

# “Raising the Bar on Intimate Relationships”

## *Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Sexuality*

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To raise the bar on the intimate relationship in marriage, couples need to know what healthy sexuality is if they want to be able to create a “sextraordinary marriage.”<sup>1</sup> Anyone can have an unhealthy or mediocre sexual relationship, yet *awesome* is within the reach of couples if they will learn what’s needed, and do the work to develop the necessary characteristics.

Many husbands and wives struggle to understand what healthy sexuality really is. One wife said to me, “I don’t even know if I know what healthy sexuality looks like other than that I need to have a voice in the bedroom and not have it be all about him.” Husbands also admit that they really don’t have an idea of what healthy is either given how much of their sexual learning is from questionable sources like pornography.

In this handout you will find 20 characteristics that can help determine what defines unhealthy and healthy (or ideal) sexuality. Another reason I created this list is to help couples figure out where they might need to *relearn* healthy sexuality as they *unlearn* some ways of thinking, being and behaving in their intimate relationships.

Both men and women will find some comfort and direction, and even a few twinges of discomfort as well as they recognize areas for improvement. This list highlights the common deficits in many sexual relationships with a blueprint for what can help both work toward a healthier sexual relationship and a sextraordinary marriage.

### **Broader Context to Sexual Characteristics**

Most lists of this kind have a focus on the unhealthy characteristics related primarily to pornography or addiction. Author and sex therapist, Wendy Maltz created a simple list of differences between healthy sex and porn-related or “unhealthy” sex<sup>2</sup>—concepts that have been integrated into this chart. Additional insights have been gleaned from the books *Every Man’s Battle* by Christian author Stephen Arterburn and *Men’s Sexual Health* by renowned sex therapists Barry W. McCarthy and Michael E. Metz.

I didn’t want the unhealthy characteristics to be solely about addictive or compulsive issues since that is just one of many dimensions of unhealthy sexuality. I have added my clinical experience as a marriage counselor and sex therapist helping couples develop healthy sexual relationships. This added context creates a broader perspective. Additional insights come from my [Male Sexuality Survey](#) of nearly 900 respondents.

This list is a rare resource not only due to its comprehensive look at healthy sexuality and the uniqueness of both male and female sexual wiring, but also because it seeks to include God’s designs for sex. With such a broad perspective, this list can help both husbands and wives move toward a healthier, richer intimate relationship—a “sextraordinary marriage!”

This table is meant to be a simplified listing of the 20 characteristics of healthy and unhealthy sexuality with additional commentary below the chart to clarify and expand on each item for greater understanding:

<b>CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY SEXUALITY</b>		
	<b>Healthy Sexuality</b>	<b>Unhealthy Sexuality</b>
1.	<b>Accepting, embracing, comfortable with one’s body</b> and/or body parts; body confidence	<b>Uncomfortable, ashamed, critical, embarrassed of one’s body</b> and/or body parts; dissatisfaction with spouse’s body; pressuring spouse to surgically alter or improve their body
2.	<b>Affection for its own sake</b> outside of lovemaking	<b>Non-sexual affection only as a precursor</b> to sex
3.	<b>Agency; freedom to choose;</b> cultivated-desire (lower-desire) spouse has a voice in the bedroom; spontaneous-desire (higher-	<b>Entitled; sex is an expectation;</b> partner feels pressured/ coerced/ manipulated; sex is demanded; spouse feels guilted into sex;

