

...because even when it's good, *it's complicated!*

A STEPMOM'S GUIDE TO

.....

INTIMACY AND SEX

A COLLECTION OF *Best Of* ARTICLES FROM

StepMom
M a g a z i n e

A Stepmom's Guide to **INTIMACY AND SEX**

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THE PASSIONATE STEPMOM

Creating the Sex Life You Desire

BY LIANA PALMERIO-McIVOR, RP

As a sex therapist, I see many different people with a range of issues. Some feel a need for sexual intimacy and some don't. Some think they aren't having enough sex. And some aren't satisfied with the sex they're having. Most, however, believe that sexual intimacy is an important part of their relationships.

Personally and professionally, I believe sex is important. But, as a stepmom, I know there are challenges to making sexual intimacy an important part of our lives with our partners. Unlike people who evolved from casual dating to committed partnerships and then followed up with kids, we hit the ground running—with kids in the picture and a host of relationship details to work out from Day One.

As stepcouples, we haven't had the same luxury of finding out how to be sexually intimate *without* children in our lives. Ours is a demanding position and it takes special care to remain connected sexually with our partners. As I've seen in my clinic, the

good news is that the challenges stepmoms face can be met with a mindful approach ... and a bit of work from both of you!

THE MAGIC INGREDIENTS

Solange is enjoying her marriage to David. It's their second. Together they have three kids from previous relationships and balance home life, sports and busy careers as finance professionals. She and David were, after only three years of marriage, having sex once every two months. In clinical terms, their relationship bordered on "sexless."

This wouldn't be a problem if both Solange and David were happy with this state of affairs. But neither was. At 37, they both thought it was too early in their lives to become asexual. As with all situations like this one, I encouraged them both to get thorough physicals to rule out any medical issues which might prevent intimacy, such as hormone imbalances and other conditions.

With clean bills of health, we then turned to

We need to trust a person enough to let our guard down, especially in moments of intimacy.

the (3) key ingredients of good sex: Connection, Relaxation and Desire.

► **Connection**—Human beings need to feel connected to one another in order to open up, be vulnerable and be authentic. We need to trust a person enough to let our guard down, especially in moments of intimacy. Connection forms naturally over the course of our time in a relationship. When it comes to sex, there is also a very practical side of connectivity involving body and mind.

When it comes to the mind, we need to recognize that romance

fiction has done us all a disservice. Our partners do not know intuitively what thoughts or desires are flickering across our minds. They may, after long familiarity with our bodies, know how we like to be touched. But desires and preferences can change. We may want to explore new aspects of our sexuality or role play, for example.

This is why there's no substitute for open communication. If you want it, ask for it.

Intimate connection naturally involves our bodies, too. Stepmoms who've had babies know the value of the bond formed early on through

skin-to-skin contact. It's so important that maternity wards now teach new moms to master it.

It's the same with our partners. When we are naked with our partners sharing warmth as skin touches skin, there's a primal conversation happening between bodies. It's an essential aspect of connection and one that I encouraged Solange to make time for.

► **Relaxation**—As stepmoms, we know all too well that every day of our lives is a dance between work, the demands of keeping a home, raising all of the kids in the family, knowing which kid is where and sometimes even caring for aging parents. We seem to live in a state of heightened tension.

This is not a condition that makes for good sex. The simple fact is that if we are tense our blood flow is redirected. Our bodies flow blood to essential fight-or-flight response centers: the brain, major organs and large muscle groups. Physically we're not prepared to be intimate.

Skin sensation is reduced and our fingers and toes may be cool to the touch. Our sex organs can't function well. We may even find that our vulvas aren't lubricating and relaxing. When we're tense, our bodies are telling our partners, "Don't touch me." We don't feel sexually interested and we certainly don't present to our partners as such.

► **Desire**—If you've ever played a sport, you've probably had a coach tell you at least once to, "Get your head in the game." It's no different with intimacy. We need to be fully present and filled with desire to have good sex. We need to want it and the first step is to think about



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it. Unlike for teenagers, our desire switch doesn't simply flick on and off.

Adults have more of a dimmer switch, which gradually builds to full excitement as we slowly turn it. Given that our largest sex organ is our brain, it's best to start there. Erotic romance novels or videos may help put you in the mind space for sex.

Massage can also help, as it not only warms the body and encourages blood flow but relaxes the mind—allowing us to be in the moment and connected both to our bodies and to our partners. Touch can gradually move from massage to stimulation in a natural way.

EXPLORING & EXPRESSING

The good news for Solange was that there are simple and effective ways to deepen connections, relax and spur desire. I encouraged her to explore her own desires and fantasies and to express them to David (and for him to do the same). This got them talking openly about sex and what shape their intimate lives could take.

I also encouraged them to spend some time lounging together with no expectations that intimacy would move to intercourse. Naked together, they could explore and relax into each other. Finally, because Solange has a vivid imagination, I asked her to have “story time” with David, retelling passages from the erotic fiction she reads.

Solange did her homework and, within two months, reported that she and David were having “mind-blowing” sex twice a week.

CREATING OPPORTUNITY

Daniela came to me with an unusual situation. She was truly, madly and deeply in love with Cheryl. Cheryl's youngest daughter is medically fragile and needs 24/7 hands-on care. Daniela very much wants a physical connection with her partner and feels badly that she's sometimes resentful of her stepdaughter for blocking that connection.

