

How your love life can help you achieve your New Year's Resolutions!

Approximately 100 million Americans set New Year's Resolutions. According to several studies, the four most common were: to lose weight, save money, develop a healthier lifestyle, and to quit smoking. While these seem like wonderful goals, unfortunately, the research also shows that 4 out of 5 people were not able to stick to their resolution. Of course, there are many reasons why people are not able to stick to their resolutions. For example, not enough time, not enough money, difficulty breaking old habits, or simply not being ready to change. Most clinical models of behavior change begin with something called the "pre-contemplation" stage. In this stage, a person is *considering* the pros and cons and the risks versus the benefits to changing that behavior. Because it generally takes six weeks of consistent effort to develop a new habit and change old behaviors, sticking to a new goal can be very difficult without having a strong enough *benefit* to keep you on track. So, if you are currently in the pre-contemplation phase of acting on a New Year's Resolution, let me offer you some benefits to behavior change that not only help you reach those goals, but may also improve your love life in the process!

Weight loss. Ugh. Just the words make me think of expensive gym memberships, trying to squeeze time into an already busy schedule, and a dietary change that forces me to forgo my favorite cookie from Panera Bread—none of which conjures the feelings of happiness that might lead to my seeing the benefit. (Seriously—have you had their Mint Crinkle Cookie? Amazing...just don't look at the calorie count!). So what could possibly *tip the scales* toward sticking to a weight loss program? A healthy sex life.

According to various studies, 30 minutes of sex can burn between 85 and 200 calories, depending on how vigorous the activity is and whether it is alone or with a partner. To me, this sounds infinitely better than 30 minutes at the gym on a treadmill! In addition to burning calories, there are several other benefits to our love lives from exercise and weight loss. For example, exercises that focus on your lower body can increase blood flow in your pelvic region. Increased blood flow helps reduce the incidence of erectile dysfunction and increases genital sensitivity in both men and women. Some exercises that focus on the lower body include squats, lunges, leg extensions, leg curls, etc. Outside of the bedroom, developing an exercise schedule with your partner, such as taking a walk together, increases your quality time together in addition to improving your health.

Blood pressure, cholesterol and testosterone levels all influence the quality of your sex life. So fellas, if you need more incentive to reduce belly fat and work on your abdominals—here it is. Testosterone is a hormone that is commonly broken down in your body's fat cells. Abdominal fat cells tend to break down testosterone more quickly than other areas of the body, and if there is extra belly fat, this could lead to lower levels of Testosterone and in extreme cases, a Testosterone deficiency. So, while you are doing those crunches remind yourself that as you lose the belly fat, you are increasing Testosterone, which will boost your sex drive and overall enjoyment of sexual activity!

The most successful weight loss plans are those in which small, manageable goals are developed and attainment is set at a reasonable rate and amount. For most people, a goal of losing one or two pounds per week is a plan that is not only healthier for your body, but also more manageable for your mind. One of the best ways to lose weight over a long period is to set incremental "weight loss goals." For example, your initial goal may be to lose four pounds in your first month, and then gradually increase that until you get to eight pounds in a month. Building in weight loss incentives will also help you to achieve these goals. Each time you reach a weight loss goal, reward yourself for all of your hard work with something you would really enjoy, preferably a non-food item. In addition to the aforementioned sexual health incentives, here are some ideas for weight loss goal rewards:

- Buy yourself new, sexy lingerie; or for men—try out a pair of satin boxers.
- Get a massage, or give yourself a day at the spa.
- For couples, plan a couple’s massage together. You could also plan a weekend getaway, when bigger weight loss goals are accomplished.
- Buy a new *toy* for the bedroom.
- Buy that outfit you have been eyeing up, but didn’t want to spend the money on.
- Reward yourself with things that make you look or feel sexier! (I’m thinking a pair of sexy Christian Louboutin shoes...on clearance, of course!)

If you are in a relationship, one of the most helpful things your partner can do to help you meet your weight loss goals is to eat healthier with you and to exercise with you, when possible. I know, I know...you don’t have enough time in your schedules. No problem. I suggest purchasing a yoga DVD for couples. You can do it any time of day, and in addition to getting some exercise, you will learn a lot of other great information about your partner’s body, and maybe some new things you’d like to try in the bedroom. Two DVD suggestions are: Yoga Two-gether (approximately \$22 on amazon.com) and Tantric Yoga for Lovers (approximately \$20 on amazon.com). I suggest doing these exercise videos when the two of you have some time alone, or after the kids have gone to bed.

Save money. In the current state of our economy, where so many are without jobs, the idea of *saving* money may seem impossible. Don’t give up yet—I believe there are areas where some minor changes could be made that might make a big difference in your wallet (or purse). Many years ago, I had a very wise supervisor share with me a very wise insight. She said, “The one thing in life that is fun, free, and accessible to all people, regardless of race, class, or income is sex.” In my clinical work over the years, I have found that this is absolutely the case. With this in mind, I have several suggestions for ways to focus on your love life that may also help you save money. One way may be to skip dinner and a movie out and stay home instead. Cooking dinner at home not only saves money, but it can also be an opportunity for bonding in your relationship. As far as the movie part, if the suggestions above aren’t doing it for you, no pun intended, here are a few that are educational as well as exciting: “Great Sex Over 50,” a two-DVD set that promises to teach you “How to keep sex alive and flourishing beyond the age of 50;” and The Tantric Secrets of Sacred Sex. Both will cost around twenty dollars, similar to a movie out, however, you will save on the money spent on gas to get there, and the fifteen dollar soda and popcorn!

