The Sex-Starved Marriage
Guest: Michele Weiner-Davis
Host: Noel Meador
Noel: Welcome to Oxygen365. I'm your host, Noel Meador. And today's podcast, I have the privilege of interviewing a very special guest, Michele Weiner-Davis. She's the author of The Divorce Remedy, The Sex-Starved Wife, and Divorce Busting. She's a regular guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show, 48 Hours, 20/20, and The Today Show. She's an international renowned seminar leader and marriage therapist in private practice. Michele offers telephone coaching to help you save your marriage and get your sex life back on track. Michele, welcome to the show.

Michele: Well, thank you so much for having me. But Noel, I have to tell you, you forgot the most important title in your description, and that's The Sex-Starved Marriage.

Noel: You beat me to the punch. I was just going to say, and today we are going to be discussing her book, The Sex-Starved Marriage: Practical Steps to Boosting your Marriage Libido. So you're absolutely right, and I'm really excited about what we're going to be covering today. Because I've got to ask you, is this a really big problem? I know you've been doing this a long, long time and I know you've been doing this a long, long time and I know you've written books on it, but give our listeners just an idea how big a problem this is.

Michele: So I've been specializing in working with couples with marital problems for the last three decades. What I've found in my practice and also the research tells us that approximately one in every three couples is experiencing a sexual desire gap, and I'll explain more about that in just a minute. So I want your listeners and viewers to really understand that if they're struggling in their sexual relationship and they're arguing about sex because one person is hot and the other isn't, that they're not alone. There should be some comfort in knowing that.

Noel: Because I think that actually related to that question is how do you actually define that you're in a sex-starved marriage? Is that the number of times you make love through the week? The month? How do you actually diagnose this?

Michele: Well, I always say that having a healthy sexual relationship isn't like having a daily minimum requirement like a vitamin. It really is different for all couples, but I can give you a definition, Noel, of a sex-starved marriage.

A sex-starved marriage is one where one spouse is desperately longing for more touch, more physical closeness, more sex, more physical connection, and the other spouse thinks, "What is the big deal? Would you just get a life? It's just sex." But to the spouse yearning for more touch, it's a huge deal because it
really is about feeling wanted, about feeling loved, about feeling appreciated, about feeling close emotionally.

And when this major disconnect happens, what also happens is that intimacy on all levels goes right out the door. They stop sitting next to each other on the couch. They stop laughing at each other's jokes. They stop doing things together. In essence, they really stop being friends. And it places the marriage at risk of infidelity and divorce. But being the divorce buster, that's how people know me, I can tell people that if they have been arguing about sex, it doesn't nail the marital coffin shut. There are so many things that couples can do to bridge the sexual desire gap and to really bring back the passion.

Noel: Yeah, and I want to get into that. Before we do that though, I need to ask the question. As you see it, and I know that you work with a lot of couples around this very, very sensitive topic. What are these steps? These tragic steps that lead them to the unfortunate conclusion of being in a sex-starved marriage?

Michele: Well, one of the typical things that happens in relationships... And by the way, I have to say a couple more things about the sex-starved marriage. One is that most people don't talk about it, but it's a pretty self-evident fact that the person with the lower sexual desire controls the sexual relationship. And they aren't doing it because they're mean-spirited or they're controlling or they're manipulative. They do it because if they're not in the mood, sex isn't likely to happen.

And Noel, I find this to be somewhat interesting. Because when you think about how decisions are made in marriage, you usually think about how mutual decisions. Two people together decide whether to get married, whether to have kids, how to deal with finances and the in-laws and where they're going to spend the holidays. But conspicuously missing from the list is anything at all having to do with the sexual relationship. And there's something else interesting about that.

The person with the lower sexual desire actually expects his or her spouse to accept the decision, not to complain about it. And also, oh yes, by the way, you must be monogamous. And this tacit agreement doesn't work all that well. So what typically happens, and more specifically an answer to your question, one person in the relationship, usually the less sexual one, really needs to feel close and connected on an emotional level before they're interested in being sexual. And then you have the other spouse who really needs to feel really close and connected on a sexual level before they're interested in investing in the relationship.
What typically happens is both spouses wait for the other person to change. And I’m telling you, it's a deadly waiting game because they grow further and further apart. The other thing that also happens, and you talk about the steps of getting to this distance, is generally, the person with lower desire has very little empathy for the person with higher desire. Because usually, people with lower desire think to themselves, "Well really, it is just about scratching an itch. It's not anything really big or important." But to the spouse yearning for touch, as I said before, it's much, much bigger than that. It really is about feeling close and connected. If you'd like, I'll tell you a story about a couple that I worked with.

