



Dear Sex Counselor,

I hear the word “libido” used a lot. What is it, exactly? If my libido isn’t as frisky as I want it to be, what can I do?

We talk about libido a lot: “He has a high libido;” “I don’t have any libido.” We’re usually referring to someone’s “sex drive” or level of sexual desire. But what does that mean?

Technically, libido can be defined as psychic energy: urges and impulses that come from the psyche, or mind. But what does that have to do with sex?

Libido is the “mind” part of sex; it’s the “desire” part of the process that leads you into further sexual play. Without the psychic energy that our conscious mind interprets as desire, sex doesn’t happen. Libido responds to a lot of different stimuli. Sometimes it’s a rush of sensation in your genitals that starts you thinking, “Hey, a little more of that would feel good.” Other times it’s an arousing image, memory or smell that leads you to say, “I’d like to pursue something sexual right now.” It can also be the awareness of the rush of blood to your cheeks when you’re aroused by someone or something. Sometimes it’s a gesture or touch from a loved one that triggers a desire for more.

Why does it come and go?

Libido is pretty fragile. If you are distracted, tired, stressed or sick, your mind tends to send this form of psychic energy away. Your mind will say, “Don’t think about sex; you have more important things to attend to,” even when you don’t want it to. This can become a problem when your mind is focusing on other things and your partner’s mind is saying, “Hey, I feel sexy... let’s romp!”

Libido is usually very strong at the beginning of a relationship—it’s the glue that bonds you together, but it tends to settle down to a lower level about six months to two years later. Although this change concerns some people, it’s actually very normal. Anyway, how would you find time to eat, sleep, work and

socialize if you were having sex as often as you did when you first fell in love?

Libido can also be affected by physical changes, including illness, major reproductive events like pregnancy and menopause, and when taking hormonal contraceptives or certain medications, such as anti-depressants. If you suspect that your libido has changed due to one of these factors, consult your health care provider. Even if there is a medical reason for a change to your libido, you can still nurture your desire on your own.

Why do my partner and I have different levels of libido?

Some people have a very active libido—their minds lead them to think about and want sex often. Others have a very mild libido—they may rarely think about or want sex without some outside prompt, or they may not be interested in sex at all. Our level of libido depends on our level of stress, our health, how many distractions are in our environment, how successful and pleasurable our most recent sexual experiences have been, and what we have been taught about sex. A recent study even suggests that libido may be genetic.

It is very common for partners to have libido levels that differ from each other. This may only happen from time to time (due to temporary stress or illness, for example), or it may be ongoing—either way is normal. Although there is nothing you can do to change your partner’s libido, there are ways both of you can work together to get your needs met.

Your particular level of libido is individual, variable, and completely normal. It is only a problem if it causes you distress and you feel strongly that you want to do something to change it. But if you are fine with how you are and it works for you, then you are normal, regardless of what anyone else thinks.

Do arousal creams or supplements like Spanish Fly help increase libido?

Most supplements will not do anything to you, physically, to increase your arousal. The original Spanish Fly is actually toxic, and even in small quantities causes an intense urinary tract irritation that will lead to an infection in most people. That irritation is perceived as arousal, which is how it got that reputation. But the things you see available that are labeled “Spanish Fly” are not actually that at all.

Some supplements work by stimulating your whole nervous system, allowing you to feel aroused more quickly, but you still need something to trigger your arousal. Some supplements, especially those that you rub on the skin, either produce mild irritation (due to ingredients like menthol or cayenne pepper), or instruct you to spend several minutes massaging the product into your genitals. It is the rubbing—which generates arousal by bringing blood flow to the area—that works, not the supplement itself. In this case, rubbing a nice sexual lubricant like *Liquid Silk* into your genital skin will do the exact same thing without the risk of irritation.

So what can I do to increase my libido?

It depends on whether or not you’ve always had a mild libido. If you have, then it is harder to change. Studies show that people with a “low” libido that has stayed the same for their whole adult lives have a very difficult time changing that level. In that situation, it may be better to learn to adapt to how you are, rather than struggle to change it. If you want to try to change a libido that has always been low or non-existent, we recommend working with a sex therapist.

If you had a higher libido that is now low, remember that libido is an elastic state of being that can be invited back into your life. You can also enjoy pleasurable sex without having a strong libido. As Rosie King, MD writes: “Desire and arousal are two separate components, and are run by different parts of the brain ... it is much easier to be turned on if you start with a high level of desire. But even if initially you feel sexually

uninterested, if your partner helps to warm you up ... you can enjoy a very pleasurable sexual experience ... [including] high levels of arousal and orgasm.” (Rosie King, MD, “The Right Conditions for Lovemaking” from *Sex Tips and Tales from Women Who Dare*, edited by Jo-Anne Baker).

If you have had a higher libido at different times in your life and you’d like it to be lively again, here are some things you can do:

Start with your body.

Check in with your body. Do you feel attractive? Do you feel healthy? Feeling good about your body is important to your libido. Spend a little time helping yourself feel good in your skin, so you can feel sexy to yourself and someone else. A little exercise, a relaxing bath, a massage or some stretching can help you feel more alive and connected to your physical self. For some people, it also helps to put on clothes or undergarments that help you feel sexy. And remember, you are sexy, regardless of what shape or size you are.

Get your mind working with your body.

