

Sex marathon with my husband: what it did for our marriage

Like many long-term couples, Amanda Greene and her husband found that physical intimacy had waned. They decided to commit to sex every day for one month

There's a statistic about marriage that has been depressing me. Sixty per cent of people in long-term relationships have sex less than twice a month (according to the mental health charity Mind). And yup, that includes me. Two children and a decade in, the days that my husband and I would jump each other a few times a week have long fizzled away. We talk, we collaborate, we're committed. But most nights the nearest we get to sex is a murmur of "love you darling" and a tender spoon.

How this has happened is a familiar lament of most married women I know. By bedtime we're knackered. Now in our mid-forties, our libido is about as raging as a duck pond. We do feel bad that we are not more up for it, but with all the pressures, from family life to our careers, putting out at bedtime comes a long way down the "to do" list. For many, it appears to have fallen off the list altogether. According to recent research, two thirds of adults now believe a happy relationship is possible without sex. I never wish to find myself in that group. Aside from surely increasing the odds that my husband — or I — might be tempted elsewhere, I want to have sex in my life, in our lives. Sex is what sets you apart as a couple. Otherwise you are just friends, flatmates, co-parents.

I turn to advice from two experts. First is leading sexologist Utta Demontis. The problem, she says, is that women like me in long-term relationships, especially mothers, cease to identify themselves as "lovers". "With all the other demands on you, you lose your sexual self," she says. "Then it's a vicious cycle, you stop having sex, your sexual energy diminishes, you stop needing it." Thus it is key to be proactive, she says. "The more we cultivate our sexual energy, the more it stays alive."

The ebbing away of sex is something that Jan Day, a therapist who specialises in intimacy, sees all the time, too. "A lot of women vacate their bodies, they are just not there," Day says. "We numb ourselves out thinking about other things — stress at work, children, that we're out of shape." Couples should not make the mistake of feeling that they cannot make love if they've had a stressful or tiring day, she says. "You don't have to be perfectly resolved, or in a good mood. In fact it can be deeply intimate to make love when you are sad, tired or anxious."

"Sex is like yoga," she adds. "The most difficult thing is getting the mat out and standing on it. Then you remember how good it makes you feel and you'll start to crave it again."

So with this advice, I put it to my husband that it's time to put sex right back at the top of the "to do list". That, according to the experts, the more I have sex, the more I'll want. I pledged to have sex every night for a month, no excuses. My husband, who at 48 is still up for it at pretty much any moment, was delighted by the

Married sex the statistics

25% of married couples report mismatched libidos

1 in 5 people in a relationship are dissatisfied with their sex life

64% of men consider a good sex life to be very important — for women the figure is 53 per cent

22% of couples who have been together for 10-14 years see sex as "very important" (Source: Relate)

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suggestion, even if it did carry the whiff of "research". Sex every night? He was hardly going to say no.

Week one

It's Sunday night, the day we are supposed to start, but my husband's flight home from a business trip has been delayed. When he tromps in at midnight I'm almost asleep. Monday morning is looming and getting revved up for sex is the last thing I feel like. As I hear his footsteps on the stairs I decide to adjourn the project until tomorrow and pretend to be out cold. But as he kisses me hello, it's clear that he hasn't forgotten the plan. To fail on the first night would be pathetic, I tell myself. So I gamely pull him under the duvet as he sheds his clothes. Actually, it's pretty romantic, reuniting in this way. It reminds me of the excitement we had in each other when we first met.

Bolstered by this enjoyable start, the next five days are surprisingly easy. We conscientiously turn off the TV at the end of the 10 o'clock news, get into bed and begin kissing before my "can I really be bothered?" thoughts have time to surface. An American sex expert, Dr Ian Kerner, once told me that even when women don't think they are in the mood, their underlying "receptive sexual desire" will kick in as soon as their arousal systems are targeted. And he's right. I've forgotten how fun sex is once you've dragged yourself over the precipice of horniness; and also how relaxed it leaves you afterwards. I'm also pleased to note that it is taking a very manageable 20 minutes, so as long as we are prompt to bed I'm not losing sleep time.

It's also immediately noticeable how much less tension there is between us in the mornings. Those 20 minutes of pleasure we've shared are like credits with each other that linger when we wake. We cuddle by the kettle and tag-team the pre-school/work mayhem without bickering or blaming. I don't feel my usual rage the day my husband announces he wants to nip out for a run, leaving me to do the breakfast and school drop-off alone.

