

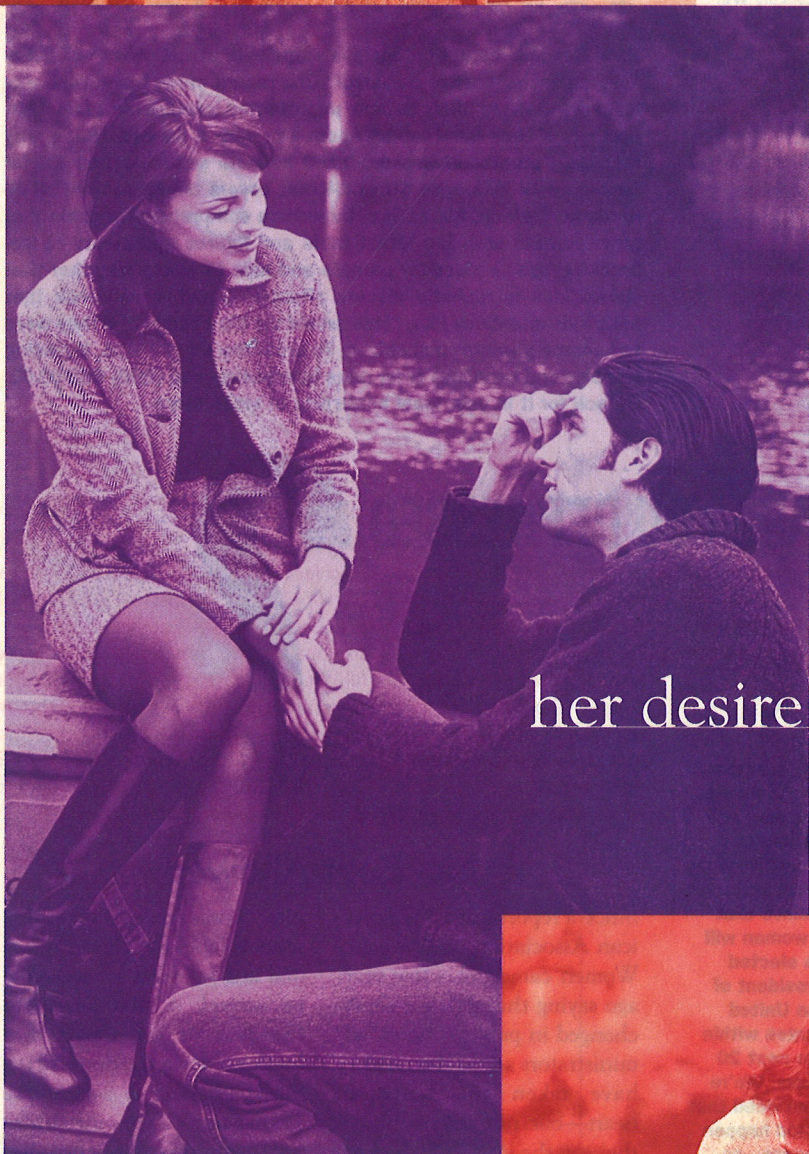


his infidelity

Judy and Brad Tavist* sit in a vast, glass-enclosed meeting room with 20 other couples who have come to sex therapist David Schnarch, Ph.D.'s marital retreat in Alta, Utah, hoping to resurrect their crumbling marriages. The Tavists took their wedding vows here 20 years ago, in a friend's backyard framed by the same majestic mountain peaks that surround the retreat. Since then, they have lived and vacationed here with their children, made friends and spent idyllic days and nights here. Now they are back, their relationship in the throes of a crisis because Judy found out that Brad has been having affairs. "Until a few months ago I didn't have a clue," she tells the group. "I don't know how to get over my anger."

The affairs had started just weeks after their marriage. At first Brad, a successful 48-year-old doctor, had rationalized that his indiscretions—one-nighters as well as long-term affairs—had nothing to do with his marriage. But recently he'd become aware of how his double life was chipping away at his connection to Judy. He'd felt lonely and depressed. And so he had confessed.

