Setting the right mood is a great way to get started, and can help lead to more passion later on.

First, we’ll start by again sharing appreciations and mirroring each other. This is a basic dialogue skill, and one we will use for many of the more advanced exercises to come. This may still feel awkward, but you may have now felt some of the nice feelings that come with the experience of being mirrored. The words may still feel stilted and forced. Don’t worry. How fast you get this is not a reflection of how much you care about each other. Let the exercise feel awkward for now. Giggle, squirm, blush, and feel silly... it’s all normal.

Try to stay focused on the exercise for the duration of both sending and receiving.

Step One

First, choose who will be the sender and who will be the receiver. Senders will “send” over one thing they appreciate about their partner. Receivers will mirror back what the sender says.

Step Two

Senders will send over one thing they appreciate about their partner sexually. Receivers will mirror this back as well.

Step Three

Finally, senders will say one thing they really like sexually and would like more of. Receivers should try not to comment on what their partner is saying, but just mirror back exactly. This is important. The receiver does not need to agree, make promises, refuse, make excuses, or answer in any way. There does not need to be any response whatsoever. This exercise is only about mirroring.

Again, there are only two responses a receiver might make—“please send that again,” or the receiver can mirror back what the sender says and then ask, “Is there more?” The sender then can say “yes” and send more or “no” and stop there.

Now that you have shared your appreciations for each other, how do you feel? Can you tell your partner what it was like to hear those things? Try not to judge what you heard, or disagree, or argue. You do not have to agree, compromise, or commit. Just sit with what you heard. You can ask questions, but try to soak up the appreciation for now.

The History of Love

Men and women have different emotional needs, and physically respond differently during sex. But we have one thing in common—we are all looking for love.

“Eros,” or the creative urge to love, is also the drive to stay alive and to live passionately. Eros is what makes us feel desire in our relationships, giving us that wonderful, energized feeling that we all long for. This is the energy we call passion.

Love is natural; it is the instinct for passion, or the Eros urge. Eros was a figure from Greek mythology; the son of Aphrodite, the

Greek goddess of love. As the representation of all that was passionate, romantic, and sexual, Eros was worshipped as a god of fertility—he was the *life* urge. Ancient Greeks felt Eros represented unbridled sexual passion. Yet he was also famous, like Cupid, for being deceitful, overly playful, and unfaithful to his lovers. In English, “Eros” is the root of the word *erotic*.

The Romans had their own interpretation of Eros; they called him Cupid, the god of love. Cupid tortured his lovers with arrows that put them under his spell and left them powerless. The name *Cupid* is a variation of Cupido, from Ancient Rome, meaning “desire,” and this god was also known by the name Amor, or “love.” It was thought that Cupid was the son of Venus, the Roman goddess of love.

Eros is at the root of our archetype of erotic love and gives us our concepts of the lover overcome with passion, undone by need, and slain in the heart by love. Our understanding of love in relationships is that it is a passionate, intense emotional bond, solidified by intimacy and connected most deeply by desire.

Is it any wonder that we want to stay in this stage of a relationship? We want that passionate, intense energy. It feeds us and makes us feel alive. This is how we identify love. When that energy fades, we fear that we have fallen out of love.

Yet much of the early stage of love is about brain chemistry. Our bodies release hormones and brain chemicals that actually make us feel high, and these chemicals promote attachment to each other. Unfortunately, our brains cannot maintain that level of chemical production indefinitely. So, over time, the hormones naturally decrease and our brain chemistry returns to normal. We lose that intense state of desire we call “love.” This is when we begin to long for more intensity again.

This is also the phase of our relationship when we have to start working at love. To create passion, we have to make a decision to commit to a deeper connection. The way we do that is through our intimate, erotic connection with our partner.

Better sex often requires more connection, and more intensity.

