

LONG-TERM
COUPLES
AREN'T THE
ONLY PEOPLE
WHO SEE
THEIR PASSION
FADE OVER
TIME; THE
CHANGE IS
JUST MORE
NOTICEABLE
BY NICOLE
GREGORY



FEEL
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ROOM OUT! OUT! OUT!





vacation sex, make-up sex, location sex, just-for-the-hell-of-it sex," muses David, a 44-year-old entrepreneur in Santa Barbara, counting the varieties of spontaneous lovemaking he and his wife engaged in during the early days of their marriage. He remembers carefully planned foreplay that included cooking breakfast and being exceptionally nice to his wife, Jane, 39 (their names have been changed to maintain their privacy). "Of course I was thinking the entire time the payoff could come later that evening," he says. Now with two small children and a house to manage, the couple have little time or energy for a carefree tumble into bed. "It's easy to just get into my TV routine," David admits. "I usually watch a game, and Jane will go read. Rarely do we go to bed at the same time."

The sexless—or almost sexless—marriage is such a common notion that it's a cliché. There's a dusty joke about marriage and sex at the bottom of every comedian's toolbox. One might think that in our sexualized culture more people are having sex than ever, but it seems we haven't escaped the cliché. I was recently at a party talking with some friends about our husbands when one woman said in a hushed tone, "My husband and I haven't had sex in over a year." I couldn't hide my surprise. Not only did she volunteer this informa-

run, according to what's known as the General Social Survey. Updated every two years, the GSS gathers information on gun control, mental health, sociopolitical participation, and other issues, with results published under separate titles. In the 142-page report "American Sexual Behavior: Trends, Socio-Demographic Differences, and Risk Behavior," married couples under 30 said they had intercourse 109 times a year; those in their sixties had it just 32 times a year. That's a precipitous drop, but couples were still coupling far more

than singles: People under 30 had sex about 73 times a year; respondents in their sixties, just 16 times.

Still, if your sex life isn't satisfying, hearing that others aren't satisfied either is hardly a consolation. Making love—often—is the glue of a romantic relationship in its

MAKING LOVE—OFTEN—IS THE GLUE OF A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP IN ITS EARLY YEARS, SO EVEN CONTENTED COUPLES CAN FIND THEMSELVES SHADOWED BY A SENSE OF LOSS **WHEN SEX BECOMES INTERMITTENT.**

tion rather freely, but she did not seem particularly troubled by it. Another acquaintance who heard that I was writing this article said, "Where are you going to find people to interview?" Then, laughing, he added, "I guess you could just throw a rock."

If you talk to researchers, you'll hear that a lot of people, not just husbands and wives, say they aren't having that much sex. While married couples do report that the amount of intercourse decreases over time, it's more infrequent for single people in the long

early years, so even contented couples can find themselves shadowed by a sense of loss when sex becomes intermittent. Researchers point to physical changes such as decreased hormonal output and health problems as reasons why we have less sex as we age, but many people say that the complexities of modern life pose much bigger obstacles.

Chip Rowe, who has been editing *Playboy's* advice column for more than a decade, says readers send him about 500 letters a month, with the lack of sex

THE SWITCH-HITTER

Dog walker
West Hollywood

in relationships the chief topic among them. "Most frequently these complaints come from men, but a lot come from women," Rowe says, explaining that young women write to him claiming that their boyfriends and husbands just don't want to have that much sex. "I was disbelieving," says Rowe, who expressed his doubt about one such letter in print, "but then I got a lot of letters chastising me."

I figured these guys must be cheating on their wives, but Rowe, who has a ringside seat in the arena of male behavior, disagrees. "When a guy is cheating, he'll generally have more sex with his wife because he's hiding the affair. A woman should be more suspicious if her husband's suddenly very affectionate. He might be guilty and trying to cover up this side thing he's got going on."

So if men are not having affairs and they're not in bed with their wives, then where are they? One place you might find them is at their computers, downloading Internet porn, several researchers told me. "The more pornography that men watch, the less sex they're actually having," says Julie M. Albright, a USC sociologist. Her study "Sex in America Online: An Exploration of Sex, Marital Status, and Sexual Identity in Internet Sex Seeking and Its Impacts," based on responses from the more than 15,000 people who took her survey on msnbc.com, appeared recently in *The Journal of Sex Research*.

I assumed most people viewing Internet porn were men, and though 75 percent of guys who responded to her survey said they had viewed or downloaded porn, Albright points out that 41 percent of women had, too. Subsets of both genders acknowledged that this has negatively affected their sex lives. Among married couples, 9 percent of men and 12 percent of women indicated that the amount of sex they had with their partners decreased as a result. A pattern emerged in the study, Albright explains, that showed how hard-core images could impact a relationship. "For men porn actually becomes a substitute for their sex life." In the erotic scenarios there's no courting, no negotiation between partners. "Most porn is by men, for men," Albright says. "In it women climax when the man so much as breathes." Nine percent of men also reported that watching Internet pornography caused them to make negative judgments about their partners' looks. Sensing this, many women respond by shutting down sexually for self-protection.

