

The love & sex issue

THEY'RE BORED IN BED

THEY WANT MORE SEX

THEY JUST DON'T WANT IT WITH THE PEOPLE THEY'RE MARRIED TO

Sound like another exposé of adulterous men? Think again. A generation of women are rejecting monogamy and challenging what it means to be in a modern marriage.

Ben Machell reports

am sitting in the plush drawing room of a country house in Dorset listening to three women, all in their forties, talk about sex. “My problem,” says one of them, “is that after eight years of marriage and spending most days wrapped up in the needs of my two young children, the last thing I feel like doing when I get into bed is making love.”

It is, she continues, depressing. “I wish I wanted sex more, because when my husband and I do get round to it, we’re so much nicer to each other,” she says – cue understanding smiles and nods from the others. “But I’m also afraid that, without it, either of us might stray. We both swear we would never have an affair, but when the intimacy dwindles? I imagine it can’t take much to be drawn in elsewhere.”

To my right, curled up on a sofa, is Michelle. The sex has evaporated in her 20-year marriage, she tells us. Once, Sunday afternoons were reserved for it. Now, she spends weekends chained to the website of a new business she recently helped to launch, while her husband plays golf. She admits that her eye is beginning to wander, but that she is also desperate for her marriage not to fail. What can she do? Beside her, Sarah sips herbal tea. Sarah’s just a bit, well ... bored of the sex she’s having with her partner. They’ve been together for ten years. She reckons they might be best off separating.

The reason I’m listening to Sarah and Michelle talk about their sex lives is because they are on a retreat called Shh, short for “Sensual, Healing, Harmony”, a four-day course that costs £2,900. It’s a bit like being on a posh spa break, but instead of pedicures and facials, they’re having group discussions with a sexologist, as well as one-to-one therapies including acupuncture and breathing exercises. “We want to help you get your glow back,” promises the Shh website. “Reclaim your sensuality, femininity and sexuality. Restore your confidence and self-esteem. Live your full sensual potential.”

Some readers, at this point, may find themselves rolling their eyes. But just as many, I suspect, will have found their ears pricking up. There is a huge demand for what Shh is offering and, since its launch 18 months ago, it has been fully booked, and has a lengthy waiting list. And it’s just one of many such courses currently drawing clientele. At a retreat in Seaford, East Sussex, you can pay to attend a two-day Conscious Relationships workshop overseen by “intimacy coach” Jan Day. Here, in a pleasant, airy room, three

couples – two in their forties; one in their twenties – are dressed in yoga clothes. Each man is touching his partner, rubbing her back, stroking her neck, caressing her breasts, while responding to her instructions: “Yes,” “No,” “Please,” “Pause,” “Stop.”

“Learn to listen, really tune in, feel trust,” Day tells them. Then she asks them to make a wish list of their sexual desires, sit opposite each other and read them out one at a time. “This is not, ‘Oh my God, he wants me to dress up as a nurse!’” she instructs. “I want you to really meet each other, talk about it, ask, ‘What does that look like?’”

Among the couples are Sarah and David. They are here because, after seven years, he wants to become more experimental in the bedroom. As a result, she’s feeling insecure and they’ve been on the brink of splitting up. Amanda and Greg, meanwhile, have only been a couple for a year, but they’re already planning ahead. If they are going stay together, they want sex to be the best it can be. Both work out with personal trainers. Why not invest in an intimacy coach, too?

Day has done this kind of work with couples for more than two decades. But over the past five years, she says, the number of people coming to her has increased

‘MEN HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET AWAY WITH A LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR KIND OF SEX’

dramatically – more than threefold. So what exactly is happening here? And I don’t mean what’s happening in terms of the activities these people are doing: the talking and touching and tantric breathing exercises. I mean, why is all this happening right now? How long after you’ve been in a relationship with someone do you suggest signing up with an intimacy coach? Why are regular couples spending time and money trying to spice up their sex lives? How come women are parting with the best part of three grand in order to achieve their “full sensual potential”?

On one level, the answer is straightforward. All these people are in monogamous



A scene from the film adaptation of Fifty Shades of Grey

relationships, and they’re all desperate to do everything they can to keep it that way, to maximise the amount of sex taking place within their marriage to minimise the amount of sex taking place outside it. But this just leads to a far more complicated question: why, then, does monogamy seem to represent such a challenge? Because, although we pay lip service to the idea – the ideal, really – of being part of a couple, faithful for ever, actually seeing it through is another thing. Committing yourself to one person is hard, and it only seems to be getting harder.

