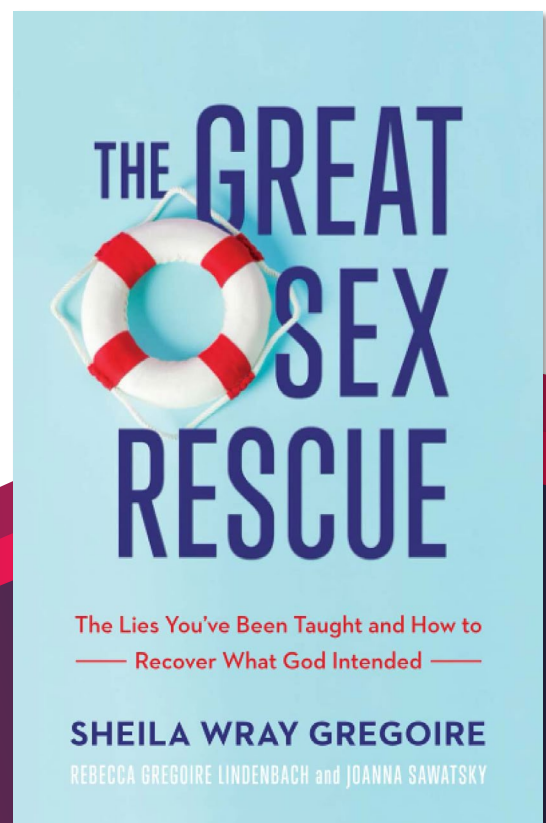


OBLIGATION SEX

Why Obligation Sex Destroys Intimacy—
And How to Restore It

Based on a survey of 20,000 predominantly evangelical women, spanning the spectrum of theological beliefs and denominations, for our book *The Great Sex Rescue*.



BARE MARRIAGE
HEALTHY, EVIDENCE-BASED, BIBLICAL ADVICE FOR SEX & MARRIAGE

with Sheila Wray Gregoire



OBLIGATION SEX

Why Obligation Sex Destroys Intimacy—And How to Restore It

Our fundamental definition of sex is that it should be mutual, intimate, and pleasurable for both. These three elements are the necessary building blocks for a healthy and satisfying sex life.

But what happens when couples are taught that sex is a need primarily for men, and that it is a wife's duty to fulfill that need whenever he desires it?

In our research for *The Great Sex Rescue*, we analyzed some of the harmful messages that evangelical couples are taught through popular marriage books and seminars. This is the most destructive belief we measured.

Women who enter marriage believing the obligation sex message are:

- **37%** more likely to experience sexual pain (vaginismus)
- **29%** less likely to frequently orgasm

In fact, vaginismus rates among evangelical women who were taught this message are on par with women who experienced prior abuse. Our bodies literally interpret this message as trauma!

When sex becomes an obligation that women must fulfill, with no freedom to say no, intimacy in the marriage is destroyed. Without the ability to say no, we can never truly say yes. Sex cannot be mutual, intimate, and pleasurable for both when the message is that men need it and women must give it, regardless of how they feel.

WHAT IS VAGINISMUS?

"Vaginismus is the body's automatic reaction to the fear of some or all types of vaginal penetration.

"Whenever penetration is attempted, your vaginal muscles tighten up on their own.

"You have no control over it.

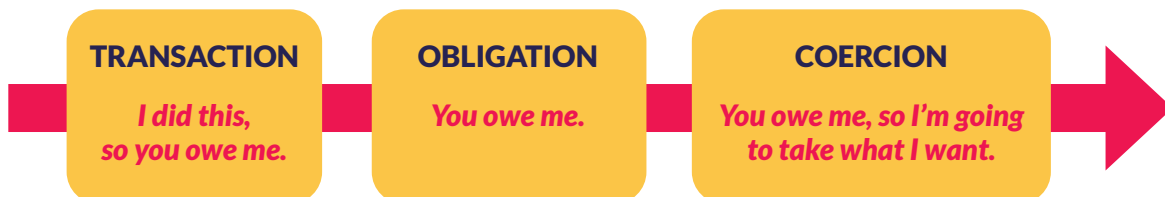
"Occasionally, you can get vaginismus even if you have previously enjoyed painless penetrative sex.

"[Vaginismus] can be painful and upsetting, but it can be treated."

(Source: www.nhs.uk/conditions/vaginismus)

Please see a pelvic floor physiotherapist if you suffer from vaginismus, and read *The Great Sex Rescue*.

The Spectrum of Obligation



In our research, we asked women how they felt about sex.

16%
said their primary emotion after intercourse is feeling used.

18.8%
said their primary motivation for sex is keeping their husbands from sinning sexually.

34.5%
said they have sex so they won't feel guilty.

10-14%
of women in the US are victims of marital rape (and even more are victims of coercion)

Clearly we have a lot of work to do to meet the standard of mutual, intimate, and pleasurable for both.

