

No More Headaches

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Dr. Juli Slattery “gets,” understands, and empathizes with men and their sexuality better than any female author I’ve ever read. Her resulting advice for wives is practical, helpful, and biblically sound. Wives who read this book will be blessed by its wisdom, and husbands whose wives read this book will be blessed by its application.

—Gary Thomas, author of *Sacred Marriage* and *Sacred Influence*

Great book! I couldn’t put it down. *No More Headaches* is practical, candid, hopeful, and seasoned with a splash of humor and compassion. There are not enough words to describe how really helpful this book is for women longing to reclaim the gift of sexuality as God intended. Every woman needs a copy of Dr. Slattery’s book on her bedside nightstand—she and her husband will be glad it’s there!

—Pam Farrel, best-selling author of *Red-Hot Monogamy*
and *Men Are Like Waffles, Women Are Like Spaghetti*

I am certain that God intended sex to be a natural, sublime, and trouble-free experience. It is far from that in today’s complex world. The distorting influences of pornography are rampant, and sexual anhedonia is prevalent in men. What a thrill it was, therefore, for me to see that Dr. Slattery’s new book, *No More Headaches*, addresses head-on our modern confusion and frustration surrounding sex. With warmth and compassion, and deep professional and personal insight into how both women and men struggle to develop a healthy sexuality, she offers sound practical and biblical advice on how women can strengthen the sexual bond every couple should have. Though written primarily to women, it isn’t just a book for them alone. I believe men can gain a lot of insight into the sexual makeup of both sexes by reading this book, so I strongly recommend it to them as well.

—Archibald D. Hart, Ph.D., FPPR.
Senior Professor of Psychology and Dean Emeritus
Graduate School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary

Juli Slattery answers the questions women are afraid to ask. I couldn't put the book down; I kept reading with disbelief at the next difficult topic she was about to tackle. Pick it up and be amazed when you start reading sentences out loud to your husband. I did!

—Dannah Gresh, author of *And the Bride Wore White*

As a researcher, I have a dilemma. I can investigate and explain the starting points that women need to know about their husbands (for example, how sexual affirmation transforms a man and his marriage), but then others must help each woman go further. Yet it is hard to find good and trustworthy resources. Juli Slattery's excellent book *No More Headaches* hits the mark in a big way regarding a sensitive subject that affects every single marriage. I highly recommend it to anyone who needs real-world yet compassionate answers about how to handle the confusion, hurt, disappointments, and just old-fashioned *differences* between husbands and wives.

—Shaunti Feldhahn, author of *For Women Only*

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You Got Me What?

I was sitting in my parents' living room when my boyfriend, Mike, said he had a surprise for me. He pulled from behind his back a little box. You know what I mean when I say that the box was just the right size. Mike and I had been dating for more than three years, and the "M" word had begun springing up quite regularly in conversation. I opened the box with great anticipation, only to find . . . a key chain.

Reading my expression, Mike realized that he had made a huge blunder. He meant the key chain as a little gesture, never thinking that I would assume it was a ring. (Yeah, 25-year-old guys can be a little clueless.) I was embarrassed by my assumption, and Mike felt awful about the mistake. We both began tripping over our words, trying to get past the awkwardness of the moment.

Have you ever had an experience like mine—expecting a gift that didn't quite turn out to be what you thought it would? Trying to show some gratitude through your disappointment, eking out a "thank you" for the electric drill you thought was a KitchenAid or the fluffy socks you hoped would be a necklace?

When Mike finally did pop the question (with a real ring!) a few months later, we began to look toward marriage. As part of our

preparation, we skimmed through books about sexual intimacy, including *Intended for Pleasure* by Dr. Ed Wheat and *The Gift of Sex* by Cliff and Joyce Penner. The titles of those two books by themselves appropriately summarized what I had hoped and dreamed our sex life would be like—a gift given by God for the purpose of pleasure. Fourteen years later, I feel like I’m still trying to figure out the gift!

The gift of sex can sometimes seem like the key chain in the ring box—we got our hopes up for nothing. When married women share honestly about their frustrations and dashed hopes, sex often tops the list. Instead of creating the oneness referred to in the Bible, sex seems to provoke conflict and division. Couples steam and fight over issues ranging from the frequency of sex to pornography. More than one bride has wondered if she could exchange this “gift” for something at the local department store!

