

Therapeutic Alliances in the Pursuit of Sexual Pleasure

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Complaints and frustrations about sex are hot topics in marital therapy. Couples come to therapy looking for the quickest fix possible for whichever problems threaten to undo them, embarrassing problems that they feel awkward discussing even among themselves and particularly in front of some stranger. They want various things from me, including for me to tell them what to do, who is wrong, where they went wrong, how to fix it, that they are compatible, that it's alright to move apart, that they are normal, or perhaps they want me to agree with each of them about the way marriage is supposed to be even though they disagree with each other. Sometimes they want me to use hypnosis for some vaguely defined purpose like enhancing sexual arousal, getting the truth from the other, or removing destructive impulses via some kind of brainwashing. Before I can assist them in any way, I first have a lot to learn.

Though they expect a lot from me, I enter into the therapy relationship knowing very little about them. I don't know how close they are to the end of their tolerance or their love for each other, how flexible they are or how much they want to or can change things. I don't know who initiated the therapy session or in response to what activating events, whether it is mutual, or what they want to accomplish. However, I enter with confidence that together we can put all the pieces of this puzzle out on the table so that we can then fit the pieces into a meaningful whole. For my part, I bring an open mind with regard to gathering the data we will need to answer these questions. I always hope to discover that they mutually want similar and realistic changes but my primary guiding principle as a therapist is to be open to, discover, and accept what is real in this moment. I'm seeking their permission to temporarily enter the sacred space of their private couple-world and to learn how it feels there. I want to inspire permission for them to talk openly about material they may have avoided so that we discover how their needs are being recognized, voiced, accepted, validated, and met. I want to know where it breaks down when needs aren't recognized, voiced, accepted, validated, and met. This includes all needs from the most insignificant to the intensely nonnegotiable, from sexual to household, time together, to career development and financial habits. They seem to be intricately interconnected no matter which area is presented as the problem.

In a good partnership, both members are already getting more of their individual needs met than either of them could accomplish solo. When this is true, both partners can appreciate the marriage as a good deal, replete though it may still be with difficult problems. It is worth the energy it is going to take to address these problems, ask for what they want, and hopefully maximize even more of their needs being met. When the partnership is not meeting individual needs as well as they could do on their own, they might do better to divorce and stop trying to reform each other. If, however, there is a basic tenderness and acceptance of each other, then my goal is to create a context in which they can explicitly share exactly what they are wanting and negotiate for understanding of that need and agreement to cooperate where possible.

It is a complex thing for most humans to know what they want and ask for it in a friendly way. This is particularly true in the sexual arena. There are lots of issues. Is something wrong with us for wanting what we want? Do we deserve to get what we want? Can we believe that the partner cares and really wants to know? Are all needs valid even if the partner doesn't like them or understand them? What would happen if everyone just went around asking for what they want? Most times in couples work, both partners will go on record as having the other's best interest at heart - that is they want their partner to be as happy as possible and have as many needs met as possible. But rarely do they feel like and believe that their partner has their best interest at heart and wants the best for them. Instead, they express doubt, misgivings and outright disbelief that the partner has their best interest at heart. I always find this to be a sad situation, especially when they really do seem to want the best for their partner. Therapy to resolve the trust barriers that keep the couple stuck doubting each other's basic caring often takes a longer time than simply negotiating compromises that would maximize specific sexual needs being met.

I often incorporate hypnosis in my marital therapy though rarely in the dramatic way it is expected. Being identified as a professional with a hypnosis specialty probably brings me more than the average amount of business in which clients expect me to mysteriously 'fix' some sexual perversion, uncover hidden aspects of the past, or investigate truth as if it were an 'X-file.' My purpose in using hypnosis is simply to focus heightened awareness into relevant areas that promote learning, understanding, goal setting, resource retrieval, and sometimes reinterpretation of past events. I like the Jungian idea of a spotlight of consciousness that is quite limited but can be moved freely to illuminate that which was in shadow moments before. When I am facilitating within the hypnotist role, I am the spotlight operator seeking to illuminate what clients want, what prevents them from having it already, and what experiences or conditions they need in order to have it. As Milton Erickson defined it, hypnotic trance is when the person

focuses inward on their own thoughts, feelings, and memories. Clinical hypnosis is a modality for communication to occur in a time limited relationship in such a way that irrelevant, external distractions are minimized while attention is concentrated on needs and desires in the current state. We are not on an archeological ‘dig’ to prove or discover what was really true in the past but to have a direct experience of individual truth in the here and now.

Personally, I am humbled by the illusiveness of truth that is constantly changing. Though I recommend couples vow to tell the moment by moment truth about what they want, feel, like, and dislike as they come to know it, I realize that this is no small task. It is a misnomer to talk about “simply” telling the truth about what each person needs and feels. There are many factors that contribute to the difficulty of this task beginning with the rampant lack of adequate specificity most people demonstrate in asking for anything they want even when they think they are being forthright and honest. And some people prefer to avoid the vulnerability they might experience when asking for something by demanding it instead. Often one partner is blamed for not doing something the other partner wants even though that partner never actually asked the other to do it or got their agreement to do it.

There is a strong cultural prohibition against doing anything that might be seen as selfish and outright asking for what one wants is often perceived as unacceptably selfish instead of refreshingly honest. As an unrealistic alternative, many clients hope to avoid this dilemma by clinging to the hope that intimates shouldn’t have to ask outright for what they want anyway because partners who are properly sensitive and care will automatically know. This would be particularly handy since so many people don’t seem to be tuned in to what they want and couldn’t tell the truth about it externally if they wanted to because the internal lines of communication just aren’t open. At best, they have a vague sense of what they object to that the partner does. Interestingly though, they often consider themselves the ultimate authority on what the spouse needs, feels, wants and deserves instead of allowing this authority to the actual person who has the needs and feelings. Couples will default to telling me ‘the truth’ about how the *partner* feels in response to my asking each person to express his or her *own* feelings. And finally, many people do not give themselves permission to say ‘no’ or say how they really feel when being asked to do something. Naturally, this is often because they fear conflict or rejection or hurting the other. So they say ‘yes’ when they don’t mean it and then don’t follow through. And though each of these complicating elements are in themselves formidable, they become even more hazardous and daunting when the needs are sexual.

Zack and Ellen were unwitting victims of communication breakdown as they sat in my office and discussed ending their partnership despite a deep love and mutual caring. Ellen described

Zack as selfish and immature. Zack energetically explained that he didn't think it was asking too much for him to expect Ellen to clean and iron his uniforms, prepare meals, perform all household and child management duties, and still be affectionate and up for sex whenever he was. I agreed that he had every right to ask for anything and everything he desired of her but it sounded like he was in fact demanding and expecting rather than simply asking. Wasn't it up to her to determine if it was too much for her to agree to do or not? It wasn't a duty she had inherited as a function of marrying him as he implied. It wasn't for me to pronounce whether his asking was appropriate or excessive. My basic belief is that the healthiest outcomes result when both people express all of their needs as soon as they become aware of them and do so in that friendly manner that assumes good will but does not expect automatic compliance. Clarifying what the needs are certainly contributes to their enjoying higher chances of being satisfied than if they weren't known or expressed. But it doesn't guarantee they will be met. One person's wishes are not an order as if the other person is a slave or an employee. The other person is an equal partner with needs of his or her own. The other person might care greatly but discover that they have a conflicting or incompatible need so that agreement to do the requested thing must be withheld until negotiations can occur. Newspaper columnist "Miss Manners" even explained that being polite does not mean automatically doing whatever is asked of one. Being polite dictates that one listens to the request and takes it into consideration, running it past personal priorities, interests, other commitments, etc before sometimes politely declining with a sincere expression of regret.