When you crave more passion in your relationship, you really crave more depth or intimacy. You want a deeper connection to your partner. There is a desire within you to know your partner at a deeper level and to be known at a deeper place. To be connected to another person is a need that both men and women share equally. We fulfill this need through sex. And the more erotic our connection, the more connected we feel with our partner. When our erotic fantasies are fulfilled, we feel a connection with our partner that adds depth and dimension to our partnership.

The Seven Stages of a Relationship

Falling in love is easy to recognize. There are signs and symptoms. For example, we long for our lovers. We feel excited to see them. We think about them often. We desire them sexually. And sometimes we feel like we can’t get enough.

Then, when the ardor and thrill of this phase of relationship moves into the more settled stages, we wonder whether we are still “in love.” When the signs are different, the highs are not as high, and the attraction is not the same, does this mean that we are no longer in love? And does this mean that the passion is gone?

No. Long-term relationships are not necessarily a death sentence for passion. These phases of partnership are normal and common to everyone. Sexual excitement and eroticism can be part of the life cycle of a relationship if both people are willing to recognize the stages and work on having a long-term, passionate partnership.

Below are the identifiable stages of a relationship.

Romantic love stage. In this stage, we feel alive and awake, and the sex is great. We feel hope and a deep connection. Romantic love generally lasts anywhere from three to twenty-seven months. This is a time of intense passion and it gives us the bond we need to stay connected during the later stages of love.

The “sweatpants” or comfort stage. At this phase, we feel comfortable in our relationship with our partner and we start to relax. The more familiar we are with each other, the safer we feel, and more of our real selves come to the surface. We also begin to relax the need to focus on our appearance. After

the first year, we sometimes start to put on weight and not shave as often, becoming careless about our looks. We also stop worrying about things we might have been concerned about initially and generally settle into the partnership.

The conflict or power struggle stage. In the power struggle phase of a relationship we begin to feel the conflict inherent in every long-term partnership. We become reactive and defensive, trying to protect the love we felt in the beginning of the relationship.

Conflicts happen because we see our partners differently now. After the haze of romantic love has passed, we begin to see our partners without the blur of our projections that we initially saw them through. In the beginning, we see our partners as the people who complete us and make us feel whole. This is because they have personality traits that we ourselves have, but have repressed. We repress those parts of ourselves for lots of reasons, including the feeling that they really aren't effective ways to get love and attention.

For example, if you are a man and you are taught as a child that “big boys don't cry”—a common phrase told to young boys—it is entirely possible that by the time you reach adulthood you will be totally shut off from your capacity to cry when you feel sad. This means that you have repressed that part of yourself that cries.

When you meet a woman and take her to a movie on a date and she cries at the commercials, you might feel overwhelming attraction for her. This is because she has the personality trait that you have repressed. And with her, you can feel whole and complete.

Unfortunately, if you fall in love and marry that woman, eventually her crying will make you crazy! It will feel irritating and annoying, and it will create conflict in your relationship. You will no longer feel attracted to that part of her, but instead will see her crying as distasteful and a way to keep you at a distance instead of attracting your love.

Other reasons that everyday conflicts occur have to do with how we keep score. Men and women are different in the way they relate to the world. Men generally solve problems by retreating and taking time to mull over the problem, coming out of their cave when they have a solution. Women generally talk about their problems until they feel less anxious about them. Men may perceive this as a way to discount their offer of a solution. Women may experience men as “shutting them down” when they don't want to hear about their issues repeatedly.

When we feel conflict in our relationship, our anxiety and stress levels increase and we respond in an almost primitive way. Our brains sense danger and we respond by preparing for a fight, where our systems tense and become ready for physical attack. We might feel we have to defend ourselves or intensify an argument when we feel this response, and unknowingly we heighten the tension for our partner. In many relationships, this stage leads to a withdrawal phase.

Withdrawal stage. Our primitive brain responds to the conflict by going into our defensive behavior. This is called the fight-or-flight response. We may fight more with our partner when we are scared and feel conflict, or we may withdraw. Our partners react to our defenses by feeling anxious, stressed, and scared. They then respond with their own defenses.

