



*The Cure for*  
**SEXLESS  
MARRIAGES**

By Elizabeth Kuster

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Twenty percent of married couples in the US haven't had sex in the past year. If that's true for you, we have a plan.

**L**OVE AND marriage may go together like a horse and carriage, but sex and marriage?

That's a different story, according to the latest research. Data scientist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz discovered last year that "sexless marriage" is one of the most-Googleed phrases when it comes to marriage gripes in the US. A survey commissioned by the Austin Institute for the Study of Family and Culture found that 12% of married couples hadn't had sex in the previous 3 months. Another survey revealed that, on average, 20% of spouses hadn't had sex in the past year.

These findings come as no surprise to sex and marriage experts. "Sexless relationships are the No. 1 issue I deal with, particularly in couples over 40," says Ian Kerner, a New York City-based sex therapist. "That's because our sexuality naturally evolves in response to the health, hormonal, and lifestyle changes we all experience as we age."

While this transition may be normal, it leaves many people wondering whether their sex life—and their marriage—is in trouble. Here, sex therapists, ob-gyns, and sex researchers explain what a sexless marriage really is, why desire ebbs, and what couples can do to regain physical intimacy.

### **What Is "Sexless" Anyway?**

The answer isn't simple. Some experts say that couples who have sex nine times or fewer each year are sexless.

Others argue that no outsider can deem a marriage sexless since preferences in frequency are personal.

"For me, it has less to do with numbers and more with a spouse's perception of those numbers," says Kerner. "A couple may still find each other attractive and want to have sex, but life keeps getting in the way, so they're just in a dry spell. But in a sexless relationship, there's a real rift between you and your partner. You feel like you're a million miles apart."

Cathy (not her real name), a 51-year-old from San Diego, knows that feeling all too well: She's been in a sexless marriage for 14 years. "It's less lonely to be alone than to lie next to a person who supposedly loves you but doesn't want you to touch him," she says. "Over the years, the gap between you becomes a canyon you can't cross."

Another reason the numbers don't always mean much is that for some couples, "nine times or fewer" may not be a bad thing. "There are people who only have sex once a year on their anniversary, and they're satisfied with that," says Ball State University sex educator and researcher Justin Lehmler.

### **Mismatched Libidos**

If "sexless" is too vague, there's another term that may be more useful when evaluating your physical connection: sexual desire discrepancy (SDD). Simply put, it means that one partner doesn't want to have sex as often as the other does—and the larger the discrepancy, the more likely it is that one spouse will be unhappy.

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that men need  
more sex  
and women  
want less.  
Not necessarily.



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Weight gain, exhaustion, and boredom can turn down the heat in your bedroom.



## “I’VE BEEN IN A SEXLESS MARRIAGE FOR YEARS, AND I’M OK WITH IT.”

My husband and I are about to celebrate our 17th wedding anniversary, and we haven’t had sex in 9 months.

Even when I first met Dave, we didn’t have the fiery kind of passion I’d had with previous partners. But, frankly, that’s what attracted

me to him. The other guys I’d dated were rock star/poet/alcoholic nightmares, and things always ended badly. It was nice to be with one of those guys who goes to work, goes to the gym, and comes home—someone I could trust and depend

on. We did have sex, but it wasn’t the tear-your-clothes-off kind. I was OK with that because I valued the emotional connection.

When we got married, we were doing it at least once a month, sometimes more. Then, after our first child was born, the dry spells got longer and longer. We’ve gone a year. I had gained 54 pounds and had a C-section, and Dave was

Many people used to blame SDD on inherent differences in male and female libidos: It was assumed that men need more sex and women want less. But research hasn’t borne that out, says Kristen Mark, director of the Sexual Health Promotion Lab at the University of Kentucky. “Our studies found that men and women are equally likely to have lower sexual desire,” she says. Same-sex couples can also experience SDD.

But beliefs in this stereotype persist and can take a major emotional toll on a marriage. “For years, I thought I was a freak because I wanted sex more than my husband did,” says Cathy. “I was raised to believe that all guys want is sex, so I started to wonder, *What’s wrong with me?* I’d wear sexy outfits for my husband and get no response from him at all. Nothing I tried worked, so I blamed myself. The damage it does to you is almost impossible to describe.”

traveling 3 weeks out of the month. I was focused on our baby, so I didn’t miss our closeness, and eventually the lack of physical intimacy became the new normal.