Flora and Mark failed the adequate specificity test big time. This first came to my attention as I sat listening to them and realizing that their lips were moving but I didn't know what they were really saying. They had initiated therapy to explore and hopefully repair the frustration and disappointment they both experienced sexually in their relationship. Flora complained that Mark was not personal and affectionate enough in and before their sexual encounters and Mark complained that Flora was not adventurous enough sexually or fun and playful anywhere. I am not surprised in such an encounter to realize that I have no clue what actual behaviors they are referring to. But it is disconcerting to hear such abstraction be handed back and forth as though they have communicated something that made sense to each other. Furthermore, I got the distinct impression that they had launched such judgments upon each other many times before. So I inquired about what exactly it is that they meant by the abstract terms they just used, looking for some kind of workable operational definition. Neither of them could elaborate about how "affectionate" or "adventurous" might actually translate into recognizable, doable, yearned for behaviors. I got the sense that it wasn't just a reluctance to share the details with each other

but that they didn't even know themselves. It was like that experience people sometimes have when shopping and being approached by a salesperson asking if they can help you find what you're looking for. You decline because you don't quite know what it is exactly that you are looking for but you believe you might recognize it should you chance upon it. The best Mark could do upon interrogation was to hazard the guess that sex might feel more adventurous if Flora was thinner, sporting a "playboy bunny" body, and if they engaged in a threesome. I asked him directly if there was anything Flora could do in the confines of her current body that did not include a third party (which according to Flora was most decidedly not going to happen) that could satisfy any little part of his yearning for more "adventure." He never did come up with anything. Flora was equally unable to define "affectionate" in any meaningful way. Both remained frustrated and dissatisfied with the other's failure to mind read and comply with the secret encoded transmission about what they wanted.

Negotiating for the Happy Medium

What are the factors that determine sexual arousal? How do we understand different levels of desire for sexual intimacy? The question of how much is "normal" fuels many arguments with each person tending to take the egocentric position that whatever he or she favors automatically becomes the barometer of normal. Driving down the highway for instance, this translates to the generally recognized understanding that, since our egocentric driver is, by definition, driving the normal speed, anyone going faster than that is a maniac and anyone going slower than that is an idiot. It is very difficult for any of us to give up the notion that our way is the right way and the other who sees it differently just needs to be fixed so that they understand and accept what's right. This is where the request for hypnosis often makes an appearance, sometimes by both partners wanting me to fix the other. This usually prompts me to suggest the possibility for their consideration that all couples are actually free to have whatever marriage contract they can live with, one that supports the majority of both of their needs. Sexual needs aren't right or wrong in and of themselves, only in relation to the partner's similar or incompatible needs. I remind them of the split screen snippet from the movie "Annie Hall" in which Woody Allen is visiting his shrink on one side and explaining how "we almost never have sex, maybe only three or four times a week." Meanwhile, on the other side of the screen, Diane Keaton is complaining to her shrink that "we have sex all the time, like three or four times a week!"

Karen and Frank were in therapy with another therapist who inappropriately referred Karen to me to "use hypnosis to help her unblock her sexual expression." Something was apparently mysteriously "wrong" with her and it was going to take hypnosis to whack it out of her. I did not accept this contract but I did agree to work, first with Karen alone, to help her explore what she

did want sexually and in the relationship generally. She was very angry at what she perceived as Frank's immaturity and explosive temper. One of the things he most frequently threw fits about was her refusal to have sex. I invited her to develop a comfortable trance state that would be conducive to visualizing and imagining herself and Frank enjoying an ideal pleasurable sexual encounter so that she could learn more about what she experienced as ideal components. Instead, upon reorientation, she reported that she was repulsed by her fantasy, angry with Frank, and did not want to see him have pleasure. And yet she claimed that she loved him and wanted to continue their marriage. I sent her on additional internal exploration assignments with such prompts as: What would an ideal marriage look like? What needed to happen to approach that state? Were there actually mysterious blocks that interfered with her sexual expression other than chronically repressed and currently accumulating anger? And why had she repressed her anger in the first place? Not surprisingly, she did not produce many specific particulars in response to any of these questions and so we decided that she needed to collect data every way she could, including engaging in "experimental sex" with her husband to observe her reactions and awareness of her needs. I recommended she use the "why not" strategy when considering Frank's daily advances. This would take the form of her saying to herself, "Sure, why not?" when Frank asked for sex. Then she was to carefully observe her internal response to determine if some really important "why not" reason should present itself. If that was the case, she would simply say a firm 'no.'

However, if she didn't produce any real reason why not, then she would proceed anyway just to find out what she could learn. Frank was delighted with this idea and they did have slightly more sex than usual. She also agreed to start telling Frank immediately when she was angry at him for his temper or selfishness but since he was much happier now that he was getting some sex again, there was less behavioral evidence she could use against him. She was never going to want sex as often as he did but she was able to examine and modify her judgmental stance that he shouldn't want sex so often. And not being so angry at him for that, she could let herself give him sex more often even when she did not share his degree of enthusiasm. It turns out that there were no mysterious blocks in this case but the mysterious chemistry of attraction is sometimes influenced by developmental blocks that can be explored and dismantled.

Using Hypnosis to Resolve Developmental Issues Affecting Attraction

Diedra and Scott both cried in their opening session as they agreed about how painful it was that though they loved each other, Diedra was not sexually attracted to Scott at all. They had a two year old son together and she had a seven year old daughter from her first marriage. She enthused about how Scott treated her so much better than her father and first husband had but she

wasn't attracted to him and thought she preferred a more "manly" and confident man. She was repulsed when he tried to touch her and somewhat uneasy with how loving and affectionate he was with her daughter. He was extremely offended by her implication that something might be sexually inappropriate in the close physical relationship he enjoyed with the daughter. In fact, the degree of upset he felt over this was the first indicator of a developmental mine we had stumbled upon. He revealed that between the ages of four and seven, his older brother and some of his friends had made him (Scott) engage in sex acts for their pleasure. This had been extremely humiliating for him and he felt that this traumatic experience had contributed to his strong need to avoid subjecting another child to such injurious behavior. The second developmental mine uncovered in this same interaction concerned Diedra's history with her father who was very cold, critical, angry, dominating and affectionately remote, thus leading her to regard with some suspicion the loving (and completely appropriate) relationship Scott and her daughter enjoyed. She also felt left out, not because they excluded her but because she did not know how to participate in such displays of affection.

I wasn't sure what else might lie in the path to their ultimate resolution of these problems they presented, but these two issues seemed to be pulsating with inordinate pressure. We addressed them in separate individual sessions. For Scott, we used hypnosis as a means for him to do a dissociative review of his younger self who had been the victim of the unwanted series of assaults he had been powerless to prevent. I suggested that he hold constant the resourceful feelings of his current maturity, wisdom, power, safety, and compassion as he watched and listened to traumatic scenes from the past. From this objective, intentional perspective, he was able to understand a lot of things differently from when it happened and could extend his current wisdom, protection, and encouragement to that younger self. To whatever extent this young boy's confidence and sexual development had been arrested or inhibited by these events, Scott was able to intervene from the boy's 'future,' as it were, to give a message of hope and permission to let those artificial obstacles be dissolved and replaced with the confidence he deserved and needed. Whether this would make him appear more "manly" in Diedra's eyes was uncertain, but Scott emerged from this session moved by the power he had been able to extend to and to retrieve from his younger self.

