

Would you do this with your partner asleep next to you?

Lots of women do. Meanwhile, men are faking orgasms. Why? Because our hyper-sexualised world is breeding a new kind of sexual anxiety. *Caroline Corcoran reports*



Sitting on the sofa, it's hard to avoid it – from *Game of Thrones* orgies to wince-makingly real sex scenes in *Girls*. And we don't bat an eyelid. So why, in such a highly sexualised society, do we find it so difficult to talk about sex? To discuss what we'd actually like, when and with who? Not only are couples' libidos at times mismatched, but it seems we're intent on keeping all our anxieties and misgivings to ourselves. We've hit a sexual stalemate.

Erica, 32, has a high sex drive and has masturbated next to the sleeping bodies of all her long-term partners (including her now husband). For some time she's felt unable to share her secret with him. 'I thought it would make him feel inadequate,' she says. 'Most of it was my higher sex drive, but sometimes I did it when I thought I could easily be caught because of the added excitement.'

Eventually, though, Erica told her husband. 'Actually he didn't have much of a reaction,' she says. 'I was judging myself more harshly than he did and since then I've stopped – once I told him, it lost its charge. Now I'm more honest about my libido and it's made us connect more, so our whole relationship is better.'

Morgan, 24, shared Erica's fears of judgement, which is why she has never told her boyfriend that she once brought herself to orgasm while he nodded off next to her. 'We'd gone to bed on sour terms, but I found myself awake and horny,' she says. 'I felt a bit of guilt before I decided to just get it over with. I never told him – I suppose I thought he'd be angry.'

We're undoubtedly at odds in the bedroom and much of this miscommunication comes back to the stigma of gender stereotypes. It's actually not unusual for women to have higher sex drives than men and in a relationship, it's unlikely we'll be in perfect sexual sync: while women prefer sex at night, men favour the morning, and 68 per cent of women and 63 per cent of men have dated someone whose libido is incompatible with their own*. In short, we're all individuals, not gender clichés.

'The belief that women's sex drives are lower than men's stems from the Victorian era when, to get the vote, women had to be "good" citizens and appear "morally pure",' says psychosexual therapist Mike Lousada. 'There was a real social desire to "save fallen women", so women knew, to get anything they wanted (such as the vote), they had to shun any interest in sex. My experience as a therapist is that women actually have higher libidos than men, but gender clichés are so ingrained that they often feel shame.'

And that's why women may keep their desire a secret, either by using a vibrator while their partner is absent or, if they need to keep the noise down while he's lying next to them, their fingers. Either way, subsequent orgasms achieved through sex without toys can seem like hard work by comparison.

For most women, discussing their masturbation habits is one of the last taboos – even those who happily regale friends about their sex lives would rarely divulge their solo exploits.

'I interviewed a large group of women on different sexual themes,' says sociologist and sexuality and mindfulness speaker Dr Jenn Gunsallus, 'and the most uncomfortable question by far ►

SEX

was "Do you masturbate and how?" We still think sex is cool if you do it with someone else, but pathetic if done alone.'

And it's not just incompatible sexual desire that's an issue for women; 84 per cent of us are most concerned about our appearance during sex*. Men, meanwhile, have their own hang-ups. During sex with a new partner, performance is their biggest concern.

'In short, the genders are sexually out of sync,' says Lousada. And it's having an impact in bedrooms worldwide. In Japan, they've dubbed it a 'celibacy syndrome' (a whole generation showing little energy for the complexities of a sex life).

But not talking about our anxieties, says Lousada, usually makes them worse. 'Great sex requires great communication, so if you're not talking about it, you're probably not having a good time,' he says.

Gender expectations don't help, either. A study in the *Journal of Sex Research* revealed that 25 per cent of male respondents admitted to faking orgasm. Why? Because they didn't want to upset their partner by admitting they couldn't ejaculate. Reasons given included stress, exhaustion, alcohol/drug use and, there it is again, performance anxiety.

Clinical psychologist Adam Sheck admits he's faked it. 'The first time, I was in my early twenties when I was having sex with a really exciting woman,' he says. 'I ejaculated in two minutes. She didn't even realise and the condom kept the evidence secure. Luckily, being young meant I could keep going until she came, and then I pretended to, too: my first act of sexual fraud.'

