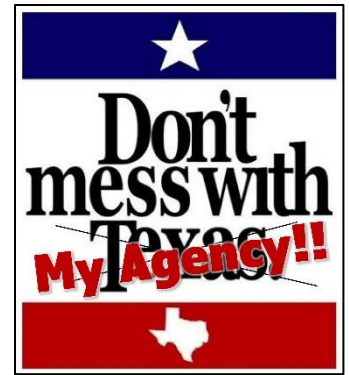


AGENCY, CHANGE & SEX

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So many couples struggle with understanding the vital importance of agency in their marriages and how that affects one's ability to change. Many have mistaken understandings of how people change, which then keeps them stuck in unhealthy patterns at best or causes significant damage to their relationships at worst. The following is a compilation of insights regarding agency, change, entitlement, neediness, bridling, and surrender within and the sexual relationship.



Agency, Entitlement and Sex. Healthy sexuality requires that both spouses feel like they have a voice in the bedroom and an ability to freely discuss their desires and choose which desires to act upon. The different wiring and general disparity in sexual desire common to any marriage can often create a dilemma when it comes to agency and choice.

For sexuality to truly bless a marriage, both spouses must be able to engage with authenticity. The cultivated-desire (lower-desire) or less-verbally expressive spouse needs to have an equal voice regarding bedroom activities and needs to feel able to genuinely choose to engage sexually or not. Sometimes that means the less-expressive spouse needs to be able to speak first so that both can be heard.

It's also a matter of balancing desire as in the case of the woman who said to her husband, "If I say no to sex, and you are a grouch for three days then I can't really choose." It's human nature to resist any form of pressure or persuasion especially if we're trying to avoid "duty sex" and shoot for "I want you" sex. And "I want you" sex doesn't sound like this: "I know it's been awhile honey, so we can have sex if you want to." I don't imagine that response would make someone feel very wanted. If the cultivated-desire spouse is consistently uninterested in being intimate, or barely willing, then it can leave the spontaneous-desire spouse feeling stuck.

The ultimate goal is for husband and wife to become more balanced in their desire for sex. While sexuality is definitely a vital aspect of marriage, if one person has a demanding entitlement to sex, then the other will naturally feel pressure and expectation—even manipulation or coercion—which inevitably inhibits them from freely choosing to engage in "I want you" sex. The result is duty sex at best.

[Sexual self-mastery and bridling of desires](#) are needed for the "spontaneous-desire spouse" and [sexual development](#) is needed for the "cultivated-desire spouse" as important parts of a healthy, balanced sexual relationship. (Taken from Laura's handout - ["Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Sexuality."](#))

Sex As a "Take." Related to a sense of entitlement in the sexual relationship many wives experience sex as what I call a "take" in their marriage. Husbands, generally, interact with their wives in ways where they "take" or demand sexual interactions. This occurs when a spouse gropes his wife in the kitchen when that is unwanted by her and she has regularly expressed so to him. These kinds of behaviors have an inhibitory effect on her desire to be intimate with him. She often feels like a sex object or a means for his satisfaction. One wife shared:

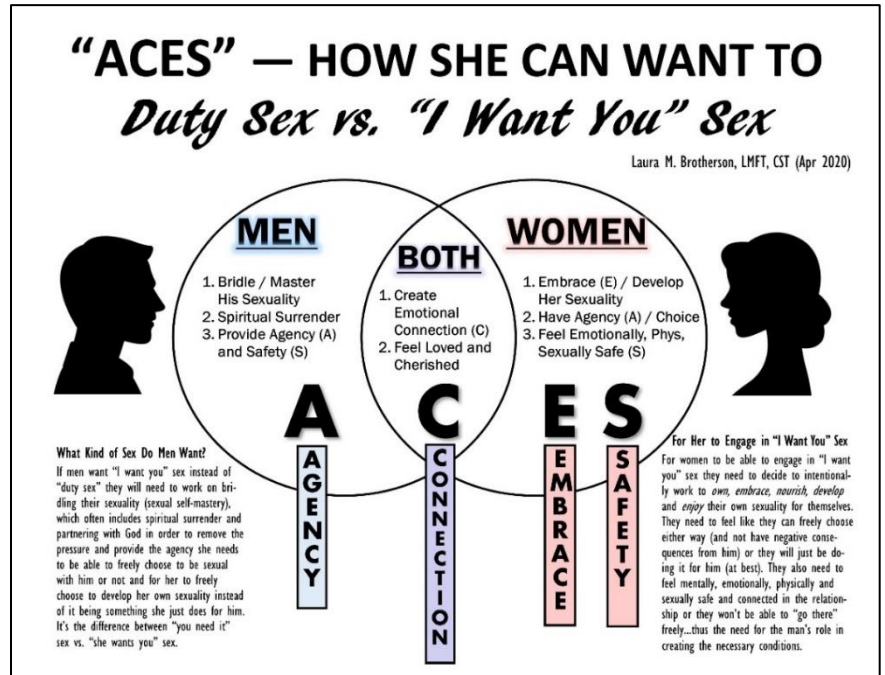
My husband is trying to do better, but I still feel don't feel "safe" with him yet enough to put my guard down. He still responds negatively when I try to express my frustration with how he treats me. He does things like forces me to kiss him. I think he thinks it's funny or that he's just teasing, but he has no idea what a negative effect it has on me sexually. He callously disregards and disrespects me and just takes what he wants from me. He has no regard for what I might be feeling or want. It's what you call a "take" and it's a total turn off! When he's feeling anxious about something, he'll especially put the pressure on and try to guilt me into having sex. He'll be rude to me throughout the day then inexplicably think I'd want to be

