

Busy Women Can Have Sex (and Enjoy It)

The only thing you want to do in bed is sleep, right? But, say experts, when sex is sidelined our relationship suffers. Here are small tweaks to bring your passion back to the boil. **BY BIDDI RORKE**

● Too tired for sex, night after night? Read our experts' tips before you turn away – again.



“I have two demanding young kids and a full-time job,” says Lisa, 39. ‘By the time I fall into bed at the end of day, I’m completely exhausted from lifting, carrying, shopping, cooking, working and driving. Most of the time, I can assure you, the last thing on my mind (or agenda) is sex.’

● As Lisa explains, it’s not as if she finds her husband unattractive or that sex isn’t satisfying. “It’s just that it takes so much energy and effort,” she says. “It’s sad to admit, but a night of heavy gritting is the easiest thing to drop from my ‘to-do’ list.”

Lisa’s lament is one many women can relate to. As Lindiwe, a self-employed

businesswoman and married mother of three says, when she crawls into bed at 10pm, she’s barely up for reading a novel, let alone fanning the flames of desire.

“I often feel bad about my lack of interest, so I sometimes go through the motions just to ‘do my duty,’” she admits. “Once things get moving I usually enjoy it. But often we just give each other a quick kiss goodnight. Who has the energy for anything else?”

Jeanine, 41, who has recently emigrated with her husband and two sons, has a different approach to the sleep versus sex debate. “I sometimes find myself gritting my teeth when my husband gets ‘that look,’” she says. “I get so little sleep as it is that losing half an hour to sex sometimes

seems too big a sacrifice. I keep telling myself this will change as the kids get older and we get more settled.”

SEX ON SNOOZE?

● US psychologist Dr Laurie Mintz, who has heard this all before, wrote *A Tired Woman’s Guide to Passionate Sex* (Adams Media) to help women like Lisa, Lindiwe and Jeanine rediscover their desire in the bedroom. “There is no doubt that lack of sleep diminishes your sex drive,” Dr Mintz explains via email. “Plus, during some life stages (such as early parenting years), stress and exhaustion are unavoidable and you might experience decreased libido.”

As Potchefstroom medical doctor and sexologist Dr Wilmé Steenekamp says, if you often feel too exhausted to consider having sex, perhaps it’s time for a medical appointment to check you don’t have a physical reason, such as a thyroid problem or the onset of menopause.

However, if you’re regularly using the “I’m too tired” excuse because you simply aren’t in the mood, you should take heed of the red flag. “Question your own behaviour and feelings towards your relationship,” Dr Steenekamp suggests. “Be really honest with yourself. Perhaps you don’t have the energy for a whole long shebang but would actually enjoy a quickie? If so, you should feel comfortable enough with yourself and your partner to be able to say so.”

Lisa, Lindiwe and Jeanine are not alone in their exhaustion. In the 2010 Durex Sexual Wellbeing Global Survey, almost 40 percent of respondents said that they wanted to feel less stressed out and tired when it came to having sex. This suggests that only three out of five couples actually feel relaxed and rested enough to get jiggy as often as they’d like.

As David Simon, author of *Vital Energy: The 7 Keys to Invigorate Body, Mind & Soul* (John Wiley & Sons) expands, deep restful sleep is critical as it replenishes not only our emotional and physical energy – but our sexual energy too. Our bodies secrete the hormone DHEA during the night, which helps produce the sex hormones testosterone and oestrogen, both of which play a major role in sex drive, he explains.

In short, if you don’t get enough zzzs, you probably won’t get enough o’s either.

And given our tendency for what has been termed “recreational sleep abuse” (where sleep is often sacrificed because of work and family demands), it’s not surprising so many of us are happy to put sex on the backburner at times. But interestingly, a recent Harvard study shows that there might be basic biological reasons for using the “I’m too tired” escape route.

According to the research, which tracked more than 150 people for an eight-week period in a windowless sleep laboratory, women’s circadian rhythms run six minutes faster than men’s and we’re more likely than our partners to feel sleep-deprived. This is because **we try to fight our faster sleep cycles, cramming too much into our evenings and being woken too early by morning light. Sex is often sacrificed in our quest to maximise our “lights out” time.**

PLAY TOGETHER, STAY TOGETHER

● But Dr Mintz cautions that sex is both the glue that holds couples together and the oil that keeps the relationship running smoothly and prevents friction. “Without sex, a committed relationship or marriage can fall apart or become only a partnership of shared chores and worries,” she says. The important thing to remember, she adds, is that it’s perfectly natural not to feel “up for it” as often as you’d like to. “Research shows us that many women in long-term relationships stop feeling spontaneously horny, but most women don’t know this is normal,” she says. “I’ve heard countless women complain about ‘duty sex’, telling me that, like Lindiwe, they have (no?) interest in sex but ‘just do it’ anyway, knowing it’ll be good – even great – once they get going.”

Dr Mintz adds that they feel tremendous relief when they realise this is normal for many women. “Duty sex is sex that someone has just to satisfy their partner and derives no enjoyment from – or worse yet, finds aversive. Duty sex is a problem, but what many women label as duty sex – sex that starts with no physical interest but turns out hot – is not something to be concerned about.”

Sometimes, Dr Mintz says, having sex when you’re not in the mood is similar to knowing your car is cold when you start it, but will warm up when you drive. “Great sex doesn’t have to start with physical

6 Steps to Sizzling Sex

1/ Thoughts: In order to enjoy sex, you first need to develop the proper state of mind. For a kick-start, tune into the sensuality around you (sunlight on your back, the coolness of stone beneath your feet).

2/ Talk: Consider non-threatening, playful ways to express your sexual desires to your partner, such as, “I was reading this book and in it, the hero does this and this to the heroine. Maybe we could try those things sometime?”

3/ Touch: Make a point of touching each other affectionately at least three times a day; and making some form of provocative, erotic contact at different points in the day when sex is impossible (e.g. while you are both on your way to a school PTA).

4/ Time: We all live demanding lives, but prioritising self-care (exercise, a good haircut, eating well) and relationship-care (quality time with your partner) go a long way towards feeling good about yourself and fostering intimacy.

5/ Spice: Are you really too tired for sex – or are you simply tired of the sex you’re having? Embark on a journey of discovery together, trying different positions and locations. Sex toys, erotic literature and steamy movies can be used solo and with your partner.

6/ Tryst: Let go of the myth that bedtime is the “right” time for sex, and instead embrace the notion that the right time is when it works for you and your partner.

Adapted from A Tired Woman’s Guide to Passionate Sex by Dr Laurie Mintz.

desire,” she notes. “It can often start with a conscious decision. Remember, your biggest sex organ is your brain – or as one of my client’s puts it – if your head isn’t there, the mechanics don’t matter.”

● **KNOW MORE** See drlauriemintz.com or read Dr Laurie Mintz’s blog on psychologytoday.com/blog/stress-and-sex