

Back in



the saddle again

when a goodnight kiss leads to something steamier

If you haven't been there for a while, what happens when a dinner date finishes in the bedroom, asks *Kate Johnston*.

There's a scene in the movie *Sleepless in Seattle* that will strike a chord with anyone re-entering the dating game. Sam, the character played by Tom Hanks, is about to venture out with a woman for the first time since being widowed. Over lunch with a male friend he laments his lack of recent experience. "What is tiramisu?" he asks nervously. "Some woman is going to want me to do it to her and I won't know what it is." Not long after, Sam takes the plunge and invites Victoria on a date – against an inspired soundtrack of Gene Autry singing 'Back In The Saddle Again'.

Hanks' character is in his 30s and in pretty good shape – so how much greater are the dilemmas and uncertainties faced by those of us aged 45-plus who sense a dinner date or night at the movies is about to segue into something steamier?

When you meet someone, what's the fine line between being 'open-minded' and 'desperate'? And if you decide you want to take it further, when and how do you approach the mood-shifting subjects of previous relationships, emotional scars, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV or other health problems, such as diabetes or arthritis, which might mean the difference between being satisfied or sorry?

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Then there's the fact that by now you pretty much know what you like and don't like in bed. Of course it's good to communicate what you want, but the question is how to do it without clinical instruction or suggestions, which though intended to incite sensual delight, actually cause 'shock and awe'.

It's a minefield. A medicinal scotch may diffuse the nerves, but the naked truth is that if it's been a long time between drinks, taking off your clothes in front of someone new is more than physically revealing – it's a psychic strip. But if you keep your sense of humour, it can still be a tease.

Expect the unexpected

Psychologist Yvonne Allen says people often have unreal expectations. "The first time doesn't have to be amazing," she says. "People feel they must perform. But it doesn't have to be a Cecil B. De Mille film in bed! Enjoy taking the time to explore each others' bodies."

Keeping things lighthearted is one of the biggest keys. "With a sense of humour, you can help each other through," says Yvonne. "It's OK to laugh and tell them you could be a bit rusty. It's about having fun."

If the first time is somewhat average, if you didn't feel you were relaxed enough or if there were genuine physical problems, don't give up. It's rarely an indicator of the potential for a good relationship. "These days, people expect things to happen immediately," says Yvonne. "Men feel they have to play the role of Mr Cool and Experienced. Today's men may have read *Cleo*

or *Cosmo* and they can feel under immense pressure to be a stud. Women can help them. And men have to be prepared to talk about it. People can't read minds. Share your fragilities. Don't pretend you're not nervous."

Some men might be relieved to find a woman wants to take time. Often they have come out of a marriage and everything seems new to them. "Many men have relied on their wife for their social networks," says Yvonne. "They can feel isolated and therefore rush into a relationship very quickly. They need to take the time to focus on friendship as a basis for the relationship."

Naked truth

But the biggest question on your mind might be: will your new, red-hot lover insist on leaving the light on?

Both sexes can feel tentative about revealing their bodies. In Clare's case

she feared being judged for a body that had twice been through childbirth. "I was afraid he would find my body a real turn-off, complete as it was with the stretch-marks," she says. "To my surprise, he said he found the stretch marks enchanting. He used to caress them affectionately and say, 'Look what those dreadful children did to you!'"

Maggie has accepted her body isn't perfect. "I feel more comfortable with myself physically than I did in my 20s, despite the fact that the mirror might suggest differently! I've learned to like my good points and put up with those less attractive bits. I don't expect a middle-aged man to look like a 25-year-old and any prospective partner had better have an equally realistic approach."

Though the physical aspect is important to men, often women judge their own bodies harshly while it's their boyfriends

who are busy admiring their new lover's body. In Tom's case, he eventually convinced his girlfriend she was beautiful by telling her he was more qualified than her to comment, as he'd seen more naked women than she had!

Lance is honest about the importance of physical attraction. "The other person's body is important to me," he says. "There was coyness on her part, but the fact of the matter is that she is gorgeous. I remember teasing her; I was surprised. I made it my mission to convince her she was gorgeous, but it took a while."

