**[Sexuality and the Mormon Marriage](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/%22%20%5Co%20%22Permanent%20Link%20to%20Sexuality%20and%20the%20Mormon%20Marriage)**

by Natasha Helfer Parker

AS A MARRIAGE AND FAMILY therapist and a member of the LDS Church, I have been interested in how Latter-day Saints approach intimacy. In February of 2009 I began a blog, *The Mormon Therapist*, designed to provide LDS members with an anonymous venue to share personal struggles. I have been inundated with questions and stories about the delicate and sacred topic of human sexuality, and troubled by the many pleas for help. The following is a sampling of comments I’ve received from readers.

Statements made by women:

“We have an OK sex life. I am rarely in the mood and have to talk myself into it. I have no idea why . . . I am just not interested most of the time. I act like I am so he doesn’t feel bad.”

“Growing up in the Church, you’re always taught to extinguish sexual thoughts. In marriage, that doesn’t seem very conducive to enhancing sexual intimacy.”

Statements made by men:

“After our last child was conceived nine years ago, my wife announced she wouldn’t have any physical relationship with me anymore. And she has enforced it: no sex, no kissing, and virtually no touching.

“My unfortunate experience, both with my parents growing up and now with my own family after being married for eighteen years, is that sexuality isn’t something that is discussed. As a result, it has become a tremendous obstacle and frustration instead of bringing us closer as is intended. A close, connected, intimate relationship is seeming more and more like a distant, impossible dream. For now, I consider myself celibate.”

I share these excerpts to begin an open and frank discussion regarding female sexuality that is too rare in LDS culture. Statistics showing sexual dissatisfaction within marriage range anywhere from thirty to sixty-five percent.[[1]](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/#foot1) My hope is that by better understanding our religious history and current cultural context we can move toward increased intimacy in our relationships.

Female sexuality has been shaped by controversial traditions, myths, cultural mores, and male dominance since the beginning of documented time. Throughout history, religious culture has often contributed to the separation between sexuality and the ideals of purity and righteousness. Even our beloved stories regarding our most pivotal women, Eve and Mary, carry with them negative cultural baggage that does little to integrate the role of mother and lover. Yet the role of lover is central in its purpose of beginning any family, and therefore central to the plan of happiness. Sex is so clearly tied with beginning a family and everything that is sacred in a spousal relationship, there should be no surprise that it has been a prioritized target by all forces not aligned with God’s.

Many religions see the taking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden as either literally or symbolically having to do with sex. The “fruit” is forbidden by God, offered up by Satan, and Eve is the one who succumbs. Not only does she partake, she “tricks” Adam to succumb as well. Even though the LDS viewpoint of this scriptural account differs dramatically from most Christian perspectives, we do not escape the story’s cultural ramifications. Because of Eve’s misunderstood actions, woman has historically been classified and treated as seductress, temptress, and underminer of man.[[2]](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/#foot2) Natural female sensuality has been rendered suspect and women are left feeling naughty or sinful when it comes to their sexual instincts. For many women this inherited, cultural—and at times unconscious—shame can be a huge psychological obstacle to overcome.

On the opposite end of the spectrum we have Mary, whose story is one of reverence and sacred doctrine. However, becoming a “virgin mother” is an impossible feat for the rest of womankind. Motherhood and virginity are inherently non-concurrent. Women will never be able to—and are not meant to—measure up to this “ideal.” The purpose of the emphasis on Mary’s virginity was to underscore the fact that Christ was the literal Son of God. It was not meant to define her sexuality or to somehow imply that not being a virgin mother is sinful. We know Mary went on to have several other children with Joseph, and likely had a loving and appropriate sexual relationship with her husband.

In the last century Western culture has begun to overcome negative sexual perceptions, prototypes, and myths. Additionally, the pendulum has at times swung too much in the other direction where sex and sexuality have lost their sacredness. This only furthers confusion and misperception about the purpose and enjoyment of sexual, intimate relationships.

In addition to the setbacks mentioned above, those raised with LDS or similar religious values spend the first part of their lives avoiding sexuality while trying to stay morally clean until marriage. Those who do not stay morally clean face processes of repentance. While repentance is intended as a deep healing process, the fact that a teenager’s parents, leaders, and role models often feel uncomfortable about sexuality can unfortunately increase feelings of unhealthy sexual shame.

