

## Not in front of the kids! A relationship expert tackles the taboo subject of sex for the over-50s

By Keren Smedley

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There was a time, growing up, when getting caught in flagrante delicto by your parents was quite possibly the most embarrassing thing imaginable. For those of us of a certain age, however, there is now a far more terrifying prospect: getting caught in the act by one of your grown-up children.

It happened to one of my life coaching clients, a 62-year-old retired primary school teacher called Jackie.

She was in the sitting room at home with John, her accountant husband of 37 years, when their grown-up son dropped by to collect something.



Putting the passion back into middle age: The baby boom generation aren't letting their age affect their sex lives

'He rang the doorbell and we didn't answer so he let himself in with his door key,' Jackie told me. 'He found us in what can only be described as a compromising position in the sitting room.'

'I don't know who was more uncomfortable, him or us. I certainly don't think John and I have ever been so mortified.'

Later, Jackie's son told her that he didn't realise that she and his father still 'did it'.

He had, in fact, stumbled across one of society's great taboo subjects, and one which is rarely discussed - sex for the over-50s.

Working as a counsellor for the past 25 years, I have observed the baby boomer generation moving through middle age.

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Like me (I'm 57) they are now in their 50s, 60s and 70s. And more than ever before, they are grappling to reconcile the onset of the ageing process with their own sexuality.

Is it OK to fall in love at 60? Is it normal to want sex at 65? Is it all right to get undressed with the bedroom lights on once you've hit 50?

These are the types of questions I am increasingly being asked. And the answer to all of them is, of course, a resounding yes.

But the problem for many baby boomers is that they are afraid even to raise the subject of middle-aged sex with friends or counsellors, or even with their partners.

As a generation, we are constantly bombarded with media images which tell us that sex is the preserve of the young.


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Happy couple: Evidence shows that more people are staying sexually active into their 50s, 60s and 70s

There is a latent fear that our sexuality should somehow vanish with the onset of the menopause. The evidence, however, suggests otherwise.

Even the latest worrying statistics, which reveal that sexually transmitted infections have tripled in the over-55s in the past six years, are telling.

And from the evidence of clients, aged over 50, coming to my relationship workshops, there is no doubt that sex is something that's a more important part of older people's lives than ever before.

We baby boomers are generally healthier than our parents were at this age, and living more active lives well into our 60s and 70s. Life expectancy has increased over the years.

Latest figures reveal that a man aged 65 can expect to live to 82 and a woman aged 65 to 85.

And while we may not all want a vigorous sex life till the day we drop, most of us would still like the option of one.

Figures released by the Office for National Statistics last year delivered another significant revelation.

The trend in long-term marriages ending in divorce had risen further. Indeed, the greatest percentage increase in failed marriages is in those of over 30 years' standing.

Increasingly, women are the driving force behind this. They want more from their relationships and where they once might have been financially dependent on their husbands, and therefore forced to stay in an unhappy marriage, now many of them have economic freedom.

And once they are out of a long-term marriage, they have to start all over again - and that means kick starting sex lives that may well have become fallow after decades with the same partner.

Not surprisingly, that can be a daunting prospect. Many find themselves in situations they could never have expected.

Mary, an office manager, told me: 'I got married when I was 22 and had a family almost straightaway. When my youngest went to school, I went back to work part time. I imagined my husband and I would retire at 65 and perhaps move to the coast.

'My world was shattered when he abandoned me after 30 years of marriage and moved in with a woman almost half his age. I found myself, at 52, angry, hurt and alone. It meant readjusting my thinking.

'My husband's betrayal just didn't fit with my values, which were about staying together through thick and thin.

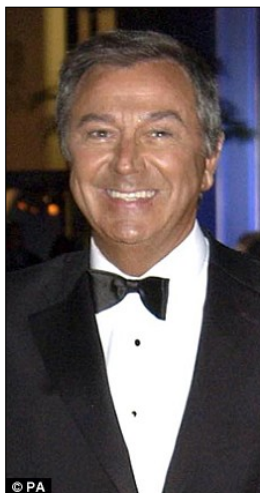
'At my children's insistence, though, I eventually tried internet dating and I've now met a lovely man. I've done something I never believed I'd do again: I've fallen in love. I feel like a teenager!

The passing of the years has left many of us, it seems, feeling uncertain about how we can maintain good, loving, long-term relationships, and unsure of how we can leave ones that aren't good for us.

