

Intimacy

The complete illustrated guide to
love, sex and living together

Edited by Dr Rosalie Burnett

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The Mature Years

AS WE GROW OLDER, does our love for our partners change? If so, in what way? Does it become more or less, or is it of a different kind? Early studies of sexual behavior supported the common opinion that our sex drive, and along with it our capacity to love passionately, declines rapidly with age. This can make it seem that the onus is entirely on companionship and mutual respect to sustain a happy, loving relationship when, one day, youthful passion burns itself out. In fact, however, for most mature couples, love and sexuality have stood the test of time well. Moreover, men and women who enjoy such fulfilling relationships are more likely to remain mentally and physically healthy in old age.

How long does love last?

Broadly, we experience two distinct forms of love – a passionate love and a companionate one (see *Ch 5*). Love is passionate when emotionally intense and focused on sensual excitement. Companionate love is less intense. It describes the affection people feel for those with whom their lives are deeply entwined. Can love of either kind last for life or will it inevitably wither and die?

While many marriages end in failure, as the high divorce rates show, for those couples who do stay together love can,

on the evidence of recent surveys, be unexpectedly robust. Research data and common experience concur in showing that couples start out loving their partners intensely. In a series of studies in the United States, over 1,000 dating couples, 100 newlyweds and 400 long-married women were asked how they felt about their partners. Steady daters and newlyweds in their early twenties reported feeling “a great deal” of passionate love and “a great deal” to “a tremendous amount” of companionate love for each other. However, even after 30 years or more of marriage, women aged 50 and upward still said they felt “some” passionate love and “a great deal” of companionate love for their partners.

Asked whether they had feelings of resentment or hostility toward their partners, newlywed couples replied “none” or “very little,” while the responses of older married women differed only slightly, from “very little” to “some.” Interestingly, these two groups gave the same replies, but the other way round, when asked how much depression they experienced in their relationships: newlywed couples said they experienced “very little” to “some” depression; older married women “none” or “very little.”

EBBS AND FLOWS OF LIVING AND LOVING

■ *In an interview he gave before his 70th birthday, the Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman spoke for many people of mature years when giving his views on life and mortality. As the river of life approached the falls beyond it, he said, it held no fears for him, only fascination and beauty.*

To the young the prospect of growing old can appear terrifying – thinning hair, unromantic sagging bodies, people who, alone once their children have left home, and with their friends and relatives becoming ill and dying around them, have little to look forward to in the way of either love or life.

To those who have reached maturity this picture is as far from the truth as is the romanticized view of youth. As shy, pimply adolescents, our first experiences of love and sex were often marred by fear and ignorance. Unrealistic expectations of our relationships distressed us, made us behave stupidly, and in some cases this resulted in disastrous marriages.

Many years later we are much wiser. Having learned by our mistakes, we know how easily love can go wrong. Many of us have learned to live alone if necessary and to supplement our lives with a rich mix of friends. We have grown more tolerant of ourselves and others and are happier for it. We know what it is reasonable to expect from a partner and what it is not. Now, we can enjoy all-round richer relationships and have learned to bounce back from the inevitable surprises and disasters of life.



MARITAL SATISFACTION IN LATER YEARS

■ *Ups and downs of family life influence the amount of satisfaction couples feel at different stages of their life together. The years after children leave home are among the most contented. Only a minority of couples are saddened by a sense of an “empty nest,” and then only temporarily. In most cases, more time for shared leisure activities allows partners to begin very quickly to rediscover*

*each other and become closer. The contrasts in satisfaction shown here are relative: they do not mean that most couples are dissatisfied with mid-marriage, only that they are more satisfied in earlier and later years (see also *Ch 10*).*