One way people respond to a perceived threat is by going into “flight” mode. This could look like withdrawal. Sometimes your partner may withdraw, to create a sense of safety around him- or herself to have some space, or to regroup.

Or you or your partner may respond to a power struggle by “freezing.” This is the “deer-in-the-headlights” response. This response can look several ways. Your partner may look frozen, be uncommunicative, or freeze, with his mouth open, drool coming out of the corner of his mouth, staring blankly at you while you demand a verbal explanation. You may remain frozen in your pattern, repeating the same things over and over, trying to be heard.

You might forget what you wanted to say, or you might feel foggy or confused during a conflict. This leads to the feeling of “if I don’t move, maybe they won’t notice me”—camouflage behavior. People who use this defense might try to blend into the background, hoping they won’t get hurt, and they will wait out the conflict until the other partner appears to be “done.” Then they will breathe a big sigh of relief and “unfreeze.”

When conflict goes on for too long, and there is a lot of defensive behavior in both partners, we have a natural tendency to withdraw from each other. We pull back slightly from the relationship, trying to protect ourselves from harm.

We might accept the situation and decide that it’s worth staying in for a variety of reasons, including the fact that we still remember the romantic love stage and hope that someday we can get back to that initial feeling. We make a choice, instead of ending the relationship, to go to sleep, sinking into the inevitability of the unhappiness, and focus on outside interests to keep us feeling energized. This begins the “sleep” phase of the relationship.

Sleep stage. In the “sleep” stage of the partnership we may feel at home and comfortable with our partner, but the sexual relationship begins to wane.

Couples at this stage of their relationship may begin to complain about lack of interest in sex, sexual dysfunction, noninitiation, feelings of rejection, abandonment, and resentment toward their partner. (Note: Many physical reasons exist for sexual dysfunction, including blood pressure medication, heart medications, cholesterol medications, menopause, hormonal imbalances, thyroid medication, birth control pills, and antidepressants. See your doctor for physical symptoms of sexual dysfunction including erectile dysfunction and lack of interest in sex.)

Sex at this point in a relationship may turn into maintenance sex, where you are able to please each other but do so more out of physical need and habit than out of a desire to experience the intensity of your romantic interest in each other. Couples begin to live parallel lives at this stage, creating enough of an individual existence to keep them happy, but not putting the energy into the partnership.

At this point the passion and the eroticism of the relationship begin to get split off. We no longer view our partners as erotic, but as someone to feel safe with. Now we are safe, but we are not fully awake and erotic. We are, essentially, asleep.

Waking up stage. The good news is that there is another stage of a relationship—the “waking up” stage. Sometimes one or both partners recognize that the partnership needs help to return to or begin a new stage of passion and connection. This is the time that many couples come to therapy. One partner recognizes the problem and doesn’t want to stay asleep. Both partners remember the “alive” feeling of sexual connection and of being in love. They want to feel energized and passionate again. The process of learning to talk to each other begins.

Learning to explore and share erotic fantasies can create new ways to connect. Connecting can keep the partnership awake and alive for the long term. Before the “waking up” stage of the relationship can

begin, we have to take a look at what has happened to our erotic needs along the way.

Love Is in the Longing

New relationships often come with an erotic charge between partners. We don't necessarily feel safe and secure yet, but we may experience an intense sexual feeling, a longing for the other person that happens when we are separated.

We think about our new partners when we are apart from them, and begin to fantasize, guessing about their body parts, which we might not have seen yet, and wondering what sexual positions might be good with this new person in our lives. Our sexual attraction is created in the longing. It is in the distance between us that we feel desire for the other.

Our experience of romantic love includes a feeling of longing, of missing our loved one. We romanticize the missing of our loved one. Most poetry and love song lyrics are about longing and the intensity of separation. For most of us, this is how we experience falling in love.

