

MARRIED, BUT PLATONIC

A mature report of an unspoken marital problem.

By Annam Suresh

What goes on in the bedroom of a married couple if IT doesn't happen? Or does IT never happen? As a matter of fact, quite often IT makes an exit – far more frequently than one suspects, if doctors are to be believed.

And neither the causes nor the consequences are uniform.

Unfortunately, IT is something people do not discuss, even if there is trouble. "IT is too sensitive a subject and I would find it uncomfortable discussing it – even from a medical practitioner's point of view," Says a gynaecologist. If a doctor is so hesitant discussing a medical issue impersonally, how is it possible for a patient to discuss her most private fears and problems and seek help?

The IT in fact is just sex. And sex among married couples. I wonder

what made the poor doctor uncomfortable discussing it, especially since she is most often consulted by pregnant women who (80 per cent of her patients after all, first come to her when they are pregnant) happened to be in that condition because of IT.

Dr Ramesh Sharma, a sexologist, confirms that a large number of marriages function with little or no sex. About whether that is healthy or not is a question that varies from couple to couple, or even person to person, he says. "Little by itself is a highly subjective estimate. What is little to one couple, or even one partner in a pair, may seem adequate to another, and excessive to a third. Everybody's sexual need is different. Also, sex itself occupies different spaces and holds different levels of importance in different people's lives. So one cannot generalise in assessing a relationship on the basis of sexual regularity alone," explains

Dr Sharma. Sexual activity and abstinence occur differently and hence each couple reacts to it differently, he points out.

FROM BAD TO WORSE

Take Pammi for instance. She and Jana, both in their late 40s, haven't had sex with each other for over a decade. It all started with Jana's retrenchment. The sudden loss of employment led him to alcohol, which in turn caused marital discord.

Things got so bad that they stopped talking to each other and nearly got divorced. Till Pammi's mother stepped in and helped Jana give up drinking. Today, though Jana is a teetotaler and holds a responsible job, they have not yet resumed their sexual life.

"Actually it no longer matters," says Pammi. "When it first happened, we were much younger and initially I felt as if my world was anyway



coming to an end. But later, as I joined my mother in helping Jana back on his feet, that became priority No. 1 – not sex. Through his therapy, we had learnt to talk to each other, communicate our fears and vulnerabilities to each other. In fact, now we are much closer than we were 10 years ago, or even when we had been just married. Today, we don't need sex to express our love. Just being with each other is a great high. If it is resumed, it is something that will sort of happen naturally – it will not have to be a preplanned performance," says Pammi.

Which is not how it is with 30-year-old Jenny. She and Jana Walter have been married for just six years. And she is as

passionately in love with him as she was when they were courting each other 10 years ago. "Walter always adored my figure. So when I put on weight after my second child, I was afraid I would not appeal to him." Apparently, Walter didn't really mind, but Jenny anyway worked out till she nearly got her pre-pregnancy figure back. Today, she can still wear her wedding gown and look just as gorgeous. Walter is just as romantic, bringing her flowers and sending her cards wherever he goes. Yet, in the bedroom things go wrong.

"Suddenly, I seem to notice this man with the huge pot belly and bad breath, who hasn't brushed after dinner and still smells of stale alcohol. And it turns me off," confesses Jenny. "I would love to

have sex with Walter – but his pot belly and foul breath are so overpowering, it is difficult to ignore them.”

Rishi and Reema are both professionals and happen to work in different cities. Hence, between the couple, sex is an occasional luxury – when they can manage a holiday or work brings them together. “We meet about five to six times a year. I take my annual leave to visit him and he does the same in turn. In addition, we sometimes grab a quick weekend or manage an official tour. But it is such a rushed time, since we try to squeeze in everything into those few days. And sex is just one of the things that we have to catch up on. But, yes, it is then the most prioritised item on the agenda,” Reema admits.

Why is it that more and more couples seem to have chased sex out of the bedroom?

“Actually, we don’t know if it is more and more couples,” points out Dr Rajesh Bhandari who has been counselling couples for years. “It is just that more and more people are talking about it. A few years ago, people didn’t talk about what happened in their bedrooms. If things went wrong, they suffered in silence. They rarely sought help, even from each other. Never from outside. Today, people seek help much earlier. So it just seems like more.”

It does seem strange that sex, or rather SEX, which is what theoretically elevates even the closest, most intimate friendships to

marriage, should exit at the first opportunity.

“Actually, every relationship is different – so every couple in fact has its own amalgamation of various components. The components and the quantum and importance of each varies – something that only the couple can decide,” says Dr Bhandari, who has spent over 30 years counselling couples on problems of sexuality.

HOW SEX EXITS

In fact, the exit of sex can happen in different ways and for different reasons. It could be medical, it could be psychological, it could be moral, religious, social, general loss of interest, incompatibility, ignorance, aversion, revenge, low self-esteem, pain, incompatible sexual preferences...

“It is not something that happens to the middle-aged alone. There are couples in their mid-20s who are not harrising sex for long periods of time,” says Dr Sharma.

Right after Kalpana gave birth to her second child, Ravi decided to come clean with her. He was a homosexual and had had a partner for several years. He had given in to his parents’ wishes by marrying and carrying on the family name. But now that he had given his wife two children, he no longer felt the need to carry on the relationship that was sexually smothering him. “I told her she was free to begin life afresh and I would do everything to make it work for her. Surprisingly, Kalpana took it very maturely. No tantrums, no blackmailing me into doing what I didn’t like,” he remembers gratefully.

Kalpana joins in. “We had been married for five years when he told me. I saw no point in destroying our relationship. He just didn’t want to have sex with me – but he still loved me. He adored the children. He had been good to me – even in bed. Even if he had married me to please his parents, he had done it in good grace and had developed a strong bond with me. Why would I want to give all that up? Besides, I realised, he must have suffered tremendously during the five years, doing what he didn’t like doing. And here he was offering me freedom, on my terms.”

But Ravi was relieved when Kalpana told him he could resume his sexual relations with his male friend but on two conditions – he would never do it in the house, and always to protect himself with a condom.

Ravi in turn allowed Kalpana the right to seek sex outside their marriage. “So far, I haven’t” says Kalpana, adding, “If I do, it will be discreet and I will see that it does not develop into anything that will threaten my relationship with Ravi or my children. Ravi is my best friend and companion – I don’t want to lose that part of him.”

Often, couples who hold good positions in their professions are so engrossed in career advancement that sex is not on top of the list. Even if it is, they are often so stressed out or exhausted by the end of the day that, once they hit the bed, they want to just sleep. “With such couples, it takes them a little while to miss sex – because very often they are both too tired to need it. But the problem is really severe when one partner is not too tired for it and the other is. Then the conflicts rear their head early,” says Sharma.

Like it happened with Sudha and Rohit. He was a marketing executive in a multinational, worked long hours and travelled frequently. Sudha worked in a primary school and had comparatively stress-free hours. So she invariably found her romantic



plans, even if they were scheduled for weekends, shot down because Rohit had had a late meeting or had had to go out of town. Rohit agrees. "I found that despite my best intentions of honouring my 'dates' with Sudha, I was constantly letting her plans be cancelled to accommodate business meetings."

So Sudha discreetly resumed her friendship with a former colleague of hers and every now and then they would get away.

"I love Rohit enough to understand his problems and have no desire to leave him. But I have my needs too and Jayant, now a sales officer with a pharmaceutical company, fulfils these. Both Jayant and I know the score and make no emotional demands. As of now Rohit does not know about my little secret. But Jayant and I know that the day Rohit has time for me, Jayant will go back to being just a friend."

"No one can predict how Rohit will react when he finds out, but Sudha seems to have chosen the most workable solution for herself for the present," says Dr Sharma.

"We knew when we got married that Rohit's career was on an upward graph and that he would work long hours," Sudha says. "Which was why I took up a job too – so I wouldn't get bored and nag him. We share a great relationship. Except for the sex bit, he is a great husband – he is very caring and does not stop me from doing what I wish. It is just that as a young woman, I have certain needs which he does not seem to match. But I do not want to end the marriage or destroy his home life just because he is tired when he gets home. The Jayant part is not really an affair in the sense that we both know we are not in love and will never want to marry each other. It is just that we are great for each other in bed. And will probably outgrow this too. Also, I am considering resuming my studies – that will leave me busier, and hopefully, I will need Jayant less. But I do not want my sexual frustration to



manifest as a nagging wife – this way it is much better."

WHEN SEX BECOMES IRKSOME

When Parvaty got pregnant, she found sex uncomfortable. Three children in quick succession left her no time to resume a normal sex life. Now, she is so tired after a day of looking after three kids, she wants to sleep when she is in bed. Sex can wait. Her husband Mahesh is no longer turned on by her appearance.

"She smells of baby food and household cleaners. She is physically no longer attractive – flabby and haggard," he says. A rather trim Mahesh has found himself a willing

BUT NOT ALL COUPLES HAVE WORKED THINGS OUT SO CALMLY. DILIP HAD BEEN RETURNING HOME LATE FOR OVER TWO YEARS – TOO MUCH WORK AT THE OFFICE, HE SAID.

partner elsewhere and between him and Parvaty there is no sex, not even when she sometimes wants it. His home life is miserable and it is quite possible he will one day walk out on her since he cannot put up with her churlish nature, frequent illnesses, unkempt appearance and the general atmosphere at home. Three noisy kids only make it worse.

But the elderly Mr and Mrs Nair, in their 60s have not shared their marital bed on a regular basis for years. "It was nothing drastic. The frequency just slowed down and tapered off. But it was replaced by conversation, reading, walks together, etc. Now we feel closer all want what we at this age. There is no compulsion to perform or display the best. An occasional moment of intimacy may or may not culminate in sex, but it is not anyway the objective," says a contented Mrs Nair.

But not all couples have worked things out so calmly. Dilip had been returning home late for over two years – too much work at the office, he said. In addition, he had had to travel often. Thus his work extended to weekends too. When he returned home he would be tired, and sex was a hasty affair – 'slam, bam, thank you ma'am' – after which he rolled over to sleep. He didn't notice the flowers that his wife had arranged in the bedroom or that she had dressed up particularly for him. Though it hurt her at times, she forgave him – he was on a new project, his company was expanding operations, and at the end of it all there would probably be a promotion for Dilip. Just another few months, he assured her. In fact, he had been saying this for two years.

All her understanding and forgiveness turned to rage when she found out that his late hours had indeed been at the office – with his attractive young secretary. His weekend trips had been to nearby resorts with her – nothing to do with his office. Shattered, she threw a tantrum. Though Dilip ended the affair, Sunita was no longer the same person. It took Dilip nearly two years

to get her to even talk to him properly. But since then, she has refused to sleep with him, even if it meant denying herself sex. "I am so disgusted – I cannot bring myself to be touched by the same hands that have touched that slut," complains Sunita. Dilip was shattered by the whole experience and he no longer has the courage to seek sex elsewhere. And the two are too old-fashioned to seek professional help. So, for years now, the two have been unable to bridge the chasm in their sexual lives.

THE WRONG WAY

Lankesh, a software engineer, was so keen on achieving his professional ambitions first that he put off marriage till he was nearly 40. However, his bachelor days hadn't been celibate. One-night stands and frequent visits to brothels had taken care of his sexual needs, a practice he continued even after he got married, though less frequently. They had also given him gonorrhoea and syphilis. He in turn infected his wife. When sex became unbearably painful for her, they were forced to see a doctor. Though they were both cured, the experience had been so painful for Medha, she now avoids sex.

"Maybe, I will allow him once or twice, after we are sure we are completely okay, because I would love to have kids. But otherwise, the

nuptial bed is a no-no for me," says Medha, for whom even the thought of sex only brings painful memories. "I cringe even when he attempts now, because I anticipate pain. I do not look forward to it. It was painful for him too, so he doesn't try too often," reveals Medha.

Saraswati, in her late 30s, comes from a fairly conservative family. Her calendar is marked with a series of fasts – a Monday fast, a Tuesday fast, a Thursday fast, a Friday fast, a Saturday fast, a fast for some particular festival, a fast for her children's health, her daughter's marriage (the daughter is just four!), her husband's longevity, his career etc. "And I am very strict about the fasts – I come out after a cold bath in wet clothes – even in Delhi's sharp winters, and live only on milk and fruits through the day. Sex is out during fasts," she says.

"In fact, there are more fasting days than sex days in Saraswati's calendar!" quips her husband Vishwajit, adding, "Which is why it took us so long to complete our family of two. We took eight years to have two kids. She might as well have married an impotent or gay man – both would have been happy then," he grumbles. He admits that the lack of sex in his marriage does bother him. "We hardly manage it once or twice a year, because if it is not any of these fasts, it is her periods or a death or birth in the family. Then there were the two pregnancies and

the post-delivery periods. We are almost like brother and sister!" he laughs.

But he admits that he seeks sex by visiting brothels, always using a condom. "If I complain, she will give me a long lecture about how the fasts were meant for us and how violating them could result in harm to the family. Also, I would much rather avoid those long lectures and have peace at home. The other option is to wind up the marriage and that will be messy – so we have this weird arrangement. I don't tell her about my escapades and she doesn't ask."

Shaheen's husband, a devout Muslim too, did not even touch her during fasts. "When we were newly married, it was difficult, but now it is okay. Anyway, after the children, I have no time either," she says.

But for Nitin and Meena, they want, but can't. Living in a joint family in a one-room apartment, there is no privacy. And they cannot afford holidays. Only when they visit Meena's parents in Nagpur do they get some privacy. But this is no more than once a year. "We are saving up for a bigger house – maybe then things will be different," says Nitin. But Meena suffers frequently from pelvic pains and headaches and is constantly irritable, which her doctor says could be because of an unsatisfactory sex life. "I am afraid that by the time we can afford a bigger house, we may not need it because we will be too old for sex," says Meena. In many cases, the presence of elderly relatives or small children too can put the brakes on sex in a marriage.

While there is a raging debate going on about premarital and extramarital sex, it is a fact that several couples are living together without sex, despite being married, whether by choice or compulsion. Some mind it, some don't. Some try to set right the situation, some don't, many don't know how to. But which way a relationship should go and how much sex the couple needs is something only the partners can decide for themselves. And many seem unable to do so.



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