

Mismatched Desire and the Unwritten Rules About Sex

Read the article first. This worksheet accompanies *Relationship Sexually Stuck? A look at your unwritten rules of engagement* at ThoughtsFromATherapist.com, which shows how rules we never chose shape when, and whether, we have sex. Search “sexually stuck” on the site to find it.

For adults in a committed relationship. Sex changes in frequency over the years for many reasons: children, work, libido, time. Often we also get in our own way by following rules about sex that we may not even agree with. This worksheet looks at our own rules, never our partner's, and at the different ways two people reach for closeness. Each partner fills in a separate copy. Nothing written here obligates anyone to anything. If there is infidelity, abuse, contempt, or sex being withheld or demanded for control, we start with a therapist instead. A few words per space is enough.

UNWRITTEN RULES

Interpretation, before thought

A rule runs underneath the reasons we give. In four-stage language it is a stage-two interpretation, picked up from family, from pop culture, or from something a partner said that we misread. Many rules were useful once.

“I am not in the mood.” Rule: don't begin, even with affection, until ready for sex.

“My partner didn't do what I asked.” Rule: sex is earned by meeting an expectation.

CRITIQUING MY RULES

When was it not true?

For each rule, we offer ourselves a reason it might not always be true, by reasoning it through or by remembering times it was not true. We critique our own rules, not our partner's.

THE SEQUENCE

Safety first, or closeness first

For some of us, emotional vulnerability generates desire, and safety comes first. For others, physical closeness softens defenses and opens emotional expression. Neither is wrong. When we assume our sequence is universal, we perceive rejection where difference lives.

THREE THINGS WE CALL PHYSICAL

Desire, affection, felt safety

Being wanted and pursued, being held for its own sake, and a steady presence that settles the nervous system are three different hungers. Meeting the wrong one, however generously, does not register as the right one.

A WORKED EXAMPLE

WHAT I SAY

“I have a lot going on at work.”

THE RULE

Life must be less complicated for sex to take place.

WHEN IT WAS NOT TRUE

The times we had sex when I was stressed were good once we started, and I always felt better after.

REASONS I FORGET

Stress reduction, comfort, play, feeling close.

THE SEQUENCE

For one of us, closeness opens desire. For the other, touch opens closeness.

GIVING AND LOOKING

“I was giving you affection, and you were looking to be wanted.”

My unwritten rules

Finish each sentence as many times as fits. Write the first answer that comes, then the more honest one.

FINISH THE SENTENCES

I ONLY HAVE SEX IF...

I NEVER HAVE SEX IF...

SEX IS SUPPOSED TO BE FOR...

I DON'T HAVE SEX BECAUSE...

TESTING MY RULES

Where it came
from, and when it
was not true

Pick the two or three rules that carry the most weight. Critique my own rules, not my partner's.

THE RULE, AND WHERE I PICKED IT UP

A TIME IT WAS NOT TRUE, OR WHY IT MIGHT NOT BE

USEFUL ONCE

What the rule
protected

A rule can have been useful in the past. What was this one protecting me from, and do I still need that protection here?

Reasons, sequence, and what I reach for

We tend to know our reasons not to have sex better than our reasons to. We can have as many reasons as we like.

EVERY REASON I WOULD EVER HAVE SEX WITH MY PARTNER

Write these before reading the list below.

REASONS OTHERS HAVE NAMED

Check any that are true for me, or could be.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Physical release | ☐ Reproduction |
| ☐ Emotional intimacy | ☐ Romance |
| ☐ Exercise | ☐ Reproductive health |
| ☐ To keep a healthy libido | ☐ Play, humor, fun |
| ☐ To help one of us sleep | ☐ Stress or anxiety reduction |
| ☐ Fantasy or experimenting | ☐ Comfort in times of sadness |
| ☐ To express an emotion | ☐ To celebrate something |
| ☐ To feel close | ☐ To be visually stimulated |
| ☐ To connect spiritually | ☐ Something to do when bored |
| ☐ Passion | ☐ Pleasure |
| ☐ Conflict resolution | |

THE SEQUENCE

What opens what

Check what fits me. Then write what I believe my partner's sequence is.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Closeness and emotional safety open my desire | ☐ Physical closeness opens my emotional expression |
| ☐ It changes with the day or the season | ☐ I have not noticed yet |

PHYSICAL

Which need I reach for

Check the one I reach for most. On the lines below, name the one I think my partner reaches for.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Sexual desire: being wanted, pursued, chosen | ☐ Sensuality and affection: being held for its own sake |
| ☐ Felt safety: a presence that settles me | |

Talking about it

Sex is a hot-button topic, and defensiveness derails it fast. We go slowly, speak about our own side, and stop if either of us needs a break.

GIVING AND LOOKING

Pattern recognition, not guilt. Often we stopped offering the love our partner needs and started giving the love we need ourselves.

I WAS GIVING YOU... AND YOU WERE LOOKING FOR...

I WAS RECEIVING... AND I AM LOOKING FOR...

SAYING IT WITHOUT THE GUESSING GAME

Specific needs, and exactly how my partner could meet them. Needs change, so this gets updated.

WHAT I NEED:

HOW YOU COULD MEET IT:

WHEN I NOTICE MYSELF DEFENDING

"I thought that I was..." and "What about the time when..." are the usual openings.

WHAT I TEND TO SAY:

WHAT I COULD SAY INSTEAD:

CAN WE CHANGE OUR PATTERN?

One small agreement each, done concurrently. Emotional availability and sex usually need to grow together rather than one waiting for the other.

MY PART:

WHAT I AM ASKING OF YOU:
