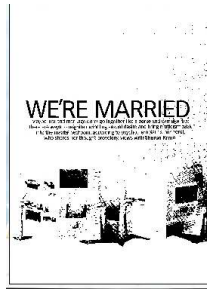


NO SEX PLEASE WE'RE MARRIED

Maybe lust and marriage don't go together like a horse and carriage, but there are ways to reignite dwindling sexual desire and bring eroticism back into the marital bedroom, according to psychotherapist Esther Perel, who shares her thought-provoking views with **Sharon Krum**.





Esther's New York family therapy office has played host to every kind of couple imaginable. Interracial, international, straight, gay, young, old, remarried, they come, sit and open up to Esther about love and commitment, struggling with adultery, uneven desire, parenting boredom. And it's easy to picture the 49-year-old mother of two sons sitting and listening with a real intensity – Belgian-born Esther is a blend of European charm and American forthrightness.

Yet Esther had also watched something play out that was confounding her – couples clearly in love, but who never had sex. Or couples in failing relationships who worked their way back to intimacy, but still had no erotic interest in each other. Why, she asks in her best-selling book *Women in Captivity: Sex, Lies and Domestic Violence*, is sex in modern couples often so lacking in desire?

Even in our confess-everything culture, Esther, who speaks eight languages, has learned that a sexless relationship is the great unspoken. "I've travelled all over the world talking about this and the silence of sexuality inside the home is everywhere."

Wearing dangly earrings, jeans, a tank top and striped velvet jacket, Esther doesn't look like your stereotypical therapist, more, frankly, like the sexiest mother on the block. (You wonder how many of her patients develop crushes on her.) With her French accent, she doesn't sound like a radical either, yet what she advises about keeping a relationship playful and erotic is. Think of her as a one-woman sexual revolution for couples.

"The story we are told is that passion only moves in one direction, that is, it fades," she says. "That it should be replaced by something more tame, enduring and long lasting. Giving up on passion is supposed to be an expression of maturity."

Esther is unconvinced. Passion, she

believes, should be a lifelong pursuit and that, while there is great comfort in being loved, we also need to feel desired. "When I talk about the erotic, I talk about what makes us feel vital, alive."

"Understand, sexuality is a language in which we talk about our deepest wishes, our most vulnerable feelings, our needs for connection, our fears, our longing. They all get expressed in the physicality of our body in ways that some of us cannot always express and experience through words."

"I think, for men, the language of the body often remains the place where they can experience their needs for tenderness, connection and vulnerability. When a woman says, 'All he wants is sex', she doesn't often get what he wants – he wants the same thing as her, connection."

Of course, Esther says, after a time, feelings for a partner won't mimic that initial, overwhelming attraction.

"Sometimes, people are not prepared for the realities of marriage and don't understand that desire ebbs and flows."

"Everybody talks about desire being more intermittent in women, whereas for men it's more linear. The big taboo is lack of desire in men. But in the therapist's office [we see] half and half. Women, when they have young children and are very busy, may have bigger lapses, but talk to them when the kids leave home. They may be in menopause, but their head has freed up and now there is permission for the selfishness of desire."

Yes, Esther understands, there are couples who don't have sex and don't regard it as an issue. "If both are okay with it, there can be warmth, care and mutual responsibility for each other that is tremendous. That being said, we human beings need to be touched. Kids who are not touched get depressed, disconnected. So, too, adults."

Esther finds modern marriage fascinating.

Consider, she says, that for hundreds of years, people married for security, duty, children. Romantic love never entered into it. Yet when women no longer had to marry for financial security, they started wanting more from the relationship: romance, sexual fulfilment, emotional stability, friendship and family. "Desire over the long haul is something people never had to cultivate."

Yet one person, she maintains, just cannot fill every need. A partner who is your best friend, confidante and lover often leads to a dying sex life. "Love is grounded in security and stability, and desire is about mystery, unpredictability," she says. "For you to desire someone, you need a distance to cross."

