

TIME

Why Are We All Having So Little Sex?



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By **BELINDA LUSCOMBE** October 26, 2018

Matt, a 34-year-old data analyst from Texas, and his wife dated for seven years before getting married in 2013. When they didn't live together, they had sex every time they saw each other. After they moved in, however, he says things changed. Their sex life became inconsistent. They'd have a really active week and then a month with nothing, or just one at-bat. It began to hurt their relationship. At one point early in their marriage, Matt's wife got pregnant, but they weren't sure the marriage was going to make it, so they terminated the pregnancy. Part of the problem for Matt, who spoke to TIME about his sex life

on the condition his last name wouldn't be printed, was that he didn't know how to talk about sex with his wife.

"I really didn't want to be pushy on that issue," he says. "She has the right to say no, always and forever." Yet he struggled with the notion that no was the automatic answer. He didn't understand why they weren't having more sex.

If Matt's story sounds familiar to you, you are not alone. Americans are not having sex. **They're not having sex in droves**. According the **General Social Survey**, a profile of American behavior that has been gathered by the National Opinion Research Council at the University of Chicago since 1972, the fraction of people getting it on at least once a week fell from 45% in 2000 to 36% in 2016. One study of the GSS data showed that more than twice as many millennials were sexually inactive in their early 20s than the prior generation was. And the sharpest drop was the most recent, in the years 2014 to 2016.

The indicators of a falling bonk rate are everywhere. In 2016, 4% fewer condoms were sold than the year before, and they fell a further 3% in 2017. Teen sex, which is monitored by the Centers for Disease Control, **is flat** and has been on a downward trend since 1985. And the **fertility rate**—the frequency at which babies are added to the population—is at a level not seen since the Great Depression.

How can this be? After all, this is the era when we've finally torn down many barriers. The social stigma around premarital sex is gone, hookups are not considered shameful, and the belief in limiting partners to one side of the gender line is no longer universal. Our many forms of contraception have reduced the risk of serious physical consequences. There are a wealth of technological assists, including apps like Tinder to help willing partners find each other, endless free online porn to rev the engines, and the Dr. Fils—tadalafil (Cialis), vardenafil (Levitra), and sildenafil (Viagra) to overcome the most common physical limitations for men.

One thing that hasn't changed is that sex remains as exhilarating as it was for our ancestors. In fact, a safe, consensual romp with a loving and appropriate

partner is one of life's rarest things, a delight with no downside. It will not make you unhealthy, pollute the atmosphere, give you a hangover or a rash, deplete the ozone, put anyone out of business, increase income inequality or further divide the nation. Unlike many nocturnal diversions, it will **make you feel better the next day**. It's pure, free fun.

Yet the slump in pumping doesn't seem to be a blip. Nearly 20% of 18- to 29-year-olds reported having no sex at all in 2016, an almost 50% rise over those who were celibate in 2000. "The downward trend is very real," says Philip Cohen, a sociology professor at University of Maryland, College Park.

Jean Twenge, professor of psychology, San Diego State University who wrote **a much-cited paper** for the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* about the downturn, says one big reason is marriage—but not for the reason everybody thinks. Married people, it shocks nearly all married people to learn, have more sex than single people of the same age. This is just a matter of logistics: people who work at pizza parlors eat a lot more pizza than others do too, because they don't have to go out and get it. Married people get it on more than their single peers because they're already going to bed with someone who is theoretically willing to have sex with them. The supply side of the equation is solved, only demand remains a riddle.

The median age for first marriage in America is now **29 for men and 27 for women**, up from 27 and 25 in 1999. While young people are often more likely to live together than their forbears, the number of cohabiting 20-somethings has remained constant, while the number of 20-something spouses has dropped. And increasingly, young people are eschewing having a relationship with one partner and instead hanging out with a loosely assorted group of friends. So there's just less of that convenience sex going on. "When people are young and healthy and have the highest sex drive, they are less likely to be living with a partner," says Twenge. "So there's a larger proportion of people in their early 20s who are not having sex at all." This is not just in the U.S. Brits are delaying even longer. More than **40% of Japanese 18- to 34-year-old singles claim they are virgins**.

