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sex and intimacy don't have to end at 60

by nathan s. welton • South Coast Beacon

Okay, sure, mom and dad do it. We're all resigned to that. But grandma and grandpa? Getting the groove on?

Absolutely. In fact, one local therapist recently published an instructional pamphlet on having relations in a Craftmatic adjustable bed.

Yep, seniors shag-- as they should.

"No matter what age we are, we are sexual beings from the time we're born until the time we die," said Suzanne Rapley, a local sex therapist with a doctorate in psychology. "We can keep our sexual health alive by paying attention to it, and by not buying into the notion of ageism-- because the truth is, people are never to old to be sexual."

Explaining that sex ranges from cuddling and hand- holding to mutual masturbation and intercourse, she said, "One of the most important things for the aging population is developing a repertoire of activities, because if you're limited because of illness or changing bodies, you need to have lots of options."

Believe it or not, love is like wine: it can get better-- if not more complex-- with each passing year. And properly cultivating it requires attention, care and compassion.

Luckily, retirees have a bit more spare time to practice and older women don't have to worry about pregnancy, "which is nothing short of lovely," said a sex therapy client, a 58-year old professional, who asked to be called Jeannie.

Still, a host of issues do haunt seniors in the sack. Fortunately many are surmountable with treatment-- either therapy or medication-- or simply require a new outlook.

To begin with, say some seniors, sex can stale after many years.

"Sex can become routine, and for people at that age, it's like 'OK, we've been doing it for a long time,' and it's almost down to a physical level," said Pamela Madison, director of Santa Barbara's Women's Sexuality Center. "Sometimes it doesn't give people the emotional satisfaction that they're hoping to gain."

To help, seniors can enroll in workshops aimed at rejuvenating love lives, either through emotional enrichment or simply through skills development that may be lacking, even after 30, 40 or 50 years of experience.

Another common problem facing seniors is a lack of desire, which paradoxically, can come from closeness, said Rapley.

"Most people think the best sex was when they started courting, but as the person becomes more important to you, you become more vulnerable-- and as you become more vulnerable, the desire begins to wax and wane," she said.

Acknowledging and accepting this can often improve the situation.

The lack of desire can also come from drugs like antidepressants or blood pressure medicines, which "can be pretty hard to override," she said. "Unfortunately there are some doctors out there who pat people on the head and say 'You're old, you've been there and done that, so get over it,' and that's pretty sad."

But desire disorders also arise from inadequacies stemming from physical ailments. For example, a man with erectile dysfunction might feel so embarrassed-- or his wife might feel incapable of arousing him-- that both find it easier to avoid lovemaking.

Better to invest in a supply of Viagra, seek therapy and explore sexuality without intercourse, according to therapists.

Still, sex without intercourse may be an alien concept to many couples not accustomed to talking in bed.

"Part of the problem for older generations is they don't have great communication skills around sexual loving," said Madison. "They grew up just getting by at a time when sex wasn't talked about, and when they're older, 'getting by' doesn't work anymore-- so they either start having conversations or they stop making love."

Jeannie, her client, echoed this. She explained she grew up in the Beaver Cleaver years in the Midwest, suffering through a taboored silence over sex. But when she enrolled in Madison's classes, she learned how to talk about lovemaking and no longer found herself embarrassed by it.

"My communication (with my husband) has improved in the sexual area," said Jeannie, nothing the communication improvements have spilled over into the rest of her life as well.

"For example, I didn't know there was such a thing as a g-spot, but after class I came home and said, 'Wow, let's see if we can find it!'"

And that's when she had the opportunity to test out some of the skills she learned in class, which in some ways functions as adult sex education.

"(These skills) can be real catalyst in a couple's relationship for deepening their intimacy and taking them into a profound spiritual eroticism together," said Madison.

One of her clients, a renter with little privacy, was so excited to test out her new knowledge that she and her husband hopped in the car, cruised into the hills and enjoyed a little back-seat mambo-- all after 40 years of marriage.

With this sort of sex therapy, "you can get in touch with that side of yourself that's been damaged or simply never allowed to flourish, and that's what I experienced," said Jeannie. "I feel more comfortable with myself, feel more in tune with myself, and that's filtered through onto a lot of other levels of my life, like my business and my family. It's not just sex."

Oh, and incidentally, she reported having an "excellent" time finding her g-spot.

want to know more?

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