Sex, the Gift That Keeps on Taking

Over the past several years, I have been speaking to women’s groups on the issue of sexual intimacy in marriage. The first time I spoke on the topic, my face was beet red, I had hives on my neck, and sweat trickled down my arms. To make matters worse, the audience was absolutely silent. I was going out on a huge limb, feeling like I was making a complete fool of myself. Surely these silent women were judging me. From the looks on their faces, no one could relate to the “headaches” I was sharing.

Lord, why am I here, humiliating myself by talking about this topic? They all probably think I’m a freak. Then and there I determined never to publicly tackle the topic again, if only I could get through the next 45 minutes.

It didn’t take long before I realized that the silence in the room had nothing to do with judgment. When I finished speaking, women flocked to me, many with tears in their eyes. Secrets, frustrations, and

questions came pouring out as I spoke with each one. Finally they had found a safe environment to address the deep concerns they had harbored for so long.

Some confessed that they hated sex. Others felt guilty for going months, even years without having sex with their husbands. A few had questions about what the Bible says about role-playing, oral sex, vibrators, or sexual videos. Still others wondered how they could ever get past the loss of trust resulting from a husband's infidelity. A few secretly confided that they wanted sex but their husbands didn't.

Now I no longer fret about speaking to women about sex. Experience after experience has taught me that practically all wives struggle in this area in one way or another. Rarely have I met a woman who consistently embraces sex with her husband as a gift. Most women view it as a chore, a burden, or a heartache; it's a source of conflict, rejection, and perhaps shame. In even the healthiest of marriages, couples struggle with issues such as how often to have sex, finding time for sex, what is appropriate, and how to combat the constant temptations in our sexually explicit culture.

I remember speaking one day to a group of women on this topic. I joked that many women prefer a good book and a piece of chocolate to sex. A woman from the audience yelled out, "I'd take an accounting textbook and a plate of broccoli over sex any day of the week!"

How about you? Can you relate to these feelings? Do you see sex as a blessing or a curse in your marriage? Or maybe it depends on your season of life. How do you make sense of the idea that sex is God's gift to you?

A Different Kind of Gift

Have you ever gotten a gift that was wrapped in several boxes? First you open a big box, only to find one slightly smaller. You open that one and find yet another wrapped box. The exercise continues until finally you



get to the real gift. By this time you're thinking, "This had better be good, like car keys or jewelry."

In many ways, the gift of sex is more like this kind of gift. Throughout the course of your marriage, you'll continue to unwrap layers of the gift. The sexual relationship between a husband and wife is a long journey with many seasons. Each season potentially presents new joys and unique challenges. Unfortunately, many women (and men) give up when the first few legs of the journey disappoint. After a few years of frustration, fighting, and disappointment, they presume that this is their lot; sex just isn't going to be that great. These words are seldom audibly spoken, but both husband and wife settle into a ho-hum routine. They look forward to the infrequent times when sex is actually pleasurable, and they bear with the dry spells. Every now and then their disappointment bubbles to the surface and the accusations fly.

God's gift of sex to a married couple is a mysterious gift indeed. On the surface, it promises two things: pleasure and intimacy. There are times in most marriages when these two promises are fulfilled. Sex can be very pleasurable, and it can also heighten emotional intimacy between husband and wife. However, the time comes in all marriages when the "gift" brings neither pleasure nor intimacy. Then what?

Shelly and Jack were in exactly that spot. Looking over the 15 years of their marriage, they could pinpoint only a few stretches when sex was a blessing. Far more often, it had become a source of conflict and pain. Jack complained that Shelly was never interested.

"Why do I always have to be the one to initiate and pursue you?" he asked.

Shelly retorted, "Jack, we have four children, and I'm exhausted! Besides, when was the last time we actually went on a date? I'm not a vending machine that can meet your needs whenever you want!"

When I talked with Shelly alone, she explained further how the issue of sex was tearing her apart. "I feel like a terrible wife, but I just

don't like sex right now. I feel like it's just one more need I have to meet. I have nothing left to give. When we have sex, I just lay there, and I hate it. But I know that Jack faces all kinds of temptation. I suspect that he's into stuff on the Internet, and I feel like it's my fault."

