

...because even when it's good, it's complicated!

A STEPMOM'S GUIDE TO

.....

**INTIMACY
AND SEX**

A COLLECTION OF *Best Of* ARTICLES FROM

StepMom
Magazine

A Stepmom's Guide to
INTIMACY AND SEX

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THE PASSIONATE STEPMOM

Creating the Sex Life You Desire

BY LIANA PALMERIO-McIVOR, RP

As a sex therapist, I see many different people with a range of issues. Some feel a need for sexual intimacy and some don't. Some think they aren't having enough sex. And some aren't satisfied with the sex they're having. Most, however, believe that sexual intimacy is an important part of their relationships.

Personally and professionally, I believe sex is important. But, as a stepmom, I know there are challenges to making sexual intimacy an important part of our lives with our partners. Unlike people who evolved from casual dating to committed partnerships and then followed up with kids, we hit the ground running—with kids in the picture and a host of relationship details to work out from Day One.

As stepcouples, we haven't had the same luxury of finding out how to be sexually intimate *without* children in our lives. Ours is a demanding position and it takes special care to remain connected sexually with our partners. As I've seen in my clinic, the

good news is that the challenges stepmoms face can be met with a mindful approach ... and a bit of work from both of you!

THE MAGIC INGREDIENTS

Solange is enjoying her marriage to David. It's their second. Together they have three kids from previous relationships and balance home life, sports and busy careers as finance professionals. She and David were, after only three years of marriage, having sex once every two months. In clinical terms, their relationship bordered on "sexless."

This wouldn't be a problem if both Solange and David were happy with this state of affairs. But neither was. At 37, they both thought it was too early in their lives to become asexual. As with all situations like this one, I encouraged them both to get thorough physicals to rule out any medical issues which might prevent intimacy, such as hormone imbalances and other conditions.

With clean bills of health, we then turned to

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the (3) key ingredients of good sex: Connection, Relaxation and Desire.

► **Connection**—Human beings need to feel connected to one another in order to open up, be vulnerable and be authentic. We need to trust a person enough to let our guard down, especially in moments of intimacy. Connection forms naturally over the course of our time in a relationship. When it comes to sex, there is also a very practical side of connectivity involving body and mind.

When it comes to the mind, we need to recognize that romance

fiction has done us all a disservice. Our partners do not know intuitively what thoughts or desires are flickering across our minds. They may, after long familiarity with our bodies, know how we like to be touched. But desires and preferences can change. We may want to explore new aspects of our sexuality or role play, for example.

This is why there's no substitute for open communication. If you want it, ask for it.

Intimate connection naturally involves our bodies, too. Stepmoms who've had babies know the value of the bond formed early on through

skin-to-skin contact. It's so important that maternity wards now teach new moms to master it.

It's the same with our partners. When we are naked with our partners sharing warmth as skin touches skin, there's a primal conversation happening between bodies. It's an essential aspect of connection and one that I encouraged Solange to make time for.

► **Relaxation**—As stepmoms, we know all too well that every day of our lives is a dance between work, the demands of keeping a home, raising all of the kids in the family, knowing which kid is where and sometimes even caring for aging parents. We seem to live in a state of heightened tension.

This is not a condition that makes for good sex. The simple fact is that if we are tense our blood flow is redirected. Our bodies flow blood to essential fight-or-flight response centers: the brain, major organs and large muscle groups. Physically we're not prepared to be intimate.

Skin sensation is reduced and our fingers and toes may be cool to the touch. Our sex organs can't function well. We may even find that our vulvas aren't lubricating and relaxing. When we're tense, our bodies are telling our partners, "Don't touch me." We don't feel sexually interested and we certainly don't present to our partners as such.

► **Desire**—If you've ever played a sport, you've probably had a coach tell you at least once to, "Get your head in the game." It's no different with intimacy. We need to be fully present and filled with desire to have good sex. We need to want it and the first step is to think about



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it. Unlike for teenagers, our desire switch doesn't simply flick on and off.

Adults have more of a dimmer switch, which gradually builds to full excitation as we slowly turn it. Given that our largest sex organ is our brain, it's best to start there. Erotic romance novels or videos may help put you in the mind space for sex.

Massage can also help, as it not only warms the body and encourages blood flow but relaxes the mind—allowing us to be in the moment and connected both to our bodies and to our partners. Touch can gradually move from massage to stimulation in a natural way.

EXPLORING & EXPRESSING

The good news for Solange was that there are simple and effective ways to deepen connections, relax and spur desire. I encouraged her to explore her own desires and fantasies and to express them to David (and for him to do the same). This got them talking openly about sex and what shape their intimate lives could take.

I also encouraged them to spend some time lounging together with no expectations that intimacy would move to intercourse. Naked together, they could explore and relax into each other. Finally, because Solange has a vivid imagination, I asked her to have "story time" with David, retelling passages from the erotic fiction she reads.

Solange did her homework and, within two months, reported that she and David were having "mind-blowing" sex twice a week.

