

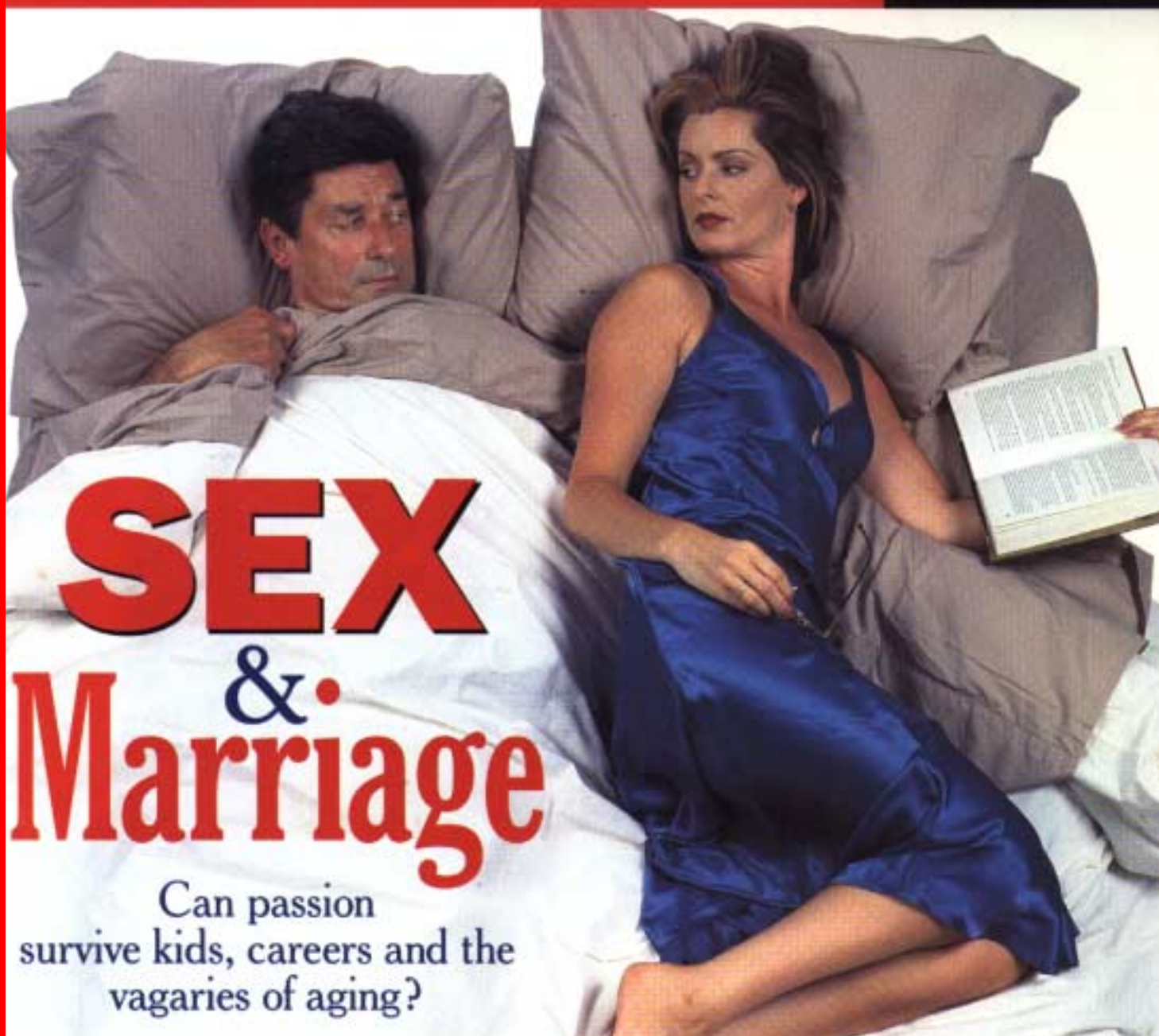
# Maclean's

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An investigation  
begins

**CANADIAN WINE:**  
Reaching for the top



## SEX & Marriage

Can passion  
survive kids, careers and the  
vagaries of aging?

A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a white ribbed tank top and dark plaid shorts, lying on a bed. He is propped up on his left arm, with his right hand behind his head. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Cover

# SEX & Mar

Experts say sex is vital to healthy relationships. Why is it so difficult for couples to do what's good for them?

