

# What married couples need to know about sex

A poll shows that long-term couples have unhappier sex lives. But it doesn't have to be that way, says **Anna Maxted**

**A**ccording to a study published this weekend by Relate, the longer couples stay together, the unhappier their sex lives. The relationship charity commissioned YouGov to ask 5,000 people across the UK: "How satisfied are you with your sex life?"

Of those who had been together for up to four years, 76 per cent said they were "very or fairly satisfied". Satisfaction then dropped to 59 per cent for those who had been together for between five and fourteen years, then dropped still further to 56 per cent for those together for 15 to 19 years.

It may come as a surprise to long-term and married couples but experts say that their suffering is needless. Love does not have to mean enduring disappointment. There's no reason why sex can't improve immeasurably along with the age of a relationship.

Here, leading sex and relationship therapists share their tips for long-term success in the bedroom.

## Don't be too nostalgic

We often think of our sex life as "going wrong", says Relate counsellor and sex therapist Denise Knowles, when in fact, it's merely changed, which is normal. It's unrealistic to recreate the X-rated acrobatics of when you first met.

However, a perceived difference in our partner's desires can feel threatening. Be receptive to exploration: "Variances you're both happy with prevent your sex life falling into a step 1, step 2, step 3, routine, and impart a frisson of the unknown," Knowles says.

Therapist Mike Lousada says, "We start a relationship with passionate enthusiasm for each other, and then over time, a move we make isn't responded to, or our partner says, 'I'm not in the mood,' and we think: 'I'd feel ashamed if

I told him I wanted to do this,' and we close down that part of ourselves."

As a result, he says, "the spectrum of our sexuality that's expressed becomes narrower: sex becomes formulaic and unsatisfying."

Our dishonesty stems from fear of being judged, because "sex is where every one of our insecurities and vulnerabilities is going to show up". But if you avoid telling the truth about sexual dissatisfaction, he says, you "avoid intimacy".

## Be tactful

Knowles calls the maintenance of conversational no-go areas "the mutual protection racket". We fear upsetting our partner.

However, she says, "in a safe, respectful, loving, healthy relationship, you might say, 'I'm reading this [insert erotic literature of choice] — wouldn't mind giving it a go. What do you think? It's not a criticism.' Your partner might say, 'I'd never have imagined you'd want to attempt something like that.' You might say, 'No, but I'd like to try.' It's this kind of frank, friendly chat, she says, that couples notoriously don't have, but should.

## Resolve your anger

Sex issues usually reflect wider problems. Knowles says, "Are you arguing because you're not having sex, or are you not having sex because you're arguing?" If you're angry with each other, you won't want to be physically close. Perhaps you feel hurt that he seems happier on his iPad than talking to you.

"If resentment goes unexpressed, it creates distance," she says. London-based psychotherapist Wendy Bristow says, "Unresolved anger kills libido stone dead. Express your anger calmly, neutrally, and never in the bedroom. Ask, 'Can I talk about this for five minutes, without you interrupting?' Then you can respond, and I won't interrupt you." Stick to the effects your anger is having on you, rather than blaming. "You may need several conversations — or professional help.

## It's not shallow to make an effort with your appearance

Knowles says, "It feels shallow to say of your partner, 'they've put weight on, I don't find them attractive', but



relationship maintenance is crucial."

Even if, amid the teamwork of raising a family, "there can be an element of feeling you don't have to try".

Complacency is the enemy of desire. "When you take things for granted, your partner feels they're no longer important: you're not interested in yourself, you're letting yourself go, you're not interested in me."

## Manufacture lust

Effort, not perfection, is key. The hormones that are released when we're making love help to bond us. But we can think ourselves into the zone beforehand. Bristow says, "Pretend you've only just met. When you first got together, you'd spend ages getting ready, you'd shave your legs, you'd kiss endlessly. Over time, all this goes out the window. Putting those things back in place can help manufacture lust. "Even thinking, 'I'm putting on lipstick because we might make love,' gets you in the mood," she says. "Otherwise sex becomes perfunctory. It's not thrilling to say, 'So are we doing it? I'll have a bath,' then mooch in wearing slippers. Making an effort gets you in the mood, and makes you more attractive to your partner."

## Start holding hands again

Rediscover the habit of casual touch. "When you're out," Knowles says, "you see younger people all snuggled up, hands in each others' back pockets. And there's the middle group, with children, life's taken over, there's not much touching." Without daily nonsexual physical affection, the idea of penetrative sex will feel like a huge, awkward, unnatural leap. Take time to kiss when you arrive home from work — "a proper snog, not a peck on the cheek," Knowles says. "It makes a connection. It's a form of foreplay, even if it doesn't lead to intercourse."

## Small gestures matter

A text to say "I'm looking forward to seeing you", something that makes you go "Aww", is very powerful. We want to be thought of and loved for precisely who we are — which is why Knowles's husband scored highly for buying her a Valentine's bouquet of freesias. Knowles says, "He could have made the grand gesture of buying 36 red roses, and I'd have said, 'Wow, look at that,' but the thoughtfulness of a bouquet of my favourite flowers meant much more. Grand gestures can feel impersonal." Sending that text might seem irrelevant, but, Lousada says, "Sex in a relationship starts with taking out the rubbish." And with the non-bin-emptier being grateful.

## Pay attention

If sex is rare, it may well be because your wife spied a blue tit in the garden, and you didn't look up from your phone. Lousada says, "In a relationship, we each make little calls for our partner's attention. It could be as simple as saying: 'There's an interesting-coloured bird in that tree.' If those calls for attention are ignored, the person then withdraws."

## Slow down

We're hardwired for sexual efficiency, but, says Lousada, "the software's outdated". Sex shouldn't be "goal-orientated: it's not about climax or penetration. It's about the pleasure of connection." Slowing down and feeling the sensations and emotions can deepen your bond. That vulnerability can cause discomfort. Lousada says, "You have a choice: run a mile, and feel something close down in both of you — or go to a deeper, more connected place."

**Relate provides sex therapy and relationship counselling across England and Wales; relate.org.uk or 0300 1001234**

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