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RICK STEIN'S
CHRISTMAS

MAGAZINE



**NO
SEX.**

And she's not the only one

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 zany 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**