

When Closeness Holds More Than One Wish

Sexuality, touch, desire, and the possibility of meeting without losing ourselves

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You may miss being wanted more than you miss a particular kind of sex. You may miss the way someone once looked at you, the unhurried attention, or the feeling that there was a part of your relationship that belonged to the two of you. It can be difficult to explain this without sounding as though you are keeping count. Sometimes you say nothing. Sometimes the loneliness comes out as a question your partner hears as criticism.

Or you may be the person who becomes tense when an affectionate moment begins to feel like the beginning of a request. You love the person beside you. You may enjoy their company and want their warmth. Yet you also want to know that a kiss can remain a kiss, that tiredness will be believed, and that your body will not be asked to reassure someone in a language it cannot honestly speak that evening.

Perhaps neither description quite fits. You might want sex and feel embarrassed about wanting it. You might feel little sexual interest and be more troubled by what you think that says about you than by the absence of sex itself. You may be learning about a changed body, recovering from an injury to trust, questioning a familiar identity, or noticing a desire you have never had room to name.

These experiences can become especially lonely when there seems to be a correct answer: be more adventurous, communicate better, make more effort, stop asking so often, learn to be satisfied. Advice can arrive before anyone has understood what is actually difficult. The person who longs for connection feels accused of wanting too much. The person who hesitates feels accused of withholding something they should be able to give.

I want to begin a little earlier, before we decide what either person ought to do. What are you reaching for? What happens inside you when that wish meets another person's different experience? Is there room for both accounts, including the parts that are uncertain, inconvenient, or painful to hear?

Making that room does not settle every difference. It can make the difference more understandable. It can also help us notice where the next step belongs: in a conversation, a practical change, a health concern, an act of repair, or a recognition that what we hope for may not be available in the way we imagined.

What we hope an intimate moment will tell us

An invitation can carry several wishes at once. You may want pleasure, play, relief, tenderness, an encounter with someone you find attractive, or the feeling of being a lover rather than only a dependable companion. You may want to be approached without having to organize the moment. You may want the freedom to initiate without feeling exposed or ridiculous.

When an invitation is declined, one answer can seem to become an answer to a much larger question. Not tonight becomes I am no longer desirable. A different preference becomes You do not really know me. A quiet response becomes proof that the relationship has changed beyond repair. Those meanings deserve attention, but they need not receive the final word about what happened.

The person receiving the invitation may be having an equally complicated experience. They might want affection but lack energy for sex. They may be anticipating discomfort. They may be afraid that being honest will lead to an argument, or that accepting a little closeness will be understood as agreeing to everything that follows. They might also be uncertain about attraction itself. Each possibility asks for a different response.

Try separating the moment into three small descriptions: what was offered or requested; what you wanted; and what you came to believe the response meant. An interpretation may prove accurate, partly accurate, or wrong. Being able to reconsider it does not make the longing unimportant. It makes the longing easier to speak about without requiring another person to confirm the whole story.

Research and clinical work on desire differences increasingly consider the relationship and its context, rather than locating the entire problem in the person who wants less. A difference is something to understand; it is not, by itself, a diagnosis of either partner. [1]

When wanting becomes embarrassing

A wish can be difficult to name because it reveals where we are still hoping to be met. You might be comfortable discussing work, money, or the children's plans and become strangely careful when you want to say that you miss being kissed. The request seems to expose more than a preference. You are letting someone see that their response matters to you, and that you cannot arrange it for yourself.

Hesitation can carry its own shame. You may feel that a loving partner should be able to offer more, or that an earlier version of you made a promise your present self is breaking. You might search for a sufficiently convincing explanation before allowing your reluctance to count. Sometimes you do not yet have an explanation. An honest account can begin with what you know now and leave the reason unfinished.

When shame enters, people can start defending positions neither quite means: I should never have to ask; you should never ask me again. Beneath the argument there may be a wish to stop feeling exposed, inadequate, or in debt. We can approach that possibility gently, without deciding that every disagreement conceals a deeper wound. Sometimes the present difference is exactly what it appears to be. It still deserves a conversation in which neither person is reduced to the difficulty.

