

Dive Deep Interview with Dr. Juli Slattery

NoMorePerfectDateNight.com

Jill Savage: Well hello. We want to welcome you to this month's Dive Deep Interview. We are spending time this month with Dr. Julianna Slattery. Dr. Juli is the founder of Authentic Intimacy, a ministry that focuses on God's plan for sex and sexuality. She is the author of 10 books, wife to Mike for 23 years, has three boys, and lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado. So Julie, we are so glad for you to join us.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Thanks so much for having me, Jill and Mark. It's always good to be with you.

Jill Savage: We wish we were with you where you are, because Colorado is our favorite place in the whole wide world.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Oh I love it when you guys visit here, so hope to do that again soon.

Jill Savage: Absolutely.

Mark Savage: Thanks for joining us. Jill briefly introduced you, but tell us about your ministry and tell us about yourself.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, absolutely. I'm a clinical psychologist, and have always been interested in just ministering to women and family and marriages. And then about six years ago when I was at Focus on the Family, which is where you and I met Jill...

Jill Savage: Yes it is!

Dr. Juli Slattery: God just really burdened my heart for this topic of sexuality and just felt like over the course of a year that the Lord was just showing me how much pain sexuality represents. That had been part of my own marriage journey as well. So I left Focus on the Family to found Authentic Intimacy with Linda Dillow, who also had written and spoken quite a bit on this topic. It's been a faith walk ever since then. Seeing God set people free and teaching His deeper truth about sexuality, that's really become a joy.

Mark Savage: Oh, that's excellent.

Jill Savage: Love that.

Jill Savage: One of the things we try to do in No More Perfect Date Night is we try to pull back the curtain on other marriages, and particularly the marriages of experts. You just mentioned that this has been a place that has been challenging for you. Can you share just a little bit of your journey and what you've learned along the way?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yes, absolutely. I would say that Mike and my journey is pretty similar to the

stories that we hear from a lot of Christian couples. We waited until we got married to be sexually intimate with the anticipation that, "This is going to be great. This is going to be such a fun part of our marriage." And really it wasn't for the first several years of our marriage. Particularly, on my part. Sexual intimacy was painful. I didn't really enjoy it. I just resigned myself to the fact that this is something that God probably made for my husband and not really for me. I just kind of had that duty mentality of, "This is important, so I have to find a way to endure this." So there was a lot of conflict in our marriage early on around sexuality, some issues with pornography, and again some of the temptations and things that most couples are dealing with were part of our story. And having three little boys, just being exhausted and feeling like that's the last thing I want to think about.

Mark Savage: Right.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, so we wrestled through some of those things. Again, probably like most couples do, without much help. Just trying to keep the crises from hitting. Until probably about 10 years into our marriage, I really started to recognize that this was an important part of marriage and that my attitude in terms of just dealing with it and not really making it a priority, God just really started to convict me about that. So in my journey that's what began the deeper dive in terms of understanding why God created sex the way He did, or why it tended to be so difficult. Not just in my marriage, but as a clinical psychologist I was meeting with all these couples and women that were telling similar stories to ours. And even more painful stories, like I know you two have shared your story. Stories also of sexual abuse and all kinds of things, and so God really got my attention that this is an area that we don't talk enough about, and that a lot of people just feel like they have to keep secrets and not bring into the light the things they're struggling with. That was really a turning point for our marriage and for me personally in ministry.

Mark Savage: Do you feel like in your ministry are you seeing couples who weren't talking about it and now are able to have conversations?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, yeah. I think for a few reasons. I think first of all, couples need tools to talk about sexual intimacy because we haven't... That hasn't been modeled for us. What words do you use? How do you talk about something that's so vulnerable without it ending in conflict? But also, I think a lot of couples don't know the priority of sex. They feel like I did where I just assumed this is kind of the icing on the cake for marriage, and if it's good, then great, but if it's not so good you just say, "Well, I guess that's the way life is." Until you really understand the importance and the priority of sexual intimacy in marriage, you won't make it an issue of conversation. You won't take the step, for example, to go see a counselor and learn how to talk about this or read a book together. Sometimes it takes a crisis to say, "This is tearing apart our marriage. If we don't get this figured out, I don't know if we'll be married two years from now." But other times God just wakes you up and says, "Hey, this could be a lot better than it is now. How do we get to that place?"

