

## Ep #132: Stop Minimizing the Importance of Sex



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**With Your Host**

**Dr. Marie Murphy**

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Hi everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. I'm a relationship coach, and I help people who are engaging in anything they think counts as infidelity to deal with their feelings, clarify what they want, and make decisions about what they're going to do. No shame, no blame, no judgments. If you're ready to begin the process of resolving your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, I can help you do it. I offer compassionate, confidential coaching via Zoom, which means we can work together no matter where you're located. To schedule an introductory coaching session with me, go to my website, [mariemurphyphd.com](http://mariemurphyphd.com).

As the title of today's episode would suggest, today we're going to talk about the importance of sex and sensuality and erotic connection. And the very important points that I want to convey to you today are as follows:

You do not do yourself any favors when you attempt to deny the importance of sex to yourself.

You do not do yourself any favors when you attempt to minimize the extent to which you value and appreciate a particularly great sexual connection with a specific person, or the general existence of great sexual connections.

You do not do yourself any favors when you tell yourself that great sex is really important to you, but it shouldn't be.

Here's the deal, people. If you can honestly acknowledge the extent to which good sex – however you define that – is important to you, you will have an easier time making relationship-related decisions you feel great about. If you do not honestly acknowledge the value you place on good sex – again, whatever that may mean to you – you are going to make relationship-related decisions a lot more complicated.

Before I go any further, I want to make two important points:

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The first is that you do not have to consider sex important. Some people do not like sex, or do not want to have sex, or do not want to prioritize sex even if they do like it. And that is fine. The point of this episode is not that you SHOULD consider sex important, or important in any particular ways – it's to encourage you to be honest with yourself about its importance in your life.

The second important point is that “sex” means a lot of different things in practice. That's a topic we could devote multiple podcast episodes to, but for today's purposes, I want you to know that when I'm talking about “sex,” I'm not talking about any particular actions or practices. I'm talking about whatever sex means to you. Also, today I'm going to talk about “good sex” – that's in quotation marks – and similarly, I am not operating from any fixed definition of what “good sex” means. When I say “good sex,” I mean sex that YOU think of as good. Okay? Okay.

With those two things established, there are lots of reasons why folks have a hard time being honest with themselves about how much they value “good sex”:

Some, of course, have to do with what the anthropologist Gayle Rubin calls “sex negativity.” Rubin argues that antipathy towards sex in general and certain kinds of sex more especially is a hallmark of social life as we know it. In other words, the pervasive notion that anything related to sex is just bad, or at least, isn't virtuous, circulates within the cultural fog, or the air we're all breathing. Her argument is more nuanced than that, but I think it's important to recognize that we are likely to have been exposed to a lot of messages that discourage us from valuing sex without reservation. That's pretty potent stuff to contend with, and in addition to that, there are other reasons why we may have a hard time being honest with ourselves about how much we appreciate sex or value sex. Such as...

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We may think there is a lot at stake if we value sex and acknowledge that to ourselves. For example, people sometimes think that if they acknowledge how amazing their sexual relationship with their affair partner is, and how much they value that, they'll have to leave their marriage and pursue a relationship with their affair partner. But that's not how it works. Being honest with yourself about how much you like or appreciate or enjoy something doesn't compel you to do anything about it. You can enjoy something, and choose not to do it. That isn't necessarily the objective, of course, but it is an option. And I'll say more about that later.

Another reason why we may have a hard time being honest with ourselves about how much we value sex is we may not think that sex is something that should be considered important. This sort of thinking can manifest in many specific ways, and have many sources. For instance, some people have gotten the idea that it is way more important to get married and stay married and to keep up the appearance of being a "good spouse" and a good family member than it is to have a good sex life. And so they may have done the good spouse thing for many years. They may have lived up to that expectation. And then they start having amazing sex with someone other than their spouse, and this seems to present a huge conundrum, and the way they attempt to manage their cognitive dissonance is by telling themselves that sex isn't really that important.

But when someone in this situation says this to themselves, what they're saying isn't true, strictly speaking. The amazing sex they're having IS an experience that they value very much. The problem comes from the conflict between the great sex they're having and the other things that are important to them in their life – like staying committed to their marriage, for example. This might seem like it's a small distinction, but it's one that's crucial to be aware of. The truth of the matter isn't that the

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great sex isn't important to the person. The truth of the matter is that the great sex seems to be in competition with something else that the person considers really important.

Another thing that people often think is that good sex is not something that can last. And since it "can't" last, as the thinking goes, it therefore shouldn't be considered important.