Noel: I would love it.

Michele: Okay. This really illustrates this. And I think so many people resonate with this story because it is so typical. I was working with a couple that had been married for about 15 years. They had a pretty good relationship, but they were in therapy to iron out some of their garden variety issues. And the guy was a very laid back guy, but toward the end of the session, he actually had a complaint for the very first time. And he said, "You know, Michele, there really is only a two hour window of opportunity on Fridays between 10:00 and 12:00 where my wife might be interested in sex." And when he said that, I glanced over at her. And she was sort of smiling because she recognized herself in that description. But when I glanced back at him, he was not smiling at all.

So I asked him, "Tell me what this has been like for you." He took a deep breath and he turned to her and he said, "You know, when we're in bed together and I reach out to you and you're not there for me, all I can think about is, 'Are you still attracted to me the way I'm attracted to you? Do you love me anymore? Do you even want to be in this marriage?' And then when you go to sleep and I'm staring up at the ceiling and hearing you breathing next to me, all I can tell you is that it's the loneliest feeling in the world lying next to you in bed."

And to this woman's credit, I have to tell you, her eyes filled up with tears and she reached out and she grabbed for his hand and here's what she said, "Do you know that every time you touch me, the only thing I ever think about is, 'Am I in the mood? Am I not in the mood?' I never, not once, have thought about what it's like to be you, and I am so, so sorry. And I promise, I will try harder," and he began to cry. And between me and you and everyone who is listening, I began to cry. It was an incredibly touching moment. And I just want to say one more thing about that. When people are listening to this story, I don't want them to get the impression that it's always the man who has higher desire. Because I'm here to tell you that I think low desire in men is America's best kept secret. So it can go either way. It really isn't just about women getting headaches; men
can get headaches too.

Noel: Yeah. You're right. And I was just going to ask that question. It's is this a gender thing, right? And you're saying no. Actually, it goes both ways. Let me ask this question. What do you think are contributing factors as to why men are more or less becoming the low desire inside of the equation?

Michele: Well, for one thing, I think it is more typical to hear about men having high desire and women having low desire. I think that there've been lots of reasons why men have low desire. For one thing, with the economy having been what it's been. So many businesses have downsized. Many men have lost their jobs or their jobs have changed. And a man's self-esteem is very connected to their sense of achievement at work. And when that isn't working out so well, a lot of men feel really deflated and they're not feeling sexual. That's one thing.

Sometimes it is hormonal issue. Sometimes they need testosterone supplementation. But one of the biggest reasons that I see men being less interested in sex than we think that they often are is that very often, their wives who are upset about the fact that they're not connecting physically become very, very critical. Criticism is not exactly an aphrodisiac. And actually, it's true both ways. Most people who feel criticized and feel their spouse's anger steer clear of being physical with their spouses.

Noel: You know, I want to come back to the low desire person. You said that it really sets that pace oftentimes in the relationship. What advice do you have for the low desire person in the relationship if that be the case?

Michele: That's a great question, Noel. So first of all, I think that it's really important to develop a little empathy. I hope that they heard the story that I just told about that other couple. That's number one. Number two, with what we now know about how to boost sexual desire whether they are physical causes, personal issues or interpersonal issues, there is such great help out there that it really is imperative that people seek the help that's available. That's the second thing.

Third thing, and this may sound funny but it's really, really important, that they adopt the Nike philosophy and just do it. And let me tell you why. I wish that I had a dollar for each time someone in my practice, often a woman, said to me, "You know, Michele, I really wasn't in the mood when my husband reached out to me and started being sexual. I had a lot on my mind. I just really wasn't present. But once we got into it, I really enjoyed myself. I had an orgasm. It felt great. And then I noticed that afterwards, we were much closer."
I actually, once I described this to a couple in my practice, I actually had a man recently say to me, "That's my wife. I wish she would just write on her hands, 'I like sex,' so she remembers it for next time." And Noel, this happens so many times that I started to do a little research about this. And what I've found out is that for millions of people, and many of them are women, sexual desire, what has to happen is they have to get their feet started, their feet moving in order to feel sexual desire. They have to be physically aroused before their brains realize that they're into it and they enjoy it. So that's why I think it really behooves, especially women, to be approachable when their husbands initiate sex. If they're feeling even neutral, they should begin and watch the fact that they're actually going to enjoy it and it's going to have such incredible relationship benefits.

