

A LINE ON LIFE

8/16/92

Becoming Sexually Adjusted *

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In many magazines, they have quizzes to tell you how sexually adjusted you are. But sexual adjustment needs to be considered in the larger context of your total relationship. How does your relationship affect your sexual sphere? What can be done to improve both the relationship and sexual satisfaction?

The sexual adjustment of any couple cannot be separated from their **total relationship**. Conflict and unresolved anger in other areas often take their toll in sexual adjustment. On the other hand, mutually satisfying relationships positively effect sexual activities. Sex is not merely a performance or a skill to be mastered like playing tennis. It is a form of communication and an extension of the whole relationship. Couples with strong and open relationships can survive most sexual problems.

Sex researchers and therapists William Masters and Virginia Johnson have some suggestions on how to deal with difficulties concerning each other's sexual needs. Problems arise over such issues as frequency of intercourse, who starts the lovemaking, or what behaviors are acceptable. When this happens, Masters and Johnson have a rule to follow — *"Each partner must accept the other as the final authority on his or her own feelings."*

When dealing with problems, partners need to be responsive to each other's needs and recognize that all sexual problems are mutual. (The same is true of all relationship problems.) Problems can be shared rather than placing blame.

In a 1967 study that compared happily married couples with unhappily married couples, a psychologist found that happier couples had superior communication skills. Happier couples not only talk more, each conveys more personal feelings and shows a greater sensitivity toward the partner's feelings. Basically, they use principles that involve leveling, feedback, and editing.

Leveling involves being open and clear about your feelings. Persistent feelings need to be expressed. However, they need to be expressed close to the time that they occur, so the topic can be recalled by both partners. In contrast, some couples engage in "gunnysacking." **Gunnysacking** is the destructive technique of "saving up" feelings and complaints and then "dumping" them all on the partner when any argument occurs. Beside the current problem, the partner might hear, *"And there was last week when.... Do you remember two months ago when...? And I still haven't forgotten about five years ago when...."* Gunnysacking is definitely not recommended. It is much better if only one problem is discussed at a time.

***"I feel _____
when _____
because _____."***

Feelings are best expressed with **"I" messages** like *"I feel _____ when _____ because _____."* Although the three parts can be given in any order, the first blank should be filled in with the emotion(s) you are feeling, the second with specific behaviors that are related to your feeling, and the last with the effect the behavior has on you. For example, a woman might tell her partner, *"I feel used when the only time I hear 'I love you' is just before intercourse, because it seems insincere and it turns me off sexually."*

When the partner receives an "I" message, it helps to use feedback before answering the statement. Essentially this involves the listener restating the message in his own words to see if the message has been received correctly — *"You seem to think that the only reason I say 'I love you' is to have sex."* Then the woman can either confirm his feedback or correct it. Once he has the message she is sending, he can ask for more information or respond with his own feelings by saying, *"I feel _____ when _____, because _____."*

In contrast to leveling which involves giving "I" messages, **editing** involves leaving out **"you" messages** that involve name-calling and blaming. When a "you" message is used, the listener gets defensive, raises emotional walls, and refuses to really listen. In contrast, the "I" message is not an attack and does not find blame. If you have the least tendency to point at someone while you are talking, you are probably attacking that person with a "you" message. Real communication ends with "you" messages. Don't use a "you" message like, *"You slob, why can't you ever pick up anything?"* It is much more effective to replace it with an "I" message, *"I feel frustrated when things are left laying around the house, because my attempts to keep it neat seem so useless."*

Some people are afraid to get angry. However, constructive and destructive arguments are not distinguished by whether anger is expressed. Like all other feelings, anger is a legitimate emotion. It can be expressed constructively in the same way, *"I feel angry when _____, because _____."*

Lastly, **don't try to "win" an argument.** Especially among loving couples, arguments are more constructive, if they are aimed at resolving shared differences rather than establishing who is right or wrong. Constructive arguments are attempts at "win-win" solutions, not "win-lose." Like any new skill, effective communication takes time to develop. Expect to make some mistakes.

However, if you can't seem to make it work, seek some professional help from a psychologist, social worker, marriage counselor, or minister.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1992, pages 692-693.