

# How to make lust last

It's a fact that, as love grows, lust almost inevitably wanes. But scientific research says there are ways to bring a flatlining libido back to life. *Rebecca Newman* reports



LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS and lust. In many ways, the terms are oxymoronic – the heady obsession that leads to dynamite love-making in the early days is miles from the cosy intimacy of a lasting relationship. Heck, I write about sex for a living and pen a monthly column for a men's magazine, lovingly exploring ways to bring even more pep to the bedroom, but still, seven years in and with a one-year-old baby, let's just say, no one's immune. But the good news is, there are definitely routes that can lead you to a more rich and heady sex life – if you're prepared to put in the work.

In the electric early days, when every inch of your lover is exciting and when you're together the world falls away, a slackening of libido is unimaginable. But

the forces are stacked against you. Over time, the rush of euphoria-inducing chemicals (such as dopamine), which fuel infatuation and obsession, are replaced with the trusting and pair-bonding ones, such as the 'cuddle hormone' oxytocin. As the beauty of intimacy develops, so you become comfortable, which is dangerously close to complacent. You no longer need to seduce your lover at the doorway and exert every part of yourself to turn him on, because you already know he's yours – and you know how to get him off.

'The challenge had gone,' says Molly, 32, a vivacious London-based lawyer, of her partner of five years, Ivo. 'I could make him orgasm, then go and watch *Girls*. We had lost that sense of exploration and excitement. The warning signs were all there – I never initiated sex or did anything

romantic to seduce him. I dressed up far more for my friends than I did for him.'

Sex and relationship specialist Dr Vena Ramphal confirms that, when you've been together years, a rut is to some degree unavoidable, and that this is often due in large part to the issue of mindfulness. 'The real problem is less the repetition than the fact that we anticipate repetition – the same foreplay, same positions etc – and so we don't pay full attention,' explains Dr Ramphal. To prevent your mind wandering away – to the laundry, the mortgage, anxieties that are antithetical to the relaxed and present state essential for female orgasm – you *must* focus. 'Change one thing about your routine, and you will trigger attention,' she adds. A blindfold, a pair of knickers that undo with silk side ribbons, deep kissing in an alleyway, ►

## ‘The less we did it, the less I wanted it and the more his pawing at me was a turn-off’

a date requiring him to wear black tie... whatever works for you and will bring you back in the moment.

Molly knew, she says, that her dwindling sex life with Ivo would lead to them growing apart and was a serious threat to their relationship. ‘The less we did it, the less I wanted it; and the less I wanted it, the more his pawing at me was a turn-off. It was a vicious circle.’ But Molly cared enough about them as a couple to take action. To break the pattern where too many nights of ‘just doing it’ had led her to associate him with average sex, she took what some might consider a drastic step and enrolled them both on a course to learn about tantra. ‘It took the focus away from penetration, and reminded us of the joy in physicality,’ she says. ‘I began to remember I actually adore sex. It took time, but we have rekindled the passion.’

But what if things have slipped further? What if you are at the point of apathy or, worse, disgust? First, consider whether it’s sex that is the problem. ‘Usually, when couples are struggling, they point to the sex (lack of it, or mismatched desire) as the issue; in fact, it’s the relationship that needs mending,’ says Wendy Strgar, the author of *Love that Works: A Guide to Enduring Intimacy*. ‘Sex breaks down because people aren’t communicating, not keeping their word or making sarcastic jokes. This kind of behaviour creates a wall, so you don’t feel safe to make yourself sexually vulnerable.’

A case in point is Andrea, 29, from Cambridge, who works in wealth management. She explains that by the end of each day, she was always tired and stressed. ‘What I really wanted was my husband to listen to me and find out how I was,’ she says. ‘Instead, he’d be knackered, too, and just want to have sex and roll over. It made me feel used and angry, so I closed off.’ Strgar says that making space to open up, to offer each other emotional support, is key to rebuilding erotic interest. ‘When people feel heard and loved, the sex part opens up.’

Certainly, there is no point simply

throwing flowers or sex toys at a lust-less match, says therapist Esther Perel, whose TED talk is entitled ‘The secret to desire in a long-term relationship.’ ‘If you’re dead inside, the other person can do a lot of things for Valentine’s, [but] it won’t make a dent,’ she says. ‘You need to connect with the things that turn you on, to take control of your desires and follow them.’

She says watching your partner excel at something creates an electric scenario – it’s a reason why your colleagues or boss can seem so hot. Think of it: him playing the guitar; working a room, charming everyone he meets; catching a wave, rapt in the moment... situations in which you are irrelevant, and he is magnetic.

Psychologist Eli J Finkel takes this idea to the extreme in his recent paper, *The Suffocation of Marriage*, suggesting relationships may benefit from ‘living apart together’ – being committed, but dwelling under separate roofs. He further encourages spreading your needs, neuroses and interests among other friends and following diverse pursuits, then, every so often, reintroducing your independent, sassy self to your man for love and sex.

Of course, many of us rather like sharing a roof and a bed. But there are lessons in Finkel’s approach. I realise I should probably phone Geek Squad to solve my computer problems, and return to the weekly girls’ night where we vent and bitch and giggle over pisco sours. My husband does not need to be my IT help desk, and my friends are infinitely better at long, analytical, ‘go, sister’-style chat. I also do my best to remember how I used to behave, to recollect how much happier he is with some time to himself, and make it happen (more difficult now we have a baby); to remind myself of the selfish side of sex – of how much I enjoy taking the time for stockings and silk, Shalimar behind my ears and inside my wrists.

There are still more strategic ways to recreate the animal attraction inherent to the early days. Scientists conducted a classic psychological experiment at

Capilano Canyon in Canada and found that, after crossing a long, wobbly rope bridge, the subjects were much more sexually charged. You don’t necessarily need a canyon, but think of situations that fire up adrenalin – perhaps a bit of healthy apprehension and endorphins. Hill climbing, surfing, kick-boxing... whatever rocks your world, seize your lover and go and do it together.

And here is the word on which every successful relationship turns: planning. ‘Spontaneity is one big myth,’ says Perel. ‘Committed sex is premeditated sex. It’s wilful, it’s intentional.’

Andrea, for instance, found that organising evenings differently transformed her relationship. ‘We made a deal,’ she says. ‘Each night, no matter how late he came in from work, I’d get 15 minutes download time to tell him everything. Also, he was in charge of fixing a weekly date night, so I always knew we’d do something – fun, glamorous, silly, whatever – that was about the two of us. By the end of that, I’d be ready for something naughty. As soon as he stopped pressuring me, I found I wanted to chase him for the first time in a while, and we were both turned on by that.’

Is there ever a time, though, when erotic flatlining is the sign you should simply walk away? According to Ramphal, ‘Lust ebbs and flows in long-term relationships. If it has died slowly, but there is still love and respect, you can revive it. But if it was killed by upset or anger – or if it was never really there in the first place – ask yourself why you are trying to save your relationship. If there was never a spark or you aren’t satisfied with your reasons for staying together, don’t force it.’

In my view, life is too short to pretend to be aroused, to lie back and think of England. Challenge yourself to reconnect with the sensual, tactile, loving woman you were and surely still are. Talk to him about what turns you on about him, and what turns him on about you. And don’t neglect the other elements of your lives – your fears and inspiration. If you care enough to do all this, then you are already halfway there. And if you’re reassured you’re both ready to fight for the joyful grail of long-term lust, and with it a newly refreshed and radiant relationship, the battle’s already half won. ■

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