



## Dear Sex Counselor,

I hear the word “libido” used a lot. What is it, exactly? If my libido isn’t as frisky as I want it to be, what can I do?

We talk about libido a lot: “He has a high libido;” “I don’t have any libido.” We’re usually referring to someone’s “sex drive” or level of sexual desire. But what does that mean, exactly?

Technically, libido can be defined as psychic energy: urges and impulses that come from the psyche, or mind. But what does that have to do with sex?

Libido is the “mind” part of sex; it’s the “desire” part of the process that leads you into further sexual play. Without the psychic energy that our conscious mind interprets as desire, sex doesn’t happen. Libido responds to a lot of different stimuli. Sometimes it’s a rush of sensation in your genitals that starts you thinking, “hey, a little more of that would feel good.” Other times it’s an arousing image, memory or smell that leads you to say, “I’d like to pursue something sexual right now.” It can also be the awareness of the rush of blood to your cheeks when you’re aroused by someone or something. Sometimes it’s a gesture or touch from a loved one that triggers a desire for more.

### Why does it come and go?

Libido is pretty fragile. If you are distracted, tired, stressed or sick, your mind tends to send this form of psychic energy away. Your mind will say, “Don’t think about sex; you have more important things to attend to,” even when you don’t want it to. This can become a problem when your mind is focusing on other things and your partner’s mind is saying, “Hey, I feel sexy...let’s romp!”

Libido is usually very strong at the beginning of a relationship—it’s the glue that bonds you together, but it tends to settle down to a lower level about six months to two years later. Although this change concerns some people, it’s actually very normal. Anyway, how would you find time to eat, sleep, work and socialize if you were having sex as often as you did when you first fell in love?

Libido can also be affected by physical changes to your body, such as those that occur during and after pregnancy and menopause, and when taking hormonal contraceptives or certain medications, such as anti-depressants. If you suspect that your libido has changed due to one of these factors, consult your health care provider. Even if there is a medical reason for a change to your libido, you can still nurture your desire on your own.

### Why is my libido at a different level than my partner’s?

Some people have a very active libido—their minds lead them to think about and want sex often. Others have a very mild libido—they may never really think about or want sex without some outside prompt, or they really aren’t interested in sex at all. Our level of libido depends on our level of stress, our health, how many distractions are in our environment, how successful and pleasurable our most recent sexual experiences have been, and what we have been taught about how to feel about sex. A recent study even suggests that libido is genetic.

It is very common for people to have different levels of libido than their partners. This may only happen from time to time, or it may be constant—either way is normal. Although there is nothing you can do to change your partner’s libido, there are ways both of you can work together to get your needs met.

Your particular level of libido is individual, variable, and completely normal. It is only a problem if it causes you distress and you feel strongly that you want to do something to change it. But if you are fine with how you are and it works for you, then you are normal, regardless of what anyone else thinks.

### Do arousal creams or supplements like Spanish Fly help increase libido?

Most supplements will not do anything to you, physically, to help you feel more *desire*. The original Spanish Fly is actually toxic, and even in small quantities causes

an intense urinary tract irritation that will lead to an infection in most people. That irritation is perceived as arousal, which is how it got that reputation. But the things you see available that are labeled “Spanish Fly” are not actually that at all.

The way that some supplements work is to stimulate your whole nervous system, which will allow you to feel more quickly aroused, but you still need something that *triggers* your arousal. Some supplements, especially those that you rub on the genitals, produce either mild irritation (like those with menthol or cayenne pepper) or they arouse you because you are rubbing them on your genitals and bringing blood into your genitals. A nice sexual lubricant like *Liquid Silk* will do the exact same thing. But no supplement or cream can increase the *thought* part of libido.

### Okay, so what can I do to increase my libido?

It depends on whether or not you’ve always had a mild libido. If you have, then it is harder to change. Studies show that people with a “low” libido that has stayed the same for their whole adult lives have a very difficult time changing that level. In that situation, it may be better to learn to adapt to how you are, rather than struggle to change it. If you want to try to change your libido and it has always been low or non-existent, we recommend getting help from a sex therapist.

Fortunately, libido is an elastic state of being that can be invited back into your life. It’s also true that you can enjoy pleasurable sex without having a strong libido. As Rosie King, MD writes: “Desire and arousal are two separate components, and are run by different parts of the brain ... it is much easier to be turned on if you start with a high level of desire. But even if initially you feel sexually uninterested, if your partner helps to warm you up ... you can enjoy a very pleasurable sexual experience ... [including] high levels of arousal and orgasm.” (Rosie King, MD, “The Right Conditions for Lovemaking” from *Sex Tips and Tales from Women Who Dare*, edited by Jo-Anne Baker).

If you have had a higher libido at different times in your life and you’d like to get it to be livelier again, here are some things you can do:

### Start with your body.

Check in with your body. Do you feel attractive? Do you feel healthy? Feeling good about your body is important to your libido. Spend a little time helping yourself feel good in your skin, so you can feel sexy to yourself and someone else. A little exercise, a relaxing bath, a massage or some stretching can help you feel more alive and connected to your physical self. For some people, it also helps to wear some slinky, sexy lingerie under your clothes—something that feels good to wear and makes you feel sexy. And remember, you are beautiful regardless of what shape or size you are.

