

Becoming Intimate Again

Starting a new relationship in our middle years raises different issues to the ones we had when we were young. *WW* dilemmas expert **Keren Smedley** answers a selection of the letters she's received

Q My wife and I split up 18 months ago and I've met a lovely woman. We've tried several times to make love but I just can't do it. I'm so embarrassed. I really fancy her but I don't seem to be able to get an erection. I feel such a failure and, although I've told her I really like her, I worry she may leave as I'm not good in bed.

A This is upsetting, understandably, but I assure you that you're not alone. More than 40% of men who are over 60 sometimes have this problem. Erectile dysfunction, as it is known, can be caused by a number of factors, some physical and some psychological. If you're feeling nervous about this new relationship and concerned about how you will 'perform', this will lower your self-confidence and you'll produce stress hormones that have a negative effect on your ability to have an erection. But the problem may be physical, so it's important that you go to your GP and are examined as most of the causes, such as raised blood pressure, high cholesterol or low

testosterone can be treated easily. I know this can be awkward and embarrassing, but it's really essential that you discuss this with your new partner, explain what's going on and tell her you're seeking help. Most importantly, talk about all the things you can do in an intimate sexual relationship that don't involve an erection. The more you touch each other and enjoy each other sexually, the easier intercourse will feel. You may also benefit from talking this through with someone impartial, in confidence. The Sexual Advice Association can be contacted via sda.uk.net and will provide lots of helpful information. There's also a helpline you can call on 020 7486 7262.

Q I was married for 37 years when my husband died suddenly. We were never very adventurous in bed and we hadn't been physically intimate for a number of years. I've recently met a new man and he's much more physical and wants to do things I hadn't even heard of and certainly don't want to do. I don't know how to tell him, or if I should.

A Communication is the key to any healthy relationship, and essential in an intimate one. Having been with someone for 37 years and not talking about the physical side of your relationship means those conversations are difficult for you. If you don't talk about this it will become more of an issue and eventually bring a wedge between you. Imagine that he's sitting in the room and talk to him, then move to his chair and see if it felt right. Keep doing this until you're confident about what you plan to say. If you're prepared and your intention is to be positive, you'll find the whole conversation much easier to have.

Q I'm a bit embarrassed to write to you. I've just been diagnosed with Chlamydia - at my age! I was told to make sure my lovers use a condom. Why, when I'm too old to get pregnant?

A There's been a significant increase in the number of people over 50 visiting STD clinics. Although many of us were brought up in a time of increased sexual freedom, we missed out on the sex education routinely now given to young people. The development of the contraceptive Pill coincided with many of us becoming sexually active and we became less used to using a condom. Many of us settled into monogamous, long-term relationships and we didn't worry about STDs. They aren't age-conscious, so we have to protect ourselves and the best way is using a condom and learning about how infections are transmitted - nhs.uk/conditions/Sexually-transmitted-infections is good place to start online, and your local sexual health clinic will have informative leaflets.

Q I never thought I'd say this at 61, but I've fallen in love again. After nine years on my own, it's a dream come true. We've become very close and he's asked me to go away for a weekend. The only problem is that he'll have to see me undressed and without my make-up on. What will he think when he wakes up and sees this flabby old woman next to him? How will I get out of bed naked without him seeing me?

A I daresay he'll think that he's a very lucky man to be spending the weekend with a gorgeous woman. Also, I'm assuming you haven't fallen in love with a 20-year-old so he may very well be worrying about the same thing. Both male and female bodies change with age but that doesn't mean they're any less attractive than they were when younger. If you get up confidently and look as though you're comfortable within yourself, he'll see exactly that. If you scurry to the bathroom, he'll get a very different impression! But, if walking across the room does feel too much, leave a towel or a robe by the bed and wrap yourself in it as you stand up.

Q I've been going out with a man for a year now and we'd like to live together. I have three teenage children so he'd have to move in with me. Up till now, he's only stayed when they are with their father, although he has been to dinner a few times. If he lives here, they'll often be home. I don't know if I can have sex with them in the next-door rooms. I said this to my partner and he said that if that's how I felt, moving in was a bad idea.

A I wonder if you're focusing on the most important aspect. Your children will be thinking about their father and whether they'll get on with this man. Helping them and your new partner to relate is the first item on the agenda. I'd suggest that you have a chat with your children:

- ❖ Remind them that you love them and that will never change whether you're living with someone else or not.

- ❖ Explain that you'd like this man to move in.
- ❖ Tell them he's your friend and not replacing their dad.
- ❖ Explain that it's important to you that they like him and ask what they need to make this easier for them.
- ❖ It may also be a good idea to try things out before he gives up his home, so start spending the weekends together and then a few days in the week. If you manage the transition well, making love to your partner shouldn't be an issue.

Q My marriage ended last year when my husband left me for someone 18 years younger than me. I bumped into them recently in the street and, although it pains me to say this, she's gorgeous looking and has a fantastic figure. I feel so old, frumpy and lonely and can't imagine ever meeting anyone again who will fancy me.

A That must have felt horrible, although I expect she wasn't nearly as lovely as you thought she was. You were undoubtedly viewing her through your negative, self-deprecating filters. That said, what she looks like is irrelevant in relation to you finding a new partner. Focusing on what you haven't got rather than what you have is never going to work. Ask your four closest friends to tell you what they like about you as a person and also what are your best physical

features - although it's rarely our external appearance that people who really fall in love with us value. They love us for who we are as people. Write your friends' list down and add your own thoughts (only your good traits!) and read it daily up to 30 times until you start to believe it. Having positive thoughts really does change one's outlook. Armed with this knowledge and the confidence it will give you, I don't think you'll have any problem attracting someone new.