

You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling **By Michael J. Bader, D.M.H.**

Rodney Dangerfield once joked: "Last time I tried to make love to my wife nothing was happening, so I said to her, 'What's the matter? You can't think of anybody either?'" This bit alludes to the problem of sexual boredom in intimate relationships. In reality, it's not funny.

Self-help books, women's magazines, and TV talk shows frequently offer us advice on how to restore passion to a relationship. Does familiarity breed erotic boredom? If so, why? Why does it often seem true that as a couple becomes more intimate and interdependent, their sex life suffers? How can we understand the oft-repeated complaint that marriage produces ennui in the bedroom?

Sexual excitement is highly sensitive to a wide array of psychological, relational, and social needs and tensions. One of the roads to intimacy, and sometimes a major defense against it, sexual arousal and engagement is exquisitely sensitive to stress and conflict. On the one hand, sexual arousal and pleasure can be used to restore identity, assuage a wound, circumvent or resolve a conflict, or re-establish an intimate connection. On the other hand, it can be the first thing to "go" as a consequence of fatigue, depression, anxiety, loss, anger, worry, or guilt.

The bedroom is also a hothouse for social tensions. Men, struggling to preserve a fragile masculinity, and making use of their greater economic and social power, may leave their families for younger women. Women, shouldering the inequities of their gender roles and responsibilities, often extinguish their own desire and desirability. The pressures of the marketplace and economic rat race infiltrate families and relationships, making playfulness and pleasure increasingly hard-won achievements. Social alienation clearly casts its shadows into the most intimate area of human experience.

Notwithstanding the importance of the wider social context, we also need to understand the private vicissitudes and psychodynamics of the problem to do justice to the intimate personal aspects of our sexual experience. In my clinical work as a psychoanalyst, for instance, I have been impressed with the central roles of guilt and worry in the etiology of sexual boredom. Certain conscious and, more often, unconscious fantasies about a partner's interior life can lead to guilt-based worries that we will hurt that partner if we get too aroused, or our identifications with a partner negate arousal to begin with. Both processes are incompatible with sexual excitement. If one is unconsciously worried about damaging one's partner or about becoming like a partner who seems damaged already, one can't "let go" with excitement. The whole complex of guilt and worry is like a cold shower. But what are we worried and guilty about exactly? What identifications are being made and how can they be dangerous? Why do these problems get worse with familiarity and intimacy? And where do they come from?

I believe that on the private and intrapsychic level, the problem stems from our families of origin. Most families have their share of tsouris. When parents are grim, unhappy, or dissatisfied with their lives, it dampens their children's natural exuberance. Children not only identify with unhappy parents, internalizing their moods and temperament, but come to feel responsible, worried, and guilty about their caretakers, and develop unconscious beliefs that they're not supposed to be optimistic and happy themselves. Such children grow up feeling guilty about being more happy, more successful in love and work, more sexually gratified, and more optimistic about having good things in life, than their parents.

Since children are still primarily raised by their mothers, these conflicts are often most poignant in relation to her. For instance, if your mother experienced herself as a victim or martyr, or was depressed and devalued herself, or was self-doubting or masochistic, you'd have hard time kicking up your heels and feeling confident or exuberant. It would be difficult to feel robust if your mother was fragile, to be spontaneous if she was controlled, to be carefree if she was worried, to feel joie de vivre if her life was without pleasure. Her trials and tribulations might not have been her fault and she may have loved you deeply. But the essential reality is that it's hard for us as children and as adults to feel deeply entitled to be happier and more successful than our parents; to do so is to hurt them or leave them behind. We'll feel selfish.

This set of conflicts rears its head in the bedroom. Maximal sexual excitement and freedom involves a "letting go" of restraints, a sense that we can be uninhibited and even a bit out of control without worrying about the

consequences. And, as much as the intensity of sexual passion is enhanced by intimacy, it paradoxically also requires a certain lack of consideration for the welfare of the other. In other words, we need to be able to take the other for granted in some sense, and assume that he or she will be okay if we yield self-control and allow our excitement to mount and become ecstatic. It is in the nature of desire to want to aggressively and ecstatically collide with the other at the same time that it wants to recognize and satisfy the other.

This doesn't mean that it's not exciting to use one's empathy to make the other happy. Arousing one's partner is a turn-on to most people for several reasons: First, making your partner happy satisfies a natural human longing; second, it's exciting to identify with someone who's aroused; third, the other's arousal is intrinsically affirming; and, finally, his or her excitement is a powerful reassurance that he or she is happy and not threatened, weak or fragile. Problems arise when a natural wish to excite the other becomes a worry, or when a natural wish to not be concerned about the other's pleasure is forbidden. This trait of selfishness in sexual arousal is frowned on by the Left and Right alike. And, yet, without it, and without the dialectic between selfishness and intimacy, sexual excitement is impossible.

Therefore, in order to get excited, we have to assume that the other can take on the full force of our excitement without being hurt or overwhelmed, that the selfish and aggressive dimension of our sexual desire will not damage its object. In many cases of sexual inhibition, the opposite is true. Again, in my clinical experience, many people worry, often unconsciously that his or her partner will feel used, abused, devalued, threatened, or overwhelmed by his or her sexual energy or fantasies. Often a woman fears that her male partner will feel threatened by the full expression of her female sexuality, that he'll feel emasculated or narcissistically injured, or that he needs her to feel weak or passive. Often a man fears that his family partner is fragile, that she feels sexually inferior, or that she's defensively brittle about being objectified. These are extremely common fantasies that reflect dynamics I've also found to be present in gay couples.