Does our relationship suffer for the lack of sex? It depends on how you define *relationship*. Our partnership is strong. Our love for our children is strong. We have a good division of labor that fluctuates, but we always

work together to get stuff done. Dave left his job some months ago, and we’ve been going to the movies on Friday afternoons, and that makes me feel closer to him. But then, I’ve never felt *not* close to him—even though the closeness doesn’t lead to us hopping in the sack. In fact, I’m not even interested in having sex with Dave. I’m not sexually attracted to him. He doesn’t spark

my pheromones. He’s my children’s father and their soccer coach.

The way I see it, you meet someone when you’re young and slowly you both change, and that changes the relationship—but not necessarily in a bad way. Things are good. Dave and I have a rhythm, even if our rhythm doesn’t involve sex.

—Nora (not her real name), 45, San Diego

## The Comparison Trap

Another challenge is the assumption that other people’s sex lives are better than our own. We also compare our current situation to the sex we used to have. “When people reflect on their sex lives, they usually remember peak experiences when sex was spontaneous and new,” says Kerner. “But it isn’t fair to compare your current sex life to the one you had when you and your partner were infatuated with each other.”

It’s a problem that James (another pseudonym) of Cedar Rapids, IA, struggles with. “It sometimes feels like my wife views sex with me as a chore,” he says. “It’s unsettling, because she used to really enjoy sex. We had a very physical relationship in the beginning. We’d have sex 20 or 25 times a month.”

If you’ve gotten stuck in the comparison trap, it may help to view your current sex life from a quality-versus-quantity perspective. “There are plenty of married couples who go through the

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## IS YOUR MARRIAGE REALLY SEXLESS?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, it may be time to seek help.

### Did you and your spouse have sex fewer than 10 times in the past year?

(Skip this if the answer is yes but you're both OK with your number.)

**Is lack of sex an ongoing problem?** Occasional dry spells are normal, but if it's constantly an issue, that's cause for concern.

**When you think back to the last time you had sex with your spouse, do you view it as a negative experience?** "Yes" or "I can't remember it" could spell trouble.

**Does the lack of a sex life bother you or your partner?** If either of you is miserable, it's time to

talk with a professional about your sexlessness.

### Do you and your spouse rarely kiss and cuddle?

Studies show that people who engage in more affectionate touching are happier in their relationships as well as more sexually satisfied.

**Is lack of sex making you feel bad about yourself?** If so, your self-esteem and self-worth may erode over time.

**Do you rarely feel like your spouse wants to have sex because he wants to be intimate with you?** If it seems like he just wants to hit the sheets because he's

horny, that's going to have a negative effect on your relationship.

### Do you feel disconnected from your spouse when you do have sex?

If the experience feels very emotionally intimate, it's a good sign.

### Does it seem like your sexual pleasure doesn't matter to your partner?

Research has found that women who feel their partner values their pleasure are happier and more sexually satisfied.

### Are you often not really in the mood during sex?

Lack of desire could indicate a health condition or relationship issues.

motions and have 'duty sex,'" says Debby Herbenick, director of the Indiana University Center for Sexual Health Promotion. "They may have frequent sex, but they don't really enjoy it." And that doesn't make their marriage better than a sexless couple's union. If you and your husband make love only eight times a year but it's always intimate and satisfying for both of you, that might be preferable to having emotionally distant sex every week.

### When Desire Goes MIA

It's not unusual for even the most sexually in-sync couples to experience SDD. Over time, libido can dip for physical, mental, or emotional reasons. "There's a lot going on as we age," says Lehmler. "You can end up with a perfect storm of factors that might undermine your or your partner's interest in sex." Some culprits to consider:

- **Illness.** Back pain, arthritis, and depression become more common with age—and that can make sex challenging, says Mary Jane Minkin, a clinical professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive sciences at the Yale School of Medicine. "It can be the disease itself that limits sexual activity or the medication required to treat the illness," she says. (To find out whether a med you're taking could be to blame, see "5 Drugs That Can Hurt Your Sex Life" on the next page.)

Men have a unique libido-lowering concern to deal with: erectile dysfunction. "Some men may talk themselves out of their desire if they're worried they can't perform," says Herbenick.

- **Weight gain.** It becomes harder to get fit and stay fit after 40, so it's not unusual for spouses of both sexes to find they've gotten heavier. If you've put on extra pounds, you may not have as much energy for sex or you might feel self-conscious about your appearance. If your partner is the one who gained weight, you might not find him as physically attractive as you used to.

- **Tiredness.** Fatigue is a symptom of many health conditions, and it's also a common side effect of several medications—and of modern life in general. But spending more time in bed (asleep) could help your libido. "Sleep is important for your sexual health because it's related to both sexual function and your desire for sex," says Lehmler.

