



10 Secrets to a Better Love Life

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Valentine's Day isn't just about chocolates, cards, and roses anymore. Nope, it's become a season of sexual self-improvement, too. Fueled by an annual rash of early February news stories, magazine pieces, talk show segments, and Internet articles about improving our love lives, many of us set out to do just that in time for Feb. 14.

But alas, these attempts at achieving a better love life may only last as long as the New Year's resolutions you abandoned the month before. A few weeks later, the sexy nightie languishes hidden in the sock drawer, the massage oil gathers dust next to the athlete's foot powder in the medicine cabinet, and you and your partner have returned to what feels like a humdrum sexual life.

So what is the secret to a better love life that lasts? We asked for some suggestions from two experts on sexuality -- Michael Castleman, author of *Great Sex: A Man's Guide to the Secret Principles of Total-Body Sex*, and Louanne Cole Weston, PhD, a board certified sex therapist and resident expert for WebMD's "Sex Matters®" message boards.

Make Dates

Castleman and Weston are in firm agreement that couples that have been together for a while need to plan time for sex.

"Make a date for sex," says Castleman, a health journalist who previously answered questions about sexuality submitted to the Playboy advisor. "Don't let it be an afterthought," he tells WebMD. "Do whatever you like to do beforehand, go to a movie or dinner, take a walk, have a glass of wine by candlelight, whatever the couple likes to do as a couple. But set aside that time."

But, you might cry, isn't scheduling unromantic? Isn't sex supposed to be spontaneous? Rare is the lover with a daily planner fetish, after all.

But Castleman has a blunt response. "Grow up," he says. "What's the problem with making a date for sex? People make plans for other things they enjoy, like ski trips or dinners out."

Weston agrees. "I think most people, especially couples with kids, have to plan ahead because they already have so much jammed into their schedules," she says. "Sure there are times when things spontaneously fall together, but those are happy accidents."

One good suggestion for a better love life is to take regular nights away from home.

"For couples that have been together for a while, sex can become routine," says Castleman. "You're worn out by the end of the day, after the job, the laundry, the kids' soccer games, and the errands.

"And instead of champagne and oysters on the half shell with a sweeping view of Lake Tahoe as your reward, you've got your same old crummy house and peanut butter and jelly and that's about it," he says. It's not exactly conducive to an exciting sex life.

It can be hard to give into the moment when you're having sex in your all-too-familiar bedroom. Your mind wanders. Did I remember to set the alarm clock? How much will it cost to repair that water damage on the ceiling?

"Lovemaking is, fundamentally, a present moment experience," says Castleman. "The best sex comes when you're not thinking about the past or the future, but only the present. And that can be hard in a room where you've always got grandma's picture smiling down on you."

Castleman recommends getting away to a place that is stripped of these reminders of everyday life. It doesn't have to be a fabulous spot by the ocean, or at least it not every time. A non-descript place off the Interstate might be just fine.

Redecorate the Bedroom

Of course, having a sex life that's wholly dependent on trysts at hotels and overnight babysitters may be a problem if you're not fabulously wealthy, childless, and unemployed. So in addition to some trips away, make some changes at home.

"The bedroom does build up a lot of mundane associations," says Weston. "But if you can do anything to transform your bedroom into something new and different, that can make a big difference."

And a better love life doesn't require installing a revolving bed or ceiling mirrors. "You don't need to do something that will freak out the kids or the housekeeper," says Weston.

Lighting some candles is an obvious suggestion. But maybe getting a nicer set of sheets and a new bedspread will make a difference. Also, removing some of the junk -- the kids' toys, the piles of laundry -- that tends to accumulate in a bedroom out can have an effect. Think about ditching the bedroom TV, too, or at least trying life without it for a while.

Everyone's got sexual fantasies of one sort or another. But for some people, those fantasies can be buried pretty deep. If your partner were to turn to you tonight and say, "What's your ultimate sexual fantasy?" or "What do you want to change about how we have sex?" do you know what you'd say?

If you're not sure, you're not alone. "Some people have to do a little work at figuring out what really arouses them," says Weston. But figuring out what you want is key to having a better love life.

So give it a little effort. Weston observes that there are plenty of tools out there to help: books, magazines, videos, and so on. Once you've come up with some ideas, telling your partner about them could be fun for both of you.

Find Out What Your Partner Wants

And then there's the flip side: You need to ask your partner the same questions that you've asked yourself. What does your partner want from your love life?

According to Weston and Castleman, one of the most common complaints they hear is that one partner wants to have sex more than the other.

Some people may huffily assume that they just have higher sex drives than their partners do. But maybe your partner is looking for something different out of your love life but hasn't felt able to ask. So bring up the subject. Talking openly might bring you closer to one another, and that's likely to make sex more interesting for both of you.

Trying something new in the bedroom is a pretty obvious suggestion for attaining a better love life, but it's one that many people have trouble following.

"For a lot of couples, the longer they're together, the more they play it safe sexually," says Weston. "You think it would go the other way, that as people get more comfortable in a relationship they feel more secure to try new things. But that's not the case."

Castleman agrees. "People resist change, especially intimate change," he says. "If you're in an established relationship, you may feel like you have more to lose. You don't want to rock the boat."