In each of these cases, a person's worry and guilt about a partner leads to an inhibition of sexual interest, curiosity, and expressiveness. Compounding the problem is a natural tendency to identify with one's sexual partner. The more I know my partner, the more I imagine that we share our inner states. If my partner is perceived as damaged, inhibited, threatened, or otherwise unhappy, the tendency to merge makes the possibility of sexual spontaneity unlikely. And it is the perception of the other's flaws, and not their actual flaws, that is crucial. Sometimes, we mis-read or misunderstand our partners radically. But our beliefs often dominate reality. Just as it's hard to be happy in an unhappy family, so is it difficult to be sexually free and vigorous in a close connection to someone whom we perceive is not. No one wants to dance on someone else's grave. And if we feel guilty about wanting to do so, there's no better (neurotic) solution than deadening ourselves in sympathy. The result is sexual boredom.

When a relationship is new, a lover can idealize a partner; these idealized qualities usually include strength, happiness, and sexuality. In this context, the lover doesn't have to worry about or feel guilty about the partner because the partner is experienced as different than the parents, and thus able to enjoy the full force of the lover's excitement rather than feel hurt by or excluded from it. For new lovers, identifications tend to be with the others strengths, and one's partner's separateness is reassuring. Thus, a new lover feels that he or she can be selfish, and this adds to the excitement. However, as lovers get to know each other better, they also see each other's faults, flaws, weaknesses, and human frailties, and the sense of separateness decreases. This opens the door to a number of processes which threaten sexual desire:

The person transfers feelings and experiences connected to a parent onto the partner who increasingly seems like a reincarnation of that parent, a parent whom the child experienced as needy, weak, or devalued;

The partner's real or imagined weaknesses and problems raise the specter of hurt or betrayal as a result of "irresponsibly" pursuing one's selfish sexual aims, just as one might have felt guilt over pursuing one's own needs rather than meeting the needs of a parent; and

The experience of the other's weaknesses or negative moods - usually exaggerated under the pressure of one's own childhood projections - opens the door to the kind of empathy and identification with an unhappy loved one which negates any sexual liveliness.

So, sexual vitality can be threatened by familiarity because feeling responsible for and worried about a partner's interior life, now perceived or experienced in more complexity, makes a sense of uninhibited sexual abandon impossible.

This approach helps us understand the psychological dimension of a wide range of cultural observations. Both men and women fetishize youth, particularly in women, because it negates the prevailing representations of devalued women in our culture. Further, a young woman, unblemished by age or the tribulations of life, is someone about whom a man need not worry, for whom he need not feel responsible. In addition to its appeal to

men, unblemished youth is appealing to women because it's an antidote to internal feelings of shame. (The reverse fantasy is seen in the recent movie *The Full Monty*, in which loser men, beaten down and shamed by life, are redeemed and become heroes to themselves and their women.) the oft-noted sexual fantasy among women in which they are swept away by a "bad" or "rough" man is similarly related to a woman's fantasized need for a strong and ruthless man about whom she needn't worry and with whom she can completely "let go" without inhibition. Finally, many elements of fashion and fashion advertising make use of sadomasochistic or dominatrix imagery to appeal to this same need of many consumers to either be someone who's hard and confident, or to be (sexually) connected with such a person - guilt-free. If the other person takes what she or he wants, so can you.

The social meanings of these psychodynamic processes are complex and can only be hinted at here. The fact that so many people struggle against internal representations of unhappy parents, particularly mothers, raises the question to begin with of why so many women experience the kind of deep frustration and dissatisfaction that becomes problematic for their children. The answer must involve structures of patriarchy, imbalances of power, the relative absence of nurturing and healthy fathers, and the absence of communities of meaning. Certainly the kind of anxieties I'm describing are exacerbated and exploited by the capitalist marketplace which inundates us with idealized images of youth and fantasies of invulnerability and narcissistic perfection.

The personal and social dimensions of sexual inhibition interact in a seamless web of causation. Alienated social relations create unhappy or distressed people who become anxious and frustrated parents who interact with helpless and dependent children in ways that shape their characters such that conflicts involving guilt, worry, and identification regularly arise and threaten the full and easy play of erotic desire. These children's relationships thus become enervated and they become vulnerable to the exploitation of the consumer marketplace and to depression and other psychological symptoms that are then passed on to the next generation. And all of this seems normal and "natural" because an essential aspect of the kinds of psychological processes I'm describing is that they feel like facts of human nature, fate, or biology.

In reality, these processes are changeable. A social order that made for happier and less stressed-out families would help, of course. Those aspects of a feminist agenda that promote happier and more empowered women might help. On a more personal, psychological level, individual and couples therapy can help. People can be helped to uncover the unconscious beliefs underlying the guilt, worry, and identifications generating sexual boredom, expose these beliefs to the light of day, and change them. Distortions and misunderstandings can be corrected, new learning and experimentation encouraged, and communication improved. The factors that contribute to boredom are deeply embedded in our culture and psyches and need to be liberated at both levels. By doing so, we might be able to get our parents out of the damn bedroom and start having more fun.

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