

The Three Kinds of Sex

By Dr. Sue Johnson,
Author of *Hold Me Tight*

Sex often draws us into a relationship and then helps keep it alive. But what is “good” sex?

If you look at the images that bombard us every day from magazines and movies, good sex is instantaneous, totally mutual, cataclysmic, and is best at the very beginning of a relationship.

In fact, surveys tell us that in real life, folks in long term relationships who can talk openly about their sex life have more and better sex than new or more reticent couples. What really determines what kind of sex you are going to have isn't the novel positions you find in the sex manual or the new tips in the latest magazine. It's how safely attached you are to your partner. Emotional presence and trust are the biggest aphrodisiacs of all.

The new science of attachment tells us that there are really 3 kinds of sex.

Sealed-Off Sex

This is all about reducing sexual tension, achieving the big O and feeling good about your sexual prowess. The name of the game is sensation, the more the better and performance, or the “God I am hot” quotient. The relationship with the other person is secondary. For a one night stand this is maybe okay. In a long term relationship this is bad news. Men seem to be more able to practice this kind of sex. They are wired to move quickly from arousal to orgasm. Women take longer to become aroused and needs more co-ordination happening with a partner to really enjoy sex.

Sealed off Sex works fine for one night stands. It is one-dimensional so continual novelty is mandatory. This kind of sex can be mutually satisfying occasionally in long term relationships, but if it is the norm, the relationship is in trouble. This kind of impersonal sex has the effect of making a partner feel used and emotionally alone.

Regular physical contact actually tunes the brain into the need to feel emotionally close. When this is missing, partners are swamped with a sense of isolation and deprivation. “When we make love, I feel like I could be anyone,” Kerrie tells me. “It just reinforces for me the sense that I don't really matter to him.” Bill, her partner, tells her, “Well, we haven't been getting along, so I try to get close by coming onto you. But I guess I don't feel sure enough, safe enough to slow down and really get into it. So I just go with the sensation. In the end, I don't really enjoy it that much either.” Lack of emotional connection shuts off real eroticism.

When this sex is the norm in a relationship, it's time to pay attention to the lack of safe emotional connection outside the bedroom.

Solace Sex

This occurs when we are not quite sure that our partner is really there for us, when we need lots of reassurance. If we are anxious about whether we can depend on our partner, we get caught up in pleasing our lover to win his or her approval. We concentrate on cuddling and affection rather than abandoning ourselves in love-making. Comforting tender touch is part of good sex, but when we get preoccupied with gaining reassurance, eroticism suffers.

With Solace Sex, we are highly sensitive to signs of rejection. So when our lover says, “I just don’t feel like it tonight”, we can’t manage to respond, “Oh, that is disappointing. I was looking forward to making love. But we can make it another time or just chat for a while.” Instead, we free fall into catastrophic thinking, doubting that we are really loved. As a result, we often wind up pressuring our partner to have sex or getting into arguments about exactly why they are not feeling sexy.

When this kind of sex is the norm, it’s time to talk to your partner about your anxieties. The safer you feel the more you will be able to let go and enjoy your sexuality.

Synchrony Sex

This is when emotional openness and responsiveness, tender touch and erotic exploration all come together. This is the sex that fulfills, satisfies and connects. The key prerequisite here is not wild sexual techniques but a safe emotional bond. The safer we feel emotionally, the more we can communicate, express our needs, play and explore our responses and relax into sexual feelings. We can literally tune into each other and co-ordinate our sexual dance, sensing each others inner state and responding to how arousal shifts and peaks. Emotional safety shapes physical synchrony and physical synchrony shapes emotional safety.

Synchrony Sex that deepens our bond with our lover, feeds our own sense of ourselves as attractive desirable sexual beings, and makes lovemaking a reliable source of eroticism and joy. Research tells us that those who can count on their partner to be there for them emotionally, who say that they have a secure bond, have sex more often and enjoy sex more.

When people feel safe with each other they can also deal with the sexual differences and problems that inevitably come up in a long term love relationship. What I tell the couples who come to see me to improve their relationship is that “Practice and emotional presence make perfect in the bedroom”. The thrill in this kind of sex is like the ‘safe adventure’ of dancing tango with a trusted partner. You are totally engaged in the dance and let the emotional and physical music take you over. The dance is then constant improvisation and play. Emotional presence and trust is the biggest aphrodisiac of all and the thrill can last a lifetime.

When you can have this kind of sex, rejoice and hold your lover tight. This is the way sex was supposed to be.

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