As the newness of a relationship wears off, desire for each other seems to decrease and we settle into a nice, safe form of loving that can feel secure, but not always passionate. With familiarity, the longing decreases. We no longer have distance between us. We have found someone to whom we can feel close and connected. This stage of the relationship feels wonderful, safe, warm, and loving. And yet we don't necessarily stay in that same state of bliss we experienced when we were falling in love and longing for connection.

How to Bring Back the Sex You Want—The Next Steps

Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist, said we have three marriages in our lifetime. The first is for children, the second is for sex, and the third is for companionship. And we can experience all three of those “marriages” in one relationship, or several. Furthermore, we can have a lasting sexual relationship through our child-rearing years, and later through our companionship times.

Sex is a way to feel connected and loving toward our partner. Eroticism can be a physical language through which we express intimacy. It is the closest we can get to our partner on a physical level. It shows trust and openness and can express attraction and affection. Throughout the life span of a relationship, sex can repair hurt, heal grief, bond us after arguments, provide tenderness, comfort us, and help with self-esteem and self-confidence.

Most of all, sex is an expression of love.

We are all looking for love. Love has two components—companionship and erotic connection. Companionship, or “hang-out ability,” is what we feel when we enjoy spending time together. Companionship becomes more and more important over time.

The other component of a relationship is eroticism. Eroticism is what keeps the relationship vital and awake and makes us feel sexually connected. Without it, a long-term partner can feel more like a roommate. Working on the eroticism in a relationship is a key element to keeping it vital and alive.

Some couples are willing to give up the sexual part of the relationship because it seems too hard to work at keeping it alive. Communicating about sex, working on the erotic needs of the relationship, and focusing on a healthy partnership where sex is a priority can be a challenge and a commitment.

When there are other priorities like children and work, couples can take their relationship for granted. Being companions can feel easier than working on a sexual connection.

The Need for Honesty

The beginning of this journey to increased erotic connection starts with learning how to talk to each other about sex, as you are learning to do in these exercises. Most of us aren't really honest with our partners about sex.

For example, more than 70 percent of women fake orgasms, according to studies. More and more men are faking it, too. (Men can fake orgasm easily, particularly if they ejaculate inside a woman's vagina. Women take it for granted that if a man says he orgasms that he has indeed ejaculated, regardless of the appearance of ejaculate. This can happen more and more as men get older.)

It is sometimes difficult to talk to our partners about our deepest fantasies because erotic needs are so many times a part of us that we keep hidden, especially from those we are closest to. Sharing a need or desire that is different than what we have been practicing in our intimate lives can feel threatening to our relationship.

Long-term partnership and intimacy can be reinforced by honest and direct communication about sexual needs. This can happen when we feel free and open enough to share our fantasies with our partner.

Establishing Trust through the Imago Dialogue

We've all heard that an important part of relationships is communication, but why then can't we do it? It seems like most people don't have any problem telling each other what is bothering them or what is lacking in their relationship. It is fairly easy to point out in our partners all of their shortcomings. And many times we repeat this list of complaints, hoping to get our needs met.

In the beginning romantic phase of our relationships we use "appreciation" to get the love we want and yet later on in the "conflict" phase of a relationship we think we can demand love by telling our partners all the ways in which they are doing it "wrong."

Forcing our partners to give us what we need doesn't work. We have to create a new way of relating to each other. The Imago method of communication does this by providing a safe, structured way to communicate concerns and appreciations. This way of increasing connection allows us to find the passion from the beginning romantic phase of our relationship. It is normal and healthy to crave the erotic connection. But to feel this connection, we need to do the work of communicating intimately, which can help us have that connection and begin to have the sex we really want.

This process is not for the faint of heart. We don't talk about sex easily in our culture. And interestingly, we talk about sex the least often with the person we are having sex with. Learning the language of intimacy is sometimes, for many couples, a whole new language of love. The language of sex and erotic need is sometimes a difficult and new language to learn.

Talking to each other using words that have been forbidden, dangerous, and illicit can be guilt provoking and feel "bad." Yet this new language can also be a way to add spice and erotic electricity to the relationship, all without even a physical touch.

