

Sex Therapy Helps Boomer Couple Renew Their Relationship

by Robert M. Schwartz, Ph.D.

Carol and Dave needed sex therapy. Married for 20 years, their most recent sexual encounter had been more than six months ago. Carol, 45, works as an administrative assistant. Dave, 48, is in management at a local bank. They believed their marriage was strong, but that the passion had disappeared. They were living as if they were brother and sister instead of husband and wife.

There was no dramatic event that changed things for Carol and Dave. Rather, they found themselves increasingly making excuses to avoid intimacy, believing that nothing really was wrong. After awhile, it just seemed easier to sidestep the subject altogether. Amazingly, they never even discussed their "problem" until one evening when Dave got a notion.

Perhaps it was the movie they



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had seen the night before — the one with the sex scene by the pool. Maybe it was the cocktail that Dave had when they got home. Whatever it was, when Dave tried to initiate sex with Carol, she was unreceptive. In

fact, she was taken by surprise and was as angry at herself for being unable to get "turned on" as she was at Dave for catching her off guard.

Having the Courage to Seek Help

Carol and Dave are fortunate. They cared enough to recognize that they had a problem they were unable to solve by themselves. They sought counseling and were referred to a Certified Sex Therapist. It came as a surprise to them that sexual dysfunction is a legitimate specialty among psychologists and other health professionals.

Sex therapists can be found in most large cities. Therapists have been trained in techniques pioneered by Masters and Johnson, and are certified by the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT). Certification requires sexuality courses, plus two years of supervised practice, and is usually sought by psychologists or clinical social workers.

The philosophy behind sex therapy is that sex is an important aspect of life, and that sexual problems can be addressed and overcome. Sex therapists believe that sexual dysfunctions can be caused by a multitude of physical or emotional factors, and that those conditions require careful diagnosis. Often, when problems begin, the couple may not recognize or understand what is happening, and inadvertently behave in ways that exacerbate tensions.

Middle Age Can Mark Beginning of Intimacy-Related Challenges

The problems of Carol and Dave were caused by the normal changes that occur in sexually-functioning

people as they reach middle age. As Dave had begun to find his own responses less spontaneous, his self-esteem had suffered, and he unconsciously began to avoid Carol for fear that he would no longer be the sexual partner he once was.

Unable to discuss his concerns with Carol, Dave simply made himself increasingly busy. Carol was busy enough herself, and she was not fully aware of her own increasing resentment and feelings of rejection. As their physical distance grew, it began to affect other aspects of their relationship. By the time Carol and Dave met with a therapist, they had begun to wonder if their marriage would survive.

The therapist patiently listened to Carol and Dave's story and began the process of educating them. She helped the couple learn a new definition of sex, namely that it is love expressed through sensual physical touch. She also taught them that good sex is about more than intercourse alone, and that sex does not have to be a "performance."

In a series of graded exercises, the therapist instructed Carol and Dave on a variety of ways to reach out to each other in a positive manner. Hesitant at first, they overcame their inhibitions and learned to communicate their sexual desires.

Dave realized that Carol was not expecting him to be a stud, and that he could focus on pleasure rather than performance. Carol learned that, at age 45, she was no less attractive to Dave than she was 20 years ago, and that Dave did not expect her to look like a sex goddess.

Over several months of therapy, Carol and Dave found new passion, deepened their love for one another and enhanced all aspects of their lives. They gradually made more time for one another and found more reason to be together than apart.

While sex therapy can not guarantee such results in all cases, the things that Carol and Dave learned — and the fulfillment they have gained from that knowledge — are typical of what other couples in their 40s, 50s or 60s experience when they make the critical decision to face the challenge of discussing the most private of behaviors with a trained professional.

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