When closeness carries a history

John Bowlby understood attachment as an enduring human bond, with its own importance alongside sexuality. This helps us recognize why an intimate invitation can matter so much without making every sexual wish an attachment problem. You may want the pleasure of the encounter and the reassurance of being someone your partner moves toward. [20]

Sue Johnson's work brings attention to how fear of disconnection can shape the conversation: one person presses for a response, while another becomes harder to reach. Beneath those movements may be loneliness, shame or apprehension. Naming the feeling can give the conversation a different beginning; it leaves the other person's actual answer open. [21]

Perhaps you learned that wanting would expose you to ridicule. Perhaps affection once came with an expectation you could not question. An ordinary hesitation now may seem to bring that whole world close again. Or the hurt may belong to this relationship: repeated dismissals, a betrayal, an agreement that has not held. Understanding asks us to consider the history you recognize and the present you are living. It gives us more to work with than either blaming the past or insisting that the current moment stands alone.

You might begin to notice the instant when disappointment becomes certainty that you do not matter, or when a partner's wish becomes certainty that you are about to lose your freedom. That instant deserves care. A little room around it may help you say what is happening before a familiar response takes over. Sometimes you will still need distance. Sometimes you will be able to stay and discover that this person, on this occasion, has something different to say.

Desire does not always arrive first

Some people recognize desire as an immediate movement toward another person. For others, interest becomes noticeable only after an experience has already been freely welcomed: a conversation, affectionate attention, or an opportunity to leave the day's demands behind. Rosemary Basson's model makes room for responsive as well as spontaneous desire. It offers one way of understanding experience, not a sequence everyone should follow. [2]

The word freely matters. Being open to seeing whether an experience is enjoyable differs from trying to endure something you do not want in the hope that your body will eventually cooperate. Curiosity includes an available ending. You can change your mind. A partner's disappointment does not remove that freedom.

Desire, bodily arousal, willingness, and consent answer different questions. What do I want? What is my body doing? Am I interested in this particular possibility? What am I agreeing to now? A bodily response cannot answer all four. Research on subjective and genital arousal shows that those responses do not always match; the ethical requirement to ask and respect a person's choice remains. [4]

Emily Nagoski's contemporary writing on long-term sexual relationships challenges the idea that spontaneous desire must remain the measure of a relationship's future. Her public synthesis offers language for circumstances and changing states that affect interest. It can help someone approach a change with curiosity, while leaving their actual preference open. The book is not a test that defines a healthy sexual life for every reader. [11]

The conditions in which wanting has room

Sometimes you know what you want but cannot find a setting in which it feels possible. You are rushed, uncomfortable, distracted, watched, uncertain about what will be expected, or carrying the mental work of everything that must happen afterward. The difficulty may belong partly to the circumstances.

The dual control model describes sexual response in terms of interacting excitatory and inhibitory processes. As an educational lens, it invites us to notice what helps interest and what makes it harder, without assuming that a person needs more stimulation or less caution. A particular limit may be sensible and worth keeping. [3]

Antonio Damasio and Gil Carvalho place feelings within the lived experience of bodily states. Allan Schore's developmental work considers how affect is shaped and regulated in early relationships. Together they support taking the bodily dimension of an encounter seriously, while leaving its particular meaning to be discovered. [23], [22]

A quickening pulse might accompany eagerness, fear, embarrassment or several things at once. A sudden stillness might be restful or unwelcome. You can notice and ask what fits, rather than forcing the sensation to reveal a hidden truth. Being met may involve a slower pace, a little more distance, an ordinary conversation or appropriate health care. There is room for your own language about what happens inside you.

The practical question is modest: what is one condition that matters here? It might be privacy, time, a clear ending, a different kind of invitation, relief from a genuine responsibility, or knowing that an honest no will be respected. A change in that condition may help. It may also reveal that your wish remains different. We are learning about fit rather than making a bargain with your body.

Esther Perel's writing makes room for an erotic life that includes imagination and sensory engagement beyond sexual activity. That broader frame can help us notice a part of ourselves that has become less available amid routine or depletion. You might enjoy music, a familiar landscape, clothing that feels like your own choice, or an unhurried exchange. These possibilities belong to your life even when they lead to no sexual encounter. [9]

You do not need to become a more exciting person to deserve company. Nor does a moment of pleasure mean that the practical burden has disappeared. Someone may need a quieter room or a shared responsibility completed before another invitation can be considered. A meaningful change sometimes looks very ordinary.