In this next exercise, you will try to create a safe space to talk about sex, and later explore your fantasies, using words and language that you will grow more comfortable with.

Try this exercise without touching and notice what happens between you and your partner. Can you feel the erotic energy increase? Do you feel yourself blush? Can you feel the pull of the words? Notice what you feel in your body and what you respond to. Try to discuss these feelings and responses with your partner after the exercise.

EXERCISE

Talk Dirty to Me

In this exercise, we will expand on the previous exercise, and take our erotic language skills to a whole new level. This is another great way for couples to create an erotic conversation. You may feel silly, embarrassed, and guilty. All of this is normal and healthy. Do the exercise anyway. You may be pleasantly surprised at how connected you feel to your partner, and how turned on you are when you are through.

You will need at least thirty minutes of uninterrupted private time together. Make sure the kids are taken care of, and you have total privacy, so that you will have no fear of being overheard or disrupted. This will help you feel comfortable and safe using whatever language you need to with your partner. Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably facing each other, close enough so that you can whisper in each other's ear.

In this exercise you will write and share what you write with each other. Make sure you have paper and something to write with and that you can see in the low light of the room. Dark markers or pens work well. Make sure you have a surface to write on that is comfortable for you. A small clock or timer may work if you want to limit the time you both take for the writing portion of the exercise.

You might want to turn down the lights, put on soft music, light some candles, and put on comfortable and sexy clothes. Setting the right mood is a great way to get started, and can help lead to increased passion. Turning down the lights so that there is slightly more darkness in the room can make this exercise easier, but make sure the room is not totally dark. You do not need to be ashamed or hide to do this work. Everything you do here is between loving and safe partners.

Try to stay focused on the exercise for the duration of both sending and receiving.

Step One

Choose who will be the sender and who will be the receiver. The sender is the first one to talk, and the receiver is the first one to listen. The sender will talk and the receiver's only job is to listen and mirror exactly what the sender says. Remember, mirroring means to say back what the sender has said with no other comments.

Step Two

After deciding who will be the sender, both of you should write down ten sexual words. They can be words that describe your partner's body parts or they can be words that describe sexual acts. Take five minutes to do this portion of the exercise. If you want to set a timer to remind you both when the time is up, you can do this, or just give each other time to write down the words.

Step Three

After you've done this, senders should say the words quietly to their partners, slowly whispering them in the receiver's ear.

Step Four

Now lean back, make eye contact, and say the words out loud while facing your partner. Remember, giggling is okay.

Step Five

Now say them one more time, and let the receiver mirror each word back, maintaining eye contact.

Step Six

While maintaining eye contact, add an adjective or descriptive word before each word on your list and say them out loud to your partner, who should mirror back after each one.

Examples might be "beautiful vagina" or "hard penis."

Step Seven

Switch roles.

When you are finished with the exercise, discuss with your partner how it felt to do the exercise. How did it feel to say the words? How did it feel to hear the words? How do you feel now?

Talking about sex is not easy, but it is worth it. This type of dialogue can help a partnership that has turned stale become the exciting relationship you crave. It can also take a good relationship and make it hot.

Mirroring, Validating, and Empathizing

Let's review the Imago dialogue, and add more depth to the parts we already know.

Mirroring is simply listening, but in an active way, without inserting our opinion. Mirroring is a way of responding by only repeating what we have heard and "sending" the information back. Giving our partners a chance to say what's on their mind and then mirroring it back allows them to hear what they have said and gives them a chance to change what they meant to say, clarify it, and get to the heart of the matter.

Example:

Sender: "I really appreciate you taking the time to massage my back this morning when we made love."

Receiver: "So what I hear you saying is you really appreciate me taking the time to massage your back this morning when we made love."

Sender: "Well, I really meant that I loved that you made time to touch me in that caring way, since we know we usually are so rushed in the morning."

Receiver: "So, you really loved that I made time to touch you in that caring way, since we are usually so rushed in the morning. Did I get that?"

