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Let's (not) Talk About Sex: X-phemistic Sex Metaphors in Agony Aunt Columns for Men and Women

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Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
I. Literature review	6
1.1. Approaches to metaphor	6
1.1.1. Conceptual metaphors	6
1.2. Critical discourse analysis	8
1.2.1 Critical metaphor analysis.....	9
1.3. Euphemisms, dysphemisms and X-phemisms	10
1.3.1. Metaphorical X-phemisms	11
1.4. Theoretical framework and literature review	13
II. Data and methods	15
III. Results and discussion	19
3.1. Overall results: Quantitative tendencies	19
3.2. Qualitative analysis	25
3.2.1. X-phemistic metaphors according to source domains in men’s and women’s datasets	25
3.2.2. The comparison of qualitative features of X-phemistic metaphor use in the two corpora.....	44
IV. Conclusions	48
References	51
Appendices	55
Appendix I. X-phemistic metaphors in men’s corpus.....	55
Appendix II. X-phemistic metaphors in women’s corpus.....	57
Appendix III. Data sources for men’s corpus	58
Appendix IV. Data sources for women’s corpus	60
Appendix V. Men’s corpus data	63
Appendix VI. Women’s corpus data.....	91

Abstract

The present thesis focuses on the metaphorical X-phemistic expressions in sex and relationship advice columns meant for men and women. The aim of this study is to examine the metaphorical X-phemism use in the discourse of advice giving and how the taboo topic of sex is conceptualized when targeting male and female audiences. The methodology of the paper includes the combination of close reading and Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU). The results of the study show that women's dataset has a higher number of X-phemistic metaphors, yet the male corpus is more characteristic of lexical variation. The analysis reveals that the metaphorical X-phemisms exemplify the contrasting priorities in men's and women's advice columns, in addition to proving to be an effective tool to politely (or impolitely) refer to the taboo and reflect the rich complexity of human sexuality.

Introduction

The advice columns, also known as “agony aunts”, have remained a popular source of entertainment since the first one appeared in late seventeenth century. Starting as a small subsection in a newspaper, such articles made their way into lifestyle magazines, Internet blogs and social media pages, offering tips on a wide variety of topics ranging from legal advice to child-rearing, yet the most sought-after columns address relationships, dating and sex. Although the present-day Western climate favours liberal values, the topic of sexual relations has, to some extent, remained a taboo which requires some linguistic concealment, however, at the same time, it also “provides a fertile seedbed for words to flourish – and the more potent the taboo, the richer the growth” (Burridge 2004, p.212). Keeping in mind that metaphor is one of the most widely employed linguistic devices of lexical creativity and a dynamic source for euphemistic and dysphemistic reference, it does not come as a surprise that metaphors are often used as a means of coping with “forbidden” topics. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to conceptual metaphor as a purely X-phemistic (euphemistic, quasi-euphemistic, quasi-dysphemistic and dysphemistic) rhetorical device which is of ever-changing nature. In fact, very few studies have taken on the task to analyse the use of euphemisms and dysphemisms in communication from a cognitive perspective and even fewer researchers have dealt with sex-related X-phemistic expressions. It could not be denied that a significant number of scholars have given close and thoughtful attention to metaphors in sexual context along cognitive lines (Kövecses, 1986,1988; Hines, 1996, 1999, 2000; Deignan, 1997, 2005, Murphy, 2001 and others). Yet even fewer researchers have taken on the task to study euphemisms/dysphemism in this specific taboo theme (Santaemilia 2005, Crespo-Fernández, 2008, 2011, 2015). In spite of providing relevant and beneficial information regarding this subject, a more up-to-date study is needed to address metaphorical expressions as manifestations of X-phemistic processes that are required when discussing sex-related subjects.

The present research adds a new element to these studies by looking at X-phemistics metaphors in a magazine discourse of advice giving, which enables us to reflect on the social and communicative functions that these metaphors perform. In addition to that, it presents a new perspective of comparing gender similarities and differences as samples of euphemistic, dysphemistic, quasi-euphemistic and quasi-dysphemistic metaphors will be collected from advice columns for men and for women. Together with other studies on (im)politeness and gender (Santaemilia 2005, Culpeper et al. 2017, Holmes 2013 and others) this paper brings forth fresh insights into the discourse strategy of applying metaphorical X-phemistic expressions to discuss the taboo topic of sex and how it varies (or does not) according to the targeted audience.

The subject of the thesis is the X-phemistic metaphorical expressions in advice columns for men and women.

The research aim is to examine the use of X-phemistic metaphors in the magazine discourse of advice giving and the way the topic of sex is conceptualised when targeting male and female audiences.

Main objectives:

1. To review the literature on Conceptual Metaphors, Euphemisms and Dysphemisms, metaphorical X-phemisms, Critical Metaphor Analysis;
2. To compile two corpora containing advice articles from magazines intended for male and female readers;
3. To identify X-phemistic metaphorical expressions which are applied to discuss the topic of sex, categorize them according to source domains and recover the target concepts;
4. To examine how each source domain and the X-phemistic metaphors within aid in the process of conveying ideas about the sexual topic at hand and what characteristics do these expressions highlight;
5. To compare the differences and similarities of X-phemistic metaphor use in advice columns to target male and female readership as well as contrast the most prominent discourse features.

The present thesis is structured into the following parts: Literature Review, Data and Methods, Results and Discussion, and Conclusions. Part I, the Literature Review, briefly overviews the most significant concepts within the fields of conceptual metaphor theory, X-phemisms and critical metaphor analysis. Part II, Data and Methods, indicates the sources from which data was taken as well as method of selection and analysis criteria. Part III, Results and Discussion, presents and discusses the findings. The Conclusions contains the summary of the findings. The thesis also includes References, a Summary in Lithuanian, and six Appendices.

I. Literature review

The current section deals with an overview of the most relevant literature that informs and provides background information for the present thesis. The subsections below present key concepts and relevant definitions in relation to (conceptual) metaphors, critical metaphor analysis, X-phemisms and specifically, metaphorical euphemisms, dysphemisms and quasi-euphemisms/ quasi-dysphemism as well as the review of literature on the most eminent studies done on metaphors or X-pehmisms in a sexual context.

1.1. Approaches to metaphor

Language is not only a tool of communication, it holds the power of shaping us, constructing our reality, and creating specific identities (Murphy 2001, 4). In essence, the language we produce (written or spoken) is a reflection of our values that may be expressed in two ways – directly or indirectly. Opinions and attitudes may be conveyed directly – for instance, by simply stating that something is good or bad, or indirectly – and the latter can be achieved through metaphor (Charteris-Black 2011, 11).

Metaphor is often viewed as a poetic device of creativity and rhetorical enhancement, relating to the matters of literature rather than to everyday language. Lakoff & Johnson (2003) go into further detail to explain that since people consider metaphors as no more than a feature of language and something that is easily expendable from everyday life, they are unaware of how pervasive it actually is, both in thought and action (Lakoff & Johnson 2003, 4). For this reason, the linguists do not define metaphors as a feature of picturesque or literary language, keeping in mind how many expressions are deeply rooted into our daily communication. Granted that metaphorical expressions act as gateways “through which persuasive and emotive ways of thinking about the world mould the language that we use and through which our thoughts about the world are moulded by language use”, the cognitive approach to metaphor is essential (Charteris-Black 2011, 2).

1.1.1. Conceptual metaphors

A conceptual metaphor is understood as consisting of two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another, or in short - conceptual domain A is conceptual domain B (Kövecses 2010, 4). As maintained by Kövecses (2010), conceptual domains help us to coherently organize our knowledge and express it in a more understandable way. The author illustrates his explanation with the

conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY. People collect information about journeys (here domain B), what it means to embark on one, the fact that it has a destination and other features to fully understand the concept of going on a journey and then effectively apply this knowledge to compare to subjects that are more abstract and harder to understand as in, for instance, love (domain A) (ibid 8).

The previously mentioned domains A and B, can also be referred to as source and target domains. The source domain (domain B), is typically a more concrete or physical entity, from which we draw metaphorical systematic correspondences to understand a more abstract entity which is the target domain (A) (ibid 4). This way, all concepts that are vague or require more explanation such as HATE, ARGUMENTS, IDEAS, DEATH and others are target domains while concepts from our physical world that are very well known to us such as JOURNEYS, REST, ANIMALS and many others are source domains.

The previously mentioned systematic correspondences between the source and target domain are referenced as mappings (ibid 7). If we come back to the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY, all of the following expressions that deal with love and come from the domain of journey are systematic correspondences. Some of these linguistic metaphorical expressions include, for example, “we’re at a crossroads” which alludes to lovers as travellers who have to make a choice in their relationship and choose a path, a specific direction that their relationship will follow (ibid 7). Or “we are going through a rough patch”, denoting not literal obstacles in one’s way but rather how couples have to overcome difficulties in their relationship.

Apart from providing creative and effective ways of conceptualizing a more difficult subject, metaphors possess a vital role in aiding to shape our attitudes and opinions towards a specific subject, therefore, it is essentially a tool of persuasion (Charteris-Black 2011, 13). Since the value of a word or expression fundamentally depends on the features of the source domain that are singled out and mapped onto the target domain, the specific choice of the source domain to compare another concept to, has important implications (Kövecses 2003, 25). It reveals the particular communicative purpose intended by the speaker as well as the motivation behind that particular expression.

Harnessing the emotions of interlocutors with the use of metaphor to influence opinions can be observed in various settings from mass communication to religious discourse. Multiple studies on the effect of metaphorical expressions as tools of persuasion in various discourses have demonstrated their success in swaying peoples’ opinions which includes advertising (Phillips and McQuarrie 2009), press reporting (Charteris-Black 2011) but most importantly, discourse of political propaganda and presidential speeches (Charteris-Black 2011; Musolff 2006; Belt 2003 and others). According to Charteris-Black

(2011), politicians employ metaphors since it is a powerful rhetorical device which allows to exert ideological power over the audience and unconsciously convince them to accept the given narrative (28).

Even though the linguistic manipulation using metaphors is most “glaring” in such texts that are specifically constructed with a persuasive goal, such as previously mentioned advertising or political speeches, evaluative and ideological metaphorical expressions may be found in a variety of other, more casual and conversational types of discourse like advice columns. Journalists may employ this strategy of choosing a particular conceptual metaphor depending on the goal - they can either make the audience highly approve and relate to certain practices and behaviours or shape a negative attitude towards the topic in question.

It could not be stated that every metaphorical expression has some underlying author judgement, yet in some cases, a sample analysis of a particular phrase may reveal certain values. For this reason, a critical analysis of metaphors, which is discussed in the following subsection, is a beneficial approach to obtain insights “into the beliefs, attitudes and feelings of the discourse community in which they occur” (Charteris-Black 2011, 13).

1.2. Critical discourse analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (often abbreviated as CDA) is an approach to the study of discourse that places texts within a social context, to examine how power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted (van Dijk 2001, 352). CDA is a research tool rather than discipline which combines linguistic methods with techniques from other human science disciplines, such as sociology, politics, history and psychology (Charteris-Black 2011, 29). This “mode” of analysis can be applied to various fields of study such as narrative analysis, sociolinguistics, media analysis and many others; however, a proper use of CDA should involve the following aspects: 1) CDA should focus on social and political issues rather than current trends; 2) it should aim not to simply describe discourse structure but to explain the texts in terms of features of social structure and how dominant discourse produces, enables or challenges the ones in power; 3) a successful example of CDA in social problems should involve several disciplines; 4) in order to be accepted, CDA research needs to be “better” than other research (van Dijk 2001, 353).

While the traditional discourse analysis takes on the task to examine how meanings are constructed between sentences and utterances, in CDA the attention is more on the specific selections that are made when producing speech (written or spoken) and the elements that causes these choices in addition to their effect (Charteris-Black 2011, 30). One of these linguistic selections involves metaphors, a specific

(possibly) conscious linguistic choice of the speaker that could potentially reveal some hidden social processes with the help of critical metaphor analysis (ibid).

1.2.1 Critical metaphor analysis

As previously mentioned, in the same fashion as CDA, Critical Metaphor Analysis is an approach that strives to uncover the hidden (and possibly unconscious) intentions in metaphors produced by language users (Charteris-Black 2011, 34). The frameworks of metaphor analysis developed by Cameron and Low (1999, 88) and Fairclough (1995, 6) proposed three similar steps in examining metaphors: 1) collecting all instances of linguistic metaphors referring to the chosen topic; 2) sorting the phrases according to conceptual metaphors they exemplify; 3) examine the results to ascertain possible thought patterns and getting a better understanding of what constructs or restrains individuals' opinions and actions (Cameron and Low 1999, 88).

In addition to the previous studies, Charteris-Black (2011) also conforms to the three-step approach; however, he brings forth an updated and more comprehensible guide to critical metaphor analysis. It starts with probably the most crucial part, i.e., an accurate metaphor identification. After close reading of the chosen texts with the goal of identifying suitable metaphors, it is essential to detect a possible “tension” between the literal source domain and the metaphoric target domain (Charteris-Black 2011, 35). This trace of incongruity or semantic tension could be found on many levels – linguistic, pragmatic or cognitive, as a result from a shift in domain use, regardless of the fact that shift happened some time before and the metaphor has become conventionalized (ibid). Consequently, the expressions that do not fit the present criteria should be omitted from further research. Secondly, the remaining lexical units are investigated in the context of the corpus to decide if the phrase functions as a metaphoric or a literal item (ibid 36).

In accordance with Charteris-Black (2011, 37), metaphor interpretation is the second stage which requires establishing a link between metaphors and the cognitive and pragmatic features that influence the choice as well as the identification of conceptual metaphors. Even at this level of analysis some insights into the metaphor choices and how “deliberate” they are in depicting a socially important portrayal (ibid 38). Finally, the analysis ends with a metaphor explanation, the goal of “identifying the social agency that is involved in their production and their social role in persuasion” (ibid 39). By peering into the underlying evaluations that are expressed through a specific choice of one or other phrase/word,

we can weigh what connotations these conceptual comparisons convey and how they might construct our understanding of the subject.

1.3. Euphemisms, dysphemisms and X-phemisms

By society's standards, such topics as sexual relations, death, bodily functions and others are deemed “filthy” and avoidable for many reasons, yet, at the same, these taboo subjects also hold a certain type of “morbid” fascination and attraction which then prompts individuals to either violate or preserve these notions and generate an array of creative cross-varietal synonyms. In simple language, cross-varietal synonyms are the “words that have the same meaning as other words used in a different context” (Allan and Burrige 2006, 29). With the help of these different linguistic alternatives to straight-talking, also known as orthophemisms, the same subject can be referred to with euphemistic and dysphemistic overtones.

Generally, a euphemism is known as a means of providing a sweeter-sounding substitute to a disrespectful and face-damaging expression. To be more precise, it is a figure of speech which is employed by the speaker to either mitigate the force of addressing a taboo or avoiding to refer to it directly altogether. In addition to the protective euphemism (which aims to shield and avoid offence), there are other, in a way overlapping, functions such as being underhand (deceiving and misrepresenting), uplifting (upgrading and inflating) and provocative (attracting interest) (Burrige 2012, 67-70). As aforementioned, the communicative purpose of a particular euphemistic expression may coincide with another function, hence the interpretation of the phrase is rather subjective and heavily relies on the context.

In contrast, a dysphemism aims to directly offend and degrade the listener and, unlike euphemism, has the sole function. Speakers resort to dysphemistic expressions when they are angry, frustrated and feel contempt towards a specific person or other matter and wish to degrade and humiliate them. Expressions count as being dysphemistic if they include curses, name-calling and any other sort of insults directed at individuals in order to hurt their feelings (Allan and Burrige 2006, 31).

In addition to euphemism and dysphemism, Allan and Burrige (2006) also differentiated two types of their cross categories, namely, a quasi-euphemism and a quasi-dysphemism, that were separated from the two figures of speech due to their deviating functions; however, all of the four terms were united

under the umbrella term X-phemism. A quasi-euphemism sets itself apart from a euphemism because of its less than “shielding” qualities – it neither tries to mitigate the force of the forbidden topic nor does it aim to intensify the taboo with an offensive goal. In the light of the present context of magazine discourse which deals with reader entertainment and discussion of sex, the following functions are especially important – for example, the cohesive quasi-euphemism, displaying in-group solidarity puts a more neutral label on a stigmatized activities such as, for instance, BDSM in terms of *playtime* (Murray and Murrell 1989, 148). Moreover, Allan and Burridge (2006) also distinguished a dirty quasi-euphemism which, at first glance, might appear dysphemistic but it is actually used to sexually stimulate the partner. Finally, the last quasi-euphemistic function involves the expression appearing ludic (defusing the seriousness of taboo subjects) which is not considered as a “pure” euphemism since such expressions do not have a humorous objective (Burridge 2012).

On the whole, the use of X-phemisms in speech is closely related to the notion of *face* (a person’s public self-image) and *politeness* (concern for the face of both the speaker and the addressee) (Culpeper et al., 2017). The goal is to either mitigate or increase (in case of dysphemisms) the threat of taboo topics to the interlocutor's public self-image (ibid). However, some X-phemistic expressions and their application go beyond of what is simply considered polite since it is not the main purpose. For this reason, X-phemistic phrases in this thesis will be considered in broader terms than just politeness and impoliteness.

1.3.1. Metaphorical X-phemisms

Although euphemisms, dysphemisms and their cross categories can be conveyed with the help of metonymy, litotes, hyperboles and others, Crespo-Fernández (2015) points out that metaphors stand out as one of the most prolific means of expression (2). Actually, these two figures of speech (X-phemisms and metaphors) are rather similar in their nature as both euphemistic/dysphemistic processes and metaphors involve the practise of naming an object with the name that belongs to something else (Chamizo Domínguez 2005, 9). The X-phemistic metaphors can therefore be defined as expressions that “adopt metaphorical mapping of both source and target domains to express the notion of a forbidden domain as a result of conscious choices from pragmatic competence” (Lee, 2011, 356).

As far as “conscious choice” is concerned, not all metaphors evoke direct associations with the source domain. Some phrases are so entrenched into our everyday language that this leads the expression to appear rather “oblique” and, therefore, such lexical units are not considered to be essentially metaphorical at all as they do not have a more basic meaning in other contexts (Muller 2008, 11). Metaphorical X-phemisms are also prone to this “life-death” cycle where they become lexicalized to the point when the original meaning is lost, and the specific expression needs a new euphemism to refer to

it. The lexicalized X-phemisms, also called explicit X-phemisms, become devoid of the capacity to refer to the taboo figuratively due to their frequent use. Therefore, if we take lexicalized euphemisms that are repeatedly employed to allude to the subject of sex, due to its close association to the topic, it acquires sexual connotations as the primary sense of the word and, thus, might even appear as the sole definition of the phrase (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 59).

In spite of this, although we do not mentally equate some euphemisms or dysphemisms to their source, we are still aware of the negative or positive undertones that originally come from these comparisons. For instance, the word *bitch*, to most people, instantly correlates to an insult directed at women, which is also the first entry definition in the Macmillan Dictionary (n.d.), however, the primary sense, from which the insult originated, is a female dog. While the comparison to an animal, especially a female one, is an example of semantic derogation, the demeaning associations of the word might actually come from our experience how the expression is applied than anything else (Fernández Fontecha and Jiménez Catalán, 2003, 772-796). In the same fashion, *sex worker* does not provide a different interpretation of the expression as a result of its continuous use with reference to prostitutes, hence it being the sole definition in the dictionary. With this in mind, the phrase *sex worker* is not very effective as far as the “concealment” of the taboo is involved, nonetheless, it is a socially acceptable lexical equivalent since it compares prostitution to ordinary commercial activity and thus carries some euphemistic force (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 77).

As it was discussed in subsection 1.1.1. on conceptual metaphors, metaphorical X-phemisms also share the feature of acting as an effective tool of evaluation and persuasion. Since the same target concept may be expressed with the use of various source domains, the choice of a particular source domain, which has a special emotional load attached (whether it is positive or negative), “lends the concept its special flavour” (Kövecses 2003, 25). Let us consider the metaphor SEX IS A GAME. When the speaker euphemistically refers to any unconventional practices as *play* and the sexual accessories as *toys*, the interlocutor is invited to view the subject as an innocent pastime which then leads to the adoption of a less judgemental attitude towards the target domain (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 88). The same principle of persuasion works with dysphemistic metaphorical expressions as well. Since metaphor is also a rich source of dysphemistic reference, individuals or other subjects can be portrayed negatively when drawing a contrast between specific domains. For instance, speakers resort to ANIMAL metaphors to talk about men who *prey* on underage girls and exhibit *predatory* tendencies. This way, we are encouraged to consider individuals engaging in illicit activities as wild, animalistic and far removed from human behaviour (Murphy 2001, 154). Broadly speaking, the evaluative function of metaphorical X-phemisms

is a crucial part of journalism which tries to mould readers' opinions in order to shape what should be considered as desirable and acceptable or vice versa.

1.4. Theoretical framework and literature review

The study of metaphors has been a sight for linguistic fascination for a considerable number of years to this today, nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, little attention has been paid to conceptual metaphor as a purely X-phemistic rhetorical device. It is true that the highlighting—hiding process of metaphorical euphemisms in relation to the topic of death has attracted considerable linguistic curiosity - Jamet (2010), Lee (2011), Galal (2014) Gathigia et al. (2018) among others, revealed that euphemistic metaphors “enable the speaker to create a distance between reality and the name given to reality” which, in turn, offers a biased, “dishonest” vision of the subject at hand (Jamet 2010, 14). However, fewer studies have dealt with euphemisms and dysphemisms in sex-related context. Although a number of researchers have studied metaphors in discourse containing sexual topics, as for instance, Deignan (1997), Hines (1996, 1999, 2000), Kövecses (1986, 2003) and Murphy (2001) who considered the insidiousness of “male bonding” language used by men and how it shapes their attitude towards masculinity, just to name a few, only several linguists specifically concentrated on metaphorical X-phemisms in sex-related discourse. Santaemilia's (2005) book and specifically a chapter on sexual euphemisms in women's magazines provides discerning ideas about the euphemistic processes as well as the magazine discourse for women which was a useful addition to the work of Porter, Douglas & Collumbien (2017). Finally, Gathigia et al. (2015) paper “Sexual Intercourse Euphemisms in the Gikūyū Language: A Cognitive Linguistics Approach” supported the fact that source domains used to conceptualize sexual intercourse are rather “universal” and are similar to those in other languages (Gathigia et al. 2015, 36). In addition to this, the authors distinguished several features of male and female language when discussing sex-related subjects. According to Gathigia et al. (2015), “female respondents tended to conceptualize sexual intercourse as a companionship, while the male ones tended to look at it more as work, a game, war, food and utility” and the reason for this is that “for men sex is about feeling powerful in order to boost their egos, while for women it is more about being treated differently, loved and appreciated” (ibid 36). Apart from qualitative studies, Kapron-King and Xu (2021) recent quantitative research on a large-scale corpus containing both spoken and written discourse looked into the euphemism use habits of men and women.

However, the most influential work and closest to the present study is that of Crespo-Fernández (2015) since it supplied a comprehensive framework of how to structure and analyse collected data according to source domains dealing with the topic of sex. Moreover, the author also provided a diverging

perspective on conventional metaphors. Although the lexicalized metaphors are generally considered to be “dead” since they are not perceived as having an alternative to a literal meaning and, therefore, the link between the metaphorical expression and its original source domain is difficult to denote; conversely, Crespo-Fernández (2015, 7) argues that conventional metaphors are very much “alive” as they demonstrate the schemas of metaphorical thought and how we structure and organize our experiences. The author admits that the metaphoricity of such expressions is hardly noticeable or unnoticeable at all, yet they remain crucial in communication and, furthermore, aid in providing important insights into understanding how sexual topics are talked about (ibid). As Kittay (1984, 188) asserted, “no matter how "dead" or conventional, such utterances are metaphors nonetheless”. The analysis of all, conventionalized and creative X-phemistic metaphors was conducted to display a fuller picture of present-day English language use and cognitive processes behind it.

II. Data and methods

The present study focuses on the X-phemistic use of metaphors in relationship advice columns for men and women that cover the taboo topic of sex. The chosen articles were extracted from online lifestyle magazines that are freely accessible on the Internet. The sources of the data for the analysis were chosen according to several criteria. First, the specific lifestyle magazines targeted either male or female audience and contained a dedicated so-called “agony aunt” column (i.e., column dedicated to providing advice) regarding sex and relationships. Such columns answer questions previously sent by the readers or address generally popular concerns surrounding the topics about sexual partners, the body and other intimate issues. Secondly, the only pieces of advice that were included into the analysis were written by authors whose gender corresponded the targeted audience of the text. In other words, the author-compiled corpora are comprised of female produced articles for female readership and male written articles for male readership. Since some magazines were found to appoint mixed-sex group of journalists for the goal of providing advice, the independent variable of columnist sex was, therefore, controlled, i.e., held constant in the present research study (Bhandari, 2021). Provided that gender has an effect on linguistic behaviour and language production (Rana and Moh, 2011, p.1), this linguistic variable was controlled in order to limit possible influence on the study’s outcome. In addition to this, to further narrow down the possibility of linguistic variation, only countries where English is an official language were used as sources of data, namely, advice columns from US and UK. The following magazines and advice columns were chosen for the collection of the data: *Men’s Health* “Relationship advice”, *Vice* “Hey Man”, *Esquire* “Sex & Relationships”, *Men’s Journal* “Sex tips”, *Eugene Weekly* “Savage Love”, *Maxim* “Maxim Man” and *GQ* “Advice on Sex & Relationships” for male audience and *Thrillist* “In Bed with Gigi Engle”, *Elle* “Sex & Relationships”, *Cosmopolitan* “Sex and Love”, *Bustle* “It’s a pleasure”, *Allure* “Ask a Sex Therapist” and *Rebellious* “Just the tip” for female audience.

The articles from relationship advice columns, that could possibly include descriptions of sexual body parts, effluvia, sexual acts and accessories based on reader questions, were compiled into two corpora for male and female audiences. However, the part of the article that contains reader questions was excluded from the corpora as the aim of the study is to analyse the columnists’ discourse when addressing specific readers. The time span of collected articles ranges from 2015 to 2022 and the total number of words per both corpora totalled in slightly over 60,000 words. To be more precise – men’s magazines corpus contains 29,995 words and women’s magazines corpus – 30,006 words.

Given that the topic of the present study is the X-phemistic metaphor use to address the “forbidden” topic of sex, the first step of the study was to differentiate all the segments of the text that might include the forementioned elements about intimate relations such as sexual acts, accessories and others. After the relevant passages were noted, it was resorted to close reading to identify exact phrases that act as X-phemisms, i.e. either euphemisms or dysphemisms. It must be emphasised that metaphorical expressions were not categorized according their function (for example, euphemism that “saves face” or dysphemism, the “face-threatening” counterpart). Instead, all metaphors that were used as a resource to discuss abstract and complex concepts in terms of a more concrete, physical reality entities, where certain qualities from a source domain are mapped onto target domain, were compiled into one table for each audience (Lakoff and Johnson 2003, 5; Crespo-Fernández 2015, 22).

As for the linguistic metaphor identification, the study was based on the framework of the *Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit* (MIPVU), a newer version of the original *Metaphor Identification Procedure* (MIP) created by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). The MIP provides following set of guidelines (Pragglejaz Group 2007, 3):

1. *Read the entire text–discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning.*
 2. *Determine the lexical units in the text–discourse*
 3. *a) For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context, that is, how it applies to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text (contextual meaning). Take into account what comes before and after the lexical unit.*

b) For each lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context. For our purposes, basic meanings tend to be
 - ✓ *More concrete; what they evoke is easier to imagine, see, hear, feel, smell, and taste;*
 - ✓ *Related to bodily action;*
 - ✓ *More precise (as opposed to vague);*
 - ✓ *Historically older.*
- Basic meanings are not necessarily the most frequent meanings of the lexical unit.*
- c) If the lexical unit has a more basic current–contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.*
4. *If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical.*

The MIPVU adds the following points to the MIP:

1. *When a word is used directly and its use may potentially be explained by some form of cross-domain mapping to a more basic referent or topic in the text, mark the word as direct metaphor.*
2. *When words are used for the purpose of lexico-grammatical substitution, such as third person personal pronouns, or when ellipsis occurs where words may be seen as missing, as in some forms of co-ordination, and when a direct or indirect meaning is conveyed by those substitutions or ellipses that may potentially be explained by some form of cross-domain mapping from a more basic meaning, referent, or topic, insert a code for implicit metaphor.*
3. *When a word functions as a signal that a cross-domain mapping may be at play, mark it as a metaphor flag (Steen et al. 2010, 26).*

As mentioned previously, all collected X-phemistic metaphors were categorized into corresponding tables that contain samples from advice columns meant for men and women. The number of discovered metaphorical X-phemisms in the female-targeted corpus resulted in 189 occurrences while the number of metaphorical X-phemisms in male magazine advice articles amounted to 161 cases per corpus. For further distribution by source domain, the present thesis adopted euphemistic and dysphemistic metaphors classification as provided by Crespo-Fernández (2015). Nevertheless, like forementioned, euphemistic and dysphemistic metaphors classification was merged and the X-phemistic function of the metaphor was not specified due to its value being highly subjective. In some cases, the speaker intention

The final step of the sample distribution was the critical analysis of collected data to revert the metaphorical euphemisms and dysphemisms into the intended target concept. In addition to Crespo-Fernández's (2015) framework, context was also crucial to ascertain the meaning behind the specific linguistic realization. The present thesis considered a wide range of metaphorical expressions – some creative ones to address the taboo and some that were lexicalized or semi-lexicalized but still provided some insights into the euphemistic and dysphemistic processes as proved by Crespo-Fernández (2015) work.

The tables containing all instances of metaphorical X-phemisms identified in discourse of advice giving in men's and women's magazines are provided in the Appendices. The Results and Discussion section of this paper will further explore the quantitative tendencies and qualitative examination of metaphorical

conceptualization of target concepts in magazines for male and female audiences and shed some light on the similarities and differences of the use of X-phemistic metaphors across the two corpora.

III. Results and discussion

The present section of the study was divided into two parts – quantitative tendencies and qualitative analysis which overview the usage of X-phemistic devices in men’s and women’s advice columns to address the taboo topic of sex. The first subsection of the results and discussion part focuses on the general frequencies of the aforementioned metaphors according to their source domain as well as compares the raw numbers of metaphorical occurrences and their variety in male versus female magazine corpus.

3.1. Overall results: Quantitative tendencies

Men’s corpus

Overall, 165 metaphorical expressions that in some way engage in the topic of sex, were found in the men’s advice column corpus and these cases were categorized into 15 different source domains. The most frequent source domains were GAMES AND SPORTS, ANIMALS, JOURNEYS and HEAT AND FIRE as it can be observed in Figure 1 provided below:

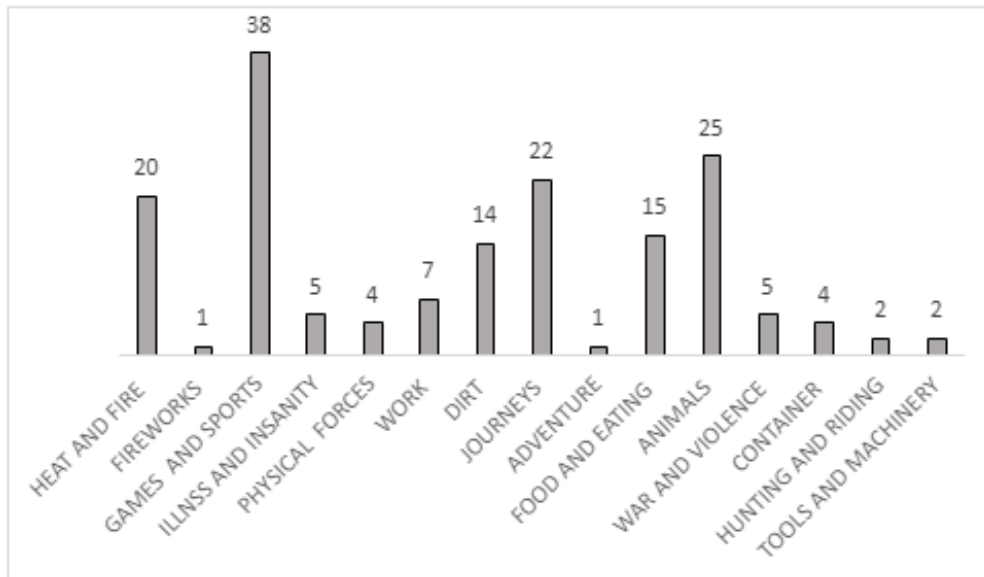


Figure 1. *Distribution of metaphors by source domain in the men’s advice column corpus*

Although the most frequently recurring source domain in men’s corpus proved to be GAMES AND SPORTS, curiously enough, only three metaphors belonged to the source concept of SPORTS. According to Crespo-

Fernández (2015), in “North American culture the vocabulary of baseball is a source of sexual euphemism” in particular and sexual activities are quite often described “in terms of the bases in a baseball match” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, p. 94). Coupled with the stereotypical outlook that sports are one of the main interests for males, the present data does not hold up true to the popular belief that sport related linguistic behaviour should be apparent when addressing male audience.

Subsequently, ANIMAL source domain appeared as second most frequent when discussing sex-related questions with the male audience. In “Sex and Language” by Crespo-Fernández (2015), the author sets the metaphors into two distinct groups by the source domains – euphemistic metaphors and dysphemistic ones (Crespo-Fernández 2015). ANIMALS as well as WAR AND VIOLENCE, HUNTING AND RIDING along with TOOLS AND MACHINERY belong to the class of dysphemistic metaphors. These findings do correspond to the conventional gender roles in which men tend to engage in impolite conversation strategies such as the use of dysphemisms (Holmes 1995; Hyde 2005 and others).

Finally, JOURNEYS and HEAT AND FIRE metaphors accounted for one quarter of total X-phemistic expressions found in men’s corpus. Generally, HEAT AND FIRE is quite commonly applied when talking about lust and arousal since the source domain of HEAT “focuses on the physiological effects of lust and sexual excitement” that these emotions have on the body (specifically, the increase in body temperature) (Kövecses 1986, p. 12). Whereas JOURNEYS is an even more indirect reference to sexual activities which resorts to “SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, p. 96). Following this schema, a sexual encounter is described as a process which has a starting point and an end point together with a time span (Crespo-Fernández 2015, p. 96). This way of conceptualizing sexual activities amounted to 22 metaphors per men’s advice column corpus.

Women’s corpus

Turning to the data collected from online magazine advice columns for women, in total, there were 189 metaphorical expressions detected and they were further distributed according to the source domains into 15 distinct types with the most recurrent ones being: GAMES AND SPORTS, WORK and HEAT AND FIRE.

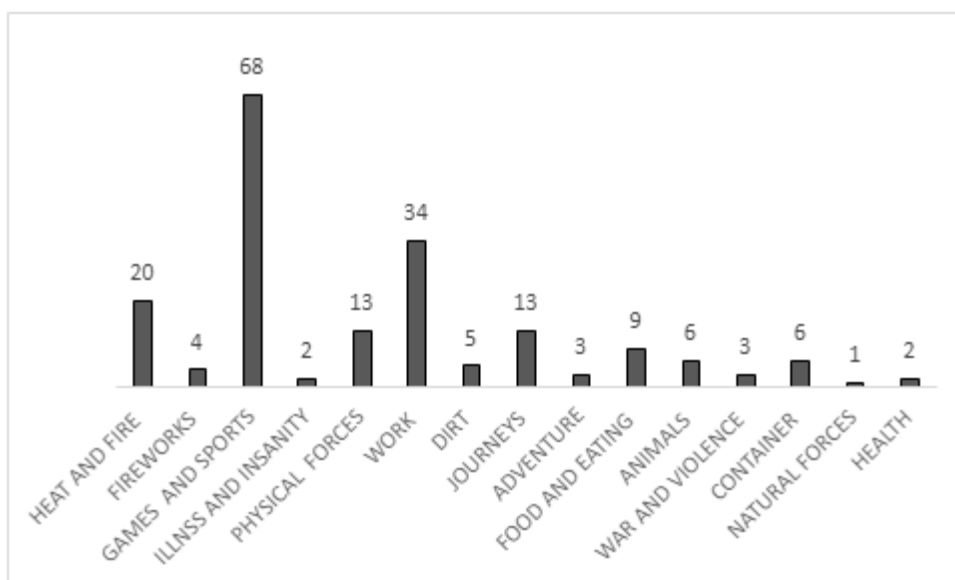


Figure 2. *Distribution of metaphors by source domain in the women's advice column corpus*

First of all, GAMES AND SPORTS proves to, without a doubt, dominate the female advice corpus, with 68 cases of metaphors which constitute over 37% of total occurrences as seen in Figure 2. Keeping in mind that this source domain was the most recurrent in male corpus as well, it can be stated with some certainty that GAMES metaphorical mappings are the most frequently applied when discussing the taboo topic of sex. As Crespo-Fernández (2015) puts it, “GAME metaphor captures those aspects of the game domain that are more apt for euphemistic use, namely fun and innocence” (Crespo-Fernández 2015, p. 88). On the one hand, fun emphasizes the playfulness in a sexual relationship, whereas consideration of sex in terms of a game brings forth the element of innocence (Crespo-Fernández 2015, p. 88).

Interestingly, the source domain of WORK also collected a significant number of instances, aggregating to a total of 34. WORK is lexical label that is laden with ambiguity and may be used to describe any subject of a sexual taboo. The terms *work* or *business* provide a wide range of euphemistic phrases that might refer to a variety of actions from any type of sexual activity to, even, prostitution. The shared features between sex and work facilitate the comprehension of this conceptual mapping – both of these matters (sex and work) require time, skill, effort and dedication (Crespo-Fernández 2015, p. 73).

Lastly, the third most common source domain, incidentally the same as in men's advice column corpus, was HEAT AND FIRE. Throughout the women's corpus various metaphorical expressions added up to 20 separate occurrences.

Quantitative comparison of X-phemistic metaphors in the two corpora

Below, in Figure 3., a visual comparison of findings in both corpora were merged into one graph to evaluate the contrast of metaphorical expressions found in men’s and women’s advice articles. Obviously, given that women’s corpus contained 189 cases as opposed to 165 in men’s, the difference in overall quantity can be observed, especially looking at source domains of GAMES AND SPORTS and WORK.

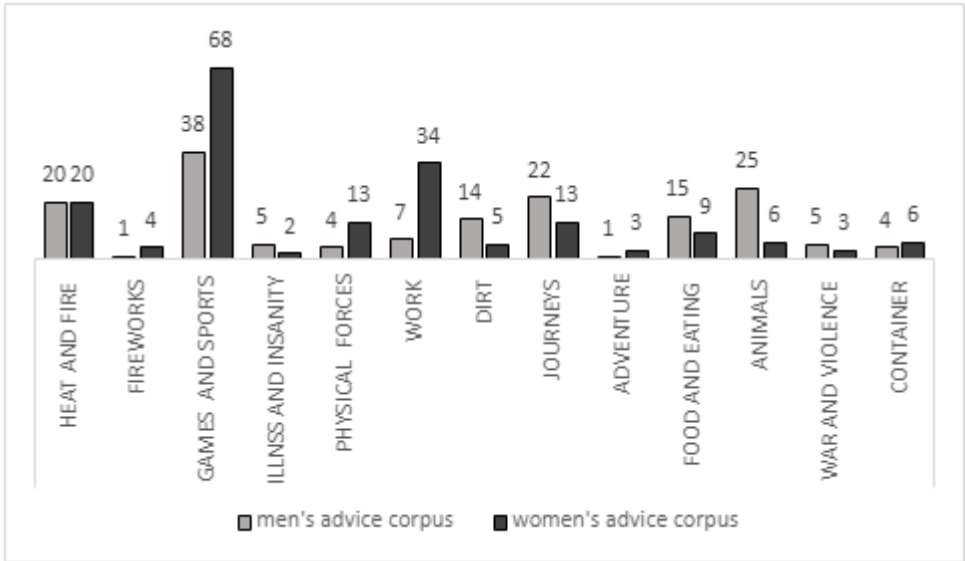


Figure 3. *Distribution of metaphors by overlapping source domains in men’s and women’s advice column corpora*

Nevertheless, the same collected data can be approached from another angle. Below, in Figure 4 you can see the comparison of different linguistic realizations that were employed to express a “forbidden” concept in overlapping source domains that appeared in both corpora. Evidently, this graph provides a more representative picture of the use of metaphors in the two datasets that goes beyond just raw numbers. Even if women’s advice column corpus resulted in a higher number of occurring metaphorical expressions, nonetheless, the male corpus was more characteristic of lexical variation or creativity of the expression of the same source domains. To be more precise, the men’s advice corpus contained over a quarter more instances of unique linguistic realizations of a target concept (75 different realizations in total) in comparison to the women’s corpus (with 57 different linguistic realizations).

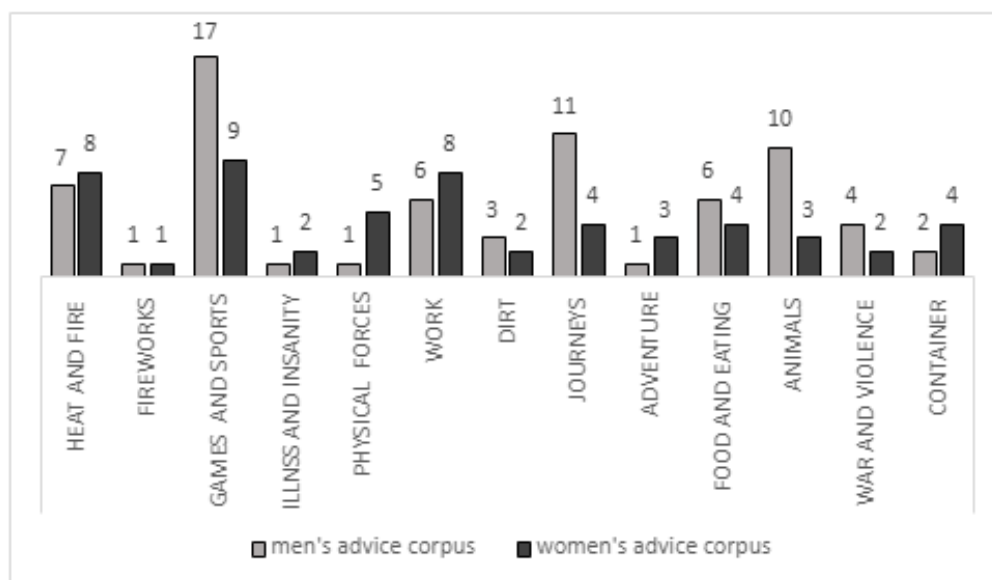


Figure 4. *Distribution of the source domains in women's versus men's advice column corpora*

The lexical variety when addressing male audience is well exemplified by the source domain of GAMES AND SPORTS. Regardless the fact that in total 68 cases of such metaphors were identified in women's corpus versus 38 in men's, those 68 cases proved to belong to only 9 rather "stagnant" types of linguistic realization as opposed to men's advice columns which demonstrated a wide range of metaphors to discuss the topic of sex.

Since the usage of X-phemisms is a cultural phenomenon and the employment of particular metaphorical expressions greatly depend on social constraints, not only within a particular country but on a smaller scale as well – different social groups marked by gender, age, interests and other variables, it is more difficult to interpret what the present study's results mean in the current context. To be more precise, does the higher frequency of occurring X-phemistic expressions in female versus male corpora fall in line with the findings of other studies carried out on the subject?

In 1972, Robin Lakoff put forth the existence of "women's language" referred to as "talking like a lady" and suggested that there is a difference in the way that men's and women's speech is constructed due to the different linguistic choices available to them: women are expected to take up different social roles than men and these roles constrain women's language use and thus force them to employ more politeness strategies (Lakoff 1972). According to Lakoff (ibid.), women are, therefore, more likely to employ tag questions, highly polite forms, avoid strong swear words and among other features – use euphemisms to avoid offensive topics. Since then, Lakoff's research methods were refuted, with Talbot (2003) stating that in essence, claims about women's language were "heavily influenced by stereotypical expectations"

(Talbot 2003, p. 474). Talbot (2003) then proceeds to exemplify how the same tag question in women's and men's case was interpreted according to the sex of the person producing them – Lakoff detected tentativeness in women's use of the linguistic feature, however, a different conclusion was reached when observing men's use of exactly the same (Talbot 2003, p. 474). As Janet Holmes has noted, “one (female) person's feeble hedging may well be perceived as another (male) person's perspicacious qualification (Holmes 1984, p.169).

Considering the fact that euphemism/dysphemism usage varies depending on culture, there is no universal answer to the question whether men or women employ X-phemisms more often. Jinyu (2013) highlights the importance of a group's social status as a root cause to gender language differences. As maintained by Jinyu (2013, p. 93) to this day women in China hold a subordinate position and are expected to comply with higher standards of politeness and if “they do not pay attention to their words even slightly, they may be criticized or ridiculed” (Jinyu 2013, p. 93). Alternatively, in English speaking countries like US, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, the social climate for women is much more liberal, hence blurring the line of gender differences. Although quantitative studies on euphemism use by men and women are scarce, a recent 2021 study by Anna Kapron-King and Yang Xu from University of Toronto evaluated whether greater use of euphemisms is truly a characteristic of women's speech. The diachronic study performed on a large-scale corpus proved that, contrary to popular belief, “in a broad range of settings involving both speech and writing, and with varying degrees of formality, women do not use or form euphemisms more than men.” (Kapron-King & Xu 2021, p. 1).

The present study does not seek to challenge the results provided by Kapron-King and Xu (2021) but succeeds in illustrating how a smaller set of data might bring forth a distorted view on certain questions like the linguistic behaviour of one or the other sex. Despite that this Master thesis deals not with how men and women employ X-phemistic expressions but rather how these expressions are used by the columnists who address a specific audience, yet any “stronger” implications should be withheld for the following reason – the data set is limited and might skew the results. To demonstrate, let us take a look at the two datasets. The metaphorical expressions in relation to the topic of sex were evenly dispersed throughout men's advice column corpus, contrary to women's advice column corpus, where X-phemistic expressions emerged in clusters, very often appearing in quite a repetitive fashion and thus inflating the number of total metaphorical occurrences. For example, one 700-word advice piece on a reader's inquiry about anal sex in *Marie Claire's* magazine contained 19 instances of the three most recurrent metaphors in female column corpus – *butt/anal play*, *foreplay* and *toy*. This means that if this one article was not included into the corpus, the total number of metaphorical expressions in men's and women's corpus would have been even.

