

The Highs and Lows of Sex During a Pandemic

Right now, we are experiencing a stressful time in our lives. The word that comes to my mind and the word that keeps resonating with my clients is uncertainty. The uncertainty of what is occurring in the world is resulting in anxiety, depression, and anger. We keep watching the news and the number of deaths due to COVID-19 rises. The frustration and uncertainty that we are feeling is anticipatory grief. This type of grief occurs when we fear what the future holds when we are uncertain. It is similar to the feeling we get when we have a loved one diagnosed with a terminal illness. We fear what may happen to them. Now as a world, we fear what may happen to us. We are feeling a loss of safety and control. Let's face it, we love to be in control and when we are not in control, we become anxious and scared. There are several thoughts that may emerge. "Social distancing? What does this mean?" "Why do I have to self-isolate?" "I have birthday plans with my friends and now I have to cancel them?" "Oh man, I have a date this weekend and I was looking forward to the possibility of having sex!"

So how does this relate to sex? During this time of uncertainty, you may experience low or high sexual desire. At this trying time, as a certified sex therapist, I have heard "I can't even think about sex right now, it is the last thing on my mind." I have also heard, "I am so aroused right now all I want to do is have sex." As human beings, we have different needs and one of those needs is sexual intimacy. Having the need for sexual intimacy can create two types of sexual desire. One is spontaneous desire. With this type of sexual desire, the mental picture of sex happens first. You have the thought of sex and BAM you want it! The other type of sexual desire is responsive desire. Responsive sexual desire happens when you feel that physical readiness for sex before you feel the mental desire. Typically, you'll already be engaged in some sort of physically stimulating activity, then start to feel mentally interested in taking things further.

Did you know that we have two sexual systems in our body? We have a sexual excitation system (SES) and a sexual inhibition system (SIS). Dr. Emily Nagoski, author of the book, *Come as You Are* states that our SES is made up of accelerators and our SIS is made up of brakes. During this time of fear and anxiety, you may be pumping the brakes. You may not feel the desire for sex because your mind is constantly thinking about how your routine has changed due to the virus outbreak or you have the fear of getting your partner sick because you are the one going out running the errands. Your partner, however, is hitting the gas pedal and is feeling very sexual because the both of you now have more time together.

During this time of uncertainty, there is also room for opportunity. If you are feeling sexually aroused, but you want to engage in physical distancing, you can still be sexual. You don't have to engage in mind blowing sex to receive sexual pleasure. Sex is not a performance. It is ALL about pleasure and it is YOUR pleasure. I always tell my clients, get curious about your partner, get creative with your sex, and make space for the erotic. Even though it is not easy, it is critical to communicate your sexual and erotic desires because your partner is not a mind reader. Examine your sexual communication, roles, and rules. Seeing a certified sex therapist can certainly help you if this is a barrier. Whether single or partnered, you can experiment with sex and one way of doing this is through masturbation and this can be mutual. Construct a sexual blueprint. Map places on your body where you have more or less sexual sensation. Track

textures, pressures, patterns and rhythms. Oh, and if you have an orgasm, that is great! Research has revealed a number of health benefits associated with orgasms. The hormone oxytocin, which may play a role in feelings of intimacy, increases five-fold at orgasm. An orgasm at least once or twice per week appears to strengthen the immune system's ability to resist flu and other viruses. Remember, the goal at this time is to get creative and look at what is possible instead of what was once achievable. Stay healthy and safe!