Judy, a 47-year-old part-time college professor, responded to his confession by going into a frenzy of snooping: She pored through his address book, his office files, his phone bills, and his hotel and restaurant receipts. One admission led to another, and, ultimately, she uncovered every dirty detail. She even went so far as to confront several of Brad's mistresses. Still, despite the intensity of her distress, Judy doesn't want to end the marriage—nor does she know what to do next.



her desire problem

Gary Stern, 38, and Charlene Porter*, 35, both computer programmers, are also participating in this couples retreat, although there are no dramatic problems in their relationship—except for their ailing sex life.

Honest, open conversation about who you are and what you want is the first step toward adult intimacy.



boot camp for couples

Is your troubled sex life threatening your relationship? This unconventional therapy could fix it beyond your wildest dreams. But a word to the wise—this is not for wimps. by Melinda Blau

It is at Gary's urging that they have come to this alpine sanctuary, ostensibly to deal with Charlene's "low desire." Both are able to have orgasms, but he complains that she doesn't want sex as often as he does. She says she doesn't like the way he goes about having it. Their sex life boils down to a predictable set of rote moves that often end in anger and disappointment.

Gary admits that he has always had trouble asserting himself sexually. "He rarely comes out and says he wants to have sex," Charlene explains. "Instead, he'll snuggle up behind me in bed, maybe start stroking my body. If I ignore him or say I'm not in the mood, he tries to convince me that I really want to make love. Sometimes I give in, but sometimes I get angry."

deromanticizing marriage

Whether the problem is low desire, monotonous sex, or a full-blown, on-the-verge-of-divorce marital crisis, the couples participating in this nine-day marital retreat are all hoping to come away with solutions for their troubles. Indeed, Schnarch's program does promise to change the way couples think about their relationships. His goal is, quite simply, to urge participants to take responsibility for getting their own needs met without losing themselves in the face of their partner's anxiety or anger. That, he says, is the first step toward adult intimacy. Not that he encourages insensitivity. Like other marital counselors, he helps partners to be-



come aware of, and honor, each other's emotional baggage, but he does not teach them how to negotiate, manage conflict, or communicate. "Couples can't stop communicating," he maintains. "But there's no tolerance for each other's message!" Unfortunately, most people just are not emotionally ready for intimacy, says Schnarch, the author of *Constructing the Sexual Crucible: An Integration of Sexual and Marital Therapy* and *Passionate Marriage: Sex, Love and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships* (due out from Norton next year). They first need "to grow themselves up." The good news? A committed relationship can be a crucible for growing up.

To assist couples toward this goal, Schnarch lays out a meticulously prepared smorgasbord of lectures, group discussions, and experiential activities covering topics such as "Recognizing Your Sexual Style," "Fighting and Playing Styles," "Desiring Sexual Desire and Passion," "The Politics of Monogamy and Affairs," and "Illusions of Trust and Commitment." There is also an eye-opening set of roundtable discussions, one with the men talking about their sexual issues (the women sit outside the circle, listening), the other with women discussing their sexual issues (the men listen). Schnarch's wife, psychologist Ruth Morehouse, Ph.D., 47, runs the women's group.

A typical day at the retreat includes a four-hour morning session and a two-to-three-hour after-dinner session. Afternoons are left free so that participants can process the morning's lessons, wander off for hikes in the mountains, or have a private session with Schnarch. Sex (in private) is neither mandatory nor discouraged (for some, the workshops are a turn-on; for others, a cold shower). However, at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, which are eaten together, people talk of nothing but sex and intimacy—they are immersed in the process and in each other's lives.

Schnarch, 50, is the driving force behind the retreat. Charismatic, calculating, and compelling, he often uses his 14-year marriage to illuminate various topics ("Yes, we have the same disagreements as everyone else. This approach makes you see them differently, but they don't disappear"). Like any good entertainer, his patter is razor-sharp. His lectures are peppered with explicit descriptions and four-letter words ("Who owns your dick?" "Who owns your vagina?")—so much so that most people are embarrassed to repeat them. He doesn't require participation, but he works the audience like a pro, encouraging questions and comments. And no matter what the question, Schnarch takes his listeners down the same road: Stop whimpering and grow up. When a lawyer in his early 30s complains that his wife's attempt to incorporate a vibrator into their love-making was like "bringing a dead squirrel into bed with us," Schnarch shoots back: "Did she let that stop her? No? Well, good for her, for not allowing your anxiety to dampen her passion. It's not your wife's job to make you feel better."

in

the men's discussion group, a guy confesses he has had a lifelong fear that he is gay and that "sleeping with women hasn't made it go away." To his surprise, other men identify.

