Sex Therapy and Combined (Sex and Medical) Therapy

Are Sexual Problems Really That Important?

While sexual problems are not life-and-death matters, they do significantly interfere with the quality of an individual’s life and/or their partner’s life. Sexual problems are also associated with depressed mood and can either cause or worsen relationship issues.

Both men and women can have sexual disorders. For men, these include hypoactive (low) sexual desire, erectile dysfunction, premature and delayed ejaculation, and genital pain. Women can suffer from hypoactive sexual desire disorder, problems with sexual arousal or orgasm, and pain during sex. Many individuals with sexual dysfunction suffer in silence. These men and women may be unsure from whom to seek help, embarrassed to raise the issue with a healthcare professional, or uncertain of whether the healthcare professional will take their problem seriously.

What can be Done to Help People with Sexual Problems?

Sex therapy by itself or sex therapy combined with a medical treatment can be helpful to men, women, and couples suffering from sexual problems. Whether the dysfunction is entirely medical, entirely psychological, or a combination of the two, every individual and/or their partner will have an emotional response to the development and continuation of the sexual problem. Sex therapy can help individuals address these emotional concerns.
What is Sex Therapy?
Sex therapy is a specialized form of counseling or psychotherapy that is designed to help individuals and couples with sexual problems. In addition to identifying what medical, psychological, or relationship issues contribute to the onset and continuation of the sexual problem, sex therapy uses specific techniques to address problems of sexual desire, arousal, orgasm, and pain. It is helpful to understand all the issues that contribute to sexual dysfunction so that a focused treatment plan can be developed.

Sex therapy is generally a short-term (approximately 3 months) treatment conducted in an individual, couples, or group setting. The decision regarding which modality is appropriate is based upon the specifics of any patient’s presenting problem. Generally, for individuals with lifelong sexual problems, individual therapy is the preferred mode; when the problem develops after a period of normal function, either individual or couples therapy may be preferred. Sex therapy relies on the skills and expertise of a sex therapist.

What is a Sex Therapist?
Sex therapists are specially trained mental health professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, and clinical social workers); however, some urologists, gynecologists, family practice physicians, physical therapists, and nurse clinicians have taken additional training to become sex therapists. Sex therapists work in collaboration with other healthcare professionals in addressing the individuals or couples’ overall sexual situation so that all aspects of the sexual problem can be completely resolved.

What Do Sex Therapists Do?
Sex therapists use a variety of interventions to help people recognize and understand their sexual function and feelings. Examples of specific techniques used in sex therapy include the stop–start technique for men with premature ejaculation, relaxation exercises paired with the insertion of vaginal dilators to diminish painful intercourse in women, and sensate focus exercises to decrease performance anxiety in individuals with sexual problems. Sex therapists can work with individuals/couples of any sexual orientation, people with gender identity conflicts, and people who have sexual fantasies or desires that are causing distress for the person and/or the partner.

What Else Can Sex Therapists Do?
Sex therapists can also help people who do not have sexual concerns such as the ones listed above. Sex therapists may provide advice on enhancing sexual life satisfaction in couples or individuals. They can also help male and female survivors of sexual abuse or violence bring closure to traumatic experience and restore satisfaction and pleasure to their sexual life. Finally, sex therapists can work with a sexual medicine healthcare provider as part of combination therapy.

What is Combination Therapy?
Sometimes, medication alone, or sex therapy alone, is not enough to effectively help patients or couples overcome their sexual problem. Combination (or Integrated) therapy is the use of both a medical intervention and a psychological one; this offers patients the best of both worlds. An example of combination therapy would be a man with erectile dysfunction who uses Viagra, Levitra, or Cialis to help with getting erections, and meets with a sex therapist to resolve relationship issues and performance anxiety.

Why is Combination Therapy a Good Idea?
In some cases, medications for sexual function may produce excellent results. However, for some couples, taking medications alone will result in unexpected obstacles such as loss of sexual desire in the partner or an increase in relationship tension with resumption of sexual activity. Using a medication to treat a sexual problem can unmask underlying issues within a couple. Combining sex therapy with medication helps individuals to overcome the surprising barriers/challenges they may encounter. In some cases, as the person or couple gains confidence and sexual function improves, the medications are withdrawn and men/women are able to successfully make love without them.

What is an Example of a Problem that Sex Therapists Can Treat?
One of the most common sexual problems is the development of performance anxiety after one has experienced repeated sexual failures. Performance anxiety may result in avoidance of sexual contact,
distraction from sensual feelings, and undermining of sexual self-confidence. When individuals avoid lovemaking, their partners may wonder why and worry that they are no longer loved or desired, or that their partner is having an affair. Sex therapists use specific techniques that help the individual and couple maintain a focus on sensuality and pleasure rather than sexual performance.

**How Does Sex Therapy Work?**

Sex therapy focuses on the issues that caused the onset of the sexual problem(s) in the first place and explores reasons why the sexual problem(s) continues. By understanding the medical, psychological, interpersonal, and cultural factors that contribute to the problem, the sex therapist can design an individualized treatment plan for that person or couple.

Sex therapists operate under a strict code of ethics. Your therapist will keep information you share about your sex life confidential, will not watch you have sex, and will not touch you in any sexual way. Although the therapist may ask questions or make statements that make you feel uncomfortable, this is not being done to embarrass or anger you but rather to help you understand your circumstances more completely. If you ever have concerns regarding your treatment, it is important that you raise these concerns with your therapist immediately for an open and frank discussion.

It is important to consider that there are many factors that may make individuals vulnerable to sexual problems: traumatic childhood experiences (sexual abuse, violence, anatomical deformity, and chronic illness to name a few), use of medication(s) with potential sexual side effects, surgeries that damage nerves important for sexual response, relationship discord, divorce, sexual humiliation, depression, performance anxiety, and loss of sexual self-confidence may initiate or maintain sexual dysfunctions. Sex therapists consider all of these factors as well as cultural issues relating to sexual development and ongoing sexual life. Therapists will also consider couple-specific issues that may interfere with couples’ ability to find time and space for lovemaking such as lack of privacy, scheduling conflicts, and family obligations. A carefully taken sexual history will identify these predisposing, precipitating, maintaining, and contextual factors and permit development of an individually focused treatment plan addressing all these issues.

**Can Sex Therapy Help Me and/or My Partner?**

This is always a difficult question to answer briefly. The short answer is that approximately two-thirds of individuals who complete a course of sex therapy report significant improvements in their sex life. Significant gains means that individuals or couples are doing better overall, have improved sexual function, are having greater sexual satisfaction, decreased performance anxiety, and/or have greater sexual self-confidence.

Over time, these gains may diminish; it is important to know that this is normal and that you may need to return to the therapist for 1–3 “booster sessions” to help overcome some of the backsliding that may occur. Remembering what you learned in sex therapy is important, and sometimes, the important messages can be forgotten.

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