**Negotiating new sexual practices – by Esther Perel**

**Negotiating new sexual practices is part of every couple’s sexuality. The first time a partner wants to try something new, how do you approach the topic?**

Before you focus on any request, first take stock of the overall quality of sexual communication between you and your partner. Do you feel comfortable expressing your wants, your likes, and dislikes? Is it open, easy and fluent -- or better described as tense, even to the point of being a power struggle?

Nicole, 34, tells me: “I’ve been with my boyfriend for a year. We’ve had good sex, tried out different things, but he now wants to try role play in the bedroom, and I don’t. It doesn’t appeal and I get annoyed when he brings it up. I feel like he thinks I’m a prude, but I just can’t force myself to try it.”

I frequently receive questions from people where one partner wants something sexually, and the other one does not. It may involve a particular practice, a discrepancy in desire, or a negotiation of the boundaries around monogamy. Sexual communication is so important, and so few couples seem to know how to do it.

I ask Nicole if her partner is suggesting, asking, or pressuring? Does she feel able to consider his request freely? To what extent does his opinion of her influence her self judgments and her choices? Clearly she’s worried about his reaction, and this can directly affect the quality of the communication between them. She can be intimidated and she can lose her self-confidence. On the other end though, Nicole’s “annoyance” can also put an end to a conversation that never even started. She’s saying “no” without ever having truly examined her feelings about the matter. Is she anxious? Fearful? Reacting from a stereotypic place?

Here’s the deal: he’s free to ask for what he wants and she’s free to say no. It’s a “both-and.” He may be upset if she refuses, and she needs to acknowledge his disappointment. She needs to know that she can be empathic, but still maintain her stance.

But I would ask, at a year into the relationship, does she trust him enough to know that he wouldn’t want to do anything to make her uncomfortable? I’ve worked with many men over the years and, I can tell you, seeing a woman disinterested or in pain is a real turn-off.

Sometimes, it’s good to try something out of your comfort zone. You may need to try new things more than once. The first time, we’re often anything but relaxed. I say this because I hear Nicole tell herself she doesn’t like something she hasn’t even tried. Why does the idea turn her off? Something she’s heard or read? Perhaps she can allow herself to be curious about why expanding her repertoire in this way is off-limits when she’s already tried a number of things in bed.

Instead of fixating on doing or not doing, could Nicole explain to her boyfriend why role play is or isn’t something she’d consider? Would she approach it at all? Or be open to approaching it gradually? They could discuss together what he imagines they would feel if they tried role playing. Alternatively, what does he think would happen if they never brought it into their relationship?

The important thing in any sexual communication is to stay away from pressure, and instead to engage in joint exploration – if yes, why yes -- and if not, why not. It is key to feel safe, to be open, and to be curious. Curiosity is the opposite of fear, and sexual intimacy follows from there.