According to Schnarch, most so-called normal couples believe that being in love means being "in the same boat"; that intimacy involves reciprocity and unconditional support (*You make me feel good about myself, and I'll take care of you. If you accept me, I'm not as bad as I thought*). In order to be loved, he says, they present false selves to one another and, rather than feel the anxiety that comes with deep intimacy, they squelch their individual desires.

Nowhere are these dynamics more evident than in the bedroom. Any sexual problem, says Schnarch—be it infidelity, low desire, infrequent sex, impotence (when there is no physiological cause)—signals that neither partner can bear the vulnerability that comes with full self-disclosure. In psychological terms, they suffer from "a low level of differentiat-

ion" that causes them to become enmeshed in each other.

Encouraging participants to become more differentiated is the foundation of Schnarch's program: The more differentiated you are, the better your ability to stay centered in the face of other people's intense emotions. People with a high level of differentiation know what their needs are and are able to express them regardless of their partner's (anticipated or actual) anger or disappointment. This focus on differentiation is found in the psychological literature, but Schnarch is unique in making it the centerpiece of his sex therapy. He maintains that the emotional and psychological independence that comes with differentiation allows individuals to express their true and deepest selves. This leads to a profoundly intimate connection between partners. And, because each person is no longer afraid of being swallowed up by the other, ultimately it also leads to delicious "wall-socket sex"—electric, mind-blowing, eyes-open sex.

If this sounds enticing, and you're ready to sign up, beware: Some couples who have attended the retreat use words like *hell*, *excruciating*, and *a pot of boiling water* to describe Schnarch's tough, stop-whimpering-and-grow-up approach. One woman—a staunch admirer of Schnarch—says that she and her husband were depressed for months afterward. But while Schnarch hasn't done a scientific follow-up, anecdotal reports from graduates suggest that his program does help some couples. Of the approximately 100 couples who have been "Schnarched" since the program's inception four years ago, only one has walked out. Some of those who stuck it out say they wanted to escape, but stayed because they had faith in Schnarch and in the process. They'd also made a hefty investment (between \$3,000 and \$4,000 for transportation, accommodations, meals, and tuition).



HUGH HARTSHORNE Hair and makeup: Johnny Lavoy for Rosamie Rentfrow.

On her, turtle-neck: Co-operative, jacket and skirt: Anthropologie, tights: Hue, boots: Nine West; on him, T-shirt: Banana Republic, shirt: Sisley by United Colors of Benetton, sweater: United Colors of Benetton, jeans: Banana Republic.

Schnarch's hard-nosed style is evident in the tug-of-war exercise: Participants pull at pillows, five minutes with a stranger, five minutes with their partner, shouting the prescribed mantra, "It's mine! I want it! It's mine! I want it!" Like a mother lion, Schnarch prowls the sidelines. When a 45-year-old woman collapses in tears, Schnarch, who refuses to coddle or direct, ignores her until she finally asks him for help in figuring out what happened. Through her sobs, she explains that with the stranger, the tug-of-war was "erotic and fun." But doing it with her husband of seven years brought out a primitive side of her—first, she says, she wanted to kill him; then she felt frightened of her feelings and started crying. Schnarch points out that her tears are a symptom of her need to differentiate herself from her husband. He suggests that she is terrified because she can't control her husband, who is physically—and, probably, psychologically—more powerful, and that she fights with her husband instead of feeling her fear. Schnarch doesn't tell her to get over it—feeling anxious is inevitable when you get that close to someone. But he does stress that she has choices. She can go on feeling angry and fearful, or she can begin to confront herself and do something about her anxiety. Like what? "Like speaking up in the group—revealing her true self without worrying about his reaction," says Schnarch. "This is about her, not him."

taking charge of your own life

One of the key exercises in Schnarch's program involves answering a series of questions about "Who Chose Who?" For example, when you were courting, did you actively choose your partner? Did he ever choose you? Who wanted whom more, from the outset? The exercise clarifies what was going on in your life when you first got involved and reflects the current state of your union, says Schnarch. "Who approaches who first? Who wants more? Who makes up first after a fight? Who approaches who in trying to start conversations?" he asks.