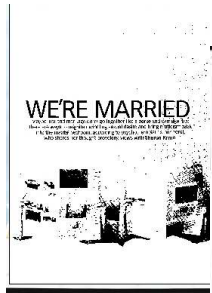
After talking with all those couples on the couch, Esther saw their sexless lives were, curiously, often due to their being too close, too merged. "If you know everything about someone, there is no mystery." It's developing separateness, she advises – in friends, activities, work – that builds curiosity about the other and fuels desire. She recounts the story of one couple who were incredibly affectionate and tactile with each other, but hadn't had sex in years.

"I said, okay, you can't touch each other. There needed to be space, so she would have room to go after him."

Then there are couples who tell Esther they are stuck, bored, what's left to say to him? To her? Esther smiles at this point – this is one of her favourite topics.

"I always say don't think you know your partners, because you don't. It's a convenience to treat your partner as a fixed, known entity, with no surprises. I think that the partner doesn't belong to you. They are a separate person who chooses every time to be with you, along with an option to renew."

Her answer is to have them sign up for >>>



private email accounts and ask that they write to each other daily. “Suddenly, they are not interacting as husband and wife, but as man and woman. Now they have a place to talk about sexuality. And as they start to write about who they are, what they’re thinking about, they rediscover each other.” It’s virtual foreplay.

So can love and desire co-exist in a committed relationship? “Yes, but they don’t always at the same time,” she says of the paradox. “There are periods when we are more focused on the stable, predictable aspects and times we are freer.”

One thing Esther would like you to disregard is any statistic that decrees some “normal” number of times that healthy couples have sex.

“It’s about how long, how hard, how many,” she says with a sigh. “People do fixate on numbers. In my practice, I ask people what does sex mean for you? I rarely ask, ‘How often do you have sex?’

“For me, what’s important is the connection. There are plenty of erotic couples, who have fantastic sex once a week, or once every two weeks. Quality doesn’t mean they had a great orgasm, but everything up to and including.”

Esther says many long-term couples can also be wrapped up with the idea of “movie” sex, that unless it’s all spontaneous combustion, it’s not truly

erotic. So they balk at the suggestion of planning. “We’re fed this idea that, after 16 years of marriage, we’re supposed to stand in front of this person and it will happen. I say sex was never spontaneous,” she announces. “You [even in the beginning] planned everything – what you will wear, what you will say – and then I tell them, committed sex is pre-meditated sex. Make it a priority and give it value. You can be out of control once you get going, but the leading up to sex should be a willful thing.”

Perhaps the most thought-provoking item on Esther’s agenda is her belief that when mothers complain they are too tired for sex, something else is at work here.

“At first, a new child is a shock to the system. But there is also erotic energy [once directed at a partner] now going towards the kids. For women, often a baby is utterly erotic.” Just look, she says, at all that kissing and cuddling of a baby or toddler. “So it’s an effort to leave the baby and reconnect with another adult.

“I have a couple right now, his wife has a baby, she has post-natal depression, she pushes him away, confusing his offer with a demand. Soon he becomes the perfect prey for a woman to go after him. Now she discovers the affair and all hell breaks loose. But he didn’t want to have an affair, he wanted his wife.”

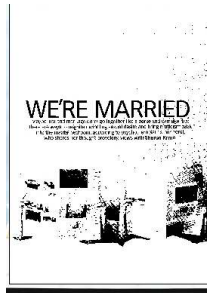
To redirect the erotic charge, she asks

parents of children of all ages to carve out regular time together: go to dinner, away for the weekend, reconnect as lovers, not Mum and Dad. “On a long list of what kids need, parents who have a healthy sex life should be one of them. When children see parents with a respectful erotic bond and the door is closed once in a while, that gives them a sense of confidence.”

Esther is extraordinarily comfortable talking about sex, makes no judgments about what predilections or fantasies patients reveal, but does have a take on affairs that challenges conventional wisdom. Such as when she tells you that, in her practice, she sees cheating in the happiest of marriages. “I am not condoning infidelity, but I am willing to understand that, sometimes, adultery is not a symptom of a relationship gone awry. People stray for a host of reasons that have nothing to do with their partner.

“I worked with a woman who lost her breasts. For nine months afterwards, she had a steamy affair. She needed a place where she could be with someone who didn’t know who she had been before and what she had gone through. And she never left her husband. She finished [the affair].”

