

### **39. Q&A Quickie "My Boring Relationship" 11:10**

Thank you so much for sharing this question. I think it is an amazing question because there is so many angles that I could answer it from and I really think that there's so much to unpack here. Anyone listening who is in a relationship can probably learn something from this person's question and from my answer because we are going to talk about things like the seven-year itch and motivation and how to maintain excitement and creativity.

And so I think whether you relate specifically to this person's question or not, I think that there's a lot you can learn hopefully from my answer regardless of where you are in your own relationship. So the first thing that stood out to me in her question was that she said they've been together for about seven and a half years. And I don't know how many of you are familiar with the term the seven-year itch that can happen in relationships.

Basically this is a term and it's not really backed up by a ton of scientific evidence, but it's a term people often use to describe the sense of restlessness and re-evaluation and a peak of conflict that seems to happen around seven years of being together. But when we take a closer look at the research and when divorce rates actually happen, we see that happen closer to the four to five year mark. And if we kind of compare those two numbers, the seven-year versus the four to five year, if we're thinking, okay, divorce rates happen anywhere between four to five years, maybe the couple has been together a few years before that.

And so all in all, maybe they've been together closer to about seven years. And so there may be some truth to that if you count the dating period as well. Now, this listener in particular said that she referred to this person as her boyfriend.

So I don't believe they're married, but regardless, they've been together for about seven and a half years. And she's describing this very common feeling of restlessness that can happen after being together with someone for a long time. I want to come back to something I said just a moment ago about divorce rates happening most commonly around the four to five year mark.

There's different reasons why we think this happens. If we look at it from an evolutionary lens, Helen Fisher has done some work in this area and her theory and others' theory is that this is kind of nature's way of ensuring that, let's say, you have children as soon as you get together, that the couple stays together, which is more likely to guarantee survival of the child if you've got more than one person caring for it during those early years. And then after about four to five years, once you're through that really rough time of early childhood, that then maybe the relationship would split up and the woman could perhaps have another child and have some variety in the genetics of her own offspring, which from an evolutionary perspective is thought to be potentially beneficial.

Now, of course, these days people stay together for a lot longer and we have this more common institution of marriage, so on and so forth. But all that to be said, I think there are many reasons why couples can reevaluate after being together anywhere between four to seven years. Now, she also said that they got together very young.

I would not advise someone to avoid relationships when they're young because when we're young and we're engaged in relationships, we're learning about ourselves, we're learning about the kind of relationship we want to have, but there are some risks, I think, when people think they've met the one at a very young age and stay with that person for the long haul. The main, I think, pitfall is that you don't really know who you are when you're very young. And she says very young, I'm guessing maybe they were in their late teens, early 20s at most.

She doesn't say her age, but that would be my guess based on kind of her question and how she sounded. So you don't really know who you are at such a young age. And I think a couple, when they get together very young can either grow apart or they can grow distant.

I remember the therapist I was working with in my 20s always used to say, you don't really know who you are until you're about closer to 30. And I think that there is so much truth to that statement. We know the brain doesn't even finish fully developing until we're about 25 years old.

The prefrontal cortex, which is where a lot of our personality resides, doesn't finish forming until about 25. And so you may have one personality as a younger person, but there may be a lot of aspects about your personality that change and evolve. And your belief systems change, your values may change.

And I don't think that a lot of people have a really solid sense of self until they start approaching 30. And so I'm wondering if for this subscriber, maybe she and her boyfriend connected in a lot of ways. She makes a point of saying that he is a great person and she can't really fault him for anything.

And so maybe from a young age, they could say, okay, yeah, we have similar value systems, but as she's matured, as he's matured, it may be that there are other areas in their lives in which they've kind of grown apart. And I don't know how drastic the difference is. I don't know if it's like a broader lifestyle thing.

Maybe he's happy with a quiet life in the English countryside and she'd rather live in a vibrant city. If there's a big difference in how each person wants to live their lives and lifestyle, that's going to create conflict in a long-term relationship. She didn't say that specifically.

What she said, and this is what I want to talk a little bit more about, is that he's not really

giving her a ton of excitement, spark or motivation. And this is what I want everyone to listen really carefully to. I think that we put too much pressure on our partners to give us those things.

