

**(RE-) EMERGENCE OF SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY NEEDS**

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Hello, this is Jose Parappully, Salesian priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre for Psychospiritual Wellbeing at Jeolikote, Uttarakhand with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

In this edition, I present another important Midlife dynamic, namely, Emergence or Re-Emergence of Sexuality and Intimacy needs.

Midlife is a time of sexual awakening or re-awakening. Sexuality can be experienced at this period in rather intense and surprising ways. This can lead to confusion, conflicts, pressure to gratify impulses and compromise of commitments. It is important to understand the nature of this awakening or re-awakening.

For some sexuality is awakened at midlife. For some others, it is re-awakened. Some religious, especially women, for example, would have made a religious life choice early in life when their sexuality had not been awakened. Because of the prevailing negative attitudes toward it during formation years, and even later, their sexuality would have remained dormant or repressed and become part of their shadow. Even for those whose sexuality had been awakened before entering religious life, sexuality and intimacy needs would have been later repressed and exiled into the shadow basement for the same reasons. As we saw in the last podcast, whatever is repressed would raise its head at midlife. Hence, there can be re-awakening of this dormant or repressed sexuality.

There is some difference in the way men and women experience this awakening or re-awakening.

**MEN'S EXPERIENCE**

While late adolescence and early adulthood is the time when the sexual drive (sexual arousals, pressure to gratify sexual impulses) in men is most intense, at midlife men's sexual need fulfillment shifts to finding mutually fulfilling relationship with a partner and greater emotional connectedness. Hence, it is in the area of relational intimacy that midlife men experience more challenges.

**Impact on Self-Image**

Physiological and psychological changes, hormonal changes in particular, have a decisive effect on a man's sexual experience at midlife. Decreasing testosterone (the male sex hormone) levels brings about a decline in sexual potency. Consequently sexual arousal can be slow and weaker, relaxation occur more quickly, and intervals between arousals become longer. Some may experience embarrassing failures while making love. Since for men in general their success at sexual performance, ability to please their sexual partner and give her pleasure and satisfaction, have a good deal to do with their self-concept, lowered sexual potency can negatively affect their self-

image and self-confidence. Many midlife men develop anxieties around their sexual competence and attractiveness to females. They will then tend to re-assure themselves through experimentation and extramarital affairs, usually with younger females.

### **Impact on Marriage**

Weakening male sexual prowess has profound impact on intimacy in marriage. Men become so embarrassed or ashamed of their lowered sexual capacity they dare not speak about it with their partner and instead pull away from any expression of intimacy. Gail Sheehy describes the dynamic:

The longer this problems remains unspoken between a couple, the more monstrous it grows, until there is an eight-hundred pound gorilla in the bedroom. Nobody mentions it for six months, two years, five years; meanwhile the pair stops hugging, stops holding hands, stops touching altogether, moves to separate beds, to separate rooms, and ultimately separate lives. They become estranged in all forms of intimacy because of this sexual shutdown. (*Passages in Men's Lives*, p. 15)

Sheehy observes that weakening of sexual potency might actually be the trigger for male midlife transition. Lowered sexual potency strikes at the core of his manly identity and sets in motion a number of the other psychological dynamics of midlife described in the earlier issues.

### **Impact on Religious Man/Priest**

The religious male is not exempt from midlife sexual anxieties and vulnerabilities, even though he has given up conscious gratification of sexual desires and impulses. Since sexual capacities profoundly affect self-concept, decreasing sexual prowess can affect the celibate male's self-image as well.

Moreover, at midlife, his repressed needs for intimacy also begin to assert themselves. He becomes more receptive to attention and affection showered on him by female admirers and vulnerable to making compromises on his celibate commitment.

Priest psychologist R. Vaughan explains this midlife vulnerability. When the priest or religious brother assesses his years in the priesthood or religious life and compares these with his dream — who he wanted to be and what he wanted to accomplish — it is quite likely that he would be disillusioned. In most cases, his life and ministry would not have turned out as rosy or fruitful as he would have wanted. At this time of self-doubt and disillusion, the company of an understanding woman whose admiration for him bolsters up his self-esteem can become extremely attractive. Their relationship can become so satisfying that he would be willing to give up what he has cherished for years — his priestly/religious vocation. He can find very many justifications to begin a new life with her.

Often, it is not genital sex, Vaughan observes, that is the motive here, but the need for emotional intimacy, the longing for a close, tender relationship in which he can express to a trusted other his overly controlled feelings without fear or anxiety. Most men normally disclose little of their inner life to anybody in earlier years. However, in midlife there is inner pressure to give expression to these repressed feelings and longings. An understanding woman, who accepts him totally, and in whose company he can be himself without fear or embarrassment provides him the freedom to give vent to those feelings and longings.

It has been found that many, if not most, priests and religious who leave their ministries and communities and marry do so in midlife. The results of a survey by Franciscan psychologist Oviedo showed that more than two-thirds of perpetually professed men religious who abandon their religious commitment do so in middle age: 37.8% in the age group 31-40 and 33.0% in the age group 41-50. Significantly, the survey found that 42% of those who leave do so because of affective and intimacy problems.

### **Midlife Challenge**

One challenge for religious men at midlife is to fulfil their intimacy needs, by developing satisfying close relationships with men and women, without compromising their celibate commitments.

It is important for religious men and priests experiencing midlife sexuality and intimacy challenges to find a trustworthy spiritual guide, with whom they can share their experiences and find guidance. This is equally true also for laymen struggling with sexuality and intimacy issues at midlife. When a spiritual guide is not available, honest sharing with a trusted friend can also help.

It is also important that one does not take hasty life-choice decisions when caught up in the emotional turbulence created by awakened or re-awakened sexuality and intimacy dynamics at midlife, especially without proper guidance and discernment.

Women's experience of sexuality and intimacy issues at midlife will be presented in the next weekend's podcast.

### **Reflection Exercise**

- *What does this article evoke in you?*
- *What are the midlife sexual and intimacy dynamics you are currently experiencing or have experienced in the past?*
- *How do you feel about these experiences and the way you handled them?*

### **Prayer**

There is a post resurrection story in the Gospel of John (Ch. 20, 11-28) which presents expression of deep intimacy that Mary of Magdala experiences in regard to Jesus of Nazareth. You could read this passage slowly and stay with this scene for a while, be in touch with whatever it evokes in you, and speak to Jesus about these as well as about your own joys and struggles around intimacy.

Have a blissful and safe weekend. Be blessed.  
Thank you for listening/reading.

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