The wishes within the wish

Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model offers language for the different concerns we can carry together. One part of you may want to reach toward your partner while another wants protection from another rejection. One may value being generous while another has become tired of disappearing. In this model, these responses can have protective intentions. You can use that language if it helps, without deciding that one concern is the real you and the others must be overcome. [24]

Try hearing the concern before choosing the action. The part that wants to stop initiating may be trying to protect your dignity. The part that keeps asking may be trying to preserve something precious in the relationship. Understanding either concern gives it a place in the conversation with yourself. You can then consider the cost of its usual response, including what it asks of another person.

You may discover that a wish needs words, a frightened expectation needs checking, or a limit needs to remain. You may simply feel less divided against yourself. From there, a more accurate invitation becomes possible: something you can offer with interest, without requiring your partner's answer to settle every feeling you carry.

When affection starts to feel like a promise

Consider an invented example. Maren has stopped leaning against Ivo while they prepare dinner. Ivo misses the small contact and assumes it means that Maren no longer enjoys being near him. Maren misses it too. She has become unsure whether accepting affection will begin a conversation about why they are not having more sex.

Their first useful discovery is not a hidden explanation for either person's desire. It is that a gesture they both valued has acquired an expectation neither has clearly named. Ivo can acknowledge that his disappointment has sometimes entered these moments. Maren can say that she wants some forms of closeness while remaining uncertain about others.

They agree, for one evening, that a brief embrace is available only if both want it, and that it will not be treated as the first step toward sex. Either can decline. Later, they can ask whether the agreement was respected and what the experience was like. No physical practice is needed to make the conversation worthwhile.

Maren notices that she does want the embrace. Ivo notices warmth and some sadness: the moment matters, and it does not answer his larger longing. Both observations can remain. The agreement has made one kind of closeness more possible; it has not settled their sexual relationship.

That distinction protects something important. A small success need not be recruited into proof that a larger yes is now owed. An unfinished wish need not cancel a real moment of affection. What becomes possible can be appreciated at its actual size.

Suppose the following week is less easy. Ivo reaches for Maren and then asks whether things are finally improving. She feels the familiar expectation return. They have something specific to revisit: she had understood the embrace as a moment apart from assessing their sexual relationship. Ivo can acknowledge what his question brought into it. Maren can describe what happened to her willingness. They may need a clearer agreement about when to discuss the larger question. Repair begins with understanding this event, rather than declaring that the whole experiment succeeded or failed.

Reliability becomes believable through these ordinary returns. One careful evening may offer relief; it takes more than an evening to learn what another person will do when disappointed. Maren can appreciate a repair and remain cautious. Ivo can follow through and still need a

separate place to speak about his longing. Their conversations have different purposes, and both deserve time.

Stan Tatkin's emphasis on caring for oneself and one's partner together offers a useful question here: does our way of handling a difference leave both people with a place in the relationship? Applied to intimacy, this includes how we receive an answer, return to an unfinished conversation and care about the effect of our conduct. Reliability takes form in those actions. [26]

Living in a body that has its own circumstances

Our intimate lives take place in bodies with histories and changing capacities. Pain, illness, medication effects, fatigue, disability, hormonal transitions, and other health concerns may deserve attention alongside emotional and relational questions. Pain during sex warrants appropriate health care; you do not need to push through it to demonstrate love or commitment. [14]

Some changes bring grief. You may miss a former ease, a kind of touch, or a sense of yourself that was once familiar. It can be painful when a partner responds only with reassurance that everything is fine. You may need them to understand that something has changed, even while there are other forms of pleasure or closeness you value.

There can also be discovery. A changed pace may make one experience more welcome. A particular activity may no longer fit. Another may matter more than expected. You are allowed to have a present body, rather than an ongoing assignment to recreate an earlier one.

