

(TC: 00:00:00)

Dr Hazel Wallace: (Advert 00:00-00:30) Hello and welcome back to another episode of The Food Medic Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Hazel. Today we're going to be talking about all things sex and desire. You might be thinking, 'Well, what does sex have to do with our health or nutrition because you are The Food Medic aren't you?' Well, on this podcast we cover all aspects of health and our relationships and sex life are also integral to that. We don't learn much about this at school and as adults we're expected to learn through experience and hearsay but that also means there's loads of myths and misconceptions around sex and I think it still remains a taboo. For this episode I'm joined by Dr. Karen Gurney who is a clinical psychologist and psycho-sexologist, it's such a mouthful. Karen is a lead psychologist for a busy central London NHS clinic specialising in sexual well-being. She's also director of The Havelock Clinic, an independent multi-disciplinary sexual problem service. As part of her mission to educate, inform and challenge widely ideas that harm people's sex lives she did her first TEDx talk and wrote the bestselling *Mind The Gap; The Truth About Desire and how to Future proof Your Sex Life in 2020*.

So, in this episode we explore some of the gaps in our knowledge when it comes to sex and desire including the orgasm gap which is the fact that heterosexual couples, men are having far more orgasms than women, female sexuality and how we can have better sex for life. Lots of the questions in this episode were actually submitted by you guys through Instagram. So, listen closely in case your question comes up.

(TC: 00:02:14)

Dr Hazel Wallace: I mean, I would love to start by just asking you a little bit more about yourself, who you are, what you do and what you're passionate about?

(TC: 00:02:21)

Dr. Karen Gurney: So, I'm a clinical psychologist and psycho-sexologist and I work part-time for the NHS managing sexual problem services and part-time for The Havelock Clinic which is an independent sexual problem service in London. Which essentially means I spend most of my time seeing clients for therapy and usually about some aspect of their sex life that they're not happy about or that they want to be different. That might be with individuals or with couples. I also do some research, some training, some supervision and I am super passionate about taking sex therapy outside of the therapy room. Which is partly why I started my Instagram a couple of years ago and did the TED talk and wrote my book, *Mind The Gap*, because to be honest not as many people need to come and see me for therapy than who come and see me. So, actually what I want to do is reduce the number of people who need to see somebody like me.

(TC: 00:03:23)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing. I've read your book and it's amazing which is why I wanted to get you on and chat to you. When I did reach out to you, you were like, 'I don't know if I can advise on food and sex.'

(TC: 00:03:38)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes it was like, 'It's not my specialist area although it's very interesting.'

(TC: 00:03:43)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Of course and even when I was, you know, I shared on stories that you were coming on and we were going to have a chat about this topic and I got a few comments like, 'Oh that's a bit left field for what you're talking about.' I'm like, 'Well, I'm a doctor and sex is a huge part of our health and our relationships and so I don't see why we shouldn't be talking about it.'

(TC: 00:04:07)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Absolutely, yes. I think there's been such a move actually in the health and wellness space to considering sexual well-being, sexual wellness as part of overall well-being and I think that's correct because I think a lot of the time people think about sex as being a really kind of frivolous pursuit and just something you do with your body and actually it's not. It's about relationships, it's about your psychological health, it's about your connection with others, it's about sometimes the strength of your relationship and so it's really important to overall well-being.

(TC: 00:04:42)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Absolutely. So, I mean, obviously we're having these conversations online, there's more podcasts, there's books coming out but why do you think sex is still a taboo?

(TC: 00:04:53)

Dr. Karen Gurney: That's a really good question and of course it's rooted in history and culture and religion. It's quite an interesting one because actually we know that we've gone through different times in history of sex being more or less taboo. So, there used to be a bit of an idea that actually sex has always been taboo but there's been quite a lot of times across cultures of sex being something that wasn't taboo at all and we celebrated. Obviously in recent centuries things have become more taboo again. I think things will stay a taboo as long as we don't talk about them and as long as we don't talk openly with young people about them they'll stay a taboo. So, that's the challenge we have at the moment is that because it's considered a taboo, it's the self-replicating prophecy.

(TC: 00:05:44)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes absolutely and I think it was really insightful for me to see what kind of questions people were asking and there was a lot of, 'Is this normal?' Especially when it comes to how much sex we're having and a lot of people, I mean my audience is primarily female, but a lot of women saying not having as much sex as my friends or I don't think I am. I would love to know, how much sex are we having and what is considered normal? Because I think there's this three times a week myth.

