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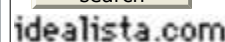


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General News**Paradise lost**

Isabel Ibáñez

Lack of sexual desire often leads to strong feelings of guilt. Almost a third of all women and 15 per cent of men admit to the condition

IF we were to believe the women's magazines, we would know what a woman needs to realize her fantasies: a seductive, soft-focus environment, a sexy CD as background sound and the ability to remember all the tips given by the experts on how to turn the male of her choice into a highly-tuned sex machine. But more serious surveys show an entirely different scenario. Women with children who work outside the home, trying desperately to be as clever and attractive as possible in the office as the road to promotion, leaving little time or energy for romance in the home. Older people who have spent their lives trying to break free of their sexual inhibitions and anxious to make one last effort to achieve romantic love. And young people, especially European women, who are fast losing their sexual appetite in an upward spiral of unattainable canons of beauty and desirability. As in many other aspects of contemporary life, reality falls short of expectation.

For many people, going to bed with one's partner means fear of rejection once more, and the inevitable worsening of the situation if one of the partners insists too much. "This is not the way to solve the problem. It only causes further problems," says Juan Carlos Sierra, professor of Evaluation Psychology at the University of Granada. The experts assure us that there is no need to worry if we fail to match the frequency with which other people claim to have sex. Once again, reality tends to fall short of expectation.

Félix López, professor of Sexual Psychology at the University of Salamanca, has this to say about it: "Until quite recently, lack of sexual desire was acceptable. Now it has turned competitive, with surveys showing problems that do not really exist." Neuro-psychiatrist Javier Aizpiri, of the Indautxu Clinic and the Therapeutic Medicine Clinic in Bilbao, agrees with him. "Sexual appetite is not generally as strong as is suggested in the media, and many ordinary people feel guilty about their own supposed inadequacy."

Women seem to suffer lack of sexual desire more than men. One in three are not sure exactly what libido is, and the experts tell us the proportion is much higher. "Now it's rare to find a woman over 40 with a strong sexual drive. They're worn out by that time, with children to care for, a home to keep and work outside the home," says Professor Aizpiri. "The concept of women enjoying sex in a Christian society over the past two thousand years has repressed women. Up to two decades ago, we had a society in which women were not expected to feel the desire for sex. In places like Brazil, on the other hand, sexual activity is highly valued in women of all ages."

While unresponsive women traditionally fall back on a headache as an excuse for not performing, many men too are happy to hear the excuse. Almost 15 per cent of men, in fact, fall into this category. "Women tend to be more demanding during sex these days, and many men, especially those in the older age-group, are simply not up to it," says Juan Carlos Sierra. And sure enough, during the last European Congress on Sexual Medicine, which took place in Vienna, the question of the new super-sexed woman was raised. These are women who feel they need sex on a regular basis for the well-being of their relationships, and they seek three key qualities in any relationship: spontaneity, satisfaction with their partners and communication. Almost half of all women, it would appear, want just this.

Félix López confirms, nevertheless, that lack of sexual desire is more common in women. "They are more demanding when it comes to sex," he says. "Many men are happy with sporadic sexual encounters, but this is rare in women. They generally demand more of an intimate relationship." And although there are theories that sexual drive is falling in men, López tells us there is no sure way of knowing this, because men tend not to recognise such a problem.

But the consulting rooms are filled with men too. Sexologist Marcos Villacorta says that 90 per cent of the men coming to his clinic suffer loss of sexual drive. "The reason is obvious: a man who does not have the desire to have sex cannot have sex with his partner, while a woman can." Most men in this situation seek a rapid cure, and women with the same problem can simply carry on without treatment. They are content with the relationship as it stands, and if they manage to achieve an orgasm while having sex that they are not really interested in, so much the better."

While agreeing that there is no measurement of normality in such a case, all share the opinion that lack of sexual desire is a complex problem. Neuro-psychiatrist Javier Aizpiri believes that sex is the most exquisite of the brain's functions, and along with other experts, lists the various factors that influence sexual desire. These are:

- Genetics.
- One's neuro-physiological state, which means illnesses of all kinds that lead to lack of sexual drive, certain periods relating to hormonal irregularity (such as during the menopause, following childbirth and so on), and the taking of medicines such as anti-contraceptives and anti-depressives.
- Education, with negative or guilt feelings of repression.
- An aggressive early upbringing.
- Unstable relationship, with constant bickering and lack of communication.
- Personality traits and emotional states such as depression, anxiety, changes of temperament, tiredness and so on.
- Sexual stimuli that lead to sexual fantasy.

Sexual fantasy is a key element in much of the treatment of diminished desire, although not all experts agree on its effectiveness, given the gap in our knowledge of how it actually works. The University of Granada has just ended a study involving 615 people between the ages of 14 and 43 which concludes that in a third of all cases of lack of sexual desire in men, the cause is "a mixture of negative sexuality and the presence or absence of certain sexual fantasies." In the case of women, this figure is reduced to 18 per cent, and as far as Sierra is concerned, it means that female sexual desire is far more complicated than male sexual desire, and that it is accompanied by feelings of anxiety.

Fantasies

Researchers divide these fantasies into four categories: intimate, which may be a relationship with one's regular partner or another; exploratory, which may be orgies with partners of a different race; impersonal, which is what we see in pornographic films, and sadomasochistic, which implies consensual violence.

Researchers have found that intimate sex is preferred by most people.

The first task of the specialist is to dig deep into the relationship of his patient, preferably in the presence of each of the partners, and analyse the likes and dislikes of each. It is essential to know if a person can be sexually satisfied by caressing alone, for example, even if orgasm is not reached. Alternative scenarios for sex are also advised, such as weekend breaks and so on. Communication is essential in any relationship, along with the outward signs of affection, such as kissing and caressing. Sex should never be an obligation, and its rhythm should never be forced. While men are generally stimulated by pornographic films, women tend to respond better to erotic literature. "One needs to be in the mood too, of course. The road to sexual satisfaction is littered with hazards, and we do not always achieve the success we desire," warns Félix López.

He also recommends fantasy as a stimulation for sex, which can work better with men, given their more simplistic approach to sex.

Villacorta believes we should seek biological causes and eliminate them. "A woman suffering from hormonal problems can be depressive and lacking in desire. And a man suffering from heart problems, diabetes or simple tiredness can lose his desire to have sex. Knowing the cause is the cure."

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