

Pillow
TALK

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SPiRE

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Ask for What You Need in the Bedroom

There are a lot of mysteries in the world.

Stonehenge. The Black Hole. Wire hangers that procreate in dark closets.

Yes, mysteries abound. And yet we women seem to feel the need to make life, well, just a little more mysterious. Especially when it comes to our husbands.

It's true. We don't want much.

We just want them to read our minds.

This is why, when they come home from work and find themselves recipients of The Silent Treatment, they ask us what is wrong and we toss them a chilling look and say, "*You know.*"

This is why, when we are given a small, intimate-looking Christmas package and unwrap the tissue to discover

a new remote for the garage opener, we fume at the men who were supposed to have known about the diamond tennis bracelet we've been coveting all year. My husband always asks, "But how was I supposed to know?" I consider this a ridiculous question in light of the elephantine clues I always leave around the house for him to trip

*Did Cinderella make things easy
for the Prince by giving him her address
or even her name?*

over: A sales flier with a dog-eared corner. A catalog with a star next to an item on page seventeen. A casual comment flung into the room during the fourth quarter of the Super Bowl game.

And *he* asks how he's supposed to know.

The nerve.

Yes, men are supposed to read our minds. When it comes to fights, presents—and especially when it comes to romance—our husbands would do well to don swami turbans and read crystal balls. They might as well, you know, because it is certainly unreasonable to expect us to make things easy for them by actually *verbalizing* the things that we want and need.

After all, did Cinderella make things easy for the Prince by giving him her address or even—heaven forbid!—her name? Of course not.

Did Sleeping Beauty leave written instructions by the side of the bed: "To awaken Princess, kiss once"? No way.

Did Juliet alert Romeo to the fact that the poison she consumed was, indeed, temporary and that he was supposed to cool his heels and wait for her to regain con-

sciousness so they could live together forever? Not a chance.

When it comes to romance, men are supposed to “just know” when to call, when to kiss, and when to give us a little space to come to our senses.

I’ll admit, it’s a flawed system. But it’s a time-honored system that has been around a lot of years.

Bedroom Telepathy

Correct me here if you think I’m going too far with this, but sometimes I wonder if this system accounts for some of the misunderstandings that can occur in the bedroom. I know that, personally, I’d love for my husband to magically ascertain and then respond to all of my unspoken sexual needs. I want him to *just know* when to kiss me, how to hold me, what to say and do in the bedroom to drive me wild with passion.

I don’t want to have to tell him these things.

Recently I’ve been interviewing women about this very subject. What I want to know is this: Am I the only woman who tries to communicate telepathically with her husband about sex?

Apparently not.

Carrie is a newlywed, married for a little over a year. She says that during lovemaking she doesn’t mind expressing her feelings about things that she enjoys. She will tell her husband, “I like this or that . . .” or “I would enjoy it if you would . . .” On the other hand, she hesitates to let him know when he initiates something that she doesn’t like. As a result, there are times during lovemaking when she feels turned-off.

Paula, married seventeen years, is the mother of three. Her story is the reverse of Carrie’s. Paula says she “def-

initely” tells her husband when something about their lovemaking makes her uncomfortable. But when there is something new she would like to try, Paula “feels funny” speaking up. Instead, she keeps silent or tries to find non-verbal methods of communicating her desires.

Ann has been married eleven years. She feels comfortable telling her husband what she likes—and doesn’t like—about sex. What is difficult for her to do, however, is initiate sex. One night she was so frustrated with her inability to communicate her desires to her husband—and so frustrated that he was lying right next to her and somehow not “picking up” on the fact that she wanted to make love—that she reached out her arm and, with one swipe, emptied her bedside table of all its contents. Digital clock, lamp, and books went flying. To the amazement of her husband, Ann went downstairs and spent the night on the couch. She says she realized even then that she was overreacting, but she felt trapped—trapped by her own silence, and trapped by the belief that somehow her husband should have had the power to sense her dilemma and rescue her from that silence.

I don’t want to suggest that sex with our husbands should epitomize all of our secret desires and fantasies, or that we have a right to demand the fulfillment of our every sexual whim, or that lovemaking should be engineered to meet our needs and our needs only.

