

5 WAYS TO LIFT YOUR LIBIDO

Has the joy of sex been replaced by the need for sleep?
Here's how to reawaken the Aphrodite within

WORDS SARAH LANG



Bringing sex back

Not having sex? Well, who has the energy? What with the kids, work, the laundry... there's barely time for a trip to the gym or a hair trim, let alone a romp in the sack.

According to The Next Report 2008, an in-depth investigation into Kiwi women's lives ('Future Perfect?', April), half of us in our 30s and early 40s are often too tired for sex. This is despite the fact we're in the prime of our lives. So what's going on? And what can we do about it?

Don't assume the urge to rip off your bloke's clothes has permanently gone out the window with your free time. Sexperts say a low libido is usually a response to something that's a little off-kilter in your life, and there are things you can do to relight your fire. So don't go storing that sexy lingerie. Here are five things that can dampen your ardour, and how to overcome them.

1 "Stress has decreased my drive"

Tracey, 34, works long hours in advertising sales for an unsupportive company with a pressure-cooker environment, and the stress has killed her sex drive. "I don't have the same urge for sex," she says. "I'm always tired and by the time I hit the bed all I can think about is sleep. When I'm super stressed by work I get snappy when my husband even touches my arm and I think he wants sex, even though he's just being affectionate."

It's not Nobel Prize-winning news that tiredness and stress are bad for our sex drive. Dr Ruth Swarbrick, Rotorua's Women's Health Care obstetrics and gynaecology specialist, regularly treats libido problems and says many of her clients are stressed. "Prolonged stress exhausts the body. If you're stressed all the time, you're probably tired all the time."

But surely being permanently exhausted (a situation so common that some doctors now just write 'TAT' for 'tired all the time' in patient notes) is because there's so much to do? And who wants sex when you're exhausted, when you're asleep by the time your head hits the pillow, or just want to wind down with a book? In The Next Report, six out of 10 respondents said there's not enough hours in the day to get everything done. More than four out of 10 women said there's too much stress in their lives, and over 50% said they always feel tired.

So what about Tracey and other tired, stressed-out women like her? Ruth suggests a blood test to rule out any physiological causes of extreme tiredness, and the creation of small stress-reducing goals such as daily meditation. "With stress, nine times out of 10, you're dealing with the psychological," she says.

That's for sure, says psychologist and longtime sex-therapy specialist Robyn Salisbury, founder/director →

of information and referral service Sex Therapy New Zealand (www.sextherapy.co.nz). “The psychological impact of feeling pressured, stressed and over-stretched cannot be underestimated. It takes its toll on all areas of your life, including your libido,” she says.

Robyn’s advice to Tracey and similarly work-stressed women is to find a way to minimise their workload and working hours, or to look for another, less stressful job.

As for Tracey misinterpreting her husband’s affection for sexual advances, Robyn thinks that’s down to more than just stress. She suggests Tracey and her husband talk about clearly separating and signalling non-sexual and sexual closeness. “He could say, ‘Come on, give me a cuddle, I know you’re exhausted.’ Then they’d both know there’s no expectation of sex.” Sometimes, Robyn says, this type of intimacy can “reinvigorate” a woman to the point that she thinks sex might be quite a nice idea.

And while it might be the last thing on a stressed mind, remember that sex is actually a great stress reliever. Aim for a time when you’re the least stressed or tired – if you collapse into bed at night, try sex in the morning.

2 “I’m embarrassed by my body”

Interior designer Kate, 56, was overweight in her 30s, slimmed down in her 40s, then left an unhappy marriage and found a new partner. But in the last few years she has put the weight back on, with interest. As a result, both her self-esteem and libido have suffered a knock. “I feel ashamed of my body at times and have more sexual inhibitions,” she admits.

In an ideal world, gaining weight wouldn’t make you feel down, but for many women it can lead to a loss of self-esteem, a hesitancy to flaunt their squishy bits during sex, or send their libido packing altogether. Robyn says a woman needs to accept her own body to feel sexy and enjoy herself in bed. “Real women have saggy boobs and bellies. Sexy isn’t a shape, it’s a state of mind, the way you inhabit your body. Try looking at yourself with acceptance, not necessarily *I’m so great*, but *This is where I’m at now and it’s okay*, and definitely without making any harsh critical judgments.”

You might feel happy about keeping your new curves, but if you really don’t feel comfortable, consider getting more exercise or eating less chocolate until you get your mojo back. Make sure you’ve got clothes and lingerie in your current size; don’t try to squeeze into smaller things. And remember, your partner sees the woman he loves – often men don’t notice an extra inch or two.

