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Not tonight, dear . . . in fact, not ever

Feminism gave women control of their sex lives, but has it gone too far? Author and sex expert Dr Pam Spurr argues that many women are risking their relationships by saying 'no'.



Emily, 37, is a successful solicitor with a husband and a two-year-old son. To her friends, she doubtless lives a charmed existence. But recently she sat across from me in a life coaching session. She was very distressed. Having just discovered that her husband of five years had had an affair, she felt that her world had disintegrated. She'd been a good partner, hadn't she? She was caring and hardworking, wasn't she?

Closer examination of their relationship revealed that Emily hadn't had sex with her husband for many months. When I pushed Emily gently on this she was incredibly defensive. It was her view that she was too busy with her career and raising their son to give any thought or time to sex.

Over the past two decades I have worked as a psychologist, life coach and sex expert, and I have found that Emily's attitude is all too common. And such views don't bode well for the success of relationships. With increasing frequency, women in their twenties, thirties and forties take a pragmatic, postfeminist view that sex is something over which they have no need to negotiate. In the bedroom, there is no compromise. If a man has a higher sex drive than a woman, then he can sort himself out. If he wants to try something new and she can't be bothered, tough luck to him.

Eventually, Emily and her husband repaired their relationship – which meant learning how to confront their differences, including sexual ones.

Olivia, a 39-year-old investment consultant, was less fortunate. She had wanted to make certain financial investments that her husband was against. Issues about their finances spread bad feeling into all other areas of their life and, like a stone dropped in water, the ripples from their acrimonious "discussions" reached far and wide.

When Olivia found that the stress of their differences diminished her sex drive, she felt completely justified in suggesting separate bedrooms. As she recounted to me – with bitter regret, after their divorce – sex had been the last thing on her mind. Her biggest mistake was not considering what was on his mind.

Having researched my new book, as well as talked to thousands of men and women over the years, I now firmly believe that too many women see the sexual side of their lives as something to be claimed completely and utterly as their own. That's fine for single women flexing their sexual muscles.

But once they settle into a relationship, many will continue to do so. This doesn't make sense to me at all – and unfortunately I'm privy to the heartbreak and distress that goes along with this view.

Like it or not, a sexless life is at the root of much heartache and many affairs and/or relationship break-ups. And although lack of sex can often be a symptom of other problems that lead a relationship to break down, it can also be the cause.

At the risk of being called old-fashioned (though I don't think that old-fashioned should always have negative connotations) and antifeminist, I'd go so far as to say that for both partners sex could be considered a duty, if it is something that one partner knows would make the other happy.

Does he really want to go up on the roof to repair a leak on a Sunday afternoon?

Does she really want to take out the rubbish in the pouring rain? No, but partners in relationships do such things because they know that it makes the other happy. Sex should be seen in the same light.

I am not advocating submission. I oppose the idea that anyone should feel pressured into sex; I understand that the "sexualisation" of society often puts unnatural expectations on both women and men. I am merely pointing out that sex, as with other parts of a relationship, needs constant care and compromise. Why should the sexual area of a relationship be ringed by an emotional fence that makes it a no-go zone for discussion, while other areas are discussed openly, argued over and resolved?

Sometimes where sex has waned, both parties initially had different physical needs that were not discussed openly at the time. I have spoken to a fair few thirty-something women who settle down with a "decent chap" knowing that he'll make a good father. On producing babies, though, many such men find themselves left out in the cold when they still desire the sexual warmth that they initially enjoyed. Such complete sexual pragmatism seems fair to these women, but what about the men? To them, sexually, men don't seem to matter much once they have served their purpose.

Sometimes both partners feel that sex does not rank highly on their list of priorities. That's fine. There's no negotiation necessary when you're both in agreement. But many women simply feel that their lives are too stressful, or that they are dealing with other relationship issues, and they don't want to raise sex as yet another issue with which to contend.

That is a very dangerous place to be if the man doesn't feel the same way. You may find, as Emily did, that he will seek sexual satisfaction without you. I certainly don't justify infidelity but I can often understand why it happens. In contrast, when a woman's sexual needs are denied, Heaven help the man responsible.

Jessica, 36, a political lobbyist, told me that she felt strongly that she and her husband were too young to give up enjoying sexual pleasure. It caused her much pain that he put long hours at work above consideration for their sex life. Tellingly, the reaction from many of her friends was "How dare he?"

That goes to the heart of this issue. As women, we have come to expect that we can control our sex lives completely – but we get angry when a man wants to do so.

Some may argue that sex is such an intimate and personal set of behaviours and beliefs that lack of compromise is justified. I would argue quite the opposite. It is because of its personal nature that sex should be explored between a couple. And by exploring their differences, and reconciling them, a couple's attachment to, and love for, each other is often heightened.

In other cases I have found an even more disturbing attitude: that it's fine to use occasional sex in a cold-hearted and calculated way as a favour or bartering tool for jobs well done by the man.

Amanda, a 38-year-old photographer, bartered sexual favours with her live-in partner when he did a particularly difficult piece of DIY or nasty bit of graft, such as unplugging drains. Using sex as a bargaining chip demeans both partners.

The solution is to take a holistic approach to a relationship and understand that every part of it – careers, finances, family issues, sex – needs nurturing and understanding. It's the "only I count" sexual attitudes that are killing off much sexual intimacy.

Never be bullied into sexual activity that turns you off or be pressured into sex that doesn't satisfy you. But always be prepared to discuss your feelings and desires and listen to his. Hopefully, that will improve your sex life and help to strengthen your relationship in other ways, too.

Dr Spurr's book *Fabulous Foreplay: The Sex Doctor's Guide To Teasing And Pleasing Your Lover*, is published by J R Books at £7.99. Order your copy at the reduced price of £7.59 (including free p&p) from Times BooksFirst, 0870 1608080; timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst