



# When You Want Sex at Different Times

*Building closeness with the Gottman Sound Relationship House, and creating your intimacy menu*

Different levels of desire are one of the most common things couples bring to therapy, and on their own they are not a sign that something is wrong. Most couples have a higher-desire partner and a lower-desire partner. The gap tends to cause the most strain when it gets read as rejection on one side and pressure on the other. This handout has three parts: rebuild the connection desire grows out of, build a shared intimacy menu, and get to know what you each actually want.

## Part 1: Start with the foundation

Dr. John Gottman's research describes lasting relationships as a house, with physical intimacy resting on top of friendship, fondness, and the small daily moments of turning toward each other. When those lower floors are strong, desire has more room to show up. Here are the levels of the Sound Relationship House, with one thing to try for each.

- **Build Love Maps.** Know your partner's inner world. **Try:** ask one open question about their current stresses, hopes, or week, and listen without fixing.
- **Share Fondness & Admiration.** Notice and say what you value. **Try:** tell your partner one specific thing you admire about them, out loud, daily.
- **Turn Toward Instead of Away.** Respond to small bids for connection. **Try:** catch the small bids this week (a comment, a touch, a sigh) and turn toward them.
- **The Positive Perspective.** Give the benefit of the doubt. **Try:** when something stings, ask "what is the most generous read of this?" before reacting.
- **Manage Conflict.** Soften how hard topics start. **Try:** raise a complaint as a wish ("I would love more \_\_\_") rather than a criticism.
- **Make Life Dreams Come True.** Support each other's hopes. **Try:** ask what your partner is longing for right now, and how you could back it.
- **Create Shared Meaning.** Build rituals and shared values. **Try:** name one small ritual of connection you want to keep or start.

**The two walls: Trust and Commitment.** The whole house is held up by trust (I know you have my back) and commitment (we are choosing this, together). For desire differences especially, it helps to reassure each other in words that a "no" to a particular activity is never a "no" to the relationship.

## Part 2: Create your intimacy menu

When one partner's go-to is something the other is not as fond of, intimacy can collapse into an all-or-nothing choice. An intimacy menu widens the options. The goal is a shared list of things you can reach for, ranging in closeness and intensity, that both of you genuinely enjoy or are open to.

### Step 1: Brainstorm on your own

Separately, each of you list intimate and physical activities under three headings. Include non-sexual closeness too (holding hands, long hugs, massage, showering together, slow kissing), not only intercourse.

Yes	Maybe / curious	Not for me
<i>things I enjoy and want</i>	<i>open to it, or under the right conditions</i>	<i>a no, and that is okay</i>

### Step 2: Compare and find the overlap

- Where you both wrote "yes": that is your core menu.
- Where one "yes" meets the other's "maybe": worth exploring gently, with no pressure.
- Honor every "not for me" without negotiating it. A clear no makes the yeses safe.

### Step 3: Write the menu together

Make a shared list with a few options at different energy levels, so there is something available whether you are both very in the mood or only a little. Closeness does not have to be all-or-nothing.

## Part 3: Going deeper

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These are for reflecting on your own and then sharing what you are comfortable sharing. They make the menu above more accurate, because they get at what you each actually want.

### Learn from what works

Emily Nagoski's research on desire (the [dual-control model](#)) describes desire as a balance: accelerators (what turns you on) weighed against brakes (what shuts desire down, such as stress, resentment, distraction, or feeling watched). Looking at your own good experiences shows you your accelerators.

- Bring to mind a sexual or sensual experience that felt genuinely good. Where were you? What was happening before and during? What made it work?
- What tends to turn you on, or help desire show up: rest, feeling wanted, privacy, a slow build, play, novelty?
- What tends to shut it down: exhaustion, stress, a messy house, feeling judged, pressure to perform?

### What your "yes" and "no" are really about

- When you say yes to sex, what are you saying yes to? What do you want from it: closeness, release, play, feeling desired, giving pleasure?
- When you say no, what exactly are you saying no to? Being on top or doing the effortful part? It being cold or goal-driven? It running long? Being the one to initiate tonight?
- A no is often a no to one version, not to all closeness. Spelling out the specific no often reveals a yes hiding inside it: "not that, but I would be up for \_\_\_."

## How do you want to feel?

Pick a few words for how you want to feel during intimacy, and share the ones that matter most right now: playful, strong, free, close, desired, taken care of, in control, let go, adored, safe, tender, wanted.

## Plan it like a scene

The kink community negotiates closeness ahead of time, and the questions translate to any couple. Talking these through in advance prevents a lot of crossed wires.

- What mood or feeling are we going for tonight?
- What do you want more of, and what do you want less of?
- What is off the table tonight (a clear, no-pressure no)?
- How will we check in if something shifts (a word, a pause)?
- What does each of us need afterward to feel close and cared for?

**On offering and passing.** Agree on a kind way to initiate and a kind way to decline. A "no" to one item on the menu is not a "no" to your partner. Many couples find a simple script helps: "I am not up for that tonight, but I would love to \_\_\_ instead."

**How to use this.** Go through it together on a calm evening, not in the middle of a conflict or right after a letdown. There are no wrong answers. The point is a shared, low-pressure way to stay close while your desire levels differ.

If desire differences have become a recurring source of hurt, that is workable, and it is common. Couples and sex therapy gives you a structured place to work on it together. Book a free 15-minute consult at [mymentalclimb.com](https://mymentalclimb.com) or call **(925) 414-0192**. Telehealth across California.