Porn can cut into a couple's sex life in other ways. It can foster anger and alienation if the wife disapproves of her husband downloading hard-core images, and, according to Gary R. Brooks, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University, it can lead to depression among men. "Men become fixated on non-relational sex," says Brooks, who wrote a book on the subject called *The Centerfold Syndrome*. "They develop an aversion to intimacy and at some level feel unfulfilled." None of this bodes well for a satisfying sex life.



In their book

Alone Together, sociologists from Pennsylvania State University distilled the results of two surveys—the first conducted in 1980 and the other in 2000. They found that fewer people said they were "very happy" with their sex lives in 2000 than two decades earlier. In another big piece of research out of the University of Chicago, this one published in 1994, 43 percent of married men and 47 percent of married women said they had sex "a few times" a month. If you can't quite say you're very happy with the frequency of sex in your life, how do you broach the subject with your partner? So much sexual communication involves nonverbal gestures and cues that it's easy to get—and give—the wrong messages. "We're not raised to talk about sex in a healthy, straightforward way, so conversations around sexuality can be limited and contrived," says Gail Wyatt, a sex therapist and professor of clinical psychology at UCLA. "This is true even between people who've been together 10 years," she says.

Embarrassment or fear of hurting the other's feelings can inhibit a person's willingness to initiate sex. If one partner gains weight, the other might stop being attracted. (Instead of criticizing or rejecting the overweight partner, or nagging about exercise, marriage counselors agree that it's more effective to suggest walking or going to the gym together.) Hormonal imbalances (which for women can flatten libido and cause intercourse to hurt) and erectile dysfunction (which can

cause intense shame) also make people avoid sex. Certain medications, especially antidepressants, can too. About 1 in 12 Americans—the majority of them women—have gone on Paxil, Prozac, and other antidepressants, which can inhibit orgasm, cause erectile dysfunction, and wipe out sexual desire altogether. Viagra can help people taking antidepressants achieve orgasm, but it may not increase sexual desire, according to recent studies reported in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. Couples wind up having to choose between different forms of unhappiness—living with the depression they were hoping to treat or living without sex.

Four years ago Johanna and George (not their real names), a couple living in Pasadena, decided to go on antidepressants to reduce the anxiety in their lives. What they didn't expect was the side effect: "It made us never, ever have sex for over a year," says Johanna, a 52-year-old actress. Recently they went off the drug, in part to rekindle [CONTINUED ON PAGE 222]

When I was 22 I got drunk with another in-the-closet guy. We got naked, had oral sex, and we never spoke of it again. That was my first sexual experience.

It's not that I wasn't attracted to girls. I used to go with friends to strip clubs a lot and have no problem getting excited. It's just that I'd also get excited when I looked at a guy.

I didn't lose my virginity with a woman until I turned 28.

I played straight for as long as I could. A guy walking down the street with a masculine shuffle—that's an act as much as a drag queen is an act. But it wasn't me.

I always thought, "If I just tried hard enough!" I didn't want to be gay so bad.

I used to give myself cut-off points. One year I said that after my birthday I wouldn't think about guys anymore. But I did.

The Larry Craig bathroom scandal really weighed on me. I kept thinking, "This is who I'm becoming." I would meet guys in chat rooms and then drive to their place. I think I was on my way there.

I woke up one day in 2007 having no intention of being gay by the end of the day. Then I had a massive panic attack. A voice in my head told me that I needed to admit it.

From the moment I admitted it out loud to my girlfriend, it took about two weeks to start living my new life.

I'll be honest—the sex I've had with men hasn't come close to being as good as the sex I had with women. I liked the emotional tenderness.



From Hot...to Not

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 143] their sex life. Yet even before the antidepressants, Johanna had recognized their level of sexual desire is very different: She'd like to have sex a couple of times a week, but her husband is content with a few times a month or less. "We've been together 20 years, and we can get so much into the daily living stuff that there isn't romantic excitement," she says. "And we both can be really mean when we fight, and I don't know how to forget what's been

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said. But we're really devoted to each other. I'm not willing to give up sex, and I don't think George is either."

Without sex to help a couple cut through "the daily living stuff" and connect intimately, a relationship loses its passion and romance. Longtime lovers may be left with a close family feeling but not a romantic one. If both partners are fine with this, then no problem. But when one person loses interest in sex, the partner who still wants it faces a dilemma. Do you put up with the situation and seek pleasure from pornography or sex toys, which will keep you in a frustrated loop that never solves the need for intimacy? Do you leave? Or do you break your agreement to fidelity and go outside the relationship for sex?