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But married folks are falling down on the job too. "The number one issue that I deal with in my practice is discrepant libido and low libido and no libido," says couples therapist Ian Kerner, author of the book *She Comes First*. Twenge's study shows that the highest drop in sexual frequency has been among married people with higher levels of education. Counterintuitively, parents with kids younger than six had the same amount of sex as their forbears had, but those with offspring in the 6 to 17 age range were doing less of what made them parents. This may reflect the more child-centric family lives that people are leading and the stress of modern parenting. "We know there's more parenting anxiety," says Cohen. "That could be turning into generalized family anxiety." Only the 60-somethings are bucking the trend—possibly partly with a little pharmaceutical help. Unlike the retirees who came before them, they're putting the sex back in sexagenarian, with an average coital frequency that is slightly higher than in two decades earlier.

Of course, it must be noted that sex is not necessarily a volume business. There are folks who have epic sex 12 times a year who are as happy as rabbits and those who knock boots every night who are as lonely as sharks. Nearly all therapists warn against using frequency as a meaningful measure of sex lives, marital competence or virility, including sex therapist and author Marty Klein: "People come to my office and say to me, 'Tell me how often people have sex,' and I won't do that," he says. "Why are we problematizing the fact that Americans might be having less sex than they used to? The difference might not be meaningful in people's actual lives."

Moreover, many couples have perfectly good reasons for not having sex: they're exhausted, they're unwell, they have too much else to do, or the kids are in the bed with them.

Whether most couples see less sex as a problem or not, the change is real and can't all be explained only by people staying single longer. There have to be

other factors as well—something that insinuated itself into our lives some time around the turn of the millennium. The most obvious candidate may be the one you're carrying right now: that device that provides ready access to unlimited entertainment or companionship all the time, everywhere. Since broadband internet became widely available in 2000, “there are so many other ways to entertain yourself,” besides sex, says Twenge. “Whether it's your smartphone and social media or streaming video, there's just so many other things to do.”

In August of this year, two economists released a working paper that looked at the link between television ownership and sexual frequency in lower income countries, where TV ownership was less common. After **analyzing data from 4 million individuals** in 80 countries they found that having a TV set in the home was associated with a 5% drop in sexual frequency.

In wealthier countries, a wider array of entertainment alternatives are even more likely to sneak into the bedroom. An online study of 1000 Americans commissioned by the bedmaker **Saatva** found that almost 40% of them bring some sort of internet-connected device to bed with them. About 60% of them browse the internet from bed and 24% of them have fallen asleep while doing so. And the more highly educated seem to be the worst offenders. The poll found that affluent Americans were more likely than Americans as a whole to fall asleep while using email, working or paying bills or finances, activities more likely to raise stress than libido. “Technology in the bedroom, unless it's technology that's being used in a kind of pro-sexual or sexual arousing way, can be a major deterrent to some of that kindling of sexual arousal that's really necessary for desire,” says Dr. Lori Brotto, an obstetrics professor at the University of British Columbia and a sex therapist.

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The trend for using beds for other activities beside sleeping and making whoopee is so robust that Saatva is marketing a bed that adjusts to the seated position to make such activities more comfortable—and sex less so. “We're one

of the few species that mate face to face,” says Sue Johnson, a Canadian psychotherapist and the developer of Emotionally Focused Therapy, a well-regarded couples counseling technique. “And face to face interactions seem to be going down everywhere. We turn to technology instead of to people. And that’s happening in sexuality just like everywhere else.” Indeed, the sex toy industry has been growing briskly, and is now worth about \$15 billion annually. Astonishing numbers of hours of pornography are being consumed online. And VR porn is taking off.