I engaged Diedra in a similar hypnotic process to revisit the roots of her confusion and pain about "manly" men and her lifelong approach toward and simultaneous avoidance of them. She was encouraged to hold constant a sense of her worth and confidence as she reviewed the events from her past interactions with her father, discovering that she could see the bigger picture she had not been privy to as a child. She could dispassionately understand how her father was

tormented by his own limitations but more able and likely to loudly critique hers. She could empathize with the little girl she had been, extending her understanding and apology about how much young Diedra must have been hurt and how hard it had been to need love but receive criticism and angry control instead. She also congratulated the younger self for her perseverance and survival even though she had to use certain defense mechanisms then which had now become obsolete. I guided Diedra to act as a reparenting agent or ally as she validated the worth of her child-self and explained to her how the grown up Diedra could protect her and guide her in finally getting all the affection and love she needed and secretly yearned for because she knew how to select safe men who knew how to give affection.

Scott was a safe man who knew how to give affection and, as an additional bonus, he had even had his “manliness” recently enhanced by his own reparenting work. However, at last contact, even though these two significant “obstacles” had been much transformed into increased capacity for tenderness and understanding, questions remained as to whether Diedra and Scott could capture the elusive sexual chemistry they so wanted. They were planning to separate and reconsider their compatibility from the perspective of independent living. There were no more obvious blocks to explore but a mystery remained about what they wanted and needed to be happy together.

Using Hypnosis to Explore Ideal Futures for Goodness of Fit

In the therapy context, I know that people want something but I’m pretty surprised when they actually know what it is. Usually, they know a lot about what they *don’t* want and what they dislike about their partner but when I ask them to describe their ideal state to the partner, more often I get a “blank” rather than specific goals. Hypnosis helps create a beneficial context for the spotlight of consciousness to be focused on illuminating secret or repressed desires and needs that can then be shared. Before initiating hypnosis, however, I sometimes choose to milk their complaints for all they’re worth by asking them what they don’t like or what they find irritating about their spouse. Plentiful data results from this question and can then be easily utilized by asking each spouse to privately take each item and turn it inside out until it becomes a go-to goal statement of something they want from the partner, even if it is only some opposite version of their original. Before they share this information with each other, they have to get themselves in a receptive, non defensive, mode in order to hear the partner’s needs. It isn’t to be taken as an implication that they aren’t already satisfying this need at times. It is simply to be taken as information about what the partner likes, whether it currently exists or not. This information can be thought of as “keys to the kingdom” that you only give to someone you trust to care and who you are willing to let in.

But before handing out any keys to kingdoms, I hypnotically guide them to travel into an imagined future together, a time when they will have accomplished the most ideal relationship they can fantasize, one that includes the various ingredients they just identified and one in which they are having a completely satisfying sex life, emotional intimacy, success resolving conflicts, sharing power, raising children, managing money, balancing time together and apart, etc. While they are fantasizing, I can give suggestions that they see sex encounters that include the important elements of mutual agreement to engage in sexual encounters, having the requisite respect for self and other that will be conducive to ideal sex, communicating verbally or nonverbally about their heartfelt desires, and having pleasure throughout.

When they can picture a properly detailed ideal relationship some months or years into the future, I ask them each to merge with the selves in that future and feel the pleasures of that accomplishment, memorize it, and then fall into another dream within the dream they are already in, and review the steps they “took” to make this happy future become a reality. Finally, I reorient them to the current time frame and invite them to share their newly detailed dream with the partner who was hopefully having a similar or at least compatible dream. This is where the “goodness of fit” part comes in. It is not unusual for couples to produce fairly different dreams and have each one delighted and inspired to include the things the partner mentioned that they had simply forgotten to include in their own fantasy, making the collected fantasy richer than either of the individual versions. There are, unfortunately, those times in which the reported parameters of the ideal relationship are so different and mutually exclusive that they may come rather painfully to the conclusion that they have such different destinations in mind that it is unlikely for them to be able to travel together happily.

Daniel and Nancy came to therapy at Nancy’s insistence. She complained that Dan, an airline pilot, had been chronically cheating in their 20 year marriage and major changes were demanded if the marriage was to continue. They had not had sex together in over six months, not at all following Nancy’s hysterectomy, and only very rarely before that. She was sure that he considered her unattractive because of the slight pooch of her belly and because he was comparing her to the much younger women she had caught him in affairs with. He agreed that sex with her was difficult because of lubrication problems and possible pain for both of them. She had the additional concern that sex wasn’t even safe unless he took an HIV test. He was swearing off other women but she didn’t know if she could believe him. He also emphasized that he most definitely did still find her sexually attractive. They were in passionate agreement that they wanted to resume sexual intimacy as a way to help Dan stay away from the other women that he claimed to be vulnerable to since he and Nancy had been so estranged from each

other. Nancy acknowledged her chronic posture of defensive distancing from Dan as well as her intention to now renounce it in favor of new trusting and expressive affiliative behaviors.

Prior to the hypnosis session to imagine what the ideal future together would look like and sound like, they had each been asked to generate a list of goals for the relationship they wanted. They were asked to see this potential relationship in action with as much detail as possible at some point in the future when they might realistically have accomplished it. Then, after reviewing how they might have gotten to that future goal, they reoriented to present time and shared their hopes, dreams, and operational definitions about the relationship they hoped to construct. Both listed an active and passionate sex life together as their highest priority. Nancy emphasized the need for absolute honesty from Dan as well as a test to clear him on possible sexually transmitted diseases. She also wanted to be included as an equal on financial matters which Dan had kept entirely in his name, excluding her from any power in that regard. She wanted to stop withholding sex and wanted him to stop withholding power. He was happy about the first part but not about the second. They both wanted to play together again, in bed and out.

Dan reluctantly but eventually took the blood test and “luckily” did come up clean. Nancy, meanwhile, used several individual hypnosis sessions to mentally explore the health and workings of her post surgery body, remembering its capacity for sensuous and sexual pleasure and appreciating the healing she had accomplished. They were just finishing construction on a new home and she used the virginal romantic master suite as a background context for mental rehearsals about how they were about to be newly married again, complete with vows to be honest and monogamous. She held constant a feeling of pride about her competent and healthy, fun-loving body while she imagined initiating sexual encounters, letting herself be seduced, flirting, touching, pleasuring, and asking for what she wanted with her newly expressive self. And with very little fanfare about how amazing it was to suddenly just turn the key and ignite the rocket again, they did just that and reported extremely satisfactory results sexually. However, at last contact Nancy is still pursuing an evasive Dan for his cooperation in her becoming financially equal. She complains that he guards his privacy and in many ways treats her as if she were one of their children, discounting her power and competence to function independently. She is resentful and noticing the impulse to distance and withdraw from him. He refuses to go to counseling with her, stating that everything is fine. She doesn't know what it means that he can seemingly tolerate such a wide gulf between them and the ideal future she thought they agreed upon.

Reinterpreting the Meaning of Things

We humans spend a huge amount of energy trying to decipher the things that our significant others say and do in terms of their inherent meaning. And in the marital arena, especially, partners rampantly make assumptions about the meaning of their spouse's actions, often without ever even checking with the spouse and possibly modifying the assumed meaning to reflect input from the other person. We take simple differences and defenses as evidence of personal rejection. Nowhere is this more painful and sensitive than in sexual matters. And nowhere is it more difficult to talk about than when the assumed rejection is sexual. In the healthiest of relationships, both people considerately and completely tell their own truth, take nothing personally, and make no assumptions. And if they can't control the impulse to take things personally or make assumptions, they will at least let the partner in on this otherwise secret world of interpretations. In this way, the partner has a chance to give input that may turn out to be extremely relevant and in many cases opposite of what the first partner was construing.