After all, a marriage license doesn’t guarantee that our every sexual desire, need, or whim will be fulfilled. It does, however, give us the legitimate, God-ordained opportunity to *seek the fulfillment* of those desires, needs, and even whims. Marriage creates the possibility—even the probability—of having those desires met. But in order for this to happen, we need to be able to take the plunge and be willing to ask for what we need in the bedroom.

Four Myths about Men, Women, and Sex

I believe there are four myths that discourage many women from being more verbal about their sexual needs and desires. No one may have actually verbalized these words to you or to me, but the concepts—almost by osmosis—seem to have seeped into the collective subconsciousness of women everywhere. They hinder many of us from being more honest in the bedroom and help foster our expectations that our men can and should know instinctively—with little help from us—how to meet our needs and desires. Ready? Here they are:

Myth #1: Men Are Omniscient

Sounds outrageous, doesn't it? Men? All-knowing? No way. After all, it took my husband three weeks to notice that I'd bleached my hair from brunette to blonde. Two months after I bought new wicker for the kitchen, Larry furrowed his brows at the chairs and asked, "Where did these come from?" But I can't be too harsh; we just passed our third year in this house and I think he knows where the silverware drawer is now. Good man . . . good provider . . . good father . . . but omniscient?

Wait. Hear me out. Think about our romantic icons. When it comes to heroes and heroines, the stories all sound pretty familiar. Men are the providers, the rescuers. They are the brawn *and* the brains. Throughout *Gone with the Wind*, who knew what Scarlett needed and wanted even when Scarlett herself was in the dark? Rhett, of course. Rhett knew how to handle Scarlett—knew how to talk to her, woo her, match wits with her, make love to her. Even when Rhett's actions exasperated Scarlett, we could see that he was making the right moves. We knew that, in the end, Scarlett would see that Rhett knew best all along.

In fairy tales, the knights and princes always seem to know who to rescue and how to go about it. But how do they know? Did Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel, or even Snow White ever actually *ask* for help? Of course not. Yet somehow, some prince somewhere was alerted and rode to the rescue. And have you ever noticed that these guys don't have real names? Just The Prince. As if any prince will do. They're all clairvoyant, after all.

What about you and me? Are we still waiting for a psychic prince? If our husbands rode white steeds into our bedrooms—suddenly transformed into omniscient heroes who knew what we needed without our having to tell them—would any of us be too disappointed? Okay, I'll admit, horse apples on the carpet would be a slight drawback, but other than that, I think I could be pretty happy with the arrangement. My guess is that you could too.

Myth #2: Boys Will Be Boys

There is a flip side to the perception of men as omniscient, and it is the perception that men don't have the maturity to handle certain facts about sex.

Carrie—the newlywed who admitted that she never tells her husband when something about their lovemaking turns her off—says that she is afraid speaking out would hurt his feelings, even wound his ego.

Another friend shrugs her shoulders when she talks about her husband's "inability" to help her transition into sex. She says her husband's idea of foreplay is the thirty seconds it takes to lock the bedroom door so the kids don't barge into the room. She admits this approach doesn't do much for her, but she justifies his behavior by saying, "Men are just like that."

Are we, by our silence, trying to protect the men we love—men we perceive as being too fragile or immature to handle the things we want, and need, to say? If so, we might be successful for a while. But as the years of marriage add up, we run the risk of building resentment

*One woman said her husband's idea
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to lock the bedroom door.*

toward the men whose egos we fought so hard to protect, while our needs go virtually unnoticed. Even worse, if we perceive our husbands as being too immature to consider any sexual needs but their own, we run the risk of losing respect for our spouses. Either emotion—resentment or disdain—is bound to seep beyond the bedroom door and poison our marriages.

Myth #3: Women Don't Have Needs—Sexual or Otherwise

I'm quite certain you are familiar with this concept.

We are, after all, perceived as the nurturers and caregivers in our families, our churches, our communities. This is, for the most part, a wonderful thing and a privilege. Unfortunately, sometimes it feels like we're trapped in a role from which there is no escape. Sometimes it feels like being a woman, and especially being a mother, is little more than a succession of preemptions in which the needs of every other member of the human race—and I use the term "human" loosely here

so as to include teenagers as well—take priority over our needs.

In life—and particularly in raising our children—it seems as though we aren't really allowed to have needs. And if a need does manage to creep in somewhere, isn't there a script somewhere in our minds that tells us it should be subjugated to the needs of other family members?

