



Relight your FIRE

[SEX] Has your libido flatlined? Are you a grown woman who is out of touch with what you want or need sexually? Don't panic, says **Rosie Ifould**. By honing the skill of 'erotic intelligence', you can begin to reconnect with your desire

Sian is the type of woman you would describe as a 'head turner'. Not only is she tall and strikingly pretty, she also has the kind of dress sense and presence that simply suggests she's sexy and confident. At first glance, you certainly wouldn't think she had that many worries about her love life. But when she turned 30, she started to worry that despite having had a fair few partners and a decent amount of sex, she'd never had an orgasm.

'I had flutters, but then my friends used to say that I'd know if it really was the real thing,' she explains. 'The more I worried about whether or not I'd orgasm, the more tense I'd get. Of course, I was great at faking it. If I did tell a boyfriend the truth he would usually try to be understanding, but then

he would start to see me as a challenge, which just made things so much worse.'

The mind-body connection

Sian didn't know it at the time, but her problem is a fairly common one. She was attractive to other people, but was completely out of touch with what really turned *her* on, and what actually made her body feel good. It's this mind-body connection that lies at the heart of what is known as 'erotic intelligence'.

'So many of us are just living from the neck up,' explains therapist Rafia Morgan, one of the founders of the Path of Love personal development process. 'Erotic intelligence is all about having the capacity to trust yourself, to be in touch with your own body, your boundaries, your values – and how you feel your own energy.'

It sounds like something that we should be able to do easily – an innate skill even – but for many of us it goes against everything that we have been conditioned to do. As a society, we've all become increasingly 'performance-orientated', comments psychosexual somatic therapist Mike Lousada. 'For a lot of women, sex is about performance rather than pleasure,' he says. 'I've noticed, for example, that there's more enthusiasm for female ejaculation now, but then there's a risk that it becomes just another trick women need to perform when having sex.'

Without erotic intelligence, our relationships can stagnate under the pressure of false expectations and having to go through the motions without feeling a real connection – either to our own bodies or to our partners. But >>>

>>> fortunately, there are ways to get in touch with your own, personal erotic intelligence, whether it's on your own, or in good company...

1 UNBLOCK YOUR BODY

The first step to enhancing your sexual awareness is to become aware of what your body is trying to tell you.

Lousada says that the first thing he does when working with a new client is to help them tune into their body. 'We would look at where they hold tension in their body and what that represents for them. It helps to uncover the unconscious beliefs they are holding,' he says.

For example, it may be that a woman carries a lot of tension in her stomach region, perhaps because she is constantly trying to hold her stomach in. She probably does this without even really noticing it, because she grew up with the belief that people would like her more if she was thin.

Your unconscious beliefs may not relate directly to desire, however, the process of unlocking them can release a lot of pent-up energy, so be prepared to tackle some unexpected emotions which may, ultimately, lead to a sense of release.

This type of work is best done in the presence of a trained therapist, but if you want to begin to investigate your relationship with your body, try this letter-writing exercise.

Allow yourself half an hour without interruptions. Begin by writing a letter to your body – tell it how you feel about it, what you like about it, and what you don't like. Then, with your non-dominant hand, write a letter back 'from' your body to you – imagine how it would respond. Because our hands are 'hooked up' to opposite sides of our brain, this helps to access different thoughts and emotional responses.

KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING

Esther Perel, Psychologies' expert, author of *Mating In Captivity* (Hodder & Stoughton, £6.50), and one of the world's most respected voices on couples and sexuality, shares her wisdom on keeping the flame alive:

- I rarely work on helping couples to have more sex. You can be having sex and feel nothing – women have done this for centuries. Instead I work on the poetics of sex, on how you connect to your erotic self.

- People can have sex once a month – but who cares? It's about how they look at each other, and how they feel in the presence of each other. It's how connected they feel to the sexual part of themselves that matters.

- The question I ask people is not: 'Do you have sex?' My question is:

'What does sex mean for you?' Where do you go? And what parts of yourself do you connect with there? What parts of yourself find expression there?

- Once you love someone, you then have to deal with the fact that you can lose that love. That is the unbearable truth – you can lose that person you love to them loving someone else, to illness, to death. You have to deal with the fact that you could be replaceable, and that you're not unique, as someone else could take your place. The discomfort of knowing that reality is hard to accept. However, if you are aware of that reality, then you are often more likely to try to present yourself at your best – whereas in many relationships, this does not necessarily happen.

For more information, visit estherperel.com

2 TUNE INTO EACH OTHER

'Sex is this very interesting social interaction where normal rules of engagement don't apply,' observes Lousada. 'We can find it very hard to say what we like or don't like, because we don't want to hurt the other person's feelings.' However, what might begin as the impulse to spare our partner's feelings can soon lead to a sexual stalemate in the bedroom, with both people being afraid to say what they really want.

'Conscious relating' is the practice of encouraging authentic, genuine communication between couples. It is sometimes linked to tantric sex, but as Lousada points out, 'the world of conscious sexuality is as broad as the world of sexuality itself,' so couples who are more into kinkiness, dressing

up or S&M can get just as much from conscious relating as those couples who like to practise tantra, and it may incorporate some of the techniques listed on the next page. Essentially, it's about staying in the present moment and exploring what is fulfilling for both partners.

