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The "Safe Adventure" of Sex

by McKell Jorgensen and Laura Waters Black



Photo by Camilla Rees @BYU SFL

Sue Johnson, a Canadian therapist who developed Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), introduced the idea that sex can be a "safe adventure" for couples.¹ A strong baseline of commitment and safety in a relationship allows both partners to explore, experiment, and take risks in their sexual relationship without fear of rejection.² This balance between comfort and growth can provide an ideal environment for couples to thrive in all aspects of their relationship, not just the physical.

Researchers from Brigham Young University, Dean Busby, Jason Carroll, and Chelom Leavitt, co-authored a book on sexual wholeness. In the book, the authors share a model that includes three important aspects of the sexual relationship: physical, emotional/relational, and spiritual.³ By nurturing and maintaining each aspect of their relationship, couples can achieve lifelong sexual satisfaction. Additional factors that impact sexual satisfaction overall are sexual commitment, timing, and frequency. These factors can play a primary role in helping couples create a "safe adventure" in their sexual relationships.

Sexual Commitment

Although there are diverse levels of sexual commitment ranging from hookups to cohabitation to marriage seen in our world today, researchers have found that overall, people in committed relationships report better sexual satisfaction. Committed relationships tend to have a sense of longevity that allows partners to truly get to know each other and

invest in the relationship, whereas in less committed relationships, like one-night stands, relationships are likely to end before couples can truly experience the emotional safety of commitment. Emotional safety invites vulnerability, disclosure, and intimacy, which makes sex a richer experience.

In Sue Johnson's work,¹ she shares the metaphor of zip-lining to illustrate this paradox. When ziplining, people tend to want to know that their equipment is securely fastened and buckled before they feel comfortable jumping into the unknown. Once a person feels that their harness is secure, they can enjoy the freedom and exhilaration of the zipline ride more fully. In a similar way, people generally need to feel safe in order to fully explore their sexual relationships, which includes sharing their needs, fears, and authentic feelings. Committed relationships take some of the risks out of the adventure, provide a sense of safety, and thereby increase the overall thrill and ecstasy of the sexual experience.

Sex can produce biological feelings of pleasure and excitement regardless of the commitment level, but the deepest, safest kind of sex can happen when two people have developed their relationship emotionally and spiritually, as well as physically. Committed couples tend to give priority to the nonsexual aspects of the relationship as well, including shared goals, respect, recreation, emotional investment, and communication skills.⁴

To keep romance alive, relationships often require more than just physical affection. Psychological arousal can be as important as physical arousal because sexual response originates in the brain, not the body; therefore, emotional safety opens couples up to experience the full range of their physical response because it is not capped by mental distraction, worry, or emotional conflict.⁵ Couples who build these important relational aspects and focus on the psychological aspects of sex will be more equipped to face obstacles with greater dedication to the relationship and to each other.

Marriage seems to be the ultimate sign of a committed relationship. This union often requires partners to promise lifelong fidelity and loyalty in sickness and in health, for better or for worse. This intentional step of commitment can increase the ability and desire of couples to work at every aspect of their relationship, including their sexual relationship.⁶ Marriage promises add a layer of commitment and investment that increase the safety of a relationship, which in turn can increase a couple's desire to explore the adventure of sex more deeply.

Sexual Timing

Couples face an important decision with the onset of their sexual relationship since sexual timing can influence a couple's ability to create a true "safe adventure" in their sexual relationship. Initiating sex later in the relationship, when individuals have had more time to develop commitment to each other on spiritual and emotional levels, can help them feel secure enough in their relationship to take more creative risks in their sex lives. When a person feels secure in their relationship and can trust that the relationship will last long-term, their sexual relationship can be built on mutual loyalty and trust in addition to physical passions, thus helping the couple to achieve a more holistic balance in their sexuality.⁷

Focusing only on the "adventure" part of the "safe adventure" of sex is risky. Sex is definitely an important part of a romantic relationship, but too much focus on the physical, especially early on in the relationship, can come at the expense of other important relationship qualities, like the spiritual and emotional facets discussed in the sexual wholeness model.⁸ For example, a teenage couple who engages in sex just a few days or weeks into a relationship may experience the thrill of a new, exciting relationship, but they may also miss out on getting to know each other's true personalities, hobbies, life goals, spirituality, etc. Such facets of relationship development are vital in both adolescent and adult romantic relationships⁹ and even appear to reduce the likelihood of adolescent depression.¹⁰

Some studies show that delaying sexual activity until marriage can have distinctive benefits across time.¹¹ Nicholas Wolfinger, a family researcher at the University of Utah, conducted a study in 2016 investigating relationship between premarital sex partners and the probability of divorce. Wolfinger found that "survey responders who tied the knot as virgins had the lowest divorce rates" and that "Americans reporting one lifetime sex partner have the happiest marriages."¹² In another study, those who reported the highest levels of sexual satisfaction were those who had waited until marriage to have sex with their partner.¹³ These findings show that waiting until marriage to have sex improves sexual outcomes and allows couples to experience greater growth as they rely on the comfort of committed relationships.

Sexual Frequency

In committed relationships, sexual frequency plays an important role in relationship maintenance and is influential in a couple's overall feelings of happiness in their sexual relationship.¹⁴ The most satisfied married couples report having sex about one to three times a week,¹⁵ although there is no "right" or "wrong" frequency. The important thing for couples to understand is that each relationship is different, each individual has different needs and preferences, and that frequency may change during different life seasons and circumstances. Counseling together as a couple to decide how to meet the needs

of each partner can increase safety and security in a relationship. In the normal course of life, most couples experience some differences in this area, which can create tension and require sensitivity to address and resolve. As Dr. Jason Carroll, a professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, observed, "Differences invite each of us to see our partner for who they really are and to be responsive to his or her needs."¹⁶

In their research, Busby, Carroll, and Leavitt have found that many relationships contain a "faster" and a "slower" partner. Who that partner may be can fluctuate over the course of the relationship, or even day to day. These authors suggest that a balance can be achieved when the "faster partner" helps prioritize sex and the "slower partner" helps the couple "appreciate the journey of sex by... creating more memorable and prolonged intimate encounters." If viewed as a positive challenge that can bring couples together instead of simply being viewed as a hurdle to jump, these differences "can create a beautiful balance for those who make unity a top priority."¹⁷

Sex can continue to be an adventure throughout the lifespan. Factors like age, physical or mental health changes, children, and stress can influence changes in sexuality.

"A strong baseline of commitment and safety in a relationship allows both partners to explore, experiment, and take risks in their sexual relationship without fear of rejection."

For example, a couple's sexual frequency tends to decrease somewhat throughout the lifespan. But this doesn't mean that when the "honeymoon phase wears off," a couple's sex life will just get worse. In fact, by nurturing and maintaining all aspects of the model of sexual wholeness,

couples who have been married for 50 years can be just as happy in their sexual life as newlyweds are, if not more.^{17 18} With concerted effort, couples can find a healthy balance between safety and adventure in their sex lives.

Sexual timing, frequency, and commitment are just three of many possible factors that can impact how people view and participate in sexual relationships. Just as a person can enjoy the thrill of a zipline experience when secured in a harness, a couple can enjoy the great adventure of sex when they feel securely attached to one another in a committed relationship. Focusing on sexual wholeness, which includes not just physical, but also emotional, relational, and spiritual aspects of relationships, can provide a foundation for couples to explore and create a "safe adventure" and experience some of the greatest joys life holds.

Endnotes

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