We unpacked this together and discovered some truths that apply to all of us stepmoms. When we are young and carefree, sex can be spontaneous. When we live together, share busy lives and own our parenting and stepparenting responsibilities, spontaneity often loses out to routine and the

demands of life. That includes providing supportive care to very ill children.

For Daniela, the solution was to enjoy increased intimacy and touching whenever possible and to outsource respite services through programs which allowed Cheryl to place her daughter in the temporary care of healthcare professionals with the knowledge that she was in good hands. The couple could then create the space to connect and be intimate.

They could do that without the pressure of providing care and, just as importantly, without the guilt of leaving Daniela's stepdaughter with unqualified caregivers. The lesson was clear: If you don't carve out space for intimacy, it simply won't





happen. I've even helped some clients create schedules and agree to a minimum level of intimacy each week, blocking out time for it.

Let's assume you've got the time for intimacy protected and you're together with your partner. There are still a few things you must do to keep the outside world from intruding on your special time. An essential measure and one that will also help with relaxation is to unplug. Banish your Blackberry or iPhone from the bedroom.

I remind my clients that, if you've got your work phone in the bedroom, it's like you're trying to be intimate with your partner but your boss and coworkers are hanging around just waiting

to intrude on your special time. Parking your electronics someplace far from the bedroom will help you focus your mind and be present in the moment.

Early on in our relationship, my husband joked that he sometimes felt like one of the monkeys in nature documentaries; the ones who were forced to have sex quickly before a predator came by. In our case, it was the threat of kids bursting in at a very inopportune moment. The solution was simple. To protect our time, we also had to protect our physical space.

We put a lock on our bedroom door and talked to the kids about our "quiet time" together. We checked to make sure the kids were

all settled before we retreated to enjoy that time alone. The kids have now come to respect our quiet time, but initially it was an education for everyone. Along with creating the right mental state for sexual intimacy, we have to create the right environment and seek out opportunities for it to happen.

MAKING INTIMACY WORK

I sometimes have to remind clients that the ideal sex we see in movies is a fantasy. Sometimes the stars don't align to allow us to have satisfying sex. And sometimes things simply don't work. Sometimes this is a function of age, which can have an effect on women (i.e., pain, insufficient lubrication) and men (i.e., erectile dysfunction).

As we discussed earlier, other things can intervene to prevent us from having good sex: stress, tension, a lack of connection, family pressures. This is why it's especially important for stepmoms to have limited expectations.

Even if it's just "naked snuggle time" without sex, you're still creating valuable intimacy. It's equally important not to blame anyone for things not going as planned. At the end of the day, remember that sexual intimacy is something all of us can have. It's always within our reach.

It simply may take some work. ■

The examples offered here represent composites, which reflect typical client concerns.

Buzzkill in the Bedroom

Has Stepfamily Stress Stifled Your Sex Life?

BY JAMIE (SIMKINS) ROGERS, LPC

Have the stressors of stepfamily life negatively affected your sex life? If you're like most stepmoms, I bet you answered an emphatic, "Yes!" Nothing kills a sex drive faster than stress. Between stepkid conflicts, disagreements over how to parent, changes in parenting schedules, court proceedings, ex-wife drama and relationship challenges, we have a lot to stress about!

Here are some suggestions for dealing with stepfamily stress and sex:

Close Your Exits

Resentment usually follows the stepmom's special brand of stress. We resent the kids

when it feels like they have more time with their dad than we do. We resent our partners for not making more time for us. We resent ourselves for feeling jealous of the children. And the cycle continues. As a result, many of us turn to unhealthy outlets like food, TV or even fits of rage instead of addressing our feelings of resentment head-on with our partners. These unhealthy outlets are known as "exits" or "escapes." In order for us to feel like having sex, and have a fulfilling sex life, we need to feel connected to our partner, which only happens through consistent, meaningful communication. However, meaningful communication cannot happen if we exit or escape our feelings. If you have been feeling



Stepfamily stress can wind us up tighter than an eight-day clock, and, **IF WE'RE NOT TAKING CARE OF OUR PHYSICAL HEALTH**, we will be even less likely to have sex.

resentful because of stepfamily issues, put the energy you would normally use to escape back into the relationship and share your feelings with your partner. If you and your partner are struggling to hear one another, a therapist could be a good resource to help you learn how to communicate in a way that fosters intimacy.

Don't Wait Until Bedtime

Maybe you're not harboring any resentment right now but feel so exhausted by stepfamily drama that it's hard to muster up the energy for sex at the end of the day when all you want to do is fall asleep. So, don't! Experiment with having sex at different times of day when you can make it a higher priority, such as early morning or in the shower before heading out to work.

Practice the Six-Second Kiss

Physical affection throughout the day creates a bond and helps you feel more ready for sex when the time is right. One fun affection ritual to try is the six-second kiss when saying goodbye for the day or hello at night. More than a passing peck on the lips, this deep, slow, passionate kiss tells your partner that you care about him and your relationship. Bonus: Studies have also shown that couples who kiss frequently tend to have more sex!



Take Care of Yourself

Are you eating right? Exercising? Taking time for yourself to relax on a regular basis? Stepfamily stress can wind us up tighter than an eight-day clock, and, if we're not taking care of our physical health, we will be even less likely to have sex. Having some of the weight of tension lifted through self-care activities will help you feel lighter and more open to sexual activities when the time is right.