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	desire spouse) feels like they have a voice as well; sex engaged in freely	results in duty sex; cultivated-desire spouse is consistently uninterested – spontaneous-desire spouse feels stuck
4.	<b>Bridled; restrained; respectful;</b> morality; healthy boundaries; emotionally or physically safe; sexual self-mastery (spontaneous-desire spouse); sexual development (cultivated-desire spouse)	<b>Unrestrained; impulse gratification;</b> disrespected boundaries; unsafe emotionally or physically; compulsive or obsessive drive (spontaneous-desire spouse); suppressed or underdeveloped drive (cultivated-desire spouse)
5.	<b>Connection-based,</b> focused on the person; focused on connection; “good-enough sex” <sup>3</sup>	<b>Performance-based;</b> focused on physical acts and/or on outcome; climax, efficiency, performance or perfection focused
6.	<b>Fully present and engaged</b> – mentally, emotionally, physically	<b>Detached mentally and emotionally;</b> passive; mechanical; fantasizing about someone other than your spouse; fantasizing about other acts
7.	<b>Informed and educated</b> in positive ways on the differences and specific inhibitors and intricacies of male/ female sexual wiring; healthy thoughts and beliefs; healthy communication about sex	<b>Uninformed and uneducated</b> or negatively taught regarding male/ female sexual differences; unrealistic expectations or sexual expectations based on personal experiences/ perspectives or other distorted, inaccurate, stereotypical media sources; negative/ distorted/ inhibited thoughts and beliefs about sex; unhealthy or no communication
8.	<b>Multi-dimensional</b> intimacy and connection – mental, emotional and spiritual in addition to physical	<b>One-dimensional</b> – physical; detached from the relationship; void of mental, emotional or spiritual connection with spouse
9.	<b>Mutual initiation;</b> mutual effort	<b>Only the spontaneous-desire spouse initiates;</b> imbalanced effort
10.	<b>Mutuality;</b> balancing self and other; respectful of each other’s sexual wiring and desires	<b>Self-centered;</b> victimizing; ignores others’ feelings, desires and boundaries; engaging in behaviors that the spouse considers demeaning, degrading, disrespectful; harming to self and/or others; spouse submits to avoid conflict
11.	<b>Mutually agreeable variety,</b> adventure, novelty, playfulness and fun included	<b>No variety, adventure,</b> novelty or playfulness; forced or pressured variety, adventure, novelty
12.	<b>Mutually fulfilling;</b> orgasm or other desired-outcome for both	<b>Self-gratifying;</b> orgasm for one; unenjoyable or unfulfilling for spouse; results in partner resisting/ resenting sex
13.	<b>Open; honest; vulnerable;</b> transparent - to fully see and be seen	<b>Secretive; hidden; withholding</b> full self
14.	<b>Organic; spontaneous;</b> natural outgrowth of the relationship; nurturing; given or shared	<b>Compulsive; impulsive drive;</b> forced; taken (sex as a “take”); preoccupation/ obsessive focus on sex

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY SEXUALITY		
	Healthy Sexuality	Unhealthy Sexuality
15.	<b>Passion</b> – energetic; ardent enthusiasm/ desire/ love for one’s spouse sexually	<b>Lust</b> – objectifying, self-serving, carnal fervor or appetite for the physical experience alone; desensitization - need more and more
16.	<b>Personal</b> ; specific person- focused; desires directed only toward one’s spouse; learning and applying spouse-specific preferences, techniques	<b>Objectifying</b> ; any partner will do; assuming, expecting, demanding yourself or your spouse be like the movies, romance novels, media, pornography, stereotypes; dehumanizing
17.	<b>Purpose is to connect</b> ; express love	<b>Purpose is self-medicating</b> ; self-soothing; used to escape or alter mood
18.	<b>Relational</b> ; interpersonal; relationship-strengthening; intimate team; spouse is a high priority	<b>Autonomous</b> ; done in isolation; secretive; relationship-weakening; spouse rarely makes it to the top of the other’s “to-do” list
19.	<b>Results in greater connection</b> ; enhanced self-esteem	<b>Results in disconnection</b> , guilt, shame, regret, emptiness, despair
20.	<b>Spiritual experience</b> ; symbol of oneness; Spirit can be present	<b>Secular counterfeit</b> of God’s designs for sex; Spirit not able to be present

