

**SEXLESS OR LESS SEX?**

There are many reasons why a relationship may break down, as Oscar Isaac and Jessica Chastain's characters in *Scenes From A Marriage* learn, but a lack of sex doesn't have to be one of them.



# Can a relationship survive *without sex*?

Many of us believe sexual chemistry is one of the bedrocks of a healthy relationship, but is it possible to maintain intimacy – and happiness – without it? The answer may surprise you

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Olivia\*, 40, can't wait to marry her fiancé Noah\*, 42. Yet the couple have what's officially termed a "sex-free relationship". They're sexually intimate less than once a year – and not even being at home together 24/7 during the pandemic lockdown changed that.

"Like most couples, when we first met, Noah and I couldn't keep our hands off each other," Olivia tells *Body+Soul*. "But things gradually slowed down; after a year or so, they'd practically stopped. Neither of us has a very high sex drive, so we weren't unhappy about it. But although we were comfortable discussing the issue, we used to worry it meant we weren't compatible. Surely if we really loved each other, we'd want to have sex?"

The couple sought the advice of a counsellor. "They told us a relationship can thrive even without sex, as long as we're intimate in other ways," Olivia says. "Since then, we've felt much more relaxed about it. We check in regularly, to make sure we're both happy, but the conclusion is always the same: nope, still not in the mood."

Although Olivia's case is fairly extreme, the stress of the pandemic has impacted sex lives around the world. The amount of sex we're having has declined as a direct result of global lockdowns, while

even before the pandemic, young Australians were having less sex than other demographics, with 40 per cent of 18-24s reporting "never" having sex in the ABC's 2019 *Australia Talks* survey.

So what happens if, like Olivia, your relationship involves no sex at all? Is it possible to maintain intimacy even without the one ingredient most of us would agree cements a healthy adult relationship?

"Yes, it is – if both people agree or accept it," Elisabeth Shaw, CEO of Relationships Australia NSW, tells *Body+Soul*. "Looking at the media, you may believe that the best relationships are full of passion and hot sex all the time, which can influence how people judge their own relationships. But what really matters is how a couple defines intimacy. It needs to be what suits them and what they can both live with."

Problems are most likely to arise, says Shaw, when your sex lives aren't fully in sync, with one person in the relationship wanting more sex than the other. "Sexual appetite varies from person to person and, at times, you might agree it isn't a very important aspect of your relationship and accept it as a smaller part of your connection," she explains. "Often, however, one person is driving the

decision and that means you need to actively work to reach a common understanding – a discussion that may also need to be revisited over time. Once a couple stops having sex, you can start to feel like flatmates or friends rather than intimately involved, so it's important that there's genuine acceptance about it, even if you're not in complete agreement."

As for Olivia, she's found that the stresses of the pandemic have brought her and Noah emotionally closer – even without the bonding powers of sex. "I'm still excited about marrying Noah, and having lived through the pandemic together, we're closer than ever," she says. "We bond through emotional chats, mutual support, lots of cuddling and holding hands in bed as we fall asleep. We're definitely more than just good friends – we just aren't that interested in sex."

And as sex-free partnerships go, Shaw says they're approaching things the right way. "A couple who have agreed not to have sex can still show their connection in a range of ways," Shaw explains. "The secret to a healthy relationship that doesn't include sex is working at the intimacy and connection that still defines you as a couple." •

\*Names have been changed.



## IS IT A SIGN OF SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS?

Psychotherapist and relationship counsellor Melissa Ferrari shares five indicators that an AWOL sex life may spell deeper trouble in a relationship.

- + You're both avoiding the issue of sex as well as other issues that have been left unaddressed for some time.
- + Other issues are evolving in your relationship with signs that you feel contemptuous towards each other.
- + There are thoughts or signs that you or your partner are contemplating an affair.
- + Resentment is building and becoming a central theme in your relationship.
- + It isn't only sex that's missing; other areas of your relationship are also suffering, such as a lack of playfulness.