By Patricia Chisholm

**Max is recalling** what sex was like before the big job, kids and mortgage. "I was a walking hormone," he says, laughing a little with his wife, Julie, in the basement of their comfortable Montreal home. The thirtysomething parents of two young children, who asked that their real names be withheld, used to fool around at least five times a week. Now, they say, they are lucky to make love that many times a month because they are either physically exhausted or mentally distracted by their demanding daytime roles—his as a boss, hers as a stay-at-home mom. Unlike many couples, though, Max and Julie haven't lost their sense of humour about what they view as a temporary decline in their physical intimacy. "It's a little sad—sex is such an enjoyable, amazing experience," Max says. "We still really enjoy it. But now I find I'm often just too tired at night. I can get it up, but I just can't get up off the couch."

Ah, sex. It's one of the few pleasures left that doesn't bloat the waistline, cause can-



# riage

cer or break the family budget. Researchers claim it even helps prevent wrinkles, and psychologists say it can rejuvenate the most tired relationship. According to a 1998 *Maclean's*/CBC poll, 78 per cent of married Canadians (as opposed to 61 per cent of single respondents) said they were sexually active, and 87 per cent of married Canadians said they were "satisfied" with their sex lives. Sexual monogamy has never been easy, though, and that fact has become depressingly clear to the great glut of baby boomers who grew up with the pill and unprecedented sexual freedom but now are struggling with aging bodies, sexual boredom, marital spats and plain old exhaustion. So much for the Summer of Love.

There is no easy way out, either. The divorce rate is falling as concerns about splintered families and AIDS prompt more people to recognize that breaking up really is hard to do. Statistics Canada reported this year that the number of divorces has fallen for four years in a row, from 78,880 in 1994 to 67,408 in 1997—a 14.5-per-cent drop. Edward Laumann, a University of Chicago sociologist who studies sexual dysfunction, says people appear to be staying together longer, despite lots of problems with sex, because they are realizing that changing partners costs huge amounts of time, money and energy, with no guarantees. "They are

aware that divorce is not a one-year experience," he says.

Of course, some passions cannot be revived, and some couples find it's easier to stay put and just be celibate. But in general, therapists say good sex is a hallmark of solid, long-term relationships. It's an opportunity to relax, to put everyday pressures aside and, especially, to reinforce emotional intimacy and physical closeness. More couples are turning to sex aids like toys and videos to ignite passions, while others are exploring unconventional options like long-term affairs and group sex. The permutations may be endless, but one thing is clear: sex, or the lack of it, still speaks volumes. "If you want to look at what is going on in your relationship, look at your sex life—it won't lie to you," advises Sig Taylor, a Calgary marriage counsellor. "It's a barometer, and it's usually the last thing to go. If couples get to the point where there is no sexuality anymore, the relationship is pretty much dead."

Most people are reluctant to talk about an unconventional or problematic sex life, making it one of the last real taboos. But in fact, problems of one kind or another are strikingly common. One of Laumann's recent studies found that, over a one-year period, 43 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men between the ages of 18 and 59 experienced some kind of sexual impediment, including lack of desire, erectile dysfunction and pain

## The elation people experience at the beginning of a relationship is really more akin to a drug-induced high

during intercourse. "These are huge numbers," he said, "and it's probably an underestimate—people don't like to admit they have problems with sex."

No wonder people don't want to talk about their troubles—the message in the media is that only losers are sitting it out. Explicit, even kinky sex now permeates movies, magazines and the Internet. *Eyes Wide Shut*, the late Stanley Kubrick's heavily hyped film, features the unlikely scenario of a married couple descending into the depths of their own, profoundly disturbing sexual fantasies. Against that backdrop, simple sex with a partner who never changes—except to acquire a few more sags and bags every year—can start to seem, well, ordinary.

What's to be done? Experts say the vast majority of aging-related sexual ailments—erectile dysfunction, pain during intercourse and lack of lubrication—can be cured medically. But

lasting solutions have to start with talk. "If couples pretend nothing is wrong, it only prolongs the problem," says Laumann. "Discussing it takes the edge off." The consequences of not talking can blight a life. "At the beginning of our marriage, things were great," says Frank, a 68-year-old retired Ontario businessman who asked for anonymity. "We had sex a couple of times a week and we were great friends." But their sex life declined sharply after they started having kids—he and his wife now have three grown children. "I felt I was inadequate," he says. "There were so many times I quietly hid my face under the sheets and cried."

He and his wife separated, but they have since struck an uneasy truce and now live together, although their sex life never resumed. Recently, he learned from a TV talk show that it is common for sexual appetites to fluctuate widely from year to year, and that the combination of life pressures and hormones is usually to blame. "I think we need to talk more about sex," he says now. "If I had known this was her body and not me, I would have done everything to fight for her."

