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Lifestyle

Why you should never tell your partner to stop masturbating

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IMAGE: [GEORGE PETERS](#)

BY MANDY STADTMILLER

4 HOURS AGO

Samuel met up with his girlfriend Katie for a midday “afternoon delight.” As he grew stiffer, suddenly so did she.

“What’s wrong?” he asked her.

“I already masturbated before I came over,” she said.

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Disappointed, Samuel realized this was now the third time in a month Katie had taken matters into her own hands (or, in this case, her own vibrator) before coming over. He decided to ask Katie to stop using her sex toy so they could improve their intimacy.

Katie acquiesced. She did get rid of the vibrator. Then she started using her electric toothbrush, instead...

Needless to say, they broke up, a perfect case study demonstrating the utter pointlessness of regulating a partner’s masturbation.

“I don’t regret how I handled it because it showed me there was a problem bigger than the masturbation,” says Samuel. (His and Katie’s names have been changed for anonymity.) “It was trying to fix a symptom that you can never really fix.”

A dirty track record

Regulating masturbation is an unwise, unwinnable and, in this case, unhealthy battle to stage. Or as researcher Steven D. Pinkerton sums it up quite nicely, “If prostitution is the world’s oldest profession, then surely masturbation is the world’s [oldest avocation](#).”

To contextualize just how unrealistic it is to curb a relationship’s masturbation:

- 80% of men and 63% of women ages 30-39 masturbated in the past year solo; 45% of men and 43% of women ages 30-39 masturbated with a partner. ([National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, 2010](#))
- Close to 85% of men and 45% of women who cohabitate with a partner reported masturbating in the past year. ([The Social Organization of Sexuality, 1994](#))

Yet human beings have always had a complicated relationship with their significant others enjoying solo sex.

“Religion has done a dangerous disservice to us all by claiming masturbation is a sin,” says Jenny Block, author of *O Wow: Discovering Your Ultimate Orgasm* and *The Ultimate Guide to Solo Sex*. “Historically, controlling masturbation was about controlling women and reproduction.”

Consider that in 18th century Europe a doomsday-style screed called *Onania* circulated around with the terrifying warning that any woman who masturbated would suffer from imbecility, hysteria and barren wombs. Or look at the very digital stimulation shaming origin of the word itself. “Masturbation” is believed to be derived from the Latin “manstuprare,” or “to defile oneself by hand.”

IMAGE: [CSA PLASTOCK](#)

Take this example

But it's 2015. Now we're inundated with gimmicky holidays like Masturbation Month (happening right now) or June's Adult Sex Education Month (it's so hard to pick out a greeting card for that one). And yet, many couples report that masturbation in a relationship is still an uncomfortable topic to broach.

Take the excruciatingly awkward tension involved in dual masturbation plotlines on HBO's new show *Togetherness*, starring Mark Duplass (Brett) and Melanie Lynskey (Michelle), who nail ennui but sadly not each other.

The series premiere takes us inside the couple's bedroom as Brett ogles the barely visible cleavage of his sleeping wife's breasts. Aroused, he touches and kisses her shoulder, whispers "mmmm" and tries to spoon. Michelle wakes up, realizes the clock says 6:22 a.m. and drowsily rejects him.

We see Brett strategizing. He pulls down the sheet ever so slightly to offer himself the visual of Michelle's exposed ass in black and white striped panties, then grabs his glasses from the table and begins cautiously masturbating. Moments later Beth wakes up from the bed rocking. She grabs her pillow and smacks him in the face. "Come on!" Brett yells. "Not cool." She tells him, "Take it outside."

Everything about this encounter signals acute relationship distress, experts agree.

Assuming the husband and the wife have already established the boundaries that it is okay for him to masturbate while she is asleep (and these discussions should

It is easy for him to masturbate while she is asleep (and these discussions should always be had ahead of time), her punishment of him for masturbation also presents a real problem.

“Couples should be open and honest about their sexual wants and desires, as well as their dislikes,” says clinical and forensic sexologist [Eric Garrison](#). “Sex has always been easier to do than to discuss, and that discomfort has even made its way into popular media.”

Talk it out

Empathy instead of masturbation criticism can go a long way, experts say, to achieving a healthy balance of boundaries, limits and a place of non-shaming.

“You’d no sooner criticize a partner’s writing, athletic prowess, job skills — or anything else they do solo — so don’t criticize their masturbation,” says April Masini, author and relationship expert at [askapril.com](#).

Or, to use a metaphor of just how damaging criticism of masturbation can be, Garrison says: “By controlling our partner’s sexuality, we are throwing grenades and laying the mines for wars to come.”

Orgasm expert Jenny Block says the problem is even more insidious. “It is incredibly hurtful and sad to be unsupportive of your partner masturbating. Everyone has a right to his or her own body; to suggest otherwise is dangerously akin to abuse.”