You may also miss how you once felt in another person's eyes. Being told that appearance does not matter can leave this loss strangely untouched. Perhaps what you miss is confidence, freedom from discomfort, or the sense that your body could bring pleasure to someone you loved. It may help to speak about that particular loss, without being hurried toward gratitude for what remains.

A caring response might be curiosity about what feels welcome now, help finding appropriate care, or company while you mourn a change. You can value adaptation and still feel sad. Your partner may have feelings about the change as well. Hearing them can be part of intimacy when the conversation leaves you with a voice in what happens to your body.

In his blessing 'For the Senses,' John O'Donohue asks that touch register 'the beauty / Of the otherness' around us. The phrase invites a kind of attention that can be easily lost when we are preoccupied with whether our bodies are performing well enough. Another person is someone to encounter, with an experience we are still learning to know. Our own body, too, deserves more than an appraisal of what it can provide. You can receive this as a poetic invitation, whatever language you use for the inner life. [27]

Lori Brotto and colleagues have studied structured mindfulness-based and supportive educational treatments for women with sexual interest/arousal difficulties. The findings give attention and education a serious place in clinical care. They do not show that a brief BKL practice will restore desire. Here, attention is offered as a way to discover what you actually experience, including a reason to stop or seek other support. [5]

Wanting honestly, hearing honestly

It can take courage to say what you want without already knowing how the other person will respond. A clear request leaves you visible. It also leaves the other person room to answer. You might say that you miss being approached, want affectionate time without an expectation, or would like help understanding what has changed. You can ask for a conversation before asking for an activity.

Listening asks something of us too. Someone's no may bring sadness, embarrassment, anger, or fear. We can take those feelings seriously while choosing how to respond. Disappointment can be expressed without becoming punishment. A refusal should not carry the task of persuading the disappointed person that the relationship is still worthwhile.

At the same time, respecting a limit does not require pretending your own wish has disappeared. You may need space to grieve, reflect, seek support, or consider what you can live with. Both people have authorship. Neither person can settle the other's experience by being more persuasive.

The World Health Organization's framing of sexual health includes well-being, respect, access to care, and freedom from coercion and discrimination. There is room within that frame for varied levels of interest, different identities and relationship arrangements, and lives in which sex is not wanted. A course cannot supply a universal quota for a good intimate life. [13]

Remaining yourself while staying in relation

Murray Bowen's work on differentiation makes room for a considered position within a relationship that matters. Daniel Siegel's account of integration brings autonomy and empathic connection into the same picture. Intimacy can include being affected by another person while retaining a voice of your own. [19], [25]

You may hear your partner's sadness and find yourself touched by it. You might want to hold their hand, talk tomorrow or acknowledge something you have avoided. You may also remain clear that you do not want sexual contact. Being moved by someone can inform your answer without taking the answer away from you. The same is true when you are the one who longs for more: you can care about a partner's limit and remain honest about the significance of your wish.

Charlotte Brontë gives this conflict a painful form in chapter XXVII of *Jane Eyre*. Jane loves Rochester and feels the force of his appeal after learning that he is already married. She also recognizes a claim on her life that cannot be surrendered to his distress. 'I care for myself,' she insists. The scene belongs to its own religious and historical world. Here it gives a human shape to the difficulty of caring deeply while retaining judgment. Its sorrow matters as much as its resolve; it is not a prescription that leaving proves self-respect. [28]

Making room for generosity and a real answer

There can be pleasure in giving someone pleasure. You may choose an experience because you enjoy their enjoyment, value the closeness, or feel curious about meeting them in a particular way. That choice belongs among the possibilities. So does discovering that an offer you made no longer feels right. Being generous does not require becoming unavailable to yourself.

The question becomes more difficult when agreement is how you keep the evening peaceful or prove that you are a good partner. You might notice that you are checking their face more than your own experience, or hoping the encounter will end without another difficult conversation. Those observations deserve attention. You do not have to convert them into an accusation to ask for a different arrangement.

The person who feels repeatedly unwanted also needs somewhere honest to stand. Respecting a refusal can leave a painful wish unanswered. You may need to say that sexual connection matters deeply to you, ask whether there is a shared willingness to explore the difference, or consider what continuing in the relationship would mean. A limit around a particular encounter and a conversation about the relationship's future can both be necessary. Taking time to find words for the larger question may make it easier to leave tonight's answer free.