Stress is a threat to stepmom libidos everywhere, but it's how you handle that stress that makes all the difference in maintaining a fulfilling sex life. Pinpoint the core issue in your relationship—resentment, time, lack of affection and poor self-care—and use the strategies above to help get you back on track! ■

Getting It On

Sex and the Woman With Stepkids

BY WEDNESDAY MARTIN, PHD

Sex is different for stepmothers. Let me explain. Sex is sex, of course, and in marriage it is frequently, well, vexed. Too much. Not enough. Too tired. Too stressed. Too worried. Too busy. But, while interviewing women with stepchildren and reviewing the psychological and sociological

literature for my book “Stepmonster,” I found that women married to or partnered with men with kids face several very specific hurdles to a satisfying sex life. Mostly, they had difficulty achieving emotional and physical intimacy with their partners. This was the case for one or more of the following reasons.



Anger and Resentment Can Kill Sexual Desire

One stepmother I interviewed (in my book, I call her Kendra) became the full-time, custodial stepmother to her teenaged daughter without being consulted about it. Owing to her husband's and her own financial obligations once the girl moved in with them, her husband made yet another unilateral decision: that there would be no more children.

Kendra was devastated not only by the realization that she would not be having a baby—something she and her husband had discussed before their marriage and agreed to do—but also by her sense (an accurate one) that she was profoundly disempowered in her home and her relationship.

Not surprisingly, the marriage deteriorated rapidly once this dynamic in which they were not equal partners in decision-making about major events that affected them both took hold. When I interviewed her, Kendra told me she hadn't felt the desire to have sex with her husband in months.

How to Understand It—and What to Do

If your relationship/marriage with stepkids is sexless, ask yourself whether you might be withholding sex from your partner because that is the only power you feel you have in the relationship. One woman I'll call Jill told me, for example, that she and her husband had fought bitterly about finances. He caved to his ex-wife's demands for money above and beyond the child

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support and gave his older son, a young adult, loan after loan that was never repaid.

Finally, after a cool-headed discussion with him about her frustration and steps she felt would help, Jill decided to keep her finances separate from her husband's. Once she stopped contributing to child support payments and began to contribute to her own IRA again, she not only jettisoned her resentment—she also recovered a sense of autonomy and her libido.

"I was taking the anger to bed at night," she explained. "Taking steps to let it go changed everything."

Another woman I'll call Angie felt disconnected from her husband because of the way he ignored the fact that his kids were frequently rejecting her and acting hostile toward her. They ignored her when she walked into the room and disrespected her in numerous ways. One day Angie finally told her husband, "I know they're your kids and you love them. I don't expect you to fix it or change them, but I need you to acknowledge that they're often unkind to me. I need you to understand that it hurts me, and to thank me for putting up with it."



Her husband surprised her by doing just that—every time the kids were there. And that made the slings and arrows easier for Angie to bear. After all, she knew her husband appreciated her efforts and felt bad about the rejection she experienced. With that little bit of acknowledgment, Angie's anger and resentment subsided significantly, and the sexual desire and attraction to her husband was back.

There are no quick fixes, but there is adequate research suggesting that getting rid of resentment and anger at a partner is one way to get desire back on track.

Not Enough Privacy

When the stepkids are younger and/or living with you, there might be the very straightforward issue of feeling inhibited by a lack of privacy. Many women told me they didn't feel comfortable having sex when their stepkids were around, either because the walls were too thin,

there were no locks on the doors or they felt it was somehow selfish or unseemly to have sex when his kids were there. Um, people, this one is relatively easy to address.

QUICK FIXES: GET SOME RUGS. BUY

SOME LOCKS. If all else fails, do it quietly. If people in a first marriage can pull it off and feel entitled to sex even with kids in the next room, so should those in a subsequent marriage. Did I mention getting over it?? Enjoy.

Feeling Eclipsed and Overwhelmed by His Kids and Their Needs

Sometimes even older stepchildren or stepchildren with easy temperaments whom we like and who like us can be exhausting to be around anyway. It's nobody's fault, exactly, that step relations cannot only be dissatisfying but also make demands on us that are draining. Often this is because we don't have a lot of time with his kids, and so when they're around we try to cram lots of relating and fun into a relatively small window of time. Or maybe you have a stepchild with social and/or emotional problems (20 percent of kids do, post-divorce), which puts

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If you want to tick your wife off and never have sex with her again, I tell men who speak to me about steplife, then have your relationship revolve around your kids rather than your kids revolve around your relationship.

pressure on your marriage and you. Finally, it's always a little stressful to have houseguests, even if they also happen to be family.

STEPS TO TAKE: I am a firm believer in making the bedroom a stepchild-free zone if it feels right. You'd be surprised just how much more energy you will have for your stepkids if there is one place in your house that is just for you and your husband.

"If we're in here and the door is closed, don't knock unless the house is burning down," one divorced and remarried dad told me he began telling his teenaged kids every night at 9 p.m. At that time, dad was officially off-duty.

"Otherwise," he explained, "They would have eaten away our whole evening. This way we had some nice time with the kids, but we also had some time before bed to talk and decompress."

When kids are littler and this strategy isn't possible, find other ways to dial it back and find a private place. Delegating unrewarding tasks to your partner (homework, laundry, cooking, for example) might free you up and leave you less stressed—and more amorous. So might going out with your girlfriends or by yourself—without your husband, I mean—every so often. And don't forget about date night. You need it, especially when the kids are around.

