

Niddah: A Practical Psychological Guide for Couples

By

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While the niddah time can be seen as the Torah's approach to guiding a married couple on the glorious path of expanding their relationship and appreciation for each other beyond the physical, for some couples it can become an enormous and painful challenge. For various reasons, the practices and rituals designed to enhance respect and intimacy are instead experienced as painful deprivation.

For some women who feel a need for physical reassurance and touch, this time can leave them feeling unloved and abandoned. Often there is a negative dynamic cycle that occurs between a husband and wife. The wife feels unloved and hungers for a physical, or at the very least, verbal affirmation of this love. The man may feel overwhelmed by his sexual urges and unconsciously retreat and avoid any interactions that could create arousal. Unfortunately, even relatively chaste aspects of emotional intensity and connection can create arousal in men, and some men will feel guilty, troubled or find the arousal frustrating and thus avoid their wives. This may lead the wife to become even more demanding of affection causing the husband to withdraw even further. This is a classic *galgal hachozet*, a self-reinforcing cycle.

And, it often doesn't stop there. Once the woman is able to go to the Mikvah and resume physical intimacy, her husband will find it easier to connect even emotionally, let alone physically. The problem is, that many women at this point will feel degraded and as if their husband only loves them for sexual needs. Another aspect that can add to the difficulties is the suddenness of the experience. Sometimes, on a moment's notice a couple must cease all forms of sexual intimacy and then because there is an obligation to be intimate on Mikvah night, there is a sudden resumption. Not everyone does well with feeling as if being turned on and off like an electric appliance.

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The Torah makes serious demands upon a Jewish male to restrict his sexual arousal and behavior within the marriage. While this can have many positive benefits for personal development, delay of gratification, increasing trust and reliance upon one another and promoting and maintaining sexual interest, it does present some challenges. The inability to relieve sexual urges within the marital relationship can make it very difficult to avoid prohibited forms of arousal, particularly for those who were not very successful managing these urges within Torah requirements during their years as a bochur. Old feelings of guilt and torment can be reawakened, leading to emotional complications such as increased irritability, anger, and emotional withdrawal from a spouse.

Other complications that can apply to both genders include:

- A spouse is uncomfortable with emotional intimacy and uses physical intimacy as a compensation for this shortcoming. When there is no opportunity for physical intimacy, the couple experiences a terrible void.
- A spouse experienced traumatic emotional abandonment in childhood relationships, leaving him or her "allergic" and reactive to any enforced separation. The normal and fleeting sadness or disappointment at losing physical contact becomes greatly magnified and is felt to be a deep betrayal.
- A spouse has a degree of misplaced piety and is overly scrupulous during the niddah state, leaving the other spouse frustrated and emotionally starved. There are those who are so extreme that they allow for little friendliness or affection.
- A spouse who has poor impulse control, and in general experiences difficulty delaying his or her gratification, may find it extremely challenging to abstain from physical intimacy during this time, leading to unwelcome overtures or actions that are felt to be disrespectful by the other spouse. Aside from the obvious problem of living with someone who is inducing one to sin or violate one's personal morals, the long lasting effects can lead to resentments, shame and guilt for both spouses that remain active way after the Niddah period. If a spouse in some way compromised his or her morals as a result of this situation there will be guilt, anger and shame . But even a spouse resisted, there also can be guilt, anger and shame. There can be resentment and contempt on the side of the spouse who felt pressured to sin, and resentment and contempt on the side of the spouse who was turned down. A very sad picture, but not utterly uncommon.
- A couple who were not originally religious or observant of these restrictions may experience one spouse's religious behavior as harsh and unreasonable. While the motivation to follow these laws is positive and with the best of intent, the other spouse may not be ready and will not take the restrictions positively and withdraw personally, leading to serious conflict in the relationship.
- In some couples there is a convergence of many or all of the above factors, leading to a perfect storm of emotional dysregulation and severe distress during the niddah period. This is demonstrated in the following true, first-person account that a client has courageously asked to be published:

"I'm already worrying about when I will be a niddah again. Loneliness once more. An unhappy husband who chooses to hold on to his resentments during the times he gets his needs met, so as not to jeopardize his chances of having a good time. When that time is over and there is no possibility that his sexual needs will be fulfilled, he can afford to express his anger. While I was a source of his pleasure before, now I am turned into a

target and the source of his resentment. It all comes gushing out like a fire hydrant, flooding me, destroying my essence. It feels like he does not want me to exist.