Sender: "Yes, that's what I meant."

Validating is the second step in the Imago dialogue. This is an important step for both the sender and the receiver. It helps the sender to feel understood, like what they said made sense. The receiver does not have to agree with what the sender has said, but being validated means the receiver has tried to make sense of the sender's experience. The receiver tries to understand the sender's point of view.

Example:

Receiver: "That makes sense to me; I know you really love it when I massage you."

Sender: "Yes, it really helped me to relax and get into the sex today."

Validation is an important part of a dialogue. Many times in a conversation with our partner we feel misunderstood and are not sure our partner really understands us. Sometimes it can feel like we are speaking different languages or that we come from different planets altogether.

The third part of the Imago dialogue is empathy. Receivers imagine what the senders might be experiencing, and try to step into their shoes and understand what the senders are feeling. Understanding our partner's feelings is what creates empathy. This is important when we talk about each other's sexual feelings as well. To be sexually empathic, we have to begin to understand how our partners feel sexually. What might feel good to them, what they might desire, and what might turn them on could be different for them than for us.

If we empathize with their feelings, it doesn't mean we have the same experience as them. It just means we understand what they might be feeling. When we empathize with our partners, we try to imagine feelings and emotions they might be having.

Example:

Receiver: "So I imagine you feel happy and turned on when I massage you first."

Sender: "I do! I get really happy and I feel hot and then I can't wait to make love to you!"

Receiver: "So you get really happy and you feel hot and can't wait to make love to me!"

The Right Time

You can use this dialogue process to go to the next step and talk about your sexual fantasies, as in the following exercise. ~~Again, using this process may feel stilted, goofy, or silly at first, but it will make your partner feel safe and validated. They will feel listened to and understood. And when your partner feels like this, they will be more likely to give you the connection you want. Your communication will feel safer and more comfortable, and ultimately, become easier. In time you will both feel like your needs are finally being met.~~

As the receiver for your partner, all you need to do is listen and mirror. The only response needed is empathy and validation. You don't need to react to hearing your partner's fantasies by promising to take them into action. All you need to do is hold the space by having the dialogue. Three important things to remember about the dialogue are

- Remember to always ask your partner "Is now a good time to have a dialogue?" Sometimes we set ourselves up for disappointment if our timing is off.
- If the time isn't right, make an appointment. An appointment to have a dialogue about sex is a great idea, because a longer wait time often leads to a greater erotic charge. Also, our partner might need a safer time or space to talk about erotic needs. Make sure your partner can commit to a later date or time.
- And finally, always start your dialogue with an appreciation!

EXERCISE

Exchanging Fantasies

In this exercise, we will take the appreciation exercise and add *validation* and *empathy*. We will create a safe space to talk more specifically about sex. Remember, appreciation is the doorway into a more connected and intimate sex life with your partner.

For this exercise, you will need at least thirty-five minutes of uninterrupted private time together. Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably facing each other in chairs, on the floor, or on a bed and maintain eye contact for the entire exercise.

You might want to turn down the lights, put on soft music, light some candles, and put on comfortable and sexy clothes. Setting the right mood is a great way to get started, and can help lead to increased passion later on.

Make sure you have nowhere to go after this exercise. Many times it can lead to lovemaking, but do not put pressure on each other to make that happen.

Step One

Start by again sharing appreciations and continuing to mirror each other. This is a basic dialogue skill, and one we will continue to use. This may still feel awkward and a little goofy, but you may now feel safer with this structure. Giggle, squirm, blush, and feel silly—it's all okay.

Try to stay focused on the exercise for the duration of both sending and receiving.

First, choose who will be the sender and who will be the receiver. The sender is the first one to talk and the receiver is the first one to listen.

This exercise may be more difficult than previous exercises. Now you are talking about your sex life, and being very specific. If you are courageous, trust the process, and follow the dialogue structure, you will find that you can stay in the dialogue with your partner without difficulty. You may feel anxious or embarrassed. Don't be afraid to share those feelings with your partner before or after your dialogue.

