

## A QUESTION OF

# Impotence

**T**heir romance began in divorce court—an unfortunate harbinger of things to come. Both Lisa\* and Ira were attorneys, and after chatting outside the courtroom, they were astonished at how right they seemed for each other. A whirlwind courtship ensued. On a balmy summer evening, following a week of dinners, parties, and theater, they were ready to make love.

After furtive foreplay, though, the pace of their lovemaking quickly slackened. Ira's erection disappeared, followed by Ira, who jumped out of bed. While dressing, he muttered some unkind remarks about the way she kissed. She felt rejected, confused, and after he left, angry. The next day, she called him and offered a few choice rejoinders to his criticisms of her kissing technique. He responded that he never wanted to see her again.

The hardest thing about an unexpectedly soft penis is knowing what to do with it. Few women react to a lover's erection failure with perfect grace and equanimity. For men, the betrayal by their own anatomy is shocking and humiliating. Even if their inability to achieve an erection is only occasional, many men see the problem as monolithic—one that evokes images of defeat and emasculation, and a diagnosis that's pure poison to their psyche: *impotence*.

In reality, complete impotence—the permanent inability to attain and sustain an erection—rarely occurs in young men. The occasional difficulties some men experience are almost always due to anxiety or other psychological problems, exhaustion, or drug or alcohol use. All are easily remedied.

Eventually, though, all men—and their lovers—will have to confront the I-word. By age forty, probably most men have experienced an episode or two of flaccidity—and their numbers grow with each ensuing decade, according to Bruce MacKenzie, founder of Impotence World Services in Maryville, Tennessee. Unfortunately, few men and even fewer women know how to acknowledge erection difficulty tactfully. Some men, when confronted with an unresponsive penis, react as Ira did. Women can be equally naive. Here are some things to do, and not do, when erection failure intrudes upon *your* relationship.

## DON'T BLAME YOURSELF

Your first impulse may be to feel that your lover finds you unattractive. But remember: He wouldn't be in bed with you if he didn't desire you. His nonerect state most likely has nothing to do with you.

*With a little love, you can keep his small problem from turning into big trouble for your relationship.*

*By Mary*

*Ellen Strote*

Even if you do understand that you're not the cause, you may still feel responsible for providing the cure. When Gloria's boyfriend started having trouble, she fought back with frilly lingerie. Her boyfriend bridled at her attempts at seduction. "He accused me of being too aggressive," she remembers. If your partner blames you—which is easier than acknowledging his own problem—don't believe him.

## TRY TO UNDERSTAND

No woman can quite imagine the humiliation of having a penis that refuses to cooperate during moments of high passion. "But," says Warren Farrell, a San Diego sex therapist and author of *The Myth of Male Power*, "if you can visualize being a little nervous, and as a result, your breasts flattened, just shriveled up, right in front of him, then you might *begin* to understand."

A woman *can* empathize with performance anxiety. "You know how it feels to question *your* sexual adequacy," says Linda De Villers, a Santa Monica psychologist. Think of how vulnerable you feel after sex. Well, a man feels vulnerable *before* sex.

## EXAMINE YOUR RELATIONSHIP

When a couple isn't communicating, his penis may speak for both of them. "The penis is like radar," says Farrell. "It's much more in touch with a man's *true* feelings. It makes his most honest statement. When his penis is soft, he is saying, 'There's something in this situation I'm not comfortable with.'"

## DON'T GET EMOTIONAL

If you act surprised, amused, irritated, or distant when your man doesn't get it up, you'll only worsen his anxiety. "If you react badly when he says, 'I feel pressured' or 'I don't feel like making love,' he may never be honest with you again," says Herb Goldberg, author of *What Men Really Want*. "Women who cry or get angry when a man tells the truth are programming him to be a liar in the relationship."

## DON'T COMFORT HIM

If you fuss over him—"You poor thing!"—his anxiety level may go through the ceiling. "A woman can ask, 'Is there

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(continued)

any way I can help you?" or "Do you want to talk?" says Stan J. Katz, a Beverly Hills, California, clinical psychologist and author of *False Love and Other Romantic Illusions*. "But if the man says no, she shouldn't push it."

Reassurance that you love him for who he is, not for his perpetual erection, may be all he needs. What he doesn't need is pity. "He hasn't been shot on the battlefield," says Goldberg. "He's not a wounded veteran." And you aren't Florence Nightingale.

### DON'T ANALYZE HIM

Be his lover, not his psychiatrist. A man who can't get an erection when he wants one already feels diminished. "Unless he asks, 'Honey, what can I do about my impotence?' which *no* man will do, he doesn't want critiques, evaluations, or analysis," says Ellen Kreidman, author of *Light His Fire: How to Keep Your Man Passionately and Hopelessly in Love With You*.

A good reason to avoid playing shrink: After physical problems are ruled out, the reasons for male sexual dysfunction are unclear even to professionals. Your man simply may be going through a stage in which he has less interest in sex.

### DON'T KEEP TRYING

"If you have already tried fondling and oral sex and he doesn't have an erection, there's probably nothing more you can do," says Katz. A woman who insists on trying to stimulate her partner's penis may succeed in getting him a little bit hard, but there won't be any momentum to his excitement, and in a few minutes, he will lose the erection again.

Sometimes, it helps to approach your goal from another direction. Marya's husband is usually a take-charge lover, but occasionally his erection will fade. "I start kissing him somewhere else or tell him how much I admire his body, and before long, he's back," she says. "I feel like a magician!"

### DON'T DENY WHAT'S HAPPENING


He probably will, and that's bad enough. A 1990 survey by the Impotence Information Center found that nearly half of all patients waited more than a year before seeking help. Some men wait as long as ten years.

Celeste's new boyfriend was one such procrastinator. "The first night we slept together, he said, 'Gosh, I've never had this problem before,'" she remembers. "But the same thing kept happening. He would be okay, then he would droop. He never brought up the problem of his erections and neither did I." The relationship, once promising, soon ended.

### SEND HIM FOR HELP

If he hasn't been able to get an erection several times in a row, consult an expert. "Don't just order him out to get fixed," warns De Villers. "Think of this as your mutual problem. Say something like 'Maybe the two of us could talk to somebody to get a better handle on this...'" He may prefer to seek help by himself, but make yourself available to any therapy that is prescribed. There is always *some* relational component to erection problems.

"Someone needs to ask the right questions," says urologist Leon Bender, the former chief of staff at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. "Does he get erections during masturbation or in the middle of the night? Maybe a girlfriend can't ask because she doesn't know what the questions are or she is too shy, but a doctor can."

What a doctor *can't* do is be there for him in his vulnerable moments to reassure him that no matter what, he is the sexiest man on earth. But you can. 

*\*In the interest of privacy, some names have been changed.*

### When It's Not All in His Head

Ten years ago, the causes of impotence were thought to be 80 percent emotional and 20 percent physical. "Those statistics are now reversed," says Dr. Bender.

Because an erection is a vascular event, anything that obstructs blood flow to the penis will cause erectile failure. Hardening and narrowing of the arteries, due to diabetes or aging, are the most common causes of organic impotence. Specialists say repeated erectile failure in young men could be early signs of heart disease.

Venous leak is the second most common cause. As the penis fills with blood during an erection, the veins don't close, allowing the blood to leak back out. A simple elastic band attached to the base of the penis traps the blood, solving the problem.