

Let's talk about sex

Relationship therapist James Earl explores loss of libido in a long-term relationship and how to reignite desire.



It's easy to feel a sense of failure in a couple relationship when sex slows down, stalls or stops. Surely, if we love each other, this side of things

should be easy, natural – and frequent? What if I rarely feel like sex with my partner – does this mean the relationship is dead? What if they want it and I don't?

Far from being uncommon, these are questions almost all couples ask at some point. It is simply a myth that everyone else is having great sex three times a week. If you have friends you can talk to about these things, you'll probably find they have the same problem. Even if they're having sex, it may be quite dutiful ('We should have sex' – and 'I'd better have sex to keep them happy').

So, why does desire fade?

One common answer is boredom. We get too familiar with our partner, and the mystery of the first few months fades into a quiet companionship. But it seems unlikely that boredom is the main reason. If I'm never going to be bored with Lebanese food, or Rembrandt self-portraits, or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, why should I become bored with the sex I used to enjoy with my partner?

Instead, let's look at the developmental stages of a relationship. When we're dating, besides the undoubted excitement of a new relationship, we're learning about our partner. This is expressed perfectly in this fabulous chat-up line from *The Odyssey*, where Circe says to Odysseus, 'Let me take you to my bed so we may learn to become friends and trust each other.' But this motive for sex, like that first flush of desire,



inevitably passes when you begin to know your partner.

We move from a simple 'play' relationship, to a far more complicated set of roles and ways of seeing each other. You are now my best friend, the centre of my social circle, my co-parent (if we have kids), my business partner (if we own property). In addition, I want you as my red-hot sex interest too. How realistic is all that, focused on one person?

The move from dating to a long-term living-together relationship fundamentally changes the significance of sex. Sex is now happening in the context of a huge

weight of domestic responsibility and routine, stress, work, tiredness, and often children and money worries.

Couples will sometimes try to base sex on love. 'When we first met, we simply had sex, but now we live together we do something a thousand times more wonderful – we make love.'

This is such a romantic idea, and you can see why it appeals. Except – this is rarely how it feels. Most people say they had better sex when they didn't yet really love each other, in those first few months together. Trying to elevate fondness into desire is more likely to lead to cuddling up and sleep,

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rather than sex. (And even that might be a stretch if you're feeling tired, irritated and disappointed). Love and sex are two different ways of breathing: the first, a long sigh of contentment, the other a sharp intake of breath.

How can you reimagine your partner as a sexual partner when you've just been to Sainsbury's with them? The good news is that you can have really great sex with someone you've been with for years if you know how to think about it (and no, it really doesn't mean finding a new chandelier to swing from!)

Firstly, try talking. Acknowledge the problem together, and treat it as quite normal, not a failure. Get your partner to read this article. Have a laugh about how once sex was easy, and now it's more complicated.

Secondly, go on talking. Try asking each other what works as a context and lead-up to sex. When you were dating you probably had two or three days preparation for sex before the next date. Nowadays, you may find all the preparation you get is your partner asking, 'Do you fancy it?' In the days or hours before sex (and yes, why not book it in?), do you need your partner to be playful? Kind? Romantic? Flirty? Wearing that nice white shirt?

Thirdly – talking again (sorry). What makes your lights go on when we actually get to the bedroom? Is sex fun and romantic? Rude and dirty? Lights on or lights off? You in control or me in control?

These are conversations that can be had slowly and become a life-long part of celebrating your similarities and differences. Just like your taste in food and music.  jamesearl.com