### Commentary on Characteristics of Healthy and Unhealthy Sexuality

1. **Accepting of body vs. Uncomfortable with body** – This characteristic may tend to be more of an issue for women than for men but both husbands and wives need to learn to love and accept themselves and make peace with their bodies as imperfect as they may be. Women especially struggle with body image issues, so not working through and overcoming body image struggles will contribute to a reticence to engage sexually. On the other hand, when women are able to accept their body as *is* even embracing and confidently sharing themselves sexually, they are able to more fully and completely let go and enjoy the intimate experience with their spouse—thus creating a stronger connection. The self-talk of this healthy acceptance would sound like, “I like who I am. I accept my body and I’m happy to share it with you.”<sup>4</sup> Men can develop this healthy self-acceptance as well, but it is less likely for negative thoughts about their appearance to dominate their minds. Unhealthy sexuality includes dissatisfaction with your spouse’s body because it can’t compete with surgically and digitally enhanced bodies often seen in media. Some will subtly or overtly pressure their partners to have their bodies surgically altered or enhanced. Both spouses need to accept the other’s body even if not in tip-top shape or it increases feelings of rejection and adds more resistance to opening up sexually.
2. **Affection for its own sake vs. Affection only leading to sex** – Affection or loving touch is needed in a marriage for its own sake—not just as something that leads to sex. Many women over the years have told me how they remember when they decided to simply stop touching their husbands because it always led to sex. That may not be the best way for either spouse to address issues of unmet needs but is a typical response. It’s a common characteristic of unhealthy sexuality where one asks for respectful behavior from the other but doesn’t receive it, so they just withdraw altogether. Men might similarly decide to stop doing something loving because it *doesn’t* lead to their desired outcome. It’s an issue for both spouses to consider. Healthy sexuality means that both husbands and wives are able to enjoy non-sexual touch or affection for its own sake, not solely as a precursor to sex. The spontaneous-desire spouse may think why just cuddle or hold hands when you can have the bigger bang of sex? In reality, both are necessary in a healthy marriage because there’s a need for non-sexual affection separate from, and in addition to frequent lovemaking.
3. **Agency vs. Entitlement** – 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 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 have the ability to 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." If the cultivated-desire spouse is consistently uninterested in being intimate, or barely willing, then it can leave the spontaneous-desire spouse feeling stuck. Agency is such an important principle in a healthy sexual relationship. It's like in the story of 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 and enthusiastically engage. That means the spontaneous-desire spouse needs to learn how to be okay even when that need isn't being met exactly how, when and how often they want. The catch-22 with agency is that until you can genuinely let go of something you won't be able to have it. And when you do let go of it, that is when you can have it. The cultivated-desire spouse also needs to be working on developing their sexuality so that it's something they do and enjoy as part of their own wholeness and not just something they do for their spouse. The ultimate goal is for husband and wife to both move toward becoming more balanced in their desire. 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 with sexual development being needed for the cultivated-desire spouse as an important part of a healthy, balanced sexual relationship.

4. **Bridled vs. Unrestrained** – Even within marriage and the passion of a sexual relationship there is still a need for bridling one's desires or cultivating one's desires. Marriage isn't a constant sexual nirvana. Differing needs, desires and priorities will need to be negotiated. A truly successful sexual relationship requires self-mastery and bridling of desires by both spouses. The spontaneous-desire spouse will need to exercise self-control, as well as manage their own expectations, desires and emotions. They will need to learn to find joy in cantering or trotting along to more closely match pace with their spouse—even though their inclination is to gallop. The cultivated-desire spouse will similarly need to exercise self-control to rise above fears or frustrations, to prioritize sexual growth, and to manage their expectations, desires, and emotions. They will need to learn to find joy in trotting and even cantering to more closely match pace with their spouse—even though their natural inclination is to walk. However counterintuitive it may seem and frustrating it may feel, the spontaneous-desire spouse needs to create a safe, pressure-free environment to allow the cultivated-desire spouse to shift their focus and energy away from self-protection and towards sexual growth. If neither the spontaneous-desire spouse works on bridling and balancing his desires with his spouse nor the cultivated-desire spouse works on embracing and developing her desires, then that alone will create an unhealthy imbalance in the sexual relationship. Sex is a team sport, and both will need to work on it in order to create a "sextraordinary marriage."<sup>5</sup> For men with their God-given testosterone-driven libido most still need to consistently work at sexual self-mastery. Since female fuel for desire tends to be emotional and relational mutual respect, emotional connection and safety will be needed. In addition, since women tend to come into marriage with a general lack of affirming sexual conditioning, they will often need to work at embracing, nurturing, developing and enjoying their sexuality though the younger generations of women seem to be moving toward better sexual readiness including more affirming sexual attitudes in marriage. When the heightened sexual fuel of pornography is or has been involved with one or both spouses then special attention to relearning healthy sexuality, respecting personal boundaries, mastering any compulsive or obsessive sexual desires for specific activities or impractical frequency is vital for a mutually fulfilling and healthy sexual relationship.
5. **Connection-based vs. Performance based** – Healthy sexuality is centered on more than just orgasm and the desirable physical pleasures of sex. It aspires to also deepen the interpersonal connection between husband and wife. Ideally, sexuality incorporates the inevitable idiosyncrasies or ups and downs of human sexuality making space for imperfect "good-enough sex"<sup>6</sup> to be good enough. An over focus on performance, perfection or outcome induces greater performance anxiety. Potential spectating (watching yourself versus letting go) decreases the ability to fully abandon ourselves to the exquisite involuntary response of sexual climax.
6. **Fully present and engaged vs. Detached and passive** – Unhealthy sexual interactions often consist of a mechanical or passive experience of "going through the motions" sexually. I often call this "dead-fish sex." Individuals are often detached or not fully present mentally, emotionally or physically. Whether it's a