The evidence? Well, when it comes to stats, you can more or less take your pick: in the UK, we have one of the highest rates of family breakdown in the western world, with only 68.9 per cent of children living with both parents. In England and Wales, 42 per cent of marriages end in divorce, which is actually a slight drop on recent years, but then, a lot fewer people are going to the altar in the first place. More of us are cohabiting, but that’s even less stable than marriage. Reliable statistics relating to infidelity are, perhaps understandably, harder to come by, although one US study suggests that between 20-40 per cent of heterosexual men and 20-25 per cent

of heterosexual women will have an affair. A UK poll commissioned by one dating website came up with similar numbers, with 25 per cent of married men and 18 per cent of married women admitting to having cheated on their partners. While these may be approximate figures, the fact that a million people each year are drawn into the family justice system could not be more concrete. You log on to Facebook and notice yet another friend’s relationship status is suddenly up in the air. “It’s complicated.” It certainly is.

And it’s only becoming more so. At a time when our relationships have never seemed less stable, new factors are combining to put them under even greater strain. Social media can serve as a Petri dish for unfaithfulness, presenting us with more faces, more people, more options, than ever before. The success of location-based dating apps such as Tinder means you can start to view life as a kind of sexual pick’n’mix. There is now a booming infidelity industry, the Illicit Encounters website, for example, claiming more than 600,000 members in the UK, which is 3 per cent of the married population. Even forms of polyamory and open, “monogamish” arrangements are, slowly, becoming less

marginal. You can now download a smartphone app, the Poly Life, designed to help you manage such relationships. “Keep your family/lovers organised,” it suggests. Which, yes, I suppose makes sense.

At the same time, we are witnessing a step change in both our attitudes towards and expectations of sex, particularly if you’re a woman. Put crudely, in many long-term relationships the supply of sex is low, but the demand for it is high – in mind if not always in body – which makes anything that helps facilitate it doubly valuable. It’s the reason Shh can charge £2,900 for its courses, and why big pharmaceutical companies are racing to develop a range of drugs designed to boost sexual desire in women.

For a lot of people – a lot of people I seem to know, anyway – this help cannot come soon enough. “It’s funny, because when you’re out with your mates they’ll say they’re only having sex once or twice a week,” says one of the guys I play football with. “But you talk to their wives and they’ll tell you they haven’t had sex for nine months. Men are in denial.”

And it’s not just men. “In my head I want to have sex with my husband, and I always mean to,” says a friend, a mother of three in her early

‘WHEN WOMEN BEGIN TO ASK FOR MORE, THAT’S GOING TO SHAKE A LOT OF RELATIONSHIP BOATS’

forties. “But after a hard day at work I tend to fall asleep thinking, ‘I’ll do it tomorrow.’”

“I meet with the mums from my old NCT group every year,” another tells me. “And after a few glasses of wine, we all admit to our lack of success in the bedroom. It’s become a joke. But actually, it’s not that funny any more.”

What we have been doing for too long, however, is quietly laying the blame for this kind of malaise at the door of women. Mike Lousada is a psychosexual therapist – feminist writer Naomi Wolf calls him her “orgasm guru” – and he is softly spoken, bearded, with swept-back grey hair. He sits, cross-legged, on the couch in his north London office. There is a popular narrative, he explains, that in a relationship between a man and a woman, it will always be the woman whose libido wanes over time while the man remains eagerly – if idly – priapic. The problem is, it’s just not true.

“It’s always the woman being presented as having lost interest in sex,” he says. “But if they have, then why is it? It’s often because the type of sex they’re having is not fulfilling. I’ll be reductive and say that it might begin with a quick kiss and a cuddle, then the man gets an erection, they have penetrative sex, he jiggles around for a few minutes, has an orgasm, then rolls over and falls asleep. She, unsurprisingly, is unfulfilled.”

Hey, I try to joke, have you been spying on me? But Lousada doesn’t laugh. Because it’s not funny. It’s actually very serious. “It’s sad and it’s incredibly commonplace,” he says. “Typically, when I ask the woman what she would like, she says she would like more kissing, more foreplay, more of her body to receive touch, more cuddling afterwards. When you break it down, it’s not that the woman doesn’t want sex. She just wants different types of sex. In fact, she wants more types of sex than he does. He just wants penetration and an orgasm. She wants five different things. She has more sexual appetite than he does; she’s just not labelling it that way.”

TWO DRUGS DESIGNED TO INCREASE SEXUAL DESIRE IN WOMEN – LYBRIDO AND LYBRIDOS – COULD BE MADE AVAILABLE AS SOON AS NEXT YEAR

MEN ONLY HAVE THEMSELVES TO BLAME IF THEIR SEX LIVES HAVE ATROPHIED

Men, then, only really have themselves to blame if they think their sex life has atrophied. “They have been able to get away for too long with a lowest common denominator kind of sex,” he says. “And when women begin to ask for more, that’s going to shake a lot of relationship boats. Men are either going to have to step up, or women may choose to have other sexual relationships. And if they are really in their sexual power, they may choose not just to have a sexual relationship with one person, but with several, or choose to invite others into their relationship.”

