

New in Sex: How to Keep It Hot

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Today

We asked for your most pressing sex questions, and you answered. Here are tips, suggestions and advice from top sex educators and therapists about how to keep the flames of desire burning in long-term relationships.

– with reporting by *Fiona Tapp from Ottawa, Canada* 

The struggle is real



1 |

Lust: It ebbs and flows

Most couples experience a strong sexual attraction at the beginning of their relationship. It's often what comes before love and helps couples develop an intimate romantic connection. However, when lust languishes, impacted by day-to-day domesticity, competing careers, housework demands, raising a family, or contending with illness and aging ... your sexual connection can be one of the first casualties.

Find out how to maintain and even improve your sex life, decades into a committed relationship, with advice from the experts.

If you're wishing you had more frequent sex, know that it's a common problem. In fact, differing libidos account for many couples' dissatisfaction with their love lives, which is normal, according to Alana Ogilvie, a licensed marriage and family therapist, certified sex therapist, and the founder of Portland Sex Therapy. "A mismatch in your libidos in a long-term partnership is an incredibly common occurrence; it is normal for your desire to settle after you've been with each other for a while. So, the first thing you can do is stop worrying about it! The sooner you realize it's normal, that there is nothing wrong with either of you, the easier it will be to get creative about coming together."

This approach reminds couples it's a problem they can solve together without judgment or conflict. Stacey Wright, a psychotherapist at Perspectives Center for Holistic Therapy, agrees: "Define the issue as a couple's problem, not the issue of one partner or another. Blame and shame only serve to further the unhelpful pattern and make it even harder to talk about."

Those in long-term relationships weather many storms together. You may have supported each other through different life stages and stressors, including job losses, pregnancies, money troubles or grief. As we get older, illness, injury, or simply advancing age might make sex harder from a purely physical point of view.

Ogilvie says it can be helpful to reframe what sex means to you and to investigate other ways to connect. “Maintaining intimacy is about diversifying how you connect with your partner. Your focus may shift from penetrative intercourse and achieving orgasm to things like pleasure, sensation and sensuality.”

Cultivating a flexible attitude to your changing sexual connection is important, but Ogilvie says it's OK to miss particular sexual acts or virility if you can no longer connect in the same way. “For couples that have to contend with an illness or disability that wasn’t present at the beginning of their relationship, it can be hard to let go of the idea of what you used to have. Acknowledge that something has been lost and that it is OK to grieve, be angry and find yourself disappointed by the change. The more you can accept that this is your new normal, the more likely it is that you will find new and creative ways to be together,” she says.

Put in the work, enjoy the rewards



1 |

Make time for each other

One of the biggest risks for couples in long-term relationships is that they don't spend as much time together as they used to. This can make maintaining a sexual connection difficult from a purely practical sense, but also can diminish the emotional connection forged when you spend quality time together. Arranging date nights, enjoying dinner together or planning a vacation can all help strengthen your bond.

Many people find it difficult to initiate a discussion about sex with their partner, especially if they are feeling dissatisfied. But Wright says, "communication is key," adding that "a couple in a sex drought can feel pressure to break the drought, and may feel undesired and unwanted."

Opening yourself up and being vulnerable leads to a deeper connection both in and out of the bedroom. Honesty and vulnerability go hand in hand with intimacy.

2 |

Increase encouraging factors

If you both agree that you'd like to have sex more often or improve the quality of your encounters, it's important to create an environment that encourages loving intimacy rather than just hoping it happens. "I recommend couples find their encouraging factors, the things that make it easier to move towards sex, and identify their inhibiting factors, the things that move them away from sex. With fewer barriers and more signs that sex is the way to go, it's more likely you will end up in a sexy scenario with your partner," Ogilvie says.

Encouraging factors might include lots of opportunities to kiss and cuddle during the day, a date spent together, or even a clean house so that you can concentrate on intimacy rather than worrying about the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. Inhibiting factors might include a stressful day at work, pain, illness or emotional distance between the two of you.

3 |

The myth of romantic spontaneity

Wright says couples should schedule "intimacy dates" into their calendar to help break a sex drought. "These may be conversational, sensual or sexual in nature. The couple can focus on learning from one another with a beginner's mind." She suggests couples investigate the type of touch that their partner enjoys the most and ask what they would like to introduce (or re-introduce) to their relationship.