wife who struggles with keeping her mind focused on the sensual experience, or a husband whose mind wanders to fantasizing about other images or activities, both avenues keep couples from enjoying the fully connected experience of healthy connected sex. Being fully present means you are focusing on each other and the pleasure you are giving and receiving. Being fully engaged means you are actively participating in the intimate experience versus being a passive bystander.

7. **Informed and educated vs. Uninformed and uneducated** – Unfortunately too few individuals come into marriage sufficiently informed in positive ways about important details regarding each other's differences in male/female sexual wiring and the specific intricacies and inhibitors of male and female sexuality. This lack of knowledge—affirming the goodness of healthy sexuality within marriage—contributes to unhealthy sexuality, lack of fulfillment, hurt feelings and disconnection in the sexual dimension. Both spouses becoming educated on these important topics will allow them to see each other, and their differing sexual wiring, with patience, understanding and compassion, rather than seeing each other as defective or depraved. One couple found that as they got educated on these important details, she was able to see him not as an overly sex-obsessed man, but as a healthy, normal guy. He was more patient and helpful as he came to understand how and why she still needed to be warmed up each time even after she began to experience the ecstasy of orgasm. He realized that she wasn't broken, but that he hadn't known how to light her fire. Many young people have received most of their information about sex (if any at all) from negative, inaccurate or pornographic media sources. Such inaccurate, stereotypical and distorted information leads to unhealthy, unrealistic expectations and negative intimate interactions. Sometimes being uninformed or misinformed by questionable sources leads a spouse to believe they already know everything there is to know, when in reality they simply don't know what they don't know. When individuals have been conditioned sexually through pornography it can be difficult for them to connect intimately in healthy ways given the unhealthy nature of pornographic media. For example, it can be difficult to know the difference between a husband's interests in greater sexual variety and something unhealthy pornography has introduced into his sexual tastes. Having an affirmingly informed and educated understanding of healthy male and female sexuality will help couples have healthy, affirming thoughts and beliefs about sex. Since sex starts in the mind for both spouses, what's going on in the brain makes a big difference. In the course of gaining a healthy and wholesome sex education, the ability to openly and comfortably discuss sex and sexuality becomes a vital skill for both husband and wife—one they can't live well without!
8. **Multi-dimensional intimacy vs. One-dimensional focus** – Ideal sexuality has a multi-dimensional, holistic quality where there is mental, emotional and even spiritual intimacy and connection—in addition to the sexual. Unhealthy sexuality tends to be one-dimensional with all the attention going solely to the physical act or outcome. Without the added elements of mental, emotional, spiritual and relational the intimate experience feels detached—like it's a separate, unrelated experience meant solely for physical release. It can leave both feeling unfulfilled in multiple ways. One wife explained, “When my husband is so focused on us doing a specific sexual act than he is on connecting with *me* that's when I feel like it's his addiction talking.” Being interested in exploring new or enhanced ways of being intimate can be healthy and fun, but a focus on a technique or position to the point of ignoring or disregarding connection with one's spouse is not healthy. It's the repeated focus or over-focus on the physical or a new sexual novelty that causes the problem. Even with a quickie, healthy sexuality still includes connection that is more than just physical.
9. **Mutual initiation vs. Imbalanced initiation and effort** – Since men generally have the higher, spontaneous desire given their biology and the extra testosterone in their system, they tend to do most of the initiating. There is also about 20% of men that function as the lower-desire spouse<sup>7</sup> who may have to work on initiating just like the wives who have more of a cultivated/responsive desire. Striving for healthy sexuality ultimately means it becomes possible for both spouses to genuinely initiate. Given the spontaneous-desire spouse's (often the man's) desire to be wanted and desired, healthy sexual relationships need to have a more balanced effort in initiating sex. Healthy sexuality has the benefit of a bridled male (or spontaneous) sexual desire and an embraced and developed female (or cultivated) sexuality resulting in a more balanced effort and investment in the sexual dimension of marriage.
10. **Mutuality vs. Self-centered** – In general healthy sexuality has an other-oriented focus. There is a mutuality to the sexual relationship, with an ongoing interest in and respect for each other's differing sexual process. Flowing from mutuality is a deep respect for the sensitivities and desires of the other. With this particular characteristic there can especially be a gender issue at play. Since women are generally socialized to attend to others even at the expense of themselves, women focusing too much on their spouse can negatively affect the sexual experience. Given a woman's wiring to warm up more slowly and be more easily distracted, wives actually need to focus on their own sensual experience in

