



Sex and relationships editor, Alice Snape, investigates how to rediscover your libido

We live in a state of constant and inescapable comparison – and as we step into the heat of summer, it can feel like *everyone* is living their best (sex) life apart from us. Head onto social media and couples are snogging on sandy beaches. Wander through the park on a balmy evening and twenty-somethings are on first dates holding hands. Stores are full of flesh-baring fashion that once would've got us thinking of hot dates.

Basically, the temperature might be rising, but the only thing making us sweat is lugging home the food shopping. Sometimes, I feel like my sexual desire has packed itself into a suitcase and boarded a one-way flight to a far-flung destination. *Will it ever come back?* I ponder as I settle in for another Netflix marathon on the sofa, while my husband sits in another room. So, I set out to meet some sexperts to see if it's possible to rediscover my lost libido.

Wherefore art thou libido?

My first port of call is psychosexologist Dr Karen Gurney, author of *Mind The Gap: The*

truth about desire and how to futureproof your sex life. I ask her what most commonly reduces desire for women. 'Being in a monogamous long-term relationship,' she asserts. Figures. 'Being with the same partner for a long time can affect desire more than age, menopausal status or stress levels. A large proportion of women – and many men – have no feelings of "out of the blue" desire at all.' According to Dr Gurney,

this is so common it should be considered normal.

Dr Gurney believes the problem is that this just isn't spoken about and that we need to understand how desire actually works. So, although it might stop popping up unexpectedly, that doesn't mean it can't

Our relationship with desire constantly changes

be triggered in the right circumstances. 'Our desire for sex,' she says, 'isn't something that's within us.' In fact, it's dependent on the situation, 'which means our relationship with desire constantly changes, depending on our context'. Dr Gurney recommends working on your "relationship climate", so that means 'really listening, showing empathy, connecting over shared interests →

and spending time together that isn't monotonous,' she says. 'Research tells us that type of time together is associated with a rise in desire.'

Next, I seek out Dr Rebecca Poet, founder of The Women's Hormone Clinic (thewomenshormoneclinic.co.uk). She points out that there's no numerical measure when it comes to sex, which means there can't be a "normal". 'With periods, you have 12 a year, on average, but there's no measure for libido,' she says. When it comes to dealing with libido issues in relationships, she's in agreement with Dr Gurney. 'Talk to each other,' she says. 'It gets to a point where you need to talk, because you both look and feel different from when you first got together. Figure out what you both want and carve out time for non-sexual and sexual intimacy.'

Horniness and hormones

OK, but hormones are also important, right? If you have periods, you might notice changes in your libido throughout your menstrual cycle. 'That's hormone related,' explains Dr Poet. 'As you're coming up to ovulation, oestrogen levels are high, as you're getting to be most fertile, so there's a natural increase in libido as we're driven to reproduce.'

But, while hormones are what underpin our physical sexual response, desire is more of a psychological process than a physical one. 'Desire is a biopsychosocial phenomenon,' says Dr Gurney, which means it happens between our bodies, our minds, in relationships and in society. For example, for a woman in her fifties, trying to separate out all the factors that feed into her desire is almost impossible. Potentially,



there's 'fatigue, hot flushes, feeling less sexually visible in society, being in a long-term relationship and having multiple caregiving responsibilities', says Dr Gurney.

Dr Poet agrees, adding 'self-esteem, body image and environment' to that list. So, where do we go from here?

First, don't ignore the physical side of things. If you've been on HRT for six months, for example, and your libido is still low, speak to a GP. They may refer you to a specialist, who may consider whether your testosterone levels are having an impact on how you're feeling. Women have a smaller quantity of it than men, but testosterone has a role in libido. 'There's also more people being treated for mental health issues,' continues Dr Poet, 'and there is a significant incidence of low libido in women on antidepressants. It's a symptom of the condition, but can also be a side-effect of treatment.'

Solo sex

Both Dr Gurney and Dr Poet agree that masturbation has the potential to set us on a new path when it comes to libido.

You can rediscover what feels good by touching yourself, affirms Dr Poet. 'You might need to stimulate yourself differently to the way you did when you were in your twenties,' she says.

And invest in a vibrator, 'to help boost blood flow to your genitals,' says Dr Poet. 'Don't use those tissues and they may become less responsive. The more you do this, the more likely you are to be responsive, and then be able to respond

when you're with a partner.' Consider the **Lelo 8 Function Sonic Clitoral Massager – Sona Cruise**, £89.

Wetter is better

Vaginal and vulval atrophy, where the tissues diminish and become delicate, is a common symptom for menopausal

women, which can lead to discomfort during intercourse. If you experience this, ask a GP for advice, or consider the Boots Online Doctor Vaginal Dryness Treatment service*.

On a practical note, lube is your new BFF. 'Choose a good quality one,' advises Dr Poet. There are options to suit all needs, from water to silicone and oil-based. There are even versions designed expressly for menopausal women, such as **MegsMenopause Motion Lotion Water Based Intimate Lubricant**, £10 (100ml).

In short, it's rarely just one thing at play. 'Once you've checked the internal workings are as optimised as they can be from a medical view, then it's about tackling everything else,' concludes Dr Poet. This process will involve 'purposeful and intentional action,' which Dr Gurney points out, 'most of us haven't been socialised to consider'. But you should put thought into what you want your sex life to look like, then plan how to get there. Strap in for the journey...

Rediscover what feels good by touching yourself

HOW TO GET YOUR SEXY BACK

Sociologist and psychosexual psychotherapist, Jordan Dixon, reveals all...

TRY SOMETHING NEW

Novelty is a powerful aphrodisiac: go to different places or try a new activity. Sexual desire isn't just centred in and around our genitals, it's the moments we feel alive.

CREATE TIME FOR SEX

Remember the planning that went into making sex happen when you thought it was spontaneous: dressing up, tidying your room... sex doesn't just happen to us.

IT'S ABOUT 'US'

Be kind to your partner. Rather than saying "I and you" say "us". Relationships are our biosphere, there's nothing redeeming about being brutal to our partner.

GOING SOLO

For masturbation, connect with your senses. Go slow. Learn how to taste a hot drink mindfully, so you can flex your sensory skills rather than be lost in your head.

ACCEPTANCE

If you're struggling with body image, ask yourself what standard you're comparing your body to and why. Accepting the reality of what our bodies look like takes work.