Jill Savage: Yes, yes, I know. My journey is similar to yours, Juli, in that for the early years I expected it to be wonderful. But honestly it wasn't, it wasn't what I anticipated, and not only that but unlike you and Mike, we *were* sexually active before we were married, both with other people and with each other. And what I began to realize years into our marriage is that my motivation for sex, my drive, had actually been a drive built out of rebellion, not a drive built out of understanding God's plan for sex and a desire for my husband. I didn't even know what a healthy desire looked like. I only knew what a rebellious desire looks like.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, thanks for sharing that, Jill, because I think what you're hitting on is really true, that sex is never just sex. It's so tied in to who we are in our identity, in what we believe about God, in what we believe about love, that we bring all this baggage into marriage related to sexuality. Some women bring into marriage, "Sex equals love, and if we're not having sex then apparently my husband doesn't love me or there's something wrong with me." When there are problems in the bedroom, usually you find that there are layers of insecurity and rejection and fear. When you begin to deal with sexual issues, what ends up happening is God starts healing all of these other things that were underneath. And I know that's part of your story as well.

Jill Savage: Yes, you're right. Because I would say that most of the time when people are dealing with sexual issues, the underlying root issues have nothing to do with sex.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Right. What I found to be true is a lot of those underlying issues actually also have to do with what we believe about God. And so I've started teaching the idea that every sexual issue is also a spiritual issue. It impacts how we see each other, but also, "Is God good? If He is, why am I experiencing this hardship? Does God really want me to be happy, because I'm not happy right now. And so what does that mean for me? Why did God let this terrible thing happen in my past?" So as we begin to deal with sexual issues, we're also addressing spiritual and relational things that need to be talked through.

Jill Savage: Excellent.

Mark Savage: That is excellent, it is.

Jill Savage: You mentioned something a minute ago that we don't understand why sex is important. Talk about that for a moment, because I'm sure that some who are joining our conversation here are thinking, "It's not important. It's not important to me, it's not important to us." Why is sex important? Why did God create it?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Mark Savage: The other side of it is, "I know why it's important..."

[chuckle]

Mark Savage: And yet I have no clue."

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yes you're right. I would answer this question 10 years ago really differently than I would now.

Mark Savage: Oh yeah.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Of course, I keep learning, but there are really two reasons why it's important. One of them is a theological reason and one of them is really practical reason. The theological reason is that God created sex to be part of a physical picture to help us understand the concept of His covenant love. This is a hard thing to unpack and it's something that I've been studying really just for the last five years or so. But it's the idea that sex isn't just this random aspect of our humanity, but because of sex a young man and a young woman will leave whatever else they're

pursuing in life, their education, their job, their hobbies and say, "I need this person. I was not made to be alone." It's sex that draws people into covenant, and the desire to be together is so strong that you're really willing to undertake sacrifice to say, "I just love this person, I want to spend my life with them." And so sex draws us into covenant but it also is this passionate celebration of a covenant promise.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Now, the importance of that theologically is, we're told in the Bible that God loves us with a covenant love. He chooses us, He's faithful to us, He's passionate about us. And so God has given us in marriage and sexuality a physical way to understand that spiritual truth. When a couple has sex, really they're celebrating the promise they've made to each other. Even if it was 30 years ago, you're still celebrating, "We've given each other a 100% to faithfulness." There should be a backdrop of a reminder of God has given Himself completely to us and He invites us into worship. He invites us into a love relationship with Him. And so when a married couple pursues healthy sexuality, they're actually playing out something that has great spiritual significance for themselves and for their family and for their community to watch and say, "I can get a glimpse of what covenant love is supposed to look like." That's the deeper theological reason, which again, is kind of hard to get our minds around. But the practical reason is because sexuality in marriage, I think, is one of the most tangible tests of our love for each other. And it's the most tangible way that we grow in love for each other. And what I mean by that is you're naturally incompatible when you get married.

Jill Savage: Yep.

