

do you think I'm sexy?

Combatting “female sexual dysfunction” – especially in midlife – is a case of mind over myth, says new research. If you’re in your 40s, 50s or beyond and believe you’re sexy and gorgeous, you’ll have a great time in the sack – and so will your partner.

By: Alison Garwood-Jones Illustration: Janice Nadeau



By society's standards, Michelle Trainer,* 34, is slim and drop-dead gorgeous. Her golden bob, graceful gestures and enthusiastic attitude capsize most of the men who meet her. You'd think she'd be confident anywhere, especially in bed. Not true, she says. "For some women it's wrinkles or jiggly thighs, but I have bad veins in my legs, so I always have sex in dim lighting and never in the daytime." She's even gone as far as covering her veins with body makeup and Band-Aids when needles and lasers didn't work. "My veins make me feel ashamed and repulsive." Michelle has one other condition when it comes to sex: "I like to work out, but my partner knows I won't have sex with him on my days off from the gym. I feel less confident." So what does Michelle's boyfriend think of this? "He's caring and accepting, all the things a loving partner should be. I'm the only one who's critical and judgmental of myself," she says, adding, "The younger equals better equation is such a drag."

It is a drag, and it doesn't get easier with age. A study published earlier this year by researchers at the University of West England surveyed over 300 women, ages 18 to 65, and found a third of them, even the midlifers, would give up at least a year of their lives for Scarlett Johansson's flawless body. Many also admitted to having negative thoughts about their bodies several times a day. Funny that: While men of every age, shape and size are said to be distracted all day by a stream of sexual fantasies, women are just as distracted by how they think they should look naked, but don't.

These findings probably won't make anyone reading this gasp. Yawn maybe, but show shock and surprise? Hardly. Women have been fretting over their beauty and desirability, as well as the warnings about their inevitable decline, long before Photoshop showed us how to smudge out laugh lines. "None of us gets to escape the messages we are bombarded with," says Pega Ren, a sexologist and clinical counsellor in Vancouver. "As women become older, society no longer sees them as sexual beings," >

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she says. Call it human nature, but there's a cultural avoidance of a whole range of issues facing women in midlife. "Unattractive, uninteresting and basically useless is the message society sends women about themselves after they hit 50," says Julia Moulden, author of *We Are the New Radicals* (McGraw-Hill, 2007) and *Ripe: Rich, Rewarding Work After 50* (2011). "And it makes me crazy having to battle it all the time, because I don't feel it myself." As a result, women in their 40s, 50s and older have been excluded from the public discussion of what a sexual woman looks like and is doing in the bedroom. Ren thinks many women internalize this message. Assuming that they are no longer desirable, they shut the door on sex.

That's why when new research on female sexuality starts emerging that challenges and reverses old chestnuts about middle age frigidity and invisibility, women and men hold their breath with hope and caution.

Why am I not feeling "it"?

Studies over the past two decades have consistently shown that women's waning interest in sex as they age – and no one is disputing that decline – is more directly associated with how attractive they perceive themselves to be than with decreasing hormone levels. In other words, it's not a physical fact that, as a woman leaves her fertile years behind, her desire for sex will automatically drop off, then disappear for good. "We've seen too many exceptions to that," says Lori Brotto, a psychologist in Port Moody, B.C., whose research on the mind's relationship with the body has gained international attention. When you follow women over their life spans, she says, health challenges, depression, smoking, alcoholism and simply being in long-term relationships can make desire dwindle. But what happens when a healthy woman pursues a new relationship at 65? "Her desire's up again."

The Samantha Joneses of the world, then, need not fret about life after their last periods. "How you feel about yourself and your partner accounts for much more of the changes in desire than the bottoming out of estrogen that happens with menopause," says Brotto. So since our bodies don't give up on

sex – and that's an important new message, so spread it – why are so many of us still putting up walls to romance?

Is there a pill for that?

The medicalization of female desire by drug companies hasn't been good for women's spontaneity or confidence in the bedroom. One of our first mistakes was assuming that a Viagra pill spray-painted pink could stoke a woman's sexual responsiveness the same way the blue one has for men. Case in point: A dozen years ago, researchers at Vivus Inc. who invented Muse (a precursor to Viagra) cheered like NASA engineers when they got the "vertical indicators" they were hoping for from the men in their clinical trials. We met our goal, announced Vivus founder Dr. Virgil Place. We "put life back into dead penises." A few years later, these same researchers slumped in their chairs when they got nothing from test groups of women using a cream (named Alista). Sure, the women experienced increased blood flow to their vaginas, but no orgasms. Even so, at last count 13 drug companies were still trying to find ways to make their pills work for women.

One area where the pharma companies were successful, however, was in creating a widespread acceptance of the labels "dysfunctional" and "diseased" for the sexually neutral and unresponsive women in their trials. Actually, the term they used was FSD for "female sexual dysfunction." It came about because company researchers – many of them without MDs or PhDs – couldn't, and still can't, answer what's clinically wrong with these gals who just don't want to have sex. But when they gave it a medical name, those airbrushed photos of skinny young things staring at us from magazines seemed harmless next to the psychological effect of being branded "dysfunctional" or "diseased" because you've lost that loving feeling.

It was the drug companies (with products to sell) who also started bombarding the media with statistics about how many women had FSD. Oprah even ran with the numbers, back when her style was more tabloid. "It's a secret epidemic," she intoned in one show as the camera moved in close, "that 43 per cent of American women experience some kind of sexual dysfunction."

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"That 43 per cent is still being bandied about," says Brotto. Actually, it's as high as 83 per cent, weighs in Stuart Meloy, a doctor who got media attention when he introduced his Orgasmatron, a so-far unsuccessful gizmo that threaded electrodes up a woman's spinal cord to try to induce an orgasm, only to set off some pretty wild leg twitches.