Sarah and Mack were both struggling with depression that seemed for the most part to be independent of each other, though they each directed a considerable amount of blame for their unhappiness to the other. They had both grown up in families that left no doubt about the actual origin and inherent logic of their feeling depressed, unworthy, and anxious as adults now. Though the initial therapy was requested by Sarah for her depression, it quickly became marital therapy, primarily so that Mack could be present to agree to and explain or reject all the things Sarah thought his various behaviors meant. Leading the list of her concerns was the fact that Mack had admitted to compulsively visiting internet porn sites each night in recent months and she took this to mean that he did not find her attractive, that he was addicted, that he didn't really love her and would probably want to leave her, that she couldn't trust him, and that he had mysterious sexual "issues" that he was too ashamed to reveal to her.

When asked about their current sex life, Sarah said they didn't have sex as often as they would like due to time constraints and the seemingly constant needs of their only child, eight year old Denise. Sarah also reported a great deal of resentment toward her dearly loved daughter for having all of these needs. Individually, she worked on creating permission to explore her own needs, express these needs, and elevate them to at least equal status as her child, husband, the dog, and anyone else she was waiting behind in line. She was able to identify with the congruent and unapologetic manner in which Denise expressed her needs and decided to let herself be inspired by the model Denise presented. Furthermore, every time she gave Denise validation for her needs and worth, I suggested that she tag on a similar transmission to the little girl self 'within' who had rarely received such messages from her own mother.

The couple-work became a context for Mack to directly give his support to these individual goals, for them to each challenge and in most cases retract the overt and covert blaming they had been doing, listen to each other in that way that does not become defensive, reactive, or judgmental as they each described their own private struggle with things that contributed to depression, and finally to address the highly charged and avoided sexual issue. Sarah had made great strides in not taking Mack's bad moods or critical remarks personally and he had been tenderly convincing that he did in fact love her, enjoy her company, find her attractive, miss her, want her, etc. So it was on this foundation that they began to explore what Mack's past forays into internet porn meant. By this time, there existed a real curiosity to know each other at new depths for how this would bring them closer together. It seemed safe and they anticipated acceptance. They became very interested in what they could learn that would benefit their relationship. Ultimately, it became clear that the porn visits meant none of the things Sarah had feared and assumed it did. Mack described a motivation based on feeling lonely, depressed, frightened and frustrated by the responsibilities associated with new job, relocation, money problems, and those same incessant needs of the eight year old Sarah described. He was isolated and distracted himself from his various pains by surfing the fantasy world of porn sites where responsibility does not intrude. It was as simple and complex as that and Sarah was able to hear and believe this explanation with a significant amount of relief. Currently, they are saying no to some of the child's and dog's needs and are making time to play with each other, sexually and otherwise, with very satisfying results. The last problem reported was that they were not used to feeling so good and it was a little unsettling – but something they were willing to deal with.

Case Study: Arguments of Demand and Rejection

Shawn and Savannah, a young navy couple married for two years, sat down in exasperation at their first therapy session. I asked them what they wanted out of being here. Savannah, acting as the spokesperson for their team, announced: “We want to achieve a normal conversation without incessant arguing.”

Carol: “And is there an identifiable theme to what this arguing is about?”

Savannah and Shawn simultaneously and in passionate agreement: “Our sex life!”

Before we explored the details of that argument, they summarized how they had gotten married after Shawn returned from a deployment and Savannah had just given birth to their son, Eric. Prior to that, they had known each other for several years prior to Savannah getting pregnant. They described themselves as friends who mainly got together for mutually enjoyed sex (though Shawn was officially dating someone else). Shawn described himself as a “jerk” during that period and only when Savannah got pregnant and the other relationship ended did

they seriously begin to discuss marriage. Much like a business arrangement and without really knowing each other or feeling in love, they calmly decided to keep the baby and to marry when he returned from the deployment. They entered the marriage with a pledge to release the many accumulated hurts and start with a “clean slate.” However, they were also starting with a three month old baby and a completely different orientation to sex despite the fact that sex had been the only significant bond between them.

And now, over a year and a half later, sex is the main thing they fight about. It turns out Savannah doesn't ever want it any more and Shawn is not only sexually frustrated but also deeply hurt by the perceived rejection of what feels like Savannah not wanting him any more. Since they never really had a bond between them except for sex, and now that sex has seemingly dried up, they spend their time fighting and blaming, not over the old hurts they successfully let go of, but over the new ones.

Asking for sex is something Shawn still does regularly, but in a less than friendly manner, more through sulking, complaining, and threatening to leave. Savannah has recently added a new demand of her own – that Shawn must wear a condom as she does not want another pregnancy at this time and she is unable to use other contraception methods. This decision on her part was motivated by what she describes as “finally beginning to feel good about myself, losing weight, and needing to have some time to figure out who I am.” Shawn was offended about how she “just sprung it” on him without warning or discussion. Though he objects to the condom for all the ordinary reasons, he is additionally offended as he interprets it to mean just another level of rejection of him and distance from him. He sees it as Savannah saying no to sex and argues that it is simply more rejection. So here is a conclusion in need of a therapeutic reinterpretation.

The second session began with Savannah discussing her new job. She had just started on the 4-11 p.m. shift which would significantly limit interaction time with Shawn who left each morning at 6 a.m. and returned at 4 p.m.

Carol: So I guess that will pretty well put an end to the incessant arguing about sex or anything for that matter because you two will hardly ever be at home and conscious at the same time any more.

Savannah: Actually we didn't argue much this week except for that one night.

Shawn (looking kind of guilty): Yeah, well...

Savannah: We did have sex but it was a big argument first. He didn't want to wear a condom, of course, even though I asked him to very nicely.

Carol: What happened?

Savannah: I gave in.

Carol: You gave in and had sex and he gave in and wore the condom?

Savannah: No, I gave in on both parts. We had sex without the condom.

Carol: What motivated you to do that?

Savannah: Because I didn't want to fight all night and I was tired of him throwing a fit.

Carol: How were you throwing a fit?

Savannah: He starts packing his stuff together like he's going to leave.

Shawn: I just get so tired of her loud mouthed sarcasm that I just want to go off on my bike (motorcycle) and go fast, doing donuts and stuff.

Note: This session was beginning to spin into insults, despair, and blame. It was evident to me that there was significant positive energy as well as negative interpretations about what the other's behavior meant. I wanted to intervene to positively frame this energy and facilitate a more accurate expression and understanding of their separate stances.

Carol: There is a lot of passionate energy on this matter of the condom. I'm not sure Savannah understands yet what this strong reaction you have really means. Will you tell her now how you feel when she asks you to wear the condom? I take it that your objections go beyond the normal one that anyone has with condoms when they put up with it anyway because sex with a condom is usually considered better than no sex at all. Of course, in this case, you got the sex without the condom but it doesn't look like either of you feel too good about that. So what does her insistence on this condom thing mean to you?

Shawn with tears in his eyes to Savannah: I just feel so hurt with all the rejection for a long time. You used to want me and it just feels so cold now. And wanting me to wear a condom just feels like one more way of getting further away from me, like an excuse you're using. It's not even just in sex, but the whole affection thing. I come up and put my arms around you from behind and you don't even stop what you are doing or act like you notice. It would really mean a lot if you acted like you care.

Carol to Savannah: Is he reading you accurately or can you help him understand how it is for you?

Savannah to Shawn: No! I don't want the condom just to be stubborn or get more distance from you! That isn't right. Even though I haven't wanted sex as much as I used to, I do still enjoy it sometimes and I am still attracted to you even when we're not having sex..

Carol: So you still want him sexually?

