

MY SEX-DROUGHT MARRIAGE

"If you're against gay sex, then you should be all in favour of gay marriage." That's a joke from the debate over same-sex marriage. I repeated the joke all the time while in a marital sex drought a decade ago. It consoled me. Because no one ever – ever – needed the punch line explained. It reminded me I wasn't alone, and that other marriages spiral privately into that peculiar vice, the dirty little secret of celibacy...



The drought started in the usual way – with a newborn. I was 35 and first-time motherhood hit me hard. My husband was exhausted, too. I don't know that either of us cared about sex at the time but, the truth is, we didn't talk about the issue much.

I've heard that this post-partum abstinence may be adaptive, because oxytocin goes to bonding with your newborn, not your lover. But, at some point, several months later, the refraining of new parenthood began to feel more like a lifestyle. Celibacy sneaked up and ambushed me. It's said that life is what happens when you're making your plans. Celibacy is what happened when I was dealing with life.

For one thing, I felt like I was cheating on my husband with my much fantasised-about lover, whose name was Sleep. I couldn't wait to fall into Sleep's arms. He was all I thought of. But I couldn't keep blaming celibacy on sleep deprivation. That was a cop-out. I heard breezy advice galore about "date nights" and "taking time for yourself" and "getting more sleep" (yeah, right).

When you're stuck in a celibate phase in marriage, the problem feels much deeper than that, and probably is. Or, it grows to be deeper on the sustenance of inertia, until you feel estranged from desire itself.

There's such a delicate alchemy to lust during the long haul of a relationship, anyway. Lust naturally fades. Sociobiologist Helen Fisher talks about the "four-year" itch. One day you can't imagine not wanting your spouse. The next, you might as well be in bed with a toaster. And I never had much of that "just do it", good-trooper spirit about sex. I'd always felt that sex was too important to fool around with when I didn't feel like it. Sometimes people end up celibate not because they care too little about their erotic life but because they care too much about it – too much to fill up on "junk-food" sex.

One of the worst things about celibacy was the shame and guilt. Being abstinent in a marriage is really different from being abstinent while single. When you're single, you might feel mildly guilty for having sex; when you're married, you feel guilty for not.

Most of us aren't really blasé or laissez-faire about our neighbours' sex lives. We care about who's having sex with whom, in a way that's all at once anxious, voyeuristic, prurient, squeamish, confused and judgmental.

Only when I fell out of step with marriage norms – when I stopped having sex – did I realise how much I'd been calibrating my marriage to other people's standards. Before, I hadn't noticed, because I wasn't a marital misfit. We enjoyed the smug comfort of having a "normal", traditional marriage that included all the usual activities.

But normal according to what? Movies? Magazines? They create this illusion – almost an accusation – that everyone has sex better, more often and more zanily than you do.

Also, abstinence made me feel like a complete fraud, an impostor who wasn't in a "real marriage". Were other non-conjugal marriages real, I challenged myself? There are

lots of rich but sexually complicated marriages.

For all my gloom, the one feeling I didn't have was that I missed sex. Celibacy wasn't a problem for me in any emotional, authentic, organic sense that I wanted sex and couldn't have it.

And then I understood the real issue. "Preferring not to" didn't feel like a legitimate, non-pathological choice. I was left thinking that we're not permitted not to want sex, or, more accurately, to be happily auto-erotic. As a friend of mine once explained, "I just don't want to involve anyone else in my sex life."

Having experienced sexual feast and famine, I'm a defender of celibacy. In a culture that truly respects sex and sees it as healthy, the freedom from having unwanted sex is just as important as the freedom to have wanted sex.

There's a whole spectrum of desire (although I think we tend to underestimate how much women want sex, and overestimate how much men want it). Some think about sex constantly; some hardly ever.

In our own lives, we probably slide along that spectrum, from caring a lot to caring not at all. A long-term relationship should be able to normalise phases of celibate repose, if both partners can live with it.

I think that's happening today. My ups and downs in married life sent me on a curiosity-driven quest, to find out what really goes on behind the closed door of marriage, and publish a book about it. I discovered such heterodoxy in the sexual habits of 21st-century marriage, from openly non-monogamous to illicitly non-monogamous to monogamous to contented, self-declared "asexual" marriages to Platonic ones where erotic needs get met in other relationships. And I'm convinced they're "real marriages", all of them. ■

Pamela Haag's *Marriage Confidential: The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives, Royal Children, Undersexed Spouses and Rebel Couples Who Are Rewriting the Rules* is published by HarperCollins (£16.99)

80% OF WIVES SAY THEIR SEX LIVES ARE PREDICTABLE

THE FEMALE VIRGIN

Headhunter Gurjot Sindhar, 25: 'Some men can be manipulative'

When I meet someone on a date, I don't tell him straightaway that I am a virgin and intend to stay that way until I get married, because I know when I tell men, they lose interest. I was put on my guard a long time ago, at school in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. There were a set of boys who were out to "get me". They were having bets on who would have sex with me first and, when I found out, I was badly hurt.