order to attain sufficient arousal and enjoyment. Her enjoyment is wired in as part of his enjoyment in healthy sexual relationships. On the other hand, with a man's higher physiological drive and ease of access to arousal, men generally need to focus on bridling their desires in order to stay alongside the wife's arousal. When unhealthy sexuality is further compounded by the harmful effects of pornography and sexual compulsivity, it leads to ignoring the spouse's feelings, desires and boundaries—sometimes pushing them to engage in behaviors they may consider to be disrespectful at best or degrading and victimizing. These activities harm both self and spouse. The less-expressive spouse will often submit to self-centered requests in an effort to please or to avoid conflict and confrontation. This simply begins a process of accumulating anger, resentment and/or fear. This is not a healthy response but common for the dynamic of the imbalance of power prevalent in many marriage relationships.

11. **Mutually agreeable variety vs. Non-existent or pressured variety** – Especially given the desire for marriages to remain strong and vibrant for the long haul, variety, adventure, novelty, fun and playfulness are needed to keep intimate relationships from going stale. Oftentimes one spouse needs to work on their playfulness and adventure while the other needs to tone down their desire for variety and novelty. The key is both moving toward the other to obtain a healthy balance essential in their healthy sexual relationship. The brain does long for some novelty and adventure to keep it fresh and new, but sexual compulsivity in the relationship will tend to push the demand for variety too far—negatively affecting many of the other healthy characteristics mentioned in this list. Having an overall light, playful and fun tone to the sexual relationship is so helpful not only in the very beginning of the learning-together stage of the intimate relationship but also as challenges come along including the natural aging process.
12. **Mutually fulfilling vs. Self-gratifying** – Obviously healthy sexuality ought to be mutually enjoyable and satisfying. When the sexual experience is more for the gratification of one person it will be difficult for the other to enthusiastically want to engage regularly. Effort should be taken to ensure that both individuals are able to experience an orgasm if desired or at least have it be a positive connecting experience for both. Because an orgasm for her tends to be a little more complex and requires more time and effort than a climax for him, sometimes just the emotional connection of a foot rub or intimate cuddling is desired. There could even be a quickie for him on another day when it's coming from a positive and connected foundation in the relationship. Win/win marital intimacy doesn't always have to equal orgasm/orgasm for both. Rarely is it a good idea to consistently engage in sex that is one-sided, not agreed upon and/or is occurring too often as that can lead to accumulated frustration, bitterness and resentment. We don't want more stories of the woman who lamented, "My husband doesn't seem to care that I don't have an orgasm. It seems like sex is mostly for him." Men need to do their part in seeing that their wife is getting the necessary emotional and sexual stimulation. Women also need to do their part to be mentally, emotionally and physically active and engaged to increase their chances of a satisfying sexual experience for both.
13. **Open and honest vs. Secretive** – Healthy sexuality means you are both open and honest with each other about your thoughts, feelings, needs, etc. You are willing to be vulnerable even though that can be scary. Vulnerability means you are willing to be fully seen and are willing to fully see each other—body and soul. Healthy sexuality requires a healthy, solid sense of self. If you need to hide yourself emotionally or physically in order to feel safe or acceptable then something needs to change. As we have already mentioned healthy sex is not something done alone or in isolation. If either spouse is secretive or hides any of their sexual behavior it leads to distrust, fear, shame, feelings of betrayal and weakens the foundation of trust healthy sexuality and healthy marriages require. Secrets of any kind are poisonous in a marriage, but sexual secrets are even more pernicious.
14. **Organic vs. Compulsive** – Healthy sexuality can be hot and heavy or fast and furious but flows out of a genuine sense of connection in the overall relationship. Women are capable of having their own healthy drive for sexual connection with their spouse but often need to cultivate it. Men also must work to tune into the relational emotions that fuel a wife's desire in order to have an organic, naturally flowing movement into them intimately connecting. When one is preoccupied or seemingly obsessed with sexuality and the drive for it feels compelled, impulsive or needed so desperately that you can't live without it, agency is affected. The healthy, spontaneous, organic connection is overpowered. Sex at that point often feels like it is something *taken* versus *given* or *shared*. The sense of entitlement and self-centered focus on one's own needs can feel compulsive versus spontaneous and nurturing to a woman who doesn't always have that same strong drive for sex that many men do. Many women have related ongoing resistance to their husband's constant, seemingly obsessive need for sex and their insistence on particular unpleasant activities, which leave them feeling offended and like a mere object for his gratification. This is poisonous to a healthy sexual relationship regardless of his reasons for such urgency. Men also speak of the pain caused by wives who never seem to "want to." Some women shame

