

How to Create More Intimacy with Your Valentine

February is perfect for cuddling, with the cold weather and longer nights. No wonder it's known as the month for romance. But, as a member of the Sandwich Generation, does caring for your growing children and aging parents make you too tired to bring Cupid back into your intimate relationship?

Lucy was on the fast track at work and active in her family life, having three teenagers and parents who were declining. Her interest in romance was waning and she was devastated by changes in her body and her psyche. "I have totally lost my libido and I feel as dry as the Sahara desert. In the past, I had been happily led around by my active sex drive - it has been my life force for so long. Now, I have lost my ballast and my identity. I want to have those feelings again."

Difficulties with intimacy may be affecting your partnership and, more likely, difficulties in your marriage may be interfering with your sexual relationship. If there are situations in your life that preoccupy your thoughts and are stressful for you, these can also affect your desires for intimacy. Begin to deal with them directly so that they do not spill over into your sex life.

1. Examine your relationship with your significant other. Are you satisfied with the intimacy? How is your communication? How do you both manage anger? Discuss the issues that are causing problems rather than withdrawing from each other. Don't use intimacy as a bargaining tool when there is unresolved resentment in your marriage.

2. Schedule a date night alone with your partner. Remember how your heart used to skip a beat when you happily thought about your next evening together? Recreate some of that excitement and mystery now. Take turns planning an activity that will remind you both of why you fell in love.

3. Focus on creating new kinds of intimacy. If your children now live away from home, you have more time and energy to devote to each other and to bring you closer together. Develop or rekindle affection, closeness and romance. Many women find that this can be enormously satisfying in a different way. Fay, an elementary school teacher, has grown to value the companionship in her relationship. "We enjoy rubbing each other's back, reading together in front of the fire, sharing funny stories about our grandchildren. Who would have thought that would feel intimate."

4. Work with your health professional to rule out physical conditions or the side effects of prescriptions that could be contributing to a decrease in your libido. Talk to your internist or gynecologist about remedies - lubricants as well as prescription medications or creams.

5. Explore techniques of expression that may be new to your relationship. Try different positions for your lovemaking. Studies have shown that an active sex life slows the aging process so your effort will be doubly rewarded. With their son away at college, Joy felt emotionally closer to her husband than ever before. "With the house to ourselves we feel less stressed, more carefree, less inhibited and make love more often."

6. Enjoy your sensuality. Have fun with it. Learn about exercises in "sensate focus" as you discover new ways to explore your body. Energy level, body image, physical limitations and the quality of the relationship all play a part in feelings of sensuality and intimacy.

Be patient and take small steps toward feeling emotionally satisfied. Allow yourself the pleasure of slowly learning more and more about your partner, even now. For Lisa and her partner, buying a motorcycle and riding together on weekends was one way of rekindling the excitement in their marriage. "What a thrill! I love it all - the speed of the ride, the wind in my hair, the physical closeness, even being the chick on the back of the bike."

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About the Author

Rosemary Lichtman, Ph.D. and Phyllis Goldberg, Ph.D. are founders of <http://www.HerMentorCenter.com>, a website for midlife women and <http://www.NourishingRelationships.Blogspot.com>, a Blog for the Sandwich Generation. They are authors of a forthcoming book about Boomers' family relationships.