

The Sex Starved Wives

If only my husband would stop pestering me for sex! That's such a common complaint, with women far more likely to have lower libido than their partners. But life isn't so great for women whose husbands do lose interest, the women married to men who get the headaches. And it's also sometimes pretty rough for those lusty souls who are always up for sex, the high drive women whose partners can't cope with the pace.

I am 39 and have really come into myself since I turned 35. My libido is high and it is devastating being with someone who never makes the first move and just really doesn't seem interested. He is 41. Even when I make a huge effort to buy new lingerie, look good and try to be sexy, he never makes the first move and when it comes to sex I always do all the work. It has really just crushed how I feel, undermined my self-confidence. I feel this should be some of the best years for me, but instead I feel absolutely alone, often cry and feel totally rejected.

This is typical of the many, many letters I regularly receive from women in this situation. They are often surrounded by friends whose partners are driving them mad wanting sex, which leads them to wonder what's wrong, why aren't their partners interested? Is he having an affair? Doesn't he like my body? What am I doing to put him off? Their minds are crowded with questions as they search for reasons for his rejection.

It's actually pretty rare for women to find themselves with men who want little or no sex – with research across the world rarely showing more than 15 per cent of men reporting low libido. *The Sex in Australia* survey of almost 20,000 people found that 25 per cent of men said they lacked interest in sex, but about a quarter of these men were not in a relationship. This compared to 55 per cent of the women reporting low drive.

There *are* low-drive men who'd always prefer a good night's sleep, men for whom sex never rates very highly. Like Aaron*, 34, who wrote to me explaining his marriage was breaking up over this issue. He'd always had excuses as to why he wasn't interested – study stress at uni, financial stress, health issues – but he finally faced the fact that his wife's sexual appetite was normal and his was non-existent: "I am the one who rolls over and turns my back on her. I am the one who brushes her advances away. I have been denying it for so long and now that I have acknowledged the problem, it might be too late."

It wasn't surprising that his marriage was struggling. My research on sexual desire (published in *The Sex Diaries*) found many women can't cope with constant rejection and leave their relationships. In the research 98 couples - all volunteers - kept diaries for up to a year, describing how they deal with mismatched desire. Of the ten couples where the women wanted more sex, four of the relationships broke up during the research.

Boy, they were an unhappy bunch of women. Some were women with pretty normal drives stuck with sexually disinterested men but others were women who just loved sex and couldn't get enough of it. The latter were such fascinating women - I called them my "juicy tomatoes."

Here's a 44 year-old, from Cairns – who described herself as "slim, long blonde hair and desirable to many men except the one I'm with." She constantly craves sex but is lucky to get it once a month. *I am hoping that as I get older this dreaded nympho thing subsides, but it has got worse as I've got older!!! I am horny EVERY DAY and what I've noticed is that if I masturbate that feeling does not go away, I could get off 10 times and still it's there. I have to avoid television programs where there are love scenes or sex, places where lovey couples go. My self-esteem is shit over this. True, I've got eggs in other baskets, but this is a BIG EGG.*

What really intrigued me was how difficult it was for many of these women to come on to their husbands. Although they grumbled about the frequency of sex, they rarely initiated. Megan was typical. This 32 year old Perth woman was deeply disappointed to find herself married to a man who wasn't up for it as much as she was. She'd love to have sex twice a day: "I've always been disappointed that I didn't have the bouncing off the walls, going at it like rabbits start to my sex life. It's never happened in the twelve years we have been together and, let's face it, it's not going to change, is it?"

Yet Megan's husband told me that despite her complaints about not getting enough, she never initiated. She admitted that was right, explaining that when they were first together she had come on to him a few times and he'd knocked her back. She couldn't bear it and just stopped trying.

That's typical, according to American sex therapist Michele Weiner Davis, who discusses this issue in her book, *The Sex Starved Wife*. "Because women stretch outside their comfort zones to initiate sex, they recoil when their initial advances are met with rejection and become gun shy," she reports, reporting that in marriages where the man has low desire nearly 37 per cent of couples have sex less than once a month. Women's reticence means sex frequency drops away whereas in marriages where the woman has low desire, only 20 per cent have it so infrequently.

Weiner Davis argues that these women need to overcome their pessimism and help their lovers find new interest in sex. "Too many women talk and talk in the hope that their words will get through to these guys," she says, advising action rather than talk. Instead of expecting rejection women should take the initiative, act as if they expect him to want sex and enjoy it.

I encouraged some of my diarists to do just that with some remarkable success stories. Like Elle, 42, who was desperate for physical intimacy with her husband and determined to

“replace her wishbone with her backbone.” Here’s a diary entry where she showed that backbone:

“Because of my fear of rejection over the past few years, I’d given up on things like having showers together but today I bit the bullet and got into the shower with Miles. It was done with some trepidation but it turned out well,” she wrote, describing the sexy fun that followed.

Some men start off with normal drives and then lose interest. There are many good reasons for declining libido in men: medical problems such as vascular and endocrine disorders; chronic illness such as liver disease, anaemia or arthritis; alcoholism and the impact of drugs; grief and depression. Medications can also impact on libido, with anti-depressants a major culprit. Then there are broader issues such as obesity, sleep problems, lack of exercise, body image concerns and relationships problems such as loss of attraction, anger and resentment. Add to this list personal circumstances that can impact on sex drive like job loss, a history of sexual or emotional abuse, conflict about sexual orientation. Then there’s a small group of men who suffer from testosterone deficiency – a rare problem usually easily treated. A good medically-trained sex therapist should be able to help sort through all these issues – I’m happy to help if you have trouble finding the right person.

The possibilities are endless but one which emerged strongly in my research was older men who end up avoiding sex rather than risk failure when they run into erection problems. It’s tragic how easily a couple can end up sexually estranged as they struggle to deal with this issue. Here’s Rachel (47), describing how her second marriage fell apart over her new husband’s lack of erections: “I sensed his lack of confidence around me and reacted to it – negatively I’m afraid. The hours of trying to be supportive in bed yielded nothing and I started to find the whole sex thing humiliating. He acted as if it was someone else’s fault and I acted like I just didn’t care.” They quickly reached the point where he “just wanted to cuddle.”

Yes, people need help with these problems but whatever the reason for a man’s low sex drive, he needs to consider the impact of rejection on his partner. The other day I was giving a talk to a group of older men and told them about a woman who cries herself to sleep because her husband won’t come near her anymore. After everyone had left a man came up to me and clutched my hand. He told me he’d lost interest in sex following hormone treatment for prostate cancer. It had never occurred to him that his wonderfully supportive wife might still be yearning to be touched. He was rushing home to find out, he said with a huge smile on his face.

*All names disguised.