It was only later Lance realised that his body image wasn't great either. "I thought it was amazing that she found me attractive – a big surprise. The notion of her being head over heels with me was a big part of feeling better about myself."

Yvonne Allen says it could help women to recognise that men express their needs and insecurities in a different way. They might come on a bit strong. "I call it the peacock phenomenon," she says. "They're wired to strut their stuff."

Talk the talk

When the self-esteem stakes are high, it's easy to leave the most unromantic of all conversations until another time. But we all know issues such as STIs don't discriminate on the basis of age. Safe sex is as important at 55 as it is at 25.

Sarah Hardy, education manager at the women's health organisation Jean Hailes Foundation, says the biggest issue for women in their 40s or older is that they may be uninformed about the risks of STIs. "It's important for women to remember that they can draw on their life skills to negotiate a safe and rewarding new sex life," says Sarah.

Both Maggie and Lance made huge assumptions about their new partners. "I hate to admit taking the 'romantic' view that my partner couldn't possibly have been in contact with an STI," says Maggie. "We didn't talk over this issue

How much is enough?

The saying goes: Women say, "If things were better between us we'd be having more sex". Men say, "If we were having more sex, things would be better between us." And they could both be true.

But what happens when your interest in sex wanes? Read these tips from Jean Hailes Foundation psychologist Dr Amanda Deeks on understanding and improving libido. If even one strikes a chord, it might help spark your very own sexual revolution.

- Determine what influences your libido, including hormones, illness, medication, relationships, personality, sexual history and society's expectations and attitudes.
- Assess your own libido to determine if you are happy with it. A low libido is only a problem if you perceive it to be. And there is nothing wrong with you if your level of desire drops away over time in a relationship.
- Work out why you have sex. There are many reasons for having sex, including lust, to create intimacy, fun and pleasure, an affirmation of our desirability, to make babies, or even to avoid conflict.
- Accept your libido may be different to your partner. It can be helpful to discuss with your partner what your enhancers and distracters to libido are.
- Stop comparing. If we are happy and our partner is also, then it doesn't matter whether we are keeping up with everybody else or not.
- Seek help for depression and anxiety. Mood disorders may impact negatively on libido.
- It's okay not always to feel desire when you have sex. If you care for your partner and there is no coercion, abuse or pain, then sometimes it is okay to have sex – without desire. Many women find even though they may not feel sexually interested at the time, once things get going, it is enjoyable.
- Seek professional help if you need to. If you have thought about your libido and it is causing you problems, seek help – either alone or together.

Online dating

In a recent **match.com** survey of over-50s, approximately half of whom were male and half female, 65% percent of people using **match.com** said they were looking for companionship, 53% friendship, 35% an activity partner, 32% marriage and 30% a travel partner.

or take precautions. In future, I am determined to be more frank."

Lance's girlfriend had the courage to mention the unmentionable. "I didn't think about STIs," says Lance. "I was more nervous about mortal sin! She mentioned it in a coy way, 'What about safe sex? Shouldn't we use a condom?' – but I didn't hear the real question. I said, 'I'm very safe, I had a vasectomy 10 years ago!'"

"I suppose I was thinking that we were both coming from stable, long-term relationships. Such an innocent child! We discussed the fact that I had not understood. It would be front-of-mind if I started a future relationship."

No rules

New relationships can be fraught with concerns – for body and soul. But there's no one way to go about it; everybody's improvising. "Don't expect it to happen overnight," says Yvonne Allen. "And if you need help, there are resources to call on. You're not alone."

For Maggie, nothing matches the intimacy of a good sexual relationship. "Friends or family can provide much by way of hugs, comfort and close conversation, but what I'd missed most of all was the experience of skin-on-skin. I wish I'd had the sort of sexual confidence in my 20s that I feel now. Sex is no longer a competition. There's no right and wrong way."

Lance's experience was a real surprise. "Neither of us had experienced anything like it," he says. "What was good for one was good for the other, so it fed back into a whole cycle of giving and receiving pleasure."

For Maggie and Lance it seems that taking the risk to get back in the saddle was worth its 'wait' in gold. **YL**



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The Jean Hailes Foundation is a centre devoted to the practical application of research findings in health and lifestyle for women.

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