However, on day six we hit a problem. As we reach for each other in bed, this suddenly feels like a chore. Although he would never admit to it, I suspect my husband is now just going through the motions too. We've made love in almost the same way every night. Now that the thrill that we are actually having sex is wearing off, it feels, well, just a bit samey. Frankly, my nether regions need a break. We agree that oral sex counts, both glad of a change.

Week two

My husband is unexpectedly called to San Francisco for a six-day work trip to Silicon Valley. I tell him this is extremely inconvenient — and, frankly, typical. If we are to stick to the experiment, the only option is phone sex. The problem is I have never had phone sex — not even in my twenties. The prospect of swapping dirty talk down the phone with the man to whom I'd usually be relaying the details of our daughters'



homework feels beyond excruciating. I decide to try to get into the mood first. My husband once gave me a book of erotica published by Agent Provocateur. I flick to my favourite story: a woman dressed up for the opera is stood up by her boyfriend. Outside the theatre she spots a roguish doorman who beckons her into a heaving nightclub full of beautiful, half-naked people dancing. As she stands at the packed bar his strong body is pushed into her from behind. Suddenly she feels his hands sliding under her cocktail dress... I dial my husband's mobile. "Hi," I say, before I get self-conscious. "I am

imagining us pressed together in a hot, sweaty club." "Er, any chance we could do this in half an hour? I'm about to walk into a meeting with our backers," he replies. It may be 11pm in London, but in San Francisco it is only 3pm.

I'll come clean now. The rest of the week is a write-off. One night he calls and I am already asleep. Another, he tries one sentence: "I want you to touch yourself." To which I can only exclaim, "No, sorry, I can't do this, I just can't." After that the content of our phone calls returns to drama club and hockey practice.



Week three

We have homecoming sex, which is fantastic. As my husband travels a lot, I realise I have been really missing a trick here. But in the days that follow we are back to the sameness problem. My husband confesses that he had anticipated that we'd find ourselves branching out more by this point. But if I am honest, I have no more desire for role play, bondage or S&M than I did when we started this experiment. I would have to be blind drunk to get over the self-consciousness of kinky sex with a man I have now been with for ten years. If I do get

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blind drunk these days, I pass out. Ever hopeful, my husband produces some porn on his phone one evening, but all I can think about is what would happen if my daughters saw something like this. It's a complete mood killer.

Week four

This begins badly as our daughters have nits. An evening of dousing the household hair with Hedrin is not the best foreplay. We get into bed stinking of chemicals, with towels on our pillows — and give ourselves a night off. The smell aside, it feels wonderful to lie next to each other reading. As intimate as anything we've done in the past three weeks.

But as it is our last week we do finally branch out. After supper one evening we have sex on the sofa. I confess, for me, this is a bit about getting it out of the way early while I'm buzzing off a glass of chablis. Another night we make love on the stairs — mainly because my husband has to get back to a conference call with the States.

On the final night of week four, we make love with the triumph of long-distance runners finishing a marathon. I'll admit that what I feel most is relief — the pressure is finally off.

So what have we gained from our sex marathon? On the disappointing side, I am sceptical that "exercising my sexual energy" has improved my libido. I don't spontaneously crave sex any more than I did a month ago. On the up side, I have been reminded of its virtues. Just as being disciplined enough to eat healthy food and take regular exercise pays massive dividends so, clearly, does sex. My husband and I were always close, but now we are a lot less cross with each other. Some might term this the healing power of intimacy. I think it is simply because sex is an easy and instant way of having a good time together. When you first become a couple, most of your time is spent revelling in each other's company. Over time, that fades into an onslaught of arrangements, obligations, irritations and resentments. Just 20 minutes a day of having joyful one-to-one togetherness helps counteract all the negatives that creep into a working marriage. Put simply, it keeps us liking each other. It makes us more forgiving.

But just like eating healthy food and exercising, it's sticking to the programme that's an issue. You swerve the gym a few times, or give in to a sausage roll, and you're back to square one. A few nights off and my husband and I are already slipping back into the bad habit of staying up way too late to feel like sex, or going to bed at different times. The truth is that keeping sex in a marriage takes discipline. And I am not even talking *Fifty Shades of Grey*. **The author's name has been changed**

Are you a low-libido couple?