(TC: 00:06:14)

Dr. Karen Gurney: There absolutely is, yes. I'm happy to answer that question but I'd like to preface it first by saying that, actually, quantity is not a good marker of a good sex life, and that it's important to note that having lots of sex that isn't great is generally worse for your sex life than having less sex that is great. So, I'd like to preface my answer with that, and also to say that quantity isn't important if the sex you're having is pleasurable, life affirming, connected sex. So, take ideas about quantity with a pinch of salt. But given that,

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we know from large scale UK research-, so, the biggest sex survey in the world happens in the UK, which is great, and we know that in a survey of 15,000 adults of all ages from 16-74, you know, the whole breadth of adulthood, that people are having sex a little less than once a week in the UK.

So, that's about three times a month. And if you're in the 34-44 age range bracket it's a little less than that still, it's about twice a month. But it's important to see that, even within those numbers, a third of UK adults haven't had sex at all in the last month. So, even if people aren't having sex that frequently, say two or three times a month, actually that's not unusual. There's a large proportion of people who aren't having any sex at all in the last month. So, I'd like people to be reassured by that because, as you say, there's a real common idea that everyone is having sex three times a week. I don't know where it comes from, this myth, but it's so pervasive and whenever I see people in sex therapy and they're worried about how much sex they're having and I say, 'How often do you think you should be having sex?' They always say, 'Three times a week.' I don't know who's got time to have sex three times a week. I mean, we all do maybe sometimes but it's very unusual and hopefully people can be reassured if they're having sex a lot less than that. I know that actually quantity does not matter one bit.

(TC: 00:08:24)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, I think that it will be really reassuring for women. I guess, second to that, like, another question that was coming up a lot was, you know, differences in sex drive or libido between partners or some people finding that they are going through a bit of a dry spell or they're having a drop off in terms of their sexual drive and I'd love to explore that with you. First of all, what is it and second of all, again, how do you know if it's too high or too low?

(TC: 00:08:53)

Dr. Karen Gurney: This is a good question but it's quite a big question so let me try and draw on some of the key points here. So, the first thing to say is that there is no such thing as sex drive and that we all have an experience of sexual desire, as you mentioned that can fluctuate, ebb and flow, across time and that's very normal. It's also very normal to have a discrepancy between partners of sex drive, sexual desire. So, it's more normal than not to have different ideas of how much sex you want. The challenge though is that we've been socialised to think of sex drive as something we should just have and something which is there and something which is innate and normal when you're in love with someone. Actually that isn't how sexual desire works. So, what I would say is that it's really normal to have different ideas of how much sex you want to your partner. It's crucial to learn about how desire works so that you can understand how to have desire feature as much as you like in your sex life which is really why I wrote the book because there's a huge gap (TC 00:10:00) between what we know about desire and what's out there in society. Then it's also important to have a conversation with your partners about what needs does sex meet for each of you psychologically and for the relationship. Why does it matter to each of you if you have a difference in the amount of sex that you'd like to be having? The reason I say this is because when there's a desire discrepancy, which is very normal, it's very rarely about the amount of sex that people are struggling with. It's about the meaning of sex.

So, for example, the higher desire partner might feel unhappy with the amount of sex that they're having because they would like to be having more of it. But why would they like to be having more of it? It can't simply be about the physical act of pleasure and orgasm because you could do that on your own. So, what

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else is it that they're missing out on? If we start to explore that with each other and find out when we have sex I feel desired, wanted, close to you, connected, like we've got a strong relationship, XYZ, whatever it might be, we can really start to find ways to help each other meet those needs when there's a desire discrepancy or perhaps when we're not feeling like sex. Sometimes it can give us a little bit more empathy with the other persons perspective so we think, 'Okay well I'm not feeling like it right now but I'd also like to feel close so let's go to bed, talk, have a bit of a kiss and see what happens.' Rather than thinking, 'My partner just always wants sex because they just want to meet their own needs and I'm frustrated with that.' Which can sometimes be the default. Does that answer the question do you think?

(TC: 00:11:48)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes I think so, absolutely. I think that's really interesting how you've reframed that in that understanding the why, like, why someone wants to have sex and I guess that also underpins one of the other questions I had for you which is, why is sex so important? Because it's not just to reproduce, it bonds you in a relationship.