And in doing so, distance ourselves from really our capability in igniting those things within ourselves or seeing how we can get motivation or excitement from other people. And I'm not talking about sexual excitement necessarily. I'm just talking about having a really interesting friend or occasionally taking a trip by yourself or having some variety of the kind of people who are in your life as opposed to expecting our primary partner to wear all of those hats.

And I think that's something that a lot of people need to pay attention to. I can't tell you how many couples I've worked with over the years where they complain about how their partner doesn't excite them or maybe doesn't sexually arouse them. And one of my first questions to them is, well, what are you doing for yourself to make your life exciting? What are you doing to take your arousal into your own hands from time to time? Because I think that when we think about how we can create excitement and invigoration and creativity in our own lives, that energy can then spill over into the relationship.

And it may be that your partner picks up on that energy and then that ignites a spark within them and then you can co-create it together. And so I think it's really important to think about the degree of pressure that you're potentially putting on your partner to do those things for you versus how much you are doing for yourself. Now to that end, if you're thinking, okay, I have said to this person, I would like to go out to new restaurants or try different cuisine or travel to exotic places and they're on board with that, then great.

Hopefully you can enjoy the excitement you've created together as a couple. But let's say you're suggesting these things and they're comfortable kind of doing the same thing day in, day out, and don't really meet you where you are. That can create problems long-term.

And so step A is seeing if there is more you could do for yourself rather than relying fully on your partner. But then B is assessing the degree to which your partner is willing to participate and engage with you in the kinds of things that you create. You also want to talk to your partner about how you can co-create excitement.

So maybe it's not just about them creating it for you or you creating it for yourself. Maybe it's having a sit down and a conversation and saying, hey, I feel like our lives have kind of stagnated. I feel a little bit stuck.

I feel a little bit bored. There is more that I want to experience. There is more that I want to do.

Can you get on board with that? And if so, can we brainstorm together as a couple things that we might be able to do to make our lives a little bit more exciting? And the last thing I want to touch on as it relates to your question is, again, you do make a point of saying that he is a great guy and there is nothing about him that you can really fault or say about his character that is bad. And I think that that is so great because it is really, really important. And again, I want everybody to hear this, that in your primary partner, you find a secure base from which you can go explore the world or from which you as a couple can go explore the world.

We know, and this is what all the science says, that in relationships where there is a lot of conflict or turmoil or distance, whether you have an anxious attachment style to your partner or maybe there is a more distant avoidant style of attachment with your partner, that people are less likely to put themselves up for a job promotion or go explore the world in whatever way that may be because they don't have that real secure base at home. And so I do think the fact that it sounds like at a foundational, fundamental level, the two of you may share some really important values, that can be a springboard from which you can talk together about how you may need to kind of jumpstart things in your relationship so that you can remain connected but also feel like there is a little bit of excitement and spice in your life. So I hope that helps.

I want to thank you again for your question and wish you the best of luck in your relationship.

Okay, our next question today is one that was submitted through the website. So I'm going to read it to you and then share my thoughts.

Here we go. Hello, Dr. Emily. Hope you're doing well.

I need some advice, please. I've been married for one and a half years and I'm just not matching my husband's energy intimacy at all. I feel like my sex drive is very low and I don't know why.

I have no idea. Like I could go a couple of weeks without asking anything from him or feeling like I want anything sexual and it's just not comfortable for him. I don't know how to fix this or what the issue is. Please help.

Okay, this is such a great question and such a common one. So I can tell you that discrepancy in sexual desire remains one of the most common yet complex issues that sex therapists face in their office.

What that means is that, you know, I'll tell you from my own practice, I would say 80% of the people who call for therapy these days are couples dealing with a discrepancy in sexual desire, much like you described here, and the rest have other issues. So it's super common, but it can be super complex. Now, let me say a few things.

We use the term, we prefer to say discrepancy in sexual desire as opposed to like a low desire issue because we never want to pathologize the lower desire partner. There may be several reasons why one person has low desire. There may be lots of reasons why one person has higher desire and there's nothing, you know, in most cases inherently wrong with either of them.