Some of the girls I knew told me I was missing out, but I am happy I am saving myself, and my friends are also proud of me. People find my decision fascinating. They think I live like a nun; I don't. I live in London now and I often go clubbing. I wear make-up, dress up in shorts, dresses, skirts, but I'm careful how I present myself. I don't flirt overtly as I don't want to give off the wrong signals. I have made a decision to love my own life and honour myself.

I have been brought up a Sikh but my decision about sex is not religious. I've seen many girls sleeping with just about anyone and it makes them more insecure. If a man loves you, he'll wait for you.

My parents are proud that I have chosen to save myself for my husband, as my mother did. But I'm sad that, as a result, it is difficult to find a boyfriend. I was very close to someone when I was about 18. I thought he was very special. We got closer and closer, but then I was too afraid to give it a go and we lost touch. I don't see him now.

I've met some nice guys who back off when I tell them how I feel. One spent a long time explaining how the physical element of relationships was important to him. I said that if he loved someone, he would wait, but he said that sex is part of love. I do see that, but I think that level of love is expressed through marriage.

I've kissed a guy, but won't go further. When I see sex on TV I switch channels; it's not something I want to watch. Some of my friends tell me how amazing sex is, others that it's awful and it hurts.

I value the intimacy of a relationship, a deep emotional and spiritual connection, so I don't take sex lightly. Some men can be manipulative and girls get caught in a trap.

Everyone has sexual urges but it's important for me to stick to what I've decided. I don't want to lower myself in anyone else's eyes, or in my own.

I don't think I've ever been in love but have hope that it will happen because I want to get married and have children. But I also don't want to get hurt.

I sometimes feel out of step with our overtly sexualised society. I joined a dating agency (lovestruck.com), but that was to help me make friends, not find romance. But I am asking for respect and I can't see why that is so hard to give. So many of my friends have been destroyed because their partners have cheated on them, and that's one thing I don't have to worry about.

Of course, mine is a difficult path. But I absolutely won't compromise. Even if I met someone and fell in love, I still wouldn't have sex with him until we were married, and if he truly loved me he'd wait. ■



I reached a decision a long time ago that I didn't want to have sex until I got married. I was brought up in Basingstoke, and my parents have had a long and happy marriage, as has my sister. At first, a lot of my friends thought my decision was weird and didn't think I would stick to it. I'm an outgoing guy and, like most people, from when I was about 15, I realised that lots of my friends were having sex. But it wasn't what I wanted to do. I felt it was disrespectful to the girls.

It hasn't been easy though – I have been tempted to change my mind many times. When you are at university and you're going out clubbing and are surrounded by beautiful girls, it's pretty difficult not to have sex. It was very difficult when there was an attractive girl in front of me basically saying, "I want to have sex with you." And there were lots of them. But girls are precious and sex is precious and I'd tell them I wanted to wait. I didn't drink heavily as I think otherwise I would probably have given in.

I live in London and see a lot of people sleeping around and they don't seem very happy. I also travel to developing countries and I see how sex can be used to destroy women's lives. I hate seeing sex used like that – violently or cheaply.

I have found it quite rewarding to swim against the current. It's not easy because of course I have a strong sex drive, but I want to promote the idea of faithfulness. I think society would be a far happier place if we took fidelity more seriously. That's why I work with the Romance Academy (romanceacademy.org), an organisation that tries to break the cycle of short-term relationships between young people by promoting fidelity and explaining the impact of early sexual activity.

I have been involved with girls who didn't share the same values. There was one amazing girl I was close to – but we both realised that a relationship wouldn't work when one of us wanted to wait and the other one didn't. I've been with my current girlfriend for a year and, fortunately, she feels the same way I do about sex and we share the same Christian faith, which forms the foundation for our decision.

Most friends know I don't want to have sex before marriage. People ask how I can risk it – what if we are not sexually compatible? But I know her really well; I think you can tell if you are compatible with someone even if you don't sleep with them.

I don't feel nervous about having sex for the first time. I guess I feel confident that if and when I marry my girlfriend we will have a lot of fun on our wedding night.

There is a lot of pressure in our society to be promiscuous, but to be a man, you don't have to sleep around. The good life isn't about having all your desires met instantly. I don't need to have sex to be happy. Some people think I am missing out, and in some ways I clearly am, but I think there is value in patience. When I am married, I will have lifelong sex with one person and I think that is great. ■

THE MALE VIRGIN

International development consultant David Hollow, 28: 'I've been tempted'