Putting the Marriage Last

If you want to tick your wife off and never have sex with her again, I tell men who speak to me about steplife, then have your relationship revolve around your kids rather than your kids revolve around your relationship. It's a sure-fire recipe for confusion, resentment and a lot of nothing between the sheets.

Marta told me that when her stepson arrived from South America for his three-month visit every summer, her husband expected her to put everything—including her career and their toddler, not to mention their marriage—on the back burner. Indeed, her husband, Ramon, was

so consumed and exhausted by the need to be a "perfect father" to his son during those months that Marta felt ignored and overlooked.

"He'd say, 'It's only three months. Just deal with it. What are you, jealous of a 10-year-old boy?' I felt so bad for resenting that my marriage came second, but I did."

It's understandable that Ramon, who missed his son terribly for nine months every year, wanted to focus on him when he was there. But there's focusing on your child—and then there's overkill that strains a marriage. Unable to find the balance, Marta and her husband had separated when last I spoke to her. If Ramon thinks his son is feeling good, he's wrong. His dad's exclusive focus on him made him feel less integrated with his stepmom and half-sibling, forever in the position of "special visitor" rather than "family member." And now the boy may well experience a second divorce.

WHAT TO DO: I am not the only expert to have written repeatedly about the need to prioritize and tend to a remarriage with kids—the most vulnerable of unions, twice as likely to end in divorce as a remarriage without kids—but the message always seems to surprise people.

If your husband doesn't understand that the couple comes first otherwise the whole ship goes down, or he feels unable to act upon it due to guilt, get yourselves to a stepfamily counselor who can help him balance fatherhood and being a husband. Stat! The National Stepfamily Resource Center is a good place to start your quest for a knowledgeable counselor who understands stepfamily issues and dynamics.

A Husband Who Withholds Affection When His Kids Are Around = A Wife Who Doesn't Want to Have Sex With Him

Plenty of women told me that, when their stepkids were around, their normally demonstra-



tive husbands wouldn't even hold their hands! Sometimes, out of a misguided sense that this will "hurt" the kids of any age, our husbands refuse to treat us warmly in their presence.

Not a good move, since we then start to associate the presence of his kids with missing out on affection. In addition, refusing to give us a hug or hold our hand when the kids are there sends a destructive message and confirms unhealthy suspicions they might have: "Being with your stepmom is a bad thing, so I play it down in your presence. She is in fact your rival—so I won't even pay much attention to her while you're around."

STEPS TO TAKE: Again, if you find yourself affection-starved when your stepkids are around, bring it up as calmly as you can (my book "Stepmonster" contains communica-

tion formulas, proven methods to cool down hot topics and ways to talk so your partner can hear you rather than tune you out or go through the roof). Or get a professional to help you sort it out. Affection is a fundamental right in a marriage, any marriage. So-called experts who tell you not to hold hands or hug or give a smooch when his kids are around are missing the point. His kids can take it—and they should see it. What better way to restore their faith that a life partnership can last, that you are loved and here to stay, and that there is reason for them, too, to trust and care for you?

It will take more than a negligee and the "Kama Sutra" to restart a staid sex life, if you're married to a man with kids.

The emotional groundwork of intimacy and connectedness must be there. Once you get that going, you're back on. ■

From Garter Belts to Compression Hose

The Evolution of a Couple's Love

BY HEATHER HETCHLER, MA



Garter belts and compression hose—two undergarments that seem to be on opposite ends of the sexy spectrum. At least that's what I used to think. Sexy is in the eye of the beholder, and my husband and I have come to learn that feeling supported and comforted sparks passion. Thus, the evolution of our love is like the evolution of my lingerie drawer. It's gone from garter belts to compression hose. Yes, it's true.



When Andy and I were first married, I remember that I was equally, if not more, concerned about what intimate items I wore every day as I was about the clothes I wore. Thoughts of making love to my husband filled my head and heart, and I so looked forward to the thrill of figuring out how we could carve out couple time with six kids in the house.

Those early days were filled with passion between two people who said, "I do," with love goggles superglued to their faces. We had read everything on remarriage and stepfamilies (all four books at the time) and spent time talking with those who had gone before us. Naively, we said, "Those things won't happen to us." We were convinced that love would see us through.

But a funny thing happened after the altar—stepfamily life. The excitement and passion of those early days were quickly complicated with ex-spouses and kids who suddenly realized they didn't want another parent. Instead of wearing fun things to bed, I spent time concocting a flannel ensemble that screamed, "Don't even think about it!" when I was feeling sad or frustrated.

As complexities of life crept in, those sexy thoughts and yearnings to be near seemed to slowly fade. The more hurt I felt in my stepmother role, the more distant I began to feel as a wife. Worse than wearing the flannel PJs to bed, I started a cycle of questions in my head that did not help me: "What did we get ourselves into?" "Why do I feel disconnected

A very funny thing happened to our marriage when we focused on supporting, encouraging and listening to one another. **THE PASSION CAME BACK**, and it's deeper and more meaningful than it was in the beginning.



from this man I love?" "Will issues with his daughter ever cease?"

Needless to say, the lingerie I purchased at the start of our marriage lay dormant as my husband and I worked on our marriage and understanding the complexities of our family and how to best handle them. I realized that I had unconsciously started measuring our marriage by a passion variable (or lack thereof) and that is not a realistic or healthy measurement of the success of a relationship. What I wore or didn't wear to bed was no longer something I really thought about.

