

# Make love, not dinner

For men, sex is not just pleasure but the way they give and receive love. *Laura Bond* asks whether we need to say yes more often

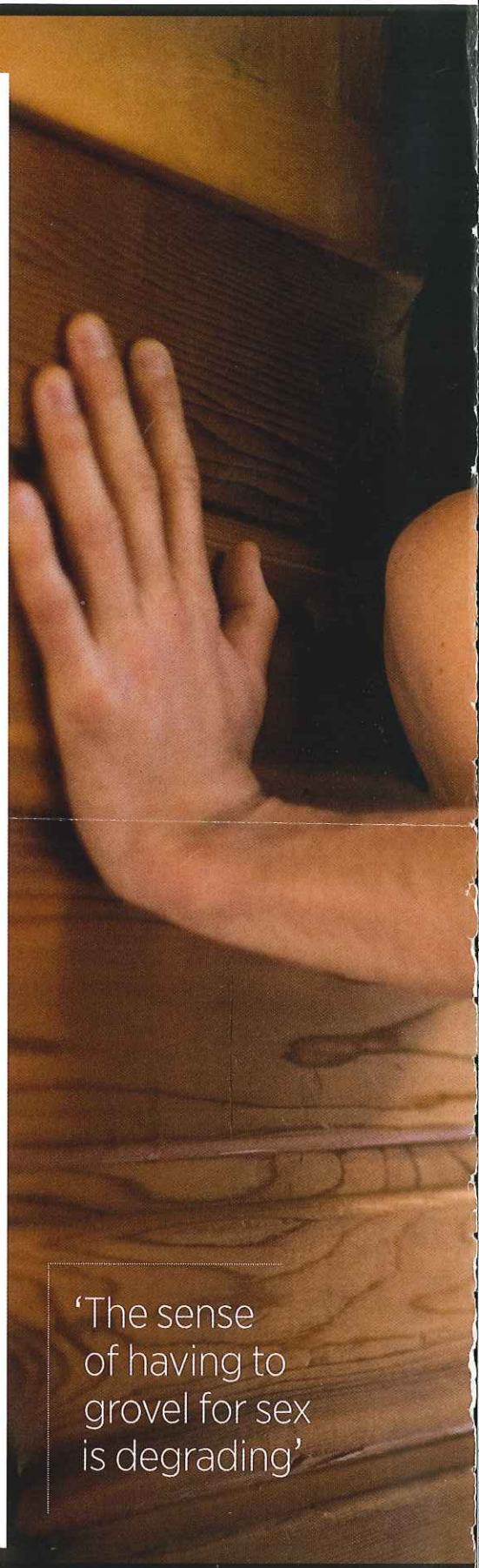
Mary, 42, has put her husband on rations until he gets the message about housework. When he leaves newly washed clothes on the floor – to be covered in dog hair – she will ignore the creeping hand across the bed at night. But Peter feels it's unfair of her to use sex as a weapon. 'He argues that even if I were a lady of leisure with a maid and housekeeper and no need to work, I still wouldn't be interested in sex,' says Mary. 'I deny, deny, deny it, but deep inside I have to admit there is a chance he's right.'

Women show their love in many ways. We make time to cook bolognese, listen to his problems and traipse across town to find his favourite shirts, then we collapse exhausted or snap at his amorous advances. 'Can't he see how much I've done already?' we rail. For many women in long-term relationships, offering sex as proof of love comes lower

on the list than washing their socks.

According to Bettina Arndt, Australia's best-known sex therapist and author of *The Sex Diaries* (Hamlyn), your partner won't see the shining floor – he'll only notice that you're not having sex. Arndt recently asked 98 Australian couples – from 20-year-old students to people who'd been married for more than 40 years – to keep diaries about their bedroom behaviour for six to nine months. The survey revealed that most men are trapped in sexless marriages where 'physical intimacy is doled out like Meaty Bites to a dog.' Arndt's belief that women should say yes to their partners more often, for the sake of their relationship and their own pleasure, has sparked controversy.

'A woman's right to say no has been enshrined in our cultural history,' writes Arndt. In 1966, New York sex therapist Helen Kaplan announced that female desire was a prerequisite for sex, and feminists cheered. But Arndt believes



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➔ this has been a damaging idea. For men, she says, the shame of being constantly sexually rejected is often too devastating to discuss. 'The sense of having to grovel for sex, of having to feel grateful for it, is quite degrading,' says Arndt. 'They put themselves up for rejection again and again, whereas most women won't do that.'

### Mismatched libidos

Arndt was overwhelmed by the sad diary material she received from the men who took part in her survey. 'I am totally at a loss as to what to do. I do love her and I think she loves me but I cannot live like a monk,' one diarist wrote. Another man, fed up with always initiating sex, reported saying to his wife, 'I'll make no more advances until you ask me'. That was eight years ago; they haven't had sex since.

Only 10 female diarists wanted sex more than their partners. But by the end of the project, three of them had ended their relationships.

So why do men stay? An entry from 48-year-old Clive offers some insight. 'I love my wife and my family. All other things are unimportant compared to them. But between my unrequited sexual needs, and her lack of sexual interest, I was going quietly insane. Having an affair wasn't on the agenda. I wanted my wife.'