But both Castleman and Weston recommend resisting the impulse to play it safe. This can mean all sorts of things -- maybe lingerie, massage, sex toys and so on -- and trying something new doesn't have to be outrageous.

"People have a lot of crazy notions about what a sexual fantasy should be," says Castleman. "They think it must mean S&M or sex on a Ferris wheel. But there are a lot less wild ways of experimenting with something new."

Weston agrees. "One small change that can have a big effect is to interrupt the pattern to how you usually have sex," says Weston. "If you're usually the shy one who waits for the other person to begin things, try starting it yourself. Just take a risk, even if it's a little one."

Sexual problems are a much more open secret now than they once were. For instance, thanks to the efforts of pharmaceutical companies and late night comics, there aren't many people left in the country who aren't aware of medications for erectile dysfunction.

Of course, that doesn't mean that everyone who needs help is getting it. "People who have sexual problems do often shy away from sexuality because they don't want to face failure," says Weston. "But these problems need to be addressed head on."

Erectile dysfunction has received the most attention, but there are plenty of other issues too, such as premature ejaculation, a loss of libido, or difficulty reaching orgasm caused by medications or medical conditions.

Weston reports that women are coming forward in larger numbers and reporting sexual problems too, such as pain during intercourse or an inability to orgasm. According to Castleman, many women complain about vaginal dryness during sex, which can be painful.

"Lubrication is important," says Weston. "Because in terms of how aroused a person is, lubrication for a woman is the equivalent of an erection for a man."

Some sexual problems may need medical attention, while others can be solved by trying different sexual techniques or buying a \$5 bottle of lubricant. But the important thing is not to muddle through with problems that are making your sex life worse. Don't settle for a mediocre sex life.

And finally, Weston is quick to point out that no matter what you've heard, drugs for erectile dysfunction do nothing to increase a person's sex drive.

Go Slowly

Some couples find that, the longer they're together, the briefer and more businesslike their sexual encounters can become.

Castleman likens it to navigating a new neighborhood. When you move to a new place, you're always trying out different routes to get to the supermarket or the hardware store. But after time, you decide on the fastest route and only take that one. No more meandering. The same thing happens to couples as they become more familiar with each other sexually.

But the fastest, most efficient route is definitely not what you want in the bedroom. Focusing on the destination -- and only the obvious parts of the anatomy -- is the worst thing you can do, he says.

"The best sex emerges from whole body sensuality -- leisurely, playful, creative," says Castleman. "It has no real direction, a little of this, a little of that."

Castleman argues that men especially have a tendency to go too fast, something that's encouraged by the down-and-dirty efficiency of sex in pornography. But Castleman says that many men find that their sexual problems -- such as premature ejaculation -- subside when they learn to take their time.

"Leisurely love-making benefits everyone," says Castleman. "Women get more turned on and enjoy sex more, while men have fewer sexual problems and feel more confident about themselves in bed. Everybody wins."

Don't Worry About What Everyone Else Is Doing

According to Weston and Castleman, one of the most common questions they get is, "How much should we be doing it?" The question implies that the answer is obvious: more than I am now.

Feeling like you "should" be having a better love life is probably universal. It explains the vast number of titles about sex in the self-help section of the bookstore, and the constancy of articles about sex advertised on magazine covers at the checkout counter (or why so many people click on articles with titles like, say, "10 Secrets to a Better Love Life.")

Castleman observes that the culture we live in -- and especially its films, whether Hollywood romances or pornography -- encourages us to think that we're not living up.

So how often "should" you have sex? "There's no answer to that," says Weston. "Stop trying to decide how much sex you should have and decide how much you want."

Keep Trying

Having a better sex life will take some work. It's like this: for many people, life is an unremitting guerilla war with those extra 10 pounds that ambush you when you're not paying attention. In the same way, people can fall into a sexual rut, a "blah" love life, unless they're making an effort to keep things exciting.

You should expect that some attempts will fall flat. A stab at a sexual role-play may be rendered ridiculous by an ill-timed call and rambling answering machine message from your mother-in-law. Or maybe the aromatic candles make you sneeze violently. Trying something new is always putting you at risk of failure.

But the important thing is to keep trying anyway. Don't let self-consciousness make you play it safe. You should never accept a just average love life.

So there they are: the 10 secrets to a better love life. But, you may exclaim, I think I've heard some of these before. It's a fair point. For instance, upon reading that communication is important for a healthy love life, there is no person in America who will smack her forehead and say, "Golly, and all this time I thought not communicating was the right idea!"

Admittedly, these suggestions are not secrets. Or at least they aren't secrets like the purpose of Stonehenge or the fate of Amelia Earhart. We've read the magazines, and watched the daytime talk shows. Many of us know what we're supposed to do to have a better love life.

But if we already know this stuff, why do we keep buying the magazines and watching the TV shows that tell us what we already know? Ultimately, our good intentions fail and we lapse back into lazy habits. We let the other stuff in life take over.

So the most important suggestion for a better love life is probably the last one: Just keep trying. Making a consistent effort is the key.

"If someone says that they don't have time or energy for a good sex life, then they can't expect to have a good sex life," says Castleman. "It's that simple."

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