Hormones can be responsible for the ups as well as the downs. The elation people feel early in a relationship is akin to a drug-induced high and is just about as sustainable, experts say. "The amount of adrenaline in the body is so great, you can get by with almost no sleep," says Richard Dearing, director of the Marriage Therapy Program at the University of Winnipeg. "You just don't have the energy to keep that



going for more than a few months."

As passions abate, couples stand back and take a hard look at one another. Details of character and temperament kick in, and partners begin to make decisions based on compat-

ibility. They may also notice that sex plays different roles in their respective lives. Libidos can differ wildly, partly because of natural hormonal levels—testosterone in men, androgen in women—and partly because of the approach that individuals take to sex. Dearing, like many therapists, has found that, typically, men use sex to feel good, while women need to feel good before they get into bed. The result when life gets stressful? He wants to, she doesn't.

**Of course, there are** no rigid categories when it comes to sex drive, and for many couples the roles are reversed. In either case, a mismatch can create big problems. Sipping a glass of white wine on a restaurant patio in Vancouver, a 38-year-old woman reflects on the recent breakup of her four-year, live-in relationship. "I realize that sex can't always be the priority," she says. "But for me, it's a way to let go of the day's hassles. You can get into it, just for the sake of pure, physical pleasure." She stayed with her partner for two years after their sex life ended, a phase that began when he was laid off. Despite her repeated efforts, it never resumed. "There was nothing I could do to reach him, and after a while I stopped try-

*The Halseys; Bentley and Doleman (below): acknowledging that sex is important to their relationships*

ing because the rejection was too hard to take. It was horrible," she recalls. "A relationship to me is a partnership—you play as a team. When something as basic as your physical intimacy breaks down, it's impossible to think of yourself that way anymore. One of you has broken the contract."

Even when two people agree on what they want out of life, and seem to be getting it, sex can suffer. Phil Bentley, 44, and John Doleman, 37, have lived together in Toronto for more than a decade. Unlike many couples, gay or straight, their early years together were tough because they decided to put all their efforts into paying off a large mortgage. They took in boarders and each worked at two jobs. "The house was always full of people so we didn't have many opportunities to be alone," says Bentley. Now, they have more time for one another, and that has translated into better sex. "After this amount of time being together, we are more honest with each other about our sexual needs," says Doleman.

National TV sex-show host Sue Johanson bursts into laughter when the subject of sex and marriage is raised. "The two are not simpatico," she chortles, only half in jest. But this grandmother has listened to thousands of tales of woe, and she believes there are many ways to revive flagging sexual appetites. As a first step, she says, couples should set aside time for the occasional date. She counsels couples to play games, such as hide-and-seek—in the nude and in the dark. Sex toys can rev things up as well, she contends, although she has found that men are often threatened if a woman buys a vibrator. "They say, 'What do you need that thing for, you've got Mr. Ever Ready here.' But once men use it to stimulate their partner, they're home free—they think it's great."

In fact, there is something of a revolution under way in the area of sex aids, especially for women. Shops like Womyns' Ware in Vancouver and Good For Her in Toronto coax women inside with tasteful decor and shelves free of hard-core videos and magazines, or cheap, crudely made products.



*Browsing at Womyns' Ware: shelves free of hard-core videos*

At Womyns' Ware, for instance, a sound system plays warm jazz in a light-filled room where merchandise is arranged so that those browsing for lubricants can avoid coming face-to-face with customers sampling handcuffs and leather floggers.

There is also a relatively new line of erotic videos aimed at women, called *Femme*. Developed by retired porn star Candida Royalle, 48, the videos feature complex story lines and shun sex scenes that degrade women. "There's a lot more out there that is couple-oriented," notes Montrealer Josey Vogels, who writes a syndicated weekly column called *My Messy Bedroom*. "Women want to explore their sexuality more, but they don't want to go to some sleazy hole in the wall—they don't want to feel creepy."

**But bedroom toys** cannot save a sex life that is undercut by marital conflict or fatigue. "Women are angry because they are aware that they are doing much more of the housework than men are," Johanson says. "A couple gets into bed and he has this copulatory gaze and she just looks at him and thinks, 'This is just one more person to service.'" If they want more sex, she says, men will "have to pick up more of the slack around the house—enough of this nonsense."