Not all couples experience the stereotypical problems represented by Shelly and Jack. Sometimes the headaches come in other forms.

For Alyssa and Brad, sex has created tension almost since day one of their marriage. Early on, Alyssa experienced tremendous pain during intercourse. In fact, the couple didn't fully consummate their marriage until almost a month after their wedding. This early setback wreaked havoc. Brad was not only frustrated but felt like a failure as a lover. He began avoiding sex. Now, several years later, Alyssa can't figure out how to get her husband interested. She wonders, "Am I not attractive? What's wrong with me?" Although neither gives voice to their feelings, both are overwhelmed with rejection and insecurity.

Still other couples fight through issues of infertility, impotency, depression, infidelity, and spells where they can barely stand to be in the same room. "This is *not* what I signed up for," each partner internally concludes.

Are We Normal?

Underlying much of the frustration and disappointment in your sexual relationship may be the question about what is normal. Based on everything you see in the media, read in books, and observe around you, you may conclude that the setbacks you and your husband may be experiencing in the bedroom are unusual, that somehow you're missing out on the gift so many others seem to be enjoying. Because sex is a private and intimate topic, you may not often hear about the struggles and doubts that other women face. Even if you talk to your friends about sex, the conversation never gets to your underlying fears and disappointments.



Almost everyone wants to know whether they're normal. Is it normal to go months without wanting sex? Is it normal to never have an orgasm? Is it normal to need something risqué or forbidden to become excited? Is it normal for a woman to be drawn to porn? Is it normal for a guy to have no sex drive? How often does the normal couple have sex? Is it normal for sex to be boring?

Every sexual relationship is unique. Research can help us understand the basics of how marital sex works and how men and women tend to function sexually, but it can't define what is normal or, more important, what a healthy sex life look like. What research can tell us is that it is very, very normal for a couple to struggle with various "headaches" throughout the journey of sex. Although the obstacles vary, every couple has a series of them to overcome. The fact that the obstacles exist is less important than how a couple deals with them.

The Lies We Believe

One of the biggest mistakes we make in marriage is to embrace a superficial understanding of the gift of sex. After unwrapping the first box, we assume that's all there is to the gift. Once the promises of pleasure and intimacy wane, we store the gift with the boxes of unused china and crystal we once took so much care to select. Oh, but there is so much more to the gift—so many layers yet to discover!

I believe that most women struggle with three lies that keep us from embracing the gift of sexuality. These lies are so subtle that we don't even know we've bought into them. Yet they generate most of the questions and frustrations that keep us from "unwrapping" the deeper levels of God's gift. As with every other good gift, the Enemy and the effects of sin have tainted married sexuality. Satan is a deceiver, twisting the meaning of God's intent for sex and blinding us from the truth that brings freedom. Throughout our time exploring the "normal" headaches of

sexual intimacy, be aware of the following lies and the extent to which you have bought into them.

Lie No. 1: God Created Sex Primarily for a Man's Pleasure

One of the facts we'll explore in this book is that female sexuality is far more complicated than male sexuality. For one thing, a man's sexuality is generally more compartmentalized, while a woman's sexuality tends to be more intertwined with emotions and relationship. Authors like Bill and Pam Farrel use the analogy that men are like waffles (with boxes) and women are like spaghetti (everything connects). Eastern cultures liken men to wood and women to water.

Physically, men are also easier to understand. It's obvious when a man is sexually aroused and when he has an orgasm; it's an all-or-nothing equation. A woman might not be able to tell if she's aroused and might not even know if she's had an orgasm. Unlike her husband, she may not be able to identify when she wants or needs sex. Her sexuality seems like a moving target.

Because women are more complicated sexually, the sexual relationship often revolves around the man's needs—when he wants sex and what arouses him. Many “good wives” have sex primarily because of their husbands' needs. A woman may or may not end up enjoying sex, but the primary motivation is all about her husband.

Later in this book, we'll talk at length about the importance of sex to your husband. As you read this information, keep in mind that sex is also God's gift to you. Male-oriented sex is not the best of what God intended for marriage. In fact, it represents an immature sexual relationship. I believe that God designed female sexuality in all its complexity not to frustrate you but to add incredible richness to the challenge of sexual intimacy. Unfortunately, most couples assume that when things don't “happen” naturally for her, the focus must just be on his needs.

