

Trick for treat

Arousing lost passion in long-term relationships

By BARBARA HOFFMAN

TRUST, equality, security, unselfishness — boy, can they louse up your love life. On the other hand, the stuff that kindles passion — risk, excitement, longing — are hardly what keeps long-term relationships ticking.

No wonder we're frustrated. So contends "Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic & the Domestic" (HarperCollins, \$24.95), a boldly un-PC book by Manhattan therapist Esther Perel.

Out today, it's based on 22 years of counseling couples — straight and gay, married and not — who've realized that, while they love the one they're with, the fire is gone.

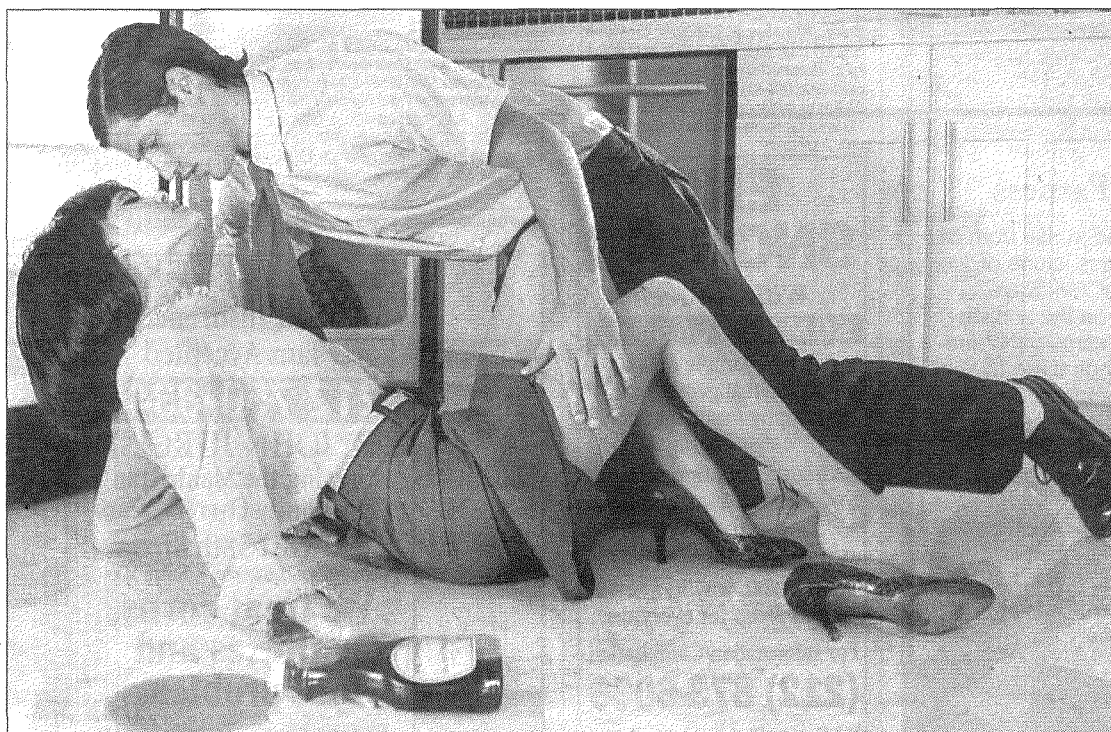
And they want it back. "What's shocking is hearing how often people say, 'I know he or she loves me, but I haven't felt wanted for so long,'" Perel tells *The Post*.

"And they know the difference." She says the anecdotes in her book — of couples so solicitous of each other that they no longer make love; of a wife who resorts to charging her husband for a sex act, to shock him into bedding her — have been lifted pretty much whole from what she's heard in her Fifth Avenue office.

"There are no composites here," says the Belgium-born psychologist, in musical, European-accented English, the fifth of her eight languages (her first was Flemish).

"What people long for is a certain kind of intensity and passion — they want to feel alive."

At the same time, says the 48-year-old mother of two, "we want it all, and we want it all with one person."



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Spontaneity is a wonderful thing for getting sex back in your life — but watch out for that maple syrup!

Little wonder why that person becomes like "a worn-out sofa: comfortable to sit in, but totally unexciting."

The problem, she says, is that passion doesn't always play by the rules of good citizenship: It thrives on power plays, seduction and manipulation.

The trick, Perel says, is learning how to face and embrace the unknown and the risky in your partner of so many years — to see her or him in a new way, to make demands that might seem downright selfish.

She'll often ask her patients to write down what they think about when they think about love — and then, on the side of the page, to describe what comes to their minds when they think about sex.

Rarely do the two sides converge. But remembering what turned you on in the first place — and trying to find it again — can go a long way to fanning the flames.

For some, it means booking a motel in a nearby suburb, or making love in the alley of their apartment building.

It didn't take alley sex to help one of Per-

el's patients, a 41-year-old writer from Brooklyn who sought treatment after seven years of happy but passionless marriage.

"We love each other, we have a child, we have this great life together and we get along," she told *The Post*, "but some kind of passion was missing for me, which made me feel like hell, because I totally love the guy!"

What helped was focusing on what drew her to her husband in the first place: in this case, his athletic ability, the way he became aggressive on a soccer field. At parties, she no longer hangs on his arm, but steps away, to watch him as he seems — free, handsome. Desirable.

"Now, if I see my husband talking to a beautiful woman at a party," she says, "I'm like, 'You're coming home with me!'"

As Perel, who calls her 21-year marriage a happy one, puts it: "I think the mystery is right in front of you, if you can make yourself open to it."

Esther Perel Q&A at the Strand Bookstore, 12th Street and Broadway, Thursday at 7 p.m.

5 easy pieces of sex advice

HERE are a few tips for stoking the home fires, courtesy of Esther Perel.

■ **Schedule.** "Spontaneity is a fabulous idea, but in a long-term relationship, whatever is going to just happen already has." So make a date for sex, and keep it.

■ **Embrace the unexpected.** Playfulness, novelty — anything that breeds anticipation fuels desire. Some couples set up a separate e-mail account for seductive exchanges; others find a hotel room in their own city where someone else makes the bed, freeing them up for pleasure.

■ **Get another angle.** Too often, the sameness and day-to-day ordinariness of domestic life obscure the very things we've fallen in love with. Step back! Many people get turned on by seeing their partner do something singular — whether it's watching him play playing soccer or seeing her give a pep talk or work out.

■ **Shut up.** Some couples talk constantly, sharing every little detail of their lives, domestic and professional — then wonder where the excitement and mystery have gone. Let your body do the talking.

■ **Put some space between you.** It's hard to long for someone when you're with him all the time. So go to the movies separately, pursue your own hobbies, nurture your fantasies. Or, as Perel puts it: "Fire needs air, and for many couples, there isn't enough air."