All things considered, the quantitative overview of the findings provides us with a more coherent view of X-phemistic metaphor application in advice giving in magazines meant for male and female audiences, albeit a rather insufficient one. In order to have a better understanding of such metaphors' usage when discussing taboo topic of intimate relations, it would be beneficial to more closely overview the findings which are provided in the following section of the paper that presents the qualitative analysis of X-phemistic metaphors in relation to the taboo topic of sex.

3.2. Qualitative analysis

The present section of the analysis focuses on the qualitative features of X-phemistic metaphors collected from the two corpora containing advice columns from magazines for men and women. This section was further subdivided to separately overview each source domain in both corpora collectively to avoid possible repetition since the domains in both datasets were nearly identical. The source domains as separate subsections were analysed in a descending order according to their frequency of occurrence as a joint total sum of samples in both datasets. The final subsection provides some general insights about the relationship advice columns for the two different audiences as well as the comparison of the X-phemistic metaphor use in each dataset.

3.2.1. X-phemistic metaphors according to source domains in men's and women's datasets

GAMES AND SPORTS

As previously discussed in the section presenting the quantitative tendencies of the findings, GAMES AND SPORTS metaphors were the most recurrent euphemistic metaphorical expressions in both corpora as they emphasize the fun side of a sexual relationship. One of the advantages of this domain is that it allows to consider sex in terms of a game which brings forth the element of innocence. This is especially important when addressing unconventional sexual practices which were frequent in men's dataset. In this case, all of the unconventional practices were described in terms of being a *play* – *knife play*, *blood play*, *period play*, *anal play*, *wax play* and *impact play*, aiming for the goal to destigmatize them (Murray and Murrell 1989, 107). A brief mention of these BDSM practices coupled with the word *play* strived to take the “edge off” the matters and sound less shocking:

- (1) *Blood play can be very dangerous—and that's part of the allure* (M12)
- (2) *Maybe impact play? <....> quick way to get your adrenaline jumping* (M13)

In the same fashion, the GAME source domain also proved to be a prolific source of extended metaphors to allude to having an orgasm. Such an instance is illustrated in the following example:

- (3) *then you do something dumb in bed that derails her pleasure, **throws her off her game** <...>. Some manoeuvres may seem innocuous, but they actually distract her from her **ultimate endgame**.* (M8)

These examples seem to bring forth the resemblance of sex to sports, especially, racing – all of the attention is on the *ultimate endgame* which is sought by separate participants and can be *derailed* or “distracted” by the other. Similarly, the notion of winning and playing sports is apparent in the expression *to score* and *the goal*:

- (4) *partners need to initiate sex if they want **to score*** (M17)

- (5) *people get caught up on **“the end goal”** way too much* (M5)

Although, according to the framework proposed by Crespo-Fernández (2015), the metaphors *to score* and *goal* fall under the scope of euphemistic expressions, other linguists, such as Murphy (2001), argue that these are example of using sex as means for domination and conquest, where “male–female relationships are reduced to a game in which there are “winners” and “losers” (72). He continues to state that these expressions objectify women by turning them into a prize and reduce male pleasure to a race (ibid). In such a way, scoring points and creating a strategy to win the game becomes the primary focus for most men, they are interested in “the goal or the end rather than in the quality of the experience” (ibid).

Unlike men’s corpus, SPORTS metaphors remained absent from the women’s dataset. However, the conceptual mapping between sex and an innocent, *playful* pastime was the most prolific source of metaphorical reference, e.g.:

- (6) *Sex is a place to explore pleasure in unusual, interesting, and safe ways. I really don't want you to lose that **playfulness*** (W1)

In the sample no. 6, *playfulness* refers not to the quality of being lively and full of fun, but to the reader’s interest in sexual practices that are out of her partner’s comfort zone. In the column, the columnist urges the audience to embrace the “zest” for “adventurous sex” and attaches a positive emotional load to the subject by conceptualizing the interest in more daring intimate acts in terms of GAME domain. The judgemental attitude of the reader’s partner and the journalist’s aim of destigmatizing the subject with several metaphorical euphemisms (that will be discussed in the respective subsections) can be observed in the following paragraph:

- (7) *If this guy actually thinks you're a "whore" for liking kinky sex, that says a lot more about him and his personal confidence than it does about you. <...> He should feel lucky to have such a **hot, adventurous** woman who loves him and enjoys trying new, fun, and novel **sexual exploits*** (W1)

The act of *playing* provides great euphemistic basis to talk about masturbation without sounding unpleasant for the reader. In the magazines, advice columnists make use of these expressions to address the sensitive subject of self-gratification (especially female) in a socially acceptable way and encourage individuals *to play with toys* or *to play with one another*:

(8) *fetish can be as simple as **playing with each other*** (W19)

(9) *What's your favorite **toy to play with**?* (W9)

The major difference between the use of metaphors in the two corpora (which will be further exemplified by JOURNEY source domain) is that the articles for women focused not on the climax but the sexual activity as a prelude to coition. This includes the frequently occurring metaphors of *foreplay* or *anal/butt (fore)play* or just simply *play*:

(10) *before you engage in any kind of **play*** (W9)

(11) *If trying anal **foreplay** with a partner is like your Olympics, it makes sense that you might want to try it beforehand* (W24)

As discussed in the literature review part of the thesis, some metaphorical expressions are lexicalized to the point where they became the sole definition in the dictionary without an alternative meaning in another context, therefore, according to MIPVU, they are not regarded as metaphors anymore. Following Harper's (n.d.) entry in the Etymology dictionary, *fore-* (in Old English meaning before) + *play* (n.), was first used as a theatrical term to refer to the prologue before the actual drama (first such recording found in 1857) and by 1921 was used in a sexual sense. Even though the euphemistic force of the noun phrase *foreplay* has weakened, Crespo-Fernández (2015) states that compound nouns with *play* such as *loveplay* or *foreplay* remain conventional examples of GAME metaphor and "are euphemistically used in polite discourse to refer to sexual stimulation as a prelude to penetration" as opposed to their more explicit equivalents (42). Indeed, the fragment no. 11 exemplifies that to some degree, the author is aware of the mental link between the original source of this metaphor and applies it to the verbal unit. To be more precise, in the column, the practice of anal foreplay is equalled to one of the sport categories in the Olympic Games.

It is true that the term *foreplay* is not the strongest case of metaphorical euphemism due to its sole meaning in the present-day language use. However, I would argue that the positive overtones of the expression remain due to its relation to the domain of GAMES and the verb *play* which creates associations to light-hearted matters. Apart from this, the phrase also provides a different perspective from which we can compare how often and in what ways sexual stimulation is talked about in men's and women's corpus. *Foreplay* proved to be a crucial subject in women's dataset, resulting in 18 occurrences in

addition to other euphemistic metaphorical expressions such as five samples of *warm-up* or *warm someone up* and previously mentioned GAMES domain realizations. While men's corpus contained only four occurrences of *foreplay* and two occurrences of HEAT metaphors to refer to activity as prelude to intercourse in a euphemistic way. Interestingly though, men's advice columns included a number of expressions that alluded to stimulation in a violent way (*to jackhammer, to obliterate, to hit* etc.). These results suggest a different degree of emphasis on the importance of arousing one's partner before having sexual relations in the two datasets, along with how this act is conceptualized.

An example of successful euphemistic naming which demonstrates a high degree of ambiguity can be observed in phrases containing the noun *game*. For instance, the person having sexual expertise is said *to have game*. *Game* may also encompass a wide range of sexual activities that can be referenced without getting into any particular details as in:

(12) *Bring your other hand into **the game** once you've gotten your bearings (W30)*

Finally, the last games-related lexical item was the word *toys* which aids with the goal of discussing sexual "accessories" meant to facilitate pleasure without directly naming them. Unlike the terms like *vibrator, dildo* or *plug*, *toy* carries the connotation of fun. Some occurrences of *toy* appeared in the male corpus, yet in the female dataset, they appeared three times more frequently. One typical example is provided below:

(13) *Some people who use **toys** learn to have a small handkerchief close by, so they can rest their **toy** on a "safe" spot (W7)*

The main takeaway from this subsection is that relationship advice columns for men and women focus on different priorities in sexual relations. While male columnists emphasize "the end goal" or "the ultimate endgame", GAMES metaphors in women's advice articles reinforce the idea that the process is just as important as the end – a goal attained by the collective effort of both parties. For a long time, tips on intimate relations in magazines seemed to overlook the fact that intercourse can be painful for women and may not be enough to reach climax. Considering the statistics of female satisfaction, i.e., that only 65% of women in stable relationships always orgasm during sex compared with 95% of straight men, the updated content of advice columns is especially significant (Kontula & Miettinen 2016).

ANIMALS

Although the data in the present study was not distributed according to the way a particular metaphorical expression functions – as euphemism or dysphemism – the source domain of ANIMALS generally denotes

a dysphemistic comparison (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 136; Allan and Burridge 2006, 179). For rather obvious reasons, drawing an analogy between a person and an animal in relation to their appearance, behaviour and size is offensive, therefore, the majority of such expressions did have dysphemistic overtones.

The most frequent metaphorical expression realising this source domain in men's advice columns was the adjective *horny* which represents the maleness characteristic in powerful mammals like rhinoceros or elks and stands for virility. Even though this highly conventionalised metaphor visually alludes to an erect penis as a horn, being *horny*, as in “sexually excited”, can be also used to refer to female sexual arousal. To exemplify, the fragment below directly refers to a lack of sexual excitement which results in absence of erection hence the expression “be horny”:

- (14) *no matter how much you'd like to be **horny**, you can't switch on the wires upstairs and downstairs (M33)*

It is worth mentioning, that although many WILD ANIMAL metaphors depict men in a positive light, the specific expressions found in the current study's dataset were rather dysphemistic. For instance, let us consider the use of *predator* in a description of male celebrities:

- (15) *conversation on the **predatory** sexual behaviours of men in power (M19)*

A man, who is a sexual predator, is not seen as a stereotypically masculine one but rather as a sex-starved animal who has no control over his actions or behaviour.

It should be added that the category of ANIMALS, specifically domesticated ones, were also used to represent men in a negative way. One of these phrases include *cumbull* – a man that supplies semen for sale. Now, on one hand, a bull is a symbol of a fighting ability and fertility; yet, referring to a person as a tool of reproduction as in – “women are incubators” or in this case, an animal who is used for reproductive effluvia, is demeaning:

- (16) *if your **cumbull** has been tested and is currently STI-free (M20)*

Considering the fact that attaining semen from other men for consumption is not a typically “masculine” activity, the disdain was not hidden from the author of the advice column who chose to apply this metaphorical label with strong dysphemistic overtones. This also could be due to the fact that the reader's question did not concern the matters of a heterosexual man but that of a homosexual one. Although advice columns nowadays do not discriminate against less “traditional” sexual orientations, some magazines do try to reinforce the old-fashioned definition of what desired masculinity is.

In a similar fashion, the juxtaposition of a man and *an ox* is also an ambiguous one. On the one hand, it represents a strong bovine with horns; however, an ox is a domesticated animal which is usually castrated in order to curb the level of testosterone and aggression and thus, as a metaphor it refers to effeminate/emasculated man. The passage in which the author is sharing experiences on how he handled being a stay-at-home father illustrates the dysphemistic value of the expression *ox*:

- (17) *I've been called a lot of things. Over-bearing and **an ox** with the smell to go with it. I can handle people asking me if my masculinity is intact despite the fact that I've been home with the kids for the last 13 years doing "women's work."* (M19)

A final farm animal-related metaphor was the term *porking* which means to engage in sexual intercourse with someone and is usually used by men. Pig, as a symbol of gluttony and fornication, is a sight of dysphemistic reference, especially considering the infamous saying "all men are pigs" and associates sex with something animalistic. The present expression could also be interpreted in a less offensive way and simply refer to the circumstances of the intimate encounter, mainly, it being "messy". In other words, there is a mental link drawn between pigs, which enjoy playing in the mud, and two lovers who engage in activities which are not exactly clean. Even so, *porking* still poses a threat to the hearer's face as it identifies sex as something barn animal-related.

Another dysphemism present in the men's advice column dataset was the word *kitten* to refer to the reader's sexual partner. At first glance, to regard women in terms of a small furry animal may seem quite innocent, playful even. Yet, it not only objectifies a person but also demonstrates uneven power relations as men are the ones being entertained and women are reduced to a plaything:

- (18) *make that **kitten** purr!* (M22)

Admittedly, the present example and other allusions to small furry animals may be intended as quasi-euphemisms, i.e., phrases that are not meant as an offense and which neither are euphemistic, but rather the speaker attempts to be simply humorous. The same cannot, however, be said about the following example of the instantiation of the metaphor PEOPLE ARE AQUATIC ANIMALS:

- (19) *that doesn't mean she wants to have sex with a **dead fish*** (M22)

In contrast to the first example, *dead fish* cannot be interpreted in any other way than being a dysphemism. Curiously enough, the analogy of being a (*dead*) *fish* or a *starfish* is mostly drawn when referring to women in bed, that is to say that they merely lay there, legs and arms apart without participating. However, the journalist bestowing tips on intimate sessions meant it as a jab towards men.

As for women's advice dataset, animalistic metaphors were rather scarce, with only three different metaphors making into the corpus with four occurrences of the previously mentioned word *horny* that is

also used by the respective gender to refer to being sexually excited as well as the rather conventional BIRD metaphor realised by the lexeme *cock* which alludes to the male reproductive organ. Both of the expressions are well-lexicalized and do not provide any significant additional insight into the discourse of advice giving in women's magazines. However, one expression encountered in the women's advice column dataset proved to be dysphemistic and conceptualized a man in terms of an animal which needs to be domesticated:

(20) *and yes, you must **tame** him* (W17)

The metaphorical conceptualisation above puts the woman in the position of power and dominance, turning her male partner to be the obedient one. Although the ANIMAL metaphors in men's corpus were used in a sarcastic way to mock and tease the male readership, such use of animalistic metaphors was not characteristic of the women's dataset. This insight is actually in line with the research done by Murphy (2001) who discussed the power of metaphors as tools of harnessing humour towards positive ends which includes male bonding. The author maintained that satire in men's discourse functioned as "the best source of liberating humor" in addition to ridicule – "the form of reverse victimization" (119). Apart from this, sarcasm is applied as a way to handle the subject of emotional vulnerability. "By deriding the emotional, men assert some kind of control over it, and this allows them to feel a little more secure about the legitimacy of what they believe to be an omnipotent masculinity" (ibid 130).

JOURNEYS

As previously mentioned, JOURNEY metaphors provide one of the most indirect means to refer to an event that has a beginning and an end. This domain puts an emphasis on the notion of progress and especially, the purpose and the success of reaching it. Similar to the euphemistic metaphors assigned to the GAME category, men's advice column corpus was also abundant with the linguistic realizations of JOURNEYS source domain to refer to the various points in time in the sexual intercourse and achieving an orgasm, in a more polite and indirect manner:

(21) *asking her if she's **approaching her destination** can make her feel pressured to hurry up - which is a great way to ensure that she isn't **close*** (M8)

Another way of conceptualizing climax is presenting sex through SPATIAL-CONTAINMENT schema which considers a sexual encounter as a bounded space which has an edge (Crespo-Fernández 2015, 100). In such way, moving beyond the boundaries of excitement as in *pushing over the edge* and being *on the edge* alludes to climax in a subtle and euphemistic way:

(22) *These moves <...> aren't going to **push her over the edge*** (M8)

A prominent feature in these sex advice columns for men is that they demonstrate a sort of obsessive preoccupation with not making your partner feel good and enjoying the process in general but reaching the end as efficiently as possible without making mistakes:

(23) *If she was **close**, you'd know—so shut up and let her **get there*** (M8)

(24) *She's right **on the edge of ecstasy**, and then you do something dumb in bed that **derails** her pleasure* (M8)

An interesting note is that this commanding and partly degrading way of addressing men was present in the discourse of popular lifestyle magazines like *Men's Health*, *Esquire* and *GQ* and less so in more “niche” ones like *Men's Journal*, *Eugene Weekly* or *Vice*. It seems that in these popular magazines, men are less *advised* what to do but *told to*.

As for the women's dataset, it contained fewer occurrences of JOURNEY metaphors, nevertheless, they proved to be slightly different, for example, a direct reference to sex as a journey as in:

(25) *It's okay to laugh and bask in all parts of **the journey*** (W8)

In addition to other travelling imagery as in *pathway to pleasure* and *getting close*, the most recurrent phrase to refer to orgasm was *come*:

(26) *We get so obsessed with wanting our partners to **come** that it gives us anxiety and our partners anxiety and then no one is **coming*** (W29)

It should be mentioned that the verb *come* was used in a sexual sense since the seventeenth century (Harper, n.d.) thus it does not have much of the euphemistic properties left. On the other hand, it does not have dysphemistic properties either as seen from the example provided above.

Generally speaking, although the frequency of reference to orgasm leads us to believe that this might be one of the main subjects of interest in women's advice columns, the context behind shifts the view and provides two interesting perspectives. First, the texts regarding the topic of sexual gratification revealed that it should not be the sole purpose of intimacy. The present argument will be further supported by the euphemisms related to other source domains like HEAT AND FIRE which is the following subject to be discussed.

Secondly, in accordance with the GAMES metaphors, the samples taken from this domain show that in case the phrase does focus on the climax in women's advice columns, the female one holds more importance. Now this might be due to the fact that after all the years of popular media's narrative of “how to please a man” (Gill 2009; Moran & Lee 2011 and others), the landscape of advice giving has finally started changing towards a healthier outlook. Since print media sales are declining and online

publications also have to fight for a chance to earn from advertising with the help of online readers, modern magazines aim to switch narrative techniques and give women agency over their own well-being in a relationship. In conclusion, the present discourse of advice columns seems less eager to promote a role of subordinate but one of equal partner that is keen on making relationship work for both people involved.

HEAT AND FIRE

The present source domain was linguistically realised in both datasets by an equal number of occurrences and was used to describe the effects of desire and sexual excitement. Such euphemistic expressions can be considered as instantiations of the co-called basic “source-in-target” metonymy where the psychological effects of an emotion such as desire directly stand for the emotion itself. In other words, the heat that is felt in one’s body upon seeing an attractive person, directly attributes this property on that other individual. As a result of this cognitive link, we are aware that there is more than heat involved when describing a man as *hot*:

(27) *Sunglasses make guys **hotter*** (M9)

It is not the glasses that make men *hot* per se; the author rather tries to imply that with this accessory a man has a higher capacity of supplying heat derived from sexual excitement to other bodies (those of women). In a similar manner, excitement in men’s corpus was expressed through such lexemes as *heat*, *being sizzling (hot)* or *steamy*. As for the women’s dataset, it also contained a high number of expressions with the adjective *hot*, the highest degree of the same metaphor – *hottest* and a comparison of sexually explicit language being *sultry*. Consider the following example:

(28) *The heat of your breath and a few **sultry** words is incredibly scintillating* (W25)

Given that the main physiological effect of sexual excitement is heat, one of the logical entailments of this metaphor is that getting sexually excited is equal to getting *warmed up*. The noun *warm-up* and its corresponding phrasal verb *to warm someone up* were used to refer to sexual arousal or stimulation in women’s advice columns:

(29) *Tell the next person you're with that you want him **to warm you up*** (W5)

(30) *a lot of women like you want these "**warm-ups**"* (W5)

Since being cold or icy is the opposite of a sexually excited body and signals lack of desire, the following phrase in advice article for women, is a hyperbole that describes the extreme effect of excitement and heat on the individual:

(31) *It must be a huge rush to **melt** your partner **into a puddle** (W27)*

In the above example arousal is described as an emotion of the highest intensity that possesses a physical ability of *melting* and transforming the body of a man *into a puddle*.

Sexual excitement and desire can also be conceptualized through the source domain of a fire – a similar feature analogy to that of heat. The euphemistic metaphors realising this source domain in men’s corpus were such fragments in which the lost sexual attraction was described as capable of being *rekindled* like *a flame* and *stoked* like *a fire*. One such example is provided below:

(32) *keep the **connubial fires stoked** with explicit texts (M3)*

The source concept of fire alludes to the intensity of the emotion of lust and desire and permits to discuss it in a socially acceptable way. The notion of *fire* and being *fiery* were also present in the women’s dataset.

FOOD AND EATING

Along with the source domain of ANIMALS, the linguistic realizations of FOOD AND EATING also generally belong to the class of dysphemistic metaphors. However, depending on the subject that the metaphorical expression refers to, some metaphors may be deemed as void of the dysphemistic function. For example, the most straightforward dysphemistic metaphorical expressions are those which construe a person’s body in terms of edible material, whereas metaphors whereby certain sexual preferences are referred to in terms of certain foods and tastes (e.g., the expression ‘*vanilla* preferences’ is used to refer to a person’s fondness of conventional sexual practices) do not carry negative dysphemistic overtones.

According to Allan and Burrige (2006, 150), “there are no true euphemisms for oral sex” and the most neutral terms referring to oral or oral anal sex are their orthophemistic forms, i.e., *cunnilingus/analingus/fellatio*. The colloquial synonyms that resort to the domain of EATING and generate cross-varietal alternatives to refer to the practices of *cunnilingus /analingus*, in the opinion of Allan and Burrige (2006, 150), are not exactly euphemistic and polite but act as examples of slang. However, Crespo-Fernández (2015, 155) goes as far as to claim that such metaphors are a sight of dysphemistic reference. While the role of a euphemism is to shield us from the taboo and “mystify” the subject, the author states that metaphors like *eating pussy/eating cock* (unlike their orthophemistic forms) specifically draw a detailed mental picture of taking genitals directly into the mouth:

(33) *Back in the day the idea of **eating pussy** was met with derision and disgust <...>, and now it’s time for the ass to have its moment (W28)*

In the sample no. 33, the metonymic SMALL FURRY ANIMAL metaphor *pussy* is essentially dysphemistic in that it reduces humans to the status of sexual object. However, the present expression also seems to have a cohesive function which "shows solidarity and helps define the gang" (Burridge 2012, p.252) in addition to being ludic and showing the funny side of this topic. This claim is further strengthened by an array of accompanying slang present in women's dataset like, for example, "salad tossing" which stands for the same oral sexual practice but is more humorous. These expressions could, therefore, be occurrences of quasi-euphemisms.

On the other hand, describing sexual practices and their degree of conventionality in terms of taste does not objectify anyone nor does it raise taboo associations. For instance, in men's advice columns a sexual relationship that lacks excitement is in need of *spice*:

(34) *when she's bored of having sex with you, she's going to cheat. But what can you do to **spice things up**? (M26)*

Another taste-related metaphor is the tendency to describe sexual practices that are deemed "boring" or too conventional in terms of having *vanilla* flavour as the most basic flavour of a dessert:

(35) *trying to navigate this new kink-positive era can be confusing – particularly for guys who are **vanilla** themselves (M6)*

The author himself admits that although there should not be any shameful associations to enjoying something that is considered a norm, the word *vanilla* tends to carry negative connotations in the advice columns. Consider the following example:

(36) *the line between kink positivity and **vanilla** shaming is regularly blurred (M6)*

The last three fragments from the texts illustrate the issue of male anxiety over sex being a performance. The focus on being *adventurous* as opposed to *vanilla*, and *spicing things up* or your partner will leave you, presents a special case of fearmongering. It is worthwhile to note that this anxiety and doubts were raised and further fuelled by the journalists themselves and not the male readership.

Finally, the last remaining metaphorical expressions in FOOD AND EATING category were the ones relating to the theme of restaurants and fine dining. In the men's dataset, the prelude to coition was conceptualized in terms of an appetizer – a small dish served before a meal:

(37) *it's an awesome **appetizer** to the main event (M1)*

Similar expression appeared in the women's dataset as well, including *to be on the menu* and *à la carte*. In the same fashion as the metaphors of *vanilla* or *spice*, allusion to the "repertoire" of sexual encounter

and what practices better not involve by simply stating *leave that off the menu* seem highly euphemistic. An even more abstract way of communicating the same idea is the following example:

(38) *some people only need butt play à la carte* (W7)

À la carte is a restaurant practice where people are allowed to order separate items from a menu instead of a set meal. In this case, the author means that for some individuals the act described in sample no. 38 is sufficient to reach climax and other “standardized” practices like sexual intercourse do not necessarily need to follow. If we consider the number of taboo references that were employed to explain this short expression, something being *à la carte* is an effective euphemism to shield off the taboo.

DIRT

Although DIRT as a source domain could generally be considered as a source of dysphemistic reference, in a controlled set of meanings this domain can also work as a collective term to point to all matters that are immoral. One of these subjects is *dirty talk* – sexually explicit language used to arouse the partner which is also obscene and has the ability to damage the hearer’s face. The adjective *dirty* efficiently protects from all the sexually graphic language and, at the same time, indicates the taboo nature of the conversation. Both of these metaphorical expressions were found in men’s and women’s datasets and were applied in the same manner:

(39) *When done well, **dirty talk** can drive your partner crazy* (M22)

(40) *a lot of people giggle when I tell them to **talk dirty** to themselves* (W26)

Likewise, the adjective *dirty* can also allude to not only immoral but also erotic or pornographic actions/ideas or simply stand as a synonym to sexual intercourse:

(41) *let’s get **dirty*** (M27)

The expression *messy sex*/or (*sticky*) *mess* found in men’s columns is more context-dependent. It may simply refer to the sex being “unclean” or “untidy” – a rumpled bed, sex effluvia stains and so on as in this example:

(42) *you think about cleaning up **messy sex*** (M27)

Nevertheless, *messy* may act as an equivalent to the word “kinky” or otherwise – unconventional. The example below was taken from an article which discusses the need for less conventional sexual practices like wax play and others:

(43) *the lust for **messy, messy sex*** (M27)

All of the metaphorical items found in both datasets that corresponded to DIRT source domain admitted to a quasi-euphemistic use. In other words, they did not intend to discuss particular sexual behaviour in a judgmental manner nor did they try to cover up the “forbidden” nature of this topic. These metaphors rather emphasized the positive attitude of the author towards exciting experiences and promoting new ways how to enjoy sex for the magazine readers.

WORK

Presenting sexual relationship as WORK not only emphasizes that fact that it requires discipline and effort but also makes it less personal. This type of euphemisms found in men’s advice columns created a mental link between one concept, which is generally frowned upon, and turned it to something rather matter-of-fact. Proof of this is the author calling a sexual relationship a mutual *contract* which limits the time spent together to *intercourse* only. WORK source domain may bring forth the positive value to some terms, for example, having many lovers was described as a *sexual career*, thus insinuating that having more partners and changing them is a successful and most importantly, essential part of a man’s life.

The quality of detachment was further reinforced when the authors of the advice columns urged the readers to treat sex as a material good or a currency that can be exchanged as a *transaction*. This is not to claim though, that advice in men’s magazines encourage such outlook for men in relationships in general. In most cases, WORK metaphors were applied to answer questions of readers who wanted to focus only on purely sexual affairs that were called “friends with benefits”, “one-night stands” or “hook-ups” and men specifically inquired how not to “catch feelings”. In such context, WORK metaphors functioned especially well since they highlight an activity which is in a way removed from the realm of enjoyment as in the phrase *do the work* and thus encourages to act in, to some extent, distant and civilised way.

The usage of WORK metaphors in women’s advice columns seemed slightly different, with the main focus being on the subcategory of JOB. *Job* is another generic term which refers to different sexual topics in a variety of phrases or compound nouns as in the following example:

(44) *The mighty **blow job**—intimidating for sure (W16)*

Along with twenty instances of *bj/blowjob*, the corpus also included phrases such as *rim job*, *hand job* and being *into the job*:

(45) *If your jaw starts to feel sore or tired a few minutes **into the job** (W16)*

Even though these more or less lexicalized items appear explicit in the context, the sexual topics of oral sex or masturbation, which more often than not have been a matter of moral and social censorship, are now represented as a form of service and obligation. While Crespo-Fernández (2015) regards this as successful realizations of euphemistic processes, to Murphy (2001) metaphorical references to sex through the source domain of WORK degrade the act of sex to being a chore devoid of intimacy and affection in addition to portraying relationships to women as a matter of control, regulation and commodity (41-43). This exemplifies the fact that the interpretation of euphemistic and dysphemistic function varies depending on the perspective.

WAR AND VIOLENCE, HUNTING AND RIDING & TOOLS AND MACHINERY

This subsection discusses metaphors of WAR AND VIOLENCE, HUNTING AND RIDING and TOOLS AND MACHINERY. The three source domain groupings were combined in the present discussion part as they all share the same qualities of strength, domination and forcefulness in addition to the fact that they tend to have dysphemistic meaning. The same metaphor can be employed and tie two source domains together as, for example, the verb *attack* connects WAR AND VIOLENCE with HUNTING and expresses the quality of forceful, maybe even non-consensual, sex. A following paragraph from the article in *Men's Health* contains an extended metaphor where all of the three source domains co-occur:

- (46) *You **attack** her clitoris. Orgasm doesn't happen via clitoral **obliteration**. <...> It doesn't need to **be jackhammered** or be the sole focus (M1)*

Although the example above is to a certain degree sarcastic, it demonstrates how sex can be talked about in a violent way. Apart from this, the dataset of men's columns additionally had occurrences of WAR OR VIOLENCE metaphors that were unironic:

- (47) *find someone you want to **bang** so hard (M7)*
(48) *teased her a little bit before you **hit her hotspot** (M8)*
(49) *that means longer waits between **shoots** (20)*

The overall conceptual basis for WAR/VIOLENCE metaphors corresponds to the view that sex is understood as a matter related to hostility, dominance and violence. For instance, fragment (45) depicts man's reproductive abilities in terms of firing a gun (the penis) and reinforces the pervasive idea that male sexuality is capable of inflicting harm on someone. The other two phrases containing *bang* and *hit* function the same way – providing imagery of hitting the partner's genitals.

Moving to another metaphor which is closely related to ANIMAL metaphor to refer to humans, indicating that SEX IS HORSE-RIDING. As seen in example below, a woman is viewed as a horse that can be *mounted* or used for *riding*:

(50) *looking for a female he can **mount*** (M18)

In spite of the fact that women can too be the ones to *ride*, *mount* or *straddle* their partners, these metaphors do not lose their offensive intention as it still portrays the bottom participant as the horse and, in addition, it depicts sexual intercourse as an animalistic activity that does not hold any intimacy or tenderness.

If we turn our attention to the women's dataset, only WAR/VIOLENCE source domain was present with two instances of the verb *bang* and a more creative way of expressing the sexual experience and knowledge of a lover as "weapon" in a *pleasure arsenal*:

(51) *one of the best sex acts to have in your **pleasure arsenal*** (W16)

This way, sexual expertise is rendered a powerful force, a secret weapon that can defeat (i.e., satisfy) one's lover. The present expression emphasizes not the features of hostility or violence but the intimate partner's in-depth sexual knowledge. Overall, the element of violence is not generally a part of advice-giving discourse in women's magazines.

PHYSICAL/NATURAL FORCES

Another systematic group of metaphorical expressions that emerged in advice columns was metaphors which realise the source domain of PHYSICAL/NATURAL FORCES in conceptualising sexual activities/processes. The consideration of lust in terms of PHYSICAL/NATURAL FORCES transmits the idea that these are the feelings that lovers cannot simply control and, therefore, they are merely victims of these higher forces. In the men's corpus MAGNETISM is an external agent that takes responsibility of the consequences of actions and, therefore, acts as a base for this euphemistic conceptualization. Here the physical phenomenon of magnetism exerts a force of attraction on the subject, in this case a man is a source of this power over the target of sexual interest:

(52) *he often **attracts** women who expect him to be "dominant"* (M6)

In women's magazines, the euphemisms from the domains of MAGNETISM and ELECTRICITY were much more prevalent, with nine metaphors referring to *attraction* or the action of *attracting* to the adjective *magnetic*:

(53) *the **magnetic** need to close the gap between you* (W10)

Magnetism represents sexual desire as a material force that cannot be resisted which is very similar to expressions relating to electricity as in *electric* or *charged*, as illustrated in the following example:

(54) *If you focus on getting to one **Big Bang** at the end (W25)*

As we are well aware, the Big Bang is a cosmological theory which explains the start of the observable universe from an infinitely hot and dense single point that then led to a still-expanding cosmos that we know today. The comparison of sexual climax to this enormous scale phenomenon is a hyperbolized description of intense feeling of pleasure and how it consumes one's body.

Corresponding to the analogous concept of helplessness in the face of a higher power, natural forces like water create an association between sex and wild nature. In this example, pleasure is a chaotic body of water – an overwhelming feeling which the sexual partner has no control over and has to *ride it out*:

(55) *riding a wave of sensation and arousal (W25)*

In essence, the conceptualization of desire in terms of PHYSICAL/NATURAL FORCES is a creative source of euphemistic items that function in two ways: they mitigate the threat to the hearer's face and, in addition to that, they accentuate a particular aspect of the sexual topic being referred to. Metaphorical references to these forces are prevalent in women's magazines and demonstrate the dominating power over the individual in the face of irresistible desire.

ILLNESS AND INSANITY and HEALTH

In the same fashion to PHYSICAL and NATURAL FORCES metaphors, the ILLNESS/INSANITY and HEALTH euphemisms function on the premise that the intense strength of sexual desire results in making us physically and mentally unable to function normally. This leads to the use of metaphors of disrupted cognitive functions, insanity being the cause for lack of control and irrational behaviour:

(56) *you can drive your partner **crazy** (M22)*

The above example and similar other instances of the use of the adjective *crazy* demonstrate how the higher sexual intensity can be expressed with the help of euphemistic metaphors which channel the helplessness and lack of control in the face of desire. Clearly, in such metaphorical construal men were not the ones in the "victim" position – they drive women *crazy* and, if we take into consideration the previous domain of PHYSICAL FORCES, the advice is centred around making male readers more *attractive* and irresistible to others than falling to such forces themselves.

Turning to the other dataset, women's corpus contained only two examples of the present theme; one being INSANITY metaphor which, just like men's in magazines, also concentrated on driving the other person "crazy" whereas the second instance being more unique:

(57) *Let your **freak** flag fly* (W1)

Generally speaking, *freak* belongs to the source domain of ILLNESS as it refers to people, animals or plants with unusual physical abnormalities. Going from there, in the present context, the use of the term *freak* to refer to someone who has interest in unconventional sexual practices, has a strong derogatory force. Nevertheless, just like the DIRT metaphors, in a controlled set of meanings the expression "freak" may have a quasi-euphemistic effect. Interestingly, though, this metaphor does not really aim to hide the topic of sexual practices and degree of their unconventionality and it does not strive to intensify the taboo with an offensive intention either. Instead, the present example seems to function as a provocative (attracting interest) or cohesive (a sight of in-group solidarity) euphemism. After all, the main goal of the advice article was to motivate the readers to embrace their sexual preferences.

The domain of HEALTH is, naturally, related to the domain of ILLNESS; however, the HEALTH metaphors do not focus on the physiological effects of sexual excitement but rather provide an evaluation on other individuals and their sexual desires. This domain usually reveals more about the values of the speaker rather than the reality. Here is the only occurrence of HEALTH metaphor in both datasets which appeared in women's advice column "In bed with Gigi Engle":

(58) *Sex is **healthy** as can be* (W3)

The topic of the article revolved around the feeling of shame and alienation of the reader as she is keener on having intimate sessions more than her boyfriend. The piece of advice featured in the magazine centred around the fact that "slut-shaming" against women is, generally, very prevalent, nonetheless, the need to have sexual relations often, and "as much as your male counterparts" is *healthy*. Here, being *healthy* is associated with demonstrating moral sexual behaviour but, above all, the author's goal is to normalize one of the most basic human needs and reduce the pervasive stigma surrounding female sexuality.

CONTAINERS

The source domain of CONTAINER provides a very abstract core to conceptualize sexual body parts, excitement and other subjects in terms of an entity that has interior, exterior and a boundary as well as other basic features that characterise containers. For example, in the men's corpus, sexual arousal is conceptualized as a hot fluid in a closed container which then builds pressure inside and causes it to

explode. The *explosion* metaphor translates to a growing sexual excitement and reaching an orgasm which equals the rupturing of the container. In the dataset, the advice columnist introduced the technique of edging for male readers which promises to heighten the intensity of orgasms, however, the effects were hyperbolized and promised to be “Earth-shattering” in addition to being:

(59) *explosive and absolutely phenomenal* (M25)

Another metaphor present in the men’s advice corpus was *backdoor* which had high euphemistic value when referring to the anus. On an interesting note, men’s magazines avoided the topic of anal sex and buttocks in general, and the one article from *GQ* about anus grooming and whether men are “ready to feel bad about their balloon knot” contained almost all X-phemistic expressions to refer to that specific body part.

On the other hand, the same metaphor in women’s advice columns had a different function that being simply protective. The extended metaphor provided below belongs to the category of quasi-euphemisms, as the “pure” euphemism does not have a humorous objective. The present expression constituted an alternative to the taboo and its function was neither to mitigate or to save face nor to intensify the taboo with an offensive intention:

(60) *Foreplay is so important because you have to “ring the doorbell” before entering. <...> Be a good guest <...>, and don’t just breakdown the door* (W7)

The extended metaphor alluding to anal play posed a witty and diverting attitude towards the matter and, although it did not conceal the taboo nature of the topic, the quasi-euphemisms aided in relieving tension. Since some sexual activities might seem daunting, the author’s choice to refer to the anus as a *backdoor* suggests that the human body is a container, however, a guarded one – containing *doors* and further reinforces the idea that the *guest* (as in a lover) has to make his presence known prior to *entering* and cannot just *breakdown the door*. This means that sex is ultimately a “friendly” activity which is, most importantly, consensual.

Similarly, the CONTAINER domain provides the conceptual basis to refer to a woman as a container of hot water – *a pot*, which on metaphorical level implies that the person is full of sexual excitement.

The women’s advice column dataset also contains one of the most frequently used terms to address homosexual people as being *closeted*:

(61) *Whether your husband is a deeply closeted gay man or bisexual is anyone’s guess* (W18)

Here, the expression *closet/closeted* stands for the attitude that the society holds with regards to homosexuality. In this metaphor, the parts of container – the inside and outside, represents the degree of

conventionality. Being *in the closet* or *closeted* means that the individual is being oppressed and locked away in a tight space, away from the public eye and judgement. The adverb “deeply” and adjective “closeted” modifies the term “gay” in such a way thus implying that the husband’s homosexuality is so concealed, it might be a secret to himself.

ADVENTURES

The consideration of a sexual relationship in terms of an ADVENTURE implies that is an exciting, novel and maybe even dangerous experience for lovers. Although the single occurrence of ADVENTURE metaphor in men’s advice corpus described the most basic act of intimacy such as kissing, the columnist Justin Kirkland wanted to point out that even the most standard activity can, as he puts it, be “amped up”:

(62) *Kissing can be fun and **adventurous*** (M24)

In women’s advice corpus, the metaphor *adventure* functioned as an extension of the JOURNEY metaphor and portrayed a sexual experience as an exciting journey where lovers are the travellers, setting foot on new and unexplored lands, taking part in pleasurable yet risky ventures. The sentence taken from *Rebellious* magazine for women, article *W4*, referred to the intention of finding new lovers as an *adventure*:

(63) *I’m excited for the **adventures** you’re going to have!* (W18)

The ambiguity behind the ADVENTURE metaphor aids in the construction of euphemistic basis to refer to a wide range of sexual practices that might be considered unconventional. The following example made use of the metaphors *adventurous* (as in having unconventional taste) and the sexual encounters, that involve such practices, were indicated as being *a sexual exploit*:

(64) *He should feel lucky to have such a hot, **adventurous** woman who loves him and enjoys trying new, fun, and novel **sexual exploits*** (W1)

Overall, the euphemistic expressions and the articles covering the topics of being “adventurous” presented a contrasting view on the content of advice columns for women. The main goal proved to be not to convince female readers to adopt novel sexual habits for the sake of one’s partner but rather concentrated on how to navigate your already “unconventional-self” in this sex-negative world or a concrete relationship. Although no general claims can be made about the content of men’s versus women’s advice columns based on this rather limited data sample, the comparison of two articles covering the topic of unconventional practices taken from the two datasets, demonstrated a fundamental divergence of attitudes. In the article *W1* meant for women, the columnist Gigi Engle put forth the idea

that if the lover is reluctant to accept the more *adventurous* side of his partner – then a woman “shouldn't be with a guy like that”. The same degree of self-acceptance was not, however, reflected in male advice article *M20* where men were prompted to “spice things up” or if “she’s bored of having sex with you, she’s going to cheat”. Given these points, one, more substantiated, conclusion could be drawn – the samples from less commercialized, niche magazines like *Rebellious* or *Thrillist* seemed to promote healthy communication and prioritization of personal well-being while pop culture magazines such as *GQ*, *Esquire* or *Cosmopolitan* and others encouraged individuals to change.

FIREWORKS

Fireworks as an explosive pyrotechnic device meant for entertainment purposes, depicts a subject of wild, uninhibited energy. In the men’s dataset, a mention of a *firecracker* describes an individual who channels his unrepressed sexual energy:

(65) *Let’s flip your potential anxieties to make you a **firecracker** in bed* (M30)

The imagery of fireworks also compares sexual climax to the sight of explosion of light and colour and leads the target audience to consider an orgasm in terms of an overwhelming and extremely intense feeling. It is highly hyperbolic and does attempt to conceal the taboo nature of the matter but rather highlights the sexual topic in a socially acceptable way as in these examples which were only available in women’s corpus:

(66) *Don’t expect **fireworks** the first time you have sex* (W8)

(67) *sexual encounters should be <...> something short of **fireworks** going off* (W19)

This subsection of FIREWORK metaphors concludes the section of the thesis which discussed the source domains and X-phemistic metaphors that were present in advice columns for men and women. It revealed the different functions of metaphorical expressions dealing with the taboo and also some general features of advice articles written for male and female audiences. The following subsection compares the most prominent X-phemistic metaphor use and advice column feature comparison in datasets for men’s and women’s advice articles.

3.2.2. The comparison of qualitative features of X-phemistic metaphor use in the two corpora

All things considered, as could be observed in the course of X-phemistic metaphor analysis that appeared in advice articles, some more prominent features of such discourse have emerged. First of all, in men’s magazines, the general atmosphere tends to be light and very humorous. We get a sense that the authors of these texts are in a position of an “older sibling” – playful yet sometimes strict and scolding cue all

of instances where the male readers are not advised of how to behave but almost instructed to. Even if the advice itself was written in an informal style, very often it was based on some previous studies or advice of other, more qualified professionals.

Apart from this, the texts on sex and relationships for men seemed to contain a number of dysphemistic references that are mainly employed as a criticism – the authors are very well aware of the dysphemistic value of such metaphorical expressions. For instance, men are warned not to act like *a dead fish* in bed or not to *attack* or *obliterate* their intimate partner's private parts. This means that the journalists make use of the negative associations that go hand in hand with these metaphors to get across the idea of these actions being unacceptable. Meanwhile, the patronising way of addressing the male audience raises some additional questions. Does the crude, almost criticising manner of speaking make advice columns more attractive to male readers as they somehow relate to it better? Coupled with the various techniques of fuelling anxiety over inadequacy of sexual performance, the advice columns for men definitely seem to aim for subservience to the magazine offered “wisdom”.

As for advice columns for women, they also share the similarity of being written in non-formal style just like men's magazines; however, they employ, to a certain degree, different conversational techniques. Female columnists addressing their readership do not assume the position of someone more knowledgeable but rather that of a friend. The articles are structured in such a way that they resemble a conversation of two intimate acquaintances who gossip or, as one author put it – “spill tea”, about a certain private subject. After building rapport, the professional and more factual information from a specialist is introduced to strengthen the columnist's advice and enhance their credibility.

Aside from the magazines' style, another distinct feature that emerged in the women's dataset was the prevalence of metaphors based on the source domains of material forces such PHYSICAL/NATURAL FORCES or FIRE which were employed to convey the magnitude and intensity of the desire and the effects it has over one's body. Unlike men's dysphemistic hyperboles (such as the domains of WAR/VIOLENCE/TOOLS), women's magazines leaned on euphemistic hyperboles known as the provocative euphemisms which are designed to not only conceal but also to attract interest. Although MAGNETISM or ELECTRICITY metaphors displayed the lovers as victims of these higher forces, such euphemisms, first and foremost, demonstrated the overwhelming power of lust and sexual attraction. With the help of these expressions, the authors actively validated the concerns of the female readership that touched upon the matters of higher sex drive and inconsistencies with their partner's drive. In such situation, the supposed responsibility is taken off the shoulders of a woman and then reassigned to the higher forces, hence establishing the idea that the level of libido is not in the hands of an individual.

There appears to be a noticeable difference between men's and women's advice columns with regards to the focus of the advice itself that is well exemplified by the choice of metaphorical expressions within the articles, specifically – self-pleasure versus pleasure of your partner. More precisely, in men's advice columns, journalists seem to emphasize the attention to the intimate partner while the focal point for women's advice columnists appears to be self-enjoyment. If we were to compare the way the source domain of JOURNEYS presents itself in both datasets, it constructs a rather contrasting view. For instance, in the men's corpus, the JOURNEY metaphors are more or less concerned with various stages of achieving an orgasm to, finally, giving one as in *approaching her destination, push her over the edge* or often appearing in the form of an extended metaphor, as in the following example:

(68) *focus on tell-tale signs that she's almost **there**—like quickened breathing —and let her **come** at her own pace (M8)*

In the majority of cases, the euphemistic phrases like *come, be/get close* were used as an indication to the pleasure “status” of a partner rather than oneself. In addition to this, the practice known as *edging* (stopping sexual stimulation right before achieving an orgasm) was introduced several times as a measure for men to ensure that a woman's pleasure would remain a priority.

On the other hand, the number of JOURNEY metaphors in the women's advice corpus was considerably smaller, with ten instances of the euphemism *come* as well as *get close* to linguistically “cover up” the orthophemism *an orgasm*. What comes as a surprise, though, is that these metaphors were preoccupied not with the pleasure of the partner, but with the one of the readers, namely, women. To illustrate the point better, let us consider the metaphorical expressions in the source domain of GAMES AND SPORTS. As previously discussed, the advice column corpus for women contains a rather inflated number of GAMES metaphors, to be more precise, *toys, foreplay* and *butt/anal play*. Nevertheless, all of the above-mentioned expressions were concentrated upon the sexual gratification of the woman instead of her intimate partner, however, the same could not be said about the men's advice articles.

What could these results mean in a more holistic view? That women are “uncaring” of their partners or that men are too fixated on *scoring the ultimate goal*, that is, the domination and conquest of the sexual encounter, instead of simply enjoying the process of it? These questions are not so easy to answer, however, it is definitely safe to state that the scenery of women's advice columns and towards what aim these articles cater, has changed.