Start thinking about the good sex you’ve enjoyed. Reflect on your favorite encounters and fantasies. Allow your mind to wander and your body to become aroused. Pay attention to the feeling of blood flowing to your genitals. Sometimes it feels like your libido has disappeared when the arousal you experience is not as obvious as it used to be, whether that means no longer lubricating quickly, or not getting a swift and firm erection. A woman may not produce lubrication the same way she used to, and that’s a normal part of aging or a side effect of oral contraceptives. A man may not become erect as easily or consistently as he used to, and that’s normal too. Try to recognize and focus on different signs of arousal: a flush on your chest, tension in your nipples, or an increase in your breathing. If you have a partner, he or she may notice that your eyes are dilating.

For women who experience dryness of the vulva and vagina, we recommend massaging a moisturizing

lubricant (*Liquid Silk* or *Sliquid Organics Silk* are good choices) into the skin of your genitals twice a day. This increases the skin's elasticity and encourages blood flow so you become aroused more comfortably and easily. See our Vaginal Renewal™ brochure for more information.

Don't stop now!

Allow yourself to think positive sexual thoughts throughout the day, conjuring up fantasies, remembering past sexual experiences, and envisioning the sex you'd like to enjoy. Think about the variety of sexual activities you find pleasurable, such as genital massage, oral sex or penetration—anything that is comfortable and gives you genuine pleasure is fair game.

Then, try something a little frisky...

Invite yourself on a sex date. If you did not masturbate before now, we encourage you to begin. Make self-pleasure a part of your self-care routine. Learn how your body responds to erotic thoughts, stories, or images. Erotic books and movies of all kinds are available to help you expand your fantasies and nurture your arousal, and can be incorporated into self-pleasuring and partner sex alike.

Pleasuring yourself will help you know how your body feels when you become aroused, and what kinds of touch and sensation feel best to you. Then, when or if you choose to have sex with a partner, you can teach your partner what you've learned about yourself. If you enjoy vaginal and/or anal penetration, include that in your self-pleasuring, exploring how deeply you like to be penetrated and what width is most comfortable. For more information about self-pleasuring, see our *Masturbation for Women* and/or our *Masturbation for Men* brochures.

But what do I do with my partner if I'm not yet ready for sex with him or her?

Work on your sensual connection. Take time to give and receive massages and enjoy touch and sensation without the pressure to go further. The goal is to get more emotionally connected with your partner. If he

or she is willing, encourage your partner to masturbate, adding an erotic toy and/or movie if desired. When you're ready, try genital massage with your partner using a personal lubricant as your massage lotion (oil can be irritating to the genitals, so avoid oil or Vaseline). Focus on giving and receiving pleasure. Experiment with a variety of activities: kissing, making out, whole body touch, oral sex, mutual masturbation, or any other intimate activities you want to explore. When you are ready, plan to massage each other to orgasm, focusing on the sensations of arousal and orgasm. If and when you become interested in penetration with your partner, massage each other first until you are both quite aroused and ready for penetration.

Keep sex going.

It helps to create some uninterrupted space for your sex life. Make a date with yourself and/or your partner to enjoy one or two hours of pleasure without answering the phone, dealing with the kids, or thinking about work pressures. We recommend scheduling time for sex, and choosing a time when you are relaxed and comfortable. Try not to get too hung up on the idea that you lose spontaneity when you schedule sex. Remember, what you do sexually can still be spontaneous, even if the timing isn't. Plus, knowing you will be having sex at a certain time creates anticipation, which heightens your arousal.

If orgasms are important to you, make sure you get the stimulation you need to have at least one orgasm during sex play. Let yourself fantasize before and during sex. It's a harmless way to increase your arousal. Don't concentrate on making your fantasies come true, instead, enjoy the wild sexual field trips your mind can take. Many people find that their fantasies can lose their charge once they are acted out, so focus on enjoying the arousal you get from them now.

Keep in mind that variety helps keep sex interesting and exciting. This may mean trying new positions and locations, exploring different types of sexual activities (oral sex, mutual masturbation), or adding a toy or movie to the mix—you decide. The *Kama Sutra*, an

ancient marriage manual, recommends incorporating taste, smell, sound and different sensations to make sex even more rewarding.

Having good sex makes you want more sex. Building your own history of pleasurable, comfortable sexual experiences will encourage your libido to grow. Making time for sex and keeping yourself healthy and relaxed also encourages your libido to come out and play more often. As one woman told us, "You know, the more I have sex, the more I want to have sex."

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Suggested Resources:

If you'd like some books to help on your journey, we recommend:

Reclaiming Desire, by Andrew Goldstein, M.D., and Marianne Brandon, Ph.D — Helps readers understand what life events can influence a person's mood and romantic willingness, along with suggestions on how to de-stress enough to revive a slowed-down sex drive.

Reclaiming Your Sexual Self, by Kathryn Hall, PhD— Disusses the reasons people experience low libido and gives helpful suggestions for creating the right conditions in your life for more desire and libido.

The Return of Desire, by Gina Ogden, PhD— An excellent book for women of all ages and orientations who want to bring desire back into their lives. Explores the spiritual side of sexuality as well.

The Heart of Desire, by Stella Resnick, PhD — A useful reference for people in long-term relationships who want to rekindle desire. Includes a Ten-Step Loving Sex Program to help nourish your sexual relationship.

Mating in Captivity, by Esther Perel — A refreshing, original look at the way sexual relationships change over time, the choices we make that create those changes, and what we can do to rekindle the flames.

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Libido

~What is libido?

~What to do if your libido is not what you want it to be

~How to spark your libido when you wish

~What to do when your partner has a different libido than you do



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