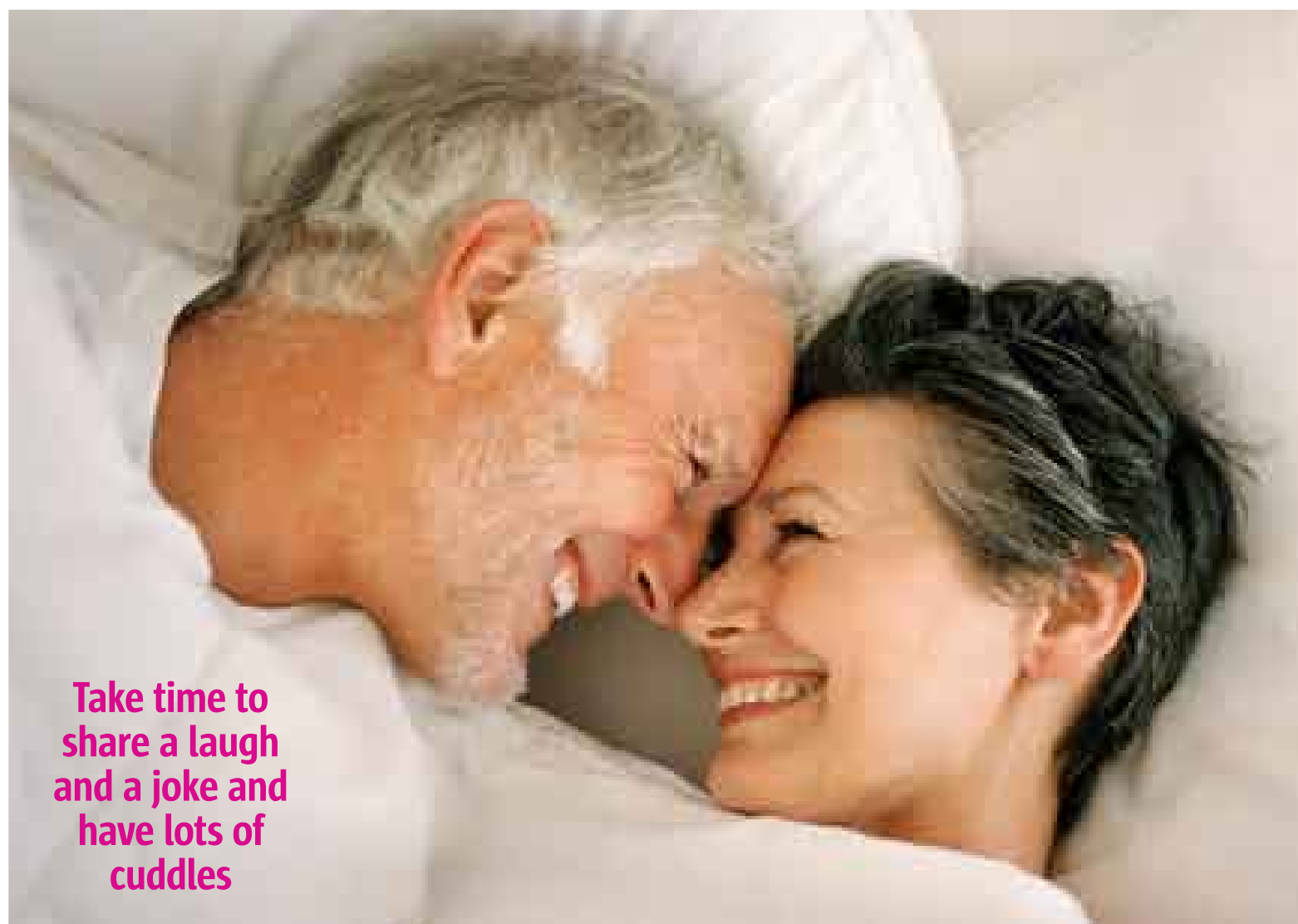


Your midlife sex and relationship guide

Our approach to relationships in the 21st century is very different from previous generations. Woman's Weekly's agony aunt, Keren Smedley, reports on the new challenges we face — and the choices we can now make



Take time to share a laugh and a joke and have lots of cuddles

Who would ever have guessed it would turn out like this? We were the first generation to take the contraceptive pill, challenge marriage, campaign for women's rights, and gay rights, too. We had a freedom that previous generations didn't and we didn't have the fears that later generations were brought up with — of

sexually transmitted diseases that could kill. We had a window and were "let out" to explore an unknown and exciting world. Yet here we are in our 50s and 60s and it's not quite as we'd expected. We thought we'd worked it all out, but many of us find ourselves uncertain about how to keep the spark in long-term relationships; or on our own when we thought we'd married for life; or having finally accepted

our sexuality and acknowledged we're gay; or that we really want to be single and possibly celibate; or that now is the time to explore, but we don't know the new rules. Many of you, like me, won't see 50 again and we face our own special issues, such as how to enjoy sex when our bodies creak a bit or how to take time to be intimate when there are so many other pressures in our lives. We're prepared to ask and

to explore ideas to help us make decisions. But, in spite of being part of a sexual revolution, we find ourselves with very few places that offer the help we need at our age. So I thought of writing a book*, to answer at least some of those questions — questions which, as your "agony aunt", I'm repeatedly asked. Take Rita, 59, a civil servant, who's been single all her life, but has now fallen in love and wants

to move in with her new partner; or 63-year-old Jim, a policeman, who, having lost his partner to cancer, doesn't know where to meet people, and isn't even sure he wants a new relationship. Not the type of issues our parents faced, for the simple reason that, by this age, they felt they were too old for sex. So what can they do?

Rita really needs to think about what it means to change her life. She will, of course, be gaining a lot from a close relationship, but will lose some of the joys of having her own space. It would be useful for Rita to write a list of what she gets from her present lifestyle and discuss these with her new partner, otherwise the change may feel overwhelming.

As for Jim, there are lots of places to meet people. He can go on the Internet, or simply look at magazine ads. But a good way of making friends is to join a further education class or special-interest group — he'll find details in his local newspaper or at his library.

At our age, our parents felt they were too old for sex

— which could lead to love.

I've spoken to many people in the process of writing my book and I don't immediately know the answers to all of the questions I've been asked. So I've done a lot of research and learned a great deal. I share these stories with you, in the hope that they will help you with some of the issues you might be facing. I've also talked to many

people who were worried about whether they're "normal". For example, Jean, a 54-year-old primary-school teacher, is finding sex less

comfortable due to menopausal changes. We discussed what happens to our bodies, so she knew she was not alone. I explained there are now many things that can help, such as vaginal pessaries, available from GPs, and lubricants, that can be bought at chemists.

Then there was Fiona, a 51-year-old payroll clerk, who was in a relationship that was really doing her no good (and she knew it) but who didn't know how to challenge her partner — or even to leave.

Reigniting romance

Marion, a 52-year-old nurse from Birmingham, wanted to know how she could keep sex exciting after 30 years of marriage. A few tips were ...

- Remind yourself of what it was that first attracted you to your husband, and try to rediscover those things in him.
- Take time to talk about your day, but listen well to what he has to tell you about his — which means not doing other things at the same time!
- Share a laugh and a joke.
- Touch each other and have lots of cuddles.
- Take each other out on a "date" or have a romantic night in.
- Be there for him when he wants you, like going to his office party or asking him to come out with you and your friends occasionally.

Meet my new man

Margaret, a 61-year-old school secretary, is divorced. She had had met someone special, but was wondering how to tell her grown-up children about him. Although all children — whatever their age — would, if asked, say that they would like their parents to be together, that's not always possible, so the next best thing is for their parents to be happy. The suggestions I made to Margaret were...

- Remind your children that you love them, whether you're in a relationship or not.
- When they first meet, choose a neutral space, arrange an activity the children will enjoy and don't make it more than a few hours long e.g. cinema and a drink or quick snack afterwards.
- Explain that you've met someone new you'd like them to meet.
- Tell them this person is your friend and not replacing their dad.
- Explain that it's important to you that they like the person.
- Space your meetings so they have time to adjust.

We talked about how to manage difficult conversations and my one essential tip is to try and find a time when neither of you are tense to talk openly about what's going wrong. Above all, remember that if you're stuck, counselling is invaluable, and, again, your GP will be able to help. Nowadays, there's absolutely no need to suffer in silence.

Last year, the Office of National Statistics revealed that the trend in long-term marriages ending in divorce shows no sign of abating. Indeed, the greatest percentage increase in failed marriages is in those of over 30 years' standing. As a result, there are now more of us in our 50s, 60s and beyond,

either looking for a relationship or learning to be single again.

This is a unique period in history — when there are more people over 65 in this country than there are 16-year-olds. And the baby-boomer bulge will last for about 30 more years as we head towards our 90s — a longer and healthier lifespan than our parents ever dreamed of. That's not to say we're all the same in our experiences, desires and expectations. Quite the opposite. But we're a formidable body of people who've been pioneers from the word go and will continue to be so. The more we understand not only ourselves but also one another, the better our relationships will be.

* *'Who's That Sleeping In My Bed? The Art Of Sex And Successful Relationships For Baby Boomers'*, by Keren Smedley, is published by Headline Springboard, price £14.99. Readers of *Woman's Weekly* can order a copy at the special discounted price of £12.99, including p&p. To order, please call 0870 755 2122, quoting "BSH690", or order online at www.pressoffers.co.uk/bsh690. Please allow 28 days for delivery. This offer is subject to availability.

