

# Psychological Perspectives on the Marital Relationship and NFP

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*Healthy Psychosexual Development and Identifying Psychological Red Flags in Follow-Up with Couples*







# PSYCHOLOGY AND NFP

## OBJECTIVES OF PRESENTATION

- I. Overarching framework for psychological understanding of NFP integrated with Catholic anthropology
- II. What is healthy psychosexual development and how does NFP fit into that concept?
- III. Red flags - Psychological obstacles when practicing NFP
- IV. Practical Ways to Help Couples

# A CATHOLIC ANTHROPOLOGICAL VISION OF SEXUAL INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

- Integrating the psychological scientific knowledge with theological and philosophical truth about the human person, we get a more robust understanding of sexual relations in the context of marriage.
- NFP or Fertility Awareness Based Methods is more than about achieving/avoiding pregnancy – it's a whole way of exercising the sexual faculties in a way that is in accord with our God given natures (striving for excellence and Aristotelian virtue) and morally subjugating ourselves to God.
- It's about having an authentically Catholic (universal, true) marriage. It will ultimately bring happiness and peace.

# NFP CONCEPTUALLY A STRUGGLE BECAUSE ITS COUNTERCULTURAL

- Sexual revolution compounded by the feminist movement and the contraception pill promulgated the false view that sex is mainly recreational and can be divorced from the procreative aspect at will. Other cultural trends, particularly in American culture, include the “two child family size ideal” and the modern need to control and plan. (Carney, 2024)
- The extreme perversions that exist due to an immoral sex culture can be seen in the child porn industry, child sex trafficking, etc. which ultimately stem from the seemingly innocuous premise that sex does not have to be subject to moral law. NFP, or FEBM, which is in its purist form intertwined irrevocably with Catholic sexual ethics is the antithesis to the ideological movement of the sexual revolution.
- NFP is in tune with the ultimate purpose and reality of human sexuality, which is procreative, unitive, and for married couples striving to obey God fully.
- NFP doesn't make your marriage great – having an authentically Catholic approach to living out the vocation and covenant of marriage makes your marriage great. NFP practice, when used in the context of a genuine Catholic marriage, may ideally foster respect, communication, awareness and reverence for the body God created, subjugation to God's will, and mortification of the body. NFP practice can also be a challenge and a stress on a relationship, requiring examination of areas where the couple can grow.

# HEALTHY SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT AND NFP

- Awakening of sense of sexuality occurs during puberty (ages average 9-11 girls 10-13 boys.) (McIlhaney, 2008)
- “The part of the brain that controls the ability to make fully mature decisions is not physically mature until an individual reaches his mid 20s.” (McIlhaney, 2008). Brain maturity is connected with ability to make wise, discerning, long term planning decisions about choosing partner and engaging in sexual activity.
- Neuroplasticity of the brain means that brain can be molded and guided by decisions and behaviors. Important for adolescence to have lots of structure and guidance from trusted source (namely their parents) and that adults can exercise their rational powers to change and grow in their behavior, actually molding their brain structure. (McIlhaney, 2008)

# HEALTHY SEXUAL RELATIONS

- A healthy sexual relationship between man and wife is ultimately the most satisfying, whole experience a human can have in the area of sexuality, characterized by sustainability and longevity, maturation, communication. (Ortega, 2025)
- The sometimes “ordinary quality” of the intimate relationship between spouses (CS Lewis warned against making eros a god) is transformed into something special and meaningful due to how it fits into the overall narrative of intimacy a couple shares through marriage - a relationship with a dynamic of fruitfulness, and total self gift.
- When sex becomes a component of long term relationship with goal of permanency, fidelity, openness to raising children together, sex is the “glue” that fosters a sense of closeness, intimacy, satisfaction, and trust to create perfect environment for long term loving relationship plus a “nest” to raise children. (McIlhaney, 2008)

## NFP DEPENDS ON THE THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIRTUE IN AREA OF HUMAN SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

- NFP can be ground where men and women grow in virtue of obedience, mutual respect, mortification, ability to channel and find creative ways to navigate struggles and conflict.
- There are different ways in which a marriage where NFP is practiced will demand sacrifice, depending on seasons of life and demands of family life.
- Striving towards excellence in the area of submitting to God's will – a life long journey of prayerful discernment and maturation in perspective.



# PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES

- The challenge of implementation of NFP is not presented in the observations, which has in recent years been enhanced and enabled by various technologies for ease of accessibility such as the “Natural Cycles” app; the sticking point for couples is the practice of abstinence during fertile windows, a practice that is vulnerable to human factors such as mood, capacity for virtue, dynamic between couples, and motivations. Every month these elements may shift! (Conway, 1981)
- One common potential obstacle to practicing NFP may be the emotional wounds couples carry from the hook up culture, which means having casual sexual encounters outside of marriage. Note that any sexual activity (not just intercourse) has the same effect on the brain so there is a broad definition. (McIlhaney, J. 2008)
- Premarital sex is especially potentially harmful because it does not build upon a strong foundation. Extramarital sexual activity (either activities that preface or lead up to intercourse as well as the intercourse itself) often stem from an infatuation phase, nonetheless triggering the neurochemicals oxytocin for women and vasopressin for men, which can cause a powerful bonding experience. When nonnegotiable difference or practical impediments arise to the couple continuing their relationship, a very painful break up ensues. Alternatively, couples may remain together despite difficulties and even relational abuse because they can't resist the powerful bond. (McIlhaney, 2008)
- Repeated casual sexual encounters or short-term sexual relationships has the effect of “reduced” or damaged potency for the neurochemicals to cause a bonding effect. Similar to tape that loses its stickiness with repeated use. (McIlhaney, 2008)
- A high volume of couples desiring to learn NFP enter the married state with the burden of emotional woundedness from having had extramarital sexual encounters. This may lead to unhealthy dynamics and sex may be used as a band aid to create sense of closeness and reassurance.



# PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES (CONT.)

- Sexual trauma and other adverse experiences can have a bearing on development of personality disorders, addictions, and psychopathologies such as anxiety and depression, and attachment disorders, which can negatively impact our ability to relate to another and communicate our needs effectively, practice restraint and present as a dynamic self gift as required in a mature married sexual relationship that uses NFP. (Conway, R., 1981)
- The Psychologist theorist Lorna Smith Benjamin (1993) stated “Every psychopathology is a gift of love” meaning that every mental health disorder was some psychological dysfunction that had its roots in the patient’s need to receive and give love, and somehow that was thwarted or damaged in early childhood experiences.



# AREAS OF GROWTH FOR COUPLES STRUGGLING

## SOME POTENTIAL PROBLEM AREAS RECOMMENDED FOR EXPLORATION, PERHAPS WITH A THERAPIST

- Rule out existence of mental health problems that are weighing on the individuals or relationship (refer for counseling, self help resources such as John Gottman, trauma therapy such as Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing)
- Level of trust between the couple
- Sense of self and identity and levels of independence versus co-dependance (for example, one spouse may feel unduly dependent on the sexual union as an affirmation of their spouses love for them) (Conway, 1981)
- Varying visions of family planning goals
- Need for deepening understanding of the church's teaching on marriage and family and call to generosity, openness to life
- Deepening appreciation for the concept of marital intimacy, which is more than just sex and requires communication of love in different ways (demonstrating love through acts of service and quality time, as an example.) (Ortega, 2025)
- Working on creative ways to navigate the abstinent period that can include physical expressions of tenderness
- Having a sense of humor and gentleness. "Sex is both pleasurable and funny as well as conjugally sacred." (Conway, 1981)
- Having an attitude of flexibility and understanding about the very human struggles and the ambivalence and challenges found in NFP. (Conway, 1981)
- Amount of outside pursuits, distractions, hobbies, friendships are healthy and balanced. (Conway, 1981)



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