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intimate with him that night. I once said to him, "What makes you think I'd want to have sex with you when you've been mean to me all day? Would you want to help me with anything if I had been mean to you all day?" He said, "No, not really." I think it was the first time he kinda got it. I used to just avoid conflict with him and give in, but now I'm learning to speak up for myself and take some of my agency back.

A-C-E-S Diagram. This ["ACES" diagram](#) below shows the significant role "Agency" plays in women being able to move from "duty sex" to "I want you" sex. Without a husband working to [bridle or master](#) his strong, God-given sexuality, he won't be able to provide the environment in which his wife feels she can freely and "safely" *choose in* sexually or not. The flip side of the agency coin is that women also play a role in needing to work to [embrace and develop](#) their sexuality as part of their wholeness.



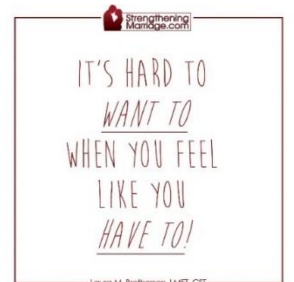
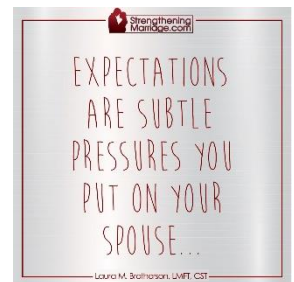
Expectations & Obligatory Sex. Expectations are like subtle pressures on your spouse. Expectations (even just in your own mind, since we can all "feel" our spouse's thoughts) often sound like: "I hope...;" "I wish...;" "I want...;" "You should...;" "You shouldn't..." These might be called "demandments" -- demands or expectations we put on our spouse sexually. Expectations or demands decreases the chance of a truly fulfilling or mutually edifying experience. "Expectation sex" is a killer of desire and arousal—often inhibiting climax.

When you put sexual pressure or expectations on your spouse, they can only respond with some kind of "obligatory sex." One couple was having sex every Saturday morning for many years. She explained, "It was kinda just expected of me. It literally became a chore." Once they took their weekly obligatory sex off the table, she was able to re-learn that she could actually choose it for herself. It took her a while to restore that feeling of choice, but she got there.

Over time it got better and is so much better now. She said, "I had to get past the part of feeling guilty and almost giving in because I just felt bad for him. I got through that phase and he's been amazing to, in essence, give me my agency back. I have a glimpse of wanting sex all on my own now!" She had to do a lot of process writing to remove the "sexual sludge" from her mind. She wrote out the following over and over until it melted away:

- I hate sex.
- I never want to have sex again.
- I hate that sex is expected of me as a wife.
- I hate that when I'm affectionate he thinks it's an invitation for sex.
- I hate that sex is so easy for men and so difficult for women.
- I hate that I even have to work on this stuff.

Human Nature to Resist. Nobody wants to be told what to do. It's human nature to resist pressure and persuasion. Innately, we rebel against things that tamper with our agency. One spouse's "neediness" in any dimension, but especially in the sexual dimension, inhibits the other person's ability to freely and genuinely change. When you



mess with people's agency, they respond with resistance, resentment, defensiveness, etc. They can't freely choose.

As soon as you need or demand something from someone, they can't freely give it. A client explained how he hates it when his wife says "thank you" after he's done something that she yelled at him to do or nagged him into doing. He said, "I don't want her 'thank you's' when what I did was merely done under protest."

You can't force or even pressure other people to do something if you want them to be able to do it freely. It's the antithesis of respecting each other's agency or right to think, feel, speak, or act differently than you do or differently than you think they should. When you let them *be them* and stop needing them to *be different*, then you can connect with each other much more easily.