But where do these messages come from? In our focus groups, we found that **almost all the women we talked to say their husbands never gave them the obligation sex message themselves**. Their husbands didn't see sex as something they were owed or entitled to take, but instead as a gift for them to share together. They saw the importance of honoring their wives' no—**they just never knew she didn't feel free to say it!**

To be sure, **not all women have good husbands** like most of these women do. Some men will take what they want without regard for their wives' feelings. And unfortunately, **many popular Christian marriage books don't even mention the concept of consent**.

But if most men truly want sex to be mutually consensual and enjoyable, **where did their wives get the idea that they couldn't say no?**

When we look at Christian teachings, the puzzle pieces start to fall into place. This is what women have been hearing for years.



HERE ARE SOME QUOTES FROM POPULAR CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE BOOKS:

“Both partners are forbidden to refuse the meeting of their mate's sexual needs.”

The Act of Marriage

“If your husband is typical, he has a need you don't have... His sexuality is different from yours, because he is visually stimulated. He needs sexual release just as you need emotional release.”

Love & Respect

“Though you know you should pray for him and fulfill him sexually, sometimes you won't want to. Talk to each other openly and honestly, then do the right thing.”

Every Man's Battle

“Keep an eye on the calendar and refuse to allow much time to go by without coming together physically.”

Power of a Praying Wife

THESE ALL COUNT AS FORMS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT:

- If a spouse is angry and potentially violent or verbally abusive, and you feel you have to have sex in order to protect yourself or your children.
- If a spouse routinely physically abuses you, and you find this happens less often if you have sex more.
- If a spouse routinely verbally abuses you and tells you that you are worthless or tells you that you will be disobeying God if you refuse sex.
- If a spouse doesn't give you any access to money or groceries or toiletries unless you regularly have sex.
- If a spouse regularly has sex with you while you are sleeping (whether or not your spouse wakes you up in the process).
- If a spouse forces a sexual act that you do not want, that is also sexual assault, even if the rest of the sexual encounter was consensual.
- If a spouse threatens that if you do not have sex, he or she will look at porn, go on sex chat websites, go to strip clubs, or visit prostitutes.

If you have to give sex in order to prevent something bad from happening

(your husband embarrassing you in front of friends; your husband using porn; your husband being mean to you or the children), that, too, **is a form of coercion**. Any time you have to give sex to prevent something bad, you cannot give an enthusiastic yes.

Unless you can say “no,” you can't really say “yes.”

If any of these are happening to you, please call a domestic abuse hotline, or reach out to a licensed counselor who specializes in domestic violence.

THE BIBLICAL BASIS USED TO JUSTIFY THIS MESSAGE COMES FROM PAUL'S COUNSEL:

- 3 The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.
- 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.
- 5 Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

1 CORINTHIANS 7:3-5

To understand this passage, we need to define two things: What does it mean to “deprive,” and what is it that we’re not to deprive one another of? Deprive does not mean refuse. **No one is required to say yes** to every single advance; **self-control is a fruit of the spirit!** But if sex is meant to be something mutual, intimate, and pleasurable for both, then telling a woman she must have sex against her will is not really sex. It’s no longer mutual or intimate, and by going along, **SHE is already being deprived!**

Telling a woman **her needs and feelings don’t matter**, and she must provide sex anyway, **erases her as a person.**

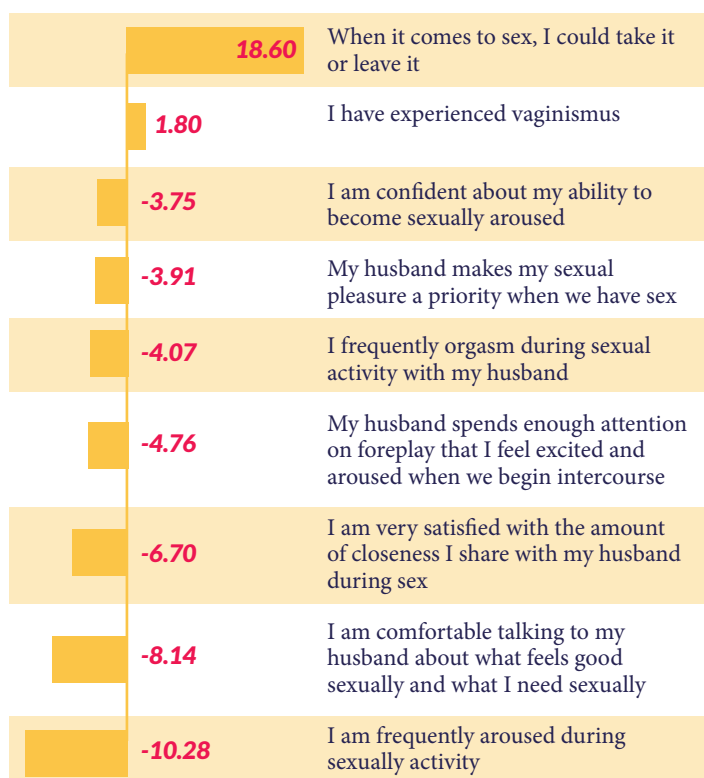
It says that who you are, including your wants, desires, and feelings, doesn’t matter. Then sex, which is supposed to be this deep knowing, becomes something far different. It’s saying, “I don’t want to know you, because your needs and desires are actually unimportant to me. **I only want to use you.**” No wonder that **16% of women in our survey said used is how they feel after sex.**

When women don’t enjoy sex, they are more likely to have intercourse out of fear, guilt, or to protect themselves from mistreatment. Having sex out of obligation also leads to women reporting less sexual and marital satisfaction.

