



DESPERATELY SEEKING *a sex drive*

Supermarket shopping and school runs are playing havoc with our sensual selves, says Bridget Harrison. It's time to dust off the Myla underwear and get back in the saddle

Get a group of women together who work, are married and have children, then bring up sex and you're likely to get the same response. A knowing eye roll, a wistful smile, a regretful sigh that says, 'Sure, it's a wonderful thing, but really, who has the energy?' Those who are married would say it's not that we don't love our partners and, yes, we know how important physical intimacy is for a relationship. It's just that when we get into bed, it's the last thing on our minds. Those who are single might say they're so out of the habit, it's faded off the agenda because there's so much else to think about.

'Most nights I just can't be bothered,' confessed one fellow mother recently. 'There are so many demands on me during the day, emotionally and physically, that I have nothing left.' My friend Rachel talks about how she no longer feels like a sexual being - apart from when she's had a few drinks. 'Do you know anyone now who yearns to have sex when they're sober?' she joked. Another friend told how she gasped in horror when her husband bought her an Agent Provocateur bra for Christmas with holes cut out for the nipples. 'I just thought, "Oh my God, that would be so cold!"' she laughed. I confessed that I, too, have a stash of Myla gauzy knickers and a Dior black mesh bra and suspenders that I now view with a mix of horror and guilt. They just look so scratchy. We all agreed that sexy underwear is all very well if you feel sexy. If you don't, it's hard to get up the enthusiasm to put it on.

Joking aside, such ready admissions on a subject so personal point to a depressing truth: there are a lot of us for whom sex

has quietly slipped to the bottom of the list. Indeed, research by women's website iVillage found that 63% of its members would choose sleep, watching TV or reading over sex. And a recent study of women aged between 35 and 55 found that more than a quarter had sex just once every two or three months.

This ebbing away of sex is something Jan Day, a therapist who specialises in intimacy, sees all the time. 'Couples drift out of the habit of sex,' she says. 'The less you have, the less you want, the less you have. And if you've been single for some time, it's easy to shut yourself down from intimacy. Your defences go up and you stop thinking of yourself as a sexual being.'

Even as a nation, we are less passionate than we were 10 years ago. A 2013 poll of 15,000 Britons aged 16 to 44 by the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles found we now have sex less than five times a month, compared with more than six times for the previous two decades. The study's researchers concluded that our habit of taking technology to bed could be to blame. I admit that I reach for my iPad most nights. A browse through Net-A-Porter is more tempting than the exertion of sex. My sexy vibe is just no longer there.

It makes me feel better to learn that this is especially common for women in long-term relationships, or who have become mothers, according to sexologist Uta Demontis. Whereas feeling sexual was once second nature, gradually we cease to identify ourselves as 'lovers', she explains. 'With all the other demands, you lose that part of yourself that is your sexual self.'

Demontis adds that when you've found a long-term partner, your 'cosy' hormone, oxytocin, which promotes bonding, >>

becomes more dominant than the predatory testosterone. In other words, once you're not looking, your sexy light goes off.

It's something I experienced myself on Valentine's Day when I accompanied a single friend to a bar. I'd made an effort to look pretty, but as I wasn't looking for a mate, I had no sparkle. No men noticed me and I didn't get that reciprocal thrill you get when someone catches your eye. You might think this would be a comfort to my husband, but the downside is that I am out of the sparkly habit even for the man I love.

It's not just coupled-up women who can stop feeling consciously sexual, argue my single friends in their late thirties. Most are reaching the peak of their careers and say they neither have the time or the inclination to go on endless dates. With a multitude of responsibilities such as work, mortgages and ageing parents, romance is no longer a priority. 'I could go six months now without even thinking about sex,' says my friend Bella who, at 40, edits her own health website, regularly visits her elderly mother and is aunt to four young nieces and nephews. 'My life is full of love without sex.' The responsibility-free world of our youth, when the hunt for a man fuelled endless nights out, is long gone.

I wonder if age is the key factor in all this. In my twenties and early thirties I felt sexy. I did wear Myla underwear - even when I had a steady boyfriend. Respected sex columnist Suzi Godson says that after 40, women's testosterone levels - which control our libido - do drop. However, it's not all bad news. As we get older, we're more likely to have better sex. We're more prone to have orgasms - and before our partners - which may prove that it's not the sex that's the issue, it's our enthusiasm for it.