The jury is out on porn’s effect on people’s sex lives. Some therapists, including Kerner, recommend watching so-called ethical porn as a way of getting couples to talk or as an arousal technique, but many others say it can be used as a way to avoid both talking and having sex, or that its constant use can drive a wedge between couples. Therapists have to had to adjust. “The biggest change that I’ve seen [since 2000] is women complaining about male use of pornography,” says Klein, who leans pro-porn. “I get that at least once a week.” Johnson, who leans more anti-porn, says the therapists in her practice cite porn use as one of couples’ most prevalent problems.

One theory is that porn has become so easy to get—any smartphone owner with wi-fi and headphones is set—and the video quality so lifelike, that “busy people are retreating from the work it takes to have sex with another person,” says Mark Regnerus, an associate professor of Sociology, at University of Texas and the author of *Cheap Sex, The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy*. “They think, O.K., this is close enough.” Pornhub, one of the popular sites, says its usage spikes between 10pm and 1am, times when people are bedding down next to their loved ones.

Some **neuroscientists have argued** that for some people, heavy porn consumption can recondition the brain’s arousal circuitry to respond more to the screen than a human. Other experts think that’s just more moral panic. Twenge’s study found that people who watched at least one pornographic movie in the previous year were *more* likely to have sex than those who didn’t, although she notes that that’s not a very useful data point in the era when Pornhub can boast that every five minutes it transmits more data than the

entire contents of the New York Public library.

Another complicating factor is the changing conversation around consent and sexual advances, shaped by the #MeToo movement. Matt, along with several other struggling sexual partners interviewed as background for this story, expresses uncertainty about where the boundaries lie. “There was always the question in my mind, *am I being unreasonable?*” Matt says. “It’s not for me to determine how legitimate her excuses are. And I don’t want to do it if she’s not into it.” But he admits he’s also possibly overthinking it. “It’s probably a cultural thing, where there’s such a huge emphasis on consent and of course, there should be,” he says, “but it’s important to the point where I’m not even willing to question whether there is something wrong in the relationship.”

Therapists have noticed the shifting dynamics in both male and female patients. The notion that wives might feel duty bound to have sex, for example, now seems quaint at best, and a tricky grey area has opened up in the space between persistence and coercion. This adds a layer of complexity to a subject couples are already notoriously bad at talking about. “I do think that conversations around consent, and what consent is, are becoming much more real,” says Brotto. “This can mean that partners are initiating less, that they’re sitting back and waiting for the female to initiate. And then feeling rejected when they don’t. In my clinical practice, I see a lot of that.”

Brotto is part of a wave of researchers—many of them Canadian, since funding is hard to come by in the U.S.—looking into the complex issue of women’s sexuality, and particularly into low desire. One of the more alarming discoveries to emerge so far is the large number of women for whom sex is actually painful. “One in five young women 18 to 29 experience chronic pain during sex,” says Natalie Rosen, a psychologist and associate professor at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. Sometimes the discomfort goes away of its own accord, but only 60% of women seek treatment and, in **a study released in 2017**, Rosen found that a third of women never mentioned it to their partners because they were ashamed, felt inadequate or feared being dumped. “Or they end the relationship preemptively without telling their partner why,” says Rosen.

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It's a sharp contrast to the predominant image of youthful sex as a fun, easygoing hookup culture, and one that may have a ripple effect for women down the line, as sex becomes a source of anxiety instead of joy. "I worry about what that means for a lifetime of sexual difficulties," says Brotto. "I think there's much more work for us to do in that area."

Gender dynamics are having an impact on one of the oldest and sturdiest reasons for abstinence: mates are not finding each other attractive. A controversial thesis was put forward in a [2012 paper in the *American Sociological Review*](#) that looked at sexual frequency and chore distribution and noted that "households in which men do more traditionally male labor and women do more traditionally female labor report higher sexual frequency." The secret to sexual chemistry, the study seemed to suggest, was for men and women to stay in their gender-stereotyped lanes. That conclusion makes sense to Regnerus. "The more alike men and women are at some level, the less interesting we become to each other," he says. "We are interested in that which we are lacking. It sounds unenlightened, but similarity is not conducive to eros."