God created women with a clitoris for *her* pleasure. Her body is



capable of achieving multiple and different types of orgasm. But she is a complicated creature who isn't easily understood. While he's a paint-by-the-numbers kit, she's a blank canvas with unlimited artistic potential. He's a banjo; she's a finely tuned Stradivarius that only a great musician can play. Her sexuality will naturally take more time and effort to figure out. Interestingly, a man reaches his sexual prime in the late teens, while a woman reaches hers closer to age 30.

Beyond the potential for physical pleasure and emotional bonding, regular marital sexuality actually has a host of other benefits for women. Studies have found that women who engage in regular intercourse have lower blood pressure and have a better physiological reaction to stressful events. Those who have sex once or twice a week also produce more antibodies that help fight infection. The release of the hormone oxytocin during sex increases feelings of closeness and intimacy, acts as a pain reliever for everyday aches and pains, and helps you sleep better. Many experts believe that the release of hormones during sex slows the aging process, strengthening muscles and even delaying wrinkles. An added bonus: Having sex three times a week for a year burns the same number of calories as running 75 miles!

Perhaps you find yourself in a place in your marriage where sex seems to be all about your husband. That's okay, but don't stay there. Despite what the world portrays, God did not design sex to be a yoke of slavery for wives. Don't give up, and don't settle for a sex life that centers on his pleasure alone. In fact, most men find the greatest sexual fulfillment in learning how to be a great lover for their wives.

Lie No. 2: Eroticism = Sexual Immorality

One of the challenges of writing this book has been addressing women from different generations. Even within the past 20 years, the sexual climate of our culture has changed drastically. If you were born in the 1960s or earlier, you probably grew up believing that good Christian

girls are not sexual. You may associate hot sex with guilt and have difficulty believing that God wants you to experience erotic sex with your husband. The sexual images and lyrics on MTV were pushing the limit in your day. Because sex was basically a taboo topic of conversation when you were younger, you may still feel uncomfortable talking about sex even with your husband.

If you were born after 1980, you likely found the topic of sex much more comfortable to talk about. When you were in junior high, your parents may have had to explain why the president was having oral sex in the Oval Office. You grew up with sexually laden chat rooms, texting, Facebook, YouTube, and *Sex and the City*. Through adolescence it was normal for you to talk to friends, even of the opposite gender, about sexual things. Psychologist Jean Twenge describes this contrast as “generation prude meets generation crude.”¹

In some ways the problems of a younger generation of women seem to be the opposite of women born just a decade earlier. While women from one generation may feel guilty about erotic pleasures, women from another generation may not know where to draw the line. Younger Christian women tend to be far more comfortable with their sexuality but struggle with what is off-limits and to what extent it is okay to pursue their own pleasure. The commonality between the two groups is confusion about the place of eroticism in a God-honoring marriage.

The truth is that God created erotic love. Nothing the world offers can be more erotic than what God intended for a married couple to experience. He designed the most intense pleasure, the most satisfying intimacy, and the most fulfilling sex. The world can't top His creation. The Old Testament book Song of Songs attests to the fact that God wants married couples to pursue the highest erotic pleasures together. However, the greatest eroticism is meant to take place within the context of marriage and is guarded by the intimacy of a trusting relationship. The world sells the lie that sexual fulfillment results from looking



outside the marriage relationship . . . that pure marital sex is boring. Christian married couples believe this lie when they rely on pornographic images, extramarital flirtations, fantasies, and other outside influences to heighten their erotic pleasure.

Many of the sexual headaches women deal with revolve around this question: How do we pursue erotic love without crossing the line into sexual immorality? By default, most married couples either give up on eroticism or plunge into the world's version of it.

If you can relate to this struggle, hang in there. Whether you feel guilty about being sexual or you wonder where to draw the line in marital sexual intimacy, we'll address these issues head-on in the chapters that follow.

Lie No. 3: The Greatest Pleasures of Sex Are Immediate

Almost every married couple I've talked to has some disaster story to tell about their honeymoon, especially if they waited for marriage to have sex. honeymoons are full of rookie mistakes; ours was no exception. Our disaster started with the fact that we had a honeymoon without a bed. Mike's parents own a log cabin vacation home in the Tennessee mountains. Since we didn't have any money, Mike asked them if we could use the cabin for our honeymoon. Not only did they say yes, but they had also just ordered a beautiful four-poster bedroom set for the cabin. But lo and behold, the furniture company delivered the furniture to their home in Florida instead of Tennessee.