WOMEN REPORT WORSE SEX IF THEY HAVE SEX OUT OF OBLIGATION

What happens to women’s sex lives when they agree that
“I engage in sex with my husband only because I feel I have to”?

(How many times more likely are they to agree with the following statements?)



WOMEN ARE LESS HAPPY IN MARRIAGE IF THEY HAVE SEX OUT OF OBLIGATION

What happens to women’s marital satisfaction when they agree that
“I engage in sex with my husband only because I feel I have to”?



POSTPARTUM AND PERIODS

This message of obligation sex even extends to the postpartum phase or when women are menstruating. In the book *Sheet Music*, Kevin Leman writes that “the most difficult time” for a man is while his wife is menstruating, and he encourages women to give their husbands oral sex or a hand job “to help her husband through that difficult time.” He adds that “faithfulness is a two-person job.”

Even worse, one woman who had suffered pelvic organ prolapse during delivery and found postpartum sex painful said that she felt like her husband wanted her “to suffer through the pain and fulfill [her] duty for his sake.” Even though she was the one who was injured, “he acts as if he is the only one hurting... The fact that my husband wants me to have sex with him despite intense pain disgusts me, and I really question who I chose to marry.”

Sadly, stories like these are not uncommon. **When the man’s “needs” are prioritized above everything else, even the health and safety of his wife, we have destroyed God’s purpose for sex** and have made it anything but mutual, intimate, and pleasurable for both.

“the most difficult time” for a man is while his **wife is menstruating...**

“faithfulness is a **two-person job**”

KEVIN LEMAN
in *Sheet Music*

...women should give their husbands **oral sex or a hand job** “to help them through that difficult time.”

RECOVERING A HEALTHIER PERSPECTIVE ON SEX

So how do we recover a healthier perspective on sex?

First, let’s start with the basic principle that **sex is the culmination of a great marriage**, not the cause. When both spouses are loving each other selflessly and tending to each other’s needs—not just his need for sexual release—intimacy and desire can flourish.

Sex is not the only need in the marriage relationship, and sometimes other needs must take precedence. Illness, life circumstance, injury (especially postpartum), and other factors may interrupt a couple’s sex life. Telling a woman she must give her husband sex regardless of her own needs robs both of them of the intimacy and pleasure that sex is supposed to bring.

Let’s take another look at 1 Corinthians 7. When Paul writes about duty within marriage, it’s important to note

he is addressing both husbands and wives. The **marriage relationship is built on mutual self-giving love**, not the selfish pursuit of one’s own interests without regard for the needs of the other.

Saying “Do not deprive” is not the equivalent of saying “Do not refuse.” When we say “Do not deprive,” we’re saying, “Someone has a need that has to be fulfilled.” But this is not the same thing as saying, “A person gets to have whatever they want.” The sexual need that God created us with is not for intercourse whenever we want or however we want. It’s for a **healthy, mutual, fulfilling sex life**, and sometimes that means saying no for a variety of reasons. God did not say “Do not deprive” in order to allow selfishness to blossom.

We often **misdiagnose the problem** as a **lack of sexual frequency** in marriage. But frequency is most often the symptom, not the problem. Sex is the culmination of a great marriage, not the cause.

- Factors that lead to sexual satisfaction in marriage:

High marital
satisfaction

Feeling
emotionally
close during
sex

She
frequently
reaches
orgasm

No porn
use in the
marriage

No sexual
dysfunction

- These factors lead to wanting sex, so frequency takes care of itself

Emotional Health + Physical Health + Relational Security + Emotional Connection + Physically Satisfying Sex = Wanting Sex

When we build on the three foundational elements of sex—**mutual**, **intimate**, and **pleasurable for both**—we can recover what God has intended husbands and wives to enjoy in their marriage.

RESCUING AND REFRAMING

INSTEAD OF THIS

“Do not **deprive your husband**.”

“Do some **chores** to get her in the mood.”

“You do not have **authority over your body**; your spouse does.”

“The only activity that is to break regular sexual relations is **prayer and fasting** for some specific cause, and this is to be only by mutual consent for a very limited time.”

SAY THIS!

“Sex is a vital part of a healthy marriage relationship that you are **both meant to enjoy**.”

“When **both spouses pull their weight around the house and feel like true partners**, sex can flourish.”

“God wants sex to be a **mutual, loving** experience.”

“Our sexual needs are very important ones, but they are not the only ones. Show love to your spouse by **caring for all of their needs**.”



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