Savannah: Yes, but I don't want to get pregnant again. I just want him to wear the condom so we can have sex without me worrying about everything that would happen if I get pregnant.

Carol: So, now that you are just about recovered from the last pregnancy obstacle, you want Shawn but you don't want another pregnancy. It sounds like you'd like him to see the condom as a green light for sex with a built in insurance policy that would guarantee even more sex and other fun together.

Savannah: That is right and I ask him really nicely but he just gets so mad. And also, I'd like to sometimes have some romance and friendly conversation snuggle time but he won't even go in the bedroom together if he thinks we're not going to have sex.

Carol: This is interesting. For two people who claim to be arguing so much, it seems as though you both want the same thing, even down to this affection ingredient. You are both describing feeling hurt when it feels like the other one is rejecting you. You get hurt if it seems like Shawn won't just cuddle and talk in the bedroom when there isn't a chance for sex and Shawn wouldn't take this condom rejection so hard if he weren't feeling like you weren't interested in his touchy, friendly gestures. So it sounds like to me that you both want sex and you both want affection at other times too. I see a lot of basis for hope in that! Where is the disconnect?

Savannah: I guess I'm not a very touchy kind of person and I am so busy with the baby and doing everything around the house that maybe I do seem not very friendly to him. But then he gets so mad and I feel like he won't even come to bed together if there is no chance of sex. I would like it if we didn't have to have sex every night but maybe every other night have sex and the night in between just have a conversation in bed and cuddle.

Carol: So, Shawn, did you hear her say that she would be interested in having sex as often as every other night? Did you know that? Would that be satisfactory?

Shawn: (Mouth open, shaking his head with a look of shock and disbelief) Oh yeah, right...

Carol: It sounds like good news to me. Would that be alright with you, and cuddle and talk every other night?

Shawn: (Still reeling with disbelief and needing to challenge Savannah) Tell her how many times we've had sex in the month since you've been back from visiting your family.

Savannah: Okay, maybe twice.

Carol: Wanting it every other night still counts as her goal doesn't it, even if things have been radically different in the recent past? You two are good at releasing old hurts. You already told me. So would every other night be enough for you or what?

Shawn: Well yes, that would be great!

Carol: I assume this frequency will be contingent on use of the pregnancy preventing condom? You wouldn't want to be having that much unprotected sex unless you're willing to make another baby.

Savannah: Yes!

Shawn: Okay, I guess I could do that.

So, it had been true for a while that Savannah did not have interest in sex itself though she did still find Shawn attractive. He had not been able to interpret this change other than as personal rejection of him. He collected additional "proof" for this theory when he attempted to be affectionate and she didn't reciprocate. We were able to put this behavior into perspective when we looked into Savannah's learning history and she reported how she had not received much in the way of modeling or encouragement to be overtly friendly. I added the objectivity to view this characteristic as imminently logical with regard to Savannah's learning history and emphasized that she had learned these interpersonal choices long before she knew Shawn. So even though it was affecting him personally now, it was not about him or because of him that she acted in this manner. It didn't mean that she wasn't a nice person or that she didn't love him. It just meant that she was not likely to be expressive about it, and that additionally, she had a strong tendency to criticize and doubt herself. Thus, he could appreciate that her recent "breakthroughs" in liking herself more were changes that could benefit their whole system, not as a way of her moving away from him. Because if she could accept herself instead of generating internal criticism, she could more easily become friendly to others as well. It turns out that he was only slightly more affiliative than her and he was also quick to self efface. Both lacked familiarity with friendly managerial or nurturing behavior.

This led to further discussion about the possibility of good change if both of them were willing to clarify what they wanted and accept the other's genuine, though new and awkward, attempts to comply just because the other wanted it, even if they didn't understand it or have the same need at that time. This, in turn, led to a common objection:

Shawn: (Looking troubled) Yeah, but I just don't know if I could handle it, knowing that she is only doing it because she feels sorry for me or something and doesn't mean it. I don't want her to just fake it.

Carol: Learning doesn't have to end. It's never too late to become the person you realize you want to be even if you didn't have the opportunity to automatically learn to be that way while you were growing up. And if the two of you as a couple help to inspire each other to grow into those ideal people as a result of the courage you have to express your needs to each other,

that is a wonderful thing. I wouldn't want either of you to do anything you legitimately did not want to do just because the other asks you to, but I do hope you can both venture into doing things for each other that are kind of appealing, even exciting, even though it is "not you" typically and it will be a bit awkward for you to go out on the limb and be that way.

Following this second session, Savannah canceled their next session. I called to get feedback as to whether no more therapy was needed because everything was fine (always a possibility I'm hoping for!) or if they had some problem with the therapy. In fact, she reported that things were better, but not ready for concluding therapy. They had just cancelled due to a big test that Shawn had to prepare for. We rescheduled with the goal to clarify and specify how they had "come over some hurdles and were having better sex" so they can both take credit for the accomplishment as well as replicate it whenever they want in the future. I asked if "better" meant that Shawn was cooperatively wearing the condom and she reported that she had bought some for him and "that tickled him so much." I took that literally as a promising development and Savannah added that her next goal was "just to loosen up a little more." We will see what she means by that in session three.

That session begins with them both smiling and Shawn explaining how Savannah had been so much easier to live with during the preceding week since she has been working because she doesn't nag him about household chores or get irritable the way she had done previously.

Carol: So that's interesting. You are overextended and tired from working. A person might think you would be more easily irritable about stuff that used to bother you but you are noticing it is working the opposite?

Savannah: I just don't have time to. I see him maybe 20 minutes a day. I can wake him up to say 'hi' and he's dead to the world. If he does wake up to say 'hi' to me he doesn't remember it the next day.

Carol to Shawn: You look like you are pleased about something?

Shawn: Actually I asked her to quit working. I miss her. Whether she nags at me to do this or that, at least she is there to do it. You know? I kind of sit at home lost because no one is telling me to do something. She gives me a list of stuff to do before she goes to work but when she comes home she is too tired to really care either. I used to put on a show pretending to care but I just didn't.

Carol to Savannah: When I talked to you last week you said the two of you had 'come over some hurdles' somehow. That sounded good and worth exploring in some detail.

Shawn: I know what one of the hurdles was. She actually initiated some sexual activity. I was dead sleeping. And she's lying. I do wake up. I feel her hand on my leg and I'm here! And I was conscious although I thought I was dreaming.

Carol: So you really liked that?

Shawn: Yeah, it was neat because when I talk her into it, it just seems like she's doing it for me with a reluctant sigh and an 'alright, here.'

Carol: And that's just not as much fun, is it?

Shawn: Well, no it's not because I tell her all the time, it's not the sex. It's really not because it's about me trying to make her feel good and her trying to make me feel good and if I talk her into it, I'm automatically just borderline to not even do it because I don't need the sex. I need for her to feel wanted and me to feel wanted like she really wants me. If I talk her into it I don't get that feeling. I get kind of like 'would you hurry?'

Carol: Sort of like an up hill battle to make her feel good since she doesn't really want to do it at that time, you probably get the sense you're making her feel worse?

Shawn: Yeah. I really do. And I didn't feel like that the other night.

Carol to Savannah: So is that a hurdle you were talking about getting over?

Savannah: Yeah, and that I also went and bought condoms.

Shawn: Yeah, that was neat.

Savannah: And he hasn't been...

Shawn: ...protesting.

Carol: Okay, well that's interesting in a surprising way too. Tell me how that was able to be perceived by you as "neat." What was cool about that?

Savannah: That he didn't have to buy them for one thing.

Shawn: Well, I don't know. Did it make you uncomfortable to buy them? Because it would me.