Fast forward a few years. Due to a medical issue, I found myself wearing compression hose. Literally. Initially, I was mortified by the thick, tight black hose that took minutes to both put on and remove. I remember the first time I was wearing them and trying to get them off in a jiffy to take advantage of some couple time. Removing compression hose is very different from removing a two-snap nightgown. It felt awkward and anything but sexy for me.

My husband was sweet and patient, saying he didn't mind them. He shared that he appreciated that the compression hose were aiding my recovery and that was what mattered. Then it dawned on me. Just like I physically went from wearing fun lingerie at

the beginning of our marriage and now found myself sporting lovely compression hose and sensible shoes, so had our love evolved. By society's standards, we weren't this exciting and outwardly passionate couple that we may have been in the beginning. We had actually become so much more.

When you think about garter belts and other sexy lingerie, there isn't much support and often too much is showing. I can say that in the early stages of our marriage I wasn't feeling very supported. As a result, I clearly let more out of my mouth than I should have.

Compression hose may not be sexy. They may take five minutes to peel off even when you are in the mood for love. But they are stable, supportive and bring healing. They represent what our marriage is today: one with open communication, support and recognition of the stressors we both deal with in aiding our healing and restoration.

A very funny thing happened to our marriage when we focused on supporting, encouraging and listening to one another. The passion came back, and it's deeper and more meaningful than it was in the beginning. From garter belts to compression hose, it's an evolution that Victoria's Secret wouldn't promote, but one that I have come to treasure. ■



To Love, Honor and Play!

The Art of Keeping Your Love Alive in the Midst of Stepfamily Chaos

BY DIANNE MARTIN, BSW, RSW

Who feels like sharing a hug when you and your lover just had a spirited discussion about his kids not doing their chores? Who wants to get warm and cuddly when your partner just spent half the evening on the phone with his or her ex?

Falling in love is easy, but staying in love—in the face of all the confusion, angst and endless stepfamily drama—is a daunting task. During chaos and challenges of stepfamily life, it is often a challenge for stepcouples to find that all-important private time to actively nurture

their relationships.

Your couple relationship is based on you and your partner being emotionally, spiritually and physically intimate with one another. It means being supportive, affectionate, loving and empathetic. Your couple relationship is the

cornerstone on which you will design and build your stepfamily identity.

It is common for stepmoms to feel overwhelmed with all the upheaval that is an integral, unavoidable and highly unenviable aspect of the stepfamily journey. You may struggle to find time to spend with your partner either talking or enjoying a close encounter of a personal nature.

Intuitively, stepmoms know that intimate relationships are enhanced and strengthened when couples make time for each other. In addition to physical closeness, establishing and nurturing a strong spiritual and emotional bond will enhance your couple relationship.

Spiritual and Emotional Intimacy

Spirituality means something different to each individual.

For some, it means formal religious beliefs, observations and participation in their local church, synagogue or mosque. For others, spirituality means engaging in private prayer, yoga or meditation. Spirituality also includes a deep love and appreciation for art, music and the awesome beauty and power of nature.

Sharing similar spiritual beliefs, values and morals supports the formation of your couple identity and relationship. Emotional intimacy evolves over time and is hugely dependent on the degree of trust between you and your partner. Intimacy comes from sharing of your deepest, happiest, saddest and most painful thoughts, feelings and



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experiences.

True emotional and spiritual intimacy requires transparency, openness and a high degree of vulnerability. It also means sharing with your partner what you most enjoy and admire about him or her.

Trust and Forgiveness

Before you feel safe sharing your thoughts about your stepkids, you need to be completely confident, have faith in and trust that your partner will listen courteously (and without judgment) to your feelings and comments.

To establish a trusting relationship, you and your partner need to be open, honest, reliable, consistent and predictable in your behaviors and attitudes. This degree of interpersonal trust takes time to evolve

and is the hallmark of an emotionally mature relationship.

Practice Forgiveness

We all make mistakes. Forgive your partner for his transgressions. Consider the issues carefully before acting or lashing out. Stepmoms who are patient, understanding, respectful, compassionate and forgiving build a powerful emotional bond with their partners.

Holding grudges, feeling like a victim or retaliating may irreparably damage your relationship. As you and your partner move forward with respect and acceptance for each other's feelings, views, thoughts and opinions, you will unleash a powerful emotional intimacy and energy that will strengthen and enhance your couple relationship.

Couple-Friendly Activities

- Spend private time with each other: Take a walk, go out for dinner or cook together.
- Designate a special place in your home for you and your partner: a place to sit and enjoy a coffee or glass of wine, play cards or read poetry aloud.
- Attend art, community or sporting events together.
- Do volunteer or community fundraising work together.
- Host a dinner party and put your love for your partner on display—in an understated way.
- Show your partner he is important to you by doing a simple favor. For example, pick up his cleaning, buy him that special book or treat him to coffee in bed.
- Be selective. When you marry a man with kids, time becomes a scarce commodity, so do protect your private time. You do not need to accept every invitation that comes your way.



Sexual Health and Happiness

In addition to fostering spiritual and emotional intimacy, you and your partner need to maintain a satisfying sexual relationship. Physical intimacy spans a range of activities from a simple kiss to spicier forms of affection that are not intended for children's eyes. A healthy sex life not only nurtures your relationship, but it fosters self-confidence in your couple identity.

When stepfamily chaos rears its ugly head, it often challenges the very foundation of your partnership. Knowing that you and your partner are on the same page will help the two of you manage complex stepfamily issues. Furthermore, having a satisfying sexual relationship releases stress and reaffirms the love you and your partner have for each other.