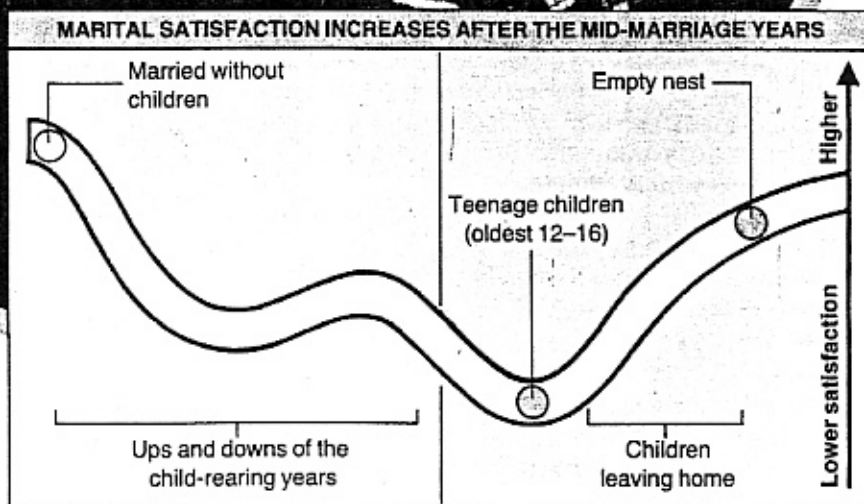
In the mature years is passion only a memory? ■ *Happy couples go on loving one another, sexually and as companions, far into their later years* ■ *Older women report less depression about relationships than newlyweds.*

While both passionate and companionate love may decline from the time of courtship and the first year of marriage, the decline is far less drastic, and relationships are potentially far more durable, than you might suppose. All partners experience some negative feelings, but these

are frequently too weak to destroy a close relationship or marriage. Indeed sociologists have found that events within the family cycle have a much greater effect than aging on satisfaction with married life. For instance, couples are least happy and under the greatest strain when there are children in the home, especially teenagers. Despite such problems, prospects are good for couples who stay deeply in love throughout their lives.



127



The myth of sex and aging

"Put a bean in a jar on your wedding night every time you make love and go on adding beans in a similar way for the first year of marriage. Then start *subtracting* a bean every time you make love. There will still be some beans left in the jar when you die." This old adage typifies conventional wisdom on the decline of sexual activity with age. Pioneer studies of sexual behavior in the late 1940s and early fifties such as the Kinsey Report supported this view, which went unchallenged until the late 1970s.

According to Kinsey, nearly all men and women up to the age of 40 regularly had intercourse with their partners, but after that the frequency fell away sharply. Couples in their thirties reported making love twice as often as couples in their fifties. Six percent of men aged 60 and as many as 20 percent of women of similar age claimed that they no longer had any sexual relations.

Later researchers found that, by the age of 70, nearly a quarter of all men and a half of all women were sexually inactive. The differences in sexual activity between men and women of the same age were largely attributed to the fact that husbands tended to be older than their wives and that it was generally the male partner who determined the frequency of sexual relations.

Setting the record straight

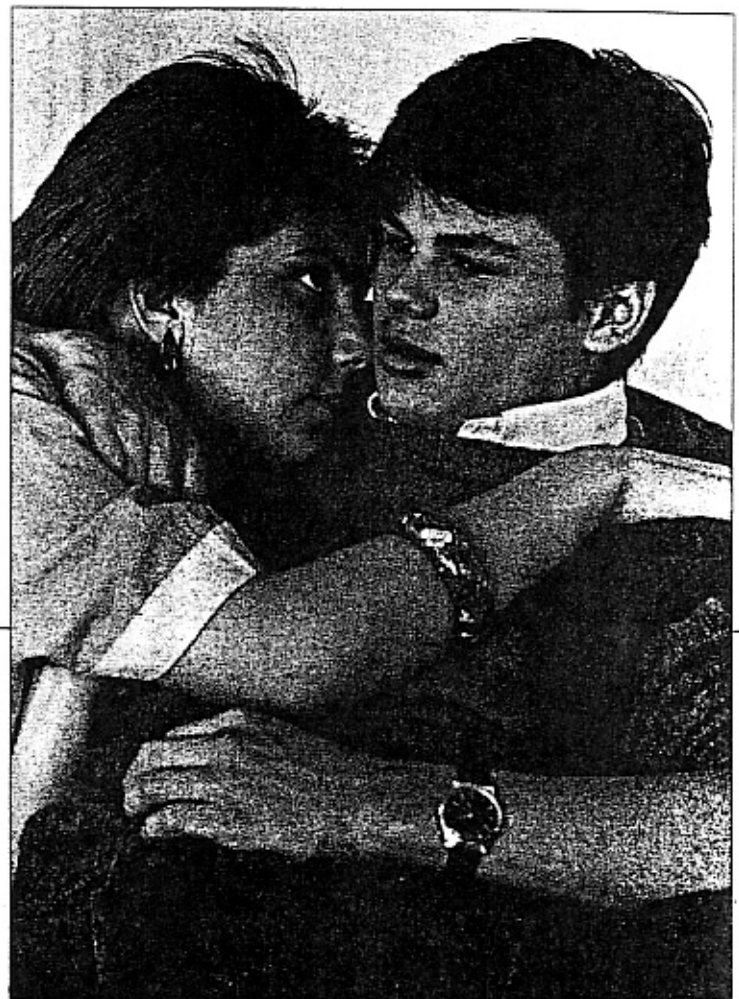
Experts have since criticized Kinsey for using small, unrepresentative samples (including elderly people who were clinic patients) that quite possibly led him to false conclusions. For instance, his findings on levels of sexual activity among 80-year-olds, as compared with 40-year-olds, made no allowance for the fact that there were proportionally far more 80-year-old widows and widowers with no available partners. Kinsey also failed to take into account