In doing the exercise, Judy realized that she had chosen Brad, but he had never actually chosen her; he'd simply let her come

along on his ride. She had followed him from city to city, ever the dutiful wife. Over the years, their relationship had grown increasingly imbalanced—he made more money, pursued his career unencumbered by responsibilities at home, and, in effect, had more freedom. "I started to see that this crisis wasn't just about Brad and his shitty behavior," says Judy. "I was going to have to do something about my life too."

Brad, meanwhile, was trying to decide whether he now would choose Judy—and whether he could promise to be faithful to her. Another therapist might have castigated him for his infidelities or labeled the behavior "an addiction." But Schnarch sees a man's unwillingness to commit to one woman as a symptom of an immature fear of being swallowed up if he gets too close to her. Brad concurs: "I knew it wasn't rational, but I was afraid that if someone got that close to me, they would take advantage of me—and my world would fall apart."

One year after graduating from Schnarch's program, Brad and Judy are still together. Judy, in an effort to take charge of her own life, now works full-time. She has also started an investing group. Brad, who finally "chose" his wife on the eighth day of the retreat, continues to honor his commitment to monogamy, which has certainly helped their flagging sex life; honesty and trust are powerful aphrodisiacs. Equally important, he finds himself married to a new, independent woman who is able to stand up for her needs. Recently, when Brad was considering a job offer in another state, Judy had been resolute: "I'm not moving. I want this marriage to work, but I'm not giving up myself anymore."

Judy doesn't know what this will mean to the future of their relationship. At the very least, it will force Brad to figure out how to further his career and keep Judy in his life. In the past, Judy did that work for him.

gary and charlene: making the first move

When partners start to act like adults, says Schnarch, they become intrigued with each other. Even more important, they become intrigued with themselves. The nature of the part- > 148



BOOT CAMP FOR COUPLES

continued from page 95

nership changes because they can't help but be affected by each other's growth. They are, as Schnarch puts it, "in separate boats traveling down the same river." Gary and Charlene's experiences at the retreat are a case in point.

Having grown up with the notion that sex was shameful, Charlene was in her 30s before she knew where her clitoris was. She has always let men determine if, when, and how she had sex. Now she is with a man who wants her to take the lead.

Gary grew up in the shadow of a critical, overbearing mother; his father had all but faded into the woodwork. Gary was one of the last boys on the block to lose his virginity and never really relished sex; he's most comfortable having sex when it's the woman's idea. As Schnarch points out, "Here you have two people who want the other to go first, both afraid they might be rejected."

But as the week progresses, Gary grows bolder. In the men's discussion group, he confesses that he has had a lifelong fear that he is gay and that "sleeping with women hasn't made it go away." To his surprise, other men identify and Schnarch applauds his openness. "Here is this guy who's afraid of not being a man," says Schnarch to the group, "and he's sticking his neck and his dick out farther than anyone else here!"

One evening toward the end of the retreat, having just attended Schnarch's "Advanced Sexual Potential II" lecture, Gary tells Charlene he wants to try the kind of sex described by Schnarch as "really doing it"—letting the sexual energy fly, rubbing, aggressive grinding, face-to-face stimulation where insertion isn't even necessary, culminating in orgasm with both eyes open so that you not only see your partner, you see into him or her.

Charlene is agreeable. She wants to please the new grown-up Gary, but her wrist hurts, her leg cramps, and finally she says, "This isn't working." Gary suggests another position. That doesn't work either. Finally, Gary says, "What's really going on here?"

Charlene tells him the truth: She's not ready for such intimate sex. Whereas the little-boy Gary would have gotten upset, pouted, and rolled over, Gary-the-man lets Charlene know how angry he feels. "You're never going to be ready!" he accuses her.

