

Names used in this column are changed to honor client confidentiality.

Icy Bedroom

His gripe: The temperature in the bedroom resembles Antarctica.

Craig describes his wife, Meg, as being “cold as ice.” He feels cheated. Where’s the spark that was once there?

In our counseling session, Meg revealed that she wasn’t disinterested in sex—she was turned off by all the groping and grabbing.

“I feel like I’m nothing more than a drug for his addiction!” Meg said.

Craig argues that his actions are based on a desire to be intimate. His manner, however, is anything but intimate. Intimacy is something you do with someone not to them. From Meg’s perspective, she isn’t refusing intimacy—she’s refusing exploitation and choicelessness.

Sexuality is an intimate expression only when it is accompanied by sensitivity and tenderness toward the other person. Intimacy sprouts from the soil of mutuality—mutual sharing and respect. If Craig were truly being intimate, his actions would be aligned with lovingness. This would include honoring Meg’s freedom to choose.

The well-known poet, Robert Frost, put it well: “To be quite free one must be free to refuse.”

Can Meg freely refuse? She says he applies psychological pressure by “getting upset and pouting if I don’t give him what he wants.”

So, the answer is no, she doesn’t feel free to refuse. Wanting more affection from Meg isn’t wrong; what’s wrong is Craig’s approach. His manner is invasive and self-centered—not heart-centered—so how could she possibly feel any desire for sexual intimacy under those conditions?

For the situation to change, he needs to let his heart guide him, not his hormones. Of vital importance is that he realize there’s a difference between grabbing and tenderness. A warm touch on the arm, or a quick peck on her forehead—in passing—are acts of tenderness.

Such acts, minus any expectations, convey: “I cherish you,” not “I’ve got to get something from you.” It’s human nature to resist any form of pressure, be it physical or—more subtly—psychological, such as guilt-inducing glances. It all spells force, and force automatically creates a counter force.

Another vital component for cultivating intimacy is friendship. John Gottman, a leading researcher in the field of marital wellness, maintains that friendship is at the core of a successful marriage. His findings indicate that dialogue—conversation—is the key to keeping

friendships well-oiled. He points out, “Isn’t that how all friendships form in the first place?”

So, it stands to reason to keep the dialogue flowing.

One client was telling me that she and her husband hadn’t talked for two days. Then suddenly, out of the blue, he asked her matter-of-factly, “Do you want to have sex tonight?”

What’s wrong with this picture? Sex is empty without emotional attachment, and emotional attachment can’t occur in a vacuum of silence and emotional distance.

As for Craig, he must understand that both he and Meg desire greater intimacy. I suggested he cultivate the friendship, starting with lots of friendly interaction. Since sexual intimacy is a sore issue between them, they need to talk it over in a caring, non-blameful, non-reactive manner. Craig should do a good job of listening to her and heed the roadblocks she feels stand between them. If he reacts negatively to what she says, the dialogue will end abruptly right along with the aura of intimacy created by honest and comfortable sharing. Clearly, we can’t expect to get from others what we are unwilling to give.

For Craig, his lesson is simple: Learn to give what you want for yourself. You want her to be sensitive to your needs and desires, so be sure to do the same for her. Have her experience respect and understanding from you in a multitude of ways. If she feels listened to and loved, his “groping” might be better tolerated and perceived for what it is to him—intimate touch—an act of connecting with his beloved as expressed on the physical level.

Foreplay begins way before the couple ever reaches the bedroom. It starts with shared kindness and is fostered by togetherness, as in working, laughing and tackling problems together.

Generally speaking, women open up like flowers in such an atmosphere.

The impulse to be affectionate is a natural outgrowth or response to feeling loved. If a man is sensitive to what a woman needs, he begins filling her “fondness bank account.” And the “interest” on that account compounds every time her feelings are important to him.

Bottom line: When there’s a problem in the bedroom, check out the status of the friendship. Friendship is the key—sexual intimacy is the byproduct.

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