In a 2009 article in journal of “Discourse and Communication”, Rosalin Gill distinguished three types of women's magazines repertoires on sex and relationship: first, the instructions on how to learn to please men, then how to transform the self, which urges women to reshape their interior lives in order to

construct a desirable subjectivity and, finally, the intimate entrepreneurship repertoire which is concerned with the goals, plans and scientific organization of relationships (Gill 2009). It is apparent that the focus in these online magazines ultimately turned to women and their needs instead of trying to remodel them. It is a well-known fact that numerous young women have grown up reading the glossy magazines that offer various types of advice – from relationships to appearance, promoting all kinds of insecurities and then selling solutions to them. It should offer relief then, that such an objective of advice columns has changed. And yet, the emphasis on sex toys as well as other less “traditional” sexual practices unlike vaginal sex which does not require buying accessories, raises some questions. Indeed, it should be noted that magazines are, first and foremost, a form of advertising that, to a varying degree, seeks to maximise profits by selling products directly (via articles) or indirectly (via banner ads and so on). For this reason, a rather “aggressive” promotion of vibrator selection on the main page on the magazines and then a subsequent flow of advice articles on sex toys and anal play seems less than accidental. Given these points, the fact that the present study presents a new angle to advice columns in women’s magazines still holds true. The fact remains that, although, the tips are centred on making the experience pleasurable for women, the stress is on the fact that it is a collective effort which requires the involvement and communication of both parties.

In contrast, for men, the current results are actually in line with the previous papers written on the features of sex and relationship advice in men’s columns. Proof of this is the analysis carried out on *Men’s Health* magazine and how it promotes the model of masculinity based on discipline regarding male pleasure, which ultimately impacts the way men approach female pleasure (Porter, Douglas & Collumbien 2017). The authors of “Enhance her pleasure – and your grip strength: Men’s Health magazine and pseudo-reciprocal pleasure” maintain that these magazines promote a type of masculinity “where men can ‘have their cake and eat it’; seeming to adhere to ideals of gender equality and reciprocity while retaining their traditional patriarchal position of producer/provider” (Porter, Douglas & Collumbien 2017, p.1). Men are thus encouraged to think and behave this way and, therefore, approach female orgasm as a product, which they can “buy” through listening to *Men’s Health* magazine’s sexual advice and to control, delay and discipline their own pleasure and orgasm. This goes in agreement with the metaphorical euphemisms found in the men’s advice column dataset such as the frequency of GAMES AND SPORTS and JOURNEYS metaphors which emphasizes the man’s control over the course of the sexual encounter. However, the control is partly limited – the “scolding” journalist tone, as observed in previous examples illustrating the JOURNEY source domain, also lets the reader know that the sexual expertise will only be achieved while adhering to the rules of the magazines hence men always have to feel a degree of insecurity and be advice-dependent.

IV. Conclusions

The goal of the present thesis was to examine the use of X-phemistic expressions to discuss the taboo topic of sex in the so-called “agony aunt” columns for men and women. After identifying the said expressions, they were further distributed into groupings based on the source domains the metaphorical expressions instantiated. The next step of the study was the critical analysis of the collected data which reverted the metaphorical euphemisms and dysphemisms into the intended target concept to establish how a certain phrase was applied in each dataset to address this “forbidden” topic. Although the objectives of the paper did not include the aim to sort out the phrases in accordance to their function (euphemistic or dysphemistic), the most notable metaphorical samples did include a more detailed description of their purpose. A more detailed description of each source domain and the occurrences found in each dataset were examined in a greater detail to reveal the conceptualization process behind these metaphors and the role that they play in the context and in fulfilling the writers’ communicative intentions.

The total number of X-phemistic metaphors found in men’s advice column corpus amounted to 165 metaphorical expressions while the women’s dataset contained 189 occurrences. Both corpora employed 15 different source domains to discuss the theme of intimate relations, however, 13 of those domains overlapped. Although the women’s advice column corpus resulted in a higher number of occurring metaphorical expressions, the male dataset was more characteristic of lexical variation when employing the same source domains.

The analysis of X-phemistic metaphors in men’s advice column corpus revealed that the most prolific source domain groupings were GAMES AND SPORTS as well as JOURNEYS. The consideration of sex in terms of a GAME supplied the ability to consider unconventional sexual practices as an innocent pastime and successfully shielded off the taboo as well as judgement. In addition to that, it was an effective tool to generate various phrases that alluded to reaching or having an orgasm. Similarly, the men’s dataset was also abundant with the linguistic realizations of JOURNEYS source domain to refer to the various points of time in the sexual intercourse. The emphasis on the notion of progress and especially the purpose of reaching it was one of the most noticeable features in men’s magazines. The almost obsessive preoccupation with not making the whole experience pleasurable, but controlling yourself and “harvesting orgasms” from others presented an interesting view about the type of advice available for men. This was in accordance with other studies that revealed how popular magazines construct a certain type of “traditional” masculinity where men retain their patriarchal position of a producer or provider of

pleasure, however, this will only be achieved if readers adhered to the rules of the magazine thus ensuring customer dependence. Such a message was effectively reinforced when employing other, more dysphemistic source domains such as ANIMALS, FOOD AND EATING or WAR/VIOLENCE and some others. Even though the majority of metaphorical expressions were employed in a sarcastic way which was in agreement with the rest of the advice columns' tone, the aim was to demonstrate the inadequacy of men in the "bedroom department". It should be noted though, that the present dataset also demonstrated a wide variety of euphemistic metaphors such as FIRE, PHYSICAL FORCES, WORK and others to refer to the taboo in such a way so that it would emphasize the similarities between the target and source concept and put forth a certain quality while also successfully protecting the reader's face.

In contrast to the dataset of texts addressed to men's readership, the women's magazine corpus introduced a different metaphorical landscape to refer to the topic of sex. In spite of the fact that GAMES AND SPORTS domain was also the most recurrent one, the articles for women focused not on the climax but the sexual activity as a prelude to coition. This was further exemplified by the domains of JOURNEY, ADVENTURE and others. In addition to that, provocative euphemisms which hyperbolized the effects of sexual desire with the help of the source domains of PHYSICAL/NATURAL FORCES, FIRE and others, played a very important double role, i.e., concealing but also arousing curiosity. Although such metaphors displayed the lovers as victims of these higher forces which cannot be resisted, they also aided in transferring the responsibility of mismatched libidos (most often women having a higher sex drive than their male partner) to this external agent. Unlike the popular stereotype, women in advice articles demonstrated the frustration of having a higher sex drive or a more varied taste for unconventional sex than their partners, however, felt shamed for that. In this regard, such source domains of ADVENTURE, CONTAINER to name some, aided in reinforcing the idea of prioritizing personal well-being above all other matters which diverged from the objectives set in men's magazines. Finally, the list of dysphemistic metaphors to refer to sexual topics when addressing female readership was rather scarce compared to the men's dataset which corresponded to the general tone of women's magazines – building friendly rapport without appearing condescending or more knowledgeable.

The analysis has revealed some differences and similarities of X-phemistic metaphor employment by columnists when addressing male and female readership. While advice columns highlighted the juxtaposed priorities in the two corpora such as self-pleasure versus pleasure of others or enjoying the process versus the end goal, the datasets also shared some similarities. Most importantly, euphemisms or quasi-euphemisms were an effective tool to politely refer to all sexual matters and emphasized such qualities as playfulness, intensity, helplessness among others. All things considered, the wide range of source domains used to verbalize sexual topics reflected the rich complexity of human sexuality.

Keeping in mind that the present thesis only dealt with X-phemistic expressions to address male or female audiences, the future studies could perhaps focus more on the language habits of a particular speaker group. To be more precise, it would be interesting to examine what source domains are used by men and women to talk about sex and whether they reinforce the stereotypes. In addition to this, the present subject could also be explored in other languages than English, with the aim of observing possible interlingual and intercultural similarities and differences, as well as to look for manifestations of cultural attitudes. Future research is also needed to explore other sexualities than heterosexuality and their linguistic behaviour to further expand our knowledge upon this subject of figurative language use in highly tabooed discourses.

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Summary in Lithuanian

Nuo pat atsiradimo vėlame septynioliktame amžiuje, patarimų skiltys tebegyvuoja kaip populiarius pramoginis žanras. Patarimų straipsniai, kuriuos galima rasti laisvalaikio žurnaluose, interneto bloguose ir socialinių medijų puslapiuose, varijuoja nuo teisinių patarimų iki vaikų auginimo, tačiau daugiausiai susidomėjimo sulaukiantys straipsniai sutelkia dėmesį į klausimus apie intymius santykius. Nors dabartinės vakarų vertybės yra įvardijamos kaip liberalios, lytiniai santykiai, tam tikra prasme, išliko kaip tabu tema, kuri reikalauja lingvistinio “maskavimo”. Eufemizmas (ir jo priešingybė disfemizmas) pateikia alternatyvą kalbėtojui “švelniau” ir mandagiau perteikti mintis apie tabu temas, dažniausiai pasitelkiant metaforas. Šio darbo tikslas yra išnagrinėti eufemistinių ir disfemistinių metaforų naudojimą patarimų skiltyse žurnaluose, skirtuose vyrams ir moterims, ir pažvelgti kaip sekso tema yra konceptualizuojama kreipiantis į vyrišką ir moterišką auditoriją.

Tyrimui buvo sudaryti du tekstynai iš patarimų skilčių apie intymius santykius žurnaluose, skirtuose vyrams ir moterims. Pirmiausia, pasitelkus atidaus skaitymo (angl. close reading) metodą, tekстыne buvo nustatyti fragmentai, kuriuose kalbama apie temas susijusias su lytiniais santykiais ir juose buvo ieškoma metaforiškų eufemizmų bei disfemizmų. Naudojantis metaforų identifikavimo metodu (MIPVU) buvo identifikuotos 165 eufemistinės/disfemistinės metaforos vyrų tekстыne ir 189 moterų tekстыne.

Tyrimas atskleidė esamus panašumus ir skirtumus tarp metaforiškų eufemizmų ir disfemizmų skirtų kreiptis į vyriškos ir moteriškos lyties skaitytojus kalbant apie seksualinius santykius. Nors patarimai vyrams ir moterims turėjo skirtingus tikslus – vieni teikė pirmenybę asmeninui pasitenkinimui ir mėgavimuisi procesu, o kiti - savo partnerio patenkinimui bei “galo” siekimui, duomenų rinkiniai taip pat turėjo panašumų. Galiausiai, eufemizmai įrodė esantys sėkminga priemonė mandagiai įvardinti mintis susijusias su šia tabu tema ir pabrėžė tokias savybes kaip žaismingumas, intensyvumas, bėjėgiškumas bei kitus bruožus.

Appendices

Appendix I. X-phemistic metaphors in men's corpus

Source domain	Source concept	Linguistic realization	Target concept	Number of occurrences
Games and sports	Games	toy	object used to enhance sexual pleasure	7
		sex play	sexual practices	3
		game	sexual excitement	3
		ultimate endgame	an orgasm	1
		foreplay	sexual activity as a prelude to coition	4
		play the (long) game	a (long) sexual encounter	2
		knife play	consensual BDSM edge play involving knives	1
		period play	sexual intercourse during menstruation.	1
		blood play	BDSM act of drawing blood from another person	4
		anal play	anal stimulation	5
		wax play	a BDSM practise with wax	1
		playtime	sexual activities	1
	impact play	a sexual practice involving spanking	1	
	play with toys	use sexual accessories	1	
Sports		to score	to have sex	1
		marathon (sex)	a long sexual encounter	1
		goal	an orgasm	1
Animals	Aquatic animals	(dead) fish	A sexual partner who lies flat and unresponsive during sex	1
	Wild animals	horny	sexually excited	10
		predator	a lustful man who looks for women in a dishonest way	1
	Animals	frisky	sexually excited	2
		ox	effeminate/emasculated man	1
		cum bull	a man that supplies semen for sale	5
		porking	(of a man) have sex with	1
		herd	a total amount of sexual partners	1
	kitten	a sexually attractive and available female	1	
	Birds	cock	the penis	2
Journeys	Destination	there	an orgasm	2
		on the edge	to be about to achieve orgasm	1
		come	to achieve orgasm	5
		get someone there	to make someone achieve orgasm	2
		approach someone's destination	to be about to achieve orgasm	1
		(get, be) close	to be about to achieve orgasm	3
		get over the edge	to achieve orgasm	1
		edging	stopping sexual stimulation right before achieving orgasm	4
	Journey	finish	to achieve orgasm	1
		head down south	to copulate	1

		to derail	to prevent an orgasm	1
Heat and fire	Fire	fire	sexual excitement	1
		rekindle the flame	to sexually excite someone after a period of inactivity	1
	Heat	warm someone up	to sexually stimulate someone	2
		sizzling	sexually exciting	1
		hot	sexually exciting	10
		steamy	sexually exciting	1
	heat	sexual excitement	3	
Food and eating	Eating	eat ass	to practice oral sex on the anus	1
		appetizer	sexual activity as a prelude to coition	1
	Fruit	juices	sex effluvia	1
	other	spice (up)	make more sexually exciting	3
		vanilla	fond of conventional sexual practices	8
Dirt	Dirt	dirty	immoral	1
			erotic or pornographic	2
		dirty talk	sexually explicit language used to arouse the partner	9
		(sticky) mess	sexual activity	2
Work	Commerce	intercourse	a sexual encounter	2
		transactional	purely sexual relationship	1
	Job	blowjob	a fellatio	1
		sexual career	a sexual history of a person	1
	Business	contract	strictly sexual relationship	1
Work	do the work	to copulate	1	
War and violence	War	attack	attack	1
		hit someone's hotspot	hit someone's hotspot	1
	Violence	to obliterate	to sexually stimulate (with force)	1
		bang	to copulate with	1
	Weapons	shoot	to ejaculate	1
Illness and insanity	Insanity	crazy	sexually excited	5
Physical forces	Magnetism	attract	to sexually attract	4
Container	Pressurised container	explosion	an orgasm	2
	Container	backdoor	the anus	2
Hunting and riding	Riding	mount	to copulate	1
		ride	to copulate	1
Tools and machines	Tool	to jackhammer	to sexually stimulate (with force)	1
	Machine	mechanical (sex)	passionate sexual act	1
Adventure	Adventure	adventurous	fond of exciting sexual experiences	1
Fireworks	Fireworks	firecracker	sexually exciting	1

Appendix II. X-phemistic metaphors in women's corpus

Source domain	Source concept	Linguistic realization	Target concept	Number of occurrences
Games and sports	Games	toy	object used to enhance sexual pleasure	22
		playfulness	engaging in unconventional sexual practices	1
		butt/anal play	anal stimulation	18
		foreplay	sexual activity as a prelude to coition	18
		play	to get involved in unconventional sexual practices	2
			to copulate	3
		game	sexual expertise	2
		urine play	sexual practice involving urine	1
play with one another	mutual masturbation	1		
Work	Commerce	affair	an extramarital sexual relationship	1
		intercourse	a sexual encounter	6
		transactional	purely sexual relationship	1
	Job	(bj)/blowjob	a fellatio	20
		rim job	anal stimulation	2
		hand job	masturbation	2
		on the job	engaged in oral sex	1
Profession	sex worker	a prostitute	1	
Heat and fire	Fire	fire	sexual excitement	1
		fiery	sexually active	1
	Heat	hot	sexually exciting	10
		warm someone up	to sexually stimulate someone	3
		a warm-up	sexual stimulation before coition	2
		sultry	sexually exciting	1
		melt into a puddle	to sexually excited someone	1
hottest	sexually exciting	1		
Journeys	Destination	(get) close	to be about to achieve orgasm	1
		come	to achieve orgasm	10
	Journey	pathway to pleasure	a sexual encounter	1
		journey	a sexual encounter	1
Physical forces	Magnetism	attract	to sexually attract	9
		magnetic	sexual attractive	1
	Electricity	charged	sexually excited	1
		electric	sexually exciting	1
	other	The Big Bang	an orgasm	1
Food and eating	Eating	eat ass	to practice oral sex on the anus	5
		eat pussy	to practice cunnilingus	1
	other	spice up	make more sexually exciting	1
		sexual menu (à la carte)	various sexual practises	2
Animals	Birds	cock	the penis	1
	Wild animals	to tame	make the partner obedient in bed	1
		horny	sexually excited	4
Container	Container	pot	a sexually excited woman	1
		backdoor	the anus	3
		ring the doorbell	to sexually stimulate someone	1
	Closet	closeted	a homosexual who has not	1

			revealed his/her sexual orientation	
Dirt	Dirt	dirty	immoral	2
		dirty talk	sexually explicit language used to arouse the partner	3
Fireworks	Fireworks	fireworks	an orgasm	4
Adventure	Adventure	adventurous	fond of unconventional sexual practices	1
		sexual exploit	an exciting sexual experience	1
		adventure	an exciting sexual experience	1
War and violence	Violence	bang	to copulate with	2
	Weapons	pleasure arsenal	various sexual practices	1
Illness and insanity	Illness	freak	fond of unconventional sexual practices	1
	Insanity	crazy	sexually excited	1
Health	Health	healthy	moral	2
Natural forces	Water	riding a wave	an orgasm	1

Appendix III. Data sources for men's corpus

(M1) Mean's Health Staff. 2021. 10 annoying things you do during sex. *Men's Health*. Accessed 21 October 2021, available from: <https://www.menshealth.com.au/annoying-habits-during-sex/>

(M2) Eaves, Aron. 2016. What it means if she cries after sex. *Men's Health*. Accessed 21 October 2021, available from: <https://www.menshealth.com/sex-women/a19548454/postcoital-dysphoria/>

(M3) Rogers, Tim. 2016. Why you should sext your wife. *Men's Health*. Accessed 21 October 2021, available from: <https://www.menshealth.com/sex-women/a19548398/dick-pics-sexperiment/>

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Appendix V. Men's corpus data

Hey man! This an overdue question, men are not the best at selfies. A quick comparison of what you send versus what you receive will tell you how bad you are at nudes, too. How many of you know which angles and poses make you look best? Very few of you, and that's just making your face look good, let alone your entire body. To answer this question, I figured I'm best off asking a few people who enjoy receiving nudes from men what they like and dislike. Of course, every person is into different things, so it's best to get an idea of what the recipient of your nudes likes to achieve the best results. As a primer though, Beth, a straight woman, is keen to stress a non-sexual aspect – she likes nudes because they offer a glimpse into your room or bathroom. “A messy background or an unwashed sink just ruins the vibe,” she says. “Tatty old boxers are an instant turn off. And I'd prefer it to be slightly shaved. I basically don't want it to look like it's just been whipped out for this photo. I'd rather have a good recycled nude than that.” Bex, a bi woman, is also quick to say that effort is essential. “Nudes are an art form. Don't just pull your trackies or boxers down and take a photo like I'm an afterthought.” On the technical side, Bex says, “the lighting is also important. Don't send grainy pictures, but also never use flash. Ambience, please”. Professional nude photographer Rosie Foster says “natural lighting is my personal preference. A softer vibe is generally more attractive. In terms of positioning, standing or mirror selfies work well. If you're sitting or lying and just pointing down at your genitals it doesn't look great. You also don't want to be too close up on the genitals”. Tom, a gay man, has similar views: “The worst thing to get sent is a fucking disembodied cock that's just floating in mid-air. It's usually in really bad lighting, you can't really see anything beyond it being angry and red,” he says, “Seeing someone's full naked body is better. One guy sent a full body shot with an emoji over his dick, which I liked.”

In conclusion the key to taking a good nude is to just be diligent about it. People want natural lighting, nice underwear and a clean space. For those with penises, avoid snapping a picture of a red-raw dick, or worse still, a flaccid one – three of the four people I spoke to have received flaccid dick pictures and none were into it. Faces should be avoided, partly for your own safety if anything ever leaks, but also because your facial expression generally makes for horrific viewing if you're concentrating on taking the nude. Also, consider having good nudes to hand. Rosie says she uses “film because it's more flattering on the skin. You could get someone to help you do that? Do men photograph men naked? Maybe they should”. Maybe they should! Some people did say they were less into receiving a recycled nude, but it's probably going to be better than a floating dick. Finally, if you haven't received any indication from them that they want a dick pic, do not send them a dick pic. There is nothing worse than sending an unsolicited dick pic.

Hey man, Seeing as lockdown reduced the idea of a date to walking around aimlessly until you need a piss – or having something more akin to an unofficial work Zoom – rest assured that even the smoothest of operators are going to be rusty by now. Fortunately, flirting is a science with a bit of art thrown in. It isn't simple to stop the general anxiety that comes along with dating, but it can be surprisingly liberating to accept the notion of “huh, maybe I am overthinking the idea that this date is going to affect the rest of my life and that if they don't like me for some reason I am forever doomed”. According to dating and relationship expert Sarah Louise Ryan, people get caught up on “the end goal” way too much. “By trying to not worry about this, you will find yourself being more present in the moment, really engaging with your date,” she says. “This means you're both more likely to actually have a good time.”

Assuming you and the person know each other's intentions (always good to be direct with these if you're texting before your date) and/or the vibe is good, we can consider the actual mechanics of flirting. Everyone is different, but I figured it made sense to get a general consensus on what makes good flirt game. I asked a bunch of people for their thoughts, and the things that came up most frequently were: eye contact, confidence and good conversation. Let's unpack them.

Eye contact is incredibly underrated. It shows a willingness to communicate and suggests our attention is fixed on the person. It's also something a lot of men actually shy away from, as it can feel pretty vulnerable. If you can, try and keep eye contact while chatting. Look down now and then and gaze back up (insert dreamboat celebrity bloke here) when necessary, so you don't feel or look like you're trying to burn a hole in their face. “Eye contact across the room lets me know you want me,” Nic, 23, says. This tip can be applied in most cases, from dancefloor to diner. Of course, if you meet eyes a couple times but they aren't trying to return eye contact, perhaps give it up for a bit. Unreciprocated eye contact can quickly get creepy.

Good conversation is the most important aspect of flirting. Here's where you'll need a little bit of imagination, to keep things alive. Just have a couple questions locked down that aren't to do with work, “what have you been up to in the last year” or any other stale pandemic questions. Use your surroundings if needs be. However, the key to all good chat is to simply listen to what the other person is saying, and to respond properly, with a bit of curiosity about who they are. “Being fully present in the moment, and connecting with what is being said is very important,” says Ryan. This is improved by eye contact and open body language: Lean in a little but keep your chest and arms/hands fairly wide. Everyone wants to feel valued, so show you're into them with body language and questions, keep them talking. As a good date or bit of flirting comes down to how

well you and the person hit it off, it's hard to guarantee success. Not everyone is compatible. That's alright, though. Could you imagine how exhausting it would be if we wanted to open a joint bank account with everyone we ever dated? No thanks.

"It's important to not see failure as a final destination," Ryan says. Essentially, if it doesn't work out long-term, there'll be other dates. Also, by not focussing on what's right in front of you, you might miss a chance to connect with them. By trying out some of the commonly-liked devices above, hopefully the stress will fade and you'll find yourself more frequently having a good time on the scene. Good luck, man.

It's a question that my wife gets from time to time from women when they find out she's married to a stay-at-home dad. It's not said with malice or judgment, but it's based on the experiences of many of the women. Women who have been married to men who made less money than they did or men who pretend to not understand the hidden mysteries of the diaper. Men who are obsessed with "*women's work*" versus "*men's work*." I never get this question, and I wonder why. Even when my wife is asked, it's away from the earshot of others. As if it might get back to me and my fragile ego will explode. I've been called a lot of things. Over-bearing, too handsome, and an **Ox** with the smell to go with it. I can handle people asking me if my masculinity is intact despite the fact that I've been home with the kids for the last 13 years doing "*women's work*." So, let's set the record straight, on this, and a couple of other things. No, I have never felt emasculated as a stay-at-home dad. I've felt worthless, broke, tired, **horny**, ignored, valued, championed, **dirty, sexy dirty**, sore, loved, and once I felt like I was almost rested. But never emasculated. Why is the idea that loving and caring for my kids is somehow not my job or responsibility? Deep down, that's what that question has always felt like to me. That it is considered by some that being an involved father is somehow "feminine". Honestly, I can't make heads or tails of it. These are my kids. I want to raise my kids. Why would that affect my masculinity?

I find that men who are offended at the thought of changing a diaper or cooking a dinner are often fragile in their own confidence. In their own sense of who they are. And they seem to put a lot of stock into what others think about them. I'm not above the machismo that often runs through men's circles. I've certainly puffed my chest out when challenged and done stupid things. But caring for my kids on a day-to-day basis is not one. I would argue the opposite. That I feel like more of a man because of the time I've spent with my kids. Diapers don't care about genders. And I'm going to let everyone in on a secret. If you've ever heard "I can't change that diaper. I don't know how," here's a truth. That's a lie. Look, it's just not that complicated. Guys I've known who have used that statement really mean that they think it's women's work and they are above that. And therein is your problem. They are not secure in their own self so they must make imaginary boundaries that mean nothing.

You often hear men who are like this use terms like "beta" and "alpha." They have taken the entirety of humanity and reduced us to feral animals. That a man must lead and bite the heads off the ones that challenge him. Again, these terms mean nothing in the real world. It's a way to make yourself feel self-important while at the same time ignoring the truly important around you. Are your kids important? Is a father's involvement with them important? Of course, it is, and it's been backed up by study after study. Those with an involved father tend to be more confident and get better grades. Is that alpha? Is that beta? Or do those terms mean absolutely nothing? In case you're wondering, it's that last one.

Yes, we are getting into toxic masculinity a little here, and that's fine. I deal with it on a pretty frequent basis. As a stay-at-home dad who writes and gives interviews, some of my comment sections can be quite colorful. I'm usually asked if I ever wear a dress, or if my wife has a real man as a boyfriend. And my personal favorite is that no woman would ever want a stay-at-home dad. I don't think they see the irony in that last one. The primary way that you become a stay-at-home dad is because a woman once wanted you. And in my case, at least three times.

The simple truth is that no one gets to decide what my masculinity means to me. If it makes certain people uncomfortable that I can sew a pillowcase, I'm fine with it. I can also build a Queen Anne chair from a couple of planks of wood. Does that make me masculine? I can cook a hell of a lemon tart, too. Does that make me feminine? If I was a male professional chef writing books and making TV shows, is that masculine even though the job is the same? You see, there is no definition beyond what it means to you. No, being a stay-at-home dad is not emasculating. For me, it has been the best way to discover what being a man is truly about. It's about taking care of what's important in your life regardless of what other people may say or think. It's about having the confidence to not only embrace myself, but my role in my children's lives. It's about cooking a bitching lemon tart. You know you're secure in your manhood when you stop caring about it. When who makes the most money becomes immaterial. When you step up and change a diaper and quit making excuses why you can't. That's what it means to be a man, and if you can't do that, maybe it's time to stop questioning others.

And for the women that have dealt with men who are threatened because of your bigger paycheck, or that doing the dishes is not their responsibly, I truly am sorry. You deserve a real man. Talk about a man on a mission: One guy tracked his entire sex life with his wife for a year to gain a healthier perspective on sex in their relationship, according to this post on Reddit. And sure, he also hoped it would result in more time between the sheets (Spoiler alert: it did!).

According to the post, this 20-something couple has been together for nearly a decade and married for the last few years. Like many long-term couples, their sex life started to hit a rough patch, which the guy blamed on their mismatched libidos.

So he decided to track their behaviors over the course of the year to see how to get their groove back. He logged dates, sex, oral sex, orgasms, sexual initiations, and other activities (like masturbation) in a spreadsheet. That added up to 108 romps and 201 orgasms (109 for him and 92 for her) over 372 days. Not too shabby!

He also stumbled upon some random but interesting findings, like that they were pretty much guaranteed to have sex on the sixteenth day of the month, which was about 14 to 15 days before her period (Research shows your cycle definitely affects your sex life—check out our tips for having hotter sex all month long). And on another curious note, as the guy started masturbating less frequently, he found that he ended up having more sex (well, that makes sense!).

By the end of his experiment, they were having sex on average two times a week, which is great news since couples are happier when they hit the sheets at least once a week. So what did he learn from all this? He admits that tracking everything was fun and really helped him reassess his relationship—for instance, he often used to forget when they last had sex. And he was "pleasantly surprised" by the amount of sex they were having (hooray!). His biggest takeaway, however, was that *both* partners need to initiate sex if they want **to score** between the sheets. So should you keep track of your bedroom action? It couldn't hurt; just make sure you're using the stats to improve your sex life in a healthy way—and not to point out that your partner is slacking. Going through a dry spell yourself? Totally normal. Check out these 13 signs you need to **spice up** your sex life to make sex more fun and learn how to get that bed rockin' again. No spreadsheets required. When you've been with the same partner for a *long* time, there will inevitably be times when you want to climb them like a tree and times that you just don't. It's totally normal.

That said, mismatched libidos can sometimes become a bigger problem and lead to stress in a relationship—not to mention a lack of satisfaction. So researchers aimed to find out what strategies women were using to manage sexual desire differences in their bond and if any of them were particularly useful. The study, published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, surveyed 179 women who had been in a relationship with a male partner for at least five years. When asked about self-reported desire, 43.9 percent of women said it was moderate, while 36.6 percent said there was little to none, and just 19.5 percent reported high or very high desire. So when their libido was super-low, what did they do to get their sex lives back on track? Most women reported amping up communication (in and out of the bedroom), while others reported scheduling sex, buying sexy lingerie or **toys**, and just having sex anyway in the hopes of becoming aroused. When asked how effective these strategies were, most women found their tricks to be at least somewhat helpful, while others reported that it was helpful for a while but not forever.

Essentially, these findings explain why we haven't been able to find a one-size-fits-all cure for low desire or even a female Viagra. "Sexual desire is complex," says lead study author Debby Herbenick, Ph.D., sex researcher at Indiana University. "It can change based on how women and men feel about their bodies, how they're getting along, family issues, whether they're getting good quality sleep or not, eating, exercise, and so on. There is unlikely to be one surefire 'fix' for sexual desire differences, so partners need to talk with each other about it and try what feels right for them."

That might be incorporating new sex **toys** or positions into their repertoire, scheduling sex or date nights, or talking about fantasies with each other. But Herbenick's biggest piece of advice may surprise you: Realize that differences in desire happen naturally in relationships and it's not necessarily a problem; in many cases, they'll peak again soon. "It's something we need to recognize as part of most long-term relationships and not blame each other or feel awful about, as that only exacerbates negative feelings."

As soon as you start having sex consistently, you begin developing your repertoire of sexual techniques—your go-to ways of making a woman moan, and keeping her coming back for more. But what if your signature moves just turn her off? "We do a terrible job of teaching men about sexuality," says Monica Lieser, a licensed marriage and family therapist and co-author of *14 Days of Foreplay*. "They feel like they have to be in charge—they better know what to do. So they just kind of fill in the blanks." Sometimes, that kind of sexual improvising works. But other times, it just leaves her feeling irritated. How many bedroom offenses are you guilty of committing? Read on to find out—and learn alternative moves that she'll be begging for next time. Maybe you just like keeping your feet warm—or perhaps you think leaving your knee-highs on is as erotic as her wearing heels to bed. Wrong. It's actually a major mood-killer for women: "It's just not visually attractive," says Lieser. "You look like a toddler—and clearly, we don't associate that with sexuality in any way."

Another not-so-innocent implication: Sporting socks during sex may suggest you're so agenda-driven—get in, get off!—that you're unwilling to even fully undress. If you like the idea of staying partially clothed, leave your pants around your ankles instead of stripping down to your socks, Lieser suggests. You repeatedly touch her no-fly zones. Every woman has a few places on her body—often her stomach or her thighs—she feels self-conscious about having touched. And consistently trying to bring that sensitive spot into **sex play** won't ease her discomfort.

"If you're trying to put your hands on this body part, even if you say you're admiring it, it's a quick way to shut us down," says DeAnna Lorraine, a dating and relationships coach in Los Angeles. It can also suggest a lack of imagination: "Clearly the guy thinks he has no other moves," Lieser says. "There's something really sexy about that, because it includes her in the

process,” says Lieser. “It’s a collaborative decision.” You let her **do all the work** when she’s on top. Woman on top is a position of sexual power for females—but that doesn’t mean she wants to have sex with a **dead fish**.

Even when she’s in control, she’s looking for an engaged bedmate: “We don’t always know what we’re doing up there, because we’re more used to the man being on top,” says Lorraine. Which means just lying still can leave her feeling a little directionless. “It makes a woman self-conscious—like, what is he expecting me to do right now?” she says.

If you like the idea of her leading, you don’t have to thrust, but you should make some physical contact: Touch her breasts, caress her backside, or even just grab her butt. You keep calling her “baby.” The occasional “baby” or “honey” can make your partner feel connected. But overdo it on the generic pet names, and you’ll just sound like a seductive sweet talker. “It makes it impersonal—like it’s not really her that you’re with,” says Lieser. You can always stick to her first name—she’ll love hearing you scream her name in the throes of pleasure—or for more intimate moments, use her nickname that you’d never want your friends to know about.

“It’s better to have a specific pet name for a girl, like Dimples or Sugar Pants—something that’s just between the two of you, instead of ‘baby’ or ‘babe,’” says Lorraine. You gaze at her vagina. Look, all those intricate folds are fascinating. But staring down her lady parts during oral doesn’t make her feel appreciated—it’s just kind of creepy. “A little bit of looking and admiring is fine,” says Lorraine. “But don’t fully focus on it.” Read: It’s okay to compliment her vagina—that’s an easy way to help her relax during oral—or even to say you love watching as you enter her. Just don’t gawk. You’re overly commanding in bed. Yes, it can be totally erotic to be told exactly what to do between the sheets—but, remember, there’s a difference between taking the reins and being controlling. “It’s nice when a man is in charge and he has a sense of confidence about him,” says Lieser. “That’s very different from just running over somebody.” How can you tell if you’re crossing the line? One clear signal: You direct her into a position that you’ve never tried before. “It’s just assumed that the partner will do it,” says Lieser.

If you want to be a little dominating, only command her to do things you’ve experimented with in the past—and mutually enjoyed. Manual stimulation is your first move. To you, it’s an awesome **appetizer** to the main event—but to her, starting with clitoral stimulation just feels a little invasive. “Men think that a woman must be manually stimulated in order to become turned on,” says Lieser. “But there’s nothing arousing [to her] about putting your finger in a vagina that is not lubricated. In fact, you’ve just gone back by about 5 feet.” The most reliable way to make her wet: Touch her everywhere but her genitals. That will rev up her desire and help lube her up—and only then will she be ready for you to **head down south**. You spring **dirty talk** on her unexpectedly. We’re not talking about spewing your go-to phrases in a moment of passion—that’s fine. We mean randomly upping the **dirty-talk** ante—spouting off a string of expletives she didn’t see coming. “You were already there in your head, but your partner wasn’t **there yet**,” says Lieser. “So there is this catch-up game.” In other words, you mentally built up the necessary arousal for your **dirty talk** to seem appropriate, but your girl is just caught off guard.

“There needs to be some kind of segue,” says Lieser. “Start your normal dirty talk, then say, ‘I have a new idea. Do you want to hear it?’ That invites her into your head, rather than forcing her to catch up.” You **attack** her clitoris. Orgasm doesn’t happen via clitoral **obliteration**. “Men think ‘clitoris, clitoris, clitoris’—they think it’s all about the clitoris, so they focus on it,” Lorraine says. “But they don’t realize it’s incredibly sensitive. It doesn’t need to be **jackhammered** or be the sole focus.”

Instead of going straight to high-speed stimulation, start by very slowly stroking her clitoris—and let her body tell you when it’s time to try a new move. “Sometimes women will shift their partner’s fingers aside or shift a little bit because it’s getting too sensitive,” says Lorraine.

You try to last as long as possible. Believe it or not, **marathon** sex probably won’t boost her satisfaction. But it *will* encourage her to mentally do her grocery shopping or plan tomorrow’s outfit. “Men hear all this stuff about stamina, so they think the longer they last, the better,” says Lorraine. “But when you keep going and going, it’s kind of like chopping wood after a while.” (She compares it to being massaged in the same spot for 45 minutes. Not fun, right?)

How can you tell if she’s disconnecting? “She will stop making noises, or she’ll just kind of stop trying—you can feel a limpness in her,” says Lorraine. Take that as your cue to wrap things up.

She’s right **on the edge of** ecstasy, and then you do something dumb in bed that **derails** her pleasure, **throws her off her game**, and ruins the rest of the night. Some maneuvers may seem innocuous, but they actually distract her from her **ultimate endgame**: achieving orgasm. Avoid these six sex moves at all costs.

Right from the get-go, there’s a rookie mistake that can eliminate her O even before it begins. It might seem counterintuitive, but going directly for her clitoris—or using too much pressure on it—before adequately **warming her up** can delay her orgasm.

“It might seem like it would make her **come** more quickly, but it’ll actually make her take longer,” says sex and relationship coach Celeste Hirschman. In other words, make sure you’ve teased her a little bit before **you hit her hotspot**, and when you

do, start slow: First apply gentle pressure to the clitoris at a slow speed, then gradually work up to a faster pace as her arousal increases. Investing time in **foreplay** in the beginning can make her orgasm all the better in the end.

If she was **close**, you'd know—so shut up and **let her get there**. “Women’s version of performance anxiety mostly comes from feeling like we’re taking too long,” explains Hirschman. So although you might be trying to encourage her by checking in, asking her if she’s **approaching her destination** can make her feel pressured to hurry up—which is a great way to ensure that she *isn't* **close**.

“Trying too hard to get the orgasm is a way you can often kill the orgasm,” says Kayt Sukel, author of *This Is Your Brain on Sex*. Instead, focus on telltale signs that she’s almost **there**—like quickened breathing and moaning—and let her **come** at her own pace. (For more ways to spot an impending O, check out 10 “When women get close to orgasm, they need the pressure and rhythm to stay the same for a while,” says Danielle Harel, Ph.D., who works alongside Hirschman at a relationship coaching practice in San Francisco. If you suddenly decide to ramp up the intensity or increase the speed, it can throw off the momentum she’s been building toward her orgasm. So once she starts saying, “*Right there! Don’t stop!*” then really, don’t. “If that’s the moment when you decide to get really creative, then she’s going to completely lose it,” warns Harel.

Sure, she likes to see you sexily undress and she appreciates that you’ve taken all of our sex tips to heart. But don’t get too caught up in putting on a show. “Sometimes men take cues from porn for how sex is supposed to be—like how long sex is supposed to last, how many orgasms a woman is supposed to have,” says Sukel. “You should be taking your cues from your partner, not what you saw in some 20-minute video on the Internet.”

Those moves you thought were **sizzling hot**? They probably aren’t going to push her **over the edge**. Instead, focus on being present and having fun with her in bed. “A lot of what turns women on is the intimacy and connection—not all of your stupid magic tricks,” says Hirschman. Having an orgasm can take some degree of focus, so don’t ruin her chances with any possible distractions. This means turning off the television and making sure you’re in a private place, but it can also mean letting her focus on her own orgasm without worrying about yours. “I honestly don’t understand how anyone gets off doing 69,” jokes Hirschman. “Trying to do things simultaneously doesn’t always work. I like the approach of ‘turn-taking,’ where each person can focus on their own pleasure.” If you **come** way before she does, let her know that the next round is all about her, and don’t lay on any pressure about having a simultaneous orgasm. Women can be prone to something Sukel calls “spectatoring”—basically like an out-of-body experience where she’s thinking about what your sex looks like without fully being “there.” And even something as innocent as complimenting her can actually take her out of the present moment.

“When I’ve talked to women about why this happens, it’s actually not men who are being dicks,” Sukel explains. “A lot of women just say that men are over-complimentary. Even making a comment that seems innocuous can get her thinking about what her ass looks like in this particular moment, and it can lead to spectatoring.” That doesn’t mean you should go radio-silent during sex. But be careful not to jabber too much—even if her ass *does* look great—so that you don’t take her out of the moment.

Researchers call the phenomenon “postcoital dysphoria.” It can involve bursting into tears or just feeling depressed or anxious. The good news: Her crying may have nothing to do with you. The women in the study specified that their feelings were “inexplicable,” so it’s not like it could be traced back to, say, the guy’s tragically subpar skills in the sack. It could just be a biological reflex to sex. A woman’s body—or a man’s, for that matter—goes through a laundry list of hormonal and neurological changes during sex, and it’s possible that one of them could trigger tears, says Lori Brotto, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of British Columbia. Or it could be something heavy.

The researchers found that women who had been sexually abused as children were more likely to experience postcoital dysphoria. For these women, sex—even good, consensual sex—could unconsciously trigger fear. There are countless other possibilities, Brotto says: She may feel lonely after the intimacy of sex is over, or she may feel vaguely guilty. Even though the study participants’ depression was inexplicable, that’s not always the case. Maybe you accidentally rammed her cervix, or maybe she caught herself wanting to say the L word for the first time. If your partner seems bummed after sex, give her a chance to talk about it, suggests Brotto.

This applies regardless of whether it’s your girlfriend, wife, or a hookup. It may seem awkward if you don’t know her well, but just be supportive. Say: “You look really sad; what’s going on?” If she doesn’t want to talk, just drop it. But rub her shoulder to reassure her that you’re there for her. If you’re in a relationship, you can bring it up again later to help her make sense of it, says Brotto. “It’s hard for a person to think rationally when they’re overcome with emotions,” she says. “But a few hours later or the next day, with some digging you may be able to figure out what is going on.”

Try asking when she started feeling sad or if she knows what spurred her feelings. Again, don’t demand an answer if she says it was nothing. “Help her make sense of it in a gentle, careful, open-ended way,” Brotto says. “Don’t try to solve it; just give her a chance to explore it.” You may find out that she hates a certain position or was just feeling weepy that day. But if she seems to consistently get sad after sex and she can’t figure out why, then she might need more than your listening ear or comfort. She may have to seek a therapist’s help so she can work through the underlying problem—with your support.

When he travels, I learned, he and his wife keep the **connubial fires** stoked with explicit texts. “You should try it,” he said. My wife and I just celebrated our 19th anniversary. I love her all the way to the bottom of her heart, as our daughter once said when she was 4 years old. That daughter is now 9. She’s got a 16-year-old brother. They take a lot of work. Work, too, takes a lot of work.

So, sexting. Maybe I *should* try it, I thought. I consulted another friend. I said I might cut a hole in a piece of paper and draw a tableau—like the Last Supper—for my penis to peek through. “Dude, take it seriously,” he advised. “If you want this to work, do it with sincerity.” A few days later, my wife left town on a business trip. That night, I sent my first sext: “Remember that time you and I had crazy sex on our dining room table?” Nothing. I followed up: “Have you been sitting there, racking your brain, trying to remember it?” Finally the response came: “Ha no driving.” The next day, after a perfunctory exchange about what time the dog had last been walked, I pivoted.

“Say, unrelated,” I wrote, “but I was thinking about that day many years ago, before we had kids, when you picked me up from the airport and let it be plainly known that you weren’t wearing panties under your skirt.” “Ha! What a complete non sequitur and fun memory. We used to be crazier,” she wrote. Me: “It’s true. You’ll recall that we went to the Blue Goose from the airport, and I had to eat an entire meal while stifling a boner.” No response. The reference to my long-ago stifled boner sat there, unrequited. Six friends attended happy hour that day. I read my efforts aloud. “Who says ‘you’ll recall’ in a sext?” one guy asked. “You sound like a lawyer addressing a hostile witness.” Another: “You ‘stifled a boner’? It’s like NBA coaches miked up in huddles, talking for the TV audience and not the players.” Their mockery was interrupted when my screen lit up: “Are you working on an article?”

Hooting and hollering ensued. I needed to send a dick pic now, they agreed. One said, “Text her: ‘Does this answer your question?’” Have you ever tried to cultivate an erection in a bathroom stall in a bar, during daylight hours, without assistance? Anyway, I sent the photo, along with their suggested message, and was immediately consumed by a level of fear and shame I’d never felt before. Would she think I’d lost my mind? Or, worse, would she think I had made her the brunt of a joke? I returned to looks of disbelief at the table. Several minutes passed, and then came her response: “Ummm.” Not “yummm.” Ummm.

I read her text aloud. One buddy quoted Otter, from *Animal House*. “You can’t spend your whole life worrying about your mistakes,” he said. “You fucked up! You trusted us!” Later, I fessed up. Yes, it was an experiment. But my heart was in the right place, along with my penis. The memory of that ride home from the airport is one I’ll never forget. Sure, we used to be crazier—but still no less in love. As for sexting? With someone as inept as I am driving the show, it was never going to work. And for me and my wife, texting is all about coordinating the daily demands of married life. One more thing. When I explained myself that night, my wife said, “You tell them I figured it out,” she said. “I sussed out your little experiment. I’m too smart for that.”

Hey man, thanks for writing in and recognising the need to grow in this area. Most men hide away from learning to have potentially painful conversations. We allow things to fizzle out while dating until we eventually find the right person and do our best to keep things going. The fizzling out part sucks. It’s especially unfair on the other person and it means you’re spending your days carrying a heavy ball of guilt. So you’re right, we do need to stop being fuckboys. But how?

The main associations of the fuckboy are ghosting just about everyone you realise you don’t like, or sleeping with people you have no intention of dating – he is a fuckboy, a boy who fucks. There’s a nuance we need to explore with the latter, which is that it’s fine to fuck around if the other person also has no intention of dating. So, really, being a fuckboy isn’t about what you do (i.e. fuck) – it’s about not making your intentions clear.

If you’re looking for casual hook-ups, then just be sure the other person is 1) explicitly aware of that, 2) okay with that and are not holding out for the possibility of something else, especially if you’re adamant that you won’t be changing your mind. If you’re not sure on what you want yourself, take things slower. Find out what it is you want before you act. If you both just want to fuck, then you’re not reasonably going to be called a fuckboy for it.

Going back to your fear of letting someone down: what are you letting them down from? If you’re dating a few people, it’s fair to assume they are too. While your compassionate instincts are good, they’re misguided. Dating coach Kate Mansfield suggests reframing the scenario where you know you don’t like them as: “You’re stopping them from meeting someone who might actually be interested in them. Cutting things off is setting the other person free to go and find actual love.”

Applying this mantra should help when it comes to the people you know you don’t like. This doesn’t mean your work is over. The sourness people can feel after a breakup are almost always over “how” it happens, not the actual breaking up. So if you’re at the stage where you know you don’t like them, and where you’ve been getting with them despite knowing this, you can’t be a dick about it. You cannot shy away from telling them the truth. Nicely.