3 “Kids are a libido blocker”

Michelle, 38, is a full-time mother to three children aged six, three, and four months. “I hardly ever have sex,” she says. “I just don’t feel like it. It’s a mixture of being physically tired and the kids climbing on me all day – sex feels like yet another thing I have to do for someone else.”

Once she weans her babies and she’s a little less tired, Michelle finds her libido gradually returns, although in the past it’s taken another year or so before it’s back to normal.

Heard the joke about children being the best contraception? In The **Next** Report, more than one in two women with children at home said they’re often too tired for sex. The figure dropped to one in three for women without children at home.

Mother of four, Marilynn McLachlan, a parenting book author and founding editor of mothers’ discussion-and-advice forum www.mumsontop.co.nz, has herself conquered low libido. “It’s perfectly normal,” she says. “You’ve been bruised, stretched, have hormones for Africa – and sleep deprivation is used as torture in some countries. Is it any wonder you’re not into sex straight away?” In addition, breastfeeding causes a drop in estrogen levels, which shrinks sexual desire – and is likely to be what Michelle’s experiencing.

But Robyn advises Michelle not to wait two years for her libido to return, as abstaining from sex can place strain on or alter your relationship with your partner. “Reclaiming your libido is empowering, and it can be a source of energy in your life,” she says.

Gently begin to remove any mental obstacles that are stopping you wanting sex, says Robyn. If you’re self-conscious about your post-baby body, try to remember what it has achieved and accept that the changes are okay. And forget those personal trainer-touting celebs and their overnight shape-ups. It’s natural and healthy to lose weight slowly.

Some mums (or their partners) see their bodies as just for baby. “It’s important mothers retain a sense of themselves as an individual and a sexual being,” says Robyn. “Make time each day to do something for yourself, whether that’s simply applying body lotion, or exercising, so you’re really in your body.” Go out with the girls, or on dates with your partner, and get that sexual spark back.



REAL WOMEN HAVE SAGGY BOOBS AND BELLIES. SEXY ISN'T A SHAPE, IT'S A STATE OF MIND, THE WAY YOU INHABIT YOUR BODY. TRY LOOKING AT YOURSELF WITH ACCEPTANCE





4 "My unhealthy lifestyle isn't helping"

Jenny, 31, was a zealous runner throughout her 20s, but in the last two years her busy job is eating into her spare time and she's gradually stopped jogging entirely. In fact, she gets hardly any exercise at all.

"I feel really sluggish most of the time and I hardly ever want to have sex," she says. A vegetarian who admits she "eats too much processed food", Jenny also enjoys a glass of wine or two most nights.

IF YOUR LIBIDO'S ON LEAVE OF ABSENCE, CHANCES ARE PLENTY OF YOUR FRIENDS ARE IN THE SAME BOAT. TALK ABOUT IT, JOKE ABOUT IT

"Sorting out libido problems starts with sorting out your lifestyle," declares Ruth, who suggests Jenny slowly reintroduce running to reclaim the higher levels of endorphins and serotonin she was used to. Just 20 minutes of cardio exercise will boost your energy and ease stress. If you find it hard to make time, build it into your schedule as you would an appointment. Make it just as important.

A healthy diet is also important if you want a healthy libido. Although you've likely heard about libido-lifting foods like raw oysters and chocolate (what doesn't it fix?), Ruth explains there's little evidence to suggest any one food fires up the sex drive. She recommends a high-fibre, high-vitamin diet, and only an occasional glass of wine – alcohol's a libido depressant.

5 "Medication kills my urge"

Sally, 32, has been taking the contraceptive pill Monofeme and anti-depressant fluoxetine for five and three years respectively. "I suspect these medications are why my libido's virtually non-existent. But at the moment, I need to take them," she says.

The contraceptive pill can lower your libido by 'mopping up' your body's free testosterone, a hormone that influences desire. Every woman reacts differently to different pills though, so Ruth advises that you see a specialist who can find one to meet your needs. Or try switching to a non-hormonal form of contraception like the IUD.

Other medications with libido-lowering side effects include sedatives, blood pressure and diabetes drugs, and anti-depressants. Talk to your doctor if this is a problem for you. You may be able to reduce your dosage, swap medication or find another way to manage your symptoms.

If your libido's on leave of absence, chances are plenty of your friends are in the same boat. Talk about it, joke about it if it helps, or see a professional. Pay attention to it and eventually, Aphrodite will return. **N**