When you need something so badly, you actually keep it from showing up. Neediness can make us so negatively focused on something we think we "need" that the energy we have behind it actually pushes it away from us or keeps it from showing up. This is where learning [self-mastery](#) and [spiritual surrender](#) become vital.

It's not a true gift from the heart if someone simply responds to the need versus responding because they are intentionally using their agency to choose. One can develop the personal differentiation or wholeness to choose to respond freely even when pressure is being put out to "meet my needs."

If you're the one who wants something to change, then recognize that your neediness is making it harder for your spouse to want to change. Instead work on mastering your own needs and emotions so that you can make requests with an attitude of "surrender" rather than having expectations that meddle with your spouse's agency. Speaking with surrender might sound something like, "Hey, would you like to be intimate tonight? No worries if not" (basically saying and believing within yourself that you are "good" either way).

People Change Best When No One Needs Them To. Agency or freedom is so deeply embedded in the human spirit by God that any pressure to make us change is met with some internal resistance. Truly people can change best when no one needs them to...including themselves.

Think about when you are trying to lose weight. If you really *need* yourself to lose the weight, you put all kinds of pressure and stress on yourself even if unspoken. It's much easier to lose weight when you don't shame, guilt, or pressure yourself about it, but just calmly work on it as best you can, with a spirit of faith that you will succeed, and with surrender to God's will and timing in all things. We can lose weight or change best from a place of acceptance rather than from shame, guilt, or criticism. We change best from a mindset of "I'm doing the best I can, and my best is good enough."



Spouse's keep the other stuck when they *need* something from their spouse. It's not very attractive and fits into the pursue (demand)/withdraw (resist) cycle that happens in relationships. It sends a vibe of pressure and expectation, which messes with the spouse's agency and limits their ability to freely and genuinely change. One wife explained, "When my husband was able to remove the pressure for me to 'be more' sexual and let go of needing me to 'love sex,' I began to feel more free to explore it once he had taken the pressure off."

Another wife described how much it made things worse when her husband tried to "help" her lose weight. She said, "I already don't feel attractive, but now that he gets on my case in the guise of trying to 'help' me, it just makes it worse for me to want to even work on my weight now."

Wholeness and Surrender. Personal wholeness and a mental state of [surrender](#) are very important principles in a healthy sexual relationship. The catch-22 with agency and sex is that until you can genuinely let go of something, you won't be able to have it (freely). When you do let go of it, that is when you can have it.

Much like the story of the Beauty and the Beast, it's not until the Beast lets Belle go that she can freely choose to love the Beast of her own accord. It's why the cultivated-desire spouse (with their lower desire) needs to feel like they can genuinely choose, in order for them to freely change and enthusiastically engage. That means the spontaneous-desire spouse needs to learn how to be okay even when the "need" for sexual connection isn't being met exactly *how*, *when*, and *how often* they want.

One wife shared how much she's appreciating her husband's work on learning to do this surrender thing:

As soon as my husband goes to surrender my subconscious resistance literally fades. When he's in a state of surrender I can feel it. I feel like I can finally breathe. It's taken him a long time to get here! But when he puts the pressure back on even subtly (or non-verbally) I just don't even want to go there even though I do want to "want to."

I can also see that as I change me and how I respond to him, it does change him. It's true that changing one person can change both people 'cuz it changes the dynamics. If he could only understand that if he would just let go of all the pressure he's inadvertently putting on me, then he'd actually get what he wants. I don't want to be resistant, but I can just feel my walls go up within me when he puts pressure on me sexually or when I feel his expectations or sense of entitlement.

It does seem to be like you say that God wired us to resist Satan's plan of force. We're wired for agency. I'm wired for agency. That's apparently why I resist and resent any of his pressure or attempts at persuasion.

As husband and wife each become individually whole, differentiated, and fully surrendered to God and His will, they get to a point where they literally know that they would be okay if they were to lose their beloved spouse. It is from that place of wholeness and [spiritual surrender](#) that a husband and wife no longer *need* each other in the codependent way many spouses NEED each other, but where they can now freely CHOOSE each other from a healthy, whole state.

The cultivated-desire spouse needs to be working to embrace, nurture, and develop their sexuality since that's not always automatic, so that sex is something they participate in and enjoy as part of their wholeness and not just something they do for their spouse.

Change Your Life by Changing Yourself. If you really want to change your life, look in the mirror and change YOU!! It's the only place you have real power anyway. By changing you, you change your spouse because you change the dynamics of your relationship. Like many of my clients, they find that when they change the way they think, feel, speak and act, it changes their relationships for the better, which invites their spouse to also change for the better naturally and without the pressure and expectations that had kept them stuck in unhealthy patterns for many years! Focus on changing you and you can create the life of your dreams.