'It can be very powerful to have that conversation "in situ", as it were,' says Lousada. 'One thing couples can try is to make an agreement to be with each other, and the moment one of them notices that they have drifted into a fantasy or thinking about something completely different, like what to have for dinner, they stop, just for a second, to reconnect again. That is a very subtle way of offering some interactive feedback to each other without necessarily saying out loud, "I liked it when you did that".'

PHOTOGRAPHS: GALLERY STOCK



3 TRY REVERSING YOUR ROLES

'One of the exercises I do regularly with my clients helps people learn how to say yes and no with physical touch,' explains relationship coach Jan Day. 'So, one person would begin to touch the other – to stroke their hair or their face perhaps – and the person being touched would have to say whether or not they enjoyed it. It sounds simple, but it can have very powerful results. You might ask the person touching to attempt to get a "no" response, so they try something, and then they are amazed to discover the other person says "yes".'

A seemingly straightforward exercise like this can reveal profound things about the power dynamic within a relationship. 'The issue of control can kill off eroticism,' continues Day.

“Erotic intelligence is all about having the capacity to trust yourself, to be in touch with your body, your values, your boundaries”

Tensions from other areas – who has the most responsibility for earning money, or doing the housework, for example – lead to one partner trying to reassert control (often through rejection) in the bedroom. 'Simple exercises around being willing to receive *and* being willing to give can help you tune into what's really hap-

pening,' adds Day. 'So, for example, a couple might try 10 minutes of spooning one way, and then the other way.'

In some cases, Day might try even more elaborate roleplay. 'I might suggest that a couple try an exercise where, for an agreed period of time, the woman does nothing unless the man tells her,' she explains. 'He is in a masterful but benevolent position, and she is in an adoring but trusting position. This exercise is an exploration of domination and submission. Is she able to trust him? Is he trustworthy? That can be an immensely powerful exercise.'

4 SHARE YOUR FANTASIES

'Fear is often a millimetre away from excitement,' says Day, and nowhere is that more apparent than when it comes >>>

>>> to revealing our deepest fantasies, especially if they involve something considered taboo. 'In order to share our fantasies with our partner we have to trust they won't throw us out, but first, we might have to deal with our own disgust and fear,' she points out.

The key is to allow for an element of risk that enhances excitement between you both, but with a foundation of trust. Day often works with couples on revealing their sexual fantasies to one another slowly. 'The way I start is to have both partners separately write a list of their visions and what they'd like in their relationship. Then I encourage them to share their desires, one at a time, and ask the other partner to repeat it back to them. It's not about words; it's about really feeling what's important. This way, they build up a picture of the other person's dreams and desires without ever saying that they have to do it. It's about not being rejected simply for sharing.'

This step-by-step process may need to happen over a few weeks, even months, but it helps couples to practise what it's like to be open and vulnerable with one another. 'After that, they



might begin to make an action plan for trying out some fantasies in bed together. They may even have discovered that they'd like the same thing...'

5 EXPERIMENT WITH SLOW SEX

We tend to think of slow sex as an intense, often laborious practice, but the reality can be quite different. Yes, it may well be intense, 'but it can be very fun as well, especially at the start,'

Day says. The aim is not, as some people mistakenly believe, to maintain impossible yoga positions for hours, but to focus on sex with a different dynamic to fast, penetrative sex.

'As soon as you try to go for a goal, you lose the point of slow sex,' Day explains. 'Be willing to let the flow of "up and down" simply unfold – sometimes he'll be hard, sometimes he'll be soft, but it won't matter. Even if you do orgasm, it will have a very different quality.'

Adapting to slow sex can take some time, and Day suggests that if you do decide to try it, you don't switch back to 'fast' penetrative sex too soon, because that may feel very jarring – a bit like going straight from a meditation class to a football match.

As a first experiment, Lousada suggests that you try 'lying naked with your partner in a way that's comfortable and so your genitals are touching – a kind of scissors position often works – and just relax and breathe. Feel the energy that flows between you. If you can manage to stay with that for a little while, you'll find that there's a beautiful exchange of energy between you from a very subtle place.'

For more information on erotic intelligence, visit: janday.com, pathoflove.net, mikelousada.com, estherperel.com

BOOSTING EROTIC INTELLIGENCE WHEN YOU'RE SINGLE

DREAM What do you usually do when a sexual fantasy pops into your mind? Do you allow it to play out, or do you push it back down because you are concentrating on something else? Psychologist Laurie Mintz, author of *A Tired Woman's Guide To Passionate Sex* (Adams Media, £9.99), recommends setting aside five minutes a day

to indulge in erotic daydreaming as a way of stimulating your sexual desire.

RECONNECT Get in touch with your body in a way that you really enjoy. It may be a long slow massage or a pounding workout that leaves you with satisfyingly achy muscles – the point is to live from the neck down, once in a while.

FLIRT Practise flirting – not as a precursor to sex, but as a playful way of showing your curiosity for others in its own right. Remember, says *Psychologies'* sex and relationships therapist Esther Perel, the word flirting 'comes from the French word meaning teasing. It's about playing with possibility. It's not about making it happen.'