I know that my husband has a mean streak. The pattern of behavior over the years of our marriage has been the same. I will be the victim of a torrent of expressions of hatred, yelled at, criticized, humiliated and subject to cruel remarks that betray the intense resentment he harbors and keeps in check during the times he can get what he wants from me. I know that the complaints and expressions of anger often do have basis in the realities of my own mistakes and faulty communication, including a lack of sensitivity at times toward his emotional or other needs. At the same time, I also know that there is no place in a marriage, or any relationship, for cruelty and hurtful comments.

And so it goes. I somehow forget about it once that time of the month passes and the abusive behavior comes to a sudden halt. I block it all out of my mind. I enjoy my powers over him and bring pleasure and fun into our relationship. I repress the pain and hurt and am only reminded of it when it begins all over again. We make up, forgive, forget and move on with our relationship and the pleasant atmosphere that goes along with the resumption of physical intimacy.

My hurt is buried deep. If I allowed it remain near the surface I would not be able to give myself to him. If that were to happen, the misery would extend into the times we could have fun together and enjoy each other's company.

During these good times we do not talk about our problems. We spend time with each other doing things we enjoy together. My husband will rarely tell me during these times that something is weighing on his mind or heart. He will simply wait until I am not available to him. Then the rage will pour out and make me feel small, stupid, taken for granted, useless and in general a burden to him. I have become an object whose only worth is being a physical target for his abuse.

I do not feel truly valued for who I am. I know in my mind that he values many of my personal attributes and the many things I do for him and for our children. However, I do not actually feel it on a gut level, in my heart or my soul. I tell myself I am appreciated and valued by him; after all, he does thank me for many things I do. I comfort myself and make do emotionally with his excitement over my body which I work hard to maintain. I try to enjoy the compliments he gives me and his expressions of gratitude when his needs are fulfilled, which I have made a priority in my marriage, knowing how important it is for him and for the stability and peace in our marriage. I try to enjoy the positive feedback I receive when he expresses appreciation for contributing to the family in other ways as well.

But I am sad and hurting deeply. The cruel behaviors I experience during the times when I am not physically available are real. It has become a terribly painful pattern that happens over and over, without any healing, just more pain on top of more hurt and

pain. It never gets addressed. We don't talk about it. It hangs around and over us, like an ominous, toxic cloud, until we are overcome by its poison."

In order to recognize and resolve these problems, it is important to keep in mind a basic principle. The Torah is a wonderful system that works best for those who are physically and emotionally healthy. While it is reasonable to expect a person who is physically well to enjoy a Shabbos meal, it would be foolish to wonder why someone infected with the flu is not singing zemiros and basking in a spiritual glow. Likewise, as wonderful as these rituals and traditions are, for people who are not emotionally well, these restrictions may not produce the best outcomes. Nevertheless, the halachos of niddah are serious, and the spiritual consequences for violating them are severe, leaving many couples trapped in a state that is strained and conflicted.

Often while one spouse claims that the other is emotionally distant and avoidant, the counterpart claims the other spouse is too needy, clingy and immature. There are times when both claims are true to a degree. In such a situation it is imperative to correctly diagnose the precise nature of the problem and develop a plan to remediate it.

If one spouse has difficulty with emotional intimacy, part of the solution is education and training regarding sensitivities, learning to become more aware and attuned to emotional nuances by focusing on the subjective feelings of the other. Some may use intellectualization as a defense, dismissing feelings as irrelevant or illogical. Such individuals need to be taught the value and importance of respecting another person's feelings. This could include accepting needs that may be considered irrational. For example, when couples disagree about a particular financial decision, a parenting technique, or even a minhag, there is great value in exploring the meaning behind the need and not just the logic. The question to ask is, what makes this so important to you? The tone of the question should be empathic and curious, not sneering or derisive.