The following is an example from some clients of how not to act. Focusing on trying to get your spouse to change is not the answer:

I don't want him "helping" or working on me. I hate it when he brings me things to read or things I should work on. Even though I know he's just trying to be encouraging it still makes me feel added pressure sexually. He needs to quit focusing on me and work on his own bridling and surrender stuff instead. And him walking around mopey about things just makes it all worse for me. I know he wants more sex, more engagement, more of me initiating, etc. He just doesn't seem to get that the best thing he can do to "help" is to work on himself and stop trying to "fix" me. He's got plenty to do to learn patience and his own self-mastery to keep him from always working at changing me.

Let Your Spouse Use Their Agency Differently. Some foundational principles of respect are to accept that your spouse will think and feel differently than you do and use their agency differently than you think they should. Remember too that your spouse making choices that differ from yours or having opinions or priorities that differ from yours is not wrong or *less-than*. Many couples seem to think it's a personal affront to their opinions and beliefs if their spouse thinks differently, as if it means something is wrong with them. It doesn't have to be defined that way. This is a manifestation of needing *other-validation* instead of being *self or God-validated*.

Being okay with your spouse when they have differing opinions and make different choices, without making it "less-than," allows them to have agency and to use it differently than you. That again creates the conditions in which your spouse is most able to freely decide they want to change or improve some things. (Taken from Laura's handout - [Common Concepts in Counseling with Couples](#).)

That Which You Resist...Persists. Resistance to *what is* keeps you stuck and miserable. Whatever you resist will actually persist. Learning to accept and surrender your will to *what is* is a huge help in letting go of *needing* or *expecting* the other person to change and instead working on changing *you*. It's about confronting or challenging the self before you attempt to confront or challenge your spouse. (You don't have any power over making your spouse change anyway, and people change best when no one needs them too.)



This is where the book [Loving What Is](#) by Byron Katie is huge in learning to make peace with *what is*, staying out of your spouse's "mental business" and not "shoulding" on your spouse or "wishing" they would change. It's also a matter of breaking free from the codependency of needing your spouse to change or act in ways that validate you and your okayness and instead getting that from yourself and God. That is the magic sauce that sets things up for your spouse to ultimately end up changing in exactly the ways you always hoped for.

She also teaches us to inquire or investigate every distressing thought with [four questions](#) to see if we might want to choose a different belief that doesn't bring us so much frustration: 1) Is it true that my wife should want sex more? 2) Can I know for sure, in God's grand scheme of things, that my wife *should* want sex more often? 3) How do I act/live when I think she should want sex more and she doesn't? 4) How would I act/live if I didn't attach to the belief that she should want sex more often?

If we get tired enough of the distress, we can begin to see how choosing different thoughts about something can not only bring us freedom and peace, but can set up the conditions for our spouse to then freely and genuinely want to and choose to change. (Especially since we're not driving them crazy with all the expectations and pressure we've been putting on them. It will create more positive feelings and interactions, allowing them to genuinely strive to make us happy as a result.)

When you stop attaching to your "story" that things need to be different than they are, you can start to change it. When you let go of needing the other person to change, they are almost magically more able to change the very things you were wishing they'd change.

In a conversation with a client who was fixated on wanting and needing his spouse to change, I shared the following thoughts that you may also find helpful:

Of course, you can always share your thoughts with your spouse about anything. You just need to be clear within yourself that her thoughts, opinions, choices, and actions aren't yours and that you don't have any control over them. You can share your opinions and preferences, but the only respectful way to communicate in a healthy marriage is with surrender -- meaning it would sound something like, "I'd rather you not _____, but of course it's your decision." And then don't throw some martyr comment at the end or something controlling, demeaning, or threatening in some way if she doesn't listen (or obey).

Our job is to always challenge or confront our self before we challenge or confront our spouse. This is what differentiation, respect, and agency are all about. When we mess with another's agency, it just creates distance. When we think we can or should dictate our spouse's agency, it creates anger and resentment in them and us as well when they don't "do as we wish."

This is a huge issue for almost anyone in a relationship. Stay in your own mental business. Stay in surrender. Keep recognizing where your agency ends and hers begins, but don't go into martyr mode, victim mode or dictator mode. Decide to respect your spouse who simply thinks and feels differently than you...if your long-term goal is connection! It's the best state from which she can freely change and have a genuine desire to change for the better.

Related Resources:

- [Marriage without Manipulation](#)
- [Unrighteous Dominion](#)
- [Unrighteous Dominion with Dr. Julie De Azevedo Hanks](#) (podcast)
- [Equal Partnership in Marriage](#)
- [Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners](#)