And there's one more tip that I have for the person with lower desire. Very often, when they're not in the mood, nothing happens. And what's to say, that that person can't offer their partner a gift. In other words, to pleasure their spouse. Even if they're not in the mood and they're really not into it, there's something to be said for giving their spouse a gift. And so often when I say that, believe it or not, the low desire spouse says, "Yeah, I'm willing to do that but my partner isn't willing to do that." And then I turn to the partner, and the partner says, "Yeah, some of my enjoyment, a big part of my enjoyment comes from watching my spouse get off on this; really be excited. And if he or she is not excited, I don't want to do it."

And you know what my advice is to that person? Get over it. Accept the gift. You're not clones. You're not going to be in the mood exactly at the same time. So being able to be more flexible in this area really, I think, helps a lot.

Noel: That's huge. That's so important. I think it's interesting that they do set the pace in the relationship, which is frustrating for the high desire individual. I guess I want to jump to that. Because if they are setting the pace, the low desire is setting the pace, the high desire, what would you say to them as it relates to that frustration? Even maybe bitterness and anger around this situation of, "Gosh, you know what? My needs aren't being met."

Michele: That, you're mind-reading, because that's where I was headed next. So thank you for that question. I appreciate it. So here's what happens in these relationships. Initially, the person with higher desire is, I think, quite open and expresses his or her feelings with vulnerability. I say use the F-word. Meaning, talk about your feelings, okay? And so they'll say things openly like, "I'm missing you. I'm feeling disconnected from you. This is so important to me. Sex is how I really feel close to you." But when those needs aren't met, and they often aren't because the person with lower desire really isn't getting how
important this is in the relationship, the vulnerability quickly shifts into anger.

And then the person is not only angry about the fact that they're not having sex. The anger spills over to every other aspect of their life together. They're yelling about the wet towels left on the floor or the pop can left in the den, and it's all a smoke screen for the fact that this dynamic is going on. And so one of the things that I tell people with higher desire is that while I completely understand how angry and frustrated you are, again, that is not an aphrodisiac. That only pushes your partner further and further away.

So here is what you have to do. You have to go back to square one and express your feelings from your heart. You're much more likely to get a spouse to try to be empathetic and understanding if you're speaking from a place of vulnerability rather than from anger.

Noel: Yeah. I have to think, we're talking about long-term committed relationships, that when this dynamic starts to play in the relationship, is that where you see the unfortunate reality of the blow up and moving towards separation? And here's my question. Is this unavoidable? I feel that like there's two forces at work here that are really playing against themselves. One side of it is routine, predictability. There's that sense of dependability, security, which we all want in a long-term relationship. On the other side of the equation, you have novelty, adventure, spontaneity. And it feels like these forces are working against themselves in the relationship. What advice would you give to couples who are stuck in that polarity in the relationship?

Michele: Well, one thing I want to say as being someone in a very long-term marriage myself, that like anything else in life whether it's sexuality or communication or parenting, in order to be good at this and have it sustain itself overtime, you have to make it a priority. And I know that's standard advice. But when I oftentimes give that advice to couples, they'll say, "Well there's the kids. It's their soccer schedule, or we don't have time."

And I say like anything else, you have to actually plan time to be passionate, to be sexual. And then they'll say, "Well, it's not spontaneous. I'll say, "Well then, you have to plan spontaneity." You really do have to put effort and energy into communicating about what turns you on, what turns you off. And by the way, I've worked. This is so startling to me that I've worked with couples who have been married for 35 years or longer. And believe it or not, many of them have never ever talked about sex with each other.

Noel: No way.
Michele: It's really true. It's startling. I'm really startled. Or they talk to each other very early on in the relationship. But let's face it. What works for two people early on in the relationship is different over time because our bodies change, our needs change. And if we don't have open communication about what feels good and what doesn't feel so good or what you want to liven things up a little bit, your relationship will become stale and it will become very, very difficult.

I wanted to add one more thing; a tip for the person with higher desire and what he or she can do. So often, when the person with higher desire wants to encourage the other spouse to become more sexual, they go out and do things that would please them. So they go buy sexy lingerie or sexy movies or sexy scents, and they give them to their spouse. But the truth is that's not necessarily what turns the person on.