Age is no barrier to happiness or an active sex life ■ Research suggests that there may be more snuggling, cuddling and petting among older couples than among younger ones

■ Comparisons of the same mature couples at different times in their marriages find little decline in sexual activity.

the different attitudes of different generations toward sex. People interviewed in the 1950s at the age of 20 would be unlikely to share the same values or have the same sexual habits at the age of 60 as men and women born in the Victorian era who were 60 at the time of being interviewed. Likewise, people brought up in the more liberal 1960s and 1970s might be more sexually active throughout their lives.

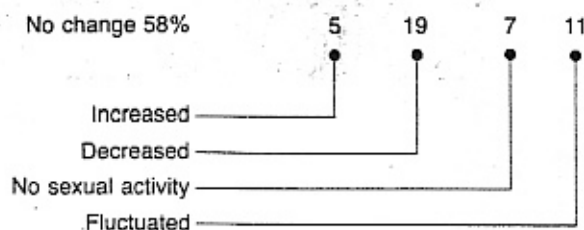
To arrive at a truer picture of contemporary sexual behavior, and to reflect the fact that our attitudes change



DOES SEXUAL ACTIVITY DECREASE?

■ American researchers interviewed married men and women ranging in age from 46 to 71 about their sexual activity. Six years later they interviewed

them again. The results suggest that for most middle-aged and older couples, passing years do not affect sexual activity.



■ Awkward uncertainty often dampens early encounters with the opposite sex ABOVE. Our relationship skills grow as we come to terms with our sexuality, and RIGHT interactions with the opposite sex become more spontaneous. And despite myths of dying passion, studies

have found sex to be a vital part of many older couples' relationships. Earlier reports of sharply declining sexual activity in later years have been criticized for relying on inaccurate research methods.

with time, the most recent studies have followed the same couples over a fixed term. One group of respondents made up of 140 couples aged between the mid-forties and early seventies recorded little change in their levels of sexual activity over a six-year period. The results of another study, carried out on 800 men and women aged between 60 and 91, showed that they retained their interest in sex, often desired it and enjoyed sexual relations on average 1.4 times a week – the same frequency as reported by Kinsey's 40-year-olds. Generally, it seems that, except for reasons such as loss of partner or ill health, our sexual activity does not decline substantially with age, as Kinsey believed. Some researchers have suggested that snuggling, cuddling and petting may be more frequent among older couples than they are among the young.

Do our expectations change?

Interviews with a wide cross section of couples in the United States showed that, whatever their age or sex, they expected very similar things from their partners and from their relationships.

The most desirable personal qualities listed were social grace, intelligence and good appearance. Emotional rewards included liking and loving, showing understanding and concern, acceptance and appreciation of each other, physical expressions of affection and sexual fulfillment, faithfulness, a feeling of security and the confidence to plan ahead.