On the other side, the spouse that feels his or her emotional needs are not being addressed should work on bridging the gap. Knowing that the other spouse has difficulties with emotional intimacy can actually be a comfort, as some of the distancing behavior should not be taken personally. When feeling lonely and neglected, finding ways to calm and reassure oneself are important. While it is gratifying to have those needs met by a spouse, it is not the only way.

Practical Tools and Tips

Although it goes without saying, every shaalah is worth asking. No matter how inconvenient, no matter how unlikely it seems that it will be "kosher" do not give up. Sometimes women have difficulty with staining or other cycle irregularities. Encourage your wife to be assertive with her medical professional (if she feels comfortable with this) and you be assertive in asking every possible shaalah and approach to help the problem. Aside from being beneficial on a practical level, it also shows your spouse that you honor your physical intimacy and want to do everything in your power to avoid unnecessary interruptions.

Easy does it. As we noted earlier the sudden cessation of physical intimacy and sudden resumption of physical intimacy can be in and of itself destabilizing for some people. Give each other time to ease back into physicality. While it may indeed be a mitzvah to have physical relations on Mikvah night, it is not a mitzvah if it causes anguish. In any case, if Mikvah night is treated with respect, almost like a private Yom Tov, and a couple devotes a full evening to this special time, it will allow for a gradual reconnection. Go for a walk or for a romantic dinner, listen to some soothing music, and even dance to it in the privacy of your bedroom. Additionally, treat your wife like a bride. Encourage and pay for whatever cosmetic and spa/ beauty experiences she desires (and you can reasonably stretch your wallet to afford before and after the Mikvah, so she is in a relaxed state. Don't let her go alone if you can avoid it. Try to take her and drop her off. And, keep in mind, not all Mikvaot are the same. Some are relatively shabby and others are quite tastefully designed. Spend the extra time and money and encourage your wife to go to the best Mikvah out there. It is a *hiddur mitzvah*.

There are also times when one spouse is feeling desire and the other is not. While there are Torah legislated obligations that each spouse has toward the other in regard to physical intimacy, if one spouse compels him or herself to engage in physical intimacy it sometimes can lead to frustration, resentment and avoidance in the future. The marriage guru and researcher John Gottman, Ph.D. uncovered a fascinating dynamic that seems counter-intuitive. Statistically, there is an inverse relationship between how free spouses feel to say they are not in the mood and decline sex and the frequency of sex the couple will actually have. Meaning, the less politics and the more each spouse feels a guilt-free ability to decline sex, the more often they actually have sex! While at first this sounds preposterous, it actually makes a good deal of sense when you take human nature into account. The number one cause of reduced desire and arousal is anxiety. The more anxiety that is introduced into the relationship and the sexual encounter, the less arousal there will likely be. Thus, if a couple can create an accepting atmosphere between the two of them, especially in regard to sexual wishes and demands, including the freedom to ask (within the bounds of *tznius*) and the freedom to decline without emotional payback, the more "nature will take its course" in the long run.

Cope Ahead

Life's disappointments and frustrations are much easier to deal with when anticipated. Think of how much easier it is to tolerate extreme traffic during your morning commute when you kind of know it's going to happen, versus being able to tolerate a sudden unexpected traffic jam in the middle of the night. So too, talk to your spouse and develop a coping strategy to plan ahead during Niddah times. What permissible activities, gestures and words are available that will help generate a feeling of love and help soothe raw nerves? Some people like little gifts or cards. Others cope by distraction and need to focus on children, family and friends. Some like to spend time together in permitted activities such as reading or playing board games or working on puzzles. Naturally, couples often have different and even contradictory coping styles. Discuss this ahead of time and negotiate balanced and fair approaches.

Special Considerations

Trauma

Past trauma frequently plays a part in the emotional and behavioral patterns of both spouses. Extreme and opposite emotional patterns can have their roots in the same developmental experiences. For example, a person who grew up with crushing poverty may end up becoming miserly as an effort to control and fight the feelings of powerlessness over money, while another person growing up in the same environment may end up becoming a compulsive spender out of the very same need. Likewise, individuals who experienced chaotic and disrupted emotional attachments in early childhood may become emotionally needy and clingy, or the opposite, distant and aloof. Both adaptations are an effort to compensate for feelings of fear and powerlessness invoked by the original trauma. Psychotherapy treatment focused on reducing reactivity and reprocessing these traumatic feelings can help.