What you have to do is tune into your partner's turn-ones, not your own turn-ones. And let's just say, in this case, a guy who has higher desire, maybe what would turn his wife on is if he said to her, "You know what? On Saturday morning, I know you've been working really hard. You stay in bed. You sleep. I'm getting up with the kids. I want you to relax." Or, "Go spend a weekend away with your girlfriends. I know that you've really been stressed out." That maybe the aphrodisiac and she'll come home wanting to be with him. So you really have to, in a sense, speak your partner's love language; not your own love language.

Noel: Yes. Well, as a husband who has three kids with my wife, I will absolutely affirm the whole space to allow her to have that time. It's learning what your spouse’s needs are, right? What are his or her emotional needs and being able to meet those versus just looking at my own?

Michele: Exactly.

Noel: So this all sounds great. I'm just thinking about the listener viewer who is sitting here thinking, "Well, I love this. But the fact is that as much as I've tried to meet halfway or even all the way, my spouse just refuses to participate in this part of our relationship?" I want you to address that, because I think that's a pretty big and real issue that we're seeing a lot.

Michele: Well, at the risk of sounding like I'm going to promote something here.

Noel: I want you to promote.
Michele: Okay. I want to tell you that I did a TEDx Talk. I know that a lot of your viewers are familiar with TEDx Talks, on the topic of *The Sex-Starved Marriage*, and there have been nearly three quarter of a million views at this point. I've gotten so many emails. You know, I love what I do but this is the thing I love most. I've gotten so many emails from people who have said to me, "I've felt so alone and lonely, and hearing you made me realize I'm not alone and I actually got my spouse to watch the talk. And for the first time in years, we're going to do something about this."

So I'm really excited about that. And then also along those same lines, the book, *The Sex-Starved Marriage*, is really written for both people to read together. I explain each person's position so that they can have compassion for one another and I really have a good way of working my way in there and then talking to the person with lower desire, who as I said, controls the sexual relationship, and giving that person reasons and motivation to turn things around in the relationship. So there is hope. Do not give up.

Noel: And I love that, the TED Talk. I'm just going to come back again. What about that couple who they're saying "I've done all of that and they still are unresponsive to this area of our relationship." Is there anything? Is it basically there is no hope? What would you say to that person?

Michele: You're talking to the psychotic optimist. I just don't think there really is such a thing. A lot of times, there are a number of things. Usually, the person with higher desire has been pursuing and pursuing and pursuing. And everyone probably knows that when you pursue someone, you're going to push the other person in the opposite direction.

So one last-ditch effort that might be tried is for the higher desired spouse to stop pushing so much; to leave room in the universe for the other partner to take some initiative. That's one thing. The other thing is so often, the person with high desire says, "You know, I'm not going to be physical at all." Because that's a complaint that I hear a lot. It's not only that we're not having sex. We're not holding hands. We're not kissing. We're not sitting next to each other on the couch. We're not cuddling in bed. We're not going to bed at the same time."

When I talk to the low desire spouses about this, what they say is, "I'm afraid that if I do anything physical; kiss him, give him a hug goodbye in the morning, that it will inevitably lead to his or her wanting this to be turning into sex. So one of the agreements that they can make for starters is to be able to touch just affectionately and sensually without it leading to sex. And of course, the very last thing I can say is that it's absolutely essential that if on your own, you haven't been able to get through to your spouse, there's professional help out
there.

We work with people literally all over the world. We give them suggestions of what they could do differently. Sometimes, it's you can't see the forest for the trees because you're so close to the problem. It's really discover something perhaps that you haven't tried, but you don't have to give up. There's always something you haven't tried.

Noel: I love that. Thank you for responding. I was just pressing because I know I've talked to them where they're just feeling so desperate and they feel like they've tried everything. And it's almost like at this point, I just can't keep going forward. It's a really tough place to be.

Michele: Well, it is. And I guess the other thing is sometimes those folks when they feel that they've tried everything, then they announce that they're getting a divorce. I think there's a step before that or several steps. One, as I just told you, they should get some professional help. But secondly, they should tell their spouse. If after trying everything, and especially things that I've outlined in the book, because there are many more alternatives than what you and I are talking about right here. They need to tell their spouse, "This is so important to me. I feel like I am so starving in this relationship and I feel so devastated that if something doesn't change, I really am going to need to leave this relationship," before they actually give up.