A lot of people take it for granted that amazing sex is something that happens at the beginning of a relationship, and only at the beginning of a relationship, and by definition cannot last forever, or even indefinitely. A lot of people have absorbed these ideas as FACTS. And there are two things I want to say about this.

The first is, even if it were true that amazing sex simply cannot last indefinitely, or beyond a certain length of time, does that mean you shouldn't value it or choose to pursue it or prioritize it? Life doesn't last indefinitely, people. And within your fleeting lifetime, there may be fleeting experiences that you know you really want to have, even if they may not last FOREVER, or continue in the same way forever.

The second thing is, we tend to completely understate the extent to which sex can continue to be pretty great in a relationship, even beyond the initial period of excitement, whether you want to call that new relationship energy, or limerence, or the honeymoon period, or whatever. We have collectively bought into some myths about the way that sex has to be, and even if these myths DO have some bearing in truth, that doesn't mean they are inescapable or inevitable. As I've talked about on other episodes, we tend to underestimate the extent to which we can intentionally create the kind of sex life we want to have with our partner, long after the initial phase of effortless excitement may have come and gone.

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Similarly, some people don't think that sex should or can be the foundation of a successful committed relationship.

And there are lots of things we could say about that, but for today's purposes, I want you to consider the question of whether great sex needs to translate into a committed, long-term relationship.

Sometimes people who are in a committed, established relationship operate under the implicit assumption that if they're going to leave their committed relationship, they'd better be heading into another committed relationship. Their thinking is that leaving their established relationship will have been a bad choice if they don't wind up in a committed relationship with their affair partner. And that operating assumption occasions questions about the viability of the relationship with the affair partner. Is it JUST about good sex? Is there anything else to it? And how can I know that, at this stage in my situation? And how am I supposed to make any decisions what to do about anything, if I can't know the answers to my questions at this stage of my situation?

I want you to ask yourself if you think you need a guarantee that the relationship with the person you're having great sex with will turn into a committed relationship in order to decide to pursue that relationship. And if you do think you need that kind of guarantee, I want you to ask yourself why. Your answer promises to reveal some important things to you – about your priorities, and perhaps about your fears, as well.

I want to suggest that you could choose to pursue a relationship simply because the sex is great in that relationship, and that's what you want to prioritize in your life right now. Even if there's no guarantee that that relationship will end up being a partnership that's equally great in other ways. Now of course, you might not want to make that choice. You might decide that great sex isn't a good enough reason to leave one relationship and pursue another. Or make any other kinds of changes in

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your life.

But in order to make these kinds of decisions, you may need to take some time to get really clear on the value you place on sex in your life right now. Why do you appreciate sex, or good sex? Why is it legitimate for you to appreciate good sex – and make it a priority in your life?

A lot of people have never had an honest conversation with themselves about this. If you have never had this kind of a conversation with yourself, you might want to have it now.

There are so many different reasons why having sex at all might be important to you – and why it might be important to you to have “good sex” or sex in particular way. We can make sex mean anything to us.

For instance, we may value the physical pleasure we get from sex, or physical pleasure that’s intertwined with emotional pleasure and psychological pleasure. Some people would say that there are even more levels of pleasure that can be experienced from sex, like spiritual ecstasy. So my very short list of ways in which you find sex pleasurable isn’t meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it’s just meant to encourage you to get clear on the ways in which you may find sex pleasurable, and clear on how much you value that pleasure.

Or, your identity may revolve around your sex life, or your sex life may inform your identity. For a lot of people, being a person who has sex at all, or has sex in a particular way, or with a particular person or persons isn’t just about the sensations associated with these experiences. It’s about what they make these experiences mean about them, and who they are.

These are just some of the ways in which you might value or appreciate

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sex. There's no right or wrong way to value sex. There's no right or wrong degree to which you should prioritize sex, or degree to which you should consider sex important.

Sometimes when I tell people that they say, "But... what if all I care about is sex, and I spend every waking minute thinking about sex or having sex or trying to have sex?" and my answer to that is, what if that is what you want, and what if that isn't a problem? Some people have decided that sex is VERY important to them and they organize their lives in the service of that. And you, too, could do that if you wanted to. And sometimes in response to that people say, "Oh no I couldn't!" and my response to that is, yes, you really COULD. You might not like some of the trade-offs you need to make in order to set your life up so that you can have sex all day everyday with whoever you want to, but that doesn't mean that you could not actually do that.