In a twist, this psychosexual “abuse” continues in *Togetherness*. Brett enters their bedroom later that day only to discover it’s now his wife trying to masturbate in secret. He confronts her, enraged and sputtering: “What the fuck’s going on? Are you jerking off? Wacking off?... You’re having a fucking fuckfest by yourself?”

Masini suggests that the solution for couples like this lies not in the blame-shame game but rather in a sharing solution. “Rather than get angry about seeing a partner masturbating, use the word ‘I,’ not a pointed finger. For instance, ‘I feel really left out. Can I join in in some way?’”

In other words, talk about sex — which includes masturbation.



IMAGE: [CSA PLASTOCK](#)

Is it like cheating?

For many, the very heart of conflicts around masturbation has to do with hurt feelings and even jealousy.

Details sex columnists Em & Lo once identified the rising trend of emotional infidelity accusations amongst couples: "[Jerking Off is the New Infidelity.](#)" They explained the tricky situation: "While some guys store everyday images and encounters to fuel their imaginations, many go straight for the porn. In a 2005 study, 25% of all men (and only 4% of women) reported having visited a pornographic website in the previous 30 days. Some women find this kind of fantasy easier to handle (you're not likely to bump into adult-movie stars at the office, after all). But others hate the idea of their partners lusting after other women, even if it's virtually.

"This causes a lot of distress in many couples, because it's seen as a type of cheating. It's not," says Masini. "Unless the behavior is interfering with regular life, and is therefore becoming an addiction (for instance if you're missing work, missing social engagements, and not sleeping because of the habit), try not to be threatened. It's usually not about you."

When partners actively try to discourage one another from self-pleasure (with or without porn), the results can create even more miscommunication.

"An old girlfriend told me she didn't want to have sex with me, which is fine obviously, but I told her that I would then just masturbate to get myself off," says my friend Richard, 45, whose name has been changed for privacy. "She told me,

‘No. I want you to hold it all in and just deal with it.’ I thought that was pretty crazy so I ignored her and did it right in front of her. She was pissed. We had a lot of problems, but that represented just how uncaring and failing to understand my needs she was. We grew apart. I couldn’t penetrate her emotionally, and I think this problem was symbolic of that.”

Certainly it's difficult to incorporate the isolation of masturbation into a couple-friendly activity.

“Masturbation has a history of privacy,” Masini says. “When it’s out of the closet and into the marital bed, it’s on new ground. Whenever you have something new in a relationship, there are going to be a slew of reactions, including feeling threatened, feeling left out, feeling inadequate, feeling cowardly — as well as feeling like this is a new adventure together.”

Trying to make a citizen’s arrest as a masturbation watchdog all comes from one common problem, Garrison says: fear. “People are afraid of offending their deity or their partner, rather than using some positive value to guide them. Considering all the positive benefits from masturbation, couples should be encouraging all parties to masturbate!”

And don’t forget: It’s not about you. It’s about your private parts.

“The truth is masturbation is about the individual and not the couple,” Block emphasizes. “[But] masturbation is great for a relationship. It makes people feel happy and sexy. It helps alleviate pain. It makes people all gooey-eyed and romantic. It alleviates stress. It makes people feel better about their bodies and it helps them to understand what it is they truly want sexually — with and without a partner.”

Light at the end of the love tunnel

Here’s a bit of sex-positive inspiration: One monogamous married woman says she and her husband are using masturbation to actively “take the shame away from our sexuality.” What does that mean? Unlimited diddling. Together. Alone. Whenever. However.

“My husband has total freedom to masturbate — with me, without me, with porn, without porn, with toys, without toys,” says Adella of Marina del Rey, California, who responded to a HARO query but prefers to keep her last name private. “He gives me the same total freedom. We can share about it or keep it private. After nine years of marriage, there are plenty of times he’s in the mood and I’m not, and vice versa. I am grateful we have the freedom to masturbate.”

Adella, unsurprisingly, is still amongst the minority.

“I hear from many women who feel threatened that their men masturbate outside of the sex life they share together,” Masini says. “This isn’t a fight you want to pick. If he’s not cheating, and you’re sharing a happy sex life, let it go.”

Or to put the entire argument in a positive-reinforcement light, consider this new Golden Rule of Masturbation: Remember to regularly rub one out, and do it for the sake of your relationship.

“Masturbate,” Block concludes. “Masturbate alone. Masturbate with your partner. Masturbate for your partner. Talk about masturbating. Make it part of your sexual play. Add masturbation to your dirty talk and sexual play. And, if you have to, fake it ‘til you make it. Once you start doing it and start silencing those foolish, ancient voices of religion and archaic social mores, you’ll find yourself enjoying each other — and yourselves — more than ever.”

BONUS: Sex toys. In Jell-O. In slow-motion.



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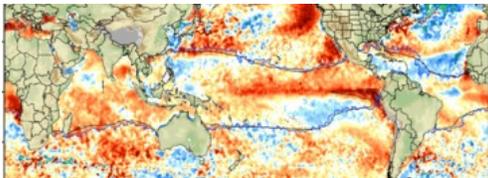
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