She also says it's important not to hold on to romantic notions of sex having to be spontaneous. "Spontaneity can be seen as more exciting or ideal but, in reality, life can be hectic and busy. And when under a lot of stress, as most are in our society, sex is not going to spontaneously happen."

4 |

Adjust your expectations

Wright also says it's important to remain realistic. If your sex life has hit a bump in the road, you can't expect fireworks overnight. "Not every time is going to be great for both partners. It may be just OK, or even lousy occasionally. Realize that the flame of desire is stoked by a regular rhythm of sexual experiences. It can dim when sex is not regular and can be smothered by avoidance, anticipatory anxiety or performance-oriented intercourse," she says.

5 |

Prepare for potential problems

Sex droughts, mismatched libidos and differing sexual needs are all normal challenges that couples in long-term relationships can experience. They need not suggest any deeper compatibility issues and can be relatively simple to solve. However, Ogilvie says that introspection can reveal other problems in your marriage or relationship.

"Sexual mismatches are often the catalyst for other problems and concerns too. What starts off as a normal amount of settling into your sexual desire can lead to negative beliefs about yourself and/or your partner, which in turn can lead to emotional disconnection, sexual dysfunction, body image issues, an increase in pornography use or infidelity."

What can couples do?



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Take off the pressure

It might sound counterintuitive, but Ogilvie says that if you are experiencing a sex drought and want to re-establish your physical connection, it can be helpful to temporarily ban sex.

“I will often recommend taking sex off the table for a while, as it can make it easier to be affectionate with each other and find your way back to sexual intimacy. You’re more likely to focus on the sensation, not the destination. With less pressure comes a greater capacity to experience pleasure; affection turns to sensuality which turns to more heightened levels of arousal, which leads to sex,” she says. The key, Ogilvie continues, is to start small and focus on enjoying pleasure in the moment.

2 |

Change your view

Wright reminds us of the complexity and variance in human sexual needs and desires. “A first step is accepting that there is no one ‘right’ level of libido or desire. Partners may have become stuck in cultural or social stereotypes of what healthy sexuality is supposed to look like. One or both partners may believe that sex is simple and if not, something is wrong. Sexuality research tells us that sexuality is multi-causal and multidimensional, and includes desire, pleasure, eroticism and satisfaction,” she says.

3 |

Have fun

If you’re feeling frustrated about your sexual relationship, it’s important to remember that reconnecting is a chance to play together. “I recommend that couples have fun learning about their preferences for types of touch and pleasure,” Wright says. “They can develop their own ‘tasting menu’ of favorites that they can choose from to define a pleasurable, satisfying and revitalizing sexual experience together, even without penetration. This may involve mutual self-stimulation, sensual touch, manual stimulation of your partner, and letting go of old and unhelpful ideas of sex as a pass-fail test. Instead, good sex is giving and receiving pleasurable touch,” she says.

4 |

Try something new

Edwina Caito, a columnist, podcaster and self-described “sexpert,” says that simple changes can help re-establish a romantic and sexual connection with your partner. “Take the time to press your bodies close together, look into one another’s eyes, and really kiss. Keep those goosebumps coming and sparks alive.” She also suggests couples sleep naked to maintain an intimate bond and spark sexual desire, as well as share their fantasies and perhaps visit a sex shop for some new toys.


“The simple act of getting online and scrolling through the wide selection of sex toys can be arousing in and of itself,” Caito says. “Additionally, you may learn something new about your partner. For instance, maybe he is curious about prostate stimulation, or maybe she’s always wanted to try a sex swing. No matter what you learn during your shopping trip, choosing a new and exciting toy will keep that sexual intimacy alive while adding a whole new dimension to your lovemaking.”

5 |

See a sex therapist

Couples shouldn’t shy away from seeking professional help, Wright says. “A sex therapist can help couples navigate the issues that brought them to this point in the relationship. They can also provide education and a framework for addressing the issues.”

Maintaining a satisfying sexual connection that lasts a lifetime requires honesty, vulnerability and communication. Make the effort to connect deeply with your partner and you’ll both enjoy a physically and emotionally rich bond for years to come.



Your Opinion Matters

Have you found a new way to keep the spark alive in a long-term relationship? Share your idea with us and we may cover it next.

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