Affairs, Esther writes, unfold in the margins of our lives. For women, she says, it may be the only place they don’t have to take care of anybody, “or talk >>>



about the kids or the plumber. For men, it can be a place where somebody is giving them a certain kind of attention they have been longing for because they feel displaced by the arrival of the children”.

Whatever the circumstances, she does not believe you must confess an affair to repair a relationship. “I don’t think there is anything to be gained.” What if a partner finds out? Try to work through it.

“Adultery can put to rest a relationship that was gasping, or it can reinvigorate it like very few things. It’s one of the most powerful alarm systems, if you can get over the pain. Do I think they [the couple she counselled with the new baby] should end their marriage? No. They’re a great couple and they have a crisis. Remember, crisis is a mixture of danger and opportunity.”

Esther, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, says her parents came out of the experience celebrating their second chance at life. “So what keeps us vital and alive interests me, so I have a respect for the erotic.” Yet she was a curious, cerebral girl, already reading psychology books by the age of 12. She trained as a psychologist in Israel, then moved to the US, where at first she specialised in working with

“ADULTERY CAN PUT TO REST A RELATIONSHIP THAT WAS GASPING, OR IT CAN REINVIGORATE IT LIKE VERY FEW THINGS.”

refugee, cross-cultural and international families. Later, she began working with couples across the spectrum and hearing their stories got her interested in investigating why, as she likes to say, the X goes out of monogamous sex. “I saw that a drop in desire is not always a sign of a failing relationship. People loved each other, yet complained about not feeling wanted.”

Esther appreciates that, once you write a book about relationships, people will be curious about yours. Married for 25 years, her husband, Jack Saul, is the director of the International Trauma Studies Program affiliated with Columbia University, where he works with refugees, some victims of torture. She was 22 when they met. “He was my mentor, we had known each other for two years as friends. Most people will have two or three marriages over a lifetime, some with the same person. This is my story.

“Our marriage shifted with the birth of our children [now 11 and 14] and then with the loss of our parents.” From the time the children were born, she and her husband went on holiday once a year to reconnect. “We were aware of what had happened to many couples and we made a concerted effort it would not happen to us.”

Does passion ebb and flow in her marriage? “Absolutely.”

Now with Esther a best-selling author, she intimates that the parameters are shifting again. “The book was the first time I did a project I wasn’t sure I could do and I did it completely independently. I think that degree of independence allowed him to be engaged and intrigued with me.

“And I think that writing it made me think and question various parts of me and us. We got to have conversations that we probably hadn’t had before. It’s not like our sex life has changed, it’s more who we are with each other.”

Over the past year, Esther has visited 16 countries to spread the word about erotic sex in committed relationships, and now, in mid-life, finds herself, unexpectedly, a therapist feted like a celebrity. ■

Mating in Captivity: Sex, Lies and Domestic Bliss, by Esther Perel, is published by Hodder & Stoughton, rrp \$35.

It is unreasonable to expect one person to meet all your needs. Wanting your partner to be a friend, lover, emotional and financial supporter will put too much pressure and dependence on the relationship.

It’s not too little emotional intimacy that kills passion, but often too much. When you share everything with your partner, there is no mystery. Eroticism thrives when there is, as Esther says, “a distance to cross”.

- **Don’t panic when eroticism dwindles. Passion in all relationships waxes and wanes, but with some thought and effort, it can always be rekindled.**
- **Create a life separate from your partner and children, through friends, hobbies, networks. Separateness is healthy. Then when you reconnect, attraction builds.**
- **Don’t fixate on the number of times you have sex – it’s about quality, not quantity.**
- **Plan for sex. Don’t assume if it’s not spontaneous it’s not erotic. Planning tells your partner you value and prioritise them and your sexual relationship.**
- **Make time to be with your partner outside the house. Have a regular lunch date, dinner, go away together every year without your children, so you can relate as adults.**
- **If the state of play in your bedroom is suffering, email each other. Talk about things that are completely unrelated to your everyday life – feelings, fantasies, desires – so you can reconnect erotically, beyond the day to day.**
- **Don’t blame children for killing your passion. Children often allow women to redirect their erotic desire, not extinguish it. Create boundaries even when the baby is small and make time for your partner, as opposed to using children to fulfil your needs.**
- **Children need parents who have strong connections, both sexual and emotional. It gives them a confident space in which to grow.**