

9 Characteristics of a Healthy Sexual Relationship for a Believer

The husband wants sex, but the wife resists. The wife can't understand why husband hasn't asked for sex in some time.

The wife feels pressured to give husband sex any time he asks. Both husband and wife wonder if some activity they want to try would be dishonoring to God. Either husband or wife or both struggle to put their sexual past behind them. Husband and/or wife use the Bible to bolster their hardened position or wrestle with a great disconnect between their sexual passions and their faith.

Does any of this reflect what's going on in your marriage? What is a healthy sexual relationship for a Christian, anyway?

If the gospel doesn't have an answer for sex, then how can it be good for much else? Sex and sexuality are a huge part of our human experience. God created sex—male and female (See Gen. 1:27). Misused, distorted or ungodly sexuality has destroyed countless lives, broken many hearts and ended many promising ministries.

Research by the Barna group indicates that Americans—and American Christians—vary greatly in what they believe about sex, what they view as the purpose of sex and what sexual behaviors they consider permissible and healthy. The “just say no” message most Christians have heard about sex outside of marriage contrasts sharply with the 21st-century sexualized culture most of us get bombarded with every day. Throw in hormones (for men and women), and it's no wonder Christians often struggle in this area.

I'm going to begin with the premise that God created sex to be

enjoyed between one man and one woman in a committed marriage. The debate behind that premise is for another day. But understanding what that relationship is designed to be can help answer many questions. So here are some thoughts on what it looks like.

A Healthy Sexual Relationship is:

Unselfish. Healthy sexuality is more about giving than it is about getting. Husband and wife focus most on satisfying each other's needs rather than on fulfilling their own desires. If both partners are focused on each other, most challenges can be overcome. How, when, where, how often, what to do—most of those questions are answered by moving in the direction of what your spouse wants.

Honest. Husband and wife may see the “how, when, where, how often” types of questions differently, but they both honestly yet kindly express their desires, fears, frustrations and more. Although both generally move toward meeting each other's needs, neither feels forced to engage in sex that would make them feel resentful toward the other.

Seasonal. Not in the sense of sometimes on/sometimes off, but in the sense of different seasons of life and of marriage carry different implications for intimacy. Not every sexual encounter will lead to the same level of excitement or satisfaction. The most important aspects of sex will vary during different seasons of marriage.

A big deal. Instead of being “just sex,” that kind of intimacy between husband and wife really is a big deal. It's treated as a valuable and precious gift worth guarding, worth working on, worth improving, worth making a priority, worth investing in, worth praying about. It's not neglected as an afterthought.

Regularly irregular. Sex may vary from often to occasional, from exciting to comfortable, from satisfying to frustrating, based on physical health, life stresses or other factors. In a

healthy relationship, husband and wife are committed to coming together physically and reconnect in this way frequently and freely but not legalistically.

Exclusive. Husband and wife look only to each other for the fulfillment of their sexual desires and needs. Sexual intimacy with any other person is of course outside the bounds of healthy sexuality, but so is pornography, emotional intimacy and the like.

Safe and Healing. Not in the sense of boring, but in the sense of being vulnerable without being hurt. Sex or withholding of sex is not used to punish, control or wound. To be completely seen and known and still be loved and accepted is a wonderfully healing experience—from specific wounds in the past and from our common human weaknesses.

Imperfectly perfect. Every marriage is the union of two imperfect people, and so is their sexual relationship. As with every other aspect of marriage, you will almost certainly hurt your spouse and be hurt by them. A healthy sexual relationship provides for honest forgiveness and continual improvement.

More than physical. The act of intercourse is simply the physical aspect of what is a well-rounded intimacy. In a sense, it's never "just sex." That complete intimacy includes friendship, forgiveness, emotional bonding, mutual understanding and spiritual connection. Complete marital sexuality, at its best, includes all the above.

There are plenty of Christian marriages where sex does not meet those ideals, but that doesn't mean it's impossible.

If you're experiencing a great sexual relationship with your spouse, celebrate! God is pleased.

If you're married and not experiencing a great sexual relationship, don't give up. Sometimes working on the sex is the most important; at other times, working on other aspects

of your marriage will result in improvements with intimacy.

If you're not married right now, don't give up, either. Fear, guilt, desperation or other negative messages may make you want to settle for something less. I encourage you to hold out for the best.

There are no "10 steps to a guaranteed awesome sexual relationship." A healthy sexual relationship for a Christian couple is a matter of growth, commitment and God's grace. It takes effort, and it's worth working for.

Question: What do you think are the characteristics of a healthy sexual relationship for a Christian marriage? Are there any I haven't listed? Please leave a comment below.
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