Discovering what is possible between you

Some relationships find more room through a change in how people approach, respond, repair, or share the conditions of daily life. Some discover a welcome form of intimacy they had been overlooking. Others become more honest about a difference that has persisted beneath accommodation or hope.

Kleinplatz and colleagues' work invites clinical attention to the quality of erotic intimacy, rather than frequency alone. Its early intervention evidence is limited, but the question is useful: what kind of encounter would be worth choosing for these people? The answer must remain theirs. An impressive experience, a particular act, or a frequency target need not become the standard. [7]

Understanding does not manufacture attraction. It cannot make a partner want what they do not want, or require someone to be content with an arrangement that leaves an important part of life unmet. There may be sorrow in recognizing this. There may also be relief in no longer treating every difference as a personal failure or a problem that sufficient effort must solve.

It can be especially painful to love someone and discover that love does not settle this part of life. You may want an answer that makes neither person wrong and costs neither person very much. Sometimes that answer takes time to find. Sometimes the available choices each carry loss. Wisdom here may mean giving the question enough honesty and support that a decision can grow from what is actually possible, while allowing yourself tenderness for the life you had hoped to share.

The work is to become more accurate and less alone with what is true: what you want, what you can offer, what has hurt, what needs care, and what remains uncertain. You may choose an agreement, a boundary, a health consultation, a supported conversation, or time before

deciding. There is no requirement to reach a major conclusion in an emotionally charged moment.

A way into the pathway

The five modules begin with an ordinary moment you want to understand. They help you name the wish and the meaning around it; examine desire and its conditions; speak and hear preferences; consider a form of closeness that is actually wanted; and review what can be built or needs to be faced. You can work alone, use an invented example, or involve a partner only by freely chosen agreement.

The free reflection is optional. It offers a starting point and a later opportunity to notice what changed. It does not assess whether your desire is normal, whether your partner loves you, or whether a relationship should continue. You may begin with one module simply because its question matters to you.

Perhaps the first change will be a clearer sentence. Perhaps it will be recognizing that a particular offer is welcome, or that a limit needs to be believed. Perhaps nothing shifts yet, but your experience has become easier to describe without blaming yourself. That can be a worthwhile beginning: a little more room to know yourself, and a more honest place from which to meet another person.

Continue exploring

Sexuality, Touch, Desire, and Intimacy · pathway and optional reflection

When Desire Becomes a Question About the Relationship

Sources and reading

Research findings, clinical frameworks and literary perspectives serve different purposes. Their inclusion does not establish the effectiveness of this educational pathway.

[1] Dewitte, M., Carvalho, J., Corona, G., Limoncin, E., Pascoal, P., Reisman, Y., & Štulhofer, A. (2020). Sexual Desire Discrepancy: A Position Statement of the European Society for Sexual Medicine. Clinical consensus / literature synthesis. Source

Position statement is not a BKL trial. Full publisher page intermittently inaccessible; no unverified detailed treatment recommendation imported.

[2] Basson, R. (2001). Human sex-response cycles. Clinical conceptual model. Source

A model developed in a gendered clinical literature is not a universal sequence or permission to override reluctance.

[3] Janssen, E., & Bancroft, J. (2023). The Dual Control Model of Sexual Response: A Scoping Review, 2009–2022. Research review / model. Source

Not an individual diagnostic test; BKL does not identify a person's brain mechanism from a self-report.

[4] Chivers, M. L., Seto, M. C., Lalumière, M. L., Laan, E., & Grimbos, T. (2010). Agreement of self-reported and genital measures of sexual arousal in men and women: A meta-analysis. Meta-analysis. Source

Laboratory aggregate findings do not establish anyone's consent or predict an individual response. Consent principles are normative, not an inference established by this meta-analysis.

[5] Brotto, L. A., Zdaniuk, B., Chivers, M. L., Jabs, F., Grabovac, A., Lalumière, M. L., Weinberg, J., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Basson, R. (2021). A randomized trial comparing group mindfulness-based cognitive therapy with group supportive sex education and therapy for the treatment of female sexual interest/arousal disorder. Randomized clinical trial. Source

148 women with diagnosed SIAD; both active conditions improved. No efficacy transfer to BKL, a brief exercise, other populations, or all sexual concerns.