Hearing about the mix-up, Mike packed a king-size air mattress for our honeymoon. We arrived at the cabin and unloaded the car only to discover that he had forgotten to pack the cap for the air mattress. Trying to salvage the situation, Mike stuffed a towel into the air hole and covered it with duct tape. Needless to say, it didn't exactly hold up. We became very familiar with the hardwood floor.

From a sexual perspective, the first year of our marriage was quite a

disappointment. It took a long time for us to figure out what we were doing. Even though I knew not to expect too much in the beginning, I was still pretty bummed. I seemed to have constant bladder infections; sex was uncomfortable at best, and painful at worst. The setbacks caused tension and frustration between Mike and me. We had looked forward to this for so long, but it seemed to cause more problems than pleasure. Eventually we graduated from those headaches only to run into new ones.

Perhaps the greatest lie women fall for is that sex is all about immediate pleasure. We naturally assume that a great sex life is one in which the couple always has fun, communicates perfectly, and experiences ecstasy together. But there is so much more to sex than what is happening in the moment. Even through the worst stretches of a couple's sex life, God can still be working on uniting a husband and wife in more subtle ways.

By God's design, sex can be fun, pleasurable, and immensely fulfilling. There are seasons in marriage when sexual intimacy and fulfillment come easily. There are other seasons, however, that are fraught with stress, resentment, and disappointment. I firmly believe that the frustrations we experience in sex aren't simply the consequences of living in a fallen world but are actually part of the gift itself. Even when sex isn't great, God is doing something in your heart and in your marriage, perhaps forging an intimacy beyond the physical.

We Are Creating Something New

As a Christian woman, it has been difficult for me at times to understand sexuality within the context of my relationship with God. Several years ago I was sitting in a Christian psychology conference when something the speaker said caught my ear. I don't even remember the context of his comment, but I vividly recall my confusion when he said, "We were all created as sexual creatures." This sounded so odd to me. Even though I



was married at the time, I certainly didn't see myself as a sexual creature. Sex to me was something separate—something I did, not something I was.

As I've struggled with this topic, I'm learning more and more that my sexuality and what I do with it is as much of an expression of me as what I say. The Bible says that our words are an expression of the overflow of our hearts (Luke 6:45). Follow me around long enough, listen to what I say, and you'll see what is in my heart. The same is true with sexuality. Not only has God created me as a sexual being, but my thoughts, actions, and attitudes ultimately reveal the desires and state of my heart as well.

God's greatest goal for me is to teach me how to love. In my own life, I have found no more practical testing ground for my heart than sexual intimacy. On the average day, I'm eager to serve my children, cook dinner, do laundry, and teach Bible studies, all with a pretty good attitude. Yet for some reason, I can't seem to muster the same positive attitude regarding sex. *Tonight? He can't be serious. Surely there's a toilet in this house that needs cleaning just so I can stall for a few minutes!*

My typical routine is to have my devotions in the evening after the kids are in bed. More than once I've been reading the Bible, praying, and praising the Lord when God has impressed on my heart that I should go upstairs and initiate sex with my husband. "Are You sure, Lord?" I ask. "I'm so into Leviticus, I just can't put it down." But the prompting is confirmed.

One evening I shared this with my husband. He responded, "That's the weirdest thing. I was just praying about that!"

Beyond my husband's prayer requests, I believe that God's prompting during my time with Him is no coincidence. As I seek to be more like my Savior, He is showing me how to love my husband. Love isn't a self-centered pursuit but a challenge to serve another person as completely as I serve myself.

Sure, God wants my husband and me to enjoy each other sexually.

He wants us to work toward learning how to please one another and to make the most of the gift He has granted us. However, He also wants to use the frustrations and headaches to challenge and stretch our understanding of what “making love” actually means.

Marital sexuality is designed for more than just pleasure. It is the Refiner’s fire that reveals the deepest attitudes of our hearts. There may be no place in your life where it is more difficult to express love than in your marriage. You may be more eager to pack your bags and become a missionary in Africa than you are to show the love of Christ in your bedroom.