Savannah: I stood there in the aisle reading all the boxes. I mean I never bought them before.

Carol: It almost seems like it was a turn on, not just something you could put up with but sort of neat.

Shawn: Well, it was kind of neat because I figured she knew I would be hesitant to buy more and she probably had this attitude like, "yes, we're out (ha ha)."

Carol: So her buying a bunch of condoms is kind of like another way of her initiating sex. It's like she's saying, "hey I want to have this much sex," right?

Savannah: Well I took an interest in it. I think that's pretty much what it is.

Carol: So that's all it took to turn the green light for you to take her up on her request that you have sex but have it with a condom, please?

Shawn: Well I don't think I'm ever going to give the full green light because that is, I don't know. I mean, she's my wife and I'd like to see... I mean, I know a lot of people are running around with five or six kids and saying oops. Out of all the people I know who are married, I just want to ask them, "hey, what method are you using? Does your wife make you wear a condom?" Because I feel really like minority. I want to be like one of the other guys and not wear one.

Carol: So it represents a pretty big push for you to do it because obviously it is still way less than what you would prefer to do. So, it is a show of your motivation or willingness to cooperate...

Shawn: Yeah, I don't want to fight with her. Ah, man, at first I thought she was just going to give in and I kept thinking I could stay being a butt hole just a little bit longer and she'll give in. I mean, how much more could it take? I'm doing a pretty good job. And she never broke.

Carol: So you decided you would go ahead and break or give up the attempt?

Savannah: I think we've both come given up a little bit on both ways.

Carol: How did you give up?

Savannah: Well just us getting along. We haven't really been fighting. We've been getting along pretty good. And then even for me to start sex is a step in the right direction. And I think he knows that too so he isn't going to fight about it.

Carol: Because it seems like the condom did stop meaning that she was somehow rejecting you. Because she bought them, she's initiating, she's making it clear she wants you. And now the condom doesn't mean that – it might still be a little irritating is all.

Shawn: It did mean that, but condom or not, she was rejecting me anyway, you know? A lot of those times, even if I wore a condom, she'd still say no. So the condom thing was like icing on the cake. Just another form of barrier or something. Now I don't feel so much like that, especially after she initiated it.

Carol: Well, it is a barrier.

Shawn: It is but it is just a small barrier.

Savannah: It's a start.

Shawn: It's a start but I don't think she's ever been rejected by me. She just doesn't know what it feels like to be rejected and the things that come of that. It really hurts me especially since we're married, I always use this phrase "my wife" this and "my wife" that and the whole aspect of everything changes when you get married. When I talked about my girlfriends, I didn't

have so much pressure on me to try and make things work. But now that's all I try to do. Like if I get rejection, I'm just sitting back thinking "my own wife doesn't want to have sex with me." That's really to me overwhelming.

Carol: Well are we talking past tense now? That overwhelmed feeling from rejection you had been feeling and that's one of the things that's shifted? That you're not feeling that rejection any more or that it's a matter of degree?

Shawn: Yeah, it's a matter of degree really. I can understand that she's tired. Sometimes when I roll over and touch her and she just moans like she's pitiful. She might as well just slap me and say 'no'.

Carol: Well, do you distinguish between times when she isn't able to be conscious and times when it feels like a rejection of you? Are you at a place where she can say no, and even though you're disappointed, you don't take it as rejection of you personally?

Shawn: No (laughing).

Carol: So anytime she says no it's still rejection?

Shawn: Yeah, because it's not like I walk in the door, kiss her, and demand sex every minute.

Carol: So what are you saying? Since you don't ask her every minute, then when you do...

Shawn: Then it's kind of hard not to take it as rejection. Because it's not like I'm asking her all the time and have a reason to get turned down.

Carol: You ask a sparing amount you mean?

Shawn: I think so.

Carol: Compared to how often you could ask if you followed all your impulses?

Shawn: Yeah. If she's up, and I'm not, I don't try to worm my way in or anything. I let her sleep and I sleep and if we have a day when we're both off which is once a week sometimes, then I'll ask her and she like sighs and says "fine."

Savannah: It hasn't been like that.

Shawn: It hasn't been as bad.

Carol: Well that's what we're talking about, how things are shifting for the better.

Shawn: And in the two weeks since we've seen you last, we've had sex twice, and like she said, it's gotten better.

Carol: Well you're moving in the right direction. And that's a good thing.

Shawn: But they were back to back too which really showed me a sign of improvement.

Carol: Oh yeah, you liked that even though it didn't spread them out?

Shawn: Yeah (laughing).

Carol: Well when you left here, you left with the lofty goal of approaching a frequency of every other night and with off nights being cuddling and talking.

Shawn: Oh, see, yeah, I had brought that up and she goes “oh yeah, that’s a goal that maybe some day we will get to” were her words. And then, I want to clarify something else. When you had said last time about there being other alternatives and substitutes for sex like oral stuff. And she’s sitting over here nodding and saying “um-hmm” and I brought that up to her and she said “yeah, I was nodding agreement that it is an alternative method, but I won’t do it.”

Carol: Oh. Was that one of the snags or hurdles that you might be moving toward getting over or considering getting over?

Savannah: No.

Shawn: No because that’s not one of my...

Carol: That’s not one of your pleasures?

Shawn: Well, no, I didn’t say that!

Carol: Not one you’re getting anyway?

Shawn: Yeah.

Savannah: And never has got used to getting.

Carol: From anyone ever or just in this relationship?

Shawn: In this relationship.

Carol: And that’s because you don’t want to for a particular reason?

Shawn: We both kind of... It’s just not a big deal for us.

Carol: Well, it looks like there is some kind of avoidance aspect to it for you. Is there any reason for that to be?

Savannah: No, I mean it’s not like it’s never been done or anything like that. It’s just not something that I’m into.

Carol: Either giving or receiving?

Savannah: No.

Carol to Shawn: And you feel kind of the same?

Savannah answering for him: No. I mean he would be a happy camper, but he just knows.

Shawn: I don’t ever ask because she would just go “hah” and I pretty much know where that’s going.

Carol: Well that is certainly inconvenient since it would be such a wonderful alternative for a couple who are stuck with the birth control method of condoms. It would be a nice break from the choice of using condoms or avoiding pleasure, an occasional reward for going along with the

condom to have some pleasure that doesn't require a condom. But that won't work if it isn't pleasurable for both people, or at least tolerable.

In this entire section my emphasis was on having them detail their successes and punctuate them so that they become solid, stable, and definite movement in the direction they want to go. Though both were clearly pleased about their progress, Shawn continued to share his ambivalence about the condoms and his difficulty releasing the rejection interpretation despite all the evidence to the contrary that Savannah is presenting. I also wanted to explore details of what further "loosening up" Savannah might be considering. Unfortunately, she made it quite clear that the oral sex option was not one of the things she had in mind to loosen her objections to. However, in the next section they do declare themselves candidates for an even more significant loosening of one of their pervasive and destructive patterns of relating, the chronic sarcasm they frequently direct to each other. This emerges as a segue from discussing possible birth control methods when Shawn shares his interpretation of Savannah's facial expression. It ends with their agreement to experiment with saying what they mean and checking out interpretations in the following week. During this section, my emphasis was on exploring how the sarcasm operates and determining what function it might currently be serving. I didn't just want them to stop doing it if they were using it for something they needed. However, since they did not identify any function other than the now obsolete one of protecting themselves like they might have had to do in their earlier families, they agree to the no sarcasm contract as an experiment to gather more data about what happens when they come out from under the cover of sarcasm with friendly honesty based on their mutual trust which they did agree upon.