Leslie, a mid-40s Victoria-area mother of two young boys, can relate. With a demanding managerial job, and jammed off-hours—daily commutes to two schools, plus appointments for tutoring, soccer, sailing—Leslie says she retreats to the bedroom with one thing in mind. "By the time my head hits the pillow, I'm ready to pass out," she says. Her husband helps a lot with the kids, she says, but she is still the one who knows if it's pizza day at school or whether the dog needs a rabies shot. Too often, sex simply falls to the bottom of her "to-do" list. "Making a date with your mate is good advice, but I also know I should be doing two miles a day on the treadmill," she says wryly. "Trying to recapture the fun you had when you were young is like trying to remember Grade 9 chemistry—you know what apparatus to use, but you're not sure which chemicals you need to get a reaction."

Experts say there are peaks and valleys in everyone's sex life. Claude Guldner, professor emeritus at the University of Guelph and one of Canada's leading sex therapists, says desire tends to follow a U-shaped pattern in most marriages: it is intense during the courtship phase, dips down with the arrival of children and—if couples are lucky—swings strongly upward again when children are



## The payoff for couples who remain intimate through a marriage's stress-plagued middle years can be extraordinary

older. Often, those at the bottom of the U fail to realize that they may be devoting too much energy to parenting at the expense of their marriage. "We need to educate people that 'husbanding and wifing' continues, even though you are now fathering and mothering," he says.

Some people understand that lesson without being taught. Cheryl, a 40-year-old Halifax hairdresser, and Bob, 43, who works in the offshore gas industry, have been married for 10 years. When their now-five-year-old son was born, the first three months were "challenging," recalls Cheryl, who with her husband requested anonymity. "We just realized that every time we would get intimate, our son would start crying. That was a given and we would just laugh." She says grabbing a few moments here and there is enough to keep sex alive. "Even if it's five minutes in the shower in the morning, when junior is having his catnap, it's better than nothing," she says.

**Cheryl says she** and her husband have ups and downs, and that things can be especially difficult when her husband arrives home after a month offshore. "I always think of my relationship as the hardest thing I will do in my life, as well as the best thing," she muses. "It's hard to keep yourself present with somebody, to keep yourself vulnerable and open. It's hard to be intimate."

Mutual neglect can do much more than lead to bad sex—it can torpedo a marriage if it spawns infidelity. Guldner, who specializes in counselling couples grappling with the fallout from cheating, says that except for chronic philanderers, affairs are rarely about sex. Usually, the cheater is avoiding another issue: they are turned off by a partner's weight gain, for instance, or they are too often left alone by a spouse obsessed with work. "Many, many people say that sex in the affair isn't nearly as good as it was with their partner," Guldner says. But if couples are willing to confront one another with their problems, they often survive an event that, in the past, was widely viewed as unforgivable. That is partly because cultural shifts have weakened old notions of sexual possessiveness. "There is less exclusivity to the sexual act now because so



Taylor in Calgary: 'look at your sex life—it won't lie to you'

many people have had premarital sex," Guldner points out.

Some see a discreet affair as a viable alternative. Susan, a Toronto manager in her late 30s who requested anonymity, is deeply committed to her family, even though she has carried on a secret affair for nine years. What she gets from her lover is not better sex, she explains, but intellectual companionship and support in her professional life. Despite that, she has no intention of leaving her husband, with whom she has three school-age children. "Marriage is such a difficult, complex relationship," she says. "I would just be exchanging one set of problems for another if I left. And I think that children have the right to grow up in a home with both parents."

The payoff for couples who remain intimate through a marriage's stressful middle years can be extraordinary. Dartmouth, N.S., residents Les and Joan Halsey have treated sex as a precious, fragile wonder that is integral to the success of their 44-year marriage. "We realized early that it was very important," says Les, 65. "Once a month, we would go out for a candlelight dinner. Taking the time is so important—it's not just going to the bedroom and



Johanson: passion is all too often undercut by fatigue

saying, 'OK, let's have sex now.'

Joan, 64, recalls times when life got in the way of their physical intimacy—job changes, caring for their three children, periods of depressed libido. And she candidly admits that it was sometimes work for a couple married at 21 to keep themselves from straying. "The seven-year itch, living in suburbia, wild parties—it's only by the grace of God we didn't go that route," she says. And she has some advice for those still battling it out in the trenches. "Don't just have a home, children, work," she advises. "Do things that interested you before you were married. We always had a little bit of something just to ourselves—it keeps us healthy. And now that our family has left the nest, we have this whole new journey together." The motto for marriage, then, is "better sex than sorry."

With Ruth Atherley and Chris Wood in Vancouver, and Susan McClelland in Toronto