Senders will "send" over one thing they appreciate about their partner. The receiver will simply mirror back what the sender says. For example:

Sender: "One thing I appreciate about you is how kind you are."

Receiver: "One thing you appreciate about me is how kind I am."

Step Two

~~Senders will send over one specific thing about your sex life that they like. The receiver will mirror back what the sender says. For example:~~

Sender: "One thing I appreciate about being in a sexual relationship with you is how open you are to trying new things."

Receiver: "So one thing you appreciate about being in a sexual relationship with me is how open I am to trying new things."

Step Three

Finally, senders will say one thing they may have fantasized about. The receiver will simply mirror back exactly what the sender sends over. For example:

Sender: "One thing I have fantasized about but possibly not shared before is having sex on an airplane with you."

Receiver: "One thing you have fantasized about but possibly not shared before is having sex on an airplane with me."

Step Four

After the senders have sent over all three steps, receivers will validate what they've just heard. Validation means that you share with your partner how it makes sense to you that he or she might be feeling or fantasizing these things. You don't have to agree with those thoughts and fantasies, and you don't have to do them. Hold all those thoughts and ideas for now. Instead, let your partner know you understand where he or she is coming from.

In response to the first three steps in this exercise, validation might sound like this:

Receiver: "So, knowing you the way I know you, it makes sense that you would appreciate my kindness because I know it means a lot to you when people are thoughtful."

Receiver: "It also makes sense that you like how open I am to trying new things because I know you love to experiment."

Receiver: "It also makes sense that you would fantasize about having sex on an airplane because you like to try risky things."

Step Five

After validation, the sender empathizes with the receiver. Showing empathy for our partners goes a long way to helping them feel understood. Empathy does not mean that you agree with what they are saying or that you are promising to participate in anything. Instead, it shows that you understand their emotional state. Sharing with your partner how you think he or she might feel could sound like this:

Receiver: "I can imagine that if you were to act out your fantasy you would feel excited and turned on. Did I get that feeling?"

Sender: "Yes, and I would also feel loved and appreciated by you."

Receiver: "So you would also feel loved and appreciated by me."

Sender: "You got me."

Now that you have done this exercise, how do you feel? Can you tell your partner what it was like for you? You do not have to disagree, agree, argue, compromise, or commit. Just sit with what you heard. You can ask questions, but try to soak up the appreciation for now, and read on.

A Sample Dialogue

This is a sample of how to use the Imago dialogue. Try following these steps to make it easier to practice the Imago form of communication.

A specific example of the above dialogue might look like this:

Sender: "One thing I appreciate about being partners with you is that you are committed to improving our relationship."

Receiver (mirrors): "So one thing you appreciate about being partners with me is that I am committed to improving our relationship."

Sender: "One thing I appreciate about being in a sexual relationship with you is how attentive you are to making sure I always"

have an orgasm.”

Receiver (mirrors): “So one thing you appreciate about being in a sexual relationship with me is how attentive I am to making sure you always have an orgasm.”

Sender: “Yes, and one specific thing you do while we are having sex that I really like is that you squeeze my breasts when you are kissing me.”

Receiver (mirrors): “So one specific thing I do while we are having sex that you really like is when I squeeze your breasts when I am kissing you.”

Sender: “Yes. And one thing I have fantasized about but never really shared is that you would squeeze my nipples really hard, maybe pinch them, while we are making love.”

Receiver (mirrors): “So one thing you have fantasized about that you have never really shared is that you would like it if I would squeeze your nipples really hard, maybe pinch them, while we are making love. Did I get that?”

Sender: “Yes, you got that!”

Receiver (validates): “So, knowing you the way I know you, it makes sense that you would appreciate the way I always make sure you have an orgasm. I know you appreciate my thoughtfulness, and I know you love to have orgasms! Did I get that?”

Sender: “Yes, you got me!”

Receiver (validates): “It also makes sense to me that you would like it when I squeeze your breasts when I kiss you because I know how sensitive your breasts are.”