Charlene spends the night alone in the lobby, curled up in an armchair, weeping. By morning, she says she "finally got that

I own my life, not Gary, not my mother, not my boss. I'm the only one who can be there for me."

Three months have passed since they endured the retreat. They've both toughened up. Gary is no longer afraid to go first, to have sexual fantasies, or to feel like a man. And Charlene feels freer to explore her erotic self. They now own a vibrator, they play in the shower, and they're even planning a secret rendezvous in another city. Though Charlene is a no-makeup, blouse-and-pants woman, she's thinking of buying a skirt for the occasion, even wearing eyeliner and lipstick. "I like the idea of fantasy role-playing—that you could meet your husband somewhere, check into a motel, and make believe he's your lover. I've spent months thinking about it!"

changing "the deal"

Willingness to embrace change is the lifeblood of a rich, satisfying sex life. But most couples, desperate not to rock the one boat they're both in, make deals that preclude introducing novelty into their relationships. No wonder they're bored, says Schnarch. Early on in their relationship, they decide tacitly to avoid doing anything that makes either of them uncomfortable in bed—in Theresa and Tom Westport's* case, for more than 27 years.

Tom, a sweet, shy, frail-looking scientist, came to the retreat to help Theresa deal with her desire problem. "I was able to have orgasms, and my husband seemed pleased, but I just wasn't eager about sex," she says. At 26, after eight years in a convent, Theresa married Tom, then 29, and asked him to "be patient." She was a virgin, and Tom was almost as inexperienced and naive, notes Theresa. While he pursued his career, she raised their two children and later went back to school to become a family therapist. They had a lackluster sex life from the outset, but Tom never complained.

After she answers the series of questions designed to help couples recognize what keeps them together, Theresa finally understands: Their deal was that she would not pressure Tom to be an exciting partner if he wouldn't pressure her to be a sexual partner. It is a truth she has always known but never dared to think about until now. Finally, she is willing to face her fear of eroticism; and she hopes he is willing to examine his cautious outlook on life. "I want to be involved with a man who wants to grow, to develop himself more," she tells him. "My first choice is you, but I'm not >

BOOT CAMP FOR COUPLES

continued from page 148

going to sacrifice the rest of my life to preserve a marriage." She once walked out on the convent, she reminds him. "We both know that I can walk out on this marriage, too." Hearing her, Tom starts to sob uncontrollably. "I didn't realize this was going to be about our relationship," he says.

The next day, when the participants are asked to write down all the things they would like their partners to do, Tom is at a loss, tormented inside. He looks around the room. Everyone else is scribbling madly, seeming to enjoy the activity. His wants are hidden from himself—how can he hope to share them with his wife?

During a touching exercise, Tom realizes that he can touch Theresa and be touched by her without feeling anything stronger than "fine" or "okay." Schnarch challenges him, "Do you want to live your life so things are just okay? Where does happiness fit in? It looks to me like you're trying to convince people that you can't feel. I think you're more sensitive than you can stand."

Cut to a week after the retreat. Tom and Theresa are nestled in a cramped tent in the pouring rain, giggling, nuzzling each other. They're making love as they never have before, talking during and after having sex, trying new positions, taking their time.

"We had wall-socket sex!" boasts Theresa. By daring to introduce novelty, which to one couple might be a sensual massage, to another, handcuffs or a different position, each partner gets to be with someone new—or at least with a new side of the old person. "He's much more exciting to me now," says Theresa.

Theresa has changed, too. She's wearing seductive nighties instead of pink flannel nightgowns. The point is, she's willing to put her erotic self out there. "Even taking the time to shop for something like that—something that only he is going to see me in—is a big step," she says.

But it's not the promise of fantasy or the new lingerie that's adding zest to the Westports' marriage. In reality, the ultimate turn-on for both of them is being able to have sex with each other's adult selves. "He comes forward as himself and I come as myself," says Theresa. "All deals are off. We are exploring our sexuality like kids, but the good news is that we've finally grown up." □

Melinda Blau is author of *Loving and Listening: A Parent's Book of Daily Inspirations for Rebuilding the Family After Divorce*.