I know, I know...I lost you back there at cooking dinner at home, right? I hear you. Really. However, since we are on the topic of cooking, it is worth mentioning that there is a wonderful little cookbook out there called, “The New Inter Courses: An aphrodisiac cookbook” by Hopkins & Lockridge (2007). While we don’t have enough solid research to support foods as aphrodisiacs, the psychological idea of them working seems to be enough. The book uses humor and sensuality in its recipes—it even suggests what dinner music to pair with some recipes! After reading the reviews of people who had purchased it, I was sold.

Alright, back to this idea of “free fun.” Sex, even if only with ourselves, produces a chemical in our body called Oxytocin. Oxytocin is produced with physical contact, and higher levels of it in our system can stimulate feelings of warmth and relaxation. Having an orgasm produces a flood of Oxytocin in our system. Due to its effect on us, it is sometimes referred to as the “love hormone.” With a partner, it can help us bond or reconnect and build trust. If you are spending money on little things to try to make you and/or your partner happy, try replacing one or two of them with time spent engaging in physical contact, like hugging, cuddling, massage, and/or lovemaking. Oxytocin also causes your body’s natural endorphin levels to rise. Endorphins in the body not only make you feel awake and energized, they can also serve as natural pain killers! So, if you are feeling achy from all that exercise to lose weight, this is just the trick. (WARNING: the response, “not tonight honey, I have a headache” is not going to work anymore if your partner is reading this).

Healthier Lifestyle. While this goal is somewhat vague, leaving much to the interpretation of yours truly, my understanding of what that means for many people is increasing exercise (check), change to a healthier diet (check), improve our mood, and reduce the intake of things deemed “damaging” to our health. Since “Quit Smoking” is our next goal, we’ll skip that for now and discuss how to improve our mood. One way of improving our mood is to decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety. NOTE: If you have severe symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, and are being treated by a doctor, consult with your doctor before making any changes to your current regimen. Disclaimer aside, a great way to reduce mild symptoms of depression and anxiety is your sex life! Having an orgasm produces a flood of Dopamine, which is a neurohormone, into your body. Dopamine is also known as the “feel good” hormone and it is responsible for a healthy libido, feelings of well being (including self-esteem), good feelings toward others, bonding with a child, and bonding with others; just to name a few. In fact, many of the antidepressants prescribed by doctors affect the neurotransmitters in the brain responsible for producing and receiving Dopamine.

While I would love to leave orgasms as “the way” to increase Dopamine, I would be remiss if I did not include other natural (though not *nearly* as fun) ways to increase the production of Dopamine in the brain. Many believe that certain foods can assist with this, including but not limited to almonds, avocados, bananas, lima beans, pumpkin seeds, and sesame seeds. Now I know why my mother was always yelling at me to eat my lima beans! (Just kidding mom...). Research also shows that certain vitamins, particularly C, E, and other antioxidants, help protect neurons in the brain that use Dopamine from free radical damage. Moreover, sugar, saturated fats, cholesterol, and refined foods have also been linked with low levels of Dopamine. And let’s not forget, having healthy levels of cholesterol and normal blood pressure are vital to our sexual desire and satisfaction!

Quit Smoking. If ever there were a way to deter our young people from starting to smoke, this surely is in the top two (second only, of course, to general health). Several studies have found a correlation between smoking cigarettes and male erectile dysfunction (ED), also called impotence. One reason why nicotine may cause ED is because it is a vasoconstrictor. A vasoconstrictor is a substance that constricts the blood vessels and restricts blood flow. For our purposes, that means that smoking cigarettes restricts blood flow to the genitals, thereby causing dysfunction. One study showed that 40% of men struggling with ED were smokers. Given that nicotine is a vasoconstricting substance, this makes logical sense. Sadly, there is little research on the sexual side effects of nicotine on women. It is reasonable to assume, however, that as a vasoconstrictor, it also reduces blood flow to female genitalia, thereby reducing sensation—possibly enough to inhibit orgasm.

It is of note that there are some research studies that have found that smoking cigarettes can induce early onset of menopause and may cause menstrual disorders in women. Of course, let us not forget that smoking cigarettes has been proven to cause rapid accumulation of wrinkles on the face. In addition, the price of cigarettes has gone up dramatically. They now cost an average of almost \$50 per carton! If you are also spending money on anti-wrinkle facial creams and lotions, you may be able to achieve TWO of these New Year’s Resolutions by quitting. Who knows...you may even find more energy and lung capacity to exercise; which in turn may drive you to eat healthier.

Focusing on the health benefits to your love life just may help you to lose weight, save money, live a healthier lifestyle, break a nicotine addiction—and give you a happier, healthier, more satisfying sex life in the process.

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