(TC: 00:12:11)

Dr. Karen Gurney: It does and I think this is one of the great misconceptions of sex. We do have an idea as humans I think that there is such a thing as a sex drive which is an urge to physically perform an act with somebody else. We know that, you know, feeling horny, feeling turned on is one of the motivations that humans have for engaging in sex but there are 236 others. So, a really important bit of sex research from some researchers called Meston and Buss found out that there are 237 reasons why humans are motivated to have sex, reasons why people seek out and express desire. They can be, as you've mentioned, reasons other than the physical act but reasons that are connected to our psychology. So, boosting our mood, stopping us feeling lonely, making us feel wanted, attractive, expressing love, out of boredom sometimes, there can be so many reasons and understanding those things about ourselves and others, the partners that we have, is super important and also really helps us to get a grasp on why sex can be important for a relationship. Because we know that sexual satisfaction is important to relationship satisfaction for most people and that sexual satisfaction also guards against challenges in the relationship, guards against people going outside the relationship, if it's monogamous, for sex elsewhere. But sometimes we can really trivialise it to being an itch that people are trying to scratch and not thinking about why that is. As you say, it can be much deeper than the physical itch. It can be that people find that feeling connected sexually is the glue that makes them feel connected to their partner in a way they don't with others.

(TC: 00:14:08)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes absolutely. (advert 14.10-15.00) I think satisfaction and pleasure is often not really discussed. It's definitely in sex education or in a doctors office and what I've been really interested in recently is the research around female pleasure and how heterosexual women are at the, kind of, bottom end of their skill when it comes to who's the most likely to have an orgasm and I found that research so interesting and I'd love to chat to you about the reasons why that is, why there's this huge gap.

(TC: 00:15:33)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes. So, yes, the orgasm gap that you are referring to is such an important piece of research because I think, again, there are lots of myths about sex. I think there used to be a widely held

belief that women's orgasms were more elusive and difficult to come by, and that was often used as an explanation for why women didn't orgasm as much as men when they had sex together. What's been so interesting about the data that came out in the mid-2000s and late-2000s around the orgasm gap, which has been replicated several times, is that, actually, if you separate men and women-, and apologies for the binary language but sex science is often quite binary in its categories, even though we know gender is not binary. If you separate people in categories of men and women and get them to masturbate, men and women can usually masturbate in the same amount of minutes, so less than five minutes, 95% of the time.

So, when it comes to reaching orgasm we know there's no difference and it's not more tricky physiologically for women to orgasm, and many women listening to this will know that from their own masturbation. It's not a difficult process. Of course, some people have challenges with orgasm but it's, generally speaking, no more than men do. But when you put men and women together to have sex, men's orgasm rate stays at 95% and women's drops to about 65%. Now, this doesn't happen when women have sex with women. The orgasm gap goes down to about 86% of the time women often, or usually, orgasm with a partner. When you put men and women together in a more casual sexual encounter the orgasm gap drastically changes. So, men continue to come at about 95% of the time so there's no difference for men, masturbation, regular partner or casual partner, they pretty much always come. When you have casual sex and you put men and women together, women's orgasm rates drop to around 18% or even lower.

So, what we see is an orgasm gap when men and women have sex together. The reasons for this are societal ideas about what sex should like, who's pleasure is prioritised and how sex happens. So, sex that always ends in penis and vagina sex for example, is less physiologically pleasurable for women than it is for men. So, women generally don't orgasm that way. Some women can, especially with additional clitoral stimulation but for most women it's all about the clitoris. So, women prefer types of sex that are people using their hands or fingers to stimulate the clitoris or receiving oral sex or using sex toys. But communicating that in a patriarchal world when our sexual scripts say sex is penis in vagina sex and you shouldn't ask for anything different can be quite difficult and women sometimes don't feel normal because they struggle to orgasm through vaginal penetration which is totally normal. So, that's the orgasm gap and it's fascinating.

(TC: 00:18:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes and I think that understanding is really important because I think a lot of women feel like it's a failure on their part because they're not able to orgasm from penetration alone when you've just explained quite rightly that, you know, a very, very small percent of women can do that and it's not a fault on women. It's the way we've been taught and how sex education is taught and we don't talk about how to pleasure a female or prioritise it because both partners pleasure matters.

