

The Chemistry of love and lust

Saldechin, Adelaide, March 9, 2011

Questions and answers

These are some questions raised anonymously at *The Chemistry of love and lust* event, and answered by Dr Patricia Weerakoon, Director of the Graduate Program in Sexual Health, Sydney University.

Is there space for pornography within a marriage? Does it change if this is a tool used by both partners to enhance desire?

A marriage is in real time with two warm, breathing bodies in intimate one-flesh sexual union. I would recommend that the couple use all their senses to arouse each other rather than depend on the visual stimulation of the unreal fantasy sex depicted in pornography.

Not all sexologists hold to this understanding of sex, love, and relationships. How do you speak to those really different ideas?

I cannot respond to this without knowledge of what these really different ideas are!

Do you feel there is value in pornography if it is created by performers in a 100% consensual and safety conscious way? Or are the damaging effects related simply the use of instant gratification type of material, not necessarily the content?

The effects of pornography are evidenced in the user, not the producer. It is as you rightly say the non intimacy, explicit instant gratification of the acts that affect the viewer. This is often exacerbated by abuse and objectification of women. Even if safe sex is used (which is very rare in commercial porn) and the sex is consensual (which again is very unusual in commercial porn where the working lifespan of female performers is reputed to be three months), the nature of the material remains the same.

How about the lack of romance phase at the start of arranged marriages? How you do account for their success? Arranged marriages are often successful – Can you comment?

Arranged marriages start with a matching script (as determined by family and friends who know and care). There is no research in this area, but it seems likely that in arranged marriages the sequence is changed and couples go into the bonding phase and love and desire follow. The success of many arranged marriages is attributed to a couple of things. Firstly, the

couple start with low expectations of romance and love and a commitment to make their marriage work. Secondly, there is a strong family support and an incentive to make good in the union.

Does Christian modesty tend to make Christians ignorant of sexual techniques?

The commitment to purity and avoidance of sex before marriage when coupled with poor pre-marital sex advice and education can lead to unrealistic expectations during the honeymoon. As a therapist I see the concerns and sometimes dysfunctions that result. It is extremely important for marriage preparation to include sex education.

How do you explain why so many couples (50%) break up?

The reasons for divorce are many and varied. They vary from one extreme of emotional and physical abuse, to the other where a couple cannot take the time and energy to build the bonds of the attachment stage. It is important for a couple to ask for help early.

What is the response for a husband whose wife can't or won't have sex?

The reasons for the lack of sexual desire in a woman vary. It can be caused by hormonal changes, illness, depression and certain medication. If the lack of desire distresses the couple and strains the relationship – it is time to go for help.

On the other hand women are slower to get sexually aroused. Many women would agree to sexual activity with a partner because they love him, or value the intimacy of love making. Many of these women will be increasingly aroused and feel desire as love making persists.

My advice to men – romance your partner; and to women – relax and enjoy.

How can stale couples rekindle a healthy sexual relationship?

A healthy sexual relationship takes time, energy and creativity – with a generous dollop of love.

Make a date night. Discuss with your partner what turned her/him on in the first bloom of love. What turns him/her on now? Make it exciting and different – then do it. It doesn't have to be expensive. It could be as simple as watching a special movie or going out for a rugby match.

Do gays/lesbians have different chemistry?

There is no research on same sex attraction and the neurochemistry.

Is using porn considered a sin?

Anything that draws our mind away from God's best purpose in our lives is a rejection of God. That is a sin. So if porn use affects our patterns of intimacy with our fellow men and women; if it becomes an idol that detracts us from true worship; if it leads us to lust after the unreal image and objectify all women/men – then it surely must class as a sin.

The word 'lust' always seems to be used in a derogatory way in the Bible, so should lust be a part of a loving marital relationship or should another word be used for unbridled passion in loving marriage?

Passion in marriage is God's gift of healthy desire. Not sure if I like the word 'unbridled' – but if it means love, sex and heaps of it - wonderful

Drugs are known to stimulate parts of the brain, such as Meth with Dopamine and Ecstasy with Serotonin. Does that mean that drugs can affect us emotionally or cause these chemicals to fire at times when they normally wouldn't?

Recreational drugs and some therapeutic medications affect sexual desire, intimacy and the more practical aspects of lovemaking such as arousal and erectile function. It is important to be aware of this and ask for help early.

Are we supposed to have only one partner where we feel this chemical reaction? Is it wrong that multiple partners do exist?

You alluded to having limerance with only one person - ie "the one". Is there only one out there for everyone?

We fall in love with someone who fits our script. It is likely that there will be more than one person who fits the script.

The mechanism deep in our brain that turns on Dopamine and other chemicals focuses our attention and energy on one person. This romance or limerance phase does not last forever. Usually about 18 – 24 months. The challenge is to ride out this time and allow your relationship to move to the deep attachment that comes with long term bonding.

Doesn't sex drive start too early (teens)?

One of the problems in teen years is that the emotional and sexual parts of the brain mature earlier than the control centres in the cerebral cortex. This is why discipline and boundaries are important in the teen years.

Does dopamine induce love at first sight triumph over differences in personality?

Love is not that blind! You fall in love with someone who fits your love/attachment script. Maybe the difference in personality is part of your script!

What happens to the 'bonding' Oxytocin when you divorce? Does it break down over time?

We don't have research in this area. We can hypothesise that is regular intimacy and sexual activity keeps levels of Oxytocin high and the couple bonded, then the breaking up and consequent lack of intimacy and sexual activity would lead to a decrease of Oxytocin.

Several questions were asked about homosexuality that related specifically to the church & the Bible. Dr Pat felt these questions were beyond her brief as a Professor of Sexual Health and best answered by a theologian.

We have listed the questions below and referred to a website that has produced resources answering many questions related to Christianity and Homosexuality

What is your view on homosexuality and how the church perceives it and deals with it?

Why is gay relationship wrong - especially when men have abused me? Does God really hate homosexuality?

How does the homosexual community fit into the church?

See Liberty Christian Ministries Inc for some helpful resources including CD's, leaflets and books.

www.libertychristianministries.org.au

or an article by John Dickson from the ABC

<http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/44682.html>