Sexuality and Stepkids

It will not harm your stepkids to see casual displays of affection

between yourself and their dad. A light kiss and gentle hug sends an important message that you and your partner love and enjoy spending time together. However, your stepchildren should not witness deep kisses, sexual caresses or long close hugs.

Overt sexual displays can be particularly uncomfortable for adolescents who are struggling with their own emerging sexuality. It is best to keep these more intense displays of affection and attraction behind closed doors.

Restricted: Adults Only

The following are some tantalizing tips guaranteed to bring a bit of sizzle to your private, adults-only time. This can be as simple as tucking the youngsters into bed early and having a movie night complete with popcorn and cuddles on the couch.

Ways to Practice Playfulness

- In the middle of an animated family dinner, catch his glance and hold it. With a sparkle in your eye, send him a saucy smile. He will get the message that you think he is important and sexy.
- Snuggle on the couch after the kids are in bed.
- Be both appreciative and affectionate every day and tell your lover what you like about him. Better still? Show him!
- Create a secret code word or phrase (puppy love, wedding, anything!) that signals you and your partner to share a kiss or hug. This is an enjoyable way to nurture your relationship and fan the flames of desire.
- Slip love notes in his jacket pocket, briefcase or lunch kit.

Do anything to be outrageously provocative and flirtatious!

X-Rated

On the lighter side of the restricted scale, you could simply share a long hug and a deep kiss every day. This will boost your self-esteem, strengthen your relationship and heighten intimacy. Feeling saucy? Cop a feel.

That's right! Check out his buns to make sure they are maintaining their internal integrity. He will love it. Shoot him an especially inviting smile, a meaningful glance, a suggestive wink or a provocative pose. Making sure, of course, that your stepchildren are nowhere within the line of sight!

XX-Rated

It is worth emphasizing that stepmoms (myself included) need to ditch the negative self-talk and self-defeating behaviors when it comes to spicing up their relationships. After being around a few decades and possibly having a couple of babies, our figures—to the dismay of many of us—may have shifted a bit south.

Think of yourself as a voluptuous babe who wants to be seen and appreciated by your lover. Put aside your shyer side and strut your stuff just to watch your man drool a bit. It's fantastic for the ego! Or put a night of hot sex on your agenda.

Sending suggestive texts or photos is a surefire way to brighten his day and let him know you appreciate him. Just be certain no one else has access to his cell phone. Above all: Be brave, courageous and bold! At the next party you attend, take time for a mini make-out session in the guest bedroom, the bathroom or the back seat of your car.

If you decide on the back seat, I



Not all forms of physical intimacy lead to sex, but enjoying a healthy and satisfying sex life leads to higher levels of satisfaction in relationships.

strongly suggest you avoid parking on a main thoroughfare—for a whole variety of reasons.

XXX-Rated

The following subject matter is intended for adventuresome stepmoms who want to spice things up. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

Not all forms of physical inti-

macy lead to sex, but enjoying a healthy and satisfying sex life leads to higher levels of satisfaction in relationships. So, what's a girl to do when she wants to spice things up but has run out of ideas?

Send the stepkids for an overnight visit while you and your fella get in the mood for baking. Put on some Chanel No. 5 and a pretty



Taking time to cultivate physical, emotional and spiritual intimacy with your partner will enrich and strengthen your bond as a couple.

apron. Hand him a sexy pair of boxers and get cooking! Make sure melted chocolate, sprinkles and champagne are on the menu.

You could also go to your local adult store (wear a hat and dark glasses, if necessary) and pick up a couple of board games, sensual oils and adult toys. A tantalizing game or toys for two consenting adults, along with candles and glasses of bubbly, will set you up for a night of sexy fun. As we know, kids can be curious critters. You may want to put a lock on the adult toy box and a bolt on the bedroom door for those nights of titillating activity.

Set the mood with romantic music and scented candles. Tell your partner why you love him as you hand him the exotic massage oil. A relaxing erotic massage will leave both of you warm and

wanting. If you are an exotic seeker of sensual delights, Tantric sex is said to be a slow form of meditative sex that can increase intimacy and create a mind/body connection that leads to powerful orgasms. Maybe that will get the home fires burning!

In summary, move outside your sexual comfort zone and become a playful, enticing and sexy seductress. Explore the full range of physical intimacy from cuddles on the couch to more exotic techniques and positions to invigorate and rejuvenate not just your lovemaking but also your relationship.

Taking time to cultivate physical, emotional and spiritual intimacy with your partner will enrich and strengthen your bond as a couple. The two of you will also act as role

models, demonstrating to your stepkids how healthy adult interactions and relationships create warm, loving and secure family homes.

Nurturing your emotional, spiritual and sexual relationships throughout your stepfamily journey is also crucial if your partnership is to grow and thrive. It is easy to get caught up in the difficult issues and painful dynamics which can lead you to forget all of the wonderful dynamics which first ignited the spark between you.

Keep your love alive and thriving by engaging in regular relationship maintenance—spiritual and emotional growth, trust building, forgiveness and sexually stimulating activities. ■

Let's Talk About **SEX**...and Stepcouples!



