

Come on baby, (re)light my fire

July 20 2016



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Many couples find that their sexual desire has dwindled over time. It's not unusual for partners who could not keep their hands off each to gradually lose interest. But new research indicates that there are ways that couples can sustain—or relight—their passion.

"Our research shows that partners who are responsive to each other outside the bedroom are able to maintain their sexual desire," says Gurit Birnbaum, psychology professor at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya, Israel. Birnbaum and her coauthors also found that women's desire is more strongly affected by their partner's responsiveness than men's desire—although men report a boost, as well.

"Responsiveness—which is a type of intimacy—is so important in a relationship because it signals that one is really concerned with the welfare of the other, but in a way that is truly open and informed about what the other cares about and wants," says Birnbaum. Responsive partners are willing to invest resources in the relationship, and show understanding at a deep level. They make the relationship feel special—that their relationship is unique—which is, at least in Western societies, what people seek from their romantic relationships.

Resolving the intimacy-desire paradox

In a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Birnbaum and coauthor Harry Reis, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, report that their new study was, in part, prompted by a concept psychologists know as the "intimacy-desire paradox."

The core of the paradox lies in the contradiction between intimate and familiar relationships that many people strive for, and the limitations of such bonds for facilitating desire. Some scholars have argued that long-term intimacy may actually inhibit rather than increase sexual desire. For example, the need for security may clash with the sense of novelty and uncertainty that can often fuel desire.

But previous research has not provided conclusive evidence for whether increased sense of intimacy actually promotes or undermines sexual

desire.

And Birnbaum and Reis's new study suggests that, under certain circumstances, there may not be a paradox.

Valued and desirable

What determines whether intimacy prompts or inhibits desire is not its mere existence, but its meaning in the larger context of a relationship, they argue. Responsiveness is most likely to encourage desire. That's because it conveys the impression that the partner is worth pursuing and thus engaging in sex with such a desirable partner is likely to promote an already valuable relationship.

As part of the study, the researchers conducted three experiments, one of which consisted of 100 couples who kept a diary for six weeks. Both partners reported on their own level of [sexual desire](#) each day as well as their perceptions of their partner's responsiveness. They also reported their own levels of feeling special and perceptions of their partner's mate value.

The results indicated that when men and women perceive their [partners](#) as responsive, they feel special and think of their partner as a valuable mate, which boosted sexual desirability.

Birnbaum notes that partner responsiveness had a significantly stronger effect on women's perceptions of themselves and others, suggesting that women experienced higher levels of desire for their responsive partner because they were more likely than men to feel special and value their partner as a result of the partner's responsiveness.

"'Being nice' and things like that are not necessarily based on who the partner is and what the partner really wants," Birnbaum says. "When a

mate is truly responsive, the [relationship](#) feels special and unique and he or she is perceived as valued and desirable.

"Sexual desire thrives on increasing intimacy and being responsive is one of the best ways to instill this elusive sensation over time; better than any pyrotechnic sex," Birnbaum says.

More information: Gurit E. Birnbaum et al, Intimately Connected: The Importance of Partner Responsiveness for Experiencing Sexual Desire., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000069](#)

Provided by University of Rochester

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