How you tell them is simple. The “reason” for ending something is usually made way too complicated. The fact is: you’re no longer into them. You do not need to tell them what it is about them you don’t like – never do that. What you dislike is

your problem, not theirs. So assess why you don't think it's working out. Perhaps the other dates you're going on are more fun and you want to focus on them, or you don't see your lifestyle aligning with this person (a nicer way of saying you're starting to find the chat a bit dull).

When you've made it clear to yourself why you want to move on, just tell them. Mansfield says that in the earlier stages of dating a text or a phone call – if you've actually had a phone call – is more than fine. “We need to learn to stop taking things so personally. I mean, if someone you've never met rejects you, it's not a personal rejection. We've got to grow a little bit of resilience.”

Take comfort in the fact that as long as you are honest, polite and clear, then you're doing the right thing. Similarly, if you're on the receiving end of being dumped, accept it. Thank them for their transparency. Though let's be honest, it's straight cis men who generally don't know how to do this.

They're the ones who tend to be less upfront about intentions, and then resort to silence. Whether it's a fear of conflict or some machismo necessity to not let the other person down, it can feel incredibly difficult to break things off. But it's time to get to the point and allow everyone to free up their brain for something that will actually work out. Surely you owe them that much?

You'll feel better for it, I'm sure. Good luck, man.

Hey man, now that we're allowed to mingle a bit more, I'm hoping to meet people again. I'm quite anxious about going on dates, and especially with flirting in the moment.

Hey man. We all have a lot of anxieties around sexual performance. This likely contributes to – and is exacerbated by – the fact that British people have less regular sex on average than in years previous, and the fact we've had our perception of sex warped slightly by porn. In lockdown of course, shagging dried up even further. Dr Lee Smith, Head of Academic Research at EKHO Wellbeing, says he “did a study which found that just 40 per cent of UK adults were sexually active during the first lockdown”. Being nervous makes a lot of sense, but we've got you covered. Psychological, physical, and inter-personal considerations all play their part in making the experience a good one. Practical concerns first though: Condoms and lube are non-negotiable. Make sure you have them. If you're convinced you can't have good sex with a condom, you're probably using the wrong ones. There are loads out there and they all have different attributes. Getting the right condom can even improve sex. Whether you want something to help you last longer or **get you (or them) there** quicker, there's a johnny for that. Do a little research before choosing. Bonus points for getting the other person's input also.

When it comes to the physical side, exercises such as “pelvic floor exercises help prolong sexual performance,” says Dr Luke Pratsides, a GP in east London and with Numan, an online clinic for men. He explains: “You can do this by sitting and squeezing the muscles 10 to 15 times. Repeat this maybe two or three times a day.” If you're worried about premature ejaculation, this can help. Otherwise you could try **edging** (i.e. stopping just before ejaculating, waiting a little, and then starting again).

The most important aspect of good sex is psychological; a **horny** mix of confidence and chemistry. To help here, I spoke with around a dozen people to get a general sense of what people of all identities and orientations like when shagging a man. There seems to be a few universal truths when it comes to good sex. “Having sex with someone should be a team effort, not just kind of going at it like a random dog on someone's leg,” says Scott Flashheart from *Probably True Podcast*, a queer life and sex podcast. What Scott's getting at is that communication is paramount for a good shag. You want to be speaking to the partner in the moment, or at least “being responsive to body language”, as Em, 26, says.

Play the long game, too. When men get positive visual or verbal queues we often assume that means they want the same but harder and faster. Not always the case! Nor is aiming for an orgasm. Though you might think society says otherwise, you're not really having sex to have an orgasm. You're there because you fancy the other person enough to be getting intimate with them. The word “confidence” was mentioned by nine of the people I spoke with. Obviously telling someone to be confident is useless, but if you can tell yourself that the more you listen and do what feels right, the more you're likely to not be their worst shag, hopefully that'll reduce the stress. Also, don't take it too seriously. Many people mentioned that being able to “have a laugh” is very important. Pay attention, but enjoy the moment for the clumsy, **frisky**, **sticky hot mess** it often is.

In short, what it comes down to is listening to what you want, but also whatever the person in the room (or car, park, dilapidated public building, etc) with you wants too. Even if you've had a good experience with them before, “sometimes I want a loving like tender shag, other times I want to be slapped and thrown around the room” as Edward, 25, points out (among many others). Considering what the other person says they like, before and during, is the way to near foolproof a decent shag. Beyond that, just enjoy yourself. Some pelvic exercises won't hurt either. At some time in their life, every bloke has felt as if they're defined by their shagging capabilities. From teenage lads comparing body counts to shuffling home in Thursday night's clothes wondering if you lasted long enough, sex often ranks high up on the list of things men deem important.

When our libido dips – where no matter how much you’d like to be **horny**, you can’t switch on the wires upstairs and downstairs – it can be miserable. Especially if there’s a **hot** person in your DMs or a partner in your bed. But this change is just that: a change. If you want your mojo back, you need to question why you don’t feel yourself. Are you stressed because you have a shitload of work to do? Or experiencing depression or anxiety? Dr Luke Pratsides, a GP at Numan, says that scientifically, a lack of testosterone is stopping your urge to have sex. In fact, running low on testosterone is a biological **cock**-block. “As far as men are concerned, when testosterone is reduced, so is our libido,” he summarises.

Practically, a lack of T comes from living an unbalanced lifestyle. “Most of the people I speak to about this aren’t getting enough sleep, they’re not getting a balanced healthy diet, and they’re not exercising enough” says Dr Katherine Hertlein, a lead therapist at sex therapy app Blueheart. Even in 2021, when we should be able to drink magic six-pack juice, exercise is essential to getting yourself back in the bedroom. You need to get your pump on to get your pump on, so to speak. “Even if it’s just an hour-long walk,” says Hertlein. Both doctors also mentioned that getting a full night’s sleep is essential.

Of course, not wanting to have sex doesn’t always mean a health or wellbeing issue is at hand. Your libido can dip for lots of reasons. Maybe you’re not into a certain person or persons anymore – or, actually, you may just not want to have sex ever. So, to answer your concern, you’ve got to get a little introspective and figure out why it is you personally don’t want to have sex at the moment.

If you have a partner, or people you regularly find yourself catching a bus in the dead of night for, question whether everything feels good there. If every time you were sent **a peach** or aubergine emoji, you’d typically be running out of the house, but now can’t be bothered – even though they consistently turn you on – something might be up. “Quality of sex is really contingent much more on the connection to the person you’re having sex with, rather than just having sex.” says Dr Nan.

Do you know your kinks, fantasies, what’s missing? Is there something you don’t enjoy, but you’ve been going along with it because it’s easier and it’s just what people do? It’s worth being open about what’s going on, especially if you’re having sex with a regular partner. Really, you want to put as little pressure on having sex as possible. Adopt an “it’s just sex, we’ll be fine” mindset. If you can try and put less importance on what’s going to happen, you’ll find things easier. The stress will fade. Before you know it, all will be good in the department of shags. One of the most frustrating things for many men is that this dip in **horniness** can make you feel like you’re killing other people’s boners. Frankly, however, anyone worth the time of day will be more than understanding that you’re not to blame for not wanting sex. But for their own wellbeing, it can be communicated that it has nothing to do with them. If you’re able to have a transparent chat – or if you’re the partner and you’re reading – then Cara Thien, founder of sexual wellness brand Dani Pepper, says “not becoming frustrated or pushy is important”. Timing these conversations is crucial. Instead of bottling up, then ruining both the evening and your confidence, Hertlein says: “You want to tell them well before you go to bed. Avoid saying it when you’re in a heated moment. Say things in a considerate, calm manner, with the right tone.”

Generally speaking, your libido won’t disappear forever. In some cases where it has, treatment is available. If you think this is the case, it’s worth getting a hormone blood test. This is rare, and more common in older age or if you’ve had any issues with your prostate. Beyond that, your inability to want a shag – if it feels like a problem – is probably a signal that something’s just not quite right. Take a second to reflect on how you’re doing, write a list of your thoughts and stresses, talk to someone. Begin to figure out where the issues lay, and you’ll be shagging, or enjoying not shagging, in no time. Good luck man.

After a year of bone-dry social distancing, heading to a stranger’s house for casual sex has, once again, been allowed. Increasingly, though, there’s a new worry for some men returning to the world of late-night hook ups: being too **vanilla**, AKA too stereotypically conventional in bed (whatever that means). Take Michael, who says that he often **attracts** women who expect him to be “dominant” or even “aggressive” during sex. All the men in the piece requested anonymity in order to speak freely about their sexual experiences. “There’s nothing wrong with that – if you’re into it – but one time I got with a friend of a friend and I later found out she said the sex was boring,” he says. “It felt a bit brutal to be honest, because she was tiny and I didn’t want to hurt her, but she expected to be properly thrown about.” As kink positivity has become mainstream, so too has the idea that if you’re not into kink, you’re a boring shag. This attitude, which can veer into shaming, is clear across social media, where phrases like “choke me”, “step on my neck” and “please run me over” have become totally casual ways of saying you fancy someone. On the other end of the spectrum, “just say you’re **vanilla** and boring and go” is now an insult.

Off the back of this trend, young people who aren’t into violent or kinky sex are the subject of mockery in TikTok videos that have been viewed millions of times. Writer Lucy Robinson recently delved into #FreakTok – a subculture where the line between kink positivity and **vanilla** shaming is regularly blurred – and thinks some of the videos make uncomfortable viewing. “One of a girl encouraging her reluctant boyfriend to choke her, has 1.1 million views,” she wrote of a video that has since been made private. “Another, of a user mocking viewers for being quote-unquote **vanilla** has 78,000 likes.” In pop culture too, we don’t have to look far to find men who are put down for not being into kink. Charlie, from HBO drama *Girls*, is a classic millennial example: in the very first episode he’s described by his girlfriend Marnie as “having a vagina”

and touching her “like a weird uncle on Thanksgiving”, for being too affectionate inside and outside the bedroom. She soon leaves him for an artist with much (much) kinkier tastes.

For some men, trying to navigate this new kink-positive era can be confusing – particularly for guys who are **vanilla** themselves. Ben, 25, has noticed an uptick in women being more forward with certain kinks on dating apps, where he thinks there is often an assumption that men should be dominant. “It can feel a bit awkward when they say things like ‘I’m looking for a REAL man to control me’ or whatever,” says Ben. “I’m not bothered about women being forward on apps, because I’d rather know what they’re into and it’s just texting. I just don’t agree that being a man means being kinky or forceful.”

In some ways, porn has a lot to answer for, with a 2010 study finding that 88 percent of the 304 scenes analysed contained physical aggression, predominantly toward women from men. Currently, women are also more likely to be on the receiving end of unwanted behaviour, with a 2019 survey of 2002 UK women aged between 18-39 finding that 38 percent experienced unwanted physical aggression during consensual sex.

With this in mind, some men are increasingly wary of overstepping during sex, but also feel pressure not to be perceived as boring compared to what seems to be becoming the new norm. Striking this balance is partly why Ben likes to keep things **vanilla** at first, especially with new partners, where he says it can take time to work out what is fantasy and reality.

“It’s happened before where we’ve met up and I’ve not been sure how hard she wanted me to choke her if she asks for that during sex, or if she’s as into that as she was over messages,” he says. “You might be taking it too far, or not far enough. You don’t want to overstep, or bore her. It can be distracting!”

Understandably, kink makes some men nervous – particularly if they feel there’s an expectation for them to take the lead, or else their masculinity gets called into question. But this type of emasculation isn’t just happening in bedrooms, or in group chats where sexual encounters are gleefully unpacked with friends moments after they end. It’s being displayed publicly on social media too. Brad, 26, feels like there’s a double standard at play when it comes to how sex with men is discussed on social media, which makes him feel self-conscious.

“There’s been a few times where I’ve seen guys being made fun of for being too conventional sexually, mostly in screengrabs of texts but a few times talking about the actual sex being boring,” he says. “But it takes two to make [sex] fun and I’m not sure it’s fair to make out that’s one person’s job. When men say shit like that about women it’s rightly called out – or should be, I think!” It’s not just straight men who are affected by this type of online chat. Mitch, 27, describes his sexual tastes as “open”, but he’s noticed a particular stigma towards gay men who aren’t hugely into kink.

“Especially now that kink is more spoken of, which is great, there comes that stigma that you need to be kinky to have sex,” he says. “You see it constantly on the Twitter timeline: ‘Oh, you’re not into spit? Gross’. Or ‘You don’t like feet and pits? What’s the point?’ The way some gay men will literally shame others for not being ‘kinky’ or ‘kinky enough’ is so weird.”

In a similar way to the young people of #FreakTok rebelling against their “conventional” elders, a high prevalence of **vanilla**-shaming among gay men might be some sort of rejection of more “basic” heterosexual norms. After all, homosexuality was once considered to be a kink in itself, and there’s a long, political history of queer kink and fetish communities helping LGBTQ+ people to resist oppression. When iPhones arrived, gay men were among the first demographics to widely embrace fetish and hookup apps, too. But it can surely be alienating for queer men who’ve faced stigma and marginalisation relating to their sexual orientation to then be shamed by their peers for their supposedly “**vanilla**” sexual tastes. As “Freedom Day” approaches, we’re hurtling towards a summer of safe (and legal) sex, finally free from the fear that Priti Patel will turn up to arrest us halfway through. But just as it’s crucial to discourage kink-shaming, respecting that kinks aren’t for some people is also important. “If they’re not kinky, it doesn’t mean that they’re incapable of great sex. I think people conflate the two,” Mitch says. “You don’t need to be kinky to be good in bed.”

Hey man. I’m sleeping with this person, and it’s casual, but I think I’m starting to get attached. I’m not sure what I want, or what to do about these feelings.

Hey man, we’ve all been there.

It’s that fabled night where you clock eyes with someone for the first time, hit it off immediately, then spend the next week wondering whether to follow them on Instagram. It’s repetitive sexting with someone you vaguely know that turns into occasional, then monthly shags. It’s thinking differently about a friend after you’ve drunkenly slept together.

In either case, the stakes have transcended your relationship’s original purpose. To go slimy-business on it, you’ve gone beyond your role’s remit in your **mutual contract**. You have – or you certainly think there’s a possibility that you could have – feelings for someone. So what the hell do you do about it? Relax, that’s where this article comes in.

Chemically speaking, here’s the situation: I don’t tend to go all bio-chem with the answers, but this one warrants it. “Sex releases the hormone oxytocin. It’s the reason we bond and fall in love with people,” says Dr Laura Vowels, an expert

advisor and principal researcher for Blueheart, a sex therapy app. Generally when our brain decides to emit this chemical, we feel empathetic, caring, and we trust people a little more. Levels of oxytocin increase when we hug or have orgasms, for instance. “It’s completely understandable that after good sex we feel closer to someone and perhaps start having feelings for them,” says Vowles. Given the fact that this is literal biology, “it’s very common for friends with benefits and casual sex partners to start having feelings,” adds James Thomas, relationship expert at Condoms.uk. Of course, this leaves us with a predicament. It is quite literally within our nature to catch feelings if we’re being intimate with people. Vowles also notes that if you sleep with the same person frequently, you’ll likely “associate that release of oxytocin and the feelings it brings with that person”. So yeah, we can go from casually bonking someone to wondering whether they’d make a good parent with ease.

LEARN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HORMONES AND FEELINGS

Oxytocin, among other things, will make us *feel like* we have feelings for the person we’re fucking, but that doesn’t mean we do have feelings or that we are attached to them. So first of all, we need to suss out what’s actually on our minds. There’s a few ways to do this. Easiest being just have a sit and think. Grab a pen and paper if that’s your bag, or a mate and a pint, whatever. Doesn’t matter. But if you’re new to this self-reflection lark, “journaling the thoughts is a good thing to do, because you can actually read it back, plus getting it out of your head is always useful,” says relationship expert John Kenny. However you do it, racking your mind is key. You have a bunch of questions to answer. Namely:

- Do you care about this person as much when you haven’t seen them for a little while?
- Are they on your mind quite a lot?
- Are you sure this isn’t just lust?
- Are you sure you’re not just a bit lonely and are using this to fill a gap?
- When you think about them, are you thinking about the sex or more about their personality, and that thing they said?

See? Loads of questions. If you’re leaning toward the feelings, ask yourself whether you really want to be in a relationship at the moment. If you’ve realised that probably, you’re all good and it’s just fleeting thoughts when you’re there or have just left, then the current situation is likely alright. If it’s a recurring but casual hook-up you’re in, remind yourself of the initial boundaries and/or arrangement you both agreed on. “Make it more **transactional** – straight in, straight out. No supplementary meals together, or time together. You’ve got to keep them at arm’s length and essentially cut off everything but the intimate sessions you’ve both agreed to,” says Thomas. Either way, you need to get more or less to the bottom of how you feel. Life is only going to be more difficult if you’re not clear on what you want. Which leads onto the next point...

IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE FEELINGS FOR REAL, YOU NEED TO TELL THEM

You know those stressful moments of not knowing how you feel about them right now? If you do the above and realise there are deeper feelings involved, and they’re not going anywhere, it means that really, this relationship has already changed a little. And you need to tell them about it.

This is pretty simple.

“Even if you’ve decided you don’t want anything more than casual sex in your life, but have started to get these feelings and need to detach yourself from them, you can tell the other person about that in a nice way,” says Dr Vowles.

This can be as simple as saying in person: “I don’t think we can do this anymore. I think it’s getting a bit confusing for me, I think it would be better if we call it off.” What often happens in these situations is, we try to either ride the feelings out or we let it fizzle out slowly instead of just saying that it isn’t going to work. “I would never advocate the ghosting route, as it is usually really painful for the other person,” explains Vowles. Bonus: You’ll also feel better for speaking to them honestly about how you feel.

“I don’t like the phrase ‘admonish themselves of responsibility’, but actually all you can do is be honest,” says Kelly. “If you’re honest about how you’re feeling and checking in with someone to see how they are, there’s less need to feel guilty then. But it’s up to you to tell them how you’re feeling if you’re not totally happy with the situation.”

Thomas adds: “If you’re both catching feelings, then why not see where things lead? If it’s a bit lopsided and the other partner is really only there for the nookie, then it’s probably not a good idea to maintain the setup.”

REFLECT ON WHETHER CASUAL RELATIONSHIPS EVEN WORK FOR YOU

At this point, it's healthy to think about your relationship style. I'm not telling you to adopt abstinence until you find someone you want to bang so hard that you'll propose to them. I'm just saying some people do not suit casual relationships at all.

Well, actually it isn't just me saying it. Dr Vowels provides an example: "If you're someone who's got more of an anxious attachment, where you need reassurance, casual sex is probably not going to work very well. In all likelihood, if the other person wants a causal relationship, you're just going to end up getting hurt."

And yes, while we might be dick-first with many thoughts, this applies to men, too. The societal expectation that men should be able to have casual sex without a hitch is a load of shite. The idea of sex and romance being interlinked isn't answered on a gender-by-gender basis – it's individual. But we all carry the baggage of gender norms, and given how men generally don't open up much, we're far more likely to go with what we think we should be doing, instead of what works for us.

Ultimately, there's no "not" getting attached. But there is a way of finding clarity and realising that a) your hormones are warping you a little and if you take a second to acknowledge that, all will remain the same; or b) you don't really want to be casual, whether it's with this person or just generally. From there, you'll need to chat with them about the next steps: Do you "go exclusive" or are you both in different places? If you end up without the FWB, take a bit of a breather before finding another – just in case there's more to this than wanting a shag all the time.

If you're the kind of man that loves and appreciates women for their beauty, allure and radiance, there are some things you need to understand. Most modern women carry a significant amount of trauma. Some of this trauma comes from transgressions that have occurred in relationship to men. Men that have sexually violated them, fathers that were emotionally unavailable, men that have lied, cheated and been abusive physically, emotionally or verbally.

It's true that you are not responsible for what has occurred in her past, yet you need to understand that when a woman opens up to you sexually, her heart opens, and her wounds also re-open.

All of her story comes with the opening of her sexuality; including sometimes the pain from her past relationships with other men and all that has been handed down to her generationally in her family lineage, especially if she has not done significant work on herself to heal all of it. If you've ever been in a relationship with a woman only to discover you are in the line of fire, understand that it may not entirely be about you. As men, when we are criticized in any way it can bring to the surface this feeling of being bad or wrong. Often our reaction to this feeling is more connected to our past than it is to the present moment. We may have stories in the back of our mind from our childhood. That are being called forward. Part of the self-work we need to do outside of the relationship is working with the inner child part of us, so he doesn't undercut our conscious mind in the heat of the moment. This way we have more access to options that allows us to respond vs. react..

The truth is that while looks do matter to men and women alike, it's far from the most important thing when it comes to finding a partner. The science of sexual attraction is a complex one that involves multiple different factors, from the way you smell to the shape of your jaw to even the color of the shirt you're wearing. Though you may not exactly bear a resemblance to Ryan Gosling or possess the elusive power of seduction like, uh, Ryan Gosling, there are still plenty of ways to make yourself more attractive. Here are 19 strategies to attract the partner of your dreams, whether in the club, in the park, or on a hookup or dating app.

Everyone wants a partner who gets their sense of humor. If you're the "funny guy" among your friends, lean into it. Even science says you should: A 2006 study published in *Evolution and Human Behavior* asked participants how much they value their partner's ability to make them laugh, and the results, not surprisingly, revealed that women truly care about their partner's humor. If you're able to make them laugh, it's an extremely attractive quality.

Sunglasses make guys hotter, and there's proof to back it up. Vanessa Brown, a lecturer at Nottingham Trent University, explained that sunglasses make a man look mysterious: "The eyes are such a tremendous source of information—and vulnerability—for the human being," she told *The Cut*. Not having that information makes women drawn to you. They want to learn more about the man behind the glasses.

Turns out nice guys don't finish last. A 2016 study out of the University of Guelph and Nipissing University surveyed 800 people in an attempt to better understand the relationship between altruism, attraction, and sex. The researchers asked participants about their sexual history as well as how often they engage in selfless acts, such as charity work and donating blood. It turns out that folks who do good things for the sake of, well, being good, got laid more. Also, while the study didn't explore this, we'd be willing to bet that selfless people are also selfless lovers, putting their partners' needs into consideration, and that is attractive. Women find wearing cologne or a signature spray attractive, but not for the reason you think. It doesn't have to do with pheromones or natural odors, at least according to a paper published in the *International Journal of Cosmetic Science*. In the study, the participants who were given a spray of cologne self-reported higher confidence and said they felt more attractive. But the findings don't end there: When a group of women were shown a silent video of the men wearing the spray, they rated them sexier than the guys who weren't wearing any cologne. This means that when you feel sexier and more

confident, women pick up on that, and find you more attractive. (Also, there's the perk of actually smelling good instead of like your gym bag.)

Garlic? Yep, garlic. We're a liiiiittle skeptical, but a 2016 study published in the academic journal *Appetite* found that men who eat garlic smell more "pleasant" and "attractive" than those who don't. The study suggests that eating garlic somehow impacts our body odor. To clarify, having a garlic-y breathe is still gross, but consuming garlic can boost you a level on the attractive scale. If you're headed out on the town, grab a few buddies to be your wingmen. According to a study from the University of California at San Diego, people were rated as better-looking when they were in group photos than in solo shots. Credit it to something called the "cheerleader effect," the researchers say. People appear more attractive in groups because viewing faces together makes them look more like the group average—which can help "even out" any one person's unattractive idiosyncrasies. (This does not, however, apply to dating apps, where you should *never* use a group photo.)

Though traveling with an entourage is never a bad move, your best wingman may actually be a baby. According to research from France, men who played nice with babies were more than three times as likely to score a woman's phone number than guys who ignored the newborns. In fact, 40% of ladies gave up their digits after they saw men smiling, cooing, and talking with the tykes. So if you have a niece or nephew you're crazy about, volunteer to babysit every once in a while. Their parents will likely appreciate the help, so it's a win-win for everyone.

Man's Best Friend, indeed: According to the same French study, women were three times as likely to give out their phone numbers to a guy on the street if he approached them with a dog than if he inquired alone. Canines can help grease social interaction, the researchers say, adding that dogs boost perceptions of kindness, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity.

Women found guys with heavy stubble—about 10 days' worth—to be more handsome than those with a lighter shadow, a full beard, or a completely clean-shaven face, Australian research found. This also applies to gay men, who find bearded men more attractive than clean-shaven guys, according to a Brazilian study. Nothing is more important than confidence when attempting to **attract** a partner, and one of the easiest ways to gauge a man's confidence is to observe how they walk down the street. Prospective partners "look first at your attire and second at how you walk," says R. Don Steele, author of *Body Language Secrets: A Guide During Courtship & Dating*. "Confident people are not in a hurry, but there's a difference between meandering and walking slowly with purpose. Always walk as if you know what you're doing and where you're going."

people who used positive words like "creative," "ambitious," or "laugh" in their online dating profiles received 33% more messages, according to a survey from dating site Zoosk. Mentioning hobby-related words like "book" or "read"—or including info about running, jogging, or lifting weights—provided a significant message boost, too. Just be careful you're not coming on too strong. Men whose first message contained words like "dinner" or "drinks" saw their response rate plummet by 35 percent.

At the very least, just make sure you have *something* in your Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, or Grindr profile. Ideally, that something should be unique to you. "I think that people should be specific," says Dr. Jess Carbino, in-house sociologist at Bumble. "People are really concerned about not deviating from what is considered normal, [but] I think that people are actually doing a huge disservice to themselves because they aren't standing out from the other hundred people in their geographic radius who match their age and gender criteria."

Guys who posted selfies on their online dating profiles received fewer messages, a Zoosk.com survey. Carbino says that women find shirtless selfies "very unattractive. Everybody wants to know somebody's fit and has a nice physique, but you can tell that through seeing somebody in clothing." Instead, have a friend snap a photo of you, and head outside while you're at it. Men with an outdoors shot collected 19 percent more messages, according to Zoosk.

That said, the "no shirtless selfies!" rule does not appear to hold on gay dating apps: an analysis of Grindr, for instance, found that most of the users showcase their bodies and physical fitness on the app, which didn't particularly affect their chances at finding a hookup. Men who let their smiles spread slowly across their faces were judged as more attractive than those who put on a quick grin, research in the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* found. The slow-smiling guys were also rated as more trustworthy, showing that their expressions might be perceived as more genuine.

Flashing a grin is also important when putting together an online dating profile. "I know 14% of individuals are more likely to be swiped right on if they are smiling because everybody knows that smiling confers kindness and approachability," says Carbino. "You don't want to look like you're grimacing, despite what Calvin Klein may be presenting in ads."

A study from UCLA found that women rated "built" men as more sexually desirable than thin, non-muscular "slender" guys and heavier, more-muscular "brawny" dudes. The researchers say it's sort of like the Goldilocks effect: Women like *some* muscles, but not too many. This is not, however, the case on gay dating apps, where men rated a muscular body as the most attractive quality in men.

Women rated men with mild scarring on their faces as more attractive for short-term flings than unblemished guys, a U.K. study discovered. Females might see scars as a sign of heightened masculinity, the researchers believe. That's especially true

if the marks were a result of some kind of trauma, since that can advertise good genes or a strong immune system. Women rated men who sat with an open body posture—legs spread, arms stretched out—and used hand gestures as **hotter** than guys who sat with their legs together and arms folded, researchers from the U.K. discovered. Open body language is considered to be a signal of dominance, the researchers say.

Just make sure you're staying compact if you're on a crowded subway train. Simply being in a room with a few vases of flowers can influence the way a woman sees you, research in the journal *Social Influence* suggests. When flowers were nearby, ladies judged men as sexier and more attractive than they did when the room was empty. Flowers can signal romance and enhance her mood, the researchers say, which may help her view you more favorably. I'm going to be very blunt with you: Your boyfriend sucks, and you should break up with him. Every time I re-read your question, I get angrier and angrier. Not only has he repeatedly broken your trust—including right after your dad died—but he's now guilt-tripping you for your sexual desires. Fuck that dude, and not in the good way! While I applaud how introspective you are, and how you're really trying to fix your relationship, this seems *very* one-sided. I showed your question to Elizabeth Earnshaw, LMFT and author of *I Want This to Work*, and she said, "I see one partner who has tried to make the relationship work by ignoring his own needs or desires." Your partner can't be out there having all the fun. He gets to cheat and fuck around; you forgive him. He wants threesomes; you do it. Now he doesn't, and do you know why? Because he sees how much you're enjoying it. It was fine when you were simply acquiescing to his desires, but the moment he saw how into it you are, he suddenly doesn't want to do it anymore. That's some hypocrisy.

Moving along here, you mention that after his repeated acts of infidelity, you're working on what you're doing wrong. Fine, but what about him? Did he acknowledge why he cheated? Has he worked to regain your trust? Did he even give you a heartfelt apology? It seems like he has not. And if I'm being one hundred percent honest, I'd be willing to bet that he is still cheating. You've given me no indication that he has stopped.

Also, the fact that you can no longer get aroused or get hard (even though you find him very attractive) speaks volumes! Often, your penis can sense when something is wrong before you can. You're likely not feeling emotionally safe or connected to him, so your penis is like, "No, I'm not doing this."

This is the only time I'll ever say this: Listen to your penis and not your heart. Your heart is leading you astray, whereas your penis knows the truth!

Needs Threesome, you are a loyal and committed boyfriend. I applaud you. But you deserve to be with someone as loyal and committed as you are. You deserve someone who treats you with respect, doesn't lie to you, and doesn't guilt you. You need to put all your love and affection into someone who deserves it. And your man now does not deserve it. *Period.*

Lehmiller didn't ask specifically *how* people incorporated blood into their fantasies, but he did ask them to write out a narrative describing their favorite fantasy of all time—and several people mentioned blood. "Most commonly, it was in the context of some BDSM activity, such as **knife play**, but it also appeared in some sci-fi/fantasy scenarios, such as sex with a vampire," he says.

While these were the most common mentions, "Other people might be drawn to blood in other ways, such as in the context of **period play** or virginity fantasies," he adds.

We asked some **blood play** enthusiasts how they partake in the kink. Sylvan, 25, says they mostly explore **blood play** using needles and blood cupping. How the practice works: Needles are used to puncture, cut, or slice skin, drawing blood. After the needles are removed, some people "cup" the inflicted area, drawing the blood out of the body and onto their skin.

Blood play can be very dangerous—and that's part of the allure, according to Lehmiller. Physically, it comes with the risks of transmitting blood-borne diseases and bacterial infections, scarring from cuts or needles, and—if you're drinking it—haemochromatosis, or iron overdose. **Blood play** can throw you for a loop mentally and emotionally, too, given how intense of an experience it can be. "Blood can be a potent symbol that they've done (or are doing) something risky or dangerous," Lehmiller says. "For some, fear and danger increase sexual thrills. This can stem from having a higher threshold for excitement, which has a tendency to draw people to riskier activities."

Blood is our life force, yet it's something that many people fear. This contradiction also creates pathways to arousal. "For some, it may be more about blood signaling a very intense experience, such as when blood appears from contact between a person's fingernails and their partner's back," Lehmiller says. "For others, it may be a symbolic way of establishing dominance or submission, or something that co-occurs with sexual pain. Blood may also hold appeal to those who are drawn to the taboo." In a 2015 study, men were put to the test on whether they found intelligent women desirable. 86% of the men stated before the study that they were into smart women. After the study, though, the researchers concluded that the men's actions didn't line up with their words (these men found the women *less* attractive once they found out they were potentially smarter than them). Why would these men not go for what they said they wanted? For the exact same reason that you or I might want to lose weight, but when your co-worker brings in doughnuts, you gobble up three.

Remember, lizards only fight, flee, freeze, feed, or fornicate, so your lizard brain starts running the show when your hunger, fear, or **horniness**/need to reproduce get activated. Dating is an experience brimming with fear and **horniness**. You might strike out. You might get rejected. Your insecurity might get piqued. You might not get the girl, have the kids, etc. When your lizard brain is running your dating life, you: don't make any moves because then you can't get rejected.; go after women who seem like "guarantees."; go after women you might never want to actually be with long-term.; treat sex like a "conquest."; read and follow dating advice from men who promise to teach you how to get notches on your belt.; sabotage relationships that have true potential. When your lizard brain is running the show, you ruin your chances of having a truly fulfilling relationship with a woman who is more suitable for you. Chris Peterson, a pioneer in the positive-psychology field, argues that **healthy relationships may be the single most important determinant to happiness**. Pretty hard to get a healthy relationship when you're going for what's *easy* instead of what's *right*.

That lizard doesn't care about whether the future mother of his children laughs at his jokes, knows the difference between you and you're, and believes in a certain version of life after death. He doesn't care if she's going to push him to be the very best lizard he can be, or if she knows how to climb the corporate ladder too. He's looking for a female lizard he can **mount** and continue his genetic line. *That's it*. But you have more than just your *lizard* brain in your skull, and you *want* to be more evolved than a *lizard*, right? If so, then you're going to have to deal with feeling uncomfortable in your dating life, in *not* going after what's easy or familiar, and in taking risks. Here are the steps you can follow to level up your dating life: Are you fearful to call, text, message, or otherwise ask out a lady? Are you postponing texting, calling, or otherwise making a move on a lady you've already met/gone on a date with? Are you being hypercritical? Overthinking or obsessing over inconsequential details? Feeling ashamed or like you've already "failed" before you've even done anything that could be considered a failure?

Do you suddenly start withdrawing and making up excuses not to see her anymore? Pick fights? Start believing she's cheating on you/doesn't think highly of you, etc.? If your lizard brain is running the show, it boils down to one of three things: You're hungry; You're fearful; You're **horny**. Let's say you have a crush on a woman, and you find yourself not wanting to call her, even though she gave you her number. You assess that you are not, in fact, hungry or **horny**, so it must be because you're afraid. So ask yourself: "Why am I afraid?" You can answer this question by recording a voice memo on your phone, typing it out in your Notes app, or doing some quick journaling. Maybe you come to, "I'm afraid she'll reject me."

Once you've figured out *why* you're afraid, move onto step 3. Once you know the "why" behind whatever has activated your lizard brain, you can start moving toward a solution, and you're going to have to soothe your lizard brain in the process. It's a dumb little thing that needs to get petted every once in a while. An easy way to do this is to write a new script. Change "I'm afraid she'll reject me" into "I am comfortable taking risks," or "I'll never know if I don't try." If you're hungry, go eat. If you're **horny**, practice the highest form of self-love. But if you're fearful, go do the thing you're afraid of! Get on a dating app. Ask the girl out. Text or at least talk to her. Kiss her. Date a woman who challenges you. Tell her you want commitment when you do. Fail and fail again. Own what went right and what went wrong and just keep at it. Don't make excuses instead of acting.

As alone as you feel, you're not alone with your feelings. They may not let on, but a lot of the guys you see "enjoying themselves," may not be having the blast you imagine. The truth is, these young men grow up to be older men, like the guys I work with at the men's center, who have always "**played the game**," but never developed a true sense of who they were as men. Now they feel lost. As you get older, it becomes much more challenging to change your habits and to be the man you always wanted to be. That's why you are a lucky man. This is the best time for you to build these muscles.

Rather than comparing yourself to others, start taking the time to figure out what the man you want to be looks like. You see, inside, you're already that man. It's just that the noise from peer pressure, marketing, TV and movies, makes it hard for you to hear that voice within. It's time to start listening to that voice, so you can start trusting that voice. That voice is you!

There's nothing wrong with you. You just don't like to do some of the things the other guys are doing. Fine. What do you want to do? And what's in the way of you doing it? I suspect, whatever the obstacles, they're more imagined than real. It takes courage to be the man you want to be. Now's the time for you to experiment and to take some risks. The rewards will be outstanding. Before anyone can jump in the comments and post "FAKE" in all caps, CC enclosed his Twitter handle in a post-post-script, which allowed me to verify that he's for real. What's more, a quick scroll through CC's Twitter revealed that he's not the only person out there methodically acquiring and chugging enormous amounts of semen. As it turns out, there's a thriving community of "cumbulls" online who enjoy supplying, and even more cumguzzlers like CC who enjoy imbibing. (Sadly, CC asked me not to publish his Twitter handle, so you'll just have to trust me: *this letter is not a fake*.)

Now, before I bring in the medical expert you hoped to hear from, CC, I wanna say this to my other readers: Nothing about CC's kink appeals to me personally—it looks like way too much of a good thing—but CC and his cumbulls aren't hurting anyone. Indeed, the world would be a better place if it had more Canadians like CC in it and fewer Canadians like those fascist assholes in trucks currently blocking border crossings. Okay! Let's meet this week's guest expert!

“It seems like there are two questions here,” said Dr. Josh Trebach, an emergency medicine physician and a medical toxicology fellow in New York City. “The first question is the risk of sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), the second is, ‘How much is too much?’ Is it safe to drink large volumes of semen?” Dr. Trebach looked at the medical literature, CC, but found it “extremely lacking” for individuals who freeze, thaw, and drink large amounts of semen. Yours is an underserved (except when you’re being overserved) and unrepresented (except on Twitter) population.

“But we do know that sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can be transmitted from performing oral sex,” said Dr. Trebach. “This includes syphilis, herpes, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV. And while it’s tempting to assume the freezing and thawing process would create a less welcoming environment for STIs, there’s evidence to suggest some STIs survive the freezing process quite well. Gonorrhea can survive temperatures lower than -300 degrees Fahrenheit for **over a year**. Chlamydia has also been able to survive **after being frozen**.”

Now, STIs are not spontaneously generated when semen comes into contact with saliva, of course, nor are they spontaneously generated when someone packs their cum in dry ice and ships it off to a stranger they met on the Internet. “But given the lack of data for those that freeze, thaw, then drink semen, I would encourage anyone doing this to err on the side of caution and assume practically the same risks as performing oral sex,” said Dr. Trebach. “This means knowing the STI status of you and your partner(s) and engaging in appropriate prevention strategies, e.g., PrEP, and frequent STI testing.”

So, let’s say your **cumbull** has been tested and is currently STI-free and in a monogamous relationship with someone who has also been tested. Or tested, STI-free, and supplying his semen to men and women like you is his sole sexual outlet. If that’s the case, CC, you shouldn’t let an exaggerated fear of contracting an STI stop you from pursuing this pleasure. That said, CC, the more **cumbulls** you add to your **herd**, the greater your risk for contracting an STI becomes. Obviously. So, for safety’s sake where STIs are concerned, you should stick with your trusted supplier, even if that means longer waits between **shoots**. As for your plan to drink an entire liter of cum in one video...

“So, how much is too much?” said Dr. Trebach. “In toxicology, we use a concept called the ‘median lethal dose,’ or ‘LD50,’ to describe how toxic a given substance is. The LD50 is, basically, the quantity of a substance that would kill 50% of people who were exposed to it—or in CC’s case, ingested it. It would be theoretically possible to extrapolate from human or animal data on the lethal dose of each individual ingredient (such as zinc) to come up with the LD50 of semen, but this would be theoretical and imprecise.” And now a little science, a little math, and a little guesswork (from me, not Dr. Trebach): Zinc is a trace element that’s important for our immune systems, metabolic functions, our body’s ability to heal wounds, and the production of important enzymes. Adult males should ingest about 11 milligrams of zinc daily, a single teaspoon of semen contains about 3% of that, and there are 203 teaspoons in a liter. So, if you were to drink an entire liter of semen, CC, you would be ingesting roughly six times your daily recommended allowance of zinc, or 66 milligrams. Assuming you don’t have some other, undiagnosed health condition, that’s probably not enough zinc (or semen) to kill you, but it is enough to make you puke. “My opinion is that if you’re drinking so much of anything that you feel like you’re going to vomit, you should probably cut back, as that may be your body’s way of telling you something is wrong or that there is too much of something present,” said Dr. Trebach. “And continuous irritation to your gastrointestinal tract through direct injury, distension, and repeated exposure is *not* advised.”

And even if there might not be enough zinc in a liter of semen to kill you—or enough citric acid or fructose or potassium or cooties—that doesn’t mean it’s safe to quickly ingest a liter of it.

“An age-old adage in the world of toxicology is that the dose makes the poison,” said Dr. Trebach. “Even things that may seem benign—water, candy, semen—can be deadly with a high enough dose, and you can have ‘toxic’ effects well below a lethal dose. In one liter of semen there’s enough sodium to surpass the recommended daily intake of sodium, and that’s just not really healthy.” People have actually died from drinking too much water, CC. It’s rare, but it happens. And it stands to reason that if a person can die after drinking 3-4 liters of water over the course of a few hours—which, again, has happened—it wouldn’t surprise anyone to learn a person died after drinking an entire liter of semen over 140 seconds, i.e., the maximum length of a video clip posted to Twitter. You say you don’t want your sister finding out about your kink after hearing your voice on my podcast, CC, and I have to assume you don’t want your sister—or the rest of your family—finding out about your kink after hearing from the coroner. I have a lot of mottos, CC, and one of them is, “Moderation in all things—including moderation.” Your kink is not my kink, CC, but your kink is okay, as the saying goes, and your kink is about the consumption of immoderate amounts of semen. But I would advise you, as I have advised many others, to be moderate about how often you’re immoderate. In your case, that means carefully choosing your cumbulls, puking when your body tells you to puke, and cutting back on the semen if your body needs to puke each time you do this. Otherwise, enjoy.

But the final word goes to Dr. Trebach, who wanted to add a quick disclaimer: he hasn’t examined you or taken a full history and physical, CC, so he doesn’t want you to think this is true medical advice. “And I know talking with a doctor about some of these issues is hard, but I like to think things are getting better. Today’s new doctors are, in my opinion, much more comfortable and open when answering questions about sexual health. Although some questions may be niche, we physicians

owe our patients respect and confidentiality as we are here to help them, not make judgments. Please find a doctor that you can discuss these questions with, so they can give you the best possibly recommendations.”

The truly important question here isn't why you want this, SPANK, but how much more time you're gonna waste sitting on your ass wondering why you want this when you could be out there getting that ass spanked? And even if you came up with a neat and tidy answer, you're still gonna want older men to spank you. Because getting to the bottom of a kink—identifying some childhood trauma that explains everything—isn't a cure. Instead of seeing the spankings you want as a riddle you need to solve you should see them as a reward for all the wondering you've had to do. If you need a label, SPANK, just say you're bisexual for spankings. Not bi for **blowjobs**, not bi for anal, not bi for JO or mutual masturbation. Just bi for spankings. You could penetrate your BF with **toys**, or you could take one (or give one) for the team once in a while (by taking ED meds and topping him), or your boyfriend could bottom for other men, seeing as your relationship is already open. Or all of the above. And if it's the thrusting and/or being in control that turns you off (or tweaks your gender dysphoria), take an ED med and let your boyfriend **ride** your hard dick—then instead of you fucking him, he'll be fucking himself. Power bottom, sub top!

t's easy to say the trick to lasting longer in bed is to relax. But if were that easy, you'd have already done that. A more practical approach? Treat it like an athlete building new muscles—specifically, the ones around your lungs.

"If anybody trains you on a sport, they're going to train you first on your breathing," says Kumi Sawyers, an instructor at Sky Ting Yoga in New York. "If you begin to work with your breath, just like you would in a yoga class, or if you're running, or doing anything physical where you coordinate your breath and your movement, all of a sudden you create a rhythm."

That rhythm prevents you from holding your breath, tensing up, or freaking out. Rhythmic breathing gets oxygen to your muscles to relax them. With time, working with your body's rhythms increases stamina for longer stints in bed and multiple orgasms. And all you have to do is sit down and practice breathing. Here, Sawyers illustrates how.

Start with **foreplay** to loosen your body and build **heat**. "You can't just stretch a muscle without **warming it up**, otherwise it will break. You have to bring that same attention to sex," Sawyers says. "There's **foreplay**, and that's how you begin."

As things with your partner intensify, remember to stay tuned in to your own rhythm and breath, which you established with the previous exercises. With that in mind, you can control the build to orgasm and back away instead of losing control.

Why: "It's like you're going fast in a car and you need to make a left turn. You have to slow down to make that turn. If you're getting to the point where you feel like you're getting ready to climax, and you don't want to, slow your breath down and stop moving so quickly so the rhythm slows again. Your body has a moment to recalibrate, and it gives you more time to go back in and start going back to climax."

There are few places where feedback can be more important than in the bedroom. Knowing what's working (or not) can lead to better, more rewarding sex. When done well, **dirty talk** can drive your partner **crazy**. When done poorly, it can drive them, well, home. Literally. And since we all have different tastes, it's unfair and inaccurate to craft an arbitrary list of "do's" and "don'ts." Instead, we asked thirty men and women to share their dirty-talk thoughts. What we found? Successful **dirty talk** isn't always about the actual words used, but more about connection and intention. Here's a list of suggestions for your coitus convos, first of which is to never, *ever* call them that. This may seem obvious, but if you aren't sure what kind of **dirty talk** your partner likes or if they like **dirty talk** at all, ask them! If you feel comfortable enough putting your parts in their parts, or vice versa, you should be comfortable enough to have a conversation. Communication will help avoid any awkward slips ups of "oh sorry, I thought you *liked* being called 'daddy's little donkey-face!'" Maybe it'll reveal desires neither of you knew the other had. And if you're still too nervous to bring up the topic, try sending them this article. Most people told me they like when the sex talk involves words of encouragement and compliments like "you're so sexy," "I wanted you all night," "you make me feel good." Sex is not the time to bring up unresolved issues like "you're emotionally unable to provide me with the stability needed to start a family." If you're having relationship problems, talk about them when you're not boning. This is not to say you can't get derogatory in your dirty talk, but only if they said (see #1) that they are comfortable with that. A huge turn-off to everyone I spoke to is when their partner fakes dirty talk. I can admit that there have been times where I repeated lines from a porn in bed because I thought it sounded sexy—"meow meow, make that **kitten purr!**"—but the result was completely un-sexy. It's like when your supervisor tries to quote Drake lyrics and you're like *oh, HELL no*. here are party games and video games and mind games, and then there are good, romp-in-the-bed sex games. These games inject some excitement into a relationship, and they are not as lazy as a simple game of "Truth or Dare" that you'll inevitably quit after two rounds, because it's boring. (Don't get us started on "Never Have I Ever." We're not bonding in our freshman dorms at State anymore.) And keeping things fun in a relationship is pretty damn important, especially if your relationship is well past the honeymoon phase. A 2016 study found that participants in long-term relationships of at least three years who enjoyed more orgasms, engaged in more oral sex, and experimented with more sex positions reported being highly satisfied with their sex lives. And wouldn't you know it, a sex game is a tailor-made way to increase all three. "Almost half of satisfied and dissatisfied couples read sexual self-help books and magazine articles," said the lead study author, "but what set sexually satisfied couples apart was that they actually tried some of the ideas." Emphasis on *actually trying*. So take this article and put it into action. Below, you'll find a range of sex game options, some involving accessories and others just requiring your

ingenuity. If it feels good for you and your partner, you're on the right track. If it feels a little awkward at first, that's A-okay, too. Practice makes perfect. So c'mon, team. Some assembly required. Sometimes, the sexiest thing you can do is communicate with your partner. But communicating can be hard as hell when you're unprompted, so this pack of cards with prompts comes in clutch. There are three levels: One that emphasizes conversation, one that's flirty, and one that'll have you and your partner daring each other to go bigger and bolder. From here, you can graduate into more advanced stuff. We all fall into ruts. That's fine. So make a simple readjustment to how you're having sex. And because it's hard to imagine what you've never seen, a sex position guidebook is key. Think of it as an encyclopedia of rearranging your bodies—an academic text. There are enough positions in this one for 366 days of sex. Try to get all those days in a row. The challenge is the prize. Goal-setting is an important factor in success. With this game, the goal is to do more sex, and better. That can mean trying more sex positions in one session than ever before. Having sex in more rooms of the house than ever before.

Having more orgasms in one night or drawing out climax longer than ever before. Incorporating more **sex toys** into the scene than ever before. If you and your partner win, then congrats. If you lose, failing to set a PR, your punishment can be not having sex for two weeks, or something like that to build tension before your next shot at the title. Blindfold your partner and play a guessing game. What kind of food are you feeding them? (Like that scene in *Nine and a Half Weeks*.) What are you touching them with? Where will you touch them next? Lelo sells a pleasure set with a feather teaser, blindfold, and couples' massager if you want to go all out.

Bet your partner 50 cents that they can't balance two quarters on their hands for 10 minutes. Their hands must be palms down on a table, each quarter resting on the back of a hand. Now, you have 10 minutes to do whatever it takes to upset those hands. You take it from here. And bonus, you could win 50 cents! There are literally tens of sex games set up like board games, and board games are all the rage these days. Put Catan aside for the night and give one a whirl. This version, called Nookii, involves cards, dice, and a board, giving your night a helpful assist from pre-made prompts and easy-to-follow rules. Buy a Jenga set if you don't already own one. On each block, write a command. You decide what, but we suggest starting at "lick my ear" and working your way up from there. When you successfully remove a block from the tower, your partner must perform the command on you. Customize a punishment for if you knock the tower down—possibly picking up the next bar tab? Take your clothes off, piece by piece, while doing literally anything. Make commercial breaks during the football game more interesting. Turn a *Succession* drinking game into a *Succession* stripping game. Play strip poker. Just get naked, competitively. Make your favorite movie sex scene. Study it. Here's a list of truly insane scenes if you are coming up short. Now, reenact it—safely, please—with your partner. Then, realize how ridiculous movie sex scenes are and give actors credit, especially Tom Cruise. That guy basically set the standard for blockbuster movie sex scenes in the '80s and '90s. Expert level: Reenact porn. Do you remember the first time you were sexually excited by an image on a screen? (We do!) It might've been a music video to a teen-pop bop, or a particularly mushy episode of *Buffy*. Most likely, it was a movie of the PG-13 persuasion, which you snuck a viewing of far from the eyes of your parents when you were nowhere near the age of 13. Looking back, those scenes were cute. Harmless. Nowhere near the sex scenes you've seen in movies since you branched out into the R-rated category and beyond. Sex scenes are nearly as old as movies themselves. In fact, one of the first films to be screened for the public debuted in 1896 and was called *The Kiss*. It was quite **steamy** for its time, featuring a full-on brushing of the lips, which, let us tell you, really riled up the modest-minded folks of the late 19th century. But these days, a movie sex scene has to accomplish a lot more to be memorable—especially when we've been so impressed by the earth-shattering sex scenes appearing in television shows of late. It has to be downright crazy. "Crazy" can be broadly interpreted in the realm of onscreen sex. There's the **hot** stuff that begs for repeated rewatches. There are downright hilarious sexual interactions that involve comedic timing, musical numbers, awkward improv, and/or puppets. There are scenes from horror movies that make us recoil in disgust, and boundary-pushing scenes that inspire a trove of thought pieces. There's most of what Micky Rourke touched in the '80s. Here's a selection of 50 such movie sex scenes, from the classics to recent releases, each one seemingly crazier than the next.

Much has changed in the past 14 years, but an adapted version of that initial conversation isn't too far off from what I have found to be true in life. Kissing can be fun and **adventurous**, whether or not it reminds you of a chicken carbonara sub. It is not nearly as complicated as it seems when you're starting out, but there are some rules that everyone should know. And, in a world where we're getting closer and closer to treating everyone equally, these rules aren't gender-specific, nor are they going to lead you into strange macho territory. The baseline? Get consent, don't be too aggressive, and don't be afraid to mess up a little bit. Yes, it's awkward. No, the first kiss you experience will not be your best material. Kissing takes practice, and the more you finesse it, the better. In the meantime, here are some guidelines. One of the lessons I learned from my Quiznos managers had to do with body language, and it was, in my opinion, one of the most beneficial pieces of advice that I've ever received. A lot of young people seem to think that the whole "yawn and slide your arm behind your partner" move is a sly one. Not only is it tired, but it's a trap. If your potential kissing friend isn't here for it, you've fully iced out the situation. Way to go! You've ruined this fine home cinema screening of *21 Jump Street*!

Instead, I learned there's a middle ground between fully getting into someone else's space and sitting paralyzed in your kissing anxiety. Simply find yourself just close enough to lean a knee over and touch theirs. Seriously. It's a non-invasive way to feel out the physical situation—if your partner pulls their knee away, you know that this is not your time. Don't

question it, just play it off with a quick apology. Stupid phantom knee. However, if someone does want to kiss you, they're probably not going to be strangely knee-phobic right before a potential facial exchange.

If you're not in a place where you want to risk going off body language vibes alone, there are ways to literally speak to someone about whether it's okay to kiss them, without making it awkward. The best way to dodge the anxiety is to be as logical as possible. If all the signs are there—the proximity, the body language—then lean in just a bit to signal your interest and quietly say that you'd like to kiss them, then wait for their response. Asking is also a good option, but remember that there is a difference in asking for a kiss and asking a grocery store clerk if avocados are still on sale. Tone is important. And a bit of lingering can be as much of a turn on to your partner as the kiss itself. A lot of people feel the need, especially in those early years, to go all in with tongue. That is decidedly a mistake. You do not go up to someone's house and kick the door down to enter. You are not the Undertaker. So much about kissing really is an in-the-moment decision, and it's one that should be made with a bit of caution. Instead of starting with aggressive tongue action, really focus on what you're doing with your lips. That's the ticket. There are six muscles that control your lips alone; that's like, the Arcade Fire of your face. So much can be done with your lips that's just as expressive and intimate (if not more!) than trying to sneak in the infamous tongue move. If it comes to a time when it feels natural to use tongue, you will know, and a passionate but tongueless kiss is a great way to start that physical conversation. It's be square with each other. You're not reading a story on "how to kiss" if this is your 500th rodeo. I respect that. You're probably about to go on a promising first date, or first hang, and you're thinking, "What if tonight is the kissing night!?" If the witching hour truly is upon you, Goody Proctor, play it cool. Don't ruin it by treating the person you're kissing like a Bop It.

Everyone thinks: *What do I do with my hands?* The answer is to let your brain, and not any other part of your body, decide that. If this really is a first kiss, imagine that the only part of the body available for your hands to reach is the shoulders and up. A gentle hand on the shoulder, face, or neck is all you need for a first kiss. No honking. No grabbing. You're not an animal. Just be a sturdy foundation for that kiss.

A kiss is an invitation, not a lease. Act in a way that makes you worthy of being invited back.

Orgasms as we know them are great, but here's something to bring your sex life to the next level: **Edging**.

Also known as orgasm control, **edging** involves getting *really close* to the point of no return, but stopping before you cross that thin line and making that impending orgasm go back to where it came from for just a while longer. Once you feel like you can last a little longer, start going at it again.

Some fans of this technique do this cycle multiple times, whereas others can't or don't want to handle it any longer and **come** after the first time. It's all up to your personal preference, and likewise, you can also implement this on your girlfriend and *really* blow her mind.

While stopping yourself (or your partner) from climaxing may sound like cruel and unnecessary torture to some, it actually makes for a much more powerful orgasm when you finally do finish. This is because **edging** increases sensitivity and blood flow in your naughty bits, which is vital for amazing orgasms.

"There is increased blood flow into the pelvic area when you stop orgasm and continue stimulation," Courtney Cleman, founder of the V. Club, tells Redbook.

"When we think of blood flow, we usually think of a male erection. But women have 'erections' of their clitoral organ, [and] **edging** creates a stronger erection for both men and women." Woo! Earth-shattering orgasms for everyone! But aside from the physiological effects, edging also has the psychological aspect of wanting what you can't have, which only makes you want it more. You know how we all tend to chase the people who pull away? It's basically the same thing. And after edging a few times and teasing yourself with that imminent orgasm, it's going to be **explosive** and absolutely phenomenal.

Furthermore, edging involves delaying gratification for a greater ultimate outcome, and science has proven multiple times that doing just that makes the end result so, *so* much more enjoyable.

In fact, one of the most well-known psychological studies in history – the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment — found that people who have the willpower to keep from indulging immediately are more successful in life, too, because it's best to wait for something to reach its full potential before giving in.

When it comes to edging, think of your orgasm like a water balloon: You can fill up the balloon normally and throw it at someone, and it'll be fun. But if you slowly add more and more water and fill it to the point of nearly bursting, it'll be so much more explosive and satisfying when you finally throw it and soak the person.

Similarly, edging is great for improving self-control and is a particularly good idea for those of us who tend to **come** just a bit too soon. The more you edge, the better you get at it, therefore the better control you have over your orgasms.

Lastly, Cleman has a bit of advice for anyone who wants to try edging: “You don’t want to confuse your partner and make them wonder why it is taking you extra time to reach orgasm. Be open about your desire to edge. It’s a **hot**, sexual practice that a couple can enjoy together.”

As someone who recently discovered edging, I very highly recommend giving it a try. You won’t be disappointed.

When you’ve been in a relationship for a while, you know *exactly* what to do to get your lady off, which is a great thing. You have that one specific tried-and-true move that gives her the big O each and every time. Good for you.

However, even the most passionate couples eventually need some novelty in the bedroom, or else your sex life is going to be really, *really* monotonous and boring, says Dr. Kristen Mark, a sex researcher at the University of Kentucky.

And when she’s bored of having sex with you, she’s going to cheat. And vice versa.

But what can you do to **spice things up**? **Sex toys**? Bondage? A threesome?? All good ideas, but you need to bring up these topics gently, because if you randomly bust out some nipple clamps and a ball gag during **foreplay**, or bring her best friend into the bedroom without warning, she’s probably not going to appreciate the gesture, even though you mean well.

That said, you need to talk about what you *really* want in bed, but sadly, most couples simply don’t talk about their secret desires, Mark says.

“Even when you’ve been with someone for years, talking about sex can be scary because you’re exposing a really vulnerable part of yourself,” she explains. “Especially if you’re introducing something new that you want to try.”

Luckily, Mark has a foolproof way to talk about your **dirtiest**, kinkiest desires with your lovely lady, and even find out what naughty thoughts she’s thinking of, *without* freaking her out. It involves lying, but don’t worry. It’s a harmless lie. She’ll never know. All you need to do is tell her you had a sex dream last night that you two were “trying whatever sex act is on your naughty to-do list.” What makes this idea brilliant is the fact that you can act on it if she seems interested, and be like, “You like that? We should try it tonight,” *or*, if she stares at you blankly when you say you “dreamt” that you tried grapefruiting and it felt fucking fantastic to get off from a citrus fruit, you can just laugh it off and say something like: “Haha, yeah...that’s weird. Too kinky for my taste. Missionary it is. *Again*.”

Moreover, once you start talking about trying new things in the sack, she’s more likely to tell you *her* secret kinks and fetishes.

In conclusion, not all lies are bad lies. This is just a teeny tiny white lie to get the ball rolling, because research confirms that couples who openly communicate and tell each other *exactly* what they want are not only happier together, but a lot better at sex.

A dedicated sex blanket makes sense when you consider that, depending on how exactly you do it, sex can involve such things as semen, vaginal fluids, sweat, lube, wax, spilled champagne, maybe some cake frosting (I don’t judge)—and who knows what else. Reveling in the slipperiness is fun in the moment; less so when you survey the damage to your *très cher* long staple, high thread count sheets. How to reconcile the adult need for legitimate, high-quality bedding and the lust for messy, messy sex? Thankfully, we have the *sex blanket*. The Liberator Fascinator Throw comes in five colors and two sizes, and manages to look so classy you’d never know it was built for being humped on. I own it in “Velvish Merlot,” and keep it tucked on the edge of my bed—before sex, my partner and I just yank it up on top of the covers. The exterior feels like velvet and looks like a sumptuous luxe throw, but inside is a water-resistant core. Admittedly, when you crinkle it up, that core sounds a little bit diaper-like, but this is a small price to pay for the ability to douse the Fascinator throw in all manner of sex effluvia knowing that none of it will seep through. Imagine, after you’ve both collapsed in glory, yanking the blanket off the bed with a magician’s flourish before crawling into crisp, dry sheets and passing out. The blanket is machine washable, ten thousand percent more mature than using a mildly damp towel for period sex, and packs nicely if you’re the kind of person who thrills to the danger of sex at the in-law’s house or you’re the only person in the world who respects the linens on hotel beds.

If you’re a sexual nomad, know that Liberator has crafted sex pillows, blankets, and even furniture from their magical fabric, allowing you to sex-proof most of your house. My partner and I have the what is essentially, a chaise lounge designed for the sole purpose of making sweet love—it’s a high-key take on one of the **best sex** toys for couples.

If you’re ready to go even beyond the sex blanket lifestyle, try Liberator’s sheet set. The smooth polyester liquid-velvet is both chic and has an impermeable moisture barrier strong enough to handle any **sex juices**. It’s machine washable, comes in a variety of colors ranging from cyan to rose. **Messy** sex is great, but there are other things to consider than ruining sheets. We all pee, and that means that we all have urinary tracts, which means that we’re all susceptible to urinary tract infections. It’s much better to have wipes on hand to **clean up** right after sex than to let germs fester in your pee hole. Body wipes are also extremely handy during group sex or **anal play**, when you want to reduce cross-contamination as much as possible. Before

you think about cleaning up messy sex, let's get **dirty**. The Organic Loven Love Is Art Kit, founded by South African-born artist, Jeremy Brown, allows couples to turn their sex into art. Simple roll out the Dexter-style plastic tarp (but for **porking**, not killing), lay out the canvas, pop open some paint, and get it on. The kit even comes with slippers to put on as you make your way to the shower once your masterpiece is complete. Then, once dry, you can stretch the canvas, frame it, and hang it up in your home. When visiting relatives ask about it simply say "it's abstract" in a superior tone and they'll shut up. Remember you don't need a third person to have a threesome—a **sex toy** will do. But, unfortunately, even vibrators can harbor bacteria and should be washed regularly. So what's more glamorous than scrubbing down a sex toy with a bar of soap? Well, placing it in a pod that sanitizes the toy in 10 minutes using UV light. Plus, it not only cleans and charges the **sex toy**, but acts as a mood light, filling your bedroom with pink and blue hues. The sleek and modern design blends in with bedside decor. Everyone will just think it's an alarm clock or lamp. It's true. A candle-lit room really does make panties wet. This elegant candle is inspired by Prometheus, of Greek mythology, who stole fire from the gods to give it to mortals. Not only will it set the mood, but you can explore **wax play** safely and without stains. Regular candle wax can burn (and not in a good way) and is almost impossible to remove. The low-temperature candle will still feed your kinks as it drips over your lover's nipples, but they'll moan rather than scream for help. A **horny** candle could be just what your burnt-out pandemic sex **game** needs.

People are shy about their buttocks. Maybe you're giggling while you're reading this. (If so: please grow the fuck up!) Talking about pooping feels more stigmatized than talking about (heterosexual) sex. But if you want to talk about *anal*? It's permeated the culture and become a sex advice column staple, but in practice? Forget it. Cue the gasps and pearl-clutching from any number of straight people, who love to pretend they would *never* partake.

There's still a fair amount of stigma around our assholes—the region is shrouded in a bit of mystery. And while that may sound funny, it actually has real-life consequences. If we don't include anal in sexual health and education, for example, then people may be led to unsafe sex practices. Many men actively fear putting something inside of their anuses—sometimes, out of a fear it will "make them gay," which also makes medical care around the prostate more difficult. (Prostate cancer—commonly detected with a digital rectal examination, otherwise known as a doctor putting their finger up your ass—is the most common cancer found in men.)

Ironically, all of this mystery actually makes the asshole ideal territory for the beauty and wellness industries. For decades, brands have exploited (primarily women's) insecurities around every imaginable region of the body, from the neck to the lower stomach, the backs of one's thighs to the feet. There are even brands, like Summer's Eve, designed to make women feel badly about the scent of their vaginas.

So it was no wonder, then, that we'd finally end up on the asshole. There is a range of new players in this arena claiming to improve your **backdoor** in some way. Chief among them is Pure For Men, a wellness company that sells fiber supplements and an array of products including wipes and anti-odor creams marketed for **anal play**. Or, there's aptly named upstart Tushy, which democratized the bidet and (according to a brand representative) is enjoying a whopping 500 percent growth in sales year over year.

It seems only logical, then, that revamping anal douching for our wellness age would be the appropriate next step. (For the uninitiated, that's using liquid to clean out your rectum—it's common prep before anal sex.) Enter Future Method, created by Dr. Evan Goldstein, who has become something of an anal authority through his New York practice, Bespoke Surgical, a proctology practice that focuses on sexual wellness for gay men. Dr. Goldstein was compelled to launch his own douching system, he says, after encountering so many patients who experienced "trauma" from preparation.

"When you're using tap water or an enema, what winds up happening is the mucosa of the inside starts to strip. The water basically washes off the protective layer of the skin, which now becomes raw and receptive to injury, like cuts, hemorrhoids, or STIs," he says. If you're taking your supplements and you have a balanced diet, Dr. Goldstein says, you can limit the amount of trauma brought on by over-douching.

But whether you're over-douching or douching extremely often (lucky you!), Dr. Goldstein ultimately decided that his first plan of attack was to change out the harsh tap water being used in douches. He worked with a team of researchers and professionals to create an over-the-counter solution that was gentler on the rectum, therefore helping to preserve the mucus lining that keeps things healthy and intact. The Future Method Disposable Isotonic Wash is now the "first of its kind, doctor-developed formula" designed for douching, with ingredients like citric acid and licorice extract that aim to calm and soothe the area before sex.

The Wash can be ordered with an accompanying douche bulb, the piece that determines how much liquid gets used. It might seem almost comically small when compared to what else is out there, given that it's about half the size of other brands. This would ring alarm bells for many who are into heavier **anal play**—someone who might skip the bulbs altogether to use what's called a "shower shot," or a hose that hooks up to their bathroom plumbing, to deliver a powerful and deep-cleaning burst of water. No matter what level you're playing at, though, many of us are all-too-familiar with the horror that comes

after realizing the water *still* isn't running clear—no matter how many times you douche. Unfortunately, Dr. Goldstein says, we don't need very much water at all, and our “deep clean” mentality is exactly the problem.

Biologically speaking, run-of-the-mill anal sex should be easy to accomplish “mess-free” after a simple bowel movement. If you're unsure, one time douching should really do the trick. Instead, he meets guys who do an “extra douche or two,” only to realize they've accidentally stimulated the bowels, thus starting completely from scratch.

The insecurities and bad habits that accompany **anal play** are, he points out, rooted in societal stigma. “We've been brought up in a culture where you need to be super, super clean—and this area is considered dirty,” he says. “In turn, so many people are over-doing it, which is causing so much harm.”

Eradicating some of this stigma was at the heart of the CBD and marijuana wellness brand Foria's mission when they set out to create dedicated products for use with the backdoor. “Anal sex has been stigmatized for a while, so we thought: how do we un-shame?” asks Kiana Reeves, the brand's Chief Educator. “How do we incorporate this important part of the body and sexual relating in ways that's informative or pleasurable to enhance people's experiences?”

One way Foria did so was by listening to their gay consumers. The brand received a whole host of testimonials from gay men that their Natural Arousal Lube with THC—a pre-play oil that's meant to stimulate the genitals—was also being used as a “natural alternative to poppers.” Gay men were finding ways to insert the oil into their anuses, rather than only use it topically as the label advised. So, Foria found a way to deliver it as a solid capsule (by mixing it with shea butter) so that people looking for a more receptive anal experience could administer THC as a suppository instead. It works by slowly dissolving over time, delivering a concentrated dose of cannabinoids to the rectum, relieving the muscles and releasing pelvic floor tension, making for a much more...open experience. Let me say that this stuff is a legitimate game changer. The high, Reeves says, is mainly localized—aka, your asshole is stoned, not your brain. So far, the product has been well received by the brand's audience; Reeves says it opened to good sales, and it enjoys five-star reviews on the brand's website.

But there's a fine line between eradicating stigma and creating more of it. Some brands looking to capitalize on all this anal talk have done so with an approach that's all-too-familiar for any gay man scanning the “LGBT magazines” in the '00s. All over, six-packed, semi-naked men have been advertising products that promise to deliver “clean” smells or “brighten” anuses that may be any shade other than pink.

For example, Pinkbooty's “Lightening Cream” and “Gold Booty Scrub” have started being advertised by an array of gay influencers on Instagram. The product's promises, according to the brand website, include the “brightening” of the asshole—presumably resulting in a “pink booty.” A full list of ingredients for the products was not disclosed on the brand's website. Anal bleaching, as it's known, can be a complicated thing to administer properly at home, and can sometimes result in irritation, burning, and over-lightening. Dr. Goldstein, for his part, does not recommend at-home bleaching. “It can get very blotchy,” he says. “And, whenever someone does bleaching or is using creams, we recommend they refrain from intercourse for about seven to 10 days.” Such instructions, if necessary, were not available on Pinkbooty's website.

Then, of course, there's the other problem with anal bleaching: how much of the practice is caught up with skin lightening creams, which have come under fire recently for being intrinsically racist, relying on white, Eurocentric beauty ideals. Between smell, cleanliness, and even hairiness down there—we already have enough to contend with. Now you're telling us that our assholes are the wrong *color*, too?

Then there's Studio Ready, which initially came to fame with a “Hot Coffee Scrub” that promised to “make **eating ass** more enjoyable.” The brand's tagline seems to say it all: “Sit on his face with confidence.” Most of their products are heavily scented in food flavors (chocolate, coffee, or mint) and focus on cleansing or exfoliating the area for a pristine **playtime** scenario. Each product is accompanied by very compelling photography, mostly of bare, round, white butts. Choosing exfoliants for delicate parts of the body can be tricky—small and spherical exfoliators are essential for safe application since they glide across the skin, whereas larger granules (like walnut seeds or coffee) can sometimes cause micro-tears or irritation. These are, of course, not ideal things to experience before **anal play**.

Still, a friend passed me a jar of the Coffee Scrub and swore that it was keeping him confident before bottoming. The super-fragrant product washed away any concerns he had that he might smell “dirty” down there, and his confidence translated to a great time in the sack. And I wasn't about to burst his bubble when somebody else was breaking his back, you know?

The foray into anal care is definitely an interesting one to watch. On the one hand, it's encouraging to see more education and information in the world, thus empowering consumers to feel better about their experiences, whether that's with pooping or sexual pleasure. It's also great to see more brands emerge that are either centering or listening to their LGBTQ+ consumers.

On the other, this is still a story about beauty and wellness experts marketing products to us that, technically, we don't need. And the only way to convince us we *need* something is by presenting us with a problem we didn't know we had. So if you now find yourself wondering: Does my anus not taste good? Does it not smell good? Does it need to be pinker? Do I need to

be waxing? Am I over-douching? May I offer you some unsolicited advice about your asshole: Don't *be* anal, just *enjoy* anal—no purchase necessary. Remember a year ago when everyone had to re-learn the proper way to wash their hands? Before masks and ventilation, the government was telling you to sing Happy Birthday twice. (How young we were!) I remember one particular video making the rounds, with colored ink demonstrating proper technique. And I remember thinking it was silly to have to tell people how to practice basic hygiene—until I read a CDC report that a not-very-nice 69 percent of men did not wash their hands regularly. Living through this pandemic has hopefully changed this for good. So while we're at it, might I also suggest the importance of washing your hands before hooking up?

Your hands are the pioneers for all physical experiences involving your sense of touch, picking up billions of pathogenic passengers on the way. And nearly any orifice in a body is a warm, squishy, welcoming environment for microorganisms. Even the most PG of sexual contact involves the exchanging of some kind of bodily fluids. In fact, when you boil it down, a lot of common sexual acts involve putting your body parts into someone else's body parts. And considering how your hands are some of your most important parts, they're introduced to some very intimate spaces in your partner—spaces that are often fragile chemical environments with delicate pH levels that do not take kindly to foreign bacteria.

As the owner of a vagina, I could tell you all about its fickleness, the essentials of an acidic pH environment, and all the uncomfortable and gross tantrums it can and *will* throw when that environment is compromised, but I'm also going to ask you to trust me.

But isn't that a mood-killer? you say, perhaps imagining excusing yourself post strip-down to give your hands a rinse in the bathroom sink. Honestly, if your date flees because you took a moment to scrub up, it is definitely not you washing your hands that's the mood murderer. But just build it in—taking a moment to excuse yourself to use the bathroom in anticipation of an approaching mood is just good planning. You do not have to announce, “brb gonna go polish these sex-hands now.”

The same way some may think that applying lube or fumbling with a condom is an awkward enough interlude to skip altogether lest the delicate mood shrivels and withers away, we all power through it because it's important for everyone's health and comfort. So is making sure your hands are clean before you put them on a body.

Would you suck on your own fingers after taking public transportation, having drinks at a bar, walking your dog, or going for a bike ride? I'll bet not, because you know about germs. Even when your hands aren't doing so many activities, there's still the possibility of hangnails, bleeding cuticles, and other such little fluid-leaking incidences that seem like no biggie until it's coming in contact with another person's mucus membranes. It's good manners to wash your hands before eating and it's even better manners to do so before engaging in intimate contact with another person.

In the past, I have definitely asked partners *hey, do you mind washing your hands before we get started/keep going?* No one has ever challenged the request (I mean, why would you if it was leading to sex?) The response is usually an obliging but slightly surprised, “Oh! Yeah, of course!” as if I'd told someone they'd forgotten to turn their headlights off when they parked their car. It's not that I think men inherently have vile, filthy hands that will immediately lead to some sort of vaginal rot when introduced. But I, too, know about germs. I have thought a lot about those invisible fuckers lately!

And while I do not mind asking, a partner thinking about hands-prep in advance before getting down would be incredibly attractive, and sexy, and mood-*enhancing*, for sure. Honestly, any gestures of care purposefully done with confidence are *très très* sexy. I cannot stress enough how attractive it is to show (not tell) your partner that you're considerate of their well-being and pleasure. It can foster a sense of trust, which allows for greater vulnerability between both of you, which in turn leads to very good sex. And that can absolutely begin with the shit you should already have been doing like washing your hands.

If your crush doesn't want to date you because you're a virgin, move along. Don't fuck some other guy so you can date *this* one. If his desire to be with you is entirely contingent on you having boned before, it sounds like he might be a jerk, anyway.

That said, I'm not opposed to you losing your virginity to “get it over with.” It sounds like you're struggling with dating because you're stuck in your head about never having had sex—so have some sex! (Other experts may disagree with me on this, but screw 'em. This is my column!)

It doesn't have to be a big to-do. There's this false notion in mainstream culture that losing your virginity should happen in a candlelit room on a bed covered with rose petals to someone you deeply love. That's not how it happens for most people! In reality, it's often an awkward and nerve-wracking experience. I couldn't get hard when I tried to lose my virginity—I literally fled from my girlfriend while she lay naked in bed. I cried the entire car ride home! But guess what? I made it past that initial hurdle, and my sex life is pretty fucking awesome now!

Julia Bendis, host of the comedic sex and relationship podcast *Somebody Had to Say It...*, agrees with my advice to go out and get laid—as long as you can keep things casual. “If you think you can emotionally handle it without getting attached or

regretting [your] choice to have sex because it was a one-night stand (and potentially no future with this person after the sex), then I say go for it," Bendis says.

It'll help you keep your emotions at bay to know that your first sexual experience doesn't in any way define you. It doesn't set the tone for the rest of your sexual career.

The question then becomes: How do you get laid? *Easily*, is the simple answer. "Tinder is perfect for this"—or any online dating site, Bendis says. If you match with a guy and there seems to be a connection, ask him out on a date. On the date, if you like him enough (and you feel safe with him), invite him back after drinks. As the date is wrapping up, you can say, "Hey, I had a really fun time with you. Want to head back to my place?" If he's down, that's when you say, "Just a heads up, I'm nervous and not the most sexually experienced, so I'd like to start on the slower side. But I'm really excited!"

Notice how I didn't recommend you say that you're a virgin. It's not something you have to disclose unless you want to. "It's your body, and it's no one else's business," Bendis says.

34-Year-Old Virgin, I know you're in your head right now. I know you've built up sex to be this huge, life-changing experience. While sex can indeed be life-changing, it's typically *not* the first time you do it. What's more important than a single act of sex is your **sexual career**: how you relate to sex, how it brings you pleasure, and how you use it to connect with others. That can only start once you start fucking. So if you think you're ready—and it sounds like you are—then hop on Tinder and hop to it.

It's refreshing to see someone asking how to get more of what they want while being equally mindful of their partner's experience. I have good news for you: I think there is a world where you and your partner can enjoy public sex (or some variation of it) together. Now, of course, a man of my stature would never recommend public sex; it's illegal, after all! I am merely creating a record of what a hypothetical person might hypothetically do if they were hypothetically interested in such a thing, *hypothetically*. In order to craft a public sex scenario that feels safe and fun for both of you, you're going to have to express to your partner exactly how much public sex turns you on, and why. You're also going to have to ask your partner which elements of public sex turn them off, and whether there are any aspects they don't mind so much—or that they even enjoy.

The next time you two are chilling together—not when you're about to have sex, because that'll add too much pressure—go ahead and ask your partner, "Hey! Can I talk to you about our sex life?" If they say they're in a good headspace to discuss it, share something like, "So, you've probably figured out that I really love public sex. I like it because [share the things that turn you on about it]. Does any part of public sex turn you on? I'd really like to see if there's a way we can have some form of public or semi-public play."

Then, listen and problem solve. There are lots of middle grounds. Perhaps your partner is into the idea of exhibitionism, but can't enjoy public sex because they're worried about getting caught. If that's the case, you two could **play** together at a sex club, so it's "public" in that people are watching you having sex in a new environment, but there's no risk of getting caught or arrested. Maybe your partner doesn't like doing it outside, but is comfortable with the two of you having sex in a locked bathroom at a house party. (Just don't be jerks and fuck in there for 20 minutes. People are waiting in line to pee!) Or perhaps you set up a public web cam on a site like Chaturbate (link NSFW); you two can wear masks for anonymity and get turned on knowing that folks are watching (and jacking) to you on the other side of the camera.

The point is, there are lots of ways to tap into the thrill you get from public sex. Get creative! Think outside the box! That said, you may never get your partner comfortable with the idea, and that's something you're going to have to accept. You can't force anyone to do a sex thing they're not down with. However, if that ends up being the case, *you* don't have to accept a life with no public sex, if it's something you feel like you absolutely need. When I showed your question to Megan Fleming, Ph.D., a sex and relationship expert at Lovehoney, she said you could always consider an open relationship if you don't want to ditch public sex forever. "Is this something that [your] partner is comfortable for [you] to explore on [your] own even though [you]'d prefer to do it together?" she asked. While I think many sex experts are a little too quick to suggest opening up a relationship, in your case, I support the idea. You have this particular kink that's very, very important to you, judging by your letter. If your partner has no interest, it's fair to see if you can get your needs met by other people. Open relationships and other forms of ethical non-monogamy are becoming more mainstream, FYI.

Whichever road you decide to pursue, I hope you can find a solution that makes both of you happy. I'm in the business of teaching people how to have the best sex ever, but sadly, this is one of those times where I'm going to ask you to stop having Earth-shattering sex. I'm aware this will require some heavy-duty restraint, because when the options are having a challenging relationship talk and having toe-curling sex, nobody wants to opt for the former. I think you're experiencing this pattern because one (or both) of you has an anxious attachment style. (FYI, attachment style refers to the way in which an individual relates emotionally to others; someone with an anxious attachment style often fears being abandoned, and therefore seeks a lot of reassurance in the relationship.)

I showed your question to Emily Jemea, Ph.D., a sex and relationship therapist in Houston. "It's not uncommon for people with an anxious attachment style to turn to sex as a way to soothe relationship anxiety that is triggered during a fight," she noted. "Sex, at least temporarily, makes them feel reassured that their partner still wants them and isn't going to leave them."

When you talk to your girlfriend—which, yes, you need to do—about your pattern of tabling problems by having sex, I would start by reassuring her that you care for her deeply and want to work through your issues so you can be as strong a team as possible. (Translation: "I'm not going to leave you!") Then, as calmly as you can, convey what's going on: "I love the **hot**, passionate sex we have when we fight, but we never end up resolving our issues. I think we should start trying to resolve conflict without having sex. What do you think?"

Hopefully, she's on the same page, and from there, you can start discussing some other problems in your relationship more calmly. But, if you end up in an argument, you're going to have to use some willpower and resist having sex. If it reaches a point of heated passion, excuse yourself and return to the conversation later. Go jerk off in the bathroom! I don't care what you do, but don't do *it*. The more you get used to resisting sex in the middle of an argument, the easier it will be going forward.

Now, Angry Sex, I know you might be worried that if you stop having rage-fueled sex, then you'll stop having passionate sex altogether. But that doesn't have to be the case. The human body is a miraculous and complex vessel, and in your case, it's conflating being sexually aroused and angrily aroused. "Arguing releases lots of adrenaline. It increases heart rate and activates the nervous system, which may feel similar to the way the body feels in the throes of passion," Jamea says. "Sex (and orgasm) is a great way to reset the nervous system into a state of calm." Clearly, you both like having sex while riled up. So, rile yourself up! Just not through fighting. Get that adrenaline spike by doing a HIIT workout for 30 minutes together before you have sex. If working out isn't either of your things, then get kinky. Honestly, some light BDSM would be perfect for you two. Maybe **impact play**? Spanking, slapping, and paddling are all quick ways to get your adrenaline jumping. Angry Sex, I want to remind you that intensity is not intimacy and high-intensity negative emotions do not equate passion. I believe that when you are more intimate with your partner by expressing your feelings, being vulnerable, and resolving conflict, you will have equally as good if not even *better* sex than fucking for reassurance or to avoid issues in your relationship.

M: What's wrong with being direct and initiating? That said, I think it's really important to acknowledge if your idea of sex is only putting a penis inside a vagina. The thing is, receiving penetration is a fairly significant thing. And if you are not really wanting it, it can be very painful and traumatic. So while you might want to put your penis inside her all the time, that doesn't necessarily mean her body is ready. It also might be worth expanding your idea of sex, right? Mutual masturbation, or **dirty talk** while you masturbate, or playing with **toys**, or oral sex, or something else. If you expand your idea of sex, she'll find more places where she'll want to **play** with you. Then it might be worthwhile having a conversation with your partner about what feels like the right amount of sex for you both, what kind of sex you crave, and even what time of day it feels good. ZZ: Totally, and I also think it's important to look at all the things happening outside the bedroom, right? So if she's working nine to five, and then she comes home and has to cook dinner, and then she cleans the dishes, and then she takes out the trash—after all that, she's exhausted. She's not gonna want to have sex! She's also not feeling appreciated in those other aspects of her life. AM: Yes, totally. ZZ: So make sure that your partner is happy and satisfied and feels connected to you outside of the bedroom. And then that's going to translate to once you guys are in the bedroom. It will facilitate and create an environment where she will want to have sex. AM: Well, first off, monogamous and cheating are not opposites. That's important to note. But I think it's really important to start to examine why he was cheating, like what was the erotic hit of cheating? Because that's probably gonna give you a lot of information as to where you wanna be with this new person. ZZ: Exactly! Why are you cheating? Is it due to abandonment issues? It could be that you like the excitement of doing something wrong with someone else. If you like being "naughty," you can incorporate those elements into your sex life with the person you're dating. Maybe it's because you're not enjoying sex with your partner or not feeling emotionally connected to your partner, so you're seeking that elsewhere. Sometimes, it's not that deep. Sometimes, you just miss having sex with other people. But whatever the root is, you need to figure it out. M: Exactly like cheating is a symptom of something else. And so it's figuring out what that thing is. I think step one is to figure out how you can possibly show up in this relationship with this person. I know I cheated because I realized that I didn't like monogamy. It wasn't for me. And that was more of a self-identity thing than an individual relationship thing. And that was important information for me, but at the same time, for this guy, it might be all sorts of other compulsive disorders or even something that needs actual medical attention. There are many people who have compulsive disorders that use sex as their outlet. So yeah, getting clear on the root of the cheating is the most important thing. Honestly, my gut response when reading this question was: Dump his ass. While you claim to have the "perfect relationship" besides these problems, that's clearly not the case. You described the last year-and-a-half as a "rollercoaster" that's been rife with accusations of flirting and cheating and general mistrust. In a so-called "perfect relationship," you don't feel insecure with your partner.

Sad and Insecure Girl, you cheated, and you (rightfully) feel bad about it. That said, on the infidelity scale, a drunken kiss is *veryyyyy* low. You also get points for telling him immediately after it happened, and not lying repeatedly, like he did.

But you know that already. The crux of your question is this: You've both been unfaithful to some degree, so how come when you do it, it's more of a problem than when he does it? How come you're punished for one slip-up, whereas he can do whatever he pleases? The simple answer: He sounds controlling and manipulative, which makes for an especially "rollercoaster"-like dynamic when paired with your anxious attachment style.

"Attachment styles" describe the different ways we behave in romantic relationships. A so-called "anxious attachment style" is characterized by a lack of independence, lots of insecurities, and a deep desire to be close to a partner. People with an anxious attachment style often worry about rejection and abandonment. They fear being too clingy—or they *are* too clingy—and require lots of validation that their partner loves and wants to be with them. They also tend to stay in toxic relationships. Sound familiar?

Your attachment style explains why you continue to date this guy, and why you're continuously motivated to show how much you love him, despite all the ways he continues to reject you. So what do you do? I say break up with him, hard as it's going to be. While the word "toxic" is grossly overused, your relationship definitely earns that descriptor. Second, you need to get into therapy to work on your anxious attachment style. Attachment styles are not set in stone, and with the help of a therapist, you'll be able to become more secure in future relationships. Your therapist will be able to help you set boundaries so you can say "no," instead of constantly trying to please or placate a partner who is clearly unable to give you the love that you need. Third, I highly recommend you read *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find—and Keep—Love*. This is the best book I've read about attachment theory; the authors give you the tools to both recognize and change your attachment style so it doesn't continue to plague your love life. Moving forward, I hope you're able to find a relationship where you don't need to constantly question if your boyfriend loves you, and you don't feel the need to fight for his affection, sexual or otherwise.

EE: So you get to break up with someone for any reason at any time, right? We get to choose whether or not we want to continue on with the relationship or not. There are certain things that of course are better to work through. And if you're really into a relationship, you might decide that the sex was awful, but I really like this person, so I'm going to figure it out. And the thing is, sex is not usually that great the first time with somebody because you might still be doing the things that you were doing with your previous partner, or you might not totally be in sync yet. With that being said, if you have an interaction with someone while you're dating, and you decide that you want to end the relationship, you get to do that. And the other person also gets to think that you're an asshole, and you can't control how they think or feel, no matter how you said it, or how you did it. If you continued the relationship, you might've still ended up being an asshole if you decided to end it in the future. So something that's really important for you to remember is that if you actually think it was the right choice for you, and you did it in a fair way, then that was your decision. You have to be able to sit with that, and the other person is also allowed to have their feelings about the way it went down. ZZ: You brought up a few good points here. I think it's interesting that he decided to not give it another shot. Of course, he doesn't have to. And who knows? Maybe she did something really weird and off-putting. EE: I would love to dig in about what "awful" is. Because it could be it sucked or it could be egregious, like something horrific happened. ZZ: Exactly, if it just wasn't good, and they didn't mesh, he could express the things that he likes [sexually], ask what she's into, and try again. So I find it interesting that he didn't try, considering that he said he really liked her. But again, he's under no obligation to try again, and as you said, maybe it was just truly awful. This situation really is tough. They're going to think of you as an asshole, and there's really nothing that you can do about that. People take rejection poorly and personally. She might think you're an asshole or call you an asshole in that moment. And then two weeks later from now think to herself—*I'm really happy he said he didn't want to do this as opposed to ghosting me or fissing out or leading me on. I'm glad he gave me a direct answer.* The thing is, you don't see how two weeks from now, she's actually much happier that you did this. You just saw that initial response where she was angry because she was hurt and rejected.

The stories of Harvey Weinstein and the men who fell from grace after him led to a necessary and rather late conversation on the **predatory** sexual behaviours of men in power. But the media frenzy that followed could frighten even the most upstanding man from romantically approaching a woman ever again. Based on anecdotal evidence, men are anxious about how to navigate the already sensitive world of dating. Given the tense zeitgeist, what's a well-meaning guy to do?

I asked both male and female friends for their take on what are the new standards of dating. Even for people who aren't actively on the scene, things are complicated. For example, is it still expected of a man to open a door for a woman? Of course, the answers depend on the context of the situation and the personal preferences of your companion, but engaging with the questions can lead to eye-opening insight and, in turn, less nerve-racking dates.

While I received a wide variety of answers, as one would expect from a range of personalities and perspectives, the main takeaway remained the same: Always err on the side of respect. So here's it is, the all new rules and dating advice for men.

There are a lot of memes – particularly aimed at women – along the lines of 'don't take him back'. If it's a gif there's probably a sassy hair flick involved. Our Internet friends are empowering us to set boundaries when we've been treated with disrespect, which is an incredibly important message, but I don't think 'never go back to an ex' is a hard and fast rule. As ever, real life is more nuanced than that. The first thing to consider is how messy the break up was. Did the relationship just fizzle out but

fundamentally you still think they're a decent human and obviously quite fit? Fine. I don't see a problem. You're a grown up, you're capable of making your own decisions. Sometimes I've found it's even better when you go back after a few years – you have the foundation of knowing each other's bodies and desires, with the added wisdom of time, experience, and reflection on what you perhaps ballsed up a bit first time round.

However, if we're talking about a serious relationship that broke down for very clear and significant reasons then no, you can't just casually wander back to an ex without a care in the world. I'm not saying 'never go back' quite yet, just that more thought has to be put into communicating to ensure you're definitely both sitting at the same place on the casual-to-serious spectrum.

If at any point you get the feeling that your ex is seeing this as an opportunity to rekindle the relationship when you were just hoping for a bit of familiar fun, stop. Don't let yourself become a puppet master, cruelly picking someone up and putting them back down – both emotionally and physically – whenever it suits you. There are plenty of other people you can sleep with without simultaneously serving up an emotional gut punch. It works both ways. If you realise there are still feelings there for you but she's well past it, stop. The warmth of familiarity can all too easily see you sleepwalking into an exercise in self-flagellation. (That's when our mates with their memes might have a point).

We all know I'm a big advocate for **being friends with exes**, but I also strongly feel there needs to be space and time for a while first, if only because you need to reset how you interact with each other. Often we fall back into bed with an ex just because it's muscle memory. Being touchy feely with them is the only behaviour we know.

In your case time has passed, so that muscle memory may well have faded by now, but be mindful of not slipping back into over-familiarity too early on. Years have gone by, people change. Get to know the person she is now, and *then* decide if you're still attracted to her. Be conscious of the process rather than being on auto-pilot. It might be that by 'going back to an ex' you mean you're considering giving the *relationship* another shot. There are times when it's incredibly mature to acknowledge the mistakes made in the relationship the first time round. Time away from a situation will have taken the emotion out of it. You might now be able to see that she was entirely right all those times she got upset when you did whatever you did. She might have since been in a relationship that's made her realise she took the things you did for her for granted.

In some cases it's responsible to accept and apologise for faults, and commit to changing and growing *together* in the future. In others, you know you'd just be re-entering a toxic cycle of everyone repeating the same behaviour and expecting the outcome to be different. Hope and optimism are admirable, but be realistic about how much has really changed. In conclusion, I'm going to whack out my old broken record again: **communicate**. Communication doesn't always have to mean a full blown deep and meaningful, it can just mean checking in. A couple of minutes of thoughtful chat can afford you months of great casual sex, or save you years of heartbreak.

Sex is funny because when you're having it you don't necessarily think about it all that much, but when you're not you're hyper-aware of it. Every time a friend / film / song / stranger mentions sex you feel as though they've seen into your soul and are trolling you personally for the lols.

In reality, no one knows, and with the greatest of respect, no one particularly cares whether you're having sex or not. It can *feel* like everyone cares because we have a collective obsession with knowing how much sex people are having, but we're never asking because we care about them, we're asking so we can scramble to compare ourselves to some arbitrary norm. As always, **quality over quantity** is what matters.

So that's the first thing: a hiatus only matters as much as you decide it matters. A new partner will take their cue from you – if you don't perceive this as a big deal, neither will they. I like the fact that you're reassured by the pandemic (hey, gotta take the positives where we can) because that more laid back attitude means that when you meet someone you're interested in, your walls will already be a little lower. You'd be doing yourself a disservice to assume people will only see you as a Man Who Hasn't Had Sex in Forever. Others won't think to see you that way unless you somehow tell them to. You're a multifaceted human with a lot of good stuff to offer. Build your confidence by identifying and leading with the stuff you're good at and proud of.

You can actively use the anxieties people might have around the pandemic to your advantage too. (Less callous than that sounds, I promise). Everyone will be coming out of this shit show with their own concerns and boundaries around personal space and human connection. That's going to give us a reason to start a conversation about consent and levels of intimacy (like, literally starting with how close to you someone is willing to stand).

Some people might want to chat online or over the phone for a lot longer than normal before meeting in person, while others will feel entirely comfortable shagging on a first not-very-socially-distant date. But the point is we *will* all have to communicate those limits. You'll both be sharing how you feel, as opposed to you feeling you're alone in having to admit something catastrophic. Next up: don't expect yourself to be perfect. There's no such thing as perfect sex anyway.

Let's flip your potential anxieties to make you a **firecracker** in bed. If you're concerned you don't know what this exciting new person might want from you... Good! **Ask!** That's what we should all be doing anyway. Some people can fall into the trap of thinking they're Good At The Sex, and therefore copy and paste the same experience regardless of whose bed they're in. No, not you. You're far more conscious and empathetic than that. This might be your first time in a while, but remember it's also this person's first time with you – the same nerves and unknowns apply.

Another thing I like is your use of 'hiatus' as opposed to the more common 'dry spell' – the latter being a desperately barren place one wants to escape from at the earliest opportunity. Get comfortable with the place you're at, and use the time to work on self-esteem and **self-pleasure**. Actively reconnect with your own body and desires. The better you understand those things for yourself, the more confident and forthright you'll be by the time you bring them to a partner.

Finally, sex is often not just about sex. It's about bonding, and feeling attractive and wanted. So take the pressure off the few moments the **mechanical** sex will be happening, and focus on all the moments around it that will satisfy your human need for connection – the laughter, the eye contact, the listening. That'll gently ease you in to the more physical parts with you barely noticing you've got that much closer to the thing you were so apprehensive about in the first place.

I grew up with rom coms that suggested there's one thing that *really* splits the population. It's not the football team you support or if you eat meat or not. It's not even whether you worship or eschew top 40 music. It's whether you have sex with the lights on or off.

On-screen relationships made me believe this was a defining feature of an adult's personality. Like you were either someone who's turned on by bathing in blinding light, or can only get your rocks off by rolling around in the pitch black.

As I've gotten older I've come to realise this is less a conscious decision that remains the same every time you have sex, and more likely the accidental result of what state you left your room in before you stumbled home with a partner, fingers more eager to fiddle with buttons than fumble around for the big light switch. However, there is something in it. There's certainly not the clear binary the films I rented from Blockbuster had me believe, but, as with everything to do with sex, there's a spectrum of needs, desires, and experiences.

There is something in the idea that some people are more at peace with the thought of their partner seeing their body under a glaring spotlight, should that be the lighting scenario they're presented with, and some for whom the notion of someone else seeing certain parts of their body up close is, paradoxically, a nerve-racking turn off. Understandably, the less comfortable you are in your own skin, the less likely you are to want to get naked ...at all, let alone in front of someone else. That plays out both physically and mentally.

It might mean we limit the positions we're up for trying for fear of how we'll look doing them. Holding shame about our bodies can make us feel less worthy of receiving pleasure, making us detach from those who want to give it to us. Negative body image can mean we distance ourselves from the physical experience, instead watching ourselves from the outside, passing judgey comment on our perceived flaws with the flair of a highly strung mum on a Facebook group. All these things rip us out of the moment, making us less present and the experience less intimate.

Our good friend porn does have a bit to answer for, not for scare-mongery, click-bait, porn-is-evil reasons, but for the simple fact that porn is ultimately a *performance*. It's not the job of porn to replicate Actual Sex. It's entertainment.

Porn has to look good. It's entirely irrelevant whether the acts being shown feel good because you're consuming sex through sight (and **sound**), not touch. Positions in porn are directed specifically because of the visual feast they serve up. Sex acts are exaggerated because simply capturing what feels good is quite frankly a bit boring to watch. This is show business darling; awkward position transitions and weird noises aren't going to make it to the final edit.

I've talked before about how benevolent filmmakers wanting you to have an unrestricted view of the action leads to those of us in the real world making a direct correlation between **lack of pubes and good sex**. Similarly, people who watch porn might be forgiven for thinking sex is only sex if the penis involved is so big it demands its own Winnebago. Look, porn performers are doing just that – performing. For you. They're making sex look good for you. But who's *your* audience? Who are you trying to make this look 'good' for? Should aiming to look good come at the expense of you and your partner feeling good? Because we make wild sweeping generalisations and deem some bodies and body parts universally 'sexy', we in turn make a value judgement about the types of bodies – *people* – that deserve great sex.

To be comfortable enough to not worry about what we look like having sex, we need to get better at being naked. I'm a big fan of general nakedness because it takes the power out of it. The more ubiquitous something is, the less of a big deal it becomes.

The thing is, nudity is not inherently sexual. We're born naked. It's literally just a state of being. We've attributed sexual meaning to simply *existing* in our bodies, and in doing so have made our lives a lot harder. (Case in point: nipples on female-

presenting bodies are censored on social media while the same biological structure on male-presenting bodies are given a free pass).

We associate nudity with sex, sex with shame, and thereby nudity with shame too. So basically we're not allowed to subsist in peace? Wicked. That we believe naked bodies are disgraceful is evident in the fact that nudes are still used as a tool to publicly humiliate people. The narrative added to a naked body is that the human that inhabits it no longer deserves respect. But women are trying to change that, and you guys might want to follow suit. Women are seeing taking nudes as self-care, as an opportunity to build confidence, be in control of how their body is viewed, and embrace both sexual, and non-sexual nudity.

Have you ever looked at the nudes women take? Like, *really* looked? With the greatest of respect lads, you need to up your game. Guys will snap an upside down pic on a Nokia 7650 and be done with it, while women could use their nudes to apply for the job of Vogue's creative director. The lighting! The poses! The carefully chosen colour schemes!

Is anyone ever going to see these photos? Maybe. Maybe not. It doesn't really matter. Editorial nous aside, it's about capturing the moments you feel really good about yourself so you can remember that that feeling is possible, and can embody it again in the future.

While we're on the subject, I've personally never understood **dick pics**, even when they were from someone I was deeply in love with and wanted to shag at every opportunity. To me, it's like sending a photo of a shin or a shoulder. It may well be a great shoulder, but it's some weird dismembered part of a whole person. I want to have sex with a whole person, and I think that's potentially a good way to think about any insecurities you might have about your own body. You may well spend every day fixating on that one thing you've always hated about your body, but your partner is wanting to have sex with *you*, not your stomach / peccs / forearm.

Anyway, get comfortable with non-sexual nudity. Take photos, go to life drawing classes, give it a couple of minutes before you get dressed after a shower. The point of looking at and thinking about naked bodies a fair amount is to reach a place where you no longer need to think about them at all. We want to be replacing any negative thoughts about how our bodies look with positive ones about how that part of our body feels.

So, what does sex – the sex *you* have – look like? Well, there are two easy ways to find out if you're so inclined. Film it, or do the livestream version of amateur porn by watching yourself in a strategically placed mirror. Watching yourself have sex in a mirror is a far cry from narcissism (although if that's why you want to watch yourself, by all means plough on). So clearly seeing your partner being turned on by you is only going to help reinforce all that body-positivity you've been working on. Plus, you're able to watch things quiver and jiggle in the mirror and connect that with what you're feeling: "Oh, it's a *good* thing that I look like that, because if I didn't this wouldn't feel like it does."

Aside from the self-love stuff, it can just be really **hot**. Mirrors give you a view of the action you might not normally get. I'm sure your partner has the best top-of-a-head in the business, but imagine being able to see exactly how they do that thing with their tongue during oral sex. Mirrors can enhance intimacy too, especially if your bread and butter positions don't normally allow you to lock eyes. Favourite position *and* emotional connection taken care of. You're welcome. I'll await my thank you card in the post.

In conclusion, the anti-beach-body champions have it right. They're out here telling us you're beach body ready if you 1) have a body and 2) go to the beach. Nailed it! The same applies here. Sex looks like whatever *you* look like while you're having sex.

If you've been hitched for years, married sex might go something like this: You're in, out, and back to watching Netflix in 20 minutes. So how can you kick-start a sex life gone **stale**, and make monogamy as **hot** as it was on your honeymoon? Follow these four tips for rekindling the **flame** inside and outside the bedroom. Back in your dating days, you probably put a lot more thought into your courtship and sex life. Though you're off the market now, steal a page from your single-guy playbook and plan a romantic rendezvous.

"I'm a big proponent of scheduled sex," says Jill McDevitt, Ph.D., who teaches sex-ed for adults. "Most people balk when I suggest this, but dates take planning, pre-thought, scheduling, and are fun!"

You used to pull out all the stops to impress your date in hopes of getting laid: A clean-shaven face. Roses at the ready. A shirt you actually ironed! The more effort you put into planning, the more you'll build anticipation and excitement—which can make all the difference between feeling "too tired for sex," and your wife slipping on (and stripping off) her special panties.

2. Be Spontaneous. In the same vein, arousal comes from the unexpected. Our brains are hard-wired to seek novel experiences, and we secrete dopamine in response to things that are new and exciting. "When there's novelty, we get a great sense of sexual satisfaction, and it's almost like we're feeling all of those same hormones that were there in the first stages

of romance,” says Bryce Britton, Ph.D., a Los Angeles-based sexologist. Start small by sending her flowers for no reason, or greet her when she comes home from work by wearing a trench coat—and nothing on underneath. Then **spice things up** by searching around your house for new spots to have sex, like on top of your laundry machine or the kitchen island. (Just make sure the kids aren’t home, and your silverware is stashed away.)

3. Re-Learn Her Desires. “People who have been having sex for decades get into this thinking where they know everything there is to know about sex,” says McDevitt. The reality? “False.” Our bodies and desires change over time, so it can be useful to check in with your partner to recalibrate your sex life. Britton recommends an exercise she calls “skin time” to get re-acquainted with each other: Lie naked, side by side, without cell phones or other distractions and without the promise of sex. “We’re looking for erotic attunement here,” says Britton.

Take time to re-learn what turns your partner on. If she was too tame for bondage back when you got married, it’s possible she’s eager to try it now. Exploring both old and new fantasies can revive the passions you had at the beginning of your relationship.

4. Have a Blast. Sex with your wife shouldn’t be a chore. Keep in mind that it’s not all about getting the orgasm—it’s about having fun. Flirting with your wife throughout the day can build up anticipation for the evening, especially if you allow some mystery. In other words, send her a few frisky texts throughout the day instead of a tacky dick pic. “Playing is what triggers dopamine, which triggers arousal,” Britton says.

Appendix VI. Women’s corpus data

First of all, I will have none of this self-blame BS about your boyfriend's boner problems. This has NOTHING to do with you, your body, or your skills in the bedroom. Why would a guy date you for two months, get all up in your body, and say he saw long-term potential if he wasn't actually **attracted** to you? That makes no sense. This is a physical or emotional problem your BOYFRIEND has. Not you!

You're right to communicate with him about this. You have to establish those open lines early on, and I'm proud of you for taking the initiative. Am I surprised homeboy was not too enthused? No, not really. Men are really weird about their penises. And I can't blame them -- there's an insane amount of pressure on guys to get it up and make sex last. Not being able to get a boner can make a lot of men feel emasculated and powerless. And those feelings don't really inspire guys to talk.

Instead of being raised to discuss their feelings or insecurities, men are too often taught to "be a man" and "toughen up." So instead of being receptive to your questions, he shut you out and left. The only way to overcome this hurdle is to sit him down and have an open discussion. Tell him how much you like him, and explain that you are just trying to understand what is going on. This is about finding solutions; not harping on problems. Obviously, there are plenty of ways to derive pleasure from sexual experiences that don't involve P in the V. But they all tend to feel a little unsatisfactory when the P is off the table entirely, don't they? If you're having a sexual experience with your boyfriend, but he's not getting off in any way, it can feel a little jarring.

You are only two months in, and this is already a pretty glaring issue. Are you willing to be in a long-term relationship with someone who doesn't get hard? Two months in, you should be tearing each other's clothes off; not already going through sexual distress. This wasn't a problem that developed over time: It's been THE problem from the very beginning... eight weeks ago. It's a pretty huge issue to be dealing with so early on.

I love sex. Anytime, anywhere, I'm pretty much down for it. Friends and family alike are somewhat flabbergasted by this notion that I could like sex "as much as a man." In our society, a man asking for sex from a woman is perfectly fine. But women are still, inexplicably, seen not as sex-seeking creatures; we're apparently the gatekeepers for men's key-master status. So when a woman wants a lot of sex and the dynamics shift, it can get weird.

First, you need to figure out: Does he want sex more too and something is getting in the way? Is he happy with how often you have sex? Or does he not want sex as much as you're having it? Then you can dig in further. Remember, though, that this conversation isn't about convincing him to have sex more often if he isn't into that. Your job is not to change his sex drive but rather to discuss it and see what you both might do differently that could work better. I think there is an assumption — even if we aren't always conscious that we're buying into it — that men will be ready and up for and interested in sex all the time. That's a lot of pressure! One thing to keep in mind for both of you, if it turns out that your sex drives don't exactly line up, is that there are a lot of sexual things you can do together that aren't full-on sex that might feel satisfying. They often sound kind of corny, so forgive me, but you can take baths or showers together, you can massage one another, you can make out without having sex, you can watch porn together, you can masturbate together. There might be something you guys *can* do more often that he's up for that helps you feel like you're satisfied.

Sex is great and you don't need a reason to be into it, but it's worth it to think about what specifically you like so much about sex that you want more of. Do you really like the physical touch part? Do you feel validated from having sex? Does it make you feel attractive? Do you feel closer to your partner when you have it? What are *you* trying to get more of from him? Work from there! I do want to say, just in case you haven't heard this or haven't been telling yourself this: It is perfectly valid to break up with someone due to sexual incompatibility. That's not cruel or evil; it's not weird; it's not wrong. For many people, their romantic partner is the *only* person they have a sexual relationship with, which makes it all the more reasonable for them to want to make sure that the sex is actually good. And not just in the sense of "when we do have sex, I **come**," but is the communication *around* sex good? Is the **foreplay** good? Are you having fun? Are you *excited* by the sex you're having with your partner? If this is the only sexual relationship you have, it needs to be good! So if you talk about it and make some changes and take some steps and things still aren't working, it's OK to walk away. It's more than OK to require the sex in your life to be good. Let me begin with the easiest of your questions: This does *not* mean you never loved him. You loved him previously, and I'm virtually certain you still love him now. The cold, crummy, thrilling, miraculous truth of the matter is that **attraction** changes over time. Rarely does it abruptly drop off a cliff and nosedive, sinking deeper and deeper into a nadir of nonsexiness. More often, it waxes and wanes. The good news about this is that even though you're less attracted to your boyfriend right now (fine, valid, morally neutral), there is opportunity for that to change, for your attraction to him to grow again.

Also, attraction isn't *purely* physical. There are all kinds of things that make up our attraction to a person, including our own state of mind. If you're in the middle of a hurricane, for example, you might not be like, "Damn, my husband Harold has really sexy calves," even if they normally get you going. It's normal to be less attracted to someone when they aren't caring for themselves, when they aren't taking initiative, when they have less of an external life going on than they did before. Often what attracts us to people is how engaged they are, how ambitious they are, or what they do *without* us. It makes a lot of sense for your attraction to have dipped. It is not evil or cruel to not be attracted to your partner, whatever the reason may be. That doesn't make you a bad person. But it also doesn't make for an easy relationship, in part because it often leads to feelings like you described of guilt or self-flagellation. I wish — and I'm fairly certain you'd agree — that weight didn't have such a cultural significance placed on it. It would be *wonderful* if we didn't ascribe any meaning at all to someone's weight. I'm sorry for him and for you (and for me and for everyone else not involved) that weight is such a thorny, painful, loaded topic. That said, unless they ask, you should *not* be sharing your negative opinion about any aspect of your partner's physical appearance.

The closest I'll allow for is begging a partner to throw away a ratty pair of gym shorts or suggesting that other shoes might look better with an outfit *kindly*. Otherwise, if it's a preference about their hair being another color or length, if it's whether they look better with makeup on, if it's about what they do with their pubes, whether they get plastic surgery, whiten their teeth, or dress like it's 1987, I implore everyone to keep their negative thoughts to *themselves*. You can compliment someone to high heaven when they wear the shirt you like or when they style their hair a certain way or whatever you choose, but to share what you don't like about their looks is a recipe for bad relationship dynamics. And weight is one of the most sensitive appearance-related topics of all. There is nothing you have to gain from telling your partner that they've gained weight and that you aren't as **horny** for them because of it. On top of that, *he* has everything to lose from you saying it. It's not like he doesn't know he's gained weight. He is fully aware, I'm sure, that his body has changed. (I also want to be clear that it's *beyond beyond beyond beyond* fine to gain 40 pounds at any time, and it's especially fine to gain 40 pounds during a years-long pandemic. His body is alive! That's great!) To be even clearer: Plenty of fat people are healthy. Plenty of fit people are unhealthy. If he has a health issue, that's for him and his doctor to discuss — NOT you. On top of that, healthiness is not better than unhealthiness. People who have chronic illnesses who will not recover from them are not lesser than "healthy" people. Health is not moral.

What I'm concerned about is his *mental* health. He has stopped doing things he previously loved or at least liked. He's stopped caring for a pet! I'm sure there are more examples that didn't make it into your letter that are not exercise-related. A lot of people have been facing worse mental health during the pandemic, but even though it's pretty normal and common right now, it's still absolutely worth taking seriously. I don't know if he is aware of or concerned about his habit changes, but if he isn't seeing a therapist or hasn't talked to a doctor, here's what I would say: "Babe, I love you so much, but I've noticed that a lot of your hobbies have kind of fallen to the wayside recently and I'm taking care of Gingerbread (I'm guessing your dog's name) a lot more than I used to. It's making me concerned about you. I need you to talk to a doctor about this. I'd also love for you to go to therapy, but I know that's a longer process. It's very important to me that we take care of ourselves and this is part of that." You can also bring up how you feel you haven't been having sex as much recently and wanting to change that. Do *not* bring up his weight. You feel **dirty** and hurt when your boyfriend turns you down. He just can't keep up with you and that's really all right, it just doesn't feel all right. Sex is a vulnerable position to be in because you're naked and opening yourself up to someone in a very unique way. Being rejected when you're in this state of sexual vulnerability really sucks. Being highly sexual and female has its ups and downs. You feel super sexy and **hot** because you're **charged** up and feel good. Sex can feel empowering. You are a **fiery** creature, lady.

On the other hand, your sexuality can also be overwhelming and you often think with your vagina instead of your brain. And this can run you into some shitty, slut-shaming situations that can negatively impact your self-esteem. When you seek pleasure as a woman, society greets you with impressed-upon feelings of guilt. You have constant sexual energy coursing through you like lava when you're a sexed-up lady. It can fuel your creativity and make you extremely vibrant and interesting... but it can also make you cranky if you don't release it. I masturbate constantly; at least once or twice a day. It just has to happen.

As a highly sexual woman, you're about two missed phone calls away from needing to drop that shit into your G-Cal as a regular 15-minute event. When you love sex, you also love to talk about sex. Since this sexually squeamish world doesn't understand women who love to talk about sex, this will confuse people and affect their views of you. It's hilarious because you can get away with saying pretty much whatever you want. You're just, "Crazy Gigi, talking about all her vibrators again!" It's also fucking annoying. No one seems to understand that these things are actually normal to discuss and your love of sexuality makes you human. No one would care if a man talked about sex the way you do. It only matters because you're a woman and therefore it's just some quirky thing about you.

I truly thought I could never have enough **sex toys**. I was wrong. When you're highly sexual, you like **sex toys** the way other women might like shoes or makeup. You wind up with more **sex toys** than Pleasure Chest. It's all fun and games until your mother-in-law is coming to town and you run out of places to hide your vibrators and buttplugs. When your main jam is sex, you have to find like-minded people. I've been lucky enough to round up quite the amazing crew of sex-pos ladies. It's a girl-gang of epic proportions, who never slut-shame and only encourage each other.

Some people might love Fashion Week. Some might like a sports game. Others enjoy nature and shit. When you're highly sexual, you want to go to Cindy Gallop lectures on pornography and the Sexual Health Expo as a part of your extracurricular activities. It just feels like home.

I am a PROUD slut. When you love sex and aren't afraid to go out and get it, people will call you a slut and a whore. They will try to make you feel bad about your sexuality and attempt to make you feel like it isn't "normal" to like sex as much as your male counterparts. What a load of crap.

Bottom line? Women love sex just as much as men do. Sex is **healthy** as can be. Own that part of you. To say -- or do -- otherwise is a fallacy. Being a highly sexual woman is a blessing and a curse, believe me. Your position is especially challenging because it's just not the norm presented in society. Women who want sex more than their partners seem abnormal; like it's wrong for you to have the desires you have.

But listen to me: A zest for sex and sexual expression is PERFECTLY NORMAL! This is nothing to feel ashamed or embarrassed about. I know it's easier said than done, but the more sexual women you surround yourself with, the more normal and comfortable it feels. Hang out with people who get what you're about. Sex is about as vulnerable a thing as there is. You're naked, you're putting yourself out there... and to be rejected when you're in that position will really mess with your self-esteem. Facing that exhausting battle, over and over again, can and will wear you down. It sucks to feel unwanted. I think it was pretty noble and selfless that your boyfriend let you get what you needed elsewhere. Sometimes, it really is the only answer when your partner isn't able to satisfy you and doesn't know what else to do. That being said, I can understand why it only happened twice. There is a big difference between having a real open relationship because the two of you want to explore other avenues of sexuality, and letting your partner have sex with another guy because you feel so inadequate.

It would be a shame to let go of someone you really love because of a difference in sexual desire. There are TONS of ways to experience sexuality outside of straight-up **intercourse**. I think you should do everything you can to bridge the gap before calling it quits on the whole partnership. We owe it to our partners to meet them halfway in all aspects of our relationships, including sex. So I suggest having your boyfriend engage in your masturbation sessions with you. Antidepressants are a bitch -- and if he needs to be on them, he needs to be on them. They can really mess up your sex drive; but if being on the antidepressants is keeping him level and out of a really dark place, you have got to work around them. Masturbating with a partner can be very sensual, if a bit unconventional. I'm much more sexual than my boyfriend, and this is a solution that really works for us by creating the closeness and intimacy I need without putting all the pressure on him to perform. Have your partner use your vibrator on you instead of doing it yourself. Or, use it on yourself and have him engage in another way, like sucking your nips or giving you a massage. He can't force himself to want to have sex, but he can participate in the action with you to make sure you're happy. If this doesn't work, the two of you should certainly seek couples counseling. Talking to someone as a couple can truly help you find real, workable solutions. You want to explore every avenue before throwing in the towel. That way you know you did everything you could.

Selfish people are the WORST, I totally agree. Unfortunately, they roam free in this big, big world. A strong woman ought to be looking for more than a guy who treats her vagina like a masturbation tool fitted only for his pleasure. It sucks to hook up with someone only to regret it later because he didn't know what the hell a clitoris was and you couldn't get off. Every human being has the right to an orgasm in every single consensual sexual encounter. But it doesn't happen automatically. While you have the right to an orgasm, girlfriend, you're not asking for what you want. And that means (more often than not, in sex and the world) that you're not going to get it. I know you want me to give you tips on how to get him to focus more on

your pleasure without having to say you want him to, but that isn't right. Ask and ye shall receive! Tell the next person you're with that you want him **to warm you up**. If he's into getting you off, he'll do it. Honestly, if you're not telling him what you want there's no way to be sure he has any idea. Not even his fault, to be honest. Most people don't know the first damn thing about vaginas. Yes, it sucks, and yes, it's frustrating; but until we have better sex ed in schools that actually focuses on the importance of PLEASURE, a guy won't know how to handle the "elusive" and "mysterious" vagina. We are forced to teach men ourselves. Which means the onus is on us to figure out exactly what works for our specific bodies first.

Now, a lot of women like you want these "warm-ups" to include head. If you want to come and head is the most enjoyable way for you, tell him you need it to get wet and/or off. Just keep in mind that he isn't obligated to go down on you, ever -- any more than a woman is obligated to give a man a blow job. No person is required to perform any sex act he or she's not into. Personally, I don't give **blow jobs** to guys I'm not into. Oral sex often feels more intimate to me than regular sex; and if I'm having a casual encounter, I'm in it to get off and leave. I'm not trying to get on my knees for some bar-dude I'm never going to see again. If he wants to go down on me, I'm certainly not going to say no -- but I'm not giving him a **BJ**. He can decide what he's feeling or not feeling.

Moving on, let's chat about taking charge and the male ego. If you want to take charge in the bedroom, then you have to TAKE CHARGE. Or at least show him! Guide his fingers to the right hotspots, or rub them yourself. Own your sexuality. If you're hooking up with some idiot who can't understand what you're telling him or showing him and he gets offended, please never call that guy ever again. There are a lot of jerks out there who try to make us feel like shit when they can't please us sexually. Slut-shaming is vile, but very prevalent everywhere we turn (and **bang**). Don't fuck a guy who would try to shame you for understanding how your own body works. You are a strong and sexy woman who doesn't have time for the lame-ass male ego. You should not be tiptoeing around a man.

I'm not surprised you feel this way at all, girl. Women spend a lot of time either conforming or desperately fighting off societal pressure to be "good girls." We get a lot of conflicting information. On the one hand, you're told by Auntie Gigi, *Cosmo*, and other sex-pos media outlets to explore your sexuality. Then, you're told by basically everyone else that you have to acquiesce to a certain ideal if you want to be "marriage material" or "worthy of dating." And those "ideals" -- the tropes in which our feminine identities have been entrenched -- can make us feel uncomfortable about our own desires. Don't listen to this horse shit. PLEASE. Being a sexual creature who wants to get betwixt the sheets and try kinky-ass stuff is **HOT** and NORMAL.

That said, let's chat about the importance of open communication in healthy relationships. A little talk about sex isn't going to scare a choice partner off. And if your new boo thang is uncomfortable with some of the things you want to do in bed, he should be able to talk to you about that. It's really about the "why." Why would he feel uncomfortable? I get your apprehension in bringing up touchy subjects with someone new. But a trusting relationship means being able to explore your sexual fantasies in a safe, non-judgmental place. You should never have to worry about your S.O. thinking you're a slut.

You have to ask yourself: is this all in my head? Am I just projecting my personal insecurities onto my boyfriend? Is he really uncomfortable? Or am I just worried that he's uncomfortable? Talk about it with your boyfriend. You say he gets shy after you **bang** -- so ask him why. This is way better than psyching yourself out and possibly creating problems where there are none. When you're cuddling or taking a walk just say, "Hey babe. I really want to talk to you about something. I don't want you to get embarrassed or feel weird. I just want to have a really honest and open conversation because I care about our relationship and your feelings are important to me."

ASK him if the things you're trying are "too much." It's OK if they are! Not every person is going to love some casual BDSM (or whatever it is you're into). Partnerships are about making everyone comfortable and compromising, sexually or otherwise. What is NOT OK is your boyfriend daring to think less of you (if he actually does). So, that's what you have to figure out first. If this guy actually thinks you're a "whore" for liking kinky sex, that says a lot more about him and his personal confidence than it does about you. If he can't separate who you are as a person from who you are in bed, that's messed up. If he thinks taboo sex is wrong, he's the one with the problem -- specifically, issues involving sexual repression. And frankly, you shouldn't be with a guy like that. Your sexual preferences and history have no weight on whether you are a good person or girlfriend material.

He should feel lucky to have such **a hot, adventurous** woman who loves him and enjoys trying new, fun, and novel **sexual exploits**. Who we are in bed isn't always who we are in life. I'm a total dom in the streets and a submissive in the sheets. It's what I like and I'm not apologizing for it. Sex is a place to explore power dynamics, comfort levels, and pleasure in unusual, interesting, and safe ways. I really don't want you to lose that **playfulness**. And you owe it to yourself to be with someone who is excited to share these experiences with you. My guess? He probably hasn't been with a woman as daring as you. But that doesn't mean he's not totally into your kinkiness, babe. So talk it out and get some clarity on his feelings. Cheers to more kinky sex for you, and fewer doubts about your man. I truly hope everything works out because we all deserve a caring guy who adores our dom-queen attitudes in bed (or whoever you want to be).

I think you should try talking about talking about sex to see how that goes. Being direct with words should reduce the possibility of missed clues and further frustration. Pick a moment when you're both calm and not rushed or distracted. When you talk with him, you might gently point out the fact that the two of you have never conversed about coitus and inquire whether there's a reason for that. You might state a desire for discussion: "I don't ever remember us talking about sex, but I'd like to talk about sex with you: the sex we're having, the sex we want, and the sex we will have. I'd like to **spice things up**, and I want to hear about your needs and fantasies." You don't mention whether the sex you're currently having is satisfying for you, and if it isn't, I encourage you to think about what you'd like to incorporate, too, and to share that with him. As always, listen actively. Make space for your partner to think and to express himself. Let pauses sit. Ask questions delicately. Do your best to answer questions he might have, and be prepared to share without direct questioning if it feels appropriate. If he needs time to reflect, that's fine—ideally this will be an ongoing conversation across many weeks, months, and years. I hope it'll be pretty intuitive from there.

If you can't talk about sex, you'll have a stickier situation. So sticky, in fact, that I'd recommend couples counseling to get the two of you to the point where you can have a frank discussion about your desires. It's the only way to get the kind of intimacy and connection you're looking for.

You don't ask me how to work on your negative self-image, but it's heartbreaking to hear you won't even allow yourself to dance. I think self-acceptance could be a crucial piece to getting to a place of healthy sexual communication with your husband, and that may require some solo therapy on your own. So in addition to having this conversation, I'd urge you to try to work on your relationship with your body. The more you love it, the easier it is for others to love it too.

The why, or more importantly how, of your finding out about this *is* pretty important. If you were looking through your boyfriend's phone or emails, you'll need to start with an apology. This might need to be an entirely separate conversation from the conversation about his sexual activities. If you found out through other channels, you can ignore this paragraph.

Even though you profess not to care about what you found out, the language you're using—"not sexually satisfied" and "what he did to solve the problem"—suggests you might be feeling like you're deficient in some way, or like you must meet all of your partner's sexual desires. That isn't always possible. Sure, people often have this pernicious idea that the two people in a couple should be able to meet all of each others' needs and desires, but that doesn't seem to be the case in practice for many people. There's a big chance that he gets something out of these **transactional** relationships that can't be replaced by a partner.

Still, you are correct—he should have talked to you about this. It sounds like you want to stay in the relationship. If that's the case, spend some time thinking about what you know you bring to the relationship, and reminding yourself of what you appreciate about him. Then bring it up. If you haven't been snooping, you can simply tell him you're aware he has other sexual partners and go from there. Pick your time wisely—when everyone's biological needs are taken care of, when you have plenty of time to talk and deal with complicated emotions, and when you aren't likely to be interrupted. Good luck. Tell him that you love how in-charge he has become—and then tell him that you're missing penetrative sex. His response will let you know whether he's open to taking your desires into account or not. You don't need to overthink this. Remember, you have just as much power and agency as the person who is in the dominant role.

You felt relief and happiness when you considered taking penetration of the table permanently, and that's a strong message from yourself. Finding a long-term partner is simply hard regardless of what your specifics are. We all have our potential deal breakers: You don't do penetration. I've done porn for 15 years. Some of my friends are non-binary, others want children raised in a specific religion, and still more are very specific about what they need to find a person attractive. Dating, no matter our particulars, is a process of sorting through potential matches until we find ones that click.

The further from heteronormative you are, the more likely you are to encounter reactions ranging from rude to judgemental. The upside is that people who are going to react in that direction tend to do so early, making the dating process that much more efficient. I like to make sure the other person is aware of my job before the end of the first meeting. If I'm on a dating app, I might get it out of the way before we meet. How and when you broach your boundaries is entirely up to you—my career is inherently public, while your pelvic pain is probably pretty personal. If you're nervous about bringing it up the first few times, warming up with general discussion of sex can be helpful, and preparing what you'll say and even rehearsing it in the mirror can also ease anxiety.

You also might make a short list of things you can do to take care of yourself if someone becomes emotionally hurtful. Leaving is a great first step. Maybe you have a third friend who can be more supportive? Sitting in water can be soothing. Whatever you do to help yourself return to balance, make sure you've got it waiting for you in case you need it after a bad date.

I wear a night guard because I grind my teeth. I have delivered at least one **blowjob** with it in, and found it just as easy as without a dental device. Presumably it will also feel better than your teeth. You probably don't need one custom made for your mouth—unless you also grind your teeth, in which case I strongly suggest it for sleeping—but there are plenty of drug-store options. You'll want to find one meant for smaller mouths.

I think I understand your reasoning, but you wrote to a [sex worker](#), and I feel obligated to mention that paying fees directly to the artist supports performer autonomy (sex workers are artists?) and self-determination—whereas paying for a subscription to a large website supports corporate control of sexual material and generally leads to homogenization and more aggressive sex or extreme power imbalances in scenes and on set. You might consider [CrashPadSeries](#), [MakeLoveNotPorn](#), or [Lustery](#) if you want to split the difference.

Do you have any insight into why you're disconnecting emotionally during sex? If you can figure out what's going on there, you can see where you need to work on things. Are you missing a connection in other areas of your life together? If so, think back on how you initially connected—what did you do together, talk about, and see in each other? If not, great—you've got somewhere stable to build from. Are you having anxiety about sex? Then you might want to dig deeper and ask yourself what you're anxious about. Is porn and your feelings about it the root of your problem? In that case, dismantle those insecurities—remember what you bring to the table and believe that your husband desires you.

Your situation seems like one where short-term therapy could be helpful. If there's room in your budget, look for a therapist with experience in sexuality, and if you aren't finding any with that specialty listed in their bio, ask when you have your initial phone call. You also might have success with apps like [Better Help](#) or similar. I don't think you owe this guy anything more detailed than "This isn't working for me anymore. Thank you for the time we've spent together, and I wish you well." Of course, *owe* versus *want to give* is worth thinking about. I'm guessing you'd like to give him a little more of an explanation, otherwise you'd have ignored his texts and moved on with your life. What you've said here seems functional—you had fun with mutual objectification until you didn't, and you'd like to end the relationship.

Having no idea how he's going to respond seems like it might be a point of anxiety for you. One of the upsides of long-distance breakups is you can easily remove yourself from the situation by hanging up. So even if you feel scared, you can remember that you're physically safe. It's probably unlikely that he'll get aggressive, but he might try to argue you into continuing the relationship. You can think beforehand about whether a shift in dynamic or terms would be appealing to you, and if that's not the case, you should remain firm on your position that this is ending. I think you've got this. When it comes to anything butt-related, we tend to get a little bit peeved on the by and large. Sure, 2014 was proclaimed "The Year of The Booty," but some of us are more into anal in [theory rather than in practice](#).

There are a few pervasive reasons why this might be: No one wants to be in pain from putting something up their butts, women are widely (and incorrectly) told they won't enjoy anal penetration, and—of course—the poop thing. Which is all the more reason to focus on the importance of anal [foreplay](#)—it can make or break the [butt stuff](#) experience. Anal sex is not like regular P in the V penetration. The vagina naturally lubricates (though you should still use additional lubricant), while the anus does not. The butt is full of taut muscles that aren't primed for being entered on a whim. You've got to work up to it. [Tina Horn](#), host and producer of the podcast [Why Are People Into That](#), tells [MarieClaire.com](#) that [anal play](#) is a way for people to expand their [sexual menu \(food and eating\)](#), but you have to consider pacing. "You can never go too slow or use too much lube," Horn tells us.

Here, we break down the many factors to consider when engaging in [anal play](#), from the longest-lasting lubes to the best ways to ease into sex. [We've said it before](#), but lube is an absolute must when it comes to all things ass-related, from [foreplay](#) to full-on anal sex. "[Anal foreplay](#) is important for the same reason any [foreplay](#) is important: Getting worked up, aroused, and ready for penetration (physically, mentally, and emotionally) creates more possibility for pleasure and can help prevent pain or tearing," Horn says. Lube is the barrier that prevents this pain or tearing. You can *never* have too much lube. Load it on there and keep applying if things dry up. Silicone lubes are easiest for anal, as they stay on longer than water-based types. The problem is that silicone lube can damage your silicone butt [toys](#). Major bummer (pun intended). Stick with silicone/water hybrid like [Babeland Silk](#) or [Sliquid Silk](#). Working the butt up to a penis or dildo takes some diligence. You guessed it! Butt plugs. If it's your first time easing into [butt-play](#), a ginormous butt-plug is not going to be a comfortable start. You won't be able to just shove a dildo or plug up your anus willy-nilly.

For beginners, the smaller the better. After you've gotten used to petite plugs, you can move up to more aggressive sizes. Start with the [Doc Johnson X Kink.com Ace](#) plug or the [Tantus Perfect Butt Plug](#). You can even buy plugs in packs of three sizes like [this one](#). Horn also reminds us to only use [toys](#) that are meant for [anal play](#). Why? [Toys](#) for [anal play](#) have either a flared or ringed base, preventing it from disappearing up the rectum. Trust us, that's the last thing you want. [Porn is a fantasy](#) that doesn't always depict accurate representations of anal sex, but it can serve as general inspiration. Horn says that porn can give you some ideas for different anal sex positions that you may not have considered before.

It acts as a part of your [foreplay](#): A way to turn you on and gear you up for the IRL anal [play](#) to come. You want to work up to anal sex cautiously. Everyone should feel comfortable. "Treat it like a slow-building symphony, not a three-minute punk song," says Horn. To loosen up your muscles, making them more receptive to penetration, use your [toy](#) or fingers to gently massage the anus. Advance slowly. Gauge your partner's reaction to everything you're doing and listen to each other's cues. "Some easy techniques involve circling the anus both clockwise and counterclockwise, and stroking the anus both upwards and downwards with however many fingers feel best," Alicia Sinclair, the CEO of [butt-plug](#) company [b-Vibe](#), tells

MarieClaire.com. When done correctly butt-play isn't painful. If it hurts, back up and try something less intense like rimming or anal fingering. "Like anal massage, fingering can help your partner relax and loosen up, while often providing additional incredible sensations," Sinclair adds.

A common misunderstanding about butt-play is that the top (i.e. the person doing the penetrating) is in control. This is not the case. The bottom should be the one directing the level and intensity of penetration. "When you're topping, whether it's with your fingers, a toy, a strap-on dildo, or a penis, be prepared to enjoy a whole lot of teasing and never rush your bottom," Horn says. Even if you're traditionally a top, you should be open to being penetrated as well. "Forget any notion you have about what 'kind of person' enjoys being penetrated or what it 'means' to penetrate," she says. "It's not like anal sex is a video game where you level up until you're an anal master: You can enjoy a little teasing on the butt-hole, a rim job, a butt plug, anal beads, a small dildo, an attached cock, the feeling of fullness, or the friction of intercourse. It all has the potential to feel incredible!"

Believed to date back 5,000 years, Tantric sex is an ancient Eastern spiritual practice. Like yoga or Zen, its purpose is enlightenment—and the philosophy transcends the bedroom into all aspects of life. In the Tantric view, sex and orgasm = spiritual awareness at its peak. And when Shiva (male energy) and Shakti (female energy) join in one sexual union, it's believed to be the highest point of enlightenment. The best part is that all of us hold the key to Tantric sex: breath. If you can keep your body relaxed and your mind clear of the mundane, your "inner goddess" can be fully present. Using your breath can spread orgasmic energy from your genitals through your entire body. This all-over tingling, in turn, leads to a more intimate connection with your partner.

And despite all the talk of a too-good-for-words orgasm, the big "O" is not the goal of Tantra. Instead, it's more about being in the moment and riding a wave of sensation and arousal (yours and your partner's). If you focus on getting to one big bang at the end, you may miss out on tons of other "orgasmic joys" happening in your bodies along the way. Tantric instructors promise that in addition to fuller orgasms, women experience them more quickly since they learn to become more relaxed and sensitized. Dawn Cartwright, a SkyDancing Tantra instructor in Los Angeles, advises that beginners to tantra follow the below tips and tricks to fully commit to the tantra experience. Transform your bedroom. Awaken your senses with flowers, aromatherapy oils, scented candles, fresh fruits, and chocolates. Include sensual fabrics like silk for added sensory elements—whether it's your sheets or your lingerie. Put on your favorite music and stand with your legs hip-width apart, relaxing your body and breathing through your mouth so that your breath travels down to your belly button. Shake your whole body—your legs, head, and butt—for one minute. Lie down, and invite your partner to come into the bedroom. "You've opened up all these places where there's tension and increased the sensitivity, allowing pleasure in," says Cartwright. "If you make love after doing that, it's more likely that you'll have a whole-body orgasm." Sit on the bed or floor, facing your partner (you're on his lap). Start by closing your eyes, and use your imagination to watch your breath move in and out of your body. Start to allow your breath to go three inches below your belly button. Begin rocking like you're in a rocking chair, moving your chest forward as you inhale, and rocking back as you exhale.

Then, as you inhale and rock forward, tighten your PC muscles; relax them as you exhale and rock back. "You may start to feel sexual sensations," says Cartwright. Stare into each other's eyes ("soul gazing") and breathe, rock, and pulsate together. "The amazing connection that you'll feel will blow your mind," says Cartwright. "Your energy fields get together, so you're both in the same state and are much more sensitive to each other. It's very electric." Continue to sit on his lap and rock together—you inhaling while he's exhaling and vice versa. As he breathes out, you'll discover yourself breathing his breath into your body and down to your sex organs. As you exhale, be conscious that you're sharing all of yourself with your partner. Then kiss and share the breath. "Intercourse is not even necessary because you're so merged," says Cartwright. "Tantra is about diving deeply into desire and pleasure. If you feel good and ecstatic, then you're on the right track."

It's a combination of the words you're saying, how you say it, and the mood you've set. Use your voice the way you're moving your body. Talk softly, look at each other or close your eyes if you feel more comfortable. You don't want to be laughing hysterically while you describe what you're about to do to your lover, but it's okay to be silly and giggle a little if that's how you feel.

You don't need to jump in with anything extreme. Something that can read as innocent as *I love the way your tongue feels on my skin* obviously means a whole lot more. If that's still too much, just whisper into your lover's ears. The heat of your breath and a few sultry words is incredibly scintillating.

Well, once you're really comfortable with it you'll find yourself using it at dinner, I swear! You'll be out hiking, and you'll say something sexy and give him a slap on the bottom. When you use it as foreplay completely out of the bedroom, it's fun and saucy and gets mental stimulation going on during the day. It's important for women to think about sex outside the bedroom so by the time you get in there, you're warmed up a bit.

For a lot of women, the point of talking dirty is to get more of what they want. Some people are totally satisfied and just incorporating it as a fun thing, which is great, but you can use it to ask for what you need or to make sure he stays put and keeps doing what he's doing. The absolute easiest way to get into it is to buy a book of erotica and take turns reading to each

other in bed. The really shy woman can literally hide behind the cover. Pass it back and forth and the nervousness breaks down. It becomes this sexy story time for the two of you that might lead to you writing your own and sharing. Having a piece of paper in front of you can be a very comfortable way to step into it. Rookies should remember that it's about relaxing and not judging yourself. Don't self-critique. I think a lot of people giggle when I tell them to **talk dirty** to themselves, but it's okay! Just think back to the sexiest scenario you've ever been involved in, and go over it play-by-play, putting words to it. Narrate it. Or use a dream situation with some **hot** Hollywood actor; it's a great way to come up with fantasy language. Trying it solo takes the fear factor out of it. You're alone, in your own world, with no one to judge you. You can't mess up! If you try it unpracticed in the bedroom, you're going to be nervous. "What if I say the wrong thing?", "What if he laughs?" No! Just say what you feel. If you love a position or angle, tell him! Say *I love it when you grab my ass*. If you're not comfortable with that word, try something different. Women can get so hung up with body part names. Some things feel very porn star and not normal to us, and that's okay. Conversely, it's okay if you're in the bedroom and you want to go to that raunchier, naughtier place. When you're practicing alone, you'll figure out what words you're comfortable with, and it's important not to try to be someone you aren't. If you're not a phone sex operator, and you don't want to be, then don't talk like it. If you're forcing yourself, your mind will go, your body will shut off, and everything will be a big downward spiral. Ask for more. Describe what he's doing. Encourage him with words like harder, faster, or slower. Give instructions along with positive encouragement. Gently guide him. One of the most empowering aspects of **dirty talk** is describing what you're about to do. You'll feel like you're taking charge and that you're about to treat him to something very pleasurable. You hold the power! You'll end up feeling like a bit of a rockstar in the bedroom.

Recently, I was in bed with a guy whose sheets I'd wanted to get tangled up in for a while. It was our third date, but I was hoping for a thousand more, and we were having the kind of intense and passionate sex that makes you believe that might be possible. I felt so close to him with our eyes locked and our bodies bendy from red wine. But suddenly he pulled away and disappeared beneath the covers, diving headfirst between my thighs. "I could do this forever," he said, his voice muffled by the blanket. All I could think was, *Please don't*. Let me be clear: It's not that I hate oral sex. A tongue feels good anywhere it roams, and I'm not bothered by the fact that bodies don't exactly taste like cherry soda all the time. But oral sex demands total surrender to the moment and the person you're with. Unfortunately, I am often stuck in my own head. Instead of being lost in ecstasy, when a guy goes down on me, I'm worrying about loose hairs, whether or not his jaw is getting exhausted, and how I look down there.

Or my mind wanders to things that have absolutely nothing to do with sex: I fret that I'm late with the cable bill or that I left the iron on. I worry that I will never reach orgasm, which usually ensures that I won't, because nothing detracts from erotic abandon like performance anxiety. All too often, receiving oral sex spirits me away from a universe of pleasure and into the troublesome territory of overeager den mother: *Are you sure you're OK down there? Do you need anything to drink? Would anyone like cookies?*

It's too bad I feel this way because the men I date seem happier than ever to go down on me. I figure it's a power thing. Decades of feminism and accessible porn have made women more comfortable with their bodies and more sexually aggressive, and guys may find it thrilling to make a woman vulnerable, to have her thighs trembling on either side of their face. It must be a huge rush to **melt** your partner **into a puddle**—which I completely understand because that's how I feel when I go down on a guy. Don't get me wrong: Many women adore oral sex, and I consider it a sign of sexual progress that a man's oral skills now give him bragging rights.

However, I'm not the only woman I know who feels ambivalence toward oral sex. When I asked female friends for their opinions, many gave less than stellar reviews: It takes too long. Guys don't know what they're doing. It requires a shower. One friend was obsessed with the notion that bits of mealy toilet paper could be stuck down there. Another simply said, "Meh."

And pop culture reflects our ambivalence. When TV shows and books portray a woman receiving oral sex (and it's a rare occurrence), it's often clumsy and unfulfilled. Take the much-talked-about scene in the HBO show *Girls*, in which a sexually inexperienced character squirms while a guy goes down on her—I can relate to that full-body cringe. Meanwhile, the heroine in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is so out of touch with her body that she doesn't masturbate, and the whole book reads like wish fulfillment for women unable to articulate what turns them on. Voila—a best seller.

In the end, the real trick to enjoying any sexual act is to know what you want and how to ask for it. So here is what I need: a dark room. Occasional giggles. Occasional quiet. A finger in the right spot helps. A vibrator can be fun. I've found that oral sex is not casual for me, which means that—I'm sorry, sailor—you can't show up at midnight, jump under the sheets, and expect to blow my mind. What I need more than anything is someone I trust and am comfortable with. Maybe that just won't happen by date number three. Till then, I'd prefer if my lovers kept their heads above the covers.

So many people complain about changes to their sex drive after starting birth control, so you're definitely not alone in this. Unfortunately, the effect of hormonal birth control on sex drive is a pretty controversial topic that doesn't have any clear-cut answers. However, according to the Mayo Clinic, we do know that hormonal birth control pills can change the level of

naturally-occurring hormones in your body. Birth control pills often can lower levels of testosterone, in particular, which is one of the main hormones that control sex drive. While this may sound like a pretty straightforward link between what's happening with you, the reality is that though some who take birth control report lower sex drive while on it, many also report no change to their level of desire. Additionally, some even report that they feel *more* desire while on the pill. Many medical professionals will say that the birth control pill should have no effect on a patient's sex drive while others say that it absolutely does. Some doctors will prescribe different types of pills, while others will recommend that their patients get off hormonal birth control altogether. It's really hard to get a straight answer from the medical community.

But what's most important here is the fact that you've noticed a change to *your* sex drive, and it sounds like that's upsetting to you. That said, it may be worth reconsidering your approach to birth control. Most doctors will say to give a pill about six months before making a decision to change or stop taking it. After that amount of time, many suggest trying a different type of pill to see if you notice any changes. If you're just not liking the birth control pill, in general, there are other types of birth control options available, including condoms, the ring, the shot, the implant, diaphragms, and I suggest you talk them over with your practitioner to decide what's right for you. Planned Parenthood also has a great page where you can compare all the different options and find the one that sounds best for you. Personally, I love talking to my clients about the non-hormonal IUD. It's definitely not the perfect solution for everyone, but it's a great one for someone who wants to see if hormones are having an impact on them. The IUD is a tiny device that is implanted in your uterus. It's one of the most effective forms of birth control, and it stays in place for up to 12 years. It doesn't have any hormones whatsoever, so you can really get a good sense of what your sex drive is like without the influence of added hormones.

Just be aware that there's a hormonal and a non-hormonal IUD. The non-hormonal version is frequently referred to as the Paragard. The hormonal version has a few different names, including the Mirena. If you want to go hormone-free, make sure you specifically tell your doctor you want the non-hormonal IUD. I also want to mention the possibility of finding another doctor. I can't tell how much you've discussed your sex drive with your doctor, but I can say that I've worked with lots of clients in my sex therapy practice who struggled to find a doctor who could work with them well when it comes to sexual issues. Some of my clients have felt too embarrassed to talk about sex with their doctor, while others have reported that their doctor didn't seem to take complaints of sexual side effects seriously. Since your doctor is the only one who can truly help you monitor and adjust any medications you take, it's important to feel like you have a good relationship with your practitioner. Finally, I have to point out that hormones aren't the only thing that controls our sex drives. Our sex drives are incredibly complex and can be influenced by a number of different factors. Consider whether you may have had any other changes in your life that might be affecting your sex drive. For example, are you under more stress than usual? Have you been sleeping less? Arguing with your partner more? Dealing with other health issues? Make sure you're considering possibilities other than the pill, and be easy with yourself while undergoing this evaluation process.

The mighty blow job—intimidating for sure, but probably one of the best sex acts to have in your pleasure arsenal. Though taking full control of your partner's penis or strap-on can feel empowering, you may have sometimes wondered if your blow job technique could use a little improvement. After all, how do you give a good blow job anyway? Sex ed *definitely* didn't cover this. Well, it really comes down to personal preferences. But for many, just getting a blow job is a huge turn on. "[People] love blow jobs because the act feels like sex, but it's a very different experience—they get to relax and receive and just enjoy what's happening in front of them," says Vanessa Marin, a certified sex therapist in Los Angeles. Plus, the visual element of watching their penis slip in and out of a mouth really gets a lot of people going, Marin adds. Not to mention, unlike a hand job or even penetrative sex, no one can replicate the sensation of a blow job on their own (obviously). Your mouth is wet and warm, like a vagina (or a lubed-up hand), but your lips and tongue are living, roving, irreplaceable works of art. It's definitely not everyone's thing (reminder: your sexual preferences are only decided by you, and no one should ever make you feel bad about them!), but when you're really clicking with a partner, a blow job can be a great way to amp up affection. "Although it may not seem as intimate [as sex] because there isn't as much face-to-face contact, the willingness to do this adds a level of trust and intimacy that is underappreciated," explains Kimberly Resnick Anderson, LCSW, a certified sex therapist based in L.A. So, back to technique, what else should you know about blow jobs aside from the...uh...basics? Well, here's exactly how to take your oral sex game to the next level, according to certified sex therapists.

1. Be enthusiastic. By far the number one rule for giving good head is actually *wanting* to give good head. "The biggest complaint I hear from clients about blow jobs has nothing to do with technique and everything to do with their partner's enthusiasm about it," Marin says. "Recipients will have a great time if they know their partner is enjoying it." (Awww!)

"There's a big difference between 'they do this for me because I like it' and someone that is actually being turned on by giving oral sex," adds Anderson. "If someone is earnest and motivated to please them, that's 90 percent of it." That's not to say you should pretend you like doing something in the bedroom if you straight-up don't. (In that vein, never do something you're not comfortable with just because a sexual partner asks you to.) But if you're considering going down on someone—which, if you're reading this article, it seems like you are—the best thing you can bring to the BJ party is a good attitude. A few ways to show your enthusiasm:

- **Make eye contact.** Don't stare the entire time without blinking (creepy), but do take conscious breaks to switch your gaze from the penis to their eyes, taking in all facial cues. (This is also a great opp to bat your lashes and "smize," you **sexpot**.)
- **Tell them how turned on you are.** You know how you can get self-conscious when a partner goes down on you? Yeah, so can everyone! So compliment how hard they are in your mouth and how excited that's making you. Or be straightforward: "I love how your penis feels in my mouth." Simple, but effective.
- **Ask them what they want.** Asking for feedback shows that you care and want to give your partner the best experience possible. You can say "How does this feel?" right before you put your mouth back on the shaft, or "Is this wet enough for you?" midway through. One question not to ask: "*Hello*, are you **close** yet?" If your partner isn't comfortable holding up their end of a Q&A during a blowie, make it simple: Try having them hold your hand and squeezing every time they feel good. It'll be easier for you to tell what moves they *really* like and gives you a nice confidence boost the whole way through.

A **blow job** might count as oral sex, but that doesn't mean your mouth has **to do all the work**. "I like to think of the mouth as providing wetness and your hands as providing tightness," says Marin. If your jaw starts to feel sore or tired a **few minutes into the job**, you're likely suctioning too hard with your mouth. So shift some of the work to your hands, counting on them for pressure. Here's your basic stroke once you've **warmed up** a bit:

- Wrap your dominant hand around the shaft, then add your mouth.
- Connect your hand to your lips—as in, press your index finger and thumb (which are making an O sign) against your lips and keep them sealed there.
- Move your hand-plus-lips up and down the penis.

If their penis is larger than average, you can keep your mouth in one place and move your wet hand up and down separately. Then from there, you can mix up your hand technique a bit. Try the Wrist Twist: With your mouth on the penis (this is still oral sex), rotate your firm wrist in clockwise circles as you move your hand up and down. Bring your other hand into **the game** once you've gotten your bearings. "Focus beyond just the penis," says Anderson. "Some people like nipple stimulation, touching their leg...make it a full-sensory experience, beyond just the pelvic region." When in doubt? Cup and gently squeeze the balls. During one of the first **blow jobs** I ever gave (to a guy I'd been dating for five months, so we were super comfortable with each other), my partner told me to spit on him. It freaked me out for a sec, but then realized he just liked it extra wet.

While everyone has their own, ahem, moisture preferences, I've found that most agree a good blow job requires a lot of saliva. You don't want to go overboard to the point that your hand is slipping all over the place, but try to do some ****sexy**** spitting (read: make it subtle) whenever the penis starts to feel a little dry. On that note, it's not a bad idea to keep a glass of water nearby to prevent dry mouth—you may need it. When giving a **blow job**, your tongue provides the warmth, texture, and wetness that they can't get elsewhere. To maximize this sensation, both Anderson and Marin suggest keeping your tongue soft in your mouth when you're moving up and down (the majority of your job), then using the tip of your tongue to trace the head and frenulum—the underside where the penis head (if circumcised) meets the shaft. Those two areas, especially the frenulum, are packed with nerve endings, so expect your partner to go **crazy**. You can also use the flat side of your tongue to lick from the bottom of the shaft to the very tip and down again, or throw in a few tongue flicks. At some point during my writing career in women's magazines, I picked up a tip from a sexpert (I wish I could remember who!) that has become my trusty signature move. (I almost hate sharing it, but in the name of **better blow jobs** for all...) As you suck, try to keep your lips in a slightly fish-face position—pretend you're about to say "purple." The word naturally contorts your lips into the perfect head-giving pout: They're slightly curled and pillowy, which makes them feel wetter and creates ideal suction. You're welcome.

A huge factor of a **blow job** is the visual component, Marin and Anderson agree—presentation is everything, people! "If someone is on the bed and you're between their legs, try going to the side," says Anderson. "Think about changing the 'traditional' view." It also allows your partner to take in the full view of your awesome bod, so give 'em a wink and strike a pose. That asses men are! That said, tell him you're sorry. He's raw. He's stupefied. He thought marriage was one long Super Bowl weekend, and suddenly he finds out he's expected to father children and take out the garbage. Yes, he's immature; and yes, you must **tame** him. But here's the rule: Never argue with a man about chores. It **kills** eroticism. Hire an impecunious college student to swab out your place twice a week, and explode a few champagne corks. Marriage is supposed to be fun. Forgive and move on. And if he doesn't wise up? Do what Cathy the Great did to her hub, Czar Peter III: Chuck him in the clink, and then swear you had nothing to do with it when he croaks. Yes. Because if you tell him no, he'll just lie and go anyway. But honestly, I'm sick of women feeling like they have to be okay with this seedy, stupid ritual so as not to appear controlling or uncool. I'd like us all to go totally gangsta, stand up, and shout at our chaps, "You're not going to that damn bachelor party!"

Ooo, girl. That is JUICY! I love a good story of an internet romance. Now, obviously my first piece of advice on all of this was going to be that you make sure he's not catfishing you. If you've Skyped a bunch of times and sent a ton of photos, you know he is (probably) who he says he is; or, at least, that he exists. So I'm not that worried about it from that perspective, but

you can never be too careful. That being said, you have to do some things for me and the people who love you. Your friends need to know which hotel you're staying at and your room number, and you need to sync up your phone so they have a pin in your location for the entire weekend. You promise you'll do those things? It may sound like overkill, but your life and safety are NEVER to be taken lightly. If you tell me you're planning to go to where he is and not tell anyone, I will scream. Going to hotels with strange men you think you know is how you end up becoming the real-life inspiration for an episode of *SVU*. Spoiler alert: You're the body. ANYWAY, back to the physical-contact thing. Yes. You can TOTALLY be intimate with this man if he ends up not being a sociopath.

Get it, girl! You do not have to wait around like a nun if the passion and fire are there. You're going to a different state (I assume?) to visit him. There is nothing wrong with making the rendezvous hot and heavy. If you really like him and he really likes you, what's stopping you? You're an adult and can make your own decisions. Don't deprive yourself of an orgasm because of some outdated idea of what makes a woman a "lady." Living by impossible standards is not good for anyone. Let your freak flag fly, mama! In fact, get yourself a new sex toy for the occasion. Have him buy something he wants to try too. Forget being coy; you two are super-into each other and should have an absolutely fabulous time together. Hotel sex is the best sex because you can get away with a lot, make a ton of noise, and the setting is a sex novelty. Keep in mind that you've been virtually dating for months. If you were in the same place, you'd most likely have already spent many nights together. Plus, it sounds like you've really been building it up with him. There is nothing like the release after a slow build. I assume you already know this, and are just looking for someone to tell you to go for it.

Listen, I'm going to try again here even though I know you don't want to hear it: Your boyfriend, based on your description, sounds like a Grade-A creep. Everything – literally everything you've said about the guy – sends up all the red flags. He thought you were ten years older than you are? Puhleeze. He did not. Or, he probably did not. He's just telling you that so you won't think he's the creep he is, dating a woman 18 years younger and only five or so years out of high school. And you only learned each other's ages after a whole month of dating? That's the sort of thing you find out about someone on the first date or two, unless you're deliberately avoiding the topic. And why would someone deliberately avoid discussing age? Well, if it's a 41-year-old dude dating a woman who's 18 years younger and probably looks and acts it, it's because he doesn't want to seem the creep that he is. He wants to be able to say, "Wow! You're only 23! You're sooo mature – I thought you were ten years older!" And then at that point, you can claim that you've already learned so much about each other and invested in this relationship, that the age gap doesn't matter (spoiler: it does). Beyond the age difference, which you said in a brief follow-up email to me that you didn't want to focus on because you want to "handle one issue at a time" and right now you're "looking at the miscommunication," what you've described here is NOT a miscommunication issue. Miscommunication suggests a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation of some kind. Your boyfriend isn't misunderstanding anything; he is deliberately gaslighting you and trying to manipulate you.

One of the appeals for guys like him in dating much, much younger women is that with young age comes naivety and it's a whole lot easier to manipulate someone who doesn't have the life experience to quickly and easily recognize manipulation like someone even ten years older than you are. That you grew up in such a restrictive home also lends itself to some naivety on your part; you've probably been sheltered from the kinds of experiences even someone at 23 may have that would help her/you discern authenticity from phoniness. So let me – let the commenters here – help you see what you are missing: Your boyfriend is a phony. He's a phony and a creep and he is not misinterpreting anything you're saying – he just doesn't like it and he wants to control you like he thought he'd be able to dating a 23-year-old very sheltered young woman. Finally, I don't care if there's zero age difference – if you're dating someone who was born the very same day as you: If the person you're in a relationship with says something that hurts you and you tell him so, and he brushes it off like your feelings don't matter or – worse! – like you're wrong about your own damn feelings, move the fuck on. Not next month, not next week. Now. Because of all the red flags, that's just about the reddest it gets. A person who cannot listen to or respect your communication is not worth the effort it would take to "bridge the communication gaps."

I've been so anxious to get to your letter. For two reasons, really. First, stories like yours seem to get rushed over quickly. I mean, seldom do we hear many people cheering for the other woman, right? They kinda get that side eye look, instead, that seems to say, GIRRRL, you weren't really expecting to feel good all the time with a man who was cheating?! And so it goes, others thinking you got just what you were in for. But I have zero patience for that kind of attitude. Because it's missing the point. The heart of this story. Which is exactly why I'm so happy you wrote to me. Because I love picking up on what others miss. They are the pieces I care so deeply about. So, FYI, I'm not going to focus on the scandal. I'm not going to perch myself up on some moral high ground and give you a lesson about being the other woman. Because I've been her too. That's the second reason I've been so anxious to get to your letter. Because you remind me of the girl I used to be. Grasping at halfhearted relationships with a full heart—without, of course, ever intending to. Trying to associate myself with a "good time" when a "good time" thrives on carelessness and when caring is the very experience that feels so good for you and I.

s mentioned, I, too, have kept on with a man who was not only in a relationship with a perfectly, respectable woman but was engaged to a perfectly, respectable woman. And while I couldn't articulate this at the time, the reason I was not only able to give myself to a man who was taken but was able to forfeit my own dignity and, most importantly, values in the process was because I wasn't myself around him, that was the romance, around him I was better.

Let me explain. The good time that kept turning me on and kept me coming back was that around him I was turned on. In his presence, it was like a flip switched. I lit up. Mentally. Emotionally. Even, physically. I wasn't lethargic. I was all light, all the time, and all perked up. That's how I was better. I could be playful and poised. I even felt purposeful. Like, I was somewhere I was meant to be. I don't know about you, but when you're the new girl in town, there's something cathartic about being invited into a home—even if that home is only a bedroom. When you've been so busy wandering around, trying to find your bearings, even if only in your head, there's something stabilizing about someone who looks you in the eyes when you're standing in the middle of his room. There's even something promising about someone who is intending on using you in a certain way. Because again, when you're just settling in and still a little bit lost, there's nothing like having a purpose.

I want you to think about what you are really **attracted** to in this arrangement of yours. Is it him and what he offers or is it the person you feel like you become in his company? Intuition tells me that you are willing to be the other woman with this man, not because he is so special or the sex is even so special, but because around him you feel like some quiet part of you begins to sing.

The mistake I made up until the very tail end of my twenties was thinking that what I was so hooked on was the “good time”—on the other person's specialness and/or our very rare connection—when the reality was, I was really just afraid of letting go of a dynamic that encouraged a side of myself that I wanted more of. I was afraid that if I ended our relationship, I would end up losing the source that connected me to a part of *me* that I was so rarely connected to. **This is the predicament that I sense your letter is actually about. You'll do anything to continue this good time you're having with this man because, if you lose him and what you have, you don't know who you'll really talk to or how you will plug into life. You don't know how you'll feel better.** And you're afraid of that. You're afraid of loneliness rushing in. That you'll feel directionless and uprooted and anonymous. But here's the thing, you're already feeling that. You're already losing that “good time” vibe. And not because you saw his girlfriend in the flesh but because the conversation and, as you so clearly mention, the appeal has already begun decreasing. And that's what you need. That's actually what you're hooking up with him for.

his is good news. You know why you were with him! And it's a reason that really has very little to do with this man himself. Trust me, *you* are the conversation and you can bring that into healthier relationship dynamics, and that healthiness, that honesty, is what's going to make a relationship feel real for you. It's going to be why it feels good. That may not be possible, and you are not to blame for what happened. Once you accept that fact, you may begin to feel less guilty. Married men do not engage in **affairs** with other men because they aren't getting enough attention from their wives. Whether your husband is a **deeply closeted** gay man or bisexual is anyone's guess. But he chose to cheat on you. Bisexual people (of both sexes) in committed relationships remain faithful -- which he wasn't for six years. Keep that in mind when you tell him (again) that you are done, then hand him some tissues and call your lawyer. Your husband shouldn't have taken a job 1,000 miles away without first talking with you. That said, what's done is done, and you need to let this play out. There's nothing to stop you from visiting. Fortunately, you and the animals are all doing well. If circumstances change, he can always quit the job and come back. When the time comes, welcome your debt-free husband home. There will be plenty of time for the two of you to hash out in person what caused him to make such a disruptive decision if there were similar jobs available in your own community.

Hey Looking, first of all, kudos to you for going after what you want and knowing what it is. And I'm excited for the **adventures** you're going to have! I'm just going to throw out some questions and thoughts for you (and anyone else looking for those rock-your-world sexual partners) to consider. Back in the day, “butt stuff” may have been something only ever seen in porn or talked about by fraternity brothers. But now that anal sex has lost some of the stigma, the butt is finally getting the attention it deserves.

And while you might think **anal play** simply means sticking things up your butt (which, yes, *is* part of it), anal **foreplay** is just as important for ensuring a safe and pleasurable experience for all parties. For starters, anal **foreplay** can happen by rimming your partner or giving/receiving an anal massage with a **toy**, finger, dildo, or penis. But keep in mind anal **foreplay** can absolutely be the main event—meaning nothing (not even penetration) has to come after it.

“Anal sex [of any kind] isn't just for people interested in kink, but it's great for all genders who want to ‘explore their sexual interest and desires,’” says erotic educator and founder of Organic Loven Taylor Sparks. But just like you've gotta walk before you can run, it's a good idea to do a lil research and prep work before diving into **anal play**. Not only will this help keep you safe, but it'll ensure you have the best possible booty sexperience. So, whether you're just looking to change things up or just want to take your time with **backdoor foreplay** before you *do* dive into penetrative anal sex, here are 39 expert-recommended anal sex and **foreplay** tips for both first-timers and experienced butt explorers.

First and foremost, anal sex shouldn't hurt. If it does, stop. Please. Sure, the sensation might feel a bit foreign, and you might be a little sore after, but pain isn't supposed to be part of it. It should basically just feel like you might need to poop during the action. Lawrence Johnson, CEO and cofounder of the leading gay men's lifestyle brand Pure for Men, says preparation and communication are essential to making it pleasurable and enjoyable. Above all, you need to “relax your muscles and breathe,” advises sexologist Emily Morse. Anal sex isn't inherently **dirtier** than other types of sex. In fact, Johnson says with

a little preparation, you can expect “the most pleasurable, clean, and worry-free experience ever.” This is because, as [clinical sexologist Kat Van Kirk](#) explains, the anus and the lower part of the rectum actually have very little fecal material in them, which means it tends to not be nearly as dirty as you think. More details on how to “prep” below. The reason: “You can absolutely transmit STDs and STIs during anal sex,” Johnson explains. This is because not only is there skin-to-skin contact and exchange of fluids, but the lining of the anus can be damaged due to friction, making it susceptible to infection. That’s why you should always use condoms—not only with anal sex but with any type of intimacy where genital fluids are exchanged.

Another good reason to wear a condom? You actually *can* get [pregnant from anal sex](#) if you’re not careful with your cleanup. Depending on where (or if) your partner ejaculates, semen could leak down/out of your anus and get inside your vagina, [resulting in a pregnancy](#). Now this is rare, but the [hottest sex](#) is the one you can feel safe about, so do what you can to eliminate unwanted reproductions like STIs and infants.

Going into anal sex, your first thought might be to give yourself an enema, and while [clinical sexologist Nancy Sutton Pierce](#) says anal douching is safe every once in a while, it’s a good practice to steer clear. “Douching destroys your rectal microbiome, so regular use is not recommended,” explains [Fabian Prado, CMO and cofounder of Pure for Men](#). Prado also adds that [anal douching may lead to higher rates of STD transmission](#), which is why skipping the enema and opting for a condom is the smart move. If you still want to clean up, some warm water splashed on your anus will give you a quick cleanse. If you are skipping the enema but still want to feel as clean as possible, both Prado and Johnson recommend eating a high-fiber diet. “Fiber for staying ready is one of the best-kept secrets of the bottom community,” Johnson says. “Aside from its many other key health benefits, dietary fiber literally keeps your sh*t together and moves it out of your system with regularity.” Having plenty of fiber—found in foods like berries, broccoli, and beans—will keep everything clean and regular. You can also opt for a [fiber supplement like Pure for Her](#) to ensure both your anal sex and your sheets stay clean.

While there’s no need to stress about fecal matter during anal sex—not only because these tips help eliminate that but also because you should have a trusting partner who supports you despite any poo—you might feel comfier going number two prior to doing the deed. Just make sure to clean well afterward and wash with soap if there’s going to be any mouth-to-anus action. And speaking of pooping, Johnson and Prado say you can expect a lil soreness the first time you go after anal, but it shouldn’t hurt. “If you experience severe pain or digestive irregularities following anal sex, it’s recommended you seek medical advice and consult with your doctor,” Johnson advises. Since the anus doesn’t self-lubricate like the vagina, using lube is vital for pleasurable (and safer!) sex. And while you might be tempted to grab some numbing lube that’s typically marketed for anal sex, Sparks highly advises avoiding those products. “Never, ever using a lubricant that numbs the anal sphincter,” she says. “This is the one place that you want to know what is painful so that you can stop whatever action you are taking, and not wait for the numbing lubricant/cream to wear off and realize there has been damage.”

Regardless of whether there’s any penetration going on, anything with anal requires lots of trust and relaxation, safety, and comfort, says sex and relationships expert [Tia Evagelou](#). If you start down the anal path tense, you’re going to have a bad—or at least not as good—time. Take a few moments to relax and get in the right headspace. And if you find the idea is too stressful or uncomfy, you can absolutely say no to [anal play](#) at any point in time. A series of [safe words](#) can include:

- A word that means “Yes, I love it”
- A word that means “Slow down” or caution
- A word that indicates “Stay in connection and talk to me”
- And a word for a hard stop.

“Sometimes people try to [have sex] through [anal sex], instead of speaking up, because they don’t want to ruin the moment for the other partner or they don’t know how to formulate their needs and sometimes even override their body’s resistance, potentially adding more discomfort to the experience,” says Evagelou. Having preset safe words will make you and your partner feel supported and safer to explore. “This can’t be emphasized enough,” says Evagelou. “When we are tense, contracting [our muscles], or disconnected from our experience, we are blocking our [pathways to pleasure](#),” she adds. If you relax and breathe, you’ll likely be able to feel a more pleasurable sensation. Let them know what you are doing and ask for their permission to do so,” says Evagelou. This means both *before* you do something and *as* you’re doing it. It might take a bit longer, but it’s well worth it as it establishes trust, safety, and connection for both to have an enjoyable experience. Plus, active consent *is* sexy, so ask away! While you might think the receiver takes a more passive role, have them guide the penetration to their satisfaction. This can feel empowering as they get to control the speed, depth, and angle of penetration in allowing their body to feel good, says Evagelou.

[Vanessa Geffrard, MPH, a sexpert for Lovers](#), recommends silicone-based lube—like [UberLube](#)—as it lasts longer compared to water-based lubes. Plus, you’ll need less of it. Just keep in mind that not all silicone lubes are safe with silicone [toys](#) (some are and some aren’t, so there’s no flat rule for this unfortch). Your best bet is to Google the [toy](#) you’re working with to see if it’s silicone before squirting some lube on.

If trying anal **foreplay** with a partner is like your Olympics, it makes sense that you might want to try it beforehand in a lower-stakes environment. Geffrard recommends the Fun Factory Limba M Dildo as the smooth, bendable nature of the **toy** allows for easy angle changes to find what's comfiest for you, and there's a suction cup on the bottom allowing you to "practice" anywhere with a flat surface, like your bedroom or the shower. Of course, having your period shouldn't make you miss out on sex, but if you're squeamish about having vaginal period sex, anal might be a good substitute in those times. "Many women report feeling more pleasure practicing anal sex during their periods while wearing a menstrual cup inside their vaginas," says Mia Sabat, a sex therapist at Enjoy. The menstrual cup is thought to stimulate the internal walls of their vagina, which can be an added plus to the sensation of anal sex.

Foreplay is so important because you have to "ring the doorbell" before entering, explains Isharna Walsh, founder/creator of Coral, a sexual wellness app. "Massage and warm up the anus before entering anything inside," she says. Be a good guest (even if it's your own booty hole), and don't just **breakdown the door (container)**.

Some people who use **toys** learn to have a small handkerchief close by, so they can rest their **toy** on a "safe" spot when they aren't using it, explains Angela Watson of DoctorClimax.com. Having little details like this worked out ahead of time can give you more freedom to enjoy the experience and not stress about little things.

It's worth it to take 15 to 20 minutes to give the receiving partner a sacral massage (aka the portion of the lower back just above the butt crack), says Walsh. "The muscles and nerve endings in the sacrum extend to the whole pelvic girdle and can help release tension," she adds. Plus, massages always feel good and anything relaxing is a bonus always.

Having your **back door** be a part of sexual **play** does not mean you need to have **anal sex**," says Gigi Engle, sexpert for Womanizer. While internal stimulation can be great too, "you can achieve just as much pleasure without ever putting anything into the anus," explains Engle. "Massage or lick around the anus," she adds, as it's full of nerve endings that can provide pleasure in and of itself. "Having clitoral stimulation is super important during **anal play** because it helps a vulva-owner to relax and become fully aroused—both critical steps in enjoying butt stuff," says Engle. Try a traditional vibrator or go for a suction **toy** like the Womanizer Liberty, both recommended by Engle.

Suction toys simulate oral sex, so while your partner might only be able to give you oral attention to one spot at a time, with a suction **toy** you can feel like they're going down on your clit while they rim you.

Warming lube can help heighten pleasure and make you even more comfortable in the moment. "The heat that is created actually helps to bring blood flow to the area and help increase stimulation to the pleasure receptors in the rectum/anus," explains Niket Sonpal, MD, of Brookdale Hospital Medical Center. The active ingredient in these heated lubricants is propylene glycol, says Dr. Sonpal, which is the same substance used in Fireball Whiskey. Some other brands use capsaicin, aka the active ingredient found in peppers.

In either case, heated lubricants should be fine for both anal and vaginal use (not in the same sex session, just like, you don't need to buy a separate, dedicated warming lube for your butt ONLY). Just be careful when touching your eyes, Dr. Sonpal warns! K-Y makes a warming lubricant that's readily available that Dr. Sonpal recommends or try Sliquid Organics' warming formula.

There are a bunch of lil muscles around your anus that can be pretty tight if you're not relaxed. And as logic follows, if those muscles and your anal sphincter are tight, inserting anything can be painful and difficult rather than pleasurable and easy. Try something like deep breathing or a relaxing massage with your partner to make sure both you and your bum muscles are sufficiently chilled out, pre-**anal play**. All sex can *sometimes* be messy, and anal sex and **foreplay** are no exception. If this is gonna stress you out to the point that you're unable to relax and enjoy yourself, try prepping your space ahead of time. Like, maybe strip the fancy sheets off your bed or cover your comforter with a soft, washable blanket and have some wipes on-hand for easy cleanup.

The butt is full of nerves (hence, the point of **anal play and foreplay**), but that doesn't necessarily mean it can tell whether something is going in or out. Again, you can put an end to things at any time, but just know that the feeling you have is probably just from the ~new stimulation~, not a sudden urge to go.

McDevitt also recommends trying a vibrating anal **toy** with a broad head. "Simply place the head against the anal opening (but don't insert!), or glide the toy in a circle around the opening. External anal vibrations add completely new sensations. Alternate between the vibe and your finger to really tease."

Just because your ultimate goal is the butthole doesn't mean you should totally ghost your partner's butt cheeks. Sadie Allison, the founder of TickleKitty.com and author of Tickle My Tush—Mild-to-Wild Anal Play Adventures for Every Booty, recommends starting off with a sensual booty massage. Using lube, "place your thumbs in the creases where the legs meet the butt cheeks and glide your thumbs along the crease from the inner thigh area to the outer side. Lift and repeat. Then put your palms together in "prayer position," placing them on their tailbone and gliding up and down their butt crack."

You know how it's basically impossible to tickle yourself? This isn't the same, but trying out anal **foreplay** on your own is informed by a similar mindset. You won't be surprised as much by your own, um, touch. It won't be the same as it would be coming from a partner, but it's a good way to feel out if you're into the sensation.

Shower sex is notorious for being hard to successfully pull off. But because relaxation is so vital here, trying **anal play** in a place where you're more likely to feel calm and loose (like the shower or tub) is helpful. Plus, if you're worried about cleanliness (which isn't a real problem, but it's an understandable concern), moving things to a place where you're already getting clean helps out.

The whole point of **anal play** is to keep it simple before working your way up. "To prepare a bottom for **sex play**, start with fingers, tongue, or a very small sex **toy** designed for **butt play**," says Pierce. "An option is to purchase a **butt plug kit** that uses several plugs of graduating sizes just for this training."

Everything that goes in should be "just the tip." The nerve endings you're trying to stimulate are in the anus and not all the way up there—hence, the moniker "rimming"—which is generally the painful part and also the part that makes you feel like you need to take a huge dump. Imagine it like a basketball hoop, and the ball should just be rolling around the rim of the basket, not actually making the basket. Does that help? I know nothing about basketball.

Vigorous jamming of fingers anywhere should not happen immediately. "So much of sex is fast—especially in porn—but **anal play** has to be prepped," says Morse. Take your time and never engage in vigorous penetration of any type until you're sufficiently aroused and ready. No, not all butt stuff needs to be done **doggy-style**. It's true it might be a little harder to get some solid eye contact going on when face-to-anus things are happening. But! There are a variety of positions to try, like lying on your back with your hips elevated or sitting on your partner's face in reverse-cowgirl. Move around until you find one that makes you feel most at ease.

The only way to know what works and what doesn't is to be totally honest with your partner about what they're doing. Pierce stresses the importance of always being tuned in to how the other is feeling and being vocal about your preferences. Vaginal, clitoral, nipple-centric—whichever feels best for you. While some people only need butt play à la carte, others can't come from anal stimulation alone. "The anal part is something that's an accent. It adds to the overall experience," says **Ian Kerner**, **sex expert**, researcher, and author of *She Comes First: The Thinking Man's Guide to Pleasuring a Woman*. (Incidentally, vagina-havers who have had anal sex report **more frequent orgasms** than those who haven't.) That being said...

"Assuming you have a considerate lover who's invested in you feeling good, I think you'd know within the first five times whether you like it or not," Kerner says, explaining that this depends on a variety of factors. "I've encountered [people] who hated receiving **oral sex** initially but love it now, and it was because they were self-conscious. It depends on your levels of inhibition, your feelings about your partner, your feelings about your body. If all these things are good to go, and you just don't like the sensation, you'll know pretty fast." "Most [people] don't get Brazilians simply to engage in anal **foreplay**," Kerner says, based on his research. If you feel comfier being hair-free, go for it, but just remember you should wait at least 24 hours to have sex after a wax since your skin will be raw and friction could lead to irritation. Q: When having sex with a new partner for the first time, would you rather it be mediocre, or mind-blowingly fantastic? If it's the latter (which I hope it is), then you've come to the right place...

Allow me to drop some tea that hardly anyone dishes: **Your sex life won't hit its peak until you master the sex talk**. You can have all the **toys**, **lube**, and sexual experiences in the world, but nothing is going to make you orgasm quite like having sex after a well-executed sex *talk* with a new partner.

Then, it's time to chat about the fun topics that are about to take your sex life to the next level. To ensure you're both having **fireworks**-level orgasms, Engle recommends asking each other these two simple questions: Make it fun. "The key is being playful, cautious, and curious," explains Engle. Try kicking off the conversation with the fun part by making it clear you're just trying to ramp up your sex life.

Engle recommends saying something along these lines: "Babe. I want us to have the best sex ever. What's a fantasy you have? What do you like during sex? What's your favorite sex position? What's your favorite **toy** to play with?" Continue with any questions you may have about their preferences, and then work your way into the other topics mentioned above. You could also try Googling for a "Yes, No, Maybe" sexual boundary list where you and your partner can discuss which of the prompts you'd be interested in trying.

You don't have to launch into it the *second* you match with that **hottie** on Tinder, but Engle does recommend bringing it up before you to take a trip to Pound Town. "Have conversations about sex before you have it at all," she advises.

"For kinks, fetishes, and anything more intense than you run-of-the-mill sex, you need to negotiate boundaries, limits, and safe words before you engage in any kind of **play**," Engle adds. "You have to make sure you are in a safe, trusting environment with someone who will respect your boundaries." In your defense, IRL convos can suck. Luckily, this doesn't have to be one

of them. "I think it's totally okay to talk about sex via text if it makes you more comfortable," says Engle (cue: major sigh of relief). "Texting is a good, neutral way to bring up something you like during sex. For instance, if you're into choking, it might be easier for you to say: *'I would really love for you to pin me to the bed while you're inside me and choke me to show me I'm yours,'* via text so you can then assess their response. If your partner is super down, you know it's safe to talk about it." Still, you're probs going to have to transition to an IRL convo at some point. *Sooo* hopefully the texts just set the mood in a super sexy way, ya feel?

Cheers to getting an A+ communication. It helps in just about every facet of life, including (but not limited to): Sliding into that hottie's DMs, calling your insurance company, and convincing your employer to give you an extra week of vacay time. Oh, and with sex too. Obviously. We all know the feeling—that sudden surge in heart rate, a euphoric lightheadedness, the **magnetic** need to close the gap between you and someone whose existence has now become your singular focus. But is it lust or love that's exciting you? And how can you even tell the difference? For starters, there are lots of ways in which love and lust can overlap. "Lust can 'feel' very much like love, especially in the beginning of a relationship when new relationship energy is at an all time high," says Taylor Sparks, erotic educator and founder of Organic Loven, one of the largest online organic intimacy shops. But both feelings of lust and love also have plenty of qualities that distinguish them as well—and it's important to tell them apart. So to help you sort out your situation, here is everything you need to know about lust vs love from the experts, including common signs of each, how to turn one into the other, and everything in between. Lust exists in the realm of the physical—it's like putting attraction on steroids. Sexuality and relationships scientist Zhana Vrangalova, PhD, defines it simply as: "You just want to fuck someone or you want to fuck them really badly." Lust is powered by the desire for sexual gratification, typically presenting as a powerful urge to achieve it. And it's due to that intensity that can make it confusing to distinguish from love.

"When you are lusting, you don't think, you just feel," says clinical sexologist Valerie Poppel, PhD, cofounder of The Swann Center, which brings inclusive sexual education and training to clients. Lust can feel all-consuming, in the way that we expect of love, but there is still greater emphasis on physical appearance rather than the "essence" of who they are. From a scientific perspective, "lust lights up our brain's reward pathways—almost like we're getting a drug hit," says Emily Morse, a doctor of human sexuality and founder of the Sex With Emily podcast, a resource for all things sex and relationships. "Lust prompts our bodies to produce more testosterone, so when we're around this person, we feel energized, highly aroused, and physical."

Love can feel intangible, as the feeling is very complex. It's a concept that humanity has spent its entire existence trying to capture in art, music, dance, and viral proposal videos, but it's not impossible to define. Simply put, love reflects deep emotional attachment—a romantic connection that, while it includes sexual **attraction**, is not defined by it like lust. And there are two main types of love. "One is the infatuation type of love, the early stage of love," says Vrangalova. This is love marked by sexual passion, being preoccupied with that person, and even being mood dependent on what's happening the relationship.

Later on comes attachment-based love. "It's characterized by a lot more calmness, and comfort and security and safety," Vrangalova says. This is a stable, long-term bond rooted in partners knowing each other, experiencing deep intimacy, and having a shared history. She adds that this kind of love usually includes vulnerability and greater levels of commitment. It's the infatuation stage of love that is particularly easy to confuse with lust, especially since that kind of love often incorporates expressions of lust. But although it seems impossible to tell them apart, there are some signs.

Start by looking at how you spend your time together. "When every encounter turns to sex or some sexual activity, it is most likely lust and not love," Sparks says. "People who are 'in love' spend almost as much time getting to know each other by doing things together other than sex, discussing their past, present, and futures, and enjoying each others company outside of the bedroom." So if you observe a physical, emotional, romantic, and spiritual connection growing that you want to nurture and grow, you're falling in love, my friend! Morse suggests listening to your body. "In [lust's] case, look for your body's arousal signs: flushed, a little hot, quicker breathing, heart beating. And then as we relax and get to know them, our body registers their presence a little differently. We're calmer around them, simply because we're more familiar." Lust is defined by intensity, but love can show up with a staggering strength in a totally different way. "They aren't comparable," Vrangalova says. "Usually, infatuation type of love is more powerful than just lust because lust is contained within a good, strong infatuation. And that infatuation is one of the most powerful emotions that humans can feel. It's a force to be reckoned with." When time is added to the equation, love shows its power. "Lust will fade over time and with age, whereas love ideally grows stronger over time," says Poppel. In fact, this reality is rooted in science.

Vrangalova says lust can last between three months to two years before our brain chemistry can no longer handle the intensity. "The emotional roller coaster is too much for us to handle." It's during this period that attachment-based love has room to form, and if it has been increasing, it will take over as the primary form of love for the couple. This is not a prescription for love's growth, this transition can happen quickly or very slowly. "If the first date ends up being really powerfully positive for people and they see potential for more, infatuation can kick in almost immediately," she says.

Rom-coms might have us thinking that hardcore crushes always yield commitments, but that's not how the real world works. Because unfortunately, most of the time, lust never turns into love, says Vrangalova. "We lust after people and that doesn't

turn into love, infatuation, or attachment.” It can be painful to feel that intensity diminish or for it to not be reciprocated or even to invest time in a relationship that doesn’t evolve into something more serious. Your feelings are valid. Just remember that “if lust never turns into love, it never was meant to be,” says Poppel.

Remember that you are likely to feel lots of ways about lots of people, and one lusty loss isn’t the end of your story. Knowing whether you’re in lust vs. love with someone is important when it comes to getting your needs met, and knowing where your lover stands can help fill in the gaps. Figuring that out is as easy as asking: “I always say that communication is a lubrication,” says Morse. “And personally, I find forthright communication sexy.” It might be helpful to begin the conversation discussing what you want and how you’d like to see the relationship progress first, then letting your partner respond so they don’t feel on the spot or ambushed into the “what are we?” convo.

Regardless, having an open conversation leaves nothing to interpretation, so even if their answer is disappointing—either because they want less or more commitment than you do—it gives you an opportunity to redesign or end the relationship if everyone isn’t on the same page.

hello, welcome to an article dedicated to all things having sex for the first time. Chances are, you may be feeling a little nervous about the whole thing. Completely understandable. Whether it's your first or 50th time, sex can be awkward—especially with someone new and especially if you're comparing it to movies, what you see in porn, or how your friends describe it. Because in reality, sex might look pretty different than you think.

For example, despite how pop culture depicts it, the whole "losing your virginity" thing is kind of BS. In fact, Laurie Mint, PhD, author of Becoming Cliterate and Lelo sexpert, wants you to take a second to reframe that whole "losing" narrative. "We have a lot of hype around penetration (especially first-time penetration). We call it 'losing one's virginity' or a more sex-positive spin, 'making one's sexual debut.' However, making this the big event is both penis-centric and not inclusive of non-heterosexual sex," she says. "I suggest instead we define one's sexual debut as their first orgasm with another person." The cool thing about adopting this mindset is realizing that it's entirely up to you to decide what you want to consider your "debut." Personally, I'd like mine to involve a very elaborate musical number, but that's just me. Kidding aside, there's no right or wrong way to have sex (as long as it's consensual, of course)—and it doesn't have to include penetration. And while sex is all about exploration and discovering your desires, you might not know what exactly you're into yet, but don't worry, that's okay. The point is, by having sex for the first time—whether it's vaginal, oral, anal, or manual—you're not losing anything. You're gaining an experience.

So relax, breathe, and enjoy the process. To clear up any and all further confusion, we've enlisted the help of some amazing experts who will guide you as you navigate sex for the first time. You've got this. It really depends. "Many people with vaginas believe that the first time they have sex it will be painful," says Tammelleo. "While it might be a little uncomfortable and awkward, it really should *not* be painful." Tammelleo adds that "hundreds of people" have told her that, when they had penetrative sex for the first time, it felt like their partner was "hitting a brick wall." Which is absolutely not what this should feel like. Lube can help with this (more on that later), but if that doesn't help get things running smoothly, you should consult your doctor or a gynecologist to see if you may have a condition called vaginismus, which makes it really hard for anything to enter the vagina.

If your vagina is burning or itching or feels any sort of bad thing during or after sex, talk to your doctor, especially if the sensation quickly doesn't go away on its own or gets worse over time. The myth that everyone with a vagina bleeds the first time they have penetrative sex is, as it turns out, very much not true. In fact, it's very incorrect and pretty problematic. Sure, some people do bleed the first time, and that bleeding is usually caused by the stretching of your hymen—a thin, delicate piece of tissue located just a couple of inches inside the vagina. But more than 50 percent of people don't bleed their first time because the hymen can be stretched during regular, non-sex activities like jumping on a trampoline, riding a bike, or running around.

Also, bleeding after sex can happen any time in your life—not just the first time. Once again, you should definitely invest in some lube to make the experience just a whole lot more enjoyable. Moving into penetrative sex, you might be wondering how something *that* size could fit inside of you. The truth is, most vaginas are between three and seven inches long, but they're actually super stretchy and can expand much longer and wider during sex (and childbirth). Very rarely, some penises won't fit, but that's why taking it slow is important.

As mentioned above, if intercourse feels uncomfortable (or like the penis is hitting a wall in your vagina), try a different position, slow things down, or try some manual or oral stimulation to increase blood flow to the vagina. Nothing is more distracting than worrying about STIs and pregnancy during sex. Even if it feels awkward, it is so, so, so important to chat with your partner beforehand about what you'll do to protect yourselves. Use a condom even if you're on another form of birth control to protect you both from STIs. Feel free to check out local clinics like Planned Parenthood for free and affordable testing.

If there's even the *slightest* possibility of sex potentially happening, you should already be prepared with a condom, suggests ob-gyn [Tamika K. Cross](#), MD. Since condoms help prevent unwanted pregnancy and STIs, take responsibility into your own hands and don't expect your partner to provide them. "Why put your faith in someone else's preparedness?" says Dr. Cross.

Despite what you might have seen in media, a P going in a V isn't what sex *is*, and Mint says thinking that is actually pretty problematic for a number of reasons. "The vast majority of people with vaginas don't orgasm from intercourse alone, so this definition is very penis-centric," she says. "Second, this definition is not inclusive of non-heterosexual sex."

If you build up penetration so much, there's a good chance you'll be extra anxious heading into the experience. Instead, try to reframe your mindset, which might help you feel a little more at ease before trying any new type of sex. Also, there's no sex hierarchy where some acts are considered more "real" than others. One type of sex isn't "more special" than other types. If you never want to have penetrative sex or oral sex or anal sex or whatever sex, don't! There's plenty of other types to experiment with, if you want to at all.

Using lube sometimes gets a bad rap as a sign that you're not turned on enough, but even if you and your body are saying "Okay, let's do this!" a little lube can make sex *so much* more pleasurable. Another benefit of using a water or silicone-based lube with a condom (by the way, avoid oil-based lube, which can degrade latex) is that less friction means the condom is less likely to tear. It's important to practice good hygiene, especially if penetration is involved since bacteria can easily make its way up the vagina or anus. Always wash your hands before and after touching another person's genitals. If this is your first time having penetrative sex, taking a bath or shower beforehand can help soothe you since the warm water can relax muscles. Additionally, afterward, you might feel like cleaning up to remove any condom residue or body fluids, but it's a personal preference, so don't feel like you have to.

The best thing you can do before you have sex for the first time: masturbate. "Take time to explore your own body and find out what you really like when it comes to how you like being touched, what areas feel pleasurable to you, and what areas don't," says sex and relationship coach [Azaria Menezes](#). This can be super empowering and make room for lots and lots of pleasure when it comes time for partnered sex, she confirms. Each person is different and preferences may even vary from day to day or mood to mood, says sex therapist and founder of [Modern Intimacy](#), [Kate Balestrieri](#). "Don't try to force anything just because you read about it in an article. Trust your own erotic truth, and let it be your guide to authentic pleasure." Pay attention to what feels good over what you think is supposed to feel good.

Whatever face you're making or how your stomach looks in any particular position literally does! not! matter! Focus, instead, on what you're experiencing, what feels good, and the sensations of how exactly your partner is touching you. "The best thing to do is to ditch the idea of performative sex so you can make room for what really turns you on," says Menezes. Hopefully this goes without saying, but no need to schedule this like an appointment. Allotting only a certain amount of minutes in your day for first-time sex sounds like an unnecessary stress you shouldn't pang yourself with.