(TC: 00:19:12)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes and it becomes really crucial when you talk about desire. Because there is no such thing as sex drive, what we know desire is is more of a motivation to be sexual than an innate urge to be sexual. We're only motivated to do something if it's rewarding for us. So, when you see an orgasm gap when people have sex together, when one person regularly doesn't get the same amount of pleasure as another, that's a disincentive and it will reduce someone's desire over time. So, that's really important. But it really made me think of something you said earlier about how we talk about sex in society because the idea of the

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sexual script that ends with penis and vagina sex is so every present in our language that we even have a word, virginity, which essentially puts that (TC 00:20:00) type of sex on a pinnacle, on a pedestal I meant, over all other types of sex and says, 'This is the important event in your life. This is you losing your 'virginity' and everything else isn't really sex.' Which is a way that language, kind of, keeps perpetuating those ideas of what sex should look like that's just really not helpful for women's sexuality.

(TC: 00:20:26)

Dr Hazel Wallace: No, absolutely. So then, in terms of narrowing that gap, obviously education is a huge part of that and I think some of the research actually did go back and they did do some form of education and seen that it did improve orgasm rates or pleasure.

(TC: 00:20:44)

Dr. Karen Gurney: That's right.

(TC: 00:20:45)

Dr Hazel Wallace: So, that's one thing but I guess, what else? Like, communicating with your partner? I think that reflects what you said in that women who are having casual sex are even less likely to orgasm but if you're in a comfortable relationship then I'm sure orgasm rates increase because you feel more comfortable, more vocal, to say these are the things that work for me.

(TC: 00:21:08)

Dr. Karen Gurney: That's right yes. I think, you know, before we venture into this it's important to say that orgasm isn't the be all and end all and it isn't the singular marker of great sex. There are plenty of other things you might want to get from sex and orgasm might be lower down your list so that's okay. But it is a marker of gender equality when it comes to sex. It is a very obvious marker of what's happening there with inequality so that's why it matters. I think there are a couple of ingredients to this. The first is, as you mentioned earlier in terms of education, I think until we start talking about pleasure as a possible outcome of sex for women which sex education up until recently has really been about all the bad things that can happen when you're not wanting them to from sex. So, it's a bit like, 'Don't have sex, you'll get an STI. Don't have sex, you might get pregnant. Don't have sex, you might get a bad reputation.' There's lots of, or there has been, lots of negative messages around women's sexuality that women are socialised into.

So, that's important for desire later on because it affects how we think and feel about sex. But it means that women are often starting their sexual career, if you like, not really understanding about the clitoris, not understanding about pleasure, not understanding which parts of their body might be the pleasure givers because no one teaches you about the clitoris. Over on my Instagram, whenever I post a picture of the full structure of the clitoris, it doesn't matter how many times I post it, people's minds are blown because they're like, 'I'm 30, I'm 40, I'm 50, I never knew that that's what the full structure of the clitoris looked like.' I mean, that's not okay is it?

(TC: 00:22:55)

Dr Hazel Wallace: No.

(TC: 00:22:56)

Dr. Karen Gurney: So, there's something about education and education about pleasure. An important part of it is communication and being able to say, 'This is the type of sex I like. This is the type of touch I like. This is what I want our sex to look like some of the time or most of the time.' But a really important underpinning of that communication is about autonomy, bodily consent and assertiveness and gender politics and that's the more tricky bit. Because I think we are often raised in a way which congratulates women putting other peoples needs first, not being too assertive, not being too demanding and we see that happen a lot in sex science. Those messages come through loud and clear. So, I think what I hope to do with widening the information on this with things like my Instagram platform is to give people the knowledge that they are normal so that they can then feel confident to assert that. Because I think knowing your normal allows you to go, 'Hold on a minute, it's not just me. Actually 80% of women can't come from this type of sex, so why shouldn't I ask for additional clitoral stimulation? Why shouldn't I say I don't want all the sex we have to look this way? So, I think giving people that information about what's normal is really helpful in allowing them to be a bit more assertive.

(TC: 00:24:22)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, absolutely and I guess, going back to what you said in that women are often praised for, you know, thinking of others and putting their needs before them, typically caregivers and things like that, also leads into the whole faking orgasm situation. And I read the stat in your book and I think it was 50 to 65% of women have said that they've faked orgasms. I actually think that could be higher.

(TC: 00:24:49)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes, I think so too.