Carol: I'm assuming you have investigated birth control that might work for you and not found one. I remember you talking about how your wife makes you wear a condom and I wonder if that would feel different if you framed it as you are a couple who don't want another baby right now and we have chosen together to temporarily opt for the condom method. The "we" thing would make it a lot more mutual.

Shawn: Yeah.

Carol: There aren't any good methods available to you that don't involve negatives like weight gain, pain, or danger, right?

Shawn: Right.

Carol: And I don't have figures on percentages of couples in your boat who opt for condoms

but I doubt if it is as much a minority as you were expressing earlier because there's not a lot of great options out there.

Shawn: Yeah, I understand that. I do. But the thing that really surprised me when I was looking up some stuff about it on the internet was her lack of interest.

Carol: Did you see any great new developments that you wanted her to explore?

Shawn: No, I really didn't. And I'm sure she has a lot more information about what's out there than I do and that is probably why she had the lack of interest. But that was when I thought she wasn't interested in sex and she would just laugh it off and go back to bed. I read a lot into everything that happens, every facial expression, and I make a conclusion out of every expression or gesture. It's just the way I am. Whether I'm right or not I don't know.

Carol: Wow! Most people don't have so much awareness about that or ever pause to wonder whether they are right or wrong. Did you ever think of checking those conclusions out with her? You know, like saying 'hey, when you just gave that look or tone of voice, I'm kind of concluding that you think this, or mean this, or want that, is that right?'

Shawn: No.

Savannah: He'll just let it build up.

Carol: Would you like for him to do that?

Savannah: Yeah, because some of the time, at least half the time it's not that I'm trying to be mean to him, it's just a reaction and I'm not trying to be mean. It's just something that happens automatically. And if I don't realize I'm doing it, I'm going to keep doing it. So if he says, "you just gave me a dirty look, why?" that would be different and I could say "I'm sorry, I didn't realize I did and I don't mean that."

Carol: Well is there any reason why you couldn't or wouldn't be willing to run it past her what you are speculating is the meaning of what she just did or said?

Shawn: Well I can't say for sure but either on my part or her part a serious amount of sarcasm would get involved that would lead to a fight.

Carol: Why would it have to? Why would it be automatic?

Shawn: Probably because of me. I read the look and kind of get upset. Then I'll come back with some smart comment that will put her on her defensive stance. Then she'll thumb through her books of sarcasm and pull out something back. Which happens to us a lot.

Carol: It sounds like sarcasm enters the scene at the point where you decide that she's against you somehow. And some of the time you might be right that she is annoyed by something you said. But all the time it is probably not even against you so the sarcasm comes in when you are concluding that she is against you.

Savannah: Concluding wrong.

Carol: And it may be incorrect concluding, that's right.

Savannah: So yeah, like she's saying, if you say in the beginning "why did you do that" instead of going two steps further and coming back with sarcasm or whatever, we wouldn't get in that argument. I'm not saying that's all the time though.

Carol: And you always have plenty of time to use your sarcasm once you find out that she was being nasty to you intentionally. You can kick it right in. That sarcasm will be ready to go.

Shawn: Yeah, I've never really done that, just ask her. So I can't speak for how that would go.

Carol: So that's a fear though that kind of stops you from doing that?

Shawn: I personally can't see her answering my question in all honesty without being sarcastic herself. But I can't say for sure because I've never approached the situation like that.

Carol: Well this sarcasm thing is something you have in common and I don't know but it's there for a good reason I guess. Right? I mean you wouldn't do it if it wasn't doing something for you.

Savannah: We feed off of one another because he says something and I say something worse and then he can say something still worse. So it's just something between the two of us.

Carol: Do you suppose it's a way to protect yourselves from hurt? Or do you suppose it's a way to keep a safe distance from each other? Not get too close even though, at one level, you certainly want to be more intimate than you are?

Savannah: I think it's just because we get mad at each other and the sarcasm comes in because we know how to be hurtful to each other and we're mad at each other.

Carol: Well, where does the mad start?

Shawn: As soon as we get in the car.

Carol: Road rage?

Shawn: No, I don't know what made me just think of that but every time we get in the car, it's like we sit down and no one says anything and then the first thing out of anyone's mouth really makes the other one mad. Is that not true? It's usually her complaining about my driving.

Savannah (laughing): The other day he almost got us into an accident.

Shawn (also laughing): Okay, that's a different situation.

Carol: You know, both of you really seem to be so easy going. Are you saying you both have these trigger tempers that get mad really fast?

Both simultaneously: Yeah, but not like rage and stuff.

Shawn: But just enough she wants to choke me out. We could probably choke each other out.

Carol: That sounds pretty mad, wanting to choke each other. (They laugh together). But the easy going part really does look like there is a lot of friendliness between you, not just love but friendliness too, because you smile, laugh, sit together and laugh about these things. If there were really a lot of hostility, you wouldn't be laughing about it. You'd be fuming about it. I'm having trouble even picturing you being as mad as you are talking about.

Shawn: Yeah, I feel kind of silly even being here really when I listen to some of the stuff we talk about. It's like I realize we don't really have problems.

Savannah: We do.

Shawn: We do but we're lucky to have the problems we've got compared to ones we could have.

Carol: So you are seeing the same thing I am, that there is a basic caring and friendliness, and positive regard for each other. That's what's puzzling for me. It seems like that would sort of insulate you from getting so mad at something that is fairly small.

Savannah: It's just trouble communicating with each other really. To be able to open up and really say "you know what, this is what just now made me mad, and not all that other stuff I just said." Because a lot of times we can start fighting about something and it can just go somewhere else and you can forget what the whole argument is about and what he got upset about and what I got upset about. Or even just trying to get him to talk about why he is upset.

Carol: So if you could interrupt it earlier before it gets going like a fire following a fuse.

Shawn: It is our communication. You know I think a lot of times, both of our problem is that we won't really come out and truly say what we are thinking. Like I can think of an example that we fought about the other day. Her parents are coming half the way from Kentucky to pick up our son for a visit. And I was basically just trying to get the details about the whole situation, about how many hours it would be and stuff like that. Me being in the marine core and that far away from my duty station would be a real problem if we got in an accident or had car trouble. And I needed to know because of my class schedule plans too. So I was trying to get details and she kind of jumps on the defensive, saying "you think it's going to take too long. You don't have to go" and all this kind of stuff.

Carol: So she's taking your quest for details and concluding that you don't really want to go or something like that and not checking it out with you first?

Shawn: And it was just hard for me to say up front that I would go when I have no idea what's involved. I didn't want to give her a for sure yes and then find out that I couldn't.

Carol: Well it sounds like it isn't the lack of understanding how to communicate better. You pretty much know what to do on that. You don't do it for some reason. And you're doing the sarcasm instead for some reason. Exactly what that reason is, we aren't fully sure yet. But it seems like that both of you are a little bit on edge anticipating being let down or hurt, rejected, not cared about enough, or something by the other. And so you are kind of ready to make that interpretation when the other asks for details instead of saying "oh sure, here they are." Or when she says "no, I'm too tired to have sex". It's like you're holding back and really ready to protect yourself with that sarcasm thing because you're both afraid that if you trust too far, extend yourself too far, get too vulnerable, too open that somehow the other one might just smack you and hurt you.

Savannah: That could be it. Especially considering everything that happened from our childhood to our adult years. The things that happened in our families could have a lot to do with it for both of us. And we do keep our defenses up. And being let down is probably a big thing for me too because it seems no matter what in my life, just getting my hopes up, I get let down on something. So yeah, it probably does have a lot to do with it.

Carol: It's just safer to not get your hopes up too much, and to bail out first.