Studying women's sexuality from the perspective of men is part of a long-standing historical tradition in medicine and psychiatry. "When you look at anatomy textbooks from a century ago," says Brotto, "the section on women's anatomy is just a few sentences long and it says, 'We assume the same processes taking place in men hold for women.'" Brotto believes what the failure of the female Viagra (and, we might add, all of the follow-up inventions) has really done for women's research is "to put the spotlight on the need for more appropriate approaches to women's sexual difficulties." So while the boys are tinkering with our parts, trying to make them come alive, a contingent of mostly female clinicians, researchers, academics and scientists (and so many of them Canadian!) are studying the mind – things such as our inner critics and the effects of ageism and sexism on body image – to better understand a woman's sexual expression over her lifetime.

Mind over matter

Sex relaxes us. The research on how it heals us emotionally is endless. For women, it's also healthy. "Women who don't have regular orgasms [with a partner or by themselves] have more incontinence and more vaginal prolapses," says Ren. As women age and society dismisses them, however, some gals have taken their invisibility as an opportunity to define

themselves, including their sexuality, on their own terms. Julia Moulden, 55, is one of them.

Moulden has noticed that, although when she used to go into a room heads would turn, "that doesn't happen anymore." Even so, she has stopped referencing her younger self and giving in to expectations. "I'm just experiencing this new me that's emerging since I turned 50, and an inner strength that gets translated physically and sexually." Moulden says the more confident she is in the bedroom, the better time she and her partner have. "It feeds this loop."

And studies confirm that learning to accept the outward signs of aging is, for women especially, key to keeping sexual feelings alive. In other words, women who say to their partners, "not now, I need to lose 10 pounds," generally show a more restricted range of sexual activities than those who accept, or even like, their bodies. Those same women with poor body images also have "fewer satisfactory sexual responses and more problems with sexual desire, excitement and resolution," say the psychologists who interviewed them. Ren believes body image fears are one way women avoid engaging in their own sexuality. "I think many women are surprised when they let themselves have good sex."

What doesn't appear to have been scientifically documented, but is certainly anecdotally confirmed, is that, when it comes to sex, men are just glad when a woman shows up. At 43, David Angler* says he's attracted to personality and connection. "I love and appreciate a woman who takes care of herself," he says, citing soft skin as his particular weakness. "But it's immaterial how large her breasts are or how big her butt is, because, if I'm with her, I've already accepted her for who she is." In >

fact, ask most guys and they'll tell you they don't notice your veins or even your new haircut when you've made it clear you want to be sexual with them. In their happiness, men skip over the details women care so much about. Now therapists are saying we should let this work in our favour.

Silencing the inner critic

If men don't notice the details, but we do, how can we silence our inner critics? This is Brotto's specialty. She practises mindfulness theory, which isn't about doing away with negative thoughts but, rather, noticing our tendencies to have them and distancing our connections with them. Through a series of exercises, she introduces women to the idea of watching themselves, and gets them thinking about thinking. "This way, when a judgment comes up, instead of saying 'Oh, I look fat' and having a cascade of negative thoughts, what you do when that initial thought comes up is say, 'Oh, well that was a judgmental thought.' You watch yourself think. You describe the kind of thought that you're having, and you do that without jumping into the thought itself."

Brotto uses the metaphor of sitting on the bank of your stream of thoughts. "You watch your thoughts go by without taking a step into the water." If you maintain that distance between you and your thoughts, and recognize them as thoughts, not a statement of reality, the hope is that some of the suffering, rumination and negativity will start to fade. But it takes time and practice.

Women, says Brotto, have this fundamental disconnect between the mind and body when it comes to sex. And it can't be broached by simply adding Kegel exercises to your workout routine. "Socially and culturally, women tend to multi-task more than men do," she says. "We take on multiple roles as mothers, wives, workers, friends and sisters, and that means gliding through different aspects of life without really being fully in the present in any of them." To encourage her clients to get accustomed to being fully in the present, Brotto has them examine something as tiny as a raisin. "Eating meditations are long and drawn out," she smiles. They're all about

embracing and being inside an experience – such as how the raisin feels between your fingers, then on your tongue, and what the burst of sweetness tastes like when you bite into it. Mindfulness helps us notice details about minor things, and savour the memories of them.

Similarly, Ren says she often encourages the women she counsels to recall an amazing sexual experience they've had. "I ask them to remember what they were thinking or feeling during that encounter, and what they were doing. And rarely do I hear, 'Well, I was holding in my stomach really well and my hair was doing this.' No! They remember how good they felt." Ren asks them to remind themselves of those good feelings the next time their inner critics threaten to take over their thoughts.

In the end, conquering a negative body image is something each woman has to achieve on her own. While their partners can support and listen to them (David says that being extra attentive and satisfying his partner sexually helps his partner to forget about her flaws), above all it's a personal decision that women need to make about what their priorities are, says Ren. Similarly, Brotto believes there's a lot that women can be doing by themselves, which is why she gives her clients mindful exercises to practise at home that don't involve their mates (those come much later). Brotto's mindfulness group sessions with the raisin are also "female only" – in part, because her clients' husbands are happy with the way their wives look and persistent about having sex with them.

The big question we need to ask ourselves is: Do we want to look good or feel good? "I don't know if you can want both of those things simultaneously without making some decisions about what's important to you," says Ren. "All I know is that this is the only body we'll ever have. It's our one shot at having as much fun and doing as much good as possible with that body. So saying, 'I'm going to wait until I lose 10 pounds before I grow a garden, love my grandchild, have great sex, write that book...'"

As Diane Lane, 46, the actress and great natural beauty, once said, "If you want to live, you have to age." So start living and loving. **hm**