Dr. Juli Slattery: And if you want to have a good sex life, you have to learn things like empathy, patience, self-control, mercy, communication. If you don't learn those things, then you'll never have a great sex life. God has given us this very tangible kind of love laboratory, called "the bedroom", where I can't run from this. I can't run from the fact that my husband hurt my feelings, and he doesn't understand me, or that he wants something that I don't want to give. Either we're going to hit a plateau in intimacy, or we're going to have to push through and really learn what it is to love each other in such a tangible way. Those are the two reasons that God has just really shown me that this is not an area that we can neglect. It's either going to be drawing us in a deeper intimacy, or it's going to be a real barrier for us.

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Dr. Juli Slattery: It's never neutral.

Mark Savage: No, that's right. Wow. That's just really well said.

Jill Savage: I love the "love laboratory".

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, yeah.

[chuckle]

Jill Savage: I can really relate to that, and I think marriage in general is a love laboratory.

Dr. Juli Slattery: It is, yes.

Jill Savage: But I would say that the sexual intimacy piece of it really engages that even more.

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, it's...

Mark Savage: I think early on, my naivety, or idealism, was I expected all of our love relationship to be easy, and to be natural, and not to have to be worked out so hard through life's challenges.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, and now looking back on it after decades of marriage, think about what you would have missed out on if it had been easy. Like all the ways, through everything you've been through as a couple, that your love for each other is so much deeper, because in this one area of marriage, what you've had to walk through together. And if it was easy then we really wouldn't be achieving what God really wants us to do, is to learn to love like He loves. In my marriage, I don't think there's one area that has been more powerful in teaching me what it really looks like to love my husband.

Jill Savage: Yeah.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Because, it requires so much from me.

Jill Savage: I think sometimes we try... Especially in those early years when it was out of duty. And when you're in that mindset you aren't really giving yourself fully to him.

Dr. Juli Slattery: No, you don't know how to. You're just frustrated at the barriers. And then, when you can begin to see the barriers as actually something that God can intentionally use to teach you what intimacy really is, it changes your perspective.

Jill Savage: Yes it does.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Jill Savage: Juli, you have a book called, *No More Headaches: Enjoying Sex and Intimacy In Marriage*. What are some very practical steps couples can take to move their sex life from where it is, to where they want it to be?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah. I think first of all, really, truly making it a priority. And not just saying, "Hey, let's have sex more often." But I have had to do this, maybe two or three times in the course of my marriage, to say before the Lord, "For the next three or four months, I want to intentionally pray about sexual intimacy in my marriage, I want to learn how to be a better lover. I want to address a wound in my heart." And sometimes, that's what it requires, addressing a wound in the marriage. But if you just think that your sex life is going to get better because you read a book that gave you a few tips on what to do in the bedroom, then that's really short-lived progress. It really requires saying, "This is a gift God has given us, and I don't feel like we've fully opened it. And let's begin to talk, and pray, and prioritize time. And to learn about each other, to learn about God's

design, and to confront some of the things we've been ignoring." And when you have that kind of intentionality, you begin to see that the atmosphere between you changes. And then you can begin to engage in the fun stuff like, "Let's try new things, and let's just kind of get out of our normal rut." But I think it first starts with establishing that priority.

Jill Savage: Right. For us, scheduling sex was a game-changer.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Jill Savage: And it sounds so odd to think about scheduling sex. Why would we do that? Because, who schedules sex?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah. [chuckle]

Jill Savage: You don't see that on the movies.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, you're right.

Jill Savage: You don't see that in romance novels. And why in the world are we allowing movies and romance novels to be the ones that define sex for us. But especially when our kids were little, this was huge.

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Jill Savage: And what we found is for the person that had lesser desire, which was me, it got me thinking about sex. And that was huge, because oftentimes I just wasn't thinking about it. For the person with the higher desire, which was Mark, it...

Mark Savage: I couldn't understand her not thinking about it.

[laughter]

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Mark Savage: I probably thought about it enough for both of us.

