

Working on our “Sexual Contract”

We rarely look at getting married as entering into a sexual contract, and yet that is very much what we are doing. Marriage is a contract on many levels - a living arrangement contract, a financial contract, a legal contract, and most definitely a sexual contract. Most of us were handed a “sexual contract” by our cultures, our families, our churches and the media.

These assumptions of what sex would look like between “us” colored the expectations you had for yourself and for one another. You had ideas about what your sexual life would look like, how you would act (or not act) sexually towards one another and others, and what you would have a right to be upset about (or not) if this contract were breached in some way. It’s unlikely you spent much time talking about these expectations. So one of the “tasks” you can think about in the midst of learning how to flourish sexually, is to go back to the drawing board and clarify with each other what you want your contract to look like going forward. By “contract” I don’t mean a written agreement... I mean ongoing, honest and vulnerable dialogue, negotiation and acceptance.

Some questions you could explore as a couple:

1. How do we each describe a “satisfying” sexual life?
2. How might we deal with differences we see between our descriptions?
3. How do we want to manage “initiation” and “accepting/rejecting” patterns we notice in our relationship?
4. How often would we ideally engage in sexual activity?
5. How do we want to manage frequency/libido differences we might have?
6. How do we want to manage erotic taste differences we might have?
7. Do we have room for privacy in our relationship or do we want to be mostly transparent about thoughts and fantasies? Are our expectations around this issue realistic?
8. Are we comfortable with solo masturbation in our relationship? Do we need to disclose if this happens or can it be part of a private realm?
9. Are we comfortable with one or both of us consuming erotic media (literature, music, film, etc.)? Do we need to disclose this or can it be private?
10. How do we want to manage meeting the needs of both of us when we express different needs? Can we use strategies such as “taking turns,” “gift-giving on special occasions,” or “managing accounts” to make sure we feel things are fair?
11. Are there deal breakers in our marriage that we’re avoiding talking about?
12. What information about our sex life is okay to discuss outside of our relationship -- with friends, family members, professionals, etc.?
13. Do we have boundaries we need to discuss in regard to substances and sexuality?
14. How do we prioritize orgasm and mutual pleasure practices in ways that are balanced and beneficial for both of us?
15. Are we comfortable with sex toys and other aids?
16. Are we comfortable with role play and fantasy play?
17. Are there fantasies we are either uncomfortable sharing or uncomfortable knowing about?
18. Are there things from our past we would rather not know/share?
19. Are there things we want in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy?
20. Are we interested in exploring BDSM play? If so, what extent?
21. Are there fetishes we would like to address openly?
22. Is there sexual trauma in either of our pasts that we would like to address as a couple?
23. Are there gender identity or orientation concerns or expressions we would like to address as a couple?

24. Are there relational aspects of our life together that are interfering with our sex life, such as interpersonal conflict, parenting, financial stress, unemployment, illness, in-laws, exes, etc.?

25. In what ways do we want to prioritize and plan so that our sex lives can be more aligned with our ideal vision?

26. Do we have similar values when it comes to sexuality?

27. How do we each define “cheating” and “infidelity”?

28. What types of things would cause us to feel betrayed?

29. Is it okay to share flirtatious energy with others?

30. Is there a budget we can prioritize to our sexual health and relationship?

Feel free to come up with other questions and concepts not covered here. Using the Yes/No/Maybe exercise can also help you get more detailed about contracting specific sexual behaviors you want or don't want to introduce in your relationship.

Talking about your sexual contract may not always be comfortable, so spend some time first helping your spouse/partner to feel as safe as possible. This process will only be as helpful as both of your abilities to show up with your whole selves and to be honest. Commit to one another that you'll share your discomfort or disagreement without shaming, belittling or condescension. As you're able to be this space for each other, you both will be much more likely to get what you want. And remember that a “good” compromise implies some level of discomfort for both parties who are negotiating. Levels of discomfort should be assessed so that fairness comes into play and resentments avoided.