Rigid and inaccurate portrayals of sexuality passed on by even well-meaning parents or leaders can be detrimental. Growing up with the idea that sex or our sexual anatomy is bad or dirty can have devastating effects for people when they try to get in touch with their passionate and sensual selves once married. Laura Brotherson states the following in her book *And They Were Not Ashamed*: “The ‘Good Girl Syndrome’ is a result of the negative conditioning that occurs from parents, church, and society as they teach—or fail to teach—the goodness of sexuality and its divine purposes. This conditioning leads to negative thoughts and feelings about sex and the body, resulting in an inhibited sexual response within marriage. . . . The Good Girl Syndrome may be the great underlying and underestimated cause of sexual dissatisfaction in marriage.”[[3]](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/#foot3) Due to cultural, religious, and family influences we all come to a marriage with a sexual history—whether we’ve had sex or not.

Sexual apathy is a problem that plagues many marriages. It can be a difficult issue to address, mainly because the nature of the problem is the problem: lack of desire. There can be underlying issues that account for apathy and indifference, and it is important to know that these issues can often be resolved. When couples disagree over the frequency of sex or the type of sexual encounter that is acceptable, it is paramount that they be willing to begin an open, nonjudgmental, and honest discussion together. It is usually not the case that there is no specific reason for a lack of interest in sexual intimacy. We are all born with a sexual self that is inherent to who we are as children of God. Unfortunately, many things can happen to this sexual self along life’s journey that take it off its intended course. Sexual apathy is usually a symptom of deeper—many times hidden or even unconscious—issues. For example:

1.A history of sexual abuse or trauma often has negative implications for a person’s sexuality. Many people who have been sexually abused are caught in a trap of shame and secrecy well into their adult years, if not their entire lives. Just because your spouse tells you they have not been sexually abused does not mean they haven’t. Disclosing this past trauma can be an incredibly difficult, anxiety-producing, and painful process that many would understandably rather avoid. If you are dealing with unresolved issues related to sexual abuse, it is important to get help. Options might include professional counselors or Church leaders who can offer support and assistance. This is not a battle you should or need to face alone.

2.Hormonal changes can have powerful effects on sexuality. This is especially the case during times of childbearing, nursing, menstruation, and menopause. Men go through hormonal changes as well. As men age testosterone levels decrease, which can affect sex drive and erectile function. Also, any time we feel inadequate in our sexuality, it can bring about strong feelings of anxiety, which then further exacerbates sexual functioning. Educating ourselves regarding normal bodily functions and how they relate to sexuality is an important process for all couples.

3.Relationship issues that carry over into the bedroom discourage sexual intimacy. Sexuality is not only a physical phenomenon, it is also very much tied to the psyche. If a woman feels angry, hurt, or disappointed, it can be extremely difficult to turn off those emotions when it comes time to be physically intimate. These issues, if left unaddressed, can turn lethal for many marriages.

4.Issues surrounding self-image and cultural expectations can also affect sexuality. The idea that our bodies need to look a certain way in order for us to feel sexy or attractive can be extremely damaging to a woman’s self-esteem. It can be difficult to allow yourself to be touched and loved physically when you deprecate the body you have, or even worse, when your spouse criticizes it as well.

This is by no means an all-extensive list—it is meant to address some very real issues that many people are facing. Sexuality is so personally centered that any slight problem can immediately be blown out of proportion, which then inadvertently affects the next sexual encounter. A negative cycle often ensues that leaves people apathetic, hopeless, shamed, angry, or hurt.

The good news is that the most pivotal resource we have to clarify, rethink, and unbias our sexual perceptions is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Its teachings support women, marriage, and sex within the bonds of marriage, and “oneness” with one’s spouse. “A man (shall) leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.”[[4]](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/#foot4) With this simple yet direct scriptural teaching we are forced to marry the thoughts of conjoined naked flesh with that of doctrinal guidance.