The Times sex expert Suzi Godson has some advice

Do you ever worry that your sex life isn't what it was? That other couples are having more sex than you are? That this might be having a detrimental effect on your

relationship? You are certainly not alone.

In a study I undertook of married couples aged 36-55, 44 per cent had sex weekly, 32 per cent had sex monthly, 11 per cent had sex annually, 9 per cent never had sex and 4 per cent had sex every day. Results from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal 2013) study suggest that an increasing number of married couples in the UK are suffering from sexual difficulties. About 50 per cent of men and women in the study reported having had a sexual problem in the previous year. Lack of interest in sex was one of the most commonly reported difficulties for men (15 per cent) and women (30 per cent), and about a quarter were struggling with mismatched libido.

In my experience as a sex writer and psychologist, loss of interest in sex can definitely be a relationship red flag. Although sex is a proportionately tiny percentage of the multitude of issues that can conspire to unravel a relationship, it is a disproportionately important element in the mix, because once a couple stop having sex, they increase the risk of an affair. One of the most common underlying causes for the deterioration of long-term sexual commitment is the fact that, beyond orgasm and possibly babies, very few of us really think about what it is that we want from our sex lives. If asked, most people will say that they want sex to provide physical pleasure and emotional connection, but dig a little deeper and you find the things we want from sex are a lot more complex than that. If we are honest, most of us also want sex to validate us, to reassure us that we are physically desirable, loveable, sexually competent, or even just plain normal. These reassurances are abundant in a new relationship, but over time, it's too easy for couples who have broken wind in front of each other to forget the importance of an unexpected romantic gesture or a surprise blow job.

Because the chance of both halves of a relationship ever being "spontaneously" in the right place, at the right time, and in the right mood is unlikely, scheduling sex is often the only solution. Be realistic though. If you have only been managing to have sex once a month for the past two years, suddenly deciding to schedule it in twice a week is just setting yourself up for failure. It is about quality not quantity, so try and make your monthly sex session more marvellous, or up your frequency to once every three weeks.

So much of our sexual behaviour isn't about the actual act of sex at all and once we can identify those individual subtexts, we begin to have a less complicated relationship with ourselves, and our partners. This is particularly

useful as we get older/fatter/balder, because over time, physical change is an inevitability. Trouble is, so many of us believe "sex" and "sexiness" to be synonymous, that we struggle to define ourselves as sexual beings once the bloom of youth has faded.

Ageing is not for sissies. Menopause plays havoc with the waistline and the libido, and erectile function decreases dramatically after the big five-o. The physical deterioration that is almost inevitable with ageing can make people feel less confident and if that insecurity is compounded by illness or immobility, it quickly becomes an excuse to let the sexual side of a relationship die. In truth, men and women can carry on having sex indefinitely and the more sex they have, the fitter and healthier they will be.

While medical treatments can address individual physical difficulties such as erectile dysfunction, or the side effects of menopause, they can't help with issues such as mismatched libidos or even anger and disappointment. Marriages, especially very long-term ones, require maintenance, and people who find themselves having relationship difficulties should get help sooner rather than later from institutions such as Relate or the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT).

There is no rule book that says you have to have sex once a week, but research by psychologist Sandra Byers at the University of New Brunswick, in Canada, has shown that people with better sex lives report happier relationships and vice versa. The longer you avoid sex, the harder it is to get it back on track, but you can reignite desire if you are both committed to improving your relationship. The first thing you have to do is start talking about sex, because the most conclusive predictor of satisfaction in a long-term relationship is not "how often" you have sex with your partner, but how easy (or difficult) you find it to talk about sex with each other.

You also need to stop taking each other for granted and recognise each other as autonomous individuals. It is ironic that couples who split up often feel a sexual awakening for their former partner because they experience them as "other" for the first time in decades. That sense of separateness which the psychologist Esther Perel describes in her book *Mating in Captivity* can be reclaimed by giving each other permission to develop as individuals within the safety of the relationship. When it comes to sex, there is no right, or wrong, just happy or unhappy. It is, and always has been, a complex issue, and "why are we not having sex?" can feel like an impossible question... but it is one that deserves an honest answer. **Suzi Godson is The Times sex and relationship columnist and the author of Sex Counsel and The Sex Book (both published by Cassell)**

“Why you aren't having sex is complex, but the longer you leave it, the harder it is to get your sex life back on track