

What is it like to live without sex?

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Ruben Paul

NO SEX PLEASE: Sara Campbell says her year of celibacy gave her a new perspective on her relationship with men.

Sex. Everyone is doing it, right? Middle-aged mums are going to tantra workshops, infidelity websites are booming and perfectly polite couples are trying a little light bondage. But while some women are busy pushing sexual boundaries, others are taking the increasingly radical decision to be celibate or are having celibacy forced upon them.

Sex therapist Gia Ravazzotti says there are many reasons women stop having sex, ranging from hormonal changes to medical conditions and lack of desire.

When sex is not rewarding or fulfilling enough, desire can be sapped, says Ravazzotti. "For most women, sex fulfils their need for intimacy, but many women lose interest in sex if their partner is not an attentive lover who enjoys sharing pleasure."

She adds that sex improves bonding, physical and mental health and overall happiness. "Having good sex can create a closeness and intimacy within a relationship that is unique."

But women can also lead fulfilled lives without it. "If [a woman] has made a choice not to have sex for whatever reason and feels comfortable with that choice, then there is no reason for her not to be happy," says Ravazzotti.

So, what is it like to live without sex?

SARA CAMPBELL, 43, EXPAT LIVING IN EGYPT

Yoga and free-diving teacher. Spent all of 2014 celibate after a series of failed relationships.

"In 2005 I moved to a small hippie town on the Red Sea in Egypt called Dahab, where I teach yoga and free-diving. I enjoy living close to nature and I'm part of a large expat community. I've had several meaningful relationships while I've been here, but when the most recent one ended in November 2013, I realised that something had to change. While my ex-boyfriend had been lovely and I'd had loving feelings for him, I'd known deep down that we were not right for each other. During our relationship I had ignored my intuition.

It wasn't the first time I'd been in a relationship I'd known deep down wasn't right for me. Since my mother's death in 2008, I'd gone from one unsuitable relationship to another. First there was a guy who bordered on being a sociopath and then there was a guy who was co-dependent. There was a theme – I kept pushing down my gut feelings.

I decided to embark on a year of celibacy. I saw it as a chance to spend time alone and focus on myself. I wanted to use the time to process what has happened in the past so that I can move on and do things differently.

It was a complicated decision, as a year of celibacy meant I'd probably sacrifice my chance to have a baby. I have always thought that if motherhood were going to happen for me then it would happen naturally. I don't judge women who have gone down the IVF or sperm-donor path, but it is not for me.

When I took sex off the table, I was able to observe my behaviour around men. I noticed that whether I am attracted to them or not, I have an urge to hook them in. I think that it comes from my own insecurities, a need to feel attractive and desirable. I have a tendency to play up to men in order to fulfil my own need for attention. I'm not a crazy bunny boiler; I think these games we play are actually very common.

When I spoke to friends about my decision, they recognised what I was talking about - how we play very subtle games - flirting, wondering how and when to respond to texts, emails, phone calls – in order to play it right, rather than just being authentic. This is normal everyday female behaviour and most women, if they have the courage to be honest, will recognise this in themselves.

My year of celibacy was very challenging. Every time I felt attracted to a man, or felt like a man was attracted to me, it was an opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to my spiritual path. But being celibate meant that I didn't step back into old, unsupportive patterns.

I didn't really miss sex, but I did sometimes crave the connection that sex can bring. I tried to channel that sexual energy into other areas of my life.

I recently met an amazing guy, but because of my year of celibacy I am much clearer on why I am getting involved - it is not just because he makes me feel attractive. I feel he is my equal and challenges me to retain the level of integrity and authenticity I have worked so hard to achieve."

SALLY BROOM, 37, SYDNEY

HR consultant. A Christian, she will not have sex again unless she remarries.

"I've always believed that sex is a good thing, but that it is meant for marriage. I was sexually active at university, and although it was fun there was always part of me that felt that it wasn't the right thing to do. I was able to justify it to myself because I was in love, but sex before marriage was at odds with my Christian beliefs.

When I married in 2010 I felt I was back in acceptable territory, which felt really good. But unfortunately it didn't last. My ex, who has different religious views to my own, left me after seven months of marriage. After the divorce, I decided I would not have sex again unless I remarry. I don't really use the word 'celibate', but I guess that I am in a sense.

I do miss sex, but not as much as I thought I would. I had a fairly high sex drive and sex was often something I'd initiate. But although I do miss it, it's not something I think about every day.

Being single again has given me an opportunity to live my life the way I want to. Since I separated, my faith has become more central to my life. I go to church every week, and I'm also part of a community group that gets together to read the Bible. I spend a lot of time thinking about how the Bible applies to my life. I think that's why I don't miss sex – I know sex is a good thing, but it's only one good thing. There are lots of other good things in my life, so I don't feel I'm depriving myself.

I'm not actively dating at the moment, but I have been on fairly regular dates over the last few years. I am nervous about how to have the conversation about sex and my decision to remain celibate until I remarry. I think that puts me off dating a little bit. I'm worried that guys will just think I am weird.

I know what I believe is right and I am going to try and live that way. So choosing to wait for marriage now, even though I have had sexual relationships in the past, feels like the right thing to do."

BREANNA PERCY, 24, MELBOURNE

Recently finished a degree in teaching. A medical condition has prevented her from having sex.

"Vaginismus is the involuntary contraction of the pelvic floor and vaginal muscles. It means I cannot have penetrative sex. There is nothing physically wrong with me; it's thought to be psychological, but I have no control over it. When the vaginal muscles contract, it is like hitting a brick wall. It's also impacted my ability to use tampons and get a pap smear.

A lot of women who suffer from vaginismus have a history of abuse or have been raped. But nothing like this has ever happened to me. People often tell me that I should just get drunk or take a Valium, which I find really frustrating – as if I haven't already tried everything.

Although I had never been able to use tampons, I didn't know that there was something wrong until I was 19. I thought that because I was a virgin it was normal to experience pain when my boyfriend attempted to penetrate me. But when, after several attempts to have sex, it still wasn't working I started looking for an explanation. I did some Googling and found out about vaginismus. My doctor was able to confirm the diagnosis.

My first boyfriend was a high school sweetheart and was also inexperienced sexually, so the fact we couldn't have sex wasn't a big deal. I was embarrassed, though. My friends were having sex and I felt I couldn't join in their conversations.

I met my current partner five years ago. I knew he had been very sexually active, so I was worried about how my condition would impact our relationship. We were able to connect on a companionship level before connecting on a physical level and I am thankful for that. A lot of relationships start the other way around and fizzle out.

We have had to find other ways to be intimate, which has been great. We cuddle and kiss a lot, which I think is something that a lot of couples neglect when they become sexual. We are sexually intimate with each other, too - it is only intercourse that is impossible.

Last year I found out that he'd had sex with another woman, which was a huge stumbling block for our relationship. I'd always said to people that cheating was a deal breaker for me. I blamed myself, thinking that if I were normal he wouldn't have to go elsewhere. We have worked on our relationship and now we are more honest with each other. In some ways it has brought us closer because it made us re-evaluate where we are and where we want to be.

I recently found out about the Women's Therapy Center in New York. They use a mixture of counselling and special dilators to treat vaginismus. It is very expensive, but it will be worth it to be cured of this awful condition. Sex is blown up to be such a huge part of a young women's life. I feel like I've been missing something really important."

Postscript: Following this interview, Breanna underwent two weeks of successful treatment at the Women's Therapy Centre. She is no longer a virgin and is elated at "being able to feel like a normal person".

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