



NEW YEAR  
**NEW RULES**

## HOW TO **BE A BETTER PARTNER**

**F** MONTHS of working, eating, breathing, and spiraling into pits of despair with your partner has left you feeling more like roommates than lovers, you might need to zero in on your intimacy, says Dana McNeil, licensed marriage and family therapist and founder of The Relationship Place.

Sexual and emotional intimacy is what lets you feel connected to another person; it's how we gauge if we're in a satisfying relationship.

Without it, you can feel alone, unsupported, or like your sex life has lost its spark. It's normal to experience an ebb and flow, especially considering the dumpster fire that was 2020. When you're stressed, your body focuses its energy on handling that threat, shunting power from everything

else, including the brain.

"The brain is an erogenous zone, and without the ability to access those intimacy tools, the desire, sex drive, and an ability to function with your partner in a loving way flies out the window," says McNeil.

But strong emotional intimacy is crucial to mental health, because it's what helps us feel safe when we're stressed, adds Jenni Skyler, Ph.D., director of The Intimacy Institute in Boulder, CO. What's more, studies show a lack of intimacy is one of the top causes of divorce.

Skip your instincts for

now: Men often initiate sex as a way to feel emotionally connected; but, in a hetero relationship, if a woman doesn't feel that bond, she won't want to be physically vulnerable, McNeil explains. This leaves everyone feeling more alone.

Instead, normalize listening and sexual intimacy will follow. Skyler suggests playing "mad, sad, glad," where you both share one thing that stirs up each of those emotions. It can be a sentence or a rant. Just keep in mind that while men are very solution-oriented in conversations, your partner might just need someone to listen—so ask what they need.

Either way, finish with what you're happy about—studies show expressing gratitude boosts relationship connection and satisfaction.

—RACHAEL SCHULTZ



# WITHOUT INTIMACY, **DESIRE FLIES** **OUT THE WINDOW.**

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