Others say that's hooey, pointing to other studies that find that in homes where guys pitch in more women are less stressed, less resentful and therefore more frisky. And their relationship is better. A [study released in April from the University of Utah](#) sliced it even further: Men who share the grocery shopping report more sexual satisfaction than men who don't, but if they do more cleaning and laundry than their spouses, sexual frequency goes down. For women, washing up was the libido killer. The lead researcher, Dan Carlson, assistant professor of family and consumer studies, says that actually both could be true but for different reasons. Homes with more traditional gender roles have sex more often because the men get to make the call as to whether

there will be any knocking of boots. And homes which are really egalitarian also have more sex because the couples are communicating better. “People want an egalitarian marriage and they’re happier when they can achieve one,” he says. It’s the murky middle, those couples desire gender equality but haven’t quite perfected it, who are sleeping facing the wall.

There are other more prosaic reasons for desire discrepancy, the academic term for the unhappy situation in which one partner wants a lot more sex than the other. Some of them are hard to budge, from genetics to upbringing to hormonal changes to sexual history to general healthiness. The higher national rates of obesity are one likely libido-dampener, for example. It’s not just that obese men are more likely to be impotent. “There are health implications,” says Maryland’s Cohen, “and there is the social self-image, feeling attractive. I would suspect that could be an issue.”

Then there’s that other public health epidemic: depression. “What we see in every national probability study is that depression usually rises to the top as being one of the leading causes of low desire, specifically,” says Brotto. Treating depression can further hurt desire; many common medications for depression, such as SSRIs, are known to lower libido.

Might people have become less happy since the turn of the millennium? Twenge thinks so. Another of her papers found that general happiness among those over 30 had dropped markedly since 2000. There could be any number of reasons for the fall, but one intriguing suggestion is that the economic trends that have shaped the current political climate may also have affected our more intimate relations. A [2011 study from the University of Virginia](#) that analyzed GSS data between 1972 and 2008 found that Americans reported being happier in the years when income inequality was at its least fierce. Not because they were richer, the study suggested, but because times seemed fairer. Many more American workers have had to embrace erratic work schedules because of the 24/7 work economy. That makes it hard for couples to spend time together.

Economic pressure might also explain why young people have experienced the steepest falloff in sexual activity. Millennials and the generation below them,

sometimes known as Gen Z, have suffered more in the great recession. Young men, especially, are finding it harder to find jobs; **more than a third of 18 to 34 year old Americans** are living with their parents, an arrangement usually mutually exclusive with having a stellar sex life.

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All of this, Twenge believes, may be leading to a generation of young people who are not interested in partnering up, who are moving away from pair bonding into the sexual equivalent of a gig economy. Instead of having a job or steady relationship, people have to find their own opportunities. “The theme that comes up over and over [among young people] is the increase in individualism,” says Twenge. “More focus on the self and less on social rules.” That would explain both the openness around sexuality and the drop in actual sex.

Whatever the causes, say therapists, the solutions don’t change. Couples need to figure out their sexual needs and wants, communicate them and perhaps put down their phones for a while. That doesn’t always mean having more sex. Cohen notes that the drop in the rate of sex has not been accompanied by a rise in divorce. “I could imagine a positive scenario where people communicate more and better within relationships now and the low interest partner talks the high interest partner out of it and they’re happier,” he says. “I think it’s important to consider that this might not be bad.”

This was the key for Matt and his wife. “Sometimes there’s still a libido mismatch,” he says of his marriage now. “And not every week or month is perfect, but my wife and I have learned to communicate better, and we’ve both learned to listen better.” Things are going so well that they recently decided the time was right to try to start a family and in October they found out they were pregnant.

Conversation, it seems, is the most powerful type of foreplay. “If you want me

to give my advice to the American public about this, it would be, ‘Talk to each other about sex,’” says Klein. “Talk to each other about how you want to feel. Do you want to feel attractive? Do you want to feel desired? Do you want to feel young? Do you want to feel graceful?” And then you have to decide if you’re willing to put the work in, he adds. “Gourmet sex is like gourmet cooking,” he says. “They don’t happen without focus.”

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