Recent aversion to sex with long-term love? What to do?

Hi Alice,

I've been with my boyfriend for just over 4 years. Our sex life has always been the strong thread in our relationship, even when we've had trouble in other areas. We both feel we are the best sexual matches we've ever had. But over the past 8 months things have slowly degraded on my end. He is still as excited as ever, but I just don't feel like it. When we try, I actually feel physically protective, as if blocking my body from a stranger, especially my breasts. It's like a physical compulsion to protect, but neither of us have a history of abuse in our relationship or outside of it, and his approach is loving and open. When he's clothed and we're not about to have sex I love holding him, being held by him, standing next to him, touching him, etc. I'm not physically repulsed by his body: I recognize that he's a ridiculously attractive man! I had some advice that I shouldn't force myself to have sex if I don't want to, but I've also heard the opposite: that I should stop thinking and just push through my body's shutdown. Most of the times when I do force myself I end up enjoying it, but that doesn't take away this "repulsion" feeling at the start. The worst thing is that he feels rejected and dissatisfied and keeps asking what he can do to turn me on. What to do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You have articulated your experience with immense compassion and insight—something that is not easy to do when an issue feels so emotionally intricate. Recognizing your feelings and asking for additional support are courageous first steps for your own well-being and your relationship.

You describe a very loving and open connection with you boyfriend. And also clearly indicate you are very physically attracted to him. It sounds like you two have begun to talk about the shift in your feelings towards sex, which can be important for your emotional and physical trust. You two also share physical affection in ways other than sex—by holding one another, being physically near, and touching one another—which are wonderful ways to maintain intimacy while exploring the change in your sexual desire.

So, now to your question? What to do?

While there is no step-by-step guide to understanding sexuality or resolving sexual concerns, there are a lot of routes to better understand our sexual health and desire. Here are a few
options to you might consider:

- **Invest time in understanding the shift in your sexual response.** There are lots of reasons why your sex drive can change—side effects of medications, stress, hormone fluctuations, and past trauma are just a few. It’s not always easy to identify the root cause(s) on your own. This may be a good time to talk with a trusted health care professional about both what may have caused this change, and also how to feel good sexually now. Mental health professionals like a counselor or therapist (or even a sex therapist[^2]) can often help you process and better understand confusing feelings or physical responses in the body and mind.

- **Expand your sexual relationship with yourself.** Consider making time, if you don’t already, to explore your libido and sexuality on your own. You may discover new components to how you like to be touched or turned on. You may also simply enjoy having time to be sexual without another person. Taking time to masturbate[^3] or explore different types of self-intimacy can also help you gauge the level of your libido, when solo.

- **Explore sex, intimacy, and physicality, minus the sex.** It sounds like, even if your boyfriend isn’t pressuring you to have sex when you feel uncomfortable or self-protective, you may be putting pressure on yourself. Consider giving yourself a little sex break to relieve some of those expectations. Fear of unmet desires may be adding to your aversion to physical contact when you and your boyfriend are taking your clothes off. One way to reduce this pressure may be exploring other ways you two can feel sexy and be sexual with one another, outside of intercourse. You mentioned holding one another feels good—that is one great example. You may also consider making out, massage, mutual masturbation, watching a sexy movie, or reading erotica together. You may also want to explore your sexual desires by taking a trip together (or solo) to your local adult toy store, like Babeland[^4] or Good Vibrations[^5]. These stores are generally stocked with books, toys, videos, and lots of educational and playful resources for both individuals and couples.

- **Expand your sexual and relationship horizons as a couple.** Growing as a couple can require a lot of emotional intelligence and dedicated communication. You have already identified feelings both you and your boyfriend are contending with currently. Sometimes, enlisting the guidance and insight of a couples counselor can create a safe space to explore your respective feelings further and foster an even deeper understanding of your relationship dynamic.

One consideration that may be very worthwhile as you continue to seek support and answers is the strong reaction your body and mind seem to be having during this time. While some people may have advised you to “just push through,” try to remember you should never feel obligated to have sex when you do not feel ready or comfortable. If you force yourself to have sex when you do not want to, it may only compound the aversion you are currently experiencing, rather than help the situation. Paying attention to the signals your body is sending you, emotional, psychological, or physical, is truly important now and as you move forward.

Hope this helps,

Alice!

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
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Medical Services (CUMC)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)

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