And what about in the bedroom? Does this philosophy apply even there? Are our sexual needs in some way secondary to those of our husbands'? Three out of three women I spoke with said yes. Okay, okay. I'll admit that three women does not a survey make, but take a moment and listen to their comments:

Newlywed Carrie agreed that her opinion might not be the "liberated, politically correct" thing to say, but she wanted to be honest. Yes, she thought her husband's sexual needs seemed more important than hers. After all, she said, statistically speaking, don't men think about sex more often than women do? Shouldn't that give them priority in the bedroom?

Another woman, the wife of a pastor, told a gathering of women that her main role in life is to meet her husband's sexual needs so that he doesn't become tempted when counseling lonely or hurting women in their congregation.

A third woman, the wife of a law student, spoke about one of her sexual needs—the need to have more time to "transition" into sex. She went on, however, to say that this is not something she discusses with her husband: "They say that, sexually, women are like Crock-Pots—we need time to warm up. But we don't always get that time, and it's easier not to have to ask for it. It's simpler just to go ahead with the program. It's just easier not to have to talk about it."

Which leads us to yet another myth that impacts the way we view ourselves and our sexuality.

Myth #4: Nice Women Don't Talk about Sex

I like sex. I've always liked sex. Before I married my husband, I had never actually experienced sex, but I knew even then that I was going to like it. The thing, however, that I couldn't do for a long time was talk about sex.

Ironic confession from a woman writing a book like this one, but it's true.

I remember, one afternoon, eating a hamburger with Larry at Burger King. We weren't married at the time, weren't even engaged, just dating, albeit fairly seriously.

We were talking about some friends of ours who were . . . well, sleeping together. We were surprised—disappointed even—at their choice. But what *really* surprised me was the words I heard from my boyfriend's mouth in the middle of Burger King that day.

He said . . . he *actually* said . . . *sexual intercourse*.

Just like that. In a full-bodied voice, not even a whisper. "Dave told me he and Jenny had sexual intercourse."

He said this in the middle of a fast-food restaurant, without even blushing.

I was mortified.

I was nineteen years old, and I could say things like "all the way" or "they *did it*" or maybe, if I was feeling very outrageous, I might say that someone "had sex." But not *sexual intercourse*. And certainly not *other* words, words like . . . well, *penis*. Never, never, never. Even reading the direction pamphlet from my box of tampons was pretty embarrassing. And watching those douche commercials on TV—particularly in mixed company—was excruciating. There should be a law against a young woman having to sit in the same room with a boyfriend or father while learning about that "not so fresh feeling" for the first time. Although, come to think of it, there's probably no other way to learn about it. Until watching the commercial, it had never crossed my

mind to verbalize those particular words to my mother or any other woman, and in my nearly four decades of living, I have never had anyone approach me with such a question.

Do nice women talk about things of a sexual nature? With the exception of the Massengill women (who seem nice enough, though I probably wouldn't invite any of them to lunch), the answer is questionable.

Oh, in real life we talk about sex, sometimes, around the edges of the topic, with our closest of friends. But in the minds of too many women lives this image of the

The truth is, nice women need sex too.

perfect spiritual woman. She's nice. She's godly. And she has never, not once, said the words *sexual intercourse* on purpose, out loud, over a Burger King Whopper and fries.

So there we have it. These seem to be our unspoken guidelines, although I'll have to admit they make a pretty sorry bunch of paradigms by which to live:

- Men are omniscient and don't need to be told about women's sexual needs.
- Men are fragile or immature and can't handle being told about women's sexual needs.
- Women aren't supposed to have sexual needs.
- And if we do happen to come down with a need or two—not unlike catching mono or the flu—we certainly aren't supposed to talk about it.

I'll admit that these concepts seem extreme, seen in black and white on the printed page. And yet I'd wager

that every one of us, in some way, at some level, has been affected by several—if not all—of these illusions.

Dispelling the Myths

The truth is simple. The truth is that men are not omniscient. Many of them—my husband tells me he's included in these ranks—are tired of being left in the dark and would actually appreciate a suggestion or directive now and then.

Men are not as fragile or as hopelessly immature as we tend to think they are.

Nice women need sex too.

And finally, communication in the bedroom is key. We have to talk about sex. Communication is, after all, the number-one prevention against misunderstandings and long-term resentments.