"Give yourself time and go slow," says Menezes. Have sex when you know you don't have any plans afterward to make room for not only the sex itself, but cuddling. You may want to engage in some pillow talk, too. The sole purpose of sex does *not* need to be experiencing an orgasm, says ob-gyn [Angela Jones](#), MD. Especially the first time you do it.

Sure, it's great, and should be something both partners actively work toward as they become more familiar with their own needs, but take the pressure off. Think about sex as a way to connect with your partner on a deeper level, via all its emotional and mental benefits. "An individual's worth is not tied to whether or not they climax during sex," says Dr. Angela. I know pop culture has ingrained in us all the need to moan and writhe with pleasure at every single touch, but do yourself a favor down the line and don't set the bar for this kind of acting. Psychotherapist [Nicole Tammelleo](#) says this is *especially* important the first time you have sex with a new partner. You don't want to create any unrealistic standards, especially since many people with vaginas don't have orgasms the first time they have sex with a new partner. "If you fake an orgasm or tell your partner you had one when you didn't, it's harder to communicate your needs in the future," Tammelleo says. Plus, once you get into the habit of faking, it makes it that much harder to stop, take a step back, and be like, "Actually, what you're doing doesn't rock my world as much as you think, sorry."

Talking about sex with a new partner is a must. "In order to have good sex, you need to communicate your wants, needs, and desires to your partner," says SKYN's sex and intimacy expert, [Gigi Engle](#). This includes talking about what this sexual encounter will mean to you, if you are in a casual or serious relationship, if you and/or your partner are planning on being monogamous, and whether or not you are sleeping with other people.

And don't worry, you don't have to bring up this convo the moment you match with someone on Tinder, but you should bring it up before you take that trip to pound town, says Engle. Also, after having sex, it's important to spend some time chatting, reconnecting, and reflecting on the experience.

Whether it's your first or fiftieth time having sex, the worst thing you can do is go into it with the assumption that you know *everything* about what your partner wants. No amount of slumber party gossip about **blow jobs** and giving massive hickeys can prepare you for what your partner is actually gonna be into.

The only way to find out is to ask them: Do they like oral sex, or would they rather leave that off the **menu**? Would they rather have the music on or off? Lights on or lights off? Not only does asking questions show your partner that you care, but it may also encourage them to do the same, making the whole experience better for everyone.

Not only should you temper your expectations going into it, but also keep in mind that when you're looking back on the experience later, don't beat yourself up about it. If you waited to have sex for the first time with a long-term partner only to break up in the future, don't feel bad for sharing that experience with that person as long as you had consensual, enthusiastic fun in the moment. No new partner needs a full report of your sexual history. Whether you've slept with 50 people or zero, that's your business. Seriously, no one is entitled to your "number." However, getting intimate for the first time can be, well, intimate. If you feel like you're withholding something important to you, it could negatively affect your overall comfort level and vibe. So if it feels right to tell them, tell them. If you'd rather not tell them, then don't. But keep in mind that if you tell someone you've never had sex before and they freak, then they're probably not someone you wanted to be with anyway. They should take that as their cue to be even *more* communicative with you.

That's absolutely okay. Remember that just because you start an activity—for example, sex—you don't have to finish or continue it. You have the right to pause or stop whatever it is. No. Matter. What. Same goes for your partner, of course. "Make sure you enthusiastically consent to each and every thing the two of you do together," says sex therapist Vanessa Marin. "'Enthusiastic' is a key part of that sentence. Don't just go along with something, make sure you're excited about it." Check in with each other as things progress to make sure you're both enthusiastic about what you're doing every single time. Just because you had sex once doesn't mean you have to say "yes" every time.

A big part of enjoying sex is focusing on the sensations you're feeling instead of, for example, your nervousness (which is totally common to feel your first time, even if you know you're ready to have sex). "Deep breathing is a fantastic way to let go of distracting thoughts," Marin points out. As you're taking those deep breaths, focus on how different parts of your body are feeling and how your partner's body feels against yours—not just the obvious part, but their fingers in your hair, hands on your hips, whatever it is. The more aroused you are, the better sex is likely to feel, so don't neglect **foreplay**. For some people that means oral sex and for others it's just old-fashioned kissing.

"Resist the temptation to think of these activities as the things you do before moving on to the 'main event,'" says Marin. Whether or not you do orgasm the first time you have penetrative sex, clitoral stimulation is the key to most vagina-havers' pleasure, and vaginal **intercourse** doesn't usually provide very much of it.

It's natural to worry that you won't be "good" in bed your first time, but trust, what matters most is that you are invested in how your partner feels and vice versa, and that you two are communicating about it. "A lot of people get anxious about sexual performance, but perhaps the best quality in a lover is enthusiasm," Marin says. If you're genuinely enjoying giving your partner pleasure, they'll notice it and have more fun, she says.

Need some guidance to get you started? Simple questions like, "How does that feel?" and "Do you like when I [fill in the blank]?" give your partner a chance to express appreciation for what you're doing or to gently ask for something a little different. A common concern is that if you tell your partner something doesn't feel good—or something else would feel better—they'll feel attacked. But if they care about your pleasure, they'll be happy to hear how to help you feel it. In the moment, it can be hard to figure out what exactly you want, so it can be helpful to talk post-sex about what you enjoyed, what you could do without, and what you'd like to try next time. Teen movies and TV shows sold us a pretty unrealistic vision of what having penetrative sex for the first time looks like. It's always perfectly choreographed and mood-lit and romantic and ends in an implied simultaneous orgasm. As if. Don't expect **fireworks** the first time you have sex—whether it's oral, anal, manual, or penetrative. Sex is messy and human and flawed and often awkward, no matter how many times you've done it. It's the practice and the exploration that make sex fun. One of the best ways to have good sex is to stop worrying about having good sex. "Have fun and enjoy moments of silliness if they arise," polyamorous activist and co-founder of The Sex Work Survival Guide, Tiana GlittersaurusRex, previously told Cosmopolitan. "It's okay to laugh and bask in all parts of the **journey**." In fact, laughing together will help ease some of your nerves, relax your muscles, and help get you talking, all things that'll make your first time—and every time after that—even better. Of the 1,040 people interviewed in one academic study, nearly half claimed an "unusual" sexual interest, and nearly a third had practiced that interest at some point.

So if you enjoy or are aroused by something you think most people don't share, you're actually quite normal. Of these unusual interests, fetishes in particular are greatly stigmatized and misunderstood. A fetish has traditionally been understood as an object or body part that is necessary for sexual satisfaction. However, in another recent study of individuals with a self-identified fetish, 76 percent of those surveyed enjoyed non-fetish sexual activity, as well.

But just because something is more common than you think doesn't mean it's any easier to navigate — especially in relationships. As Kathy Slaughter, a sex therapist and LCSW in Indianapolis, explained, “We live in a society where fetishes are just one more weird thing to be weird about in this already sex negative framework that makes any sexual expression suspect.” I spoke with Kathy about how to navigate conversations and sexual intimacy when you or your partner has a fetish. “I’ve definitely seen relationships create room for fetishes that the partners don’t [have a common interest in],” Kathy explained. “Sexual compatibility is tricky business. The odds that two random humans are going to be emotionally, intellectually, lifestyle, and sexually compatible on all things ain’t gonna happen, and particularly isn’t likely to happen with sexuality. So most partnerships include some variance of ‘I’m into this and you’re not really.’” Sexual compatibility isn’t just about fetishes or specific sexual interests. It includes a number of preferred sexual styles, as well: rough or gentle, more or less **foreplay**, whether you prefer more or less penetrative sex. “If it’s ‘This is weird and I don’t know what to do with it,’ level of discomfort, that’s one problem. If it’s a complete ‘I can’t even approach this, and it’s maybe even triggering to me’ kind of a revulsion, that’s a different problem.” In the first situation, compromise may be possible. For instance, you can take turns doing things you’re more interested in, then the things your partner is more interested in. “It doesn’t mean like every single time, but it just means being aware of how your sexuality works and trying to do what you can to meet your partner where they’re at if it’s not going to be costly to you.”

This costly part is the key. Can you try something without holding it against your partner or being triggered by it? Sometimes it takes a while to warm up to something new. When I’m dating someone who is into something I’m not, I’ll keep asking questions around it until I find an angle that appeals to me. Sometimes roleplay will work. Or sometimes just seeing the joy on my lover’s face when they talk about their interest makes me want to keep feeding that joy.

Sex doesn’t have to be **fireworks** for both people all the time. Kathy explained it’s more common with people in long-term relationships who report having satisfactory sex lives to often have sex that’s just OK. “We encounter this belief often in my practice that all sexual encounters should be equally mutually satisfactory and something short of **fireworks** going off. One of the things we talk about as sex therapists is learning how to embrace ‘good enough’ sex.” A common objection when someone has an unusual fetish is that they only want to act on it when the other person is truly into it as well. If this rings true for you, I want to push you. There are many people out there (like me) who simply enjoy feeding our lover’s enjoyment. For instance, I’ve had several lovers into **urine play**. It doesn’t turn me on to pee on them (but it doesn’t gross me out either), and I love making them happy. *That’s* what I get out of it. And who knows ... maybe someday it will start to turn me on, as well. Relatedly, Kathy said, “Sometimes fetishes only need fantasy. Sometimes your partner enjoying their ay, and [what they’re watching] doesn’t matter [to you] because your face is in their crotch.”

Whatever you’re into, you’re probably not the only one. There are online communities with forums and other resources for practically everything under the sun. Depending on your interest, there may also be conventions and local communities, as well. You can ask others how they talk to their partners, and can learn how to more clearly and confidently express yourself. “Pursuing opportunities that give you a place to observe someone else talking about their fetish is a rich learning opportunity for you to then level-up your ability to go and have a comfortable conversation with someone that shares your fetish,” Kathy said. Being able to express yourself in an environment you trust will be supportive can help you build these skills before you attempt it in a situation where the level of support is unknown. But there are additional benefits to pursuing resources and community: You can learn more about yourself and work on self-acceptance.

“If we’re trying to talk to somebody about something that’s important to us, but we’re not very comfortable with it, it can be really hard for that other person to feel comfortable with it [because they will unconsciously pick up on your unease with it],” Kathy said.

2. Find shared ground first. It’s common in new relationships to have “what are you into?” types of conversations. These conversations serve many purposes. For starters, you can get to know each other and find common ground. At least for me, when there’s a scary topic looming in the shadows, it’s difficult to be fully present. But, in a relationship, there are two people with unique desires and interests ... and you’re dating this person for a reason. Maybe authentically saying something like, “I want to hear all about you first” can offer you the freedom to focus on them for a while. Ask lots of questions and enjoy this person that intrigues you. But remember that one-sided vulnerability will always feel off. When you’re there in that moment with them, heart open, it will show. In addition, these flirty and (hopefully) fun conversations can act as practice rounds for more meaty subjects. The more comfortable you are simply talking about sexual topics, the easier it will be to delve into deeper ones. “If you’re interested in something that’s more complicated or ‘off the beaten path,’ then developing a skill that allows you to make that conversation more deep and meaningful would probably serve you well,” Kathy said.

1. Treat it like any other difficult conversation Kathy recommends calling upon other difficult conversations you’ve had with your partner. What worked well in the past? Consider where you were and how you started the discussion: “For some people, an ideal context might be having dinner out somewhere together because there’s no distractions and there’s pleasurable food on the table. Other people might find that overwhelming and would respond better to going for a long

walk together. Couples who are accustomed to being more active together might find that tough conversations are easier to navigate while they're sharing a hobby like rock climbing or camping. That kind of nuance depends on knowing your partner." 2. Keep in mind what you love or are attracted to about your partner When we're faced with something we don't understand, we so often approach it with a sense of "othering." Remind yourself of all the reasons you care about this person. Being curious about what your partner gets from the fetish and why they enjoy it is just another way to get to know your partner. If it's a deep part of who they are, then their fetish may be interwoven into the characteristics you find endearing about them. It may be a part of what shaped them in the past, or is tied to what drives them, or how they see the world. Keep in mind that whatever you feel for each other is real and genuine. It doesn't change based on this knowledge. People are complicated, and one interest does not define them. But it can deepen your understanding of your partner in unexpected ways. 3. Don't take their fetish personally Many partners worry when a lover's sexual interest isn't something they can (or want to) fulfill, such as an interest in a particular length of hair, breast size, or race. Kathy encourages partners to not view this interest as a perceived lack in themselves. There are cultural myths that when you find the right person, you fulfill them completely. "And that's just not true," Kathy explained. "If you you think about it, there are probably a lot of your partner's needs that you don't quite meet." 4. Be honest with your partner and yourself. Can you imagine telling your partner that the goal of this conversation is to build stronger intimacy? If so, then start by offering reassurances. However, some fetishes get under people's skin more than others, Kathy explained. When you can't offer these reassurances, but you're committed to this person, it's probably time to consult a therapist. "The vast majority of people are uncomfortable talking about sex [with anyone], and it's not at all uncommon for that to include the people that they're partnered with. And then you throw fetishes on top of it — the degree of shame and embarrassment and confusion just multiplies. When you've got that kind of emotional stew going on, people behave really strangely and people in relationship with them do, as well." This strange behavior often includes snooping — looking at your partner's email or browser history. Conversely, it may feel safer to leave your partner hints instead of talking to them directly. But a direct conversation is better, because it helps both partners work together. "When I work with couples, I am constantly reminding them to look at it as they are on the same team trying to solve this problem together. Not that we're trying to figure out who did what wrong and who did what right, and whose fault is it anyway. It's much healthier and productive to say to your partner, *How can I come alongside you? How can I support you with this problem that we're dealing with together?*"

When You Can't Find Common Ground. Sometimes common ground just isn't possible. I've had many many conversations with people whose partners unable to have the conversations they need to strengthen or repair intimacy. In some cases, it's the person with the fetish. In others, the partner is unable to be open-minded (maybe even with themselves) about any unusual interests. There may be layers of things going on, like a history of abuse or toxic religious baggage. It may be impossible to unwrap our relationship with sex and physical intimacy without also unwrapping our relationship to religion, our gender, our families, etc. My advice in these situations is to bring in a neutral third party: Find a therapist that is kink-friendly. If both partners a ready to talk, then couple's therapy may be best. Otherwise, whichever partner is trying to initiate the conversation can use the guidance of an individual therapist. Are long-lasting healthy relationships really dependent on good sex? Researchers from the University of Guelph collected data from over 700 couples that had been together for over 20 years. In the majority of cases, over time a couple's relationship satisfaction increased while their sexual satisfaction decreased. Long-term couples are satisfied with their relationship even if they aren't sexually satisfied. Per this study, that's the norm and goes against what this idea that you need to find the most amazing sex ever for your relationship to thrive. But of course decreased sexual satisfaction isn't guaranteed. Part of what your family might be saying is that sex and other physical intimacy *can* get better over time for many reasons: A couple's communication can improve; they can continue to learn what each other enjoys and try new things together; they can grow more physically comfortable with each other, as well as their own bodies. For some couples, this increased sexual intimacy may very well be the glue that holds them together. What I personally take from this is that everyone's life and relationship is different, and there's no one solution for happy, successful relationships. There are commonalities among many people's experiences, but what works for them won't magically work for *all* people, and it can be oppressive to individuals who try and conform. Your families seem to be important to you and your fiancé. If part of that closeness comes from listening to them and respecting their advice, perhaps you could ask them for different advice. If the sex lives of your family members is stellar, can they give you advice on how they've improved it? Besides sex, what has helped them remained satisfied with their partners?

Is Sex Inherently Intimate? And Is It Weird to Not Want Sex Very Often? Researchers are finding that some individuals experience a disconnect between sexual acts and romantic feelings. For some this disconnect may be a mental disconnect while for others it's physical. It may can come from past trauma or it could be biologically-based. Many things impact how we experience and relate to sexuality, physical and emotional intimacy, like our religious and cultural upbringings, our past sexual experiences, and our unique genetic makeup. This is why I think the concept of intimacy is subjective. If you ask

two people to describe what intimacy means, you'll probably get two very different definitions. The same with love. The same with sex.

I think there are a lot of folks who carry around shame or embarrassment believing that what they experience as intimacy or love is different than others and therefore less valid. It's simply not true. We're just not talking about our unique experiences enough to break down the norms. Speaking of which, have you heard of "grey asexuality?" Grey asexuality is a term that describes the spectrum between asexuality and sexuality. It can resonate for folks who experience infrequent sexual attraction or desire. There are discussions about grey asexuality on the online forums of the [Asexual Visibility and Education Network \(AVEN\)](#) that might be useful to you. Specifically, if you're worried about being "weird" for not wanting sex frequently, you might be comforted by others who share your experience. Can Other Acts Be Just As—If Not More—Intimate Than Sex? YES. You are not alone in finding other acts to be just as or more intimate and fulfilling. In [an earlier post on sexual scripts](#), I wrote about how our common definitions of sex are so limited and hetero-centric.

There are many reasons why people can be less interested or not interested in all in genital-based sexual acts but still want to share physical intimacy with others. You two have found ways to share a deep connection that are fulfilling to the two of you. And I have no doubt that the longer you're together, the deeper this intimacy will grow through acts like running your hands through his hair. This is why I think it's so important to remember to trust your own perspective. What you experience is valid. What you desire is valid. It's not that your family is "wrong." They're just not *you*. They're speaking from their experiences. You can listen to them and consider what they have to say while still honoring your own opinion. Whenever you're in doubt, find a quiet place, and listen to your own heart. You seem to be doing well for yourself. Disclaimer: As always, there's no perfect solution to any relationship issue and you may benefit from the help of a neutral, trained professional. Jera is not a licensed mental health professional, just a writer living as authentically as they can.

There's pretty much no such thing as "outside the norm" when it comes to sex and relationships; frankly, most questions boil down to the same few themes, and their details are what makes them personal and consuming and heartbreaking. The thing about [ethical non-monogamy](#) is that it requires partners to be *extra skilled communicators*; it demands of its practitioners excruciating honesty, vulnerable admissions, and [painful conversations](#) ad nauseam. It *also* promises a lot of **hot**, hot fun, so please understand that by no means am I trying to sway anyone — least of all you or your wife — away from the practice. I'm just contending that consensually non-exclusive relationships are a little like playing a video game on hard mode.

Everyone in every relationship *ought to* try to [communicate openly and honestly](#) with their partner at every opportunity. The rub is, as humans, we frequently suck at it. We all bungle our attempts to convey our feelings from time to time, but the sheer *amount* of communication, the number of communicative opportunities if you will, rises in a relationship with more open doors. You have to be able to talk about your wants, your needs, and your desires; more specifically, you have to discuss what you want from your partner, but also what you want from other people, what your partner gets from you, and also what they get from other people. You have to lay your sh*t *bare!* Ideally, you've opened these lines of communication and strengthened them well before deciding to [explore non-monogamy](#).

What you and your wife have right now, to steal a line from *Cool Hand Luke*, is a failure to communicate. Or, maybe not an outright failure as much as an avoidance of communication. I'm thrilled you and your wife were honest enough with each other that you figured out that you're both turned on by her being with other people. That's amazing. Some people are 10 years into a relationship, having sex they don't particularly care one way or another about, because they don't know [how to bring up their kinks or fantasies](#). So good on you guys for going there!

That said, when you opened up the relationship, what were the [boundaries](#)? What were the deal-breakers? What were things you wanted to hear about each other's outside sex lives, and the things you didn't want to know? There are a million more questions and of course, they all don't have to have solid, static, immovable answers, but it seems maybe some of them went undiscussed when you originally decided to incorporate ethical non-monogamy into your lives. So now you and your wife have some backtracking to do, and it might be kind of painful, and it might change the relationship and what the guidelines are for openness. But guess what? This right here is *exactly* the kind of excruciating honesty open relationships are all about! Woo! You get to practice! One of the biggest things that stood out to me is that you know she's sending **hot** pics to other people, but she's telling you that she doesn't have those photos. How *do* you know about these photos? Are you snooping? Is she lying? Are these Snapchats that disappear? When you say you like seeing sexy photos of her, does that mean you have seen them before? What the heck is going on here, basically.

As you mentioned, it's totally fair to not send anyone — even your spouse — photos of yourself. You do not need a reason to keep said photos private, or to not take them, or to take them and not show anyone. It's good you understand that and also that showing a spouse might feel different than showing a hookup or a stranger for all kinds of reasons. You've clearly come at this with empathy, having already thought of some not-crappy reasons why she might not be sharing these photos with you. That said, since you do somehow know about these photos, and since you're feeling weird and hurt about them, you need to revisit your [boundaries](#). (And, depending on how you found out about the photos, that may lead to establishing new boundaries for both of you.)

In my imagination, it goes something like this: “Babe, I really want to talk to you about our boundaries with non-monogamy. I’m so into you being with other people and them being turned on by you, I’m still interested in this, but I need to discuss something that’s hurting me.” Then explain how you know about the photos and how you feel about them. The more honest you are about how *you feel* without being blame-y or shame-y, the better.

Maybe your new boundary is that you guys will only share nudes with people outside the relationship if the other partner has seen them first. Maybe it’s a blanket no on sharing nudes with external partners. Maybe after you explain how the situation is making you feel, she’ll explain why she hasn’t been sharing them with you. Perhaps you said something one time that made her think you’re actually not that into nudes, and you don’t remember saying anything of the sort! I don’t know, and right now, you don’t either.

Here comes the hard part (and no, the conversation above was not the hard part, I’m sorry to say). This talk might not go the way you want it to go. It might end up uncovering more hurtful information or elicit a painful response. She may not want to give up sending photos to other people because it gives something to her, and she may *also* not feel comfortable sending them to you. You cannot, of course, make anyone do anything. All you can do is lay out your own feelings and invite your partner to help you come to a new agreement that works for both of you.

In an ideal world, she’s completely unaware that she’s been hurting you and is gung-ho about addressing it. But if she isn’t, you’ll need to think long and hard about whether your agreement to be non-monogamous still works, because, after all, the idea behind ENM is that it should enrich the lives of both partners (or every partner). It’s not an agreement that one person gets to have whatever “freedoms” they want, with no input or compromise around them. In your letter, you ask if your request is reasonable, but I don’t know what your actual *request* is going to be, and maybe you don’t yet either. I will tell you that your pain is reasonable, and very addressable. However, to get there, you have some difficult conversations ahead of you.

What you’re going through is frustrating but also incredibly normal. Quite literally every single couple I know has had disparate sex drives at one point or another. It’s a situation where no one’s wrong or right, they just have different needs, and sometimes that kind of problem is the hardest to address. It’s not like you can just *make* someone want sex less or more. More like this. But what you can do is... talk about it! Talking about sex can be so uncomfortable, even when it’s with a partner you love and trust. I mean, I talk about sex for work and it took me a while to get over the idea that talking about certain topics is embarrassing — even if *I* didn’t find them shameful! But it makes sense — our sexual desires, our assumptions, our turn-ons, and our turn-offs are so closely linked to memories marked by shame, guilt, worry, or insecurity. The only way to get comfortable with talking about sex is to keep doing it and doing it until it’s less uncomfortable.

My recommendation is to have a date night, something low key and relaxing like eating dinner together (don’t bring this up on your axe-throwing date) and mention to your boyfriend using words that feel authentic to *you*: “Hey, I would love for us to talk about how often we’re having sex. I would love to be having more sex with you than we are now, and I want to hear what you think about that.” Right now, I — and possibly you — have *no clue* why you two aren’t having more sex.

Maybe he’s worried he’s initiating too much, maybe he’s bad at initiating, maybe he has a very low sex drive naturally, maybe his sex drive has fallen recently due to health issues or medication, maybe he’s feeling insecure about something, maybe he’s not satisfied with the sex you guys have been having for some reason, maybe he’s struggling with a mental health issue, maybe he thought you didn’t want sex as much, maybe a previous partner told him he was too **horny**, maybe work is stressing him out, maybe he’s interested in another “type” of sex but he’s worried you aren’t into it so he’s been holding back. There are lots of potential pieces of the puzzle! I recently found out that my college ex had a baby, something he wanted very badly when we were together. (I did not.) I found out by checking his only available social media account, Facebook, and to make things *worse*, he unfriended me a while back, so I’m only able to see public photos of him, his new wife, and their baby. I was pulling up a photo to show a friend who never met him, and I was perversely glad for the reason to check in guilt-free and see what he was up to, and secretly thrilled by the new information I gleaned. Why?

Because I’m human! At one point in my life, I was putting this person’s junk in my mouth — why *wouldn’t* I be at least a little curious about where he is now? I mean, it’s a very, very odd thing, to go from loving someone dearly to not being in their life at all. It’s almost eerie that love that deep can fade or end. I think we all have a fascination with our exes and where they are to some degree. I wasn’t even in love with my ex, and I’m still utterly gripped by his milestone developments. Even my incredibly stoic and non-sentimental boyfriend occasionally looks up his exes! In fact, everyone I know does! Including my parents! And if we didn’t have social media to check, we’d be wondering about them just the same. *That* is normal.

However, and I think you know this, checking in on an ex every single day is *a lot*, and it doesn’t seem to be giving you anything. In fact, it seems to be actively harming you. So why can’t you stop? I have some guesses, but I also think the answer is multifaceted. Yes, the behavior is painful, and you’d like to quit, but likely — if you look closely — there’s something the habit is giving you. Perhaps you feel like you deserve to be punished for ending the relationship, and this feels like a small daily dose of your own medicine. Perhaps you miss the person you were when you were together, even if you don’t miss him. Perhaps you’re subconsciously trying to sabotage your current relationship (I can’t imagine your current boyfriend knows how often you ex-stalk) for some reason. Or maybe you’re not unhappy with your current boyfriend, but you feel like

you don't deserve to be happy with a partner at all after ending your previous relationship. I don't know, but it's very possible that this routine gives you some kind of bad feeling that fulfills a belief you have about yourself.

Alternatively, sometimes our brains are just d*cks. I don't know how much you know about intrusive thoughts, but sometimes our brains get really, really stuck, for no good reason! What makes it worse is that often we get stuck on the fact that we're stuck, and then we start to feel really bad about it. We obsess, and then we obsess about obsessing, and the habit or the thought grows more and more powerful, a snowball rolling downhill. Unhealthy habits are much harder to break than healthy ones, unfortunately, because, as you described, doing harmful things can feel very... indulgent (see also drinking an entire bottle of champagne or dropping \$150 on a coat you don't need). The silver lining here is that you are not going to do this for the rest of your life; I promise you. Someday this man and his life will become less interesting to you. I'm not saying you'll never have the urge to check in on him. I think you will! Again, very human and normal. The key right now is to figure out how to change your habits, not your desires.

My absolute strongest recommendation is to block him on everything. (At the very least, you need to mute him so that pictures of him, his new girlfriend, and their blue heeler puppy named Steve-O cannot possibly pop up randomly.) If you don't think you can do it yourself, ask a friend to smash that block button for you.

To soften the blow, pick a date in the future — I'll suggest Jan. 27 for no good reason at all — where you'll unblock him for a day and check in, guilt-free. By then, you might not even be that excited about it. If you make it successfully, treat yourself to a pedicure or a slice of Snickers cheesecake or whatever makes your heart sing. Until Jan. 27, remind yourself that you don't actually *like* checking in on his Instagram. Imagine all the things you can pick up if you put down this habit and all the guilt you feel around it! Learning Portuguese, being more present with your current partner, or becoming a certified scuba instructor. I promise you can and will stop and it will feel really good when you do. I also promise you'll always wonder about the person you used to love, just like all the rest of us.

First of all, you deserve alone time simply because you're human. You don't need to list reasons why it makes you feel better in order to justify it. That your boyfriend doesn't respect your need for alone time is just as upsetting as his lack of regard for your sexual preferences. Both behaviors are violating, self-centered, and manipulative. Healthy people *want* their partner to get time for themselves, to recharge in whatever ways make them feel good.

Now, onto the sex issue. I'm surprised by his claim that “a regular, healthy sex life is part of a good relationship” when *he* is the one who has, unintentionally perhaps, created a toxic pattern around sex. His position here — essentially, no alone time, no turning down sex — is certainly far from what anyone would consider “healthy.”

It's perfectly understandable if your partner isn't thrilled with the amount of sex you two are having, or with the ways that sex is being initiated. It's common, if sad, to occasionally feel undesired by your partner, or to feel dissatisfied with your sex life, and it's something that can be addressed. The problem here is *how* he's choosing to respond. You've expressed to him your wants and needs, and he's pushing back against those asks using *multiple* tactics. That is what is incredibly troubling to me. *That* is red flag central.

Having a partner turn down sex doesn't feel amazing. I get that. Obviously, it would be great if our sex drives always lined up with our partners. That said, a more healthy conversation about sex would go like this, “Hey babe, want to have sex tonight?” and then the other person might say, “I'm not really feeling up for it, but I'd love to make out/watch TV together/cuddle tonight.” Or whatever! And then both parties would feel totally fine. Maybe one person would jerk off! Maybe they'd watch porn together and not have sex! Maybe they'd both fall asleep and do nothing! But if you can't have basic conversations around sex without it becoming a rejection, that's concerning.

Imagine sex like eating. If you said, “Hey, do you want to have lunch now?” and your partner replied, “Oh, no, I'm not hungry,” and then you got upset, that would be absolutely bananas, right? Being horny and being hungry are very similar. They're body feelings! You don't always want as much as your partner at the same time, and *that's perfectly OK*. You don't owe your partner a matching sex drive. The simplest answer here is for you to break up with this man who has no respect for your needs and boundaries, and a problematic connection between sex and validation to boot. That said, I know it's much easier said than done to just walk away. If you stay, it's imperative that you make a *massive* change before your own relationship to sex gets violated or harmed. I don't want you to look back in a year and think, “Wow, I used to really enjoy sex, and now it feels like something I owe the people I date.” I don't want you to feel used, undervalued, or objectified. Those are *not* feelings you should ever feel in a relationship.

I don't know your boyfriend beyond what you've told me here, but my best friend's ex exhibited similar patterns. He was insistent about sex and guilt-tripped her when they didn't have it “regularly,” which to him meant every day. He was jealous when she spent time doing anything that wasn't actively validating him and their relationship. The whole thing was, for her — and possibly for him! — exhausting. Theirs was not a caring relationship equally imagined by both parties. Instead, she was a slot machine, and if he put in enough “nice guy” quarters, he might win sex. If he didn't, he made her life miserable,

becoming clingy and whiny to the point where it was easier to just have sex with him to sate him for a little while. Maybe reading this written about someone else will allow it to sink in: That's not love, it's manipulation.

One of the most concerning parts about this situation is that you've had multiple conversations — big conversations by your own admission — but he still doesn't seem to be capable of hearing you or adjusting his behavior. If you're set on staying in this relationship, though, I think you have to have a lot more big talks, starting with a real Come To Jesus talk. The talk to end all talks.

For me, it would go something like this. "Byron, you are doing things that are deal-breakers for me, and if they continue, I will have to leave. This isn't an ultimatum; it's a hard boundary. I've been telling you what I need for a while, and you have either not understood me or not been willing to listen. If I turn down sex, it doesn't mean I don't want you. It's not a measure of my love. I'm not giving sex to you as a gift. Sex is something *we* do *together* because it feels good. Even if it didn't feel good for me, I'm concerned that you still would want to have it. Help me brainstorm a solution that works for us, because I'm at the end of my rope." Ultimately, he needs to understand how much his actions have hurt you, and want to change his behavior as a result of that — not simply because you're "mad" at him.

I would also *insist* on couples therapy and individual therapy for him. He needs to get to the bottom of why he believes that he is owed sex by a partner, and why that's the only way he's feeling validated by you. Together, you might find it helpful to have a third party there who can listen to what's going on and point out unhealthy behaviors and patterns. Without that, I'm concerned the current dynamic will slowly chip away at your self-assurance that your own needs are just as important as his.

In relationships where sex is a particularly sensitive issue, some couples implement the red, yellow, and green light system, where green would represent, "*I'm **horny** as hell, all systems go,*" yellow would mean, "*Let's take a shower together and see where we're at,*" and red would signal, "*I'm exhausted, raincheck?*" Putting sexual desire in code words removes some of the emotion behind it, which can help minimize feelings of rejection. Additionally, suggesting a different intimate activity is usually helpful in making that partner feel like they're still desired; something like, "*I'm not up for it now, but I can't wait to spend all day in bed with you this weekend,*" or "*I'm beat, but let's cuddle and watch the new show you've been talking about.*" Again, not having sex with your partner isn't a rejection of them, nor does it signify a lack of love. Your partner equating those things isn't healthy, but it *is* understandable — almost none of us has a perfectly sound relationship with sex and desire. Him taking those feelings out on you, however, isn't OK, and it's a dynamic that has to change if your relationship is to continue.

Sweet person! You could do "better" by not blaming yourself for what your boyfriend's penis does or doesn't do. I understand that you want to please your boyfriend, and that's lovely, but sex is always much more complicated than "right" or "wrong."

That said, it's possible your boyfriend simply doesn't **come** from oral sex. Some people don't. Some don't **come** from **intercourse** or **hand jobs** or anal. Some people don't get erections. Some don't get very wet. Bodies are weird and finicky and marvelously complex. It's possible, also that the issue is not physical, but emotional. Maybe your boyfriend's too in his head about oral, or is concerned about you feeling bad if he doesn't **come**, which makes it that much harder for anyone to feel great. It's possible that he might be too used to the precise grip and feel of his hand, if the only way he's ever **come** is through masturbation. Any number of reasons are possible, and many of them have nothing to do with you at all.

What can you do, then? You can be honest with him about your feelings. You can listen respectfully to each other's fears and needs and desires and then decide together what you might do to meet those desires and calm those fears.

But mostly, I'd suggest you relax. Orgasms are fun but they are ultimately meaningless. An orgasm doesn't "prove" anything about whether the sex we just had was satisfying. To make the point in a gross way, scientists can bring a corpse to orgasm by stimulating the sacral nerve of people who are brain-dead but still on life support. Was it good for them? Who knows. An orgasm is just an involuntary response of our nervous systems. What DOES make sex satisfying is pleasure and intentionality and **play**.

This is, coincidentally, how we learn to be better lovers — through practice, through experimentation, and through communication. It would probably be good for both of you to take orgasm off the table entirely for a little while and focus instead on pleasure and play. Set a 10-minute timer and take turns experimenting with each other's bodies. Use your hands, use your mouths, nuzzle, lick, nibble, tease, tug, and maybe even slap (be gentle!). Try different positions. Try different movements. Try lube. Get weird with it! Make noise. Laugh. (You don't mention it, but I sincerely hope he is oral-sexing you in return. If he isn't, then all the more reason to do this.) As you experiment with different sensations, try to notice how you feel. Are you having fun? Are you turned on? Are you **warm**? Are you excited?

You might find that as soon as you stop fixating on "giving" someone an orgasm, it comes like lightning. (And remember, no one can give another person an orgasm; it's an involuntary body response. You can help it along but you can't "make" it happen.) We get so obsessed with wanting our partners to **come** that it gives us anxiety and our partners anxiety and then no

one is **coming**, except those lucky research cadavers, I guess. When we focus instead on pleasure and making ourselves feel good, then all endings are happy endings.

I can't tell from your very short letter what indicators have made you feel like your boyfriend might be using you for sex — does he only text to booty-call you and ignore other messages? Does he balk when you ask him to take you on a date? Is he not very available, except with his penis?

If your needs aren't getting met in this relationship, however, I would encourage you to take a hard look at what you'd like to change and say something about it. Require actions and not just words from him in response. (This is important. Talk, as they say, is cheap. He also might shape up for a few weeks and then revert back to old habits, which is also something you should watch out for.) For instance, if he bails as soon he's had an orgasm, and you'd like him to spend the night sometimes, then make that a request. If he puts forth no efforts to show up for you in the ways that you require, then send him to the Landfill of Relationships Past (LORP). Remember, too, that you are in charge of your body and your genitals! If you are doing what you please with them, and taking ownership of those decisions, then you can't be "used." Because you have the power. You always have it. It can't be taken from you. Your boyfriend can still be a bad partner or a bad lay, but he can't use you for sex if you don't grant him that ownership.

Often, when we talk of being used, what we really mean is that we feel unappreciated. If your relationship feels one-sided, and you seem to be the one putting in all the effort, scheduling all the dates, picking up all the tabs, and so on, then that's going to make you feel you're being taken advantage of. So, again, take stock of what's upsetting you, speak up about it, and act accordingly.

It's good to keep listening to those gut-level discomforts. If something feels off, it's probably because it is. The onus is then on you to do something about it. And if the off-ness doesn't change, then find someone else who will devote the kind of care and attention that you crave. There are times where I am glad to be alive when I am, and I am glad to be alive when people on the internet started publicly getting on the **ass-eating** train. As with any sexual act there can be hundreds of reasons why someone finds it **hot**. The baseline for me is this: if people are clean, there is not really an inch of the body that I don't find sexy or wouldn't want to lick/kiss/touch and the ass just falls into that. Not only does it fall into that but it's full of wonderfully sensitive nerve endings. I get that people find it gross, that they can't remove the ass from its famous function of pooping, it's a very fair stance. However when I'm in the heat of the moment I just don't think about any of that stuff, our bodies are there for pleasure and connection and I welcome any form that takes.

Ass eating has been around for as long as there've been asses and tongues, and, as with all the best things, it was big in the queer scene before the straights twigged to it. But certainly **ass eating** is having a moment, whether it's Marnie bent over a sink while Desi goes to town in *Girls*, Nicki Minaj rapping "He toss my salad like his name Romaine" in *Anaconda* (salad tossing = anilingus), or this wonderful moment in Patricia Lockwood's novel *No One Is Talking About This*:

*"Our enemies! What if they had planted the thing about **eating ass**, to make us all suddenly want and claim to **eat ass**, to talk constantly about our devotion to eating ass, to pose on our album covers with napkins tied around our necks and knives and forks poised over delectable asses? God, it was genius! No swifter way to bring down the supposed citizens of the free world than to transform them into a nation of ass-eaters!"*

Seriously, though, people find ass-eating **hot** because, well, it feels good! Or because their sexual partner/s like how it feels and getting someone else off also gets them off! Cultural taboos change over time. Back in the day the idea of **eating pussy** was met with derision and disgust and we've moved past that (most of us at least), and now it's time for the ass to have its moment. Elena: For some, it is the very fact that the butt is often considered taboo and off-limits that makes it so gosh darn irresistible. For others, anilingus is a pretty ordinary and helpful precursor to anal sex. As someone with a vagina, it's assumed that is the part of my body that someone has sex with, and I think diverging from that is fun and makes sex feel more expansive. (I have a theory about how even straight people's tastes are now evolving beyond the procreative imperative but we can save that for another time). When it comes to sex, especially hetero sex, I think any activity that provides more routes for pleasure than your stock-standard penetration is welcome.

Yes! The pop culture examples I used all have women on the receiving end of anilingus but straight men are having their salads tossed too. And given that anything to do with boy butts has always been coded as gay, and hence a no-go zone for straight guys, it's bloody wonderful that straight boys are starting to let down the walls of restrictive heteronormativity, allowing themselves be vulnerable and - bonus! - welcoming new types of pleasure. All of this said, just because everyone else is talking about **eating ass** doesn't mean they're actually doing it, and even if they ARE all doing it, that doesn't mean you should feel any pressure to do it if it's not your jam! The moment something starts to feel like a norm it risks becoming coercive (i.e. everyone else is doing it so I have to do it too) but you shouldn't ever do something sexual that you don't want to do. Sure, it's great to explore your boundaries, especially with someone you feel safe with, but some people will never be ass eaters and that's totally fine.

Elena: If you do want to try it though — or you want someone else to try on you —, there are two things that are key for me to feel comfortable and ‘hot’ with **rim jobs**: being clean and being waxed between the cheeks. The latter is very much a personal preference and not something that everyone will feel the need to do, but for me it’s the only hair removal I do, I love the ritual and find it quells any butt-related nerves. If I haven’t had the chance to shower (water wipes are good too!) or I’ve had an upset stomach, then no, the idea of someone eating my ass does not appeal. It’s cool and exciting that we each have different turn-ons so don’t worry if something is or isn’t your cup of tea, it’s all a rich tapestry baby. And remember, no sexual act should be assumed as on the table - always ask before eating.

Alison, Arielle and Jia all say that with the majority of their past sexual partners, the sexual encounter ended when, in Jia’s words, “the guy **came** and rolled over.”

“Literally only one guy, one out of everyone I’ve been with, would do other stuff with me when he finished,” says Alison. However, she acknowledges that, “sometimes, they physically can’t,” referring to the fact that, anecdotally speaking, many men are out like a light after they’ve orgasmed. The fact remains, however, that in their experiences, sex typically ended before the women had the chance to experience any pleasure themselves, whether through orgasm or other mental and physical fulfilment. And the guy **coming** was seen as the pinnacle, the natural culmination, of the sexual encounter.

And while men haven’t been inclined to keep going once they’ve **come** so their partner can achieve pleasure, the women say they regularly continue with sex even when they’re not feeling it anymore, just so the guy would **come**. “Oh my gosh, so many times,” says Arielle. “There have been times I’m just like, can you come already.”

“I think I’ve only ever told one guy to stop,” says Alison. “I was like, nah this feels weird, just stop, and he was okay with that. But a lot of the time I’m thinking, oh this is boring.” Why are women so willing to power through with sex so that their partners can get their pleasure - even when we’re not receiving it ourselves? “I think we’re conditioned to think that sex revolves around men,” says Arielle. “If you watch porn, it’s always a guy **coming**. You hardly see the girl coming unless you specifically look for a girl having an orgasm.”

Jia seconds this, saying, “The cumshot being the money shot - that says it all.” Jia says the natural focus on men’s pleasure is so ingrained that for a long time, she didn’t think to question it. She says that she felt disappointed at the end of sex, “but nothing in me was urging me to ask for more. And I guess it is that internalised feeling that it is all about the guy and pleasing him, and you are the tool that facilitates that.” “So it didn’t even occur to me that I could also have an orgasm after the guy has ejaculated.” On the flipside, if male orgasms are centred in the examples of hetero sex we see in porn and media (which is often where people see examples of what sex looks like for the first time), it means we’re also always seeing women as the objects of desire facilitating that pleasure, rather than people with desire of our own. When you internalise that objectification, it can create a dynamic where you’re almost watching yourself from the man’s perspective when you have sex. Jia says, “I found myself self-objectifying during sex a lot when I was younger, and wondering, oh, does my hair look good? Or is my flab gonna fall out in a not-attractive manner? And all that takes away from the pleasure of sex and being able to enjoy the moment.”

A recent TikTok trend has women literally looking at and criticising themselves through the male gaze. In the trend, women film themselves from a low angle to mimic what their sexual partners must see when they’re on top during sex. The joke is that they’re mortified to see what they look like in that position, sometimes smacking their phone away to stop filming. The captions are typically something like: “Cool. Never going on top ever again.” We see the same dynamic play out in the amount of prep and grooming straight women and men put in before sex, even when it’s a casual hookup. “I put in so much effort,” Alison confesses. “I get my face done, make sure it’s all shaved, wear lingerie. That shit takes time.” In a staggeringly accurate observation, Arielle retorts that guys on the other hand, “have holey undies that say Monday on it and it’s fucking Wednesday. Like, what are you doing?” Arielle says she’s stopped putting in as much effort into doing herself up before a hookup as she used to. Both she and Alison also say they’ve “simmered down” a bit from their hoe phase days, with Arielle declaring that she “won’t accept mediocre sex anymore.” If we look at the data collected in her notes app records, her frequency of hookups this year has gone down by 80 per cent compared to last year. Jia had her own hoe phase during her 20s, taking a “trial and error” approach to sex. One encounter that helped her realise she “wouldn’t take shit in the bedroom anymore” was a one night stand with a friend at the time. “After we had sex, we just rolled over and laid on his bed. And in the darkness, he said, “You’re on my side of the bed, MOVE.” And it was... I was rattled. It was so cold, the way he said it. I felt so sad. Like, how have I let this guy be inside me? So things like that happened. And I think they were turning points for me in realising that I don’t enjoy sex sometimes. And it’s my responsibility to make sure I don’t have those experiences anymore.”

Drawing a boundary against bad sex is a good first step. But from there, how do we start having better sex? One answer lies in decentring men’s orgasms during sex, which also means moving away from only thinking about sex as a penis going into a vagina. I was obviously attracted. We started chatting and very quickly moved on to texting because I hate chatting on the app. I always say, “Dude, here’s my number. Do you wanna just chat with me?” The first text he sends me is, “If you don’t mind, would you want to do a phone call first to gauge our chemistry?” And I was like, “What?” Like an interview. Somebody

actually told me that this was their best advice for online dating. You can get a sense of your conversational pace—if it works or if it doesn't. So I was not opposed. And then he was like, "Or FaceTime?" FaceTime is so personal. I don't FaceTime with my best friends. I don't even FaceTime with my sister. And you're usually at home and don't look cute. But I'd decided to adopt a "Just say yes" attitude, just be open to opportunity so I could figure out what I like and what I don't. So I FaceTimed him. We ended up on the phone for an hour just talking—the typical kinds of things, like, "What do you do?" The conversation flow was going really well. He looked even better on FaceTime than he did in his photos—boys suck at Tinder profile pictures. It was a Friday night and I was like, "Oh my God. I don't need to even leave the house. This is brilliant." And I did like him. We start messaging and he starts telling me how he's moving to New York in three weeks. I hate that. The idea of planting seeds to me is so frustrating, because the whole point of apps is to meet people in person as soon as possible, because otherwise what you get is a pen pal. I didn't want this to become that. He was finishing up a master's degree at an Ivy League out of state and was going to move to New York to get a business degree. He's like, "I want to get a hotel room and come to the city this weekend. And then we can get to know each other in person in the hotel room." I said, "What?" Like, "Don't you think we need to do the other things first? Can you at least pretend to want to take me out to drinks first before getting to bed with me?" He's like, "Well, why can't we do both? Why can't we have both?" When I started resisting him, he said, "I just feel myself falling for you." We'd been talking for five days. He said, "I love your smile and your personality, and the fact that you're ambitious." A big profession of love. I felt like an escort, with him asking me to meet in a hotel room and "get to know each other." I was like, "You seem too nice to be this sleazy." He said, "I don't want you to feel that way. I don't want you to feel pressure. I just feel like we're attracted to each other, that's obvious. Why beat around the bush? Why can't you get to know somebody sexually?" Then he said, "We wouldn't just be fucking. We'd order takeout."