[laughter]

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Jill Savage: But what it did though, is it also took rejection out of the picture. There was no asking, and then being fearful of being rejected and getting a no. We knew at the very least this is when it was going to happen, and it really reduced his anxiety and his stress over it.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah. Yeah, that's great advice. And there are a lot of couples who have said that scheduling sex has resolved a lot of those conflicts they had and a lot of the ambiguity, and like you said, Jill, just being prepared, not like feeling caught off guard if you've got a kitchen full of dishes to do and the kids are demanding your time. And then it just feels like one more thing that's

demanding of you instead of being able to anticipate it.

My husband and I have never scheduled sex. But we have done instead, is a system that's worked really well for us, where one of us says a code word that means, "I'm thinking about this." If my husband says the code word, then I know within 24 hours then I'm going to initiate. Because then that gives me the ability to say, "Alright, I want to be emotionally ready for this."

Dr. Juli Slattery: I don't want to be anticipating that I have 10 other things to do, and so my mind is not into it. We've addressed some of those issues that way, and that's worked really well for us. Just the scheduling thing didn't work too well for us because it felt like... We would schedule it and then something else would always get in the way. But that's part of being intentional, is finding out as a couple, "How do we make this a priority in our regular life?" And not just say, "Once a year on our anniversary, we'll celebrate."

[laughter]

Jill Savage: No, I love that. And I think the more practical ways we can share ideas that gets couple's minds turning on to, "What could work for us? Could scheduling sex work? Could a code word work?" And I love what you just said about that because the code word he shares, and I assume maybe... Do you guys do it the other way around, where you use the code word and within 24 hours, he is initiating? Or...

Mark Savage: Yeah. But it usually takes him about 10 minutes to initiate after the code word.

[laughter]

Dr. Juli Slattery: 10 minutes or less. It's like, "Now." So for me, I'm the one that just needs more of that time. And that's kind of gender typical, but it's not always the case, I've met a lot of couples where it's the opposite. But... [chuckle]

Mark Savage: Yeah, that's funny.

Jill Savage: Yeah. I love that. Well, let's talk for a moment about just some specific seasons of life or situations where sex is hard. I'm thinking, particularly health issues. We definitely had to deal with that when I had cancer.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Jill Savage: And it really changes things. I'm thinking just pure exhaustion. Those crazy times of life where you're just literally at the end of your physical rope, and even midlife. Do you have any particular thoughts on any of those that would help our couples to navigate them?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, absolutely. I think sometimes sex within marriage can become legalistic. And what I mean by that is, I've heard people say, "Whenever your spouse initiates sex, you should always say yes." Okay, well, that's a principle, but if you take it to an extreme, it becomes legalism. What if you have a significant conflict you need to address in your marriage and actually the worst thing for you in that moment would be to have sex? What if there's a physical issue? What if there's a really demanding spouse that isn't being sensitive to the fact that you're exhausted? Another way

we get legalistic about sexual intimacy in marriage is saying it should always include intercourse and if it doesn't then we're not being sexually intimate.

Dr. Juli Slattery: I encourage couples to think more about the spirit behind sexuality. The purpose of it for a couple is being able to express your love for each other and learning to love each other in a very intimate way. Sometimes the most loving thing that you can do through a season of grief, medical illness, or great stress, is to have great sensitivity for each other. To say, "This is not a normal season but I recognize that you might still have sexual desire and need that I don't feel like I can fulfill in the normal way, so let's get creative. How can I be sensitive to you? How can we share an intimate moment even if it doesn't look like traditionally what we think of sexual intimacy?" And so, just encouraging couples again to get to the spirit of, "How do we love each other well through this season? How can we give each other grace? How can we recognize that maybe for one of us this isn't and can't be a huge priority right now, but navigate this season with caring for each other and our needs?"

Dr. Juli Slattery: And I think if that's the conversation you figure out ways to work around whatever barriers there are. But I would say never say the answer to that would be for me to go fulfill my own sexual desire by myself. Whatever it is let's share it together, so that it's still something that we're pursuing as a couple.

Jill Savage: Well, and I think one of the principles behind what you're talking about too, is that requires you to have a conversation about sex outside of sex.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah. [chuckle]

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Jill Savage: And that's not easy for couples to do.

Mark Savage: Right.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Jill Savage: Because we tend to only talk about sex when we're either frustrated with sex, trying to have sex, it's not working, and those are not the ideal times to have conversations.

Dr. Juli Slattery: No.