Years later, his reasons for faking were different: 'In my forties, after two orgasms, it was challenging to have another. I didn't mind, but sometimes my partner would see it as a failure on her part. So I'd fake it.'

When Lucy's** boyfriend confessed he'd once faked it because he was tired, she says, 'My first reaction was, how? But he said he'd used spit and it was dark.'

Sheck says that men have so inextricably tied what they do in bed to perceptions of their own masculinity, they're now terrified to show weakness. 'We feel like, "I am my penis, I am my sex life, I am my capacity to have a strong erection that never ends" and we need to let that go,' he says.

His concern backs up the arrival of the 'frerosexual', a trend highlighted in a recent report on the modern man who has as many body insecurities as women and extreme anxiety over his 'performance'.

As trends go, argues Lousada, men faking it says a lot about the social pressure to perform, which can ruin our pleasure. Women aren't exempt from 'performing' either, as we still tend to focus on how we look; our facial expressions, whether this pose or that one does our body any favours. If neither men nor women are in the

moment, is it any wonder there's so much anxiety around sex?

Porn, adds Lousada, is the predominant source of anxiety for men. 'Ironically, the pressure comes from their own use of it, which stresses the importance of orgasm and ejaculation,' he says. 'The nervous system can even shut down and with it our capacity to orgasm. A man's sense of masculinity is often linked to whether he can satisfy a woman. It takes maturity to realise that's not a measure of a "true" man.'

As a concept, it's not that dissimilar to the pressure felt by some women who spend so much energy trying to look porn-star sexy, they forget to actually enjoy sex.

Dr Gunsaulus says that both genders must realise that no-one's sex life looks anything like a porn film, especially in a long-term relationship.

'The excitement of the early days is an animal thing,' she says. 'It's impossible to keep that up, but very rarely do we have honest conversations about that. If we did, it would take the pressure off everybody.'

Part of the problem is that with sex being such a sensitive, rarely broached subject, we all take things very personally. 'If your partner wants to talk to you about your sex life,' says Dr Gunsaulus, 'your instant reaction will probably be, "you're not attracted to me" or "something's wrong". In reality, it's rarely about you. For women with a higher sex drive than their partners, for instance, once they realise it's not that their partner isn't attracted to their body but just that sometimes he doesn't desire sex, they relax.'

'If you're the sort of person who feels and demonstrates love through physical touch, then when sex suffers you won't feel connected with your partner,' says Dr Gunsaulus.

She advises communicating as much as possible, but acknowledges that, for many couples, that can be difficult. 'When sex becomes sporadic, generally one person still wants it more,' she says. 'But then there's a stalemate because we're not trained to talk about it – we don't know the words to use.'

Instead, the danger is that we dart into secretive worlds, whether that means lies about orgasms, masturbation or replacing physical relationships with online ones.

'A lot of men go on the internet for porn but don't actually want to meet someone in real life,' says Sheck. 'They're much happier

staying in the fantasy.'

Nothing can replace an honest relationship with the human lying next to us in bed, which means that it is crucial to learn to talk about sex, however hard that might be. 'What we need to remember is that these ideas of gender clichés and stereotypes are societally created,' says Lousada. 'And if society (we) created them, that means that we can rip them down, too.' ■

HOW TO TALK ABOUT SEX WHEN IT'S BECOME A 'THING'...

...without making it an even bigger 'thing'

Don't discuss what happens in bed, in bed

'We're more vulnerable in bed, especially after sex,' says Sheck, 'so we're more inclined to take things personally. Separate it from that sex act and you get some healthy distance.'

Put a positive spin on things

'Focus on the fact you want things to get better and you're not just walking away,' says Lousada. Having a common goal can bring you together. Aim to have an evening where one of you calls the shots, sexually, then the other.

Avoid having a large Merlot to steel your nerves

'I know it's tempting to have the discussion after a bottle of wine, but that's much more likely to end in arguments,' says Lousada. 'Do it when there's no alcohol involved.'

Don't build it into One Big Dramatic Conversation

If the issue took a while to rear its head, it won't be solved quickly. 'If anyone gets overwhelmed, take time out and pick it up later,' advises Sheck. 'You don't have to resolve everything in one day.'

Blame it on someone else

If there's something particular you want to try in bed, but you're embarrassed, distance yourself. 'Say, "hey I saw this on the internet" or "my friend went to this workshop." You'll seem curious, not dissatisfied,' says Dr Gunsaulus.