Sender: “Yes.”

Receiver (validates): “And it sure makes sense to me that you might have fantasies about me pinching and squeezing your nipples harder because I know when I have played with them in the past it has really felt great to you. Is that right?”

Sender: “Yes! You got me.”

If you are having trouble validating, think about your partner and what you know about her. What do you know about her that would make it seem reasonable that she would feel these things? You don't have to understand, but does it make sense to you that your partner would feel these things, knowing her the way you do? How can you relate to these feelings that she has?

If your partner is bringing things up that seem totally out of character, or sharing thoughts and fantasies that are shocking to you, it might be hard to validate what she is saying in this exercise. If you are trying to stay in a dialogue with her and really want to make this exercise work for you, it can be a challenge to stay with it. Mirroring what your partner says can help her feel safe to tell you what's really on her mind. She will feel like you are not judging her, and will be more likely to be honest with you in the future about her desires and fantasies.

After mirroring your partner as well as you can, try validating what she said. Can you find something in what she said that makes sense to you?

After validating your partner, try empathizing with her.

Receiver (empathizes): “I can imagine that when you receive those things in bed you feel—*loved, appreciated, safe, cared for, desired, attractive, alive, young, and excited*. Did I get that?”

Receiver (empathizes): “And I can imagine that having those things makes you feel excited and that if you could fulfill that fantasy you would feel really turned on and alive!”

What are some emotions that you imagine your partner might feel now, and that she might feel if she had her fantasy come true? If you were to put yourself in her shoes, what do you think makes sense about the way she might feel? Now check it out with her.

Receiver: “Did I get that?”

Sender: “Yes, I feel that, and I would feel that, and I would also feel sexually fulfilled if I had that fantasy come true.”

Receiver: “So I got your feelings, and you would also feel sexually fulfilled if you had that fantasy come true.”

Sender: “You got me.”

Real-Life Experiences

Let's take a look at a couple who came into a therapy session and used these techniques to improve their sex life. Notice how they use the dialogue and see whether there are ways that you can use the experiences to help you and your partner improve your communication skills.

Alma and Don came into my office to talk about their issues around sexuality and the blocks in the relationship. For many years they had been sexless. They came to therapy to begin the conversation they both wanted to have about sex.

Don's fears about telling Alma his fantasies were deeply rooted in his past. He had always been afraid to talk about sex because in his childhood he had heard from his church and his family that talking about sex was wrong and that anything outside of sex for procreation was a sin.

Don and Alma built up to the following Imago dialogue, which is a good example of a successful exchange. Using the Imago dialogue, Don asked Alma whether she was ready to hear his fantasies.

Don: "Is now a good time to tell you about one of my fantasies?"

Alma: "Yes, now is fine."

Don: "I am nervous to tell you about this, but have always wanted to share this fantasy with you."

Alma: "So you are nervous to tell me about this, but have always wanted to share this fantasy with me. Is that right?"

Don: "Yes. Well, okay, um, please don't judge me, but ... "

Alma: "Oh, so you are asking if I would please not judge you."

Don: "Yes. One of my secret erotic fantasies is actually to masturbate in front of you."

Alma did not respond for a moment. Instead of reacting in any way, positively or negatively, she continued to mirror him.

Alma: "So one of your secret erotic fantasies is to masturbate in front of me. Did I get that?"

Don: "Yes, you got it. I guess I have had that fantasy for a long time."

Alma mirrored his words.

Alma: "So what I hear you saying is that one of your fantasies is that you have thought about masturbating in front of me. Is there more?"

Don described in detail what his deepest and most hidden fantasies were about masturbating for her.

Slowly, as the process continued, Alma was able to hear what Don described, and why he felt the feelings he did. He described his fears about sharing these thoughts with her. He talked about feeling ashamed of his thoughts.

Don: "I don't think it's wrong, but part of me feels like that should be private. I want you to know that I love you and want to share this with you."

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