It's just that they have a difference. And so that's why we refer to these kinds of issues as couples who are dealing with a discrepancy in sexual desire. Oftentimes the lower desire partner is the one who is pathologized or blamed as, you know, if they just had higher desire or matched the higher desire person's level of interest that the relationship would be fine, but we don't like to think about it like that.

What we do as sex therapists is work with the couple on how to narrow the gap so that it feels more manageable. At the end of the day, it is unusual to match up with someone with whom you have the exact same level of sexual interest in terms of how frequently you want it or in terms of the kinds of things that you want to do sexually. There's usually going to be some differences and that's okay.

It's learning how to manage those differences, but it's also, you know, taking into consideration that it might not be the best idea to pair up with someone who has completely different interests than you, again, in terms of how frequently they desire sex and in the kinds of things that they want to do sexually, because that can create pretty big problems long-term. Now, what often ends up happening is that couples feel like they're pretty similar in the beginning stages of the relationship, and that's because they are riding that new relationship high, that new relationship energy. Everything feels effortless and seamless and easy, and, you know, sex feels like it comes totally naturally.

But we know that the honeymoon period usually fades anywhere between 6 to 18 months after being together. And you say you've been married for one and a half years, and so you're at that 18-month mark of being married. Now, I don't know how long you were together prior to getting married, but definitely, I think marriage and cohabitation can kind of pop that honeymoon phase bubble for a lot of people, just because blending two lives in that way can pose a lot of challenges.

And, you know, the rose-colored glasses come off, and when you're standing next to each other, brushing your teeth every night and determining whether or not you can take out a mortgage and, you know, talking about the best way to pay your bills, that can take a little bit of the romance away. Which is why, rather than waiting around for desire to just kind of show up, you have to cultivate it. And this is a fact that a lot of people don't like to hear, because, look, at the end of the day, we want things to come easy.

But they don't always come easy. I think the things that we want, we have to really take into our own hands and figure out what we need to do to cultivate it. In this case, maybe

that thing is sexual desire.

Now, you say that you feel like it's low, you don't know why, you could go a couple weeks without asking for anything. I always think it's a good idea to talk a little bit about the difference between spontaneous and responsive sexual desire. Spontaneous desire is that sort of kind of spontaneous feeling of being horny, in the mood, wanting sex, just kind of out of the blue, versus responsive desire, which means you don't really experience that feeling of being in the mood the way we traditionally think of it.

It may be that you don't really get into it or get in the mood until things get going a little bit or until the other person initiates. And so a better question to ask yourself is, am I open to sex? Which is a different question than, am I in the mood for sex? And so, you say you could go a couple weeks without asking for anything. And I wonder if you were to ask yourself the question, am I open to having sex this evening? You might find that if you were to initiate every now and then, that you could get into it and have a perfectly enjoyable, satisfactory sexual experience.

Now, I don't know what's going on with him that is making him have much higher desire than you. Something I often see, and I'm assuming based on your question here that you're a heterosexual couple, something I often see is that the female partner takes on way more in terms of household management than the male partner does. And so maybe the male partner, and this is very much a stereotype, so I want to say that as a disclaimer, but the male partner kind of sitting back lounging on the couch while the female partner is cooking dinner and cleaning the dishes and so on and so forth.

Well, okay, so the male partner has had a chance to relax and unwind at the end of the day. And by the time they've relaxed enough to then think about sex, the female partner is just sitting down for the first time and has not had the chance to relax, which is oftentimes a prerequisite for sexual arousal. And so I always talk with couples about kind of what they're each doing in terms of household contribution, what they're each doing in terms of carving out time throughout the day to relax or at the end of the day to relax and unwind.

And so those are just some things that you may want to think about and evaluate in your own relationship and talk with your partner about. But at the end of the day, there can be a lot of different reasons why people experience higher or lower desire. I think a really great conversation to have with your partner is kind of what factors contribute to his desire and share what factors contribute to your desire and see how you might be able to negotiate or collaborate things so that the gap is a little bit smaller and easier to manage.

But it's important to remember that there may always be a little bit of a difference and that's okay. You can still have a very healthy and satisfying relationship despite that fact. So I hope that helps and I wish you the best of luck.