Shawn: We both know that. It's something we've been dealing with for a while now.

Carol: I was really impressed when we first met and you were discussing how you had so rationally made that decision when you got married to erase the old hurts and forgive and start with a clean slate. That's pretty mature thing a lot of people don't think of to do in their marriage. And now it seems like it might be time to reinstate that or to take that same kind of thing to another level right now. I don't know what would happen. I don't know if it would be a little foolhardy to just stop sarcasm. I don't know how much you really need it, but if you could experimentally make a no sarcasm contract for a week we could see what happens and maybe learn whether you need it or not. So for one week, every time you feel the impulse to start with something sarcastic, you're going to back it up and think, wait a minute, what do I really mean and what do I really want to say here instead of some sarcastic cover up. Because the only reason to refrain from doing that that I can think of is if you had some really good, valid reason not to trust each other to be capable of handling what you are going to say, or to care enough about you to receive the gift of your honesty. And I think you pass that test. I think you do care enough about each other.

Savannah: Oh yeah, I trust him.

Carol: It's kind of like that sarcasm thing is obsolete. It's a defense mechanism you both know really good how to use from years of past training, but it doesn't seem like it applies. It

doesn't seem like you really need it in this relationship. It's like you had a huge bunch of furniture that you've collected that doesn't fit in the apartment or house that you live in now. Why stack it all on top of itself. Just get rid of it with the attitude that this furniture served me well but I don't need it any more.

Shawn: We could probably do that. It would be hard but we could try it.

And in the final segment of this session, in exploring which kind of standard obstacles they would expect to encounter, we discovered the related issue of taking an honest answer at face value, accepting it and the sender's statement as true even when the other feels differently. And in this case, we were also able to recognize the positive intention behind the annoying behavior of Shawn not accepting Savannah's no as an answer in his quest to share various joys with her.

Carol: Yeah, and with any habit you try to get rid of like that, the first step is that you just notice all the times you start to do it. And you may already be at that step because you've been talking about it, describing how it operates. But when you set out to stop it, you'll realize the scope of the thing more fully. Kind of like when you say that "fine" thing when you know full well things aren't fine. You know you don't like something but you've said fine in that sarcastic voice, then say "wait a minute", what do you really mean? Well I mean that I don't like that.

Shawn: Whenever she says "fine" or "Yep" that means no.

Carol: You know the language. Would you rather just hear her say no?

Shawn: Yeah.

Savannah: But a lot of times he won't let me just say no.

Carol: How does he prevent you?

Savannah: Even if I'm eating something and he's eating something different, for an example, he will insist that I try his even when I say no. He keeps on pushing me to try it. He's very persistent and a lot of times he will just not let you say no. Sometimes I eat it to shut him up.

Carol: Ok, let's say he doesn't take no for an answer and stop. Is that what you mean?

Savannah: Well, yeah.

Carol: And so you feel like your "no" is ineffective. And so finally you go ahead and say yes but you are unhappy about it?

Savannah: "Fine, whatever! Yep!" That's exactly what I do.

Carol: What would be a better way for that to go? What do you (Shawn) think would be a better way?

Shawn (assuming a firm voice tone and impersonating Savannah): "Shawn, I said no."

Carol: Are you telling her that you could handle it for her to be firm like that and just basically to say 'zip it, I said no.'?

Shawn: When I'm trying to get her to eat something?

Carol: Or whatever you're trying to get her to do when she says no?

Shawn (laughing): Oh, no, I see where this is going and no.

Carol: I am not necessarily talking about sex, but really, about anything.

Shawn: I would like her to give her absolute, honest to God answer.

Savannah: How can 'no' be more honest to God?

Shawn: That stuff doesn't matter, food or whatever. I wouldn't be upset if she didn't.

Carol: Then why do you keep on?

Shawn: Probably because it's really good and she needs to try it.

Carol: You really want her to have the pleasure? Your intention, and we'll assume it's a good one. How would you (Savannah) phrase what his positive intention is?

Savannah: Well, he sees that he likes it and he wants to do it and so he wants me to share the joy.

Carol: And you like that, you just don't want your joy in the particular package that he's having it?

Savannah: Right. I just want him to drop it because it's just a little thing.

Carol: And not just about eating. It can happen about anything. Big things too. And it is your biggest thing that you want her to have pleasure. It says how much you love her.

Shawn: Yeah, I do.

Carol: So it's good news for you anytime you can learn how to increase her pleasure, right? Even if it means your accepting her answers for what she wants. And you just make it clear to her that you are doing that because of how much you value her having pleasure. And I wouldn't be surprised to hear that somehow all this leads to more sex and more pleasure all round. See you next week.

In the fourth and last session, Savannah and Shawn pushed to explore tolerance for each other's different needs in every area. Though it was understood that different sexual needs were on both of their minds, the discussion centered on distribution of financial power and household responsibilities. Savannah reported that she felt like "a nobody" in the sense that she doesn't make much of the money and that nothing is in her name. She also reported feeling "like the mother" when she tries unsuccessfully to get Shawn to hold a clean house at the same priority level she has. Shawn surprised her by sharing that he felt like "a nobody" too, "just someone to

pay the bills.” Their revelations about their similar pain were accomplished without blaming the other and they generated quite a significant amount of tenderness and compassion. They reiterated their intention to leave off the sarcasm in favor of expressing what they really mean and want, for example with Savannah coming home and asking outright for some sympathy or help or understanding. This would represent a welcome departure from her previous habit of coming home and complaining that Shawn hasn’t cleaned anything up. They jokingly (and yet seriously) discussed a possible arrangement in which Shawn would vacuum the house every other day as per Savannah’s desire and because of a carpal tunnel injury that made this difficult for her to do. Coincidentally, this every other day frequency was exactly how often he desired sex. He suggested that he would happily become a “vacuuming fool” if the two activities could be contingently linked.

I did not even mention to them how far they had come from their first session when they only wanted to achieve a normal conversation without incessant arguing. I simply congratulated them about being ‘on the brink’ of an exciting and profound shift in their way of relating to each other, one that included great sex as well as intimate affection and satisfying conversations that validate the truth about how important they are to one another.

Discussion

In all the cases discussed in this chapter, I selected those portions of the therapy that dealt with sexual matters, particularly expectations and needs. Success resolving sensitive sexual feelings and behavior is obviously more likely when other interconnected aspects of the relationship are addressed as well. While not discussed at any length, these aspects include grief work, resolution of earlier traumas, increased frequency of positive comments within the marriage itself, helping people locate the resources for tenderness and kindness, and the ability to express those to one another. These kinds of subjects were minimized in compliance with the theme of this book. However, the same guiding assumptions discussed in the beginning of this chapter certainly apply whether addressing larger therapy goals or specific pursuits of sexual improvement and pleasure.

I am always moved by the privilege of being allowed into the tender and vulnerable zone of a couple’s private world. Overall, I find it to be a minor difference whether we are talking overtly about sex or other concerns because it seems to me that everything is necessarily interconnected with everything else. Like strands of tangled wires, any one subject we select will eventually lead back into all the others and be affected by the others. The distinction with couples talking about sex is their particular awkwardness and embarrassment that comes from publicly discussing something that they were already uncomfortable talking about privately. The value

I'm able to bring to this discussion is my comfort and objectivity as the spotlight operator who will hold the light gently but unflinchingly to this tender place that has long been covered up under the shadow of shame. I do so from the firm conviction that we are on a quest for treasure together and that the more any area has been hidden away as if it is a weakness or dirty secret, the more we are likely to gain by finally allowing, including, and celebrating its particularly strong power and benefit.