CREATING OPPORTUNITY

Daniela came to me with an unusual situation. She was truly, madly and deeply in love with Cheryl. Cheryl's youngest daughter is medically fragile and needs 24/7 hands-on care. Daniela very much wants a physical connection with her partner and feels badly that she's sometimes resentful of her stepdaughter for blocking that connection.

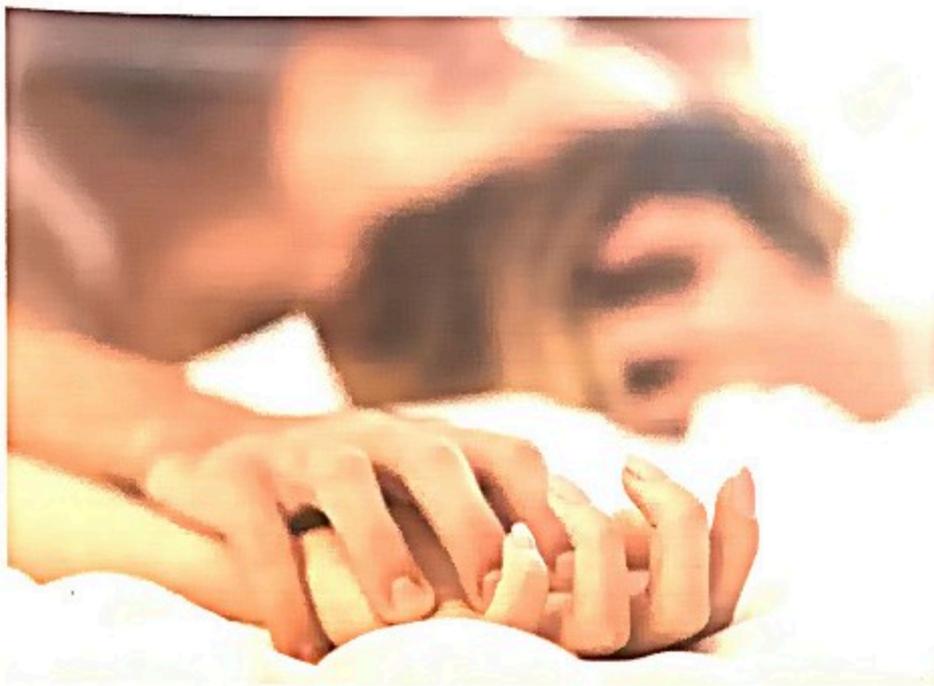
We unpacked this together and discovered some truths that apply to all of us stepmoms. When we are young and carefree, sex can be spontaneous. When we live together, share busy lives and own our parenting and stepparenting responsibilities, spontaneity often loses out to routine and the

demands of life. That includes providing supportive care to very ill children.

For Daniela, the solution was to enjoy increased intimacy and touching whenever possible and to outsource respite services through programs which allowed Cheryl to place her daughter in the temporary care of healthcare professionals with the knowledge that she was in good hands. The couple could then create the space to connect and be intimate.

They could do that without the pressure of providing care and, just as importantly, without the guilt of leaving Daniela's stepdaughter with unqualified caregivers. The lesson was clear: If you don't carve out space for intimacy, it simply won't





happen. I've even helped some clients create schedules and agree to a minimum level of intimacy each week, blocking out time for it.

Let's assume you've got the time for intimacy protected and you're together with your partner. There are still a few things you must do to keep the outside world from intruding on your special time. An essential measure and one that will also help with relaxation is to unplug. Banish your Blackberry or iPhone from the bedroom.

I remind my clients that, if you've got your work phone in the bedroom, it's like you're trying to be intimate with your partner but your boss and coworkers are hanging around just waiting

to intrude on your special time. Parking your electronics someplace far from the bedroom will help you focus your mind and be present in the moment.

Early on in our relationship, my husband joked that he sometimes felt like one of the monkeys in nature documentaries; the ones who were forced to have sex quickly before a predator came by. In our case, it was the threat of kids bursting in at a very inopportune moment. The solution was simple. To protect our time, we also had to protect our physical space.

We put a lock on our bedroom door and talked to the kids about our "quiet time" together. We checked to make sure the kids were

all settled before we retreated to enjoy that time alone. The kids have now come to respect our quiet time, but initially it was an education for everyone. Along with creating the right mental state for sexual intimacy, we have to create the right environment and seek out opportunities for it to happen.

MAKING INTIMACY WORK

I sometimes have to remind clients that the ideal sex we see in movies is a fantasy. Sometimes the stars don't align to allow us to have satisfying sex. And sometimes things simply don't work. Sometimes this is a function of age, which can have an effect on women (i.e., pain, insufficient lubrication) and men (i.e., erectile dysfunction).

As we discussed earlier, other things can intervene to prevent us from having good sex: stress, tension, a lack of connection, family pressures. This is why it's especially important for stepmoms to have limited expectations.

Even if it's just "naked snuggle time" without sex, you're still creating valuable intimacy. It's equally important not to blame anyone for things not going as planned. At the end of the day, remember that sexual intimacy is something all of us can have. It's always within our reach.

It simply may take some work. ■

The examples offered here represent composites, which reflect typical client concerns.