Lousada is convinced we are seeing the start of a period in which more and more women – western women, anyway – are entering this state of “sexual power”. “That is the big, seismic shift happening right now,” he says. And if you think it’s unlikely that you or any women you know will suddenly get heavily into polyamory, Lousada’s message is essentially, well, you never know. Give it time. “Cultural norms change and evolve,” he says, and points to the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which has now sold more than 100 million copies. Not long ago, BDSM – bondage, dominance, sadomasochism – was a fringe erotic interest, deviant and taboo. Now? Millions of women read it on public transport and will no doubt queue for tickets when the film adaptation hits the multiplexes next month. And I would argue that the popularity of courses such as Shh, ones urging women to achieve their “full sensual potential”, only serves to demonstrate this change. A growing number of women are asking themselves two important questions. What do I want? And how do I get it?

Lousada is not the only person suggesting this. “We are seeing a rise in female sexual expression,” says biological anthropologist Dr Helen Fisher in her TED talk, *Why We Love, Why We Cheat*. And as women claim more and more of this sexual power for themselves, the way in which we view monogamy will depend largely on what they decide to do with it.

Actually, Fisher continues, what we are seeing is not so much a case of women “claiming” sexual power as “reclaiming” it. As women edge towards economic parity with men, all that’s happening is a return to an ancient status quo. “For millions of years on the grasslands of Africa, women commuted to work to gather vegetables. They came home with 60 to 80 per cent of the evening meal. The double-income family was the standard. And women were regarded as just as economically, socially and sexually powerful as men.”

Psychosexual therapist Mike Lousada. Below: Noel Biderman of Ashley Madison



‘PEOPLE THINK, “I LOVE MY MARRIAGE, BUT I CAN’T LIVE LIKE THIS – THE BEDROOM IS TOO BORING”’



Only then someone went and invented the plough, which ruined everything for women because they lost their jobs as food collectors and the powers that came with it. But the more economic power women win for themselves, the more sexual freedom they will enjoy. When things change in the boardroom, things change in the bedroom. Noel Biderman is CEO of Ashley Madison, a dating site marketed at married men and women, which, he says, boasts 31 million subscribers in 49 countries. He may not have a background in biological anthropology, but he believes Fisher’s theory is correct. Plus, he has the stats to prove it.

“If you want to know if a woman is going to be unfaithful to her husband then the biggest indicator is if she outearns him. That’s the biggest factor! I think that’s fascinating!” he says, talking in quick, excited sentences. “That’s the case in a whole bunch of countries, but it’s particularly prominent in the UK.”

Married Australian women are also a booming market for the same reason. “I think over there you have the best representation of gender equality in the world. There are more women than men in postgraduate studies in Australia and they outearn men in lots of different professions.”

Although Biderman is himself married and maintains that he is a faithful husband, he also believes that the romantic ideal of monogamy is done, dead, over. On the one hand you think, well, you would say that. But on the other, he’s the one running the numbers, crunching the stats and, ultimately, making millions on the backs of men and women being unfaithful. He says that 30,000 new members sign up to Ashley Madison every day. The site attracted more than one billion views in 2014.

The funny thing is that, for all his grandstanding, Biderman admits that if we could all just communicate with our partners a bit better about our sexual desires, then he would probably be out of a job. But we don’t, because it’s awkward and frightening, especially if we want to go beyond what most of us would consider the boundaries of monogamous love.

“The vast majority of people out there are predisposed to cheat rather than talk,” he says. “They think, ‘I love my marriage, I love my kids and I don’t want a divorce, but I can’t live like this, because the bedroom is just too boring for me.’ These people are terrified of the conversation – the one about changing the boundaries of monogamy in their relationship – because they’re worried about being policed for the rest of their lives. What if the partner says, ‘No, I didn’t sign up for that?’ ➤

JOHN BOND/THE SUN, PHIL FISK

MOTHERS ARE FOUR TIMES MORE LIKELY THAN FATHERS TO BELIEVE THAT THEIR PARTNER WANTS SEX MORE OFTEN THAN THEY DO

So people would rather cheat than converse. It's a problem we have created for ourselves."

To those of us still busting a gut on the coalface of monogamy – men and women alike – a lot of this information can seem confusing. Does the idea of finding someone you love and then agreeing not to sleep with other people make us sexual Neanderthals, doomed to slowly dwindle? And if monogamy's days are numbered, why did we even need it in the first place?

Professor Anders Sandberg is a neuroscientist and philosopher based at the Future of Humanity Institute at the University of Oxford. He believes romantic love began as just a slightly modified version of the love that a parent feels for a child. "I would argue that evolution first invented maternal love, which is older than love between adults. Then it was just exapted, which is what you call it when evolution takes something that already exists and then uses it for something else. So that way, it was able to get people to stick together."