Ah, but how to go about it!

Here are some suggestions that might come in handy as you seek to improve your communication and develop greater integrity and honesty regarding your sexual needs:

- *Communication can be verbal or nonverbal.* With some nonverbal direction during lovemaking, you may be able to communicate quite effectively with your husband. Try repositioning his hand or your bodies, perhaps with an affirmative comment such as “This is better.”
- *Communication can be negative or positive.* When possible, frame your words positively, avoiding defense-raising phrases such as “I hate it when . . .” or “What really bugs me is . . .” or even “You always . . .” Instead, try to communicate the reverse

by using lead-ins such as “I really enjoy . . .” or “I prefer it when we . . .”

Still, there may be times you need to tell your husband about something you don’t like, and the subtle approach is just not working. You may need to explain if a particular act or attitude makes you feel turned off or embarrassed. Again, concentrate on your feelings (“I don’t enjoy . . .” or “This makes me feel . . .”) rather than resorting to accusatory or demeaning shots at your husband.

- *Communication is a two-way street.* After expressing some of your needs to your husband, ask him what you might do to better meet his needs. In the give-and-take of two-way communication, your husband might be less defensive and more willing to listen. You may learn a few things as well.
- *Practice the art of negotiation.* More often than we like to admit, life is about compromise. If your husband enjoys the missionary position and you prefer sex on the stair-stepper, agree to find times to satisfy each desire. Share fantasies. Agree to wear that Elvira costume now and then, and don’t be afraid to negotiate the fulfillment of a few of your fantasies in return.
- *Never withhold sex as a weapon or negotiating tool.* Sexual communion between husband and wife is the wellspring of the marriage relationship—it is, indeed, the intimate sacrament that makes marriage something more than a friendship or business partnership. If you express a need and find that your husband is having a difficult time grasping the significance of what you are asking, avoid the temptation to suggest cold showers for a month. Remember that the small wounds and unkindnesses that husbands and wives inflict on each other are not easily salved.

- *Good communication benefits you—and your husband too.* Go ahead. Ask for what you need. You'll benefit from the effort. But your husband will benefit too. If your sexual needs are given appropriate attention, who knows? You might enjoy sex more, want sex more often, or become less inhibited in sexual situations with your husband. Do you think your husband would enjoy these kinds of developments? Besides, let's be honest: Being able to turn a woman genuinely inside-out with pleasure—real pleasure, no faking here—is an esteem-booster for any man. Don't deny your husband the satisfaction of becoming the best possible lover to his wife. Ask for what you need. Do it for you. Do it for him.

Your Odds of Success

There is, of course, one small hitch in all of this. There is the possibility that you will express your needs to your husband and that he will listen carefully, process your heartfelt words, look at you sincerely and say, in so many words, "No way."

If this happens infrequently, so be it. As I mentioned before, the simple fact that we experience and express a particular desire does not mean we have some sort of inalienable right to have that desire satisfied by our husbands. As much as we lament the fact, our husbands are free agents. We can't *make* them do anything (as evidenced by the long list of uncompleted—even unattempted—"honey-do" projects that we create and maintain in vain for the men in our lives)!

A realistic expectation, then, might be that a portion of our requests would be met happily by our husbands; a majority of our requests would be satisfied through

some form of negotiation and compromise; and that some of our requests might be turned down completely, leaving us to negotiate within ourselves for some form of closure or management of that issue.

I believe that following these suggestions is much healthier and much more effective than the alternative of NEVER ASKING, and as a result, NEVER RECEIVING at all.

Before you ask your husband for what you need, ask yourself a question: *What do I need?* Perhaps it is a different frequency of intimacy, or a better “bridge” into sexuality as it is expressed with your husband, or the fulfillment of a particular sexual dream or fantasy. Perhaps you need to negotiate the cessation or redirection of an act or behavior that leaves you feeling humiliated. Maybe it is simply that you prefer sex in the mornings, or that you’d really like to reminisce and spend an evening just “making out” in the backseat of the car!

It’s okay to want things. And it’s okay to talk about the things we want. There are, of course, no guarantees in life—no marriage or husband or “sex life” is without flaws. But we owe it to ourselves, and to the men we love, to manage our sexuality with honesty, integrity, and a willingness to share not just our bodies, but something that is far more intimate: the verbalization of our very dreams and desires and needs.