

Working with relationships there will inevitably be times when we are dealing with sexual difficulties.

Some couples present with a difference in sexual drive as part of their problem. When it isn't presented as the initial issue, it can emerge that this difference has been a problem for one or both of the couple for some time. It's fair to say that in general we are not very good at talking about sex - despite the tsunami of media information which would suggest otherwise (although I recognise the culturally specific implications of this and that outside of my white middle-class English sensibility this is not always the case!) This inability to address perceived fallings in sexual functioning can lead to couples experiencing real difficulties in their relationship. As a result, I spend a lot of time with couples exploring exactly what sexual functioning means to them in terms of a loving relationship. Exploring when the differences started to appear, and what might have precipitated them. Exploring what, if anything, needs to be different. Exploring what sex actually is and how this definition might change.

Human beings are a unique and complex set of things; biology, experience, feeling, understanding, beliefs, values and so on. And as such it is virtually impossible to meet someone with exactly the same set of these things as you. Which means it is virtually impossible to meet someone with exactly the same sex drive as you. Or exactly the same turn-ons as you. Or exactly the same dislikes as you. We meet, and hopefully negotiate, a way of managing these differences. Or, as is often the case, we just muddle along and either adapt to each other or blindly continue assuming everything is great and our partners are just as excited by the missionary position as we are.

When working in these situations one of the first jobs is to normalise the sexual drives of each. There is no right number of times to be having sex and often couples can get stuck in a binary position: each pathologizing the other's sex drive as too high or too low. I have found these differences appear in all relationships, whatever the gender of those involved.

But here is where we see a difference in gay male relationships and how these differences are handled. There is a dominant discourse that gay men are promiscuous, and more likely to have multiple sex partners than straight men, and both lesbian and straight women. And there is research that supports this discourse (1.) I'm unaware of any research on people who's sexuality falls outside of the gay/ straight binary.

Many gay male couples have an open relationship. This is a relationship in which both partners have negotiated a set of rules to facilitate one or both of them having sexual relationships with other men. And the key word here is "negotiated". I'm not talking about infidelity. I'm not talking about one partner having sex outside the relationship and lying about it either overtly or by omission. Gay men are just as capable as anyone of doing this, and the damage done to the relationship and the hurt partner is the same no matter what the sexuality.

But where a level of openness can be agreed, and the rules jointly established, relationships can flourish. Where there are differences in libido, an open relationship can be a great way of allowing each partner to ensure their needs are being met without resorting to betrayal. For the partner with the lower sex drive, this can be liberating. They are free from having to meet all of their partners sexual needs, and so free from the associated feelings of resentment or failure which can go with this (see Esther Perel for some great writing on the impossibility of us meeting all of our partners' needs). And the more highly sexed partner gets their physical needs met without the need for deceit and associated guilt.

When I'm working with people in mixed gender relationships, I will always introduce the idea of open relationships as a way of managing their differences. And invariably I am greeted with incredulity. The discourse of monogamy is so ingrained, couples find it hard to even contemplate the idea of consensual non-monogamy. But with the right negotiated rules in place, an open relationship can save a struggling monogamous one. A sexually open relationship can bring a level of emotional openness that builds and strengthens the relationship. That creates space for feelings to be freely expressed, acknowledged and considered.

The key to all this is openness. A willingness to talk about things in a way many people simply aren't used to doing. It needs a degree of trust, allowing each partner to feel and express vulnerability. This is where relationship counselling can help as the couple set out to negotiate what is and is not OK in this new way of relating. We can help the clients think about what they are and are not comfortable with. How they express and react to discomfort. How they are going to renegotiate the rules as experience teaches them things they hadn't considered. How they are going to ensure both partners are in fact happy with the agreement and it isn't being forced onto anyone just to keep the relationship going.

It's a real challenge to go against deeply ingrained beliefs about sex, relationships and monogamy. But it can be a challenge that produces powerful results.

1. Modesto Ramirez, O. & Brown, J. (2010) Attachment Style, Rules Regarding Sex, and Couple Satisfaction: A study of Gay Male Couples. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*. Vol 31; p 202-213