their husbands simply for having a healthy sex drive because they have put sex in a carnal, not-okay category due to past negative experiences and/or trauma. With so many wives who have yet to embrace, develop and enjoy their own sexuality any attempt at connecting sexually may feel like an unhealthy “take” to her. And yet there are times that men do “take” in ways that are unhealthy. Both husbands and wives need intimate understanding and self-awareness in order to stay in the healthy realm of naturally sharing in the sexual experience versus compulsively seeing sex as something you can or deserve to take. Couples often have to do some repair work of past resentments, wounds and unhealthy behaviors in order to get to a healthy place. There is a need for balance and equal effort on both the husband’s and wife’s part to achieve a healthy sexual relationship.

15. **Passion vs. Lust** – Passion and lust often get confused with each other when it comes to sexuality. Since dictionary definitions of passion and lust are quite similar, biblical references provide more clarity on the unsavory nature of lust versus the positive nature of passion (see 2 Peter 1:4; 2 Timothy 2:22; Titus 2:12; 1 Peter 2:11). Lust is selfish, insatiable, illicit, coarse, carnal, objectifying and focused primarily on the physical while passion is a more wholesome sentiment of ardent enthusiasm, emotion or love for one’s spouse and/or the shared sensual experience. Passion is an intense, positive relational experience whereas lust is an intense selfish and carnal experience. With lust, compulsivity or objectification there is additional risk of desensitization where the simple ecstasy of sexuality is not enough. Engaging in virtual sex with an idealized image makes it more and more difficult to be excited by the real thing with a real person. More and different and almost perfect is constantly needed. It’s not just about wanting some variety. It’s as if one is unable to be satiated.
16. **Personal vs. Objectifying** – Healthy sexuality as designed by God is personal and reserved only for one’s spouse. Additionally, lovemaking requires learning that is specific to your spouse since what will be arousing and satisfying is unique to them. One of the most commonly understood characteristics of unhealthy sexuality is that the partner is objectified. Objectification is to degrade one’s spouse to an object or mere means of satisfying carnal lusts. This means it’s not really personal or about them and their needs since any partner will do. Another angle on objectifying is to assume, expect or demand that your spouse think like, act like or be like what you’ve seen in the movies, media, pornography and other stereotypes versus checking in with each other to create a shared sexual style that is specific to you. So many in today’s society have been sexually trained by pornography that it will take some work to undo the damaging beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that have been instilled. Personal and connected sex is very different than objectified, self-satisfying sex that is solely focused on physicality.
17. **Purpose is to connect vs. Self-medicate** – Other than procreation, the primary purpose of healthy sexuality is to connect husband and wife in a uniquely bonding, powerful experience of expressing love, affection and passion as they become one—body and soul. It can even be a great stress-reliever if that is true for both spouses and not inconsiderate of one spouse. By contrast unhealthy sexuality is a means of self-medicating, self-soothing painful emotions, such as anxiety or depression and used as an unhealthy escape from the challenges of life. The spouse becomes simply an object or the means for his release if she is included at all. When sex becomes something one spouse does compulsively because it has become hard-wired into the brain as the go-to drug of choice for managing negative emotions it has slipped into an unintended realm of a counterfeit of God’s designs. Brenda was grateful that her husband had stopped masturbating and looking at porn every day. But she sadly told me, “We’ve literally been having sex every night. I’ve become his new buzz and sexual outlet. It’s not like we’re connecting. I am just a fix for him. I can’t be his new drug.”
18. **Relational vs. Autonomous** – Healthy sexuality is relational and relationship-strengthening where your spouse is a high priority and you work together as an intimate team in the sexual relationship. The secular world may say it is healthy to engage in sexual activity with yourself. God is pretty clear about us overcoming the carnal man, denying ourselves of all ungodliness and working to bridle our passions rather than letting them rule over us (see Mosiah 3:19, Moroni 10:32, Alma 38:12). It may be tempting to impulsively engage in pleasurable sexual sensations in isolation for our own enjoyment, but God’s gift of sexuality is reserved for husband and wife to share in a healthy, relational, marriage-strengthening manner. If one spouse rarely makes it to the top of the other’s “to-do” list that creates problems as well. Divine sexuality is not meant to be taken into our own hands, diminishing the power of the spirit over the flesh and weakening the relationship as well. In the Bible we are reminded that our body is a temple for the Spirit of the Lord and is not our own but is bought with a price paid for by the Savior of the world (see 1 Corinthians 6:15-20).
19. **Results in greater connection vs. Disconnection** – Healthy sexual interactions will have a positive result including greater connection as husband and wife and enhanced feelings of self-esteem. The