[7] Kleinplatz, P. J., et al. (2018). From Sexual Desire Discrepancies to Desirable Sex: Creating the Optimal Connection. Small intervention study / clinical research. [Source](#)

14 heterosexual couples; no randomized control described in inspected abstract. Findings are preliminary and do not establish BKL outcomes.

[9] Perel, E., & Miller, M. A. (2021). Intimacy and Your 5 Senses: How to Invite Eroticism into Your Relationship When You're Feeling Depleted. Clinical / popular essay. [Source](#)

Clinical interpretation, not outcome evidence. No hormones, neurobiology, inevitable benefit, sensory-access assumption or copied exercise imported.

[11] Nagoski, E. (2024). Come Together: The Science (and Art!) of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections. Research-informed popular synthesis. [Source](#)

Book metadata, description and author summaries were consulted, not the full book. No full-book reading or chapter-specific attribution claimed.

[13] World Health Organization (n.d.). Sexual health. Public-health definition / normative framework. [Source](#)
Definition is not an individual assessment instrument or outcome standard requiring sex.

[14] American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (n.d.). When Sex Is Painful. Clinical patient guidance. [Source](#)
No individualized diagnosis, medication recommendation, pelvic exercise or pain treatment provided.

[19] Bowen Center for the Study of the Family (n.d.). Differentiation of Self. Family-systems clinical theory. [Source](#)
Not a diagnostic scale, sexual-maturity hierarchy or evidence that differentiation restores desire. Site's fictional family narrative is not reused.

[20] Bowlby, J. (1977). The making and breaking of affectional bonds. I. Aetiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory. Foundational attachment theory / clinical synthesis. [Source](#)

Theoretical synthesis; not an individual causal account or an intimacy-intervention trial.

[21] Johnson, S. M., interviewed by T. Ferriss (2021). Iconic Therapist Dr. Sue Johnson — How to Improve Sex and Crack the Code of Love (#529). Founder's clinical account of EFT / original interview. [Source](#)

Clinical interview, not a treatment trial. Broad male/female neurobiological claims and guaranteed restoration of desire are not imported.

[22] Schore, A. N. (2001). Effects of a secure attachment relationship on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health. Developmental affect-regulation / interdisciplinary theoretical synthesis. [Source](#)

Infant-focused synthesis; adult application is clinical interpretation. No individual history, exclusive hemisphere localization or neural treatment change inferred.

[23] Damasio, A., & Carvalho, G. B. (2013). The nature of feelings: Evolutionary and neurobiological origins. Neuroscientific review / theoretical synthesis. [Source](#)

Abstract-level reading; bodily experience does not establish its personal meaning, consent or a diagnosis.

[24] IFS Institute / model developed by Richard C. Schwartz (n.d.). The Internal Family Systems Model Outline. Foundational parts-oriented clinical model. [Source](#)

Model-specific constructs, optional language; no anatomical claim, required trauma history, memory recovery or efficacy transfer.

[25] Siegel, D. J. (n.d.). Interpersonal Neurobiology. Interpersonal-neurobiology conceptual framework. [Source](#)
Conceptual synthesis, not a measured neural outcome or a trial of these practices.

[26] Tatkin, S. (2018). Secure-Functioning Essentials: Taking Care of Yourself and Your Partner at the Same Time. PACT clinical framework / original clinical essay. [Source](#)

Clinical principle, not outcome evidence. Fixed timing, universal threat-neurobiology, mandatory eye contact and ending without unhappiness are not adopted.

[27] O'Donohue, J. (2008). For the Senses. Poetry / optional philosophical reflection. [Source](#)

Original poem text read in attributed reprint, not full book or publisher copy. Interpretation is literary; no clinical evidence or required spiritual belief.

[28] Brontë, C. (1847). *Jane Eyre*, chapter XXVII. Classic literature / original scene. Source

Selected chapter passage, not a claim of full-novel reading. Novel's historical/religious premises and departure are not clinical prescriptions.