Jill Savage: We have to push ourselves to have conversation outside the bedroom about sex, but when those conversations are sensitive, empathetic, compassionate, and kind, we can make some progress.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, yeah. I don't know about you guys, but I don't think I've ever experienced a good conversation about sex in the middle of it.

[laughter]

Dr. Juli Slattery: You said it, it's always emotionally charged, you're not rational, you're not

connecting well. That needs to be a regular part of a couple's conversation and prayer life regardless of whether there's a specific issue you're addressing, but just to learn to say every few months, "How do you think our sex life is? How would you like to see a change?" Give the opportunity to share what's good and where you need to grow and what challenges you're facing, and begin to bring that before the Lord together as a couple. And that might feel really awkward but it makes a huge difference.

Jill Savage: Yeah, it does and specifically for those of you Date Night members, I want you to know that we had a Design-a-Date several months ago, and I'll make sure that we put a link to it underneath this video, but a Design-A-Date which was all about let's talk about sex and it was all about talking about sex outside of the bedroom. We'll attach that to this video so that you have the opportunity to have some questions in front of you that can help drive that conversation.

Mark Savage: Yeah, yeah. I think conversations are challenging but rewarding if couples would really take that courage... And we call courage a "God tool," but take the courage to have the conversation.

Jill Savage: One of the places we often have the conversation about sex is when we're driving somewhere together just the two of us. And that seems odd...

[chuckle]

Jill Savage: But I think it probably works well because we're not sitting face-to-face, we're in the car and we've got time, and sometimes that's when one of us will bring it up and say, "You know, We haven't talked about sex for a while, how are things, how do you think things are going?"

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, that's very true and I think you're right when you're not face-to-face it's easier. On a walk, on a drive, that sort of thing is great. Another thing that Mike and I have learned to do, and particularly we did this early in our marriage, was to read a book on sexuality out loud together, like a good Christian book, and the reason that that was so effective was because we were verbalizing terms and the issues, but we didn't have to come up with the words. I would read a chapter and I might stop and say, "Wait a minute. What they said right there, that's how I feel," and then he would read a chapter. And it taught us, it gave us an exercise to teach us that it's okay to say these things out loud to each other. That might be a place to start too particularly if you feel like, "I wouldn't even know how to bring it up."

Jill Savage: Yeah, I love that.

Mark Savage: Yeah, I do too. I think that's really powerful.

Jill Savage: We actually did that during our recovery from our crisis and the affair. We read a couple of books aloud together and it did the same thing for us with that. "Oh my gosh, that's exactly what I felt, but I couldn't put words to that."

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah.

Jill Savage: So you're right, it really does provide the words.

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Jill Savage: It's good. Alright. Well, we always ask one final question in our interviews and since this is No More Perfect Date Night, we'd love to know what you and Mike's favorite date night is?

[laughter]

Jill Savage: Or one of your favorite date nights?

Dr. Juli Slattery: Oh, like on a regular basis what our favorite date is?

Jill Savage: Yeah.

Mark Savage: Yeah.

Jill Savage: Or, just what you just enjoy doing.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, okay absolutely. Well we have... I guess this is a sign that we're really getting old, we don't like date nights anymore, we have date mornings.

Jill Savage: Oh, I love it.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah, so our favorite date is to get up in the morning on Saturday mornings and go swimming. We both like swimming laps and so we swim right next to each other and swim laps in the pool for like an hour or so, and then we go to breakfast, our favorite breakfast spot, and then the date continues from there sometimes. But we've really learned in this stage of life with our kids getting a lot older, teenagers... We're exhausted at night, and we find when we go out at night we don't connect well. And so we've learned to really take advantage of when the kids are sleeping in and have a date morning.

Mark Savage: Sounds cool.

Jill Savage: I love that.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Yeah. Yeah.

Jill Savage: Well, we are so grateful for you joining us. Thank you Juli for taking the time.

Mark Savage: Yeah, thank you so much.

Dr. Juli Slattery: Well, thank you. It's always a joy.

Jill Savage: This is Mark and Jill Savage, and we're signing off with a reminder that a real marriage isn't perfect. A real marriage is two people being perfected. Thanks for joining us.