While men's lust doesn't seem to wane, women's flaming desire can diminish after a few years of sharing a bed. A recent study by psychologist Dietrich Klusman revealed that 60 per cent of 30-year-old women wanted sex often at the beginning of a relationship, but that within four years this figure fell to 50 per cent and after 20 years it dropped to about 20 per cent. The proportion of men wanting regular sex stayed between 60 and 80 per cent.



### 'It's not about lying back and thinking of England'

'Women wrap up sex in all the garbage of the day,' says Arndt. 'They take all their daily irritations to bed.'

Barbara, 58, captured this perfectly in her diary. Her partner told her she couldn't buy a certain type of cheese because it was too expensive. 'These petty irritations build up and, at the end of the day, why would I feel like having sex with him?' she wrote. So how do we get past anger and bitterness? Diarist Alice offers some clues. 'As soon as I let go of resentment, I want to touch him. Sex is a reassuring sign that we are back

in tune. This is about my maturity and letting go of ego.'

Arndt believes the first mistake we make is always to expect or demand mutual pleasure. 'Many loving relationships work best when the "quickie" is part of the repertoire, which often means that the woman gives sex as a gift, without expecting to climax,' she suggests. But the idea of having sex when we're not up for it seems like a betrayal of feminism.

'It's not about lying back and thinking of England,' says Arndt. 'It's about putting the canoe in the water and paddling – and seeing what happens.'

According to recent research and literature, 'seeing what happens' often leads to our own pleasure. Sandra Leiblum, author of *Getting The Sex You*

## Learn to let go

### ● Show willing

'Being in the right mood requires a deliberate decision on the part of women,' says Bettina Arndt. To tune in to our own desire she suggests taking half an hour at the end of the day to 'read a romance, do a bit of pampering or simply to relax and say to yourself, "I will feel like sex and if he presses the right buttons and I will enjoy it".'

### ● Keep it interesting

Esther Perel, author of *Mating In Captivity* (Hodder & Stoughton), believes desire thrives on 'the mysterious, the novel, the unexpected'. One couple who took part in Arndt's survey have kept records of their sex life for 23 years and kept it interesting by doing things such as having tango lessons, 'underwear parades' and sex in the car.

### ● Be seen

'Men write to me saying that seeing their partner naked is one of the great

treats,' says Arndt. 'They're not looking at floppy boobs and cellulite.' Inhibition is a quick way to dampen your own desire, as well as your partner's.

### ● Speak your mind

'Women often aren't easy to please in bed, and they have terrible trouble communicating how they like to be touched,' says Arndt. If you've been hoping he'll pick up on the tensing of a leg muscle or a small groan or an indifferent look, you might have to adopt a more direct approach.

### ● Use your imagination

Alfred Kinsey, researcher and author of *Sexual Behaviour In The Human Male* (Indiana University Press), wrote that 'the male goes through life picking up and responding to visual erotic clues that feed his sexual imagination'. Cultivate your own erotic library to tap in to, rather than bringing daily worries and irritations to bed.

*Want* (Crown), believes fooling around is often the very thing that triggers desire, while Michele Weiner Davis urges women to 'just do it' in her book *The Sex-Starved Marriage* (Simon & Schuster).

Central to this argument is research from Professor Rosemary Basson, from the University of British Columbia, which reveals that many women experience arousal and orgasm if they have sex without any prior desire. Having sex releases a cascade of positive chemicals and hormones, including oxytocin – known to promote bonding and attachment – as well as testosterone, which boosts arousal.

In *The Sex Diaries* some women found that taking the initiative helped them feel more in charge, and less like they were capitulating to the pestering hand.

Natalie, who now lives in London,

wrote: 'Came home late last night from a party and jumped my husband. He was very happy to participate.' But while writing the diary, she also felt compelled to give her husband a taste of his own medicine. She started to proposition him at 'deliberately inconvenient moments'.

### Take the initiative

Arndt insists there is no right or wrong way to behave in the bedroom. She wants to highlight the fact that the road to relationship harmony is often riddled with pot-holes – 'women's distractible libidos, female reticence, male laziness, lack of communication' – that we all need to smooth over.

Writing sex diaries often made couples more conscious about their actions and more considerate of one another. 'I hadn't really thought about the exercise as a therapeutic thing,' says Arndt, 'but the benefits quickly emerged.' Men began to be more understanding of their partners' lives and took more care seducing them. Women began to be more generous.

When Lucy and Noel, both in their late thirties, began writing the diaries, sex was a battleground. By the end of Arndt's project, things were looking up. Lucy wrote: 'He held me all night like he'd really missed me, and I wondered if I'd been so callous as to not recognise his need to be held himself.'

We can make sure the fridge is stocked with his favourite food, remember his dental appointments and pick up his clothes from the dog hair-covered floor but, as the diaries show, all of this will count for nothing unless we make our partner feel wanted, both physically and emotionally. As one diarist so aptly wrote: 'Without sex we'd just be two people living under the same roof.' Desire is a decision – so just do it. ■