(TC: 00:24:52)

Dr Hazel Wallace: But thinking about everything that you said, it's not just doing them a disservice, you know, there's wider implications for that but then, I think if more women were aware that actually it's not on them why it hasn't happened and so you don't have too, you know, appease your partner. So, I think this conversation, hopefully, will help change those (mw 25.17) a little bit.

(TC: 00:25:19)

Dr. Karen Gurney: I'd like to think so and as you say, there's something about knowing your normal to not have orgasms through vaginal penetration alone, which allows you then to communicate that in a way that is matter of fact and say, 'I'd like to cum and I'm going to need x, y or z.' Or if they ask you, 'Did you cum?' And you say, 'No, but I really enjoyed it. I only really cum from x, y, z.' You know, if we don't have those types of conversations no matter the gender of our partners then we're perpetuating an idea that women's pleasure is easy to come by through those roots that we know that it's not. But essentially, faking orgasms is a communication. It's communication that it doesn't really help in the longer term, both on a societal level and on an individual level, because you don't get to say what you need but it is a communication of something which is often, 'I'd like to finish now. I've had enough of this or I'd like to signal to you that it's time to stop.' So I think building communication skills, more generally, can also help because it's also okay to say, 'This is great, but I'm not going to come but I'm happy to stop now, if you're okay with that. Or I'm happy to do something else.' So it is all connected to communication as well.

(TC: 00:26:39)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, absolutely. That's really helpful. And then thinking about, you know, we've been talking about couples and obviously, people can have self pleasure and masturbation and as much as sex holds a lot of stigma and the conversation around that, I feel like masturbation and self pleasure is even more stigmatised. And I would love to address that because some of the questions that I got were from women who were saying, you know, 'Is it bad that I use sex toys or I'm trying to wean myself off sex toys.'

(TC: 00:27:12)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Oh, no.

(TC: 00:27:13)

Dr Hazel Wallace: And so I just wanted to bring this topic up and would be interested in your thoughts on it.

(TC: 00:27:19)

Dr. Karen Gurney: That's a really interesting question. People do worry a bit about becoming, and I'm doing inverted commas here, like, dependent on sex toys, and it's just not a thing. So, let's start at the beginning with this. So, your question was about the stigma, and something I find fascinating about masturbation or solo sex, sometimes we might call it, around stigma, is I think it's become less stigmatised for women recently. That's a really positive thing, because we know there's a strong association between solo sex and masturbation, and good sexual functioning for women. So, generally speaking, we know that people who start masturbating earlier and enjoy masturbation tend to have good sexual functioning and are able to know what their body needs, are able to experience more orgasms etc. But, what's interesting to me is there hasn't been that same discourse around male sexuality and masturbation, and I think it's still something which is seen as a little bit negative for men to take their time in enjoying a solo sex session and I think that's interesting and it would be great to see that narrative changing. I think, for men, it's seen as a little bit more something they shouldn't be doing.

(TC: 00:28:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, that's true. I've not thought about that, you know, well, I mean obviously, I'm biased in what I see online but a lot more women are speaking openly and, you know, working with companies who, kind of, promote female pleasure but you don't see the same from a male side of things. So that's really interesting.

(TC: 00:28:56)

Dr. Karen Gurney: You really don't. (Advert 28:57-29:27). And I'd really like to see the same discourse for men's sexual wellness around taking the time to enjoy masturbation in a very sensual, self-care, erotic way and when I talk to men about masturbation, there's an awful lot of, kind of, 'It happens very quickly. It's a, kind of, get it done with job.' There's not much, kind of, external planning of the environment, thinking about they might want it to be and actually, it can really benefit men also to set some time (TC 00:30:00) aside to really touch their body, to think about pleasure, to experiment with new things, to set the scene and that could benefit men as well. But generally speaking, masturbation is really good for our sex lives. It helps us be more connected to our sexual function and what we want. It's very rare, but it does happen, that some

people feel out of control with masturbation. That's usually linked. It's not addictive. It's nothing to worry about. It's usually linked with it's become a way to manage low mood because it does make us feel good, the chemicals that are released when we orgasm, they give us a little mood boost so it becomes a very effective way to manage low mood. So, some people feel like that but it's very rare and that's not about masturbation or sex toys being addictive, it's just because it's a really nice strategy. A bit like going for a run can be a nice strategy if you're feeling a bit low and we can support people with other ways of managing that.

