

An Open Letter to Spouses of Survivors of Sexual Abuse

by Diane Hawkins

Dear Spouse,

We want you to know:

- We feel very badly—even guilty—that we cannot give you a normal sex life.
- We long to have it work right for both of us.
- We want you to understand the roots of our problems with sex.
- We want you to know that our responses are often just as confusing to us as to you, and we may not be able to answer all your questions asking “Why?”
- *We want you to work with us to make sex become either possible, or better, for both of us.*

We want you to understand these things about why sex is so difficult for us:

- Our traumatic sexual violation as a child is deeply stamped on the experience of sex for us. When we have sex with you, the unresolved memories of this violation can be triggered so easily. Sometimes our minds flash back and exchange you with our perpetrator. We don't want that to happen, but we don't have much control over it as long as those memories are hidden or unresolved.
- The effects of sexual violation in childhood surpass any other type of abuse.
- Approximately 95% of people with DID were sexually traumatized as children. This bears witness to how overwhelming this kind of abuse is to a young child.
- Dealing with our sexual abuse memories is not easy either. It requires revisiting those seemingly intolerable moments of violation & identifying the beliefs that came as a result, so they can be addressed and God can speak truth and healing into them. All areas of our abuse have to be dealt with in this manner, but revisiting the sexual violation memories are perhaps the most difficult. It takes tremendous ego strength, courage, and motivation. It is like diving into the deepest end of a swimming pool filled with black swamp water and swarming with alligators and water moccasins to open the drain at the bottom, not knowing whether we will come out alive (that is how it *feels*). Because of the inner strength that it takes to do this, please don't expect us to do it early in our healing journey. If we are left completely on our own to do it, it may, in fact, be the last thing we finally have the guts to do. Or we may just skip it altogether.

But you can make a difference in this. If we know that we have a loving partner who understands the difficulty of the process and *if we can feel your support as we work towards this goal*, it may increase our motivation and courage to actually face those dreaded memories.

- Shame is one of the aftereffects of sexual abuse that we also want you to understand. This shame may be attached to our physical bodies, the act of sex itself, and/or just talking about sexual things. Because of this we may need *you* to initiate any discussion about how we can improve our sexual experience.

We want you to understand these things about our behaviors in regard to sex:

- When we set boundaries, this doesn't mean we are rejecting you as our love-mate.

- When we say “No,” it doesn’t mean we don’t love you.
- When we cannot say “No” and have it honored, we feel used as a sexual object just like our abusers did to us. We feel it as re-victimization, and it sets us back rather than moving forward into a more positive sexual experience with you.
- We never had the freedom to say “No” to our perpetrators. We would like you to help us experience the right to say “No” and have it respected. This is absolutely necessary for us to move out of the “victim role” in regard to sex. *If you want to know how you can help us move towards a healthier sexual relationship with you, this is a crucial step.* It will make us feel safer with you. It is very scary to open the door to a sexual relationship if we do not have an escape hatch or rip cord. If you can give this to us, it will make a big difference.

Some other things that would make sex feel *safer* to us are:

- Please don’t pull surprises on us. Anything that hits us unexpectedly is apt to trigger those of us with DID to switch into a protective alter. If we are to have a positive sexual experience with you, we would like you to express or exhibit your intentions over a period of perhaps hours. (Someone once said, “Good sex begins at breakfast.”) Leading us gradually into the sexual experience enables us to adjust our identity system into the best position for having sex when the time comes. While being able to be “spontaneous” in sex may be a goal to work towards, we may not be able to handle that until we have gained more healing.
- On the other hand, it’s okay to ask us if we might be up to it as long as you are willing to abide by our response.
- Please don’t hold us in restrictive “clamp downs” during sex. This makes us feel trapped and is apt to cause flashbacks to our abuse.
- We need you to respect whatever boundaries we have set as well as the times we choose to say, “No,” as explained above.

Some of the things that would make sex a *better* experience for us are:

- The best sexual experience for us is when we truly feel loved by you and it becomes an expression of that love.
- We want you to make love to us as a person, not just our body.
- We like being close to you, talking and sharing our hearts with each other. We like affectionate touches during the day that are not necessarily sexual in nature—like the pats and hugs you may give to your sister. All of these increase our feeling of love, safety, and comfort with being near you.

We know sex is an area of great importance to you. Therefore, we hope that you will make it so important that you are willing to sit down and talk to us about it so that we can better understand each other and design an individually tailored approach to sex in *our* marriage. We want to feel that we are *equal partners* in negotiating this. Some of the things we may need to talk about:

- What your needs are and what our needs are
- What your desires are and what our desires are
- What things make sex seem safer to each of us
- What things make sex more enjoyable for each of us
- How we are each most comfortable with having a sexual experience initiated

- What boundaries you want us to respect in regard to sex and what we boundaries we want you to respect in regard to our sexual experiences
 - These will reflect the things we are each comfortable with and what we are not
 - These can change in either direction over time:
 - When we are dealing most potently with our sexual abuse issues in therapy
 - As we gain greater healing of those memories
 - As we learn a healthier interpretation of various sex acts
- What to do if in the middle of sex, I am triggered into past memories, experiences, etc.
- Since we both bring sexual “baggage” into the marriage, we *both* need to examine our beliefs about sex and identify their roots. Healing will come when, in the emotional context of that original situation, we allow God the opportunity to change those beliefs. (This may need to take place within a therapy session.)

Please understand that each sexual abuse survivor may be different in what they can handle at any given time. Some cannot tolerate sex at all for at least some periods during the healing journey. Others may be able to do it intermittently, when things are going well. Some of us may have alter-identities that can handle sex well, but you mustn't count on this always occurring.

Sometimes you may need to help us go through a desensitization process in order for us to move into a positive sexual experience with us. We may need to go through a step-wise sequence of becoming comfortable with the visual experience of nudity, then with touching gradually more sexual parts of the body, then moving forward with heavier “petting,” and finally into having sex under the safe conditions we have stipulated. We need to warn you that we might have to go through this desensitization a number of times through the healing process if we have DID. In the end bringing our Original Self, or true identity, to be comfortable with the sexual experience will be most important.

Please, will you help us get where you want us to be?

Your loving spouse

Me

(This letter reflects a compilation of thoughts expressed by numerous sexual abuse survivors gathered at the “Restoring Shattered Marriages” retreat conducted by Restoration in Christ Ministries in May 2006.)