Of course, the point for you may not be that you want to have sex all day every day. That may not be what you want. My intention in using that example is to urge you to think beyond whatever constraints you may be imposing on the extent to which you want to prioritize sex in your life. And what I'm encouraging you to do today is to get really clear on the ways in which sex matters to you, and the extent to which sex matters to you so that you can make decisions about how you want to prioritize – or not prioritize – sex in your life that you like.

Interestingly, being clear on the value you place on sex and on good sex or great sex or amazing sex does not just help you pursue these kinds of experiences. Being clear on the value you place on sex can also help you make decisions about when you DON'T want to pursue or prioritize sex.

For instance, sometimes I work with people who are married, and feel deeply devoted to their spouse and their family, but they're also having

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an affair with someone who they are having mind-blowing sex with. The best sex of their life.

And what sometimes gets these people really stuck in confusion and frustration is when they tell themselves that the great sex they're having is really nice, but it isn't all that important. Or, similarly, they might be telling themselves that the great sex is great and all, but their family should matter more to them. The commitment they made to their spouse should matter more to them.

But neither of those statements are as true as you might think they are. If great sex is important to you, telling yourself it isn't is effectively a lie. And it isn't true in any absolute sense that a commitment to one's spouse and family matters more, or should matter more, than pursuing great sex. A lot of people might THINK that it is, but that doesn't mean it's an inviolable law of the universe or anything like that. Moreover, when we try to use this kind of reasoning with ourselves – that is, when we try to convince ourselves of things that aren't really true – we usually resist. And why wouldn't we?

If you are deeply devoted to your family, and are also enjoying the amazing experience of having really great sex with someone who you technically aren't supposed to be having sex with, you do have the option of allowing both things to be true at once. I want to be devoted to my family, and I also want to have great sex with this other person. Sometimes we think our head will explode if we allowing seemingly competing things to be true for us, but it probably won't literally explode. And when we allow ourselves to be honest about all of the things we want, we're better able to make choices about what we're going to do with those desires, or how we're going to act on our preferences.

Some people who are married decide to give up their relationship with their affair partner who they were having amazing sex with because they

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would prefer to do that than give up their marriage and their family. And although they may not be excited about relinquishing their sexual relationship with their affair partner, they are okay with their decision to do so because they really WANT to honor the commitment they made to their spouse, and work on that relationship, and they really want to keep their family together. That's different from not wanting to deal with the inconvenience of getting divorced, by the way.

And making this kind of a decision is very different from saying that sex isn't important, or shouldn't be as important to you as your marriage and your family.

You can really enjoy something and really value it and really appreciate it and still not choose it. You may decide, great sex is really important to me, but other things are even more important to me, or at least, more important to me right now.

Or, you may decide that great sex is really important to you and you want to make it a high priority in your life – and that may mean that you do choose to leave your marriage so you can pursue great sex elsewhere, but that doesn't have to mean that you abandon your family. Rather, it may mean that you find different ways of being a family, even if you don't want to be married to your spouse anymore.

Also, if you decide that you want to prioritize your commitment to your relationship with your spouse over the great sex you've been having with someone other than them, you still have the option of working on your sex life with your spouse! Even if you've never had great sex with them before, that doesn't mean you never can. But, making this choice may mean that you forego a certain sexual relationship or a certain set of sexual experiences that were really important to you.

So it's important to keep in mind that sometimes the way we're framing

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our options isn't the most helpful way of looking at them. Sometimes we aren't actually giving up what we think we're giving up. Sometimes we think we're certainly giving something up forever and there's no possibility of ever having it again, but that doesn't have to be the case.

But that said, it's important to acknowledge that most of us, at any given moment in our lives, are making decisions about what we're going to prioritize. And sometimes these decisions require some pretty significant trade-offs. And that does not have to be a problem, as long as we're making these trade-offs consciously and willingly. As far as I know, the only way to live without making trade-offs is to like everything equally. And although you COULD decide to live that way, I don't know anyone who actually does that. Most of us prefer to have preferences! Most of us don't WANT to like everything equally! But in a world where we get to have the pleasures that come with preferring some things over others, we also get to deal with not having what we want, sometimes. Or not having everything we want all at once. Yes, it may be possible to have everything we want all at once, sometimes. But expecting to have that all the time may be a recipe for unhappiness. Being willing to not have everything we want all at once all the time may actually increase our net happiness.

When we can willingly choose to give up things that are important to us for reasons that we like, it's totally different from giving something up because we think we have to, and then trying to convince ourselves that maybe it wasn't all that important to us anyway. That kind of self-denial, or dishonesty with ourselves doesn't lead to anything great.

Now I'm going to give you an example of what choosing not to prioritize something that we value can look like that isn't about sex.

