How can a couple keep their sexual desire going strong for the long haul?

Be nice to each other.

New research shows one way to keep desire strong is to be responsive to your partner’s needs out of the bedroom.

People who are responsive do three things: They understand what their partner is really saying, validate what is important to their partner, such as his or her attitudes, goals and desires, and care for or express warmth and affection toward their partner.
“Responsiveness creates a deep feeling that someone really knows and understands you,” says Gurit Birnbaum, a social psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), a private university in Herzliya, Israel, who is the lead researcher on the new studies. “It makes you feel unique and special, and that is very, very sexy.”

In the beginning of a relationship, neurotransmitters such as dopamine push the partners to have sex as much as possible. Scan the brain of someone in this early, passionate stage of love and it will look very much like the brain of someone on drugs.

The addiction doesn’t last. Research suggests the chemical phase of passionate love typically continues between one and three years. Desire fades for different reasons: the chemical addiction to a partner subsides; people age and hormones decrease; emotional distance can cause passion to drop.

The new research—by psychologists at the IDC, the University of Rochester, Bar-Ilan University, in Ramat Gan, Israel, and Cornell Tech in New York, published this month in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology—consists of three studies of more than 100 heterosexual couples each. In the first, partners rated each others’ responsiveness and their own feelings of desire after a back and forth in an online app, where one person described a recent experience and thought his or her partner was responding. It was really a researcher.

In the second study, researchers reviewed videotapes of couples as one partner told a positive or negative personal story and the other responded. Then they were told to express physical intimacy. Researchers coded the subjects’ responsiveness and their expressions of desire.
In the third study, couples were asked to keep a daily diary for six weeks, reporting on the quality of the relationship, how responsive each partner felt the other was, and their level of desire. The participants were also asked to rate whether they felt their partner was valuable that day—someone others would perceive as a good partner—and how special he or she made them feel.

The studies showed that both men and women who felt their partner was more responsive felt more sexual desire for their partner. But women were affected more than men when their partner was responsive, meaning their desire for their partner increased more. The researchers believe women’s sexual desire is more sensitive in general to the emotional atmosphere than men’s.

‘Research suggests the chemical phase of passionate love typically continues between one and three years.’

The new research contradicts a decades-old theory that psychologists call the Intimacy-Desire paradox, which proposes that desire drops as two people become more emotionally intimate. It purports that people seek intimacy in a relationship, but desire thrives on distance and uncertainty.

Dr. Birnbaum says that certain types of intimacy are better for your sex life than others. Impersonal intimacy—familiarity without an emotional component—does kill desire. Think of your partner shaving in front of you or leaving the bathroom door open. But emotional intimacy that makes the relationship feel unique can boost it.

Tips to boost desire in your relationship by being responsive:

Start now. It is better to prevent a decline in desire than to try to revive it when it is lost, Dr. Birnbaum says.

Listen without judging. Don’t interrupt. Don’t spend the time while your partner is speaking thinking about how you will respond. “Most people want to give advice,” says Dr. Birnbaum. “It’s not the same as being there as a warm and wise ear.”
Pay attention to details. Look for ways to show your understanding and support. Does your wife have a big interview coming up and need solitude to prepare? Take the children out to dinner. Is your husband’s team in the playoffs? Don’t ask him to clean the garage right now. Being responsive is often expressed by behaviors, not just words, Dr. Birnbaum says.

Talk about your desire. Share your fantasies. Watch a sexy movie and talk about what parts you liked best.

Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at elizabeth.bernstein@wsj.com or follow her on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram at EBernsteinWSJ.