opposite is true for unhealthy sexual interactions where disconnection, guilt, shame, regret, emptiness and despair may result. A husband who talked his wife into doing something she really wasn't okay with is going to make it more likely for them to both feel disconnected and increase negative feelings about sex, self, spouse and the relationship. If someone suggests a "quickie," and it is coming from a place of connection then even though it may be physical focused and mostly one-sided satisfaction wise it can still be a healthy component of the sexual relationship. One who views porn and masturbates tends to have feelings of shame, regret and despair resulting in disconnection. Results of the sexual experience will help you know whether they are in a healthy or unhealthy vein.

20. **Spiritual experience vs. Secular counterfeit** – One of the most overlooked and misunderstood aspects of healthy sexuality is the spiritual dimension. Many couples struggle to connect sex with spirituality despite the fact that it was God that created sex in the first place. He created male and female sexuality. By divine design healthy sexuality is defined as a spiritual experience symbolizing *oneness*. The term spiritual means relating to or consisting of spirit. Sex itself is designed by God to join husband and wife together as one—body and soul. This is a spiritual symbol of our being one with our spouse and with God (see John 17:11, 21-22). Contrary to what many may believe, healthy, passionate sexuality doesn't have to be somber or solemn to be spiritual. With an understanding of the divine nature of sexuality and its healthy use within marriage there can be an overriding sense of sacredness and spirituality within the act of lovemaking. With so many unhealthy forms of sexuality we can clearly see and feel the difference between God's designs and the many secular counterfeits. Understanding the ultimate divinity of the sexual experience allows us to recognize that even within arousal and passion the Spirit can still be present. Couples need to have this realization of the sacredness and incredible oneness of the one-flesh experience as divinely designed into God's multi-dimensional creation of marital sexuality.

Knowledge is power, so I hope these insights on the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy sexuality will help you raise the bar on the intimate relationship in your marriage—allowing you to create your own "sextraordinary marriage."

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Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Certified Sex Therapist, Laura M. Brotherson is the founder of [The Marital Intimacy Institute](#) with a mission to help couples create "sextraordinary marriages." She counsels with couples, individuals and families in private practice (and online). Laura is the author of the best-selling book, [And They Were Not Ashamed: Strengthening Marriage through Sexual Fulfillment](#), and her latest book, [Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage](#).

Laura is actively engaged in providing marriage education through [Couples Cruises](#), [articles](#), [newsletters](#), radio and television broadcasts, and presenting at [conferences and workshops](#). Laura is passionate about helping couples navigate the intricacies of intimacy to help build strong marriages and families. Laura and her husband are the founders of [StrengtheningMarriage.com](#)—*your trusted resource for education, products and services to strengthen marriages ... intimately!*

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<sup>1</sup> Laura M. Brotherson, *Knowing HER Intimately: 12 Keys for Creating a Sextraordinary Marriage* (Boise, Idaho: Inspire Book, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Wendy and Larry Maltz, *The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Problems Caused by Pornography* (Collins Living, 2008), 182.

<sup>3</sup> Barry W. McCarthy and Michael E. Metz, *Men's Sexual Health* (Routledge, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Brotherson, *Knowing HER Intimately*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Brotherson, *Knowing HER Intimately*.

<sup>6</sup> McCarthy and Metz, *Men's Sexual Health*.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel J. DeNoon, "When a Man's Sex Drive Is Too Low," *WebMD*, May 21, 2009, <https://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/features/when-a-mans-sex-drive-is-too-low#1>.