So how can we feel consciously sexual again? It's a question that many women are asking, says Jan Day. She's seen a huge upsurge of interest in her workshops, where singles and couples learn to get used to intimacy again and discuss how to give themselves 'permission' to feel. 'Women realise that what they once took for granted now requires *intention*,' says Day.

Doing this, Day and Demontis agree that it's not about sexy underwear or scented candles. It's about making room for sex, not just time-wise, but in our heads. It's also about relearning to feel our bodies as sexual entities. 'A lot of women vacate their bodies,' says Day. 'We numb ourselves thinking about other things - work stress, children, being out of shape - so we have to learn to come back into our body and inhabit it.' Demontis adds, 'During the day, we tend to have masculine energy. We are goal-focused, analytical, all *in the head*. When we get home, we need to tap back into our feminine energy, which is about connection, sensation and intimacy.'

One way to do this is to take a shower when you have some time to yourself and concentrate on the feeling of the water on your naked skin, says Day. 'Focus on that sensation.' And what if a million anxious thoughts keep you distracted? 'You can't stop yourself from thinking about neglected homework and chores, but you can control your focus,' she says. 'It's all about intention. You have to tell yourself that you want to reconnect with your sensuality and deliberately think about how your body feels under the water, until the chatter fades away.'

It's also important to bring that intention back into your relationship, says Day. 'Break the pattern of being switched

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off and distant by trying a hug, a compliment, even by talking about missing sex. Often the tiniest things can get the ball rolling.'

Day also stresses that we should overcome the idea that we can't make love if

we've had a tough day. 'You don't have to be in a good mood to enjoy sex,' she says. 'It can be deeply intimate to make love when you're sad, tired or anxious.' She's right. If I feel so preoccupied that sex seems inconceivable, I remind myself that female orgasms have been proven to help you de-stress and sleep better. Often I have sunk back into the pillows after sex, sighing. 'God, I really needed that.'

Two other women who are on a mission to help us become consciously sexual again are Lucy Arrowsmith and Vikki van Someren. They have launched a women-only retreat called Shh... (sensualhealingharmony.com), which takes place in Dorset and Ibiza. Women can try a programme that combines group workshops with individual therapies based on massage, deep breathing and acupuncture. 'All are aimed at helping you shift negative energy and feel more present in your body,' says van Someren. She invited me to try Shh... and it was here that I had yet more revelations about my lacklustre libido.

During a group workshop, we learned that sexual energy is drained when we are not in integrity with ourselves. I found myself unloading a raft of anxieties about my decision to scale down my career to look after my young sons, which I had not linked to my libido before. Then I tried a new therapy called 'transformational breathing', which involved an hour of intense breathing into the pelvis that is said to release stored-up emotions. I found myself sobbing uncontrollably. Afterwards I felt extraordinarily relieved and calm. I returned from Shh... feeling unexpectedly peaceful. I had realised that bottled-up insecurity about my professional life had caused me to harbour latent resentment towards my husband - and myself. Now I had let this insecurity go, my resentment was gone and sex suddenly felt a lot more appealing.

The Shh... retreat costs an eye-watering £2,900 for three nights, but you can use a similar breathing technique at home, says therapist Aimee Hartley. 'For 10 minutes each day, lie on the floor and breathe deeply so that your stomach rises with each breath,' she says. 'I've started to do this and am noticeably more relaxed and cheerful, according to my husband.'

But it is perhaps another of Jan Day's tips that has helped me most. Sex is like going to the gym, she says. You may dread it but once you're flying along that treadmill, you remember how good it makes you feel. And when sex does not happen organically, you have to consciously schedule it back in your life. 'It's fine not to want sex right now. The key is wanting to want it,' she says. 'Think about it, talk about it, make space for it.'

Uta Demontis puts it differently: 'Sexual energy is like a muscle. The more you work it, the stronger it gets.' So I've pledged to try to have sex at least once a week, even if I don't feel like it. And it's working. I've been amazed how quickly it has started to feel important again. True, my Dior suspenders are still in the drawer, but Jan Day is right. I don't need them. ■