BY MARY T. KELLY, MA

Sex in the stepfamily system? Sex? “What is *that*?” many of you might be asking. Or, some of you may be saying, “Sex? Well, fuhgettabout it! Who has the time, opportunity or desire?” As every seasoned stepcouple knows, their relationship often gets overshadowed by the needs and demands of all the kids, exes,

finances and work. Time becomes a precious commodity, and for some mysterious reason, sex is one of the first things to go.

For so many stepcouples (maybe you are one of these couples), way too much time is spent dealing with conflict around the children and relationships with your ex-spouses. Talk about a libido killer.

Couples in remarriage don't have the luxury of hoping and waiting for the day they can truly focus on one another. They have to **IMPLANT THE PRIORITY OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP INTO THE CORE OF THEIR LIVES** from the moment they say, "I do."

As stepcouples are legitimately tussling over the realities of stepfamily life, the bloom falls quickly off the rose of love (and sex) that brought the two of you together in the first place.

Survival mode kicks in, and couples find themselves in a marital rut as soon as the honeymoon ends and the realities of the complicated lives of stepfamilies begin.

The first thing to go is Date Night, and, to be honest, not maintaining your date night is a potential deathblow to your marriage and sex life.

Date Night is one of the most common recommendations any marriage and family therapist makes. It may sound like a cliché, but it's not.

Given that 70 percent of second marriages in which both partners bring kids from

previous relationships into the home end in divorce, according to a 30-year longitudinal study led by E. Mavis Hetherington, PhD, it is critical that couples give their marriage top billing. As an astute client of mine once said, "We need to make our children our top *responsibility*, but we need to make our marriage our top *priority*."

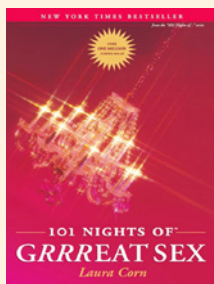
Couples in remarriage don't have the luxury of hoping and waiting for the day they can truly focus on one another. They have to implant the priority of their relationship into the core of their lives from the moment they say, "I do."

As gimmicky as it may sound, couples in remarriages must build one-on-one time into their routines to reconnect after a busy day. They need to make Date Night a weekly priority. If need be, sex needs to be scheduled

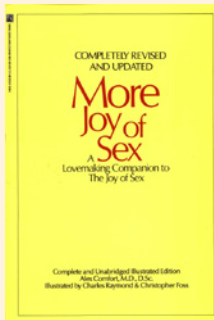


An essential rule for Date Night or before having sex: **NO TALK OF CHILDREN, EX-SPOUSES, FINANCES OR ANY OTHER REALITIES** that could take away that loving feeling.

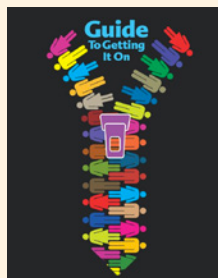
Sexy Stepcouple Resources



- Intimate accessories and toys: GoodVibes.com
- "The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica," edited by Maxim Jakubowski
- "101 Nights of Grrreat Sex: Secret Sealed Seductions for Fun-Loving Couples," by Laura Corn



- "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Amazing Sex," edited by Sari Locker
- "Erotic Massage: The Tantric Touch of Love," by Kenneth Ray Stubbs, PhD, with Louise-Andree Saulnier
- "More Joy of Sex: A Lovemaking Companion to The Joy of Sex," by Alex Comfort, MD, DSc
- "Guide to Getting It On!," by Paul Joannides



into the day. An essential rule for Date Night or before having sex: no talk of children, ex-spouses, finances or any other realities that could take away that loving feeling.

Now let's talk about *sex*. If the priority isn't on the marriage, Date Night or finding time to be alone together, then sex usually falls along the wayside, too. Sex, especially for men, can be the great connector. Sex can make you feel loved and valued. Sex can make you feel good. Sex can make all the other craziness, the disturbances and the distractions go away. Remember how great sex was when you first got together? Remember the passion, the love and how you couldn't get enough of one another? You know how when you do have sex, you say to one another, "Why don't we do this more often?"

Find the time to have sex, whether it's an evening alone for passion or lovemaking or those "quickie" moments at odd times during the day that remind you, for at least those small windows, no one else exists in the world but the two of you.

Do you have five minutes? Do you have some oil? Do you have a hand, a mouth, a body? Do you have a car? Is there a nearby Lovers Lane? Do you have some toys? Do you have an imagination? Get creative.

Don't let the kids and the exes and the dogs and the cats have the power to stop your passion and your love life. Remember, the goal is to get the damn kids out of the house and onto their own lives. The goal is that once the kids are gone there will still be a healthy, vibrant relationship between you and your partner and plenty of time to enjoy one another.

So, light the candles, turn on the music, slip into something more comfortable (preferably nothing), and, as the Nike ad so wisely encourages, "Just do it." ■

Love Your Partner Where They Are

BY HEATHER HETCHLER, MA

"The beginning of love is to let those we love be perfectly themselves, and not to twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them."

—Thomas Merton

Love. It's what we crave. It's what we want to give to others. To love and be loved is the basis of human existence. While we all have that basic need to both give and receive love, many of us withhold love from our partner and/or

don't accept love from our partner when they aren't who we want them to be. Withholding and rejecting love from your partner can be a slow fade and a protective mechanism that is used to not feel hurt and pain.

When we first meet and are getting to know our partner the blissful moments far outweigh the challenges, but when our role as stepmom becomes more formalized some difficult times present themselves. That's when we can look to our partner to make things better and get back to the initial

state of euphoria and peace.