More than learning a new technique or strategy to spice up our love lives, we need God to challenge and change our thoughts and attitudes. Like everything else in life, sex is truly a matter of the heart. This isn’t to discount the legitimate emotional, relational, and physical roadblocks in sex but to reframe how we approach them. An intimacy without conflict, understanding, compromise, sacrifice, and heartfelt communication is cheap and cannot stand the test of time. It is through the struggle that our hearts are forged together and that our attitudes are challenged to be like Christ’s.

Okay, one more gift analogy. Because I have three boys, I’m very familiar with LEGOs. Without fail, Mike and I spend at least a couple of hours every Christmas morning helping our boys put together intricate LEGO sets. Whereas many kids’ toys have labels that say “some assembly required,” the whole purpose of LEGOs is to assemble them. Kids have much more fun building the LEGO creations than they ever have playing with the completed projects. In fact, as soon as they build them, they take them apart to create something new.

I challenge you to think of the gift of sex through this lens. Maybe you expected to open a gift that was already assembled. You naively thought, as I did, that you and your husband were destined for a lifetime of pleasure and intimacy. Instead, you found that your bedroom is metaphorically scattered with thousands of LEGOs and no directions.



Consider the fact that God's greatest gift to your marriage may not be the assembled product but what happens as you strive to put it together.

The Journey Is More Important than the Destination

Less than a year ago, Mike and I moved from the Midwest to Colorado Springs. Because we are both outdoorsy, active people, it didn't take long before we decided to tackle Pikes Peak. If you aren't familiar with Colorado Springs, the 14,000-foot peak dwarfs the city. The climb up is a 13-mile hike, gaining about 7,000 feet in elevation.

We started the journey before sunrise and hiked steadily, reaching the summit at around two o'clock. There were parts of the hike that were absolutely miserable, where we could barely take another step. My muscles ached, and I was dizzy from the lack of oxygen at that elevation. Yet there were other times during the journey that were absolutely breathtaking (in a good way). We would look out at these gorgeous views of the trees and mountains, God's beauty surrounding us. Sometimes we would stop to evaluate how far we'd already come. At other times we were overwhelmed as we looked upward at the treacherous terrain ahead. Most of the journey was just hiking—no elation and no misery but just working together and encouraging each other toward a goal. Now I take great pleasure in looking at Pikes Peak and saying to Mike, "We climbed that!"

In a similar way, you shouldn't be so focused on the destination of sex that you forget the beauty of the journey. The greatest memories aren't of reaching the peak, but of the moments you tarried together to get there. The obstacles and trials are as important in the journey as the pleasures.

During our time together in this book, we'll look at the most common sexual-intimacy headaches that crop up for women. As we explore

problems like body image, the impact of the past, pornography, and differences in desire, we'll hit some of the highlights of research and other information about sex. However, the answer to these headaches is not simply more information or even greater understanding. Although information and understanding are helpful, our relationships can be transformed only as God reveals and changes our hearts. Beyond just seeking the cure for common intimacy headaches, let's endeavor to see marital sexuality within the context of the larger journey of marriage and spiritual growth.

God is doing something in your life and in your marriage. He desires to transform your heart, to teach you how to love and how to be loved. Might the gift of sex be one area in which He is working? Are you willing to surrender this part of your life to Him?

Would you be so bold as to journey with me, inviting God to teach us to see the gift of sex as He sees it?

S O M E T H I N G T O T H I N K A B O U T • • • •

1. What "headaches" have you experienced in your marriage?

2. Which of these three lies have most impacted your sex life:

- God created sex primarily for a man's pleasure.
- Eroticism = sexual immorality.
- The greatest pleasures of sex are immediate.

How have these lies played out in your sexual relationship with your husband?

3. Choose an analogy that represents the "gift" sex is in your marriage. Write a prayer about your desire for God to redeem this gift.



Notes

Chapter 1

1. Jean Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 159.

Chapter 2

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Chapter 5

1. Adapted from Archibald D. Hart, *The Sexual Man* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1994), 32–33, 68.
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Web-site

<http://www.pureintimacy.org>

Counseling

To speak to a counselor or for a referral to a counselor in your area, call 1-800-AFAMILY.