Correct gospel teachings can be a great starting place for many who are struggling with their sexuality. One of the most important truths of the restored gospel is the understanding that Heavenly Father is a physical being. This belief sets us apart from most other religions. Even before Joseph Smith’s vision, we were taught in Genesis that we are created in God’s image. We have the added clarification and understanding that there exists a Heavenly Mother—the feminine part of Deity that is also biblically addressed when we are taught, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”[[5]](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/#foot5) As women who have been correctly taught that our bodies are temples of divine heritage, we need to remember that these temples have been created for a righteous purpose, complete with organs and hormones that help facilitate the act of sex. The same goes for the sacred male sexual parts. When we understand that our heavenly parents are physical beings with the same anatomical parts we have, we are better equipped to embrace our own physical bodies.

We learn through scripture that from the beginning of human existence, Heavenly Father has used symbolism and ritual to help us understand deeper concepts and doctrine. Temple ceremonies, baptisms, sacramental ordinances, etc., are ceremonial and physical manifestations meant to represent spiritual concepts. As a religious ceremony, marriage is the ritual that has us commit to each other emotionally and spiritually. Sex follows, in essence, as a private ritual that has us commit to each other physically. It is the tangible symbol that literally brings two people together.

Since sexuality plays such an important role in married life, it is important that women learn to recognize and respond to their own sexual needs, as well as the needs of their husbands. For those needing some direction on how to embrace their sensuality and improve sexual expressions of love within marriage, here are some suggestions:

1.Start with self-esteem work. It is important to love yourself enough that you can allow someone else to love you and touch you. Our current culture, obsessed with the perfect look, body, and breast size, does not help us feel good about ourselves. However, we do not need to buy into this climate of self-hatred. Our LDS beliefs regarding our self worth and divine nature should serve as a resource. Self-help books such as *Self Esteem*,[[6]](http://journal.segullah.org/feature-articles/sexuality-and-the-mormon-marriage/#foot6) by Matthew McKay, PhD, and Patrick Fanning, can be useful as well.

2.Do not underestimate the consequences of rigidly labeling your sexuality. If you define yourself as the one who has the “lower sex drive,” this will more than likely become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If unpleasant or frustrating sexual experiences have left you disillusioned or feeling that better sex is not worth working for, challenge these notions as well. Understand that a couple’s sexual journey is a process—one that should improve with time, patience, and increased communication.

3.Educate yourself regarding your body. Many women often do not know the names of all their sexual organs, much less what everything is supposed to do or be used for. Learn the male anatomy as well. Be aware of the biological mechanics of the sexual process.

4.Encourage and follow up on any romantic or sexual feelings inclined toward your husband. Do not wait for or expect him to always be the initiator. Think positively about your spouse (the physical, emotional, and personality traits) rather than focusing on negatives. Take time to be romantic: date nights, sending flowers, cooking a special meal, love notes, anything that shows you are willing to give of yourself.

5.Creativity, open communication, and feeling safe enough to be honest are all crucial to increased intimacy.

6.If there are relational issues standing in the way (trust problems, anger, resentment, bitterness, contention) it may be time to seek professional help and begin marital therapy. Couples do not need to be in the throes of divorce for therapy to be useful. In fact, therapy is usually more beneficial when couples are hoping to improve their relationships instead of looking to get out.

7.Rule out medical issues that may compromise your sex drive by consulting with your doctor.

Sex is good. It is of God. It is a wonderful, sacred, bonding, and procreative power; a gift that in essence allows a taste of divinity! Dorothy Allison says, “Women lose their lives not knowing they can do something different. . . . I claimed myself and remade my life. Only when I knew I belonged to myself completely did I become capable of giving myself to another, of finding joy in desire, pleasure in our love, power in this body no one else owns.”7 May we go forward and stake claim in this miraculous embodiment we call the female self—then be willing to wholeheartedly join with the other half we call husband.
 *Natasha Helfer Parker, MS, LCMFT, is a licensed marriage and family therapist who has been in practice for thirteen years. She received her bachelor’s degree in psychology from BYU and her master’s degree in family therapy from Friends University in Wichita, Kansas. She began her career working in a drug addiction treatment center in Detroit, then contracted with the Chicago chapter of LDS Family Services while living in the Milwaukee area. She has been in private practice for the last seven years. She is a clinical member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and a member of the American Association of Sexual Educators, Counselors and Therapists. She started her blog,* The Mormon Therapist*, in February of 2009 as a way to reach out to LDS members in an “advice column” format. Her blog visitors are representative of all fifty states and eighty countries. She has been married for fourteen years and has four childre*