Misplaced Piety

When a spouse has a degree of misplaced piety and is overly scrupulous during the niddah state, it can leave the other spouse frustrated and emotionally starved. There are those who are so extreme that they allow for little friendliness or affection. While the halachos on the books can seem quite forbidding, it is important to seek guidance from one's rabbi to ascertain the true approach that preserves shalom bayis.

Sometimes, being over scrupulous in the area of intimacy and halacha can be the result of naiveté and/or anxiety. After all, if a religious young man or woman has spent his or her entire young adult life abstaining from thoughts and feelings that are forbidden, it can be difficult to suddenly make the switch into the intense physical intimacy of married life. As a result, some people will hide behind religious scrupulosity as a way to manage and control overwhelming feelings. Usually, a good heart to heart talk with a madrich, rebbe or mashgiach can help set the record straight. This is one reason it is important for a young couple to agree in advance on a rabbi or rebbe that they both respect, so when they have incompatibilities or disagreements about religion and ritual, they have someone to turn to for guidance and a fair resolution.

Unfortunately, there are some individuals whose over scrupulousness stems from a personality disorder known as Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD). This condition is not to be confused with OCD, which involves obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors that the person himself wishes to be rid of. A person with OCPD has a perfectionistic, rigid, risk-averse controlling personality. People such as this find it difficult to compromise and often see others as less than perfect and inferior when they cannot live up to their standards.

In areas of intimacy, this can lead to serious marital dysfunction. Many of the halachos of niddah depend on detailed nuances that on the one hand require obsessive attention to detail, but on the other hand require the ability to let go and trust the process. While the smallest drop of blood or the minutest gesture of intimacy can have major halachic import, at other times the halachos can seem to be lenient to a degree that is difficult to understand. A person with OCPD

can drive his or her partner insane with inappropriate chumros, all the while bringing support from literal and technical readings of quoted authorities. This is again why it is so important that the couple have a rabbinic authority whom they both respect to clarify and place the restrictions and customs within a healthy context.

Further complicating matters, a person with OCPD tends to manage his or her life in an intellectual, non-emotional manner. During the niddah period he or she will be distant; then, when the couple is no longer under the niddah restriction, act full of interest and energy. This results in the other spouse feeling like an object, only loved for his or her body. Of course, that is not entirely the truth, but the sudden switch from distance to affection can be confusing and deeply hurtful. It takes careful work and heartfelt conversations to help this couple bridge their gaps. If the OCPD is so strong that it disables the person from seeing the other spouse's perspective, or the possibility that he or she may be wrong, couples counseling is a worthwhile option to consider.

Addictions

Addicts often have traumatic experiences, chaotic family history which leads to poor emotional attachment, and poor boundaries and impulse control. This is a perfect storm for some extremely toxic experiences around Niddah, sexual abstinence, and sudden abandonment. A multi-faceted approach is helpful, including immersion in twelve step work to help correct distorted beliefs and expectations about self and others, and develop healthier attitudes toward difficulties that cannot be controlled. Psychotherapy for trauma also can be helpful as well as couples therapy to increase the understanding, empathy, and provide better coping communication skills, while defusing power struggles.

In conclusion, it is important to bear in mind that the Torah is sometimes experienced as powerful and strong medicine. In our times, where the sanctity of family life and the human body is under attack and in danger of being degraded via media and the challenges presented by new technologies, we indeed need strong medicine. However, strong medicine can have side effects, and the more infected a person is, the more violent the body may react to the treatment. On occasion, the medicine can be too strong and even endanger the patient. A good physician must know how to titrate the dose. We who use and benefit from the Torah's medicine must be mindful of its potency and potential complications and side effects. Careful administration of the medicine and some willingness to tough out the treatments can lead us to healthier, happier relationships and self-growth. You can do it!