"Some couples have rules," says Colin (not his real name), a 55-year-old gay man in Santa Monica, describing agreements in which one or the other can have sexual liaisons—though gay men in his generation are acutely aware that outside sexual contact brings the risk of AIDS. Colin has been in a monogamous relationship for ten years ("I'm a serial monogamist," he says, before listing several long-term boyfriends), and while sex has waned, the closeness that he and his partner share goes far beyond counting

how many times a week they have sex. "The priority is the issue of emotional trust," he says. "I've seen relationships where there's very little sex and it's clearly a beautiful relationship, and where there's a lot of sex and it's clearly a beautiful relationship."

A couple can become stuck if their sex drives are out of sync. Who gives in to the other's desires? It seems wrong that the one who wants more sex should be consistently dissatisfied. Nor does it seem right that the one who wants less sex should go through with it just to keep the other happy. "We have to accept that there are libido gaps between men and women," says Joan Sewell, the North Carolina-based author of *I'd Rather Eat Chocolate*. "I heard Oprah quote research that said 43 percent of women suffer from sexual dysfunction," says Sewell, "and I started to wonder, *Then what is normal?*"

By the time Sewell and her husband, Kip, were able to face their seriously mismatched sex needs, they'd come close to

she just wasn't going to get around to it," he says, laughing. Kip is amazed at the number of men who tell him they're not getting as much sex as they want but seem unwilling to compromise with their partners. "If you're not willing to compromise, you're on the track to divorce court." He observes that men see women who are hot and ready on TV and ask themselves, Why can't I have that? "They think everyone's having a better sex life than they are."

Happier couples seem able to accept their sexual differences rather than walking around feeling misunderstood or putting each other down. One often-true stereotype is that women need a context—conversation, romance, foreplay—to feel appreciated and loved, and thus ready for sex, while men express their love by *having* sex. David, the overwhelmed husband and father of two, illustrates his situation this way: "Jane needs a little attention, some listening, some genuine appreciation for her daily grind—then *maybe*," he says. "I, on the other hand, can ready myself with lightning speed if she were to make the first move. My first move is usually a poke or a grab, which never works."

"If a woman is feeling driven to the ground at the end of the day, her partner might do well to give her a hug and let her take a hot bath,"

UCLA's Gail Wyatt tells me. "When a man sees angst and worry in his partner's face, he should realize she might need to be left alone to get a good night's sleep rather than get hit on for sex. Offering a person comfort and safety—when a woman receives that, she might want to return the favor, and that could include sex."

Mutual massages, erotic board games, hot baths, intercourse appointments, different digs, new tricks—scores of remedies are offered in countless books for husbands and wives to get their motors revving again. A unique idea did emerge this past summer, when not one but two books came out featuring middle-aged couples who set out to revive their sex lives (and perhaps sell a book or two) in a strikingly similar fashion. In *365 Nights* Charla Muller tells how she offered to have sex with her husband, Brad, every day for a year as a 40th-birthday present (they'd been married for eight years). Charla recounts how after their honeymoon, Brad had ceased giving her foot massages and she had told her husband, an ardent football fan, that she did not care who won the national football

championship. Their marriage was strong but often contentious. Charla suffered depression that sneaked up on her after the death of a close friend. One year of daily sex with her husband revitalized her and helped her realize there is always time for intimacy, and that they both need it. In fact, she found, it makes for a happier, less tense household. She also recognized that the decision to have sex should not be overanalyzed and that daily intimacy deflated any building anger she had toward her husband over petty complaints.

Douglas Brown shares the details of a 101-day sex marathon with his wife, Annie, in his book *Just Do It*. Doug, 40, and Annie, 38, had been married for 11 years, with two young children, by the time they realized they'd fallen into a routine of less and less

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sex. When Annie got the idea of having sex 100 days in a row, Doug responded enthusiastically. They defined sex as intercourse (oral sex did not count), and the book describes their escapades: having sex in the basement while their children sat glued to the TV watching videos, experimenting with products such as Keep Dick Hard (a towelette drenched in a liquid containing caffeine and pepper, among other ingredients), trying new positions such as on an

exercise ball, and combining sex with yoga. There were days when they only had time for a 5-minute quickie and others when they enjoyed a full 25-minute romp. Their worst sex took place on a night following a nasty argument. As days went by Doug and Annie found that their "sexpedition" brought them closer: They talked more, about everything, and looked forward to being together in bed. At the end of the marathon they celebrated—by having sex again the next day.

No self-respecting therapist is likely to prescribe nonstop sex, but the two books make the case for mustering a willingness to reverse the pull of boredom, fatigue, and stress by getting naked together. Indeed, the "American Sexual Behavior" survey found that couples who deemed themselves happy had more sex. Or is it that more sex makes for happier couples? The two are so intertwined that the answer is hardly important. But it's reassuring to know that if you're lucky enough to experience one, the other might follow. ■