- **Stress.** Constant tension can make it hard to concentrate on sex, and it may even trigger hormonal changes that could diminish libido. There may be an evolutionary component to the problem, too. "When you're stressed, the fight-or-flight response encoded in our bodies is mediated through the same tissues that mediate sexual responsiveness, dampening desire and telling your body that you should be paying attention to something other than sex," says holistic gynecologist Eden Fromberg, a clinical assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at SUNY Downstate College of Medicine.

- **Boredom.** This is a big issue in sexless marriages, according to Minkin. "Couples who have been together 10 or 15 years may not do new things," she says. "They don't experiment."

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• **Anger and resentment.** Emotional baggage—whether it’s in the form of old grudges, lingering hostility and resentment, jealousy, or blame—can do a number on your libido. “Some people get upset at their spouse for very big things, like cheating and lying,” says Herbenick. “For others, it’s ‘he treats me like a maid.’”

### Reigniting Your Sex Life

If you and your partner feel more like roommates than lovers, this advice can help you find your spark again.

• **Talk with your spouse about how your SDD began.** It won’t be the easiest conversation you’ve ever had, but it’s

## 5 DRUGS THAT CAN HURT YOUR SEX LIFE

**Antihistamines** These drugs dry up your sinuses, but they can also sap moisture from other mucous membranes—including the vagina.

**Birth control pills** They limit the (already small) amount of libido-boosting testosterone your ovaries produce, which hampers desire.

**Blood pressure medications** Antihypertensives can lead to erectile dysfunction.

**Pain medications** They numb pain—and all other sensations, including the sexual variety. The stronger the medication you’re taking and the higher the dose, the greater the effect on your desire.

**Psychiatric medications** The selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) class of antidepressants—which includes Prozac, Zoloft, and Lexapro—is infamous for dampening libido.

vital to discuss the causes—without blame. “It’s important not to put the burden on the partner who has lower desire,” says Mark. “Couples have to meet in the middle.” If a health issue is the culprit, see your doctor. Couples counseling or sex therapy can also help.

• **Flip your script.** Sometimes a change in perspective can make a difference. “If your partner says, ‘I’m horny and I need sex,’ you might think, *Ugh. He just wants to get off. That doesn’t make me feel wanted.*,” says Herbenick. “But what if you changed that to *He finds me really hot or He really loves me?*”

• **Pencil it in at least once a week.** “It sounds unromantic, but when couples schedule sex, they’re prepared,” says Lehmler. “They know it’s going to happen. They can shut off work and other stresses earlier in the evening so they’re ready and relaxed.” (Bonus: Advance scheduling can help build anticipation and act as foreplay.)

• **Just do it.** One advantage women have over men is that they can choose to have sex even when they’re not really in the mood. That doesn’t sound like a positive, but doing so may boost your desire, says Minkin. “If a woman’s attitude is ‘I’m going to start having sex with my husband because that’s going to increase our intimacy and improve our relationship,’ that increased sexual contact can actually trigger her libido,” she explains.

• **Share your fantasies.** If you feel shy about giving your husband the details, Kerner recommends telling him that you had a dream about him. “Say, ‘I had the sexiest daydream about you at work



If kids and other stressors have driven a wedge between you, Step 1 is to talk about it—without blame.

today. I don’t know what was going on in my unconscious, but wow, we were...’ and then fill in the blank with something a little surprising,” he says.

• **Tweak your sexual routine.** Even small changes can turn up the heat. “You don’t have to put on a production,” says sex therapist and researcher Christine Milrod. “Something as minor as a foot rub can make a difference.” Take sexual inspiration wherever you find it. “My friend discovered that watching sex scenes in the show *Scandal* got her interested in her husband again,” says Mark.

• **Learn each other’s turn-ons.** They may have changed over the years. Milrod suggests that each spouse make a list in private with three headings: *What I find sexually exciting*, *What I might find*

*exciting*, and *What I absolutely refuse to try*. Then compare lists to identify activities you’re both willing to explore.

• **Redefine sex.** It doesn’t have to be vaginal, and it doesn’t have to end in orgasm (that adds too much pressure). And don’t discount the value of cuddling. Even intimate acts that don’t include touching—reading a book out loud to each other, enjoying a candlelit dinner—can help you get back in sync.

• **Don’t give up.** “People who have been married for a long time might think sex is a no-brainer because they know what buttons to push,” says Milrod. “But it’s actually the opposite. The longer you’re with someone, the higher the expectations and the more effort it takes. So don’t get discouraged.” 12

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