Because a lot of times, people announce that they're getting a divorce when it's too late. And when their spouse then starts to change—which they do. They become affectionate and more physical—the other spouse will say, "That's too little, too late." So really be open and honest with your spouse about how devastating this has been for you and the steps you're going to take if something doesn't change; not as a threat, not as an ultimatum, but as the truth.

Noel: Yes. That's really good. One of the populations that we serve is our military. In that, we've had a chance. It's been a real privilege and honor to come alongside couples who are wounded, ill, and injured. Many of them are invisible wounds, so they're dealing with PTSD and TBI and some of those injuries. I know that you addressed this in the book about medication and how medication have implications to this area of the relationship. I was just wondering if you could address that. Maybe not necessarily specific to that audience, but just how medication, I think, is becoming more and more commonplace to hear how this is affecting the sex life of couples.

Michele: So a lot of people are taking antidepressants. I'm not sure if that's what you're talking about.
Noel: Yes.

Michele: There's a certain kinds of antidepressant called SSRI. And 40% of people who take SSRIs, both for depression and anxiety, by the way, experience sexual side-effects where they have difficulty feeling aroused, they have difficulty getting erections, and difficulty climaxing. Then they think there's something wrong with them or they think there's something wrong with their spouse when they're experiencing some of these dysfunctions, when in truth what they need to do is go back to their doctors and ask, "Is there an alternative to this medication so that I'm not experiencing some of these sexual difficulties?"

Noel: Okay. This is very, very helpful.

Michele: By the way, in terms of people experiencing PTSD or some of the other dysfunctions or disabilities that you just mentioned, there's such great help available for people so that they can feel better and be more present in their relationships.

Noel: Well, I think we've been landing on some of the negative consequences of this is not working and low desire versus high desire. I want to just jump momentarily, wrap up here. Talk about the benefits that you see in couples who have an active sex life. Can we just maybe cover some of those things? I think that at the end of the day, it's about that putting in perspective and saying here's where the hope lies in this type of aspiring to. It's not easy. It's a challenge. We have to communicate. We have to overcome our conflict. But when we are able to meet at that place of an active sex life, what are the benefits for those couples?

Michele: Look. Sex and touch is a tie that binds. It is primal for us in terms of a sense of connection, closeness, feeling safe in a relationship. Plus when it works the right way, having sex with your spouse should be what sets the relationship apart from all other relationships. It is what makes it special and unique.

I have found that when I go out to a restaurant and I watch couples, I can always tell who's having sex and who isn't having sex. There seems to be a lightness, a connection, smiling, more conversation. And I can always tell the people who are not having sex, it's all missing. It's just missing. Not everybody is going to feel that sex is a tie that binds for them. But if you happen to be married to someone who feels that way, then taking care of each other, this mutual care-taking that underlines all healthy relationships is something that
really, really needs to be in place.

Noel: You're so funny. I've had that thought when I sat in the restaurant. So thanks for actually stating what I was thinking.

Michele: You'll notice if you were next time when you go out to a restaurant.

Noel: Yeah, exactly. So what we've been talking about is Michele Weiner-Davis book, *The Sex-Starved Marriage*. An amazing, absolute masterful piece that you've written here. I think just the candor and the honesty and yet the practical advice, I can't recommend this book enough to our audience. Well, just so you all know, the book and how to get this is going to be linked right below this video along with the TED Talk that you mentioned, which is a great talk. I've watched it and it's amazing how many people have viewed it. That will also be linked down below this video so you can go and look at it and watch that. So Michele, I want to say thank you.

Michele: Just let me say one more thing, because we work a lot with military over the phone in our phone coaching program. That really if anyone is having a difficult time sexually or otherwise in their relationship and one person is considering getting out, before you take any major steps to make that change, really it would be great to talk to a divorce-busting coach because there are solutions.

And thank you so much for having me on. It's been a while since we've talked and I really appreciate your help.

Noel: Oh my gosh. No, it's a privilege and honor, so thank you. So on that coaching, so they just call you guys directly, right? Because that's a great resource.

Michele: Yeah. We have a couple of numbers, and I can give them to you if you like, afterwards. And we literally speak to military folks all over the world who have actually said to us, "I'm in the front line tier in this part of the world but nothing is as scary to me as what's happening in my marriage." So we've been really helping those folks out.

Noel: Right. Well again, thank you so much and until next time. Thank you for the work that you're doing.

Michele: And thanks for the work you're doing as well.

Noel: All right. Take care.