He says the reason evolution needed us to stick together was simple. Human babies take a very long time to grow up, and thus require a great deal of parental care. I tell Sandberg I've got a three-month-old boy, so he's preaching to the choir. Anyway, rather than have the father slope back off into the woods after the baby arrives – and it is a temptation – evolution needed to find a way of making the parents stick together. Affection for the child became affection for one another. If you've ever called your partner "baby", Sandberg thinks this could be an echo to the distant origin of romantic love.

Only, there's a problem here. As a system, it is imperfect. "The interesting part is that evolution doesn't really care very much how well something works as long as it works well enough," says Sandberg. "So if people stay together long enough for their children to get a good start? Fine. Does love have to last for ever? Evolution really doesn't care."

Evolution also isn't that fussed about whether we're happy or not. In the past, when short life expectancies meant we might die a few years after our children reached adulthood, this wasn't so much of an issue. But today? We live for ages. What's our evolutionary incentive to stay in love into middle age and beyond? For centuries, we committed to one person through marriage because there wasn't the option of cohabiting with a few different partners before settling down, mainly due to the risk of pregnancy. First you pledged yourself to someone, then you started having sex with them. Only with the arrival of reliable contraception, suddenly, you could



Anthropologist
Dr Helen Fisher

'THE BIGGEST INDICATOR A WOMAN WILL BE UNFAITHFUL IS IF SHE OUTEARNS HER HUSBAND'

sleep with pretty much anyone. The damage done to female sexual freedom by the plough began to be at least partly undone by the Pill.

And it could yet prove that the Pill is only just the start. Here is an interesting statistic. According to the women's advocacy group Even The Score, men in the US now have 26 different drug options available for the treatment of sexual dysfunction. Women, by contrast, have none. If a man can't get an erection but wants to, he can merrily neck little blue pills and renew his Ashley Madison subscription. If a woman can't feel arousal but wants to, well, tough luck. This is a sorry state of affairs. But it's unlikely to remain this way. Pharmaceutical companies are spending hundreds of millions of dollars on developing a handful of drugs such as Lybrido, Lybridos and Flibanserin, which have all undergone clinical trials and are currently seeking approval from the Food and Drug Administration.

Dr Andrew Goldstein treats female sexual dysfunction at the Centre for Vulvovaginal Disorders in Washington DC and has taken part in these trials. If we want to appreciate the extent that women really are seizing their sexual power – at least the extent that women want to – we need only examine the demand for these still unlicensed drugs. "Let me tell you, they are kicking down my door to get in,"

he says. "They beg and plead to be part of these trials. So many of them view their sexuality as an integral part of their body and their being, and if it is taken from them, they feel as if a body part has been taken from them."

He says that these drugs are highly sophisticated. Unlike, say, Viagra, which resolves what is basically a plumbing issue, something like Lybrido would actually cause changes in brain chemistry. Anders Sandberg says that in the future it's possible that these pharmaceutical companies could go one step further and start to develop drugs that don't just enhance sexual desire, but actually enhance our ability to love someone. He says that the hormone oxytocin – sometimes referred to as "the bonding hormone", and which plays a role in everything from orgasm to childbirth – could start to see more use.

The big question, though, is if they were to perfect a pill that made you love your partner even more, would you take it? Think of the heartache and pain that everyone, men and women, could sidestep for ever. Only Anders Sandberg is not so sure that we are, as a species, ever going to be ready for that. He points to research that suggests we really don't want to tinker with traits we see as fundamental to ourselves. In one survey, only 9 per cent of people would take a pill that made them kinder. Logically, that makes absolutely no sense. But then, if all this has demonstrated anything, it's that neither does love. We will agonise over our relationships, attend courses to improve our sex lives, embark on damaging affairs or go through life with the nagging suspicion that we could be having more. But when it's suggested we could somehow fiddle with our synapses, we get very squeamish. "Part of the reason for this is that it ties you to a very biochemical view of things," says Sandberg. "And people like to think they are more than their biochemistry."

Helen Fisher echoes this same point. The weirdest thing about us, really, is that we put ourselves through all this in the first place. "I don't think, honestly, we're an animal that was built to be happy. We are an animal that was built to reproduce," she says. "I think the happiness we find, we make. And I think we can make good relationships with each other."

In other words, we're romantic. We don't always get it right, but you can't say that we're not constantly trying, and we'll never stop obsessing about love and sex and togetherness. We really are more than just our biochemistry. Frustrating as that may sometimes be. ■

Additional reporting by Bridget Harrison and Barbara McMahon

SALES OF FIFTY SHADES OF GREY HAVE NOW EXCEEDED 100 MILLION