For many years, yoga was a really big part of my life. I started doing yoga very reluctantly, because I believed it was something that only

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flexible people could do, and I sure as hell wasn't physically very flexible. I had a lot of low-grade body problems, and when I saw people doing yoga, I was like, yeah, I'll never be able to do that. That's something that other people get to do. And people always told me how great yoga was and I was like, well, that sounds amazing, but I'll never be able to experience the kinds of benefits people are talking about getting from yoga because that just isn't available to me.

But then, miraculously, I did start doing yoga, and pretty soon I was like, holy shit, this is like the best thing that's ever happened to me. Or one of the top five, anyway. Discovering yoga was not the SAME as discovering great sex, but it was similar in the sense that it ushered me into a completely different relationship with my body, and a completely different understanding of the kinds of experiences I could have with my physical body, or in my physical body. More specifically, it ushered me into a far more enjoyable relationship with my body, and a far more enjoyable set of experiences in my body, than the ones I'd been having before. And I appreciated this a LOT. And the overall effect of having these kinds of experiences was not unlike the way that some people experience the overall effect of having a sex life they really enjoy. It was such a great enhancement to my experience of being alive.

In addition to that, being a person who did yoga also became a pretty big part of my identity. And then I started teaching yoga, I enjoyed that so much too, both in terms of the actual teaching itself, and in having the identity of yoga teacher. And this was true for a decent chunk of my life. I taught at least a couple of classes or a couple of private lessons a week for more than ten years, and for some of those years, I was teaching quite a bit more than that.

Even so, there came a time when I chose to stop teaching yoga. I chose to give it up, not because it wasn't important to me anymore, but because I wanted to spend the time I was spending teaching yoga in

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other ways. Put differently, teaching yoga was important to me, but other things were becoming even more important to me. And it was sad to let it go. For one thing, I didn't really like giving up that part of my identity. But for another thing, not teaching yoga also ended up meaning that I did less yoga. That didn't have to be the case, of course, but it worked out that way for me. And so in addition to losing this part of my identity, I also began to do a lot less of something that I really enjoyed doing, and that had tremendous benefits for my overall well-being, including but not limited to my physical well-being. I still practice yoga. I truly don't think I would be able to do anything else if I didn't. But instead of yoga being a huge part of my life, it's now kind of at minimum baseline level.

It's an imperfect analogy, but giving up yoga to the extent that I have is kind of like choosing to prioritize other things over great sex. It's not that I've stopped valuing yoga. It's not that I chose to relinquish it, to the extent that I did, because it wasn't important to me anymore. It's because I decided that right now, there are other things that are even more important to me. Which is saying a lot! But I think that the better our lives get, the more we find ourselves in the position of having to give up something pretty great for something that's even better, or something that we want even more. And that's not the worst problem to have.

I also want to make it clear that I do experience any drawbacks to my choices. Doing less yoga than I used to has consequences for me. I like the way I feel in my body when I have a more frequent and more rigorous yoga practice a lot more than I like the way I feel in my body when I have a minimum baseline yoga practice. But I tolerate the consequences of doing less yoga because I've made the choices I have for reasons that I like. And, I also know that I can make adjustments in this department if I choose to! Decisions I have made to this point do not doom me to a particular fate forever.

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And that's true for you, too, when it comes to decisions about how you want to prioritize sex in your life. There may be times when you want to make good sex a very high priority. There may be times when you decide that you can live without good sex, or with less of it, for reasons that you are as happy with as you can be.

Okay. I want to make it absolutely clear that the point of this episode is NOT that you should recognize how important great sex is, and then decide not to prioritize it in your life – or that if you decide that sex is really important to you, that means you have to prioritize it in a particular way. What I am saying is, when you get clear on how important sex is to you, you'll be in a much better decision to make decisions about how you want to prioritize sex in relation to the other things that are important to you in your life.

And that is it for today. If you're ready to begin the process of making your infidelity situation less complicated and less confusing, let's work together. I can help you get clear on what you want to prioritize in your life right now, and help you take action in the service of your highest priorities. If you have been stuck in indecision or inaction for longer than you'd like, now is the time to begin the process of getting unstuck. When you're ready for change, you can schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, [mariemurphyphd.com](http://mariemurphyphd.com). I can't wait to meet you.

All right everyone, thank you all so much for listening! If you've enjoyed what you've heard, I would greatly appreciate it if you would head on over to iTunes to rate and review the show. Your ratings help other people who would benefit from hearing this podcast find it. So share the love! Please and thank you. Have an excellent week. Bye for now.