### Get your mind in on it.

Start thinking about the good sex you’ve enjoyed. Reflect on your favorite past encounters and fantasies. Allow your mind to wander and your body to become aroused. Pay attention to the feeling of blood flowing to your genitals. If you are an older woman, you may not produce lubrication the same way you used to, and that’s perfectly normal. If you are an older man, you may not become erect as easily or consistently as you use to, and that’s normal, too. Try to recognize different signs of arousal: a flush on your chest, tension in your nipples, or an increase in your breathing. If you have a partner, he or she may notice that your eyes are dilating. For women who experience dryness of the vulva and vagina, we recommend massaging a moisturizing lubricant (*Liquid Silk* is a good choice) into the skin of your genitals twice a day. This increases the skin’s elasticity and encourages blood flow so you become aroused more comfortably. See our *Vaginal Renewal* brochure for more information.

### Don’t stop now!

Allow yourself to think positive sexual thoughts throughout the day, including fantasies, remembering past sexual experiences, and envisioning the wonderful

sex that you'd like to enjoy. Think about the variety of sexual activities that would be pleasurable, such as genital massage, oral sex or comfortable penetration (if you're ready for that, and enjoy it).

Then, try something a little frisky...

Invite yourself on a sex date. If you did not masturbate before now, you are encouraged to begin. Make self-pleasure a part of your self-care routine. Learn how your body responds to erotic thoughts, stories, pictures or movies. A lot of quality erotica is available to help you expand your fantasies and nurture your arousal during both self-pleasuring and partner sex.

Pleasuring yourself will help you know how your body feels when you become aroused, and what kinds of touch and sensation feel best to you. If you enjoy penetration, include that in your self-pleasuring, exploring how deeply you like to be penetrated and what width is most comfortable. Then, when or if you choose to have sex with a partner, you can teach your partner what you've learned about what works best for you. For more information about self-pleasuring, see our *Masturbation for Women* and/or our *Masturbation for Men* brochures.

But what do I do with my partner if I'm not yet ready for sex with him or her?

Work on your sensual connection. Take time for giving and receiving massages and enjoying touch and sensation without pressure to have sex. The goal is to get more emotionally connected with your partner. Encourage your partner to masturbate, adding an erotic toy and/or movie if desired. When you're ready, start with genital massage using a personal lubricant as your massage lotion (oil can be irritating to the genitals, so avoid oil or Vaseline). Focus on giving and receiving pleasure. Experiment with non-penetrative activities: kissing, making out, whole body touch, oral sex, mutual masturbation, or any other intimate activities you want to explore. Eventually, plan to massage each other to orgasm, focusing on the sensations of

arousal and orgasm. When and if you become interested in penetrative sex, have your partner massage you first until you are quite aroused and ready for penetration.

Keep sex going.

It helps to create some uninterrupted space for your sex life. Make a date with yourself and/or your partner to enjoy one or two hours of pleasure without answering the phone, dealing with the kids, or thinking about work pressures. We recommend scheduling time for sex, and choosing a time when you are relaxed and comfortable. Try not to get too hung up on the idea that you lose spontaneity when you schedule sex. Remember, what you do sexually can still be spontaneous, even if the timing isn't. Plus, knowing you will be having sex at a certain time creates anticipation, which heightens your arousal.

If orgasms are important to you, make sure you get the stimulation you need to have at least one orgasm during sex play. Let yourself fantasize before and during sex. It's harmless, and it's a good way to increase your arousal. Don't concentrate on making your fantasies come true, instead, enjoy the wild sexual field trips your mind can take. Many people find that their fantasies can lose their charge once they are acted out, so focus on enjoying the arousal you get from them now.

Keep in mind that variety is important to keep sex interesting and exciting. You can try new positions and locations, and it's great to explore different types of sexual activities (oral sex, mutual masturbation). The *Kama Sutra*, an ancient marriage manual, recommends incorporating taste, smell, sound and different sensations to make sex even more rewarding.

Having good sex makes you want more sex. Building your own history of pleasurable, comfortable sexual experiences will encourage your libido to grow. Making time for sex and keeping yourself healthy and relaxed also makes space for your libido to come out and play more often. As one woman said to us "You know, the more I have sex, the more I want to have sex."

Suggested Resources:

If you'd like some books to help on your journey, we recommend:

*Reclaiming Desire*, by Andrew Goldstein, M.D., and Marianne Brandon, Ph.D -- A great book to help you understand how many areas of your life come together to influence your mood and romantic willingness, and what you can do to de-stress enough to revive a slowed-down sex drive.

*Reclaiming Your Sexual Self*, by Kathryn Hall, Ph.D. -- Discusses the reasons people experience low libido and gives helpful suggestions for creating the right conditions in your life for more desire and libido.

*The Return of Desire*, by Gina Ogden, PhD -- An excellent book for women who want to bring desire back into their lives. Inclusive of women of all ages and orientations. Explores the spiritual side of sexuality as well.

*The Sex Starved Wife: What to do When He's Lost Desire*, by Michele Weiner Davis -- Gives advice for women in heterosexual marriages whose husbands want less sex than they do, or none at all. Offers good tools to help couples gain understanding and revive their marriage.

*Mating in Captivity*, by Esther Perel -- A refreshing, original look at the way sexual relationships change over time, the choices we make that create those changes, and what we can do to rekindle the flames.

# Libido

~What is libido?

~What to do if your libido is not what you want it to be

~How to spark your libido when you wish

~What to do when your partner has a different libido than you do



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