Other rewards arose simply from the day-to-day business of living together. These included someone to share the responsibilities for finances, for running the house and for



Relationships can be crucially important to older couples ■ *In the first six months of bereavement, widowers have more heart attacks* ■ *Older women who are happy with their partners have better health.*

making decisions, and having a constant companion who is sociable, good with friends and relatives and can help with such things as remembering special occasions.

Benefits of a healthy relationship

Love and intimacy are basic human needs, and probably essential to our physical and mental well-being (see *Ch 1*). In particular, loving relationships can be critical for older couples, offering stability and a degree of self-protection. In the first place, it is better to have than not have a partner in old age. Those without are more likely to suffer from stress-related illnesses or behavior that will hasten their own

death, such as heavy smoking or drug or alcohol abuse. Researchers have found that, during the first six months of bereavement, the death rate among widowers aged 55 or more was 40 percent higher than for the age group as a whole. After six months, the rates gradually fell back to normal. Since the increase in death rate among recent widowers is mainly in the form of heart disease, it is often called the "broken heart syndrome."

Almost as important as the presence or absence of an

ADVICE FROM GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY COUPLES

■ *When couples celebrating their Golden Anniversaries were asked their secrets of success and what they had learned in 50 years, they gave answers like these:*

- *I started out expecting marriage to be like something out of a romantic novel – he would be like a Mr Rochester, strong and protective, and I would always be gentle and yielding like Jane Eyre. Finally, I learned that just wouldn't work. When he tried to push me around and I let him, he lost all respect for me. Give-and-take includes making a stand sometimes. That way, you keep your respect for each other.*
- *I learned how different two people can really be. For the first dozen years of marriage, I made myself miserable. I thought that if she really loved me, she would like to sit by the fire and spend her day planning long romantic trips. When she didn't, I couldn't believe it! How could she not want to be with me when all I wanted was to be with her? Now I realize she is just different – she is wired up to be on the go. When she's not tidying up, she wants to spend time alone, reading. I've just had to learn to love her for what she is, not for what I was convinced my wife should be.*
- *Actually we don't have too much in common. Before my husband retired, we led separate lives: mine was at home, his was at the office. I did everything I could to save him any trouble. I told the children "Don't bother your father." That was a big mistake because he never really got close to*



them. When they left home, we had nothing. Luckily, we have a second chance now – we've got grandchildren who we spend a lot of time with, going for walks or to the movies.

- *I couldn't stand to see her suffer. I'd withdraw right away if I thought what I had to say would make her cry. Now I realize people don't really grow up if they never suffer. You know the old saying "Without a hurt, the heart is hollow." It's often better to say your piece than to bottle things up because you're afraid of hurting the other person. Now I'm less worried about her or the children, we can get a lot closer. I've also learned how to listen without trying to control or fix things all the time.*

▲ **Long life and good fortune.** *Celebrating their parents' 60 years together, a French family sing a traditional song, sprinkle the couple with champagne through a piece of linen, in a traditional good luck ritual, and wish them long life. Research confirms that sharing old age with a partner improves our chances of remaining physically and mentally healthy. The more satisfying the relationship, the more likely it is to have this beneficial effect.*

intimate partner in your maturity is the quality of that relationship. Interviews with some 240 American women aged between 50 and 82 showed that love, sex and general satisfaction with the relationship greatly affected the women's health. The happier and more contented they were with

their partners, the fewer symptoms of self-consciousness, depression and anxiety they showed. A loving, satisfying relationship not only makes for greater happiness in later years, but also improves your chances of enjoying good health, remaining in sound mind and living longer. RLR EH



131



A TIME FOR REFLECTION

■ *ABOVE* Bound together by shared experiences, an elderly couple enjoy peaceful companionship as they watch the tide. Discussing old times with a partner is one way of fulfilling the need most elderly people feel to reflect on their lives. Putting past events into perspective helps us to make sense of our lives, and this is a key to contentment in old age. We reflect on what we have contributed to the world or how we will be remembered. *LEFT* For this woman facing her last years

without a partner, a photograph album provides the stimulus to reflection on the life she shared with her husband. Memories of the relationship they had help to sustain her sense of worth and her sense of having something important to say about family history.