Because we've felt such joy and ease in the beginning of our relationship, we can often long for those days and push our partners to bring those days back even though it isn't realistic. While there is no doubt that stepfamily life has both blessings and challenges, the reality is that there are many complexities that cannot be controlled. Doing life together means good and tough times and understanding and honoring that you and your partner are two separate people with two different histories and two unique approaches to problem solving.

Anything that happens in our stepfamily or in the home of our ex-spouse and our partner's ex-spouse affects our relationship with our partner. This includes the good, the bad and the ugly. Challenges can draw us closer or pull us apart. When our partner doesn't respond to a challenge the way we would or the way we want them to, hurt and frustration can set in and can define how we treat our partner. If we are not on guard, resentment can slowly creep into our hearts and shadow the love we feel for our partner. I know this to be true from many stepmoms I speak with and from personal experience.



"Love me where I am," my husband softly spoke to me at lunch a few months ago. "Love me where I am today, not where you want me to be tomorrow," he repeated. I stared at him in bewilderment. "Of course I love you," I told him. The question, "How could he think otherwise?" raced in my head.

While I love my husband and love being his wife, his heartfelt words forced me to come face-to-face with the fact that he was not *feeling* my unconditional love. He explained that he knew that I loved him but that my outward expression of love for him had slowly changed, as a result of some tough situations with the kids and our "unagreement" on how I thought he should handle things. I love him, and I realized in that moment that I had to change myself and the way I was expressing love (*or not expressing love*) to him if I wanted him to feel loved. There were some challenges where I wished he would have handled things differently, but they didn't affect my love for him. Yet, they did affect the way he was feeling loved. That needed to be addressed, as I never want my husband to feel that my love for him is based on his words or actions.

"Intense love does not measure; it just gives."

— Mother Theresa

In the following days, I came to terms with two truths. First, I realized that my intent to love and my feelings of love for my husband weren't enough. The important thing was for him to feel my love.

I had to accept that my intention to love him is different from his ability to feel love. Second, I had to examine my heart. Words spoken and actions taken truly reflect the condition of one's heart. I asked myself, "Were my words and actions communicating a heart that cherished and loved my husband and our marriage or were they communicating a heart that longed to change my husband and his approach to parenting?" My answers were sobering, but only the truth can bring about true change.

Often the hardest person to take a long, hard look at is oneself, but it is necessary if you want to change your relationship for the better. It wasn't easy for me to really look at my thoughts and behaviors considering recent issues in our stepfamily, but it was necessary. I didn't like what I uncovered. When I recognized and admitted my mistakes I started working on changing me and ensuring that my words and actions communicated the passion and love that burn in my heart for my husband. I also realized that just because my husband wasn't reacting to stepfamily stress in an emotional manner didn't mean he didn't care. I became grateful for his level-headed responses to crisis, and it hit me hard what a disaster it would be if we were both emotional responders.

After time spent soul searching and working on changing me and not my husband, I am happy to report our marriage has grown stronger. I am thankful that my husband felt secure enough in our

marriage to tell me how he was feeling, and I'm grateful for our partnering and working together to communicate openly and honestly about what makes the other feel loved.

I am grateful to have an amazing spouse, and I believe we all have a partner that we love and cherish or else we wouldn't be stepmoms. The question that I had to ask myself and the question that I challenge you to ask yourself is: "Are you loving your partner completely as they are or are you trying to define who they are or should be?" If you aren't sure of the answer, I would challenge you to go to your partner and say to them, "I love you very much, and I want to make sure that you always feel my love. Is there anything I can do that will say, 'I love you,' to you' that I'm not already doing? Is there anything that I'm doing currently that makes you feel that I don't love you as you are?" Then be prepared to take their response and use it to strengthen your relationship.

Let us each love our partner where they are today. And may we apply these principles to loving and accepting our stepkids and our partners' exes. Focus on today. Love those in your life where they are today. Learn from your past and press on for today and tomorrow.

"Truly loving another means letting go of all expectations. It means full acceptance, even celebration of another's personhood."

—Karen Casey

Meet the Contributing Writers



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WEDNESDAY MARTIN, PHD, is an author, social researcher and stepmother. Her book "Stepmonster" is widely considered a go-to resource for stepmothers, adult stepchildren, therapists and others who seek a uniquely candid, interdisciplinary and comprehensive look at the topic. Wednesday's work on women, gender and families has appeared in "The New York Times," "The Atlantic," "The Forward" and "Refinery29" among others. Her book "Primates of Park Avenue: An Anthropological Memoir of Manhattan Motherhood" was a No. 1 best seller. Her book "Untrue" (2018) is an exploration of female infidelity. Wednesday believes stepmothering is a feminist issue.



HEATHER HETCHLER, MA, has a passion for equipping stepmoms to thrive. She is the founder of CafeSMom.com, which brings positive resources, encouragement and support to stepmothers. She speaks about divorce recovery and stepfamily issues and is the co-author of "Unwrapping the Gift of Stepfamily Peace." As a stepmom coach, her passion is to help stepmothers define their own positive path to success. As a full-time mom and stepmom, Heather resides in Cleveland with her husband, four children and two stepchildren.

Meet the Contributing Writers



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- Pg 7 - Rogers, J. (December 2014). "Buzzkill in the Bedroom."
- Pg 9 - Martin, W. (February 2016). "Getting It On."
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- Pg 16 - Martin, D. (February 2014). "To Love, Honor and Play."
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