Sexuality, Touch, Desire, and Intimacy · About 4 minutes

Caring for the Conditions Without Promising Desire

Pain, capacity and circumstances deserve attention in their own right

What is the evening actually like in the life where desire is supposed to appear? Begin with the body that has been living through the day.

Attention to these conditions can be caring. It becomes harder to receive when there is an unspoken expectation attached: after all this help, you should want sex again.

A weekend away, with what expectations?

Sam, in this fictional example, has been experiencing pain during sex and no longer wants to attempt it. Rowan suggests a weekend away. Sam would welcome rest and time together, but worries that accepting the trip will be taken as willingness to resume sexual activity.

Rowan can clarify the offer: “Would you enjoy going away for rest and company, with no expectation of sex?” Sam may say yes, no, or ask for a different arrangement. Rowan needs to decide whether that is genuinely an offer they can make. Disappointment during the trip would not entitle Rowan to renegotiate Sam's body through pressure.

A holiday is also no substitute for assessment of unexplained pain. Official health guidance recommends appropriate medical assessment for frequent or severe pain during sex.[2] Sam does not need a diagnosis before stopping an activity that hurts, and seeking care would not commit them to resuming it later. Cost, access and previous healthcare experiences may influence which help is possible or welcome.

Sexual-response research considers influences that support arousal and influences that inhibit it, with considerable variation between people.[1] Context therefore matters, but it cannot be used to diagnose Sam from the outside. Rowan still needs to hear what Sam says about their experience.

Support that is worthwhile whatever happens next

Sharing household work, helping with an appointment when asked, or creating more privacy can improve someone's life. Those benefits have value even if sexual interest remains unchanged. Treating help as an investment that must produce desire places another demand on the person receiving it.

Rowan's wish for a shared sexual life also deserves an honest place. There may be grief for a kind of pleasure or recognition they used to share. Sam may have losses of their own. Neither person needs to pretend the change is easy, and neither can promise an earlier version of intimacy will return.

It may be useful to separate two conversations: what care is wanted now, and how each person understands the relationship they are living in. They overlap, but they ask different things. One can lead to practical support; the other may reveal wishes, limits or differences that remain difficult.

The companion considers what closeness asks of two people with bodies and lives of their own. This piece turns toward the conditions those bodies have been living in.

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A less painful, less pressured evening has value of its own. Desire will have to be heard in its own time, if and when it speaks.

Companion reading · When Closeness Holds More Than One Wish

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Sexuality, Touch, Desire, and Intimacy (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Janssen, E., & Bancroft, J. (2023). The dual control model of sexual response: A scoping review, 2009–2022. The Journal of Sex Research, 60(7), 948–968. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2219247 Source.

[2] American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (n.d.). When sex is painful. Patient FAQ. Source.

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