We're fearful of starting new ones and have major concerns about whether we're now too old for a successful sex life if we decided to begin again with a new partner.

We're a generation that, in spite of flower power and freely available sex in our youthful days, carries many of our parents' inhibitions.

As a result, we find ourselves trapped between the old and the new when it comes to sex in our later years.



Age is nothing but a number: David Jason, left, and Des O'Connor have both become fathers over the age of 60

Too often, we're uncertain of the new rules; sometimes we're not even sure there are any. We knew what the rules were when we were young and we knew when we were breaking them.

Today's choices about sex and relationships are both liberating and confusing.

For example, at a recent counselling session, Sarah Gordon, an attractive 54-year-old maternity nurse and mother of 23-year-old twin sons, asked me: 'Is it all right to fall in love and want to be intimate at my age?'

Given that Sarah was becoming a young adult as the Sixties swung into the Seventies, this revealed a surprising lack of confidence. But perhaps it shouldn't be so surprising at all.

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The baby boomers were brought up in households with two parents, when divorce figures were low, homosexual relationships were unlawful and the expectation was that we'd all marry and have 2.4 children.

Men would be the main breadwinners and women would stay at home after they had children and only work, if at all, part time.

Our parents were welcoming in a new era having lived through World War II and rationing.

When we baby boomers were born, life was on the up and they wanted their children to have it all.

They were determined to make it a bright future for us, but they were equally determined to instill in us their sexual morals and social values, and these have stayed with us, despite the sexual revolution that unfolded in the Sixties.

That then, is the generation which is now seeking to make sense of the sexual rules - or lack of them - governing the world of relationships today.

One lady I spoke to, 59-year-old Margaret, who lives with her second husband in Wolverhampton, recalls: 'The sexual revolution passed me by. Like everyone else, I listened to The Beatles and did the Twist, but I left school at 16, went to work in the local supermarket, met my first husband by the time I was 19 and had three children in quick succession.

'I wasn't out there partying. I was knee deep in nappies throughout my 20s.'

While Margaret was busy bringing up her children, the world was changing.

Established ways of life and behaviour were challenged. Couples openly lived together without feeling the need to marry. Women's and gay rights became hotly debated issues.

Male homosexuality was legalised in England and Wales in 1967 and the Abortion Act came into effect in 1968.

Alongside this, there was an increase in the commercialisation of sexuality through advertising, and a relaxing of censorship laws.

While researching my book, *Who's That Sleeping In My Bed? The Art Of Sex And Relationships For Baby Boomers*, I talked to lots of men and women in their 50s and 60s, like Sarah and Margaret, about how things were when they grew up and how things are now.

'I still find I'm trying to work out what's right and what's wrong and at times it feels like I've lost the manual,' says Penny, a graphic designer, who, at 49 and having been married for 22 years, finally had the courage to walk out of her marriage to pursue a new relationship.

Physiotherapist Myra Williams, 54, divorced when her children were young. She dated a few people over the years but didn't have a serious relationship until she met 56-year-old James, a speech therapist, at work. In time, she introduced him to her four children and they all got on well.

When James proposed, she told her children over a family meal. Her eldest daughter immediately piped up: 'That's fine - as long as you never talk about sex.'

It seems that while millions of us stages of a sexual relationship, but to this you can also bring your experience of relationships.

You can use your skills to get what you want. As a 16-year-old you might have sat by the phone, moping, waiting for a man to call.

As a 56-year-old, you're less likely to put up with being messed around. And everybody is different.

It's OK not to want sex too, and OK to want it five times a night. It's entirely up to you. Libido can be affected by the ageing process, especially by the menopause in women.

It's about using what you've got and feeling at ease with yourself. And feeling able to talk about it to others.

Relationships look very different in 2009 from how they were in the Sixties and Seventies.

It's easy when you get to 50 or 60 to be seduced into believing your days of heady sex and fun are over.

But, as Dr Joel Block points out in his book *Sex Over 50*: 'Sex may change as we get older, but that's the good news!'

How many of us stumbled through our youth not sure what we were doing, feeling too shy to ask and assuming we should somehow instinctively know? Most, I expect.

But here we are, still healthy and, in spite of the odd creaky joint, still fit enough to enjoy good sex and confident enough, too, to ask for what we want.

Just one word of advice: don't mention it in front of the children.

- *Who's That Sleeping In My Bed? The Art Of Sex And Relationships For Baby Boomers*, by Keren Smedley, £12.99, Headline Springboard.

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