But people worry about becoming dependent on sex toys. It doesn't work like that so how it does work is if you're using a sex toy, it can be that, for example, your clitoris might be a bit numb for usual for a period of like 15 seconds, I think the research shows, after orgasm which can make it quite difficult to feel much after that but then it's gone and you're back to normal. So, there is a little bit of an effect in the very, very short term of that stimulation taking away sensation after you've cum but not in any harmful way. In actual fact, the more people have orgasms, and have orgasms through different means and different ways, the easier it is for them to have orgasms. So, what sex toys basically do is remind our brain and our body that those neuro pathways are there and that orgasm is something that we can do and can do quite easily. I think something people worry about getting reliant on them though because they struggle to introduce them with a partner and I think we really need to normalise the idea that sex toys, vibrators, clitoral suction devices, whatever it might be, should come into sex with partners and I think that's something that queer couples find a lot easier than cis-head couples who might struggle a little bit to integrate and might worry that their partner sees that as an insult to their sexual skill. But actually, bringing a vibrator into sex with someone else can increase pleasure for both of you, make sex quicker, make orgasms come more easily and that, has an incentivising effect on desire over time.

(TC: 00:32:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, absolutely. And I think, like, most couples want to provide pleasure to their partner because that's giving them pleasure, and, typically, like, having those conversations on how you can support them, I'm sure they would be more than supportive to try these things.

(TC: 00:32:57)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes. There was some great research on that actually. I wish I had it in my head, to tell you the statistics, but I can't keep all the percentages in my head the whole time. But there was some great research which said that-, and, again, I'm talking about women having sex with men here, because that's where we know women struggle most with sexual satisfaction. So, that's why I'm often talking about women having with men. That women were more worried about telling a partner about wanting to use a sex toy and thought partners would react badly. But when men were interviewed about their female partners introducing sex toys, they were pretty much all open to it. So, there is a bit of a discrepancy there, in terms of what we expect people will say and what they actually say.

(TC: 00:33:40)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, that's so interesting. I'm going back to, kind of, a couple of things that we've brought up. Like obviously, it's a very physical act, sex, but what our mind is doing during sex is super important and it can, you know, it can be the difference between good sex and terrible sex if you're distracted. And so, how can we best focus our minds to work with us and not against us?

(TC: 00:34:07)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes, this is something I'm super interested in, especially being a clinical psychologist thinking about the brain and how it interacts with what's happening with our body. So, it might help if I explain the process to people so they can see where our minds can get in the way.

So, the first thing that happens when there's a sexual stimulus in front of us, so that means like a naked partner, or kissing someone, or we're listening to audio erotica, or whatever it is, is that our brains automatically respond with physical arousal. We know that happens for people in research when they're wired up to devices and looking at sexual stimuli, so it's an automatic process. What happens next in terms of our sexual function, so how turned on we get, the amount of desire we feel, how well our erections work, how close to orgasm we get etc. is that depending on how much attention we're able to pay to that sexual stimulus, our bodies respond in different ways.

So, we know that when people are distracted, they tend to see a decline in the sexual function, so that makes it harder for them to get turned on, makes it harder for them to maintain erections, it can make it harder for them to orgasm. We get distracted by a lot of things because the human brain is a thought-generating machine, and so we've got this constant battle in our brain of brains are wanting to just respond to sexual stimulus with physical arousal like many other animals do, but because we've got this human bit of our brain which generates thoughts constantly, if our past learning, or memories, or associations with sex are quite negative and we're having lots of thoughts like, 'What's going to happen?' 'What will they think of my body?' 'What if I don't orgasm?' 'What if I don't stay hard?' 'What if we get pregnant?' 'What if we don't get pregnant?' If we're having those types of thoughts, then our attention is distracted away from sex and onto worries and what that does is closes down our sexual function and makes it really difficult for our bodies to respond in the way that we want. So, that's where in sex science the biggest leap in the last, kind of, decade or so has been, understanding the role of attention and using generic mindfulness skills to train our brain, if you like, to be able to be more present in the moment. They're skills that are essential for sex.

(TC: 00:36:28)

Dr Hazel Wallace: So, focusing on, kind of, the senses as you would in traditional mindfulness techniques?

(TC: 00:36:35)

Dr. Karen Gurney: That's right, yes. So, I usually get people to do six or eight weeks of daily mindfulness first, to build up generic mindfulness skills outside of sex. So, you know, using an app, one of the good mindfulness apps for around eight to ten minutes a day. Then, getting them to bring that into solo sex, masturbation, so just bringing their attention back the whole