



## 1 Sex Therapy and Combined (Sex and 2 Medical) Therapy

### 3 Are Sexual Problems Really That Important?

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

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

### 18 What can be Done to Help People with Sexual Problems?

19 Sex therapy by itself or sex therapy combined with a medical  
20 treatment can be helpful to men, women, and couples suffering  
21 from sexual problems. Whether the dysfunction is entirely medical,  
22 entirely psychological, or a combination of the two, every  
23 individual and/or their partner will have an emotional response to  
24 the development and continuation of the sexual problem. Sex  
25 therapy can help individuals address these emotional concerns.

## 26 SIDE BAR

### 27 How Do I Find a Qualified Sex Therapist?

28 In the United States, there are several pro-  
29 fessional organizations whose members are  
30 well trained and educated in the treatment  
31 of sexual problems. These include the  
32 Society for Sex Therapy and Research  
33 (<http://www.sstarnet.org>), the American  
34 Association of Sexuality Educators, Coun-  
35 selors and Therapists (AASECT, <http://www.aasect.org>), and the Society for the  
36 Scientific Study of Sex (<http://www.sexscience.org>). Prospective patients can go  
37 to these organization's Web sites and look  
38 for sex therapists that practice in or close to  
39 where they reside.

40 It is important to seek treatment from thera-  
41 pists that have a specialization in the realm  
42 of sex therapy. Many therapists state that  
43 they manage sexual problems as part of an  
44 overall general practice. However, a trained  
45 sex therapist is more likely to identify the  
46 sexual problem and develop an appropriate  
47 and sensitive treatment plan than profes-  
48 sionals who do not specialize in these con-  
49 ditions. AAASECT offers a certification in sex  
50 therapy; this process insures that the thera-  
51 pist has had adequate training, supervision,  
52 and education in sex therapy. Consulting  
53 with an AAASECT certified therapist will  
54 ensure that you are seeing a highly trained  
55 and experienced professional.

56 If you live outside the United States, con-  
57 sider asking your healthcare professional  
58 for a referral or contact the sexology orga-  
59 nization in your country such as the Scan-  
60 dinavian Association of Sexology, the Italian  
61 Federation of Scientific Sexology, or The  
62 British Association of Sexual and Relation-  
63 ship Therapy.

64 If you have a sexual problem or concern,  
65 please consider that expert help is available  
66 to address your needs. Suffering in silence  
67 is not necessary. You can take active steps  
68 by yourself or through your healthcare pro-  
69 fessional to get the help you and your  
70 partner need to restore a satisfying and  
71 healthy sexual life.

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## 1 What is Sex Therapy?

2 Sex therapy is a specialized form of counseling or psychotherapy that is designed to help individuals and  
3 couples with sexual problems. In addition to identifying what medical, psychological, or relationship issues  
4 contribute to the onset and continuation of the sexual problem, sex therapy uses specific techniques to address  
5 problems of sexual desire, arousal, orgasm, and pain. It is helpful to understand all the issues that contribute  
6 to sexual dysfunction so that a focused treatment plan can be developed.

7  
8 Sex therapy is generally a short-term (approximately 3 months) treatment conducted in an individual, couples,  
9 or group setting. The decision regarding which modality is appropriate is based upon the specifics of any  
10 patient's presenting problem. Generally, for individuals with lifelong sexual problems, individual therapy is  
11 the preferred mode; when the problem develops after a period of normal function, either individual or couples  
12 therapy may be preferred. Sex therapy relies on the skills and expertise of a sex therapist.

## 13 14 What is a Sex Therapist?

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

## 20 21 What Do Sex Therapists Do?

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

## 29 30 What Else Can Sex Therapists Do?

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

## 36 37 What is Combination Therapy?

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

## 43 44 Why is Combination Therapy a Good Idea?

45 In some cases, medications for sexual function may produce excellent results. However, for some couples,  
46 taking medications alone will result in unexpected obstacles such as loss of sexual desire in the partner or an  
47 increase in relationship tension with resumption of sexual activity. Using a medication to treat a sexual  
48 problem can unmask underlying issues within a couple. Combining sex therapy with medication helps  
49 individuals to overcome the surprising barriers/challenges they may encounter. In some cases, as the person  
50 or couple gains confidence and sexual function improves, the medications are withdrawn and men/women  
51 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,

1 distraction from sensual feelings, and undermining of sexual self-confidence. When individuals avoid  
2 lovemaking, their partners may wonder why and worry that they are no longer loved or desired, or that their  
3 partner is having an affair. Sex therapists use specific techniques that help the individual and couple maintain  
4 a focus on sensuality and pleasure rather than sexual performance.

## 5 6 **How Does Sex Therapy Work?**

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

11  
12 Sex therapists operate under a strict code of ethics. Your therapist will keep information you share about your  
13 sex life confidential, will not watch you have sex, and will not touch you in any sexual way. Although the  
14 therapist may ask questions or make statements that make you feel uncomfortable, this is not being done to  
15 embarrass or anger you but rather to help you understand your circumstances more completely. If you ever  
16 have concerns regarding your treatment, it is important that you raise these concerns with your therapist  
17 immediately for an open and frank discussion.

18  
19 It is important to consider that there are many factors that may make individuals vulnerable to sexual  
20 problems: traumatic childhood experiences (sexual abuse, violence, anatomical deformity, and chronic illness  
21 to name a few), use of medication(s) with potential sexual side effects, surgeries that damage nerves important  
22 for sexual response, relationship discord, divorce, sexual humiliation, depression, performance anxiety, and  
23 loss of sexual self-confidence may initiate or maintain sexual dysfunctions. Sex therapists consider all of these  
24 factors as well as cultural issues relating to sexual development and ongoing sexual life. Therapists will also  
25 consider couple-specific issues that may interfere with couples' ability to find time and space for lovemaking  
26 such as lack of privacy, scheduling conflicts, and family obligations. A carefully taken sexual history will  
27 identify these predisposing, precipitating, maintaining, and contextual factors and permit development of an  
28 individually focused treatment plan addressing all these issues.

## 29 30 **Can Sex Therapy Help Me and/or My Partner?**

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

35  
36 Over time, these gains may diminish; it is important to know that this is normal and that you may need to  
37 return to the therapist for 1–3 "booster sessions" to help overcome some of the backsliding that may occur.  
38 Remembering what you learned in sex therapy is important, and sometimes, the important messages can be  
39 forgotten.

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Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited	
Journal Code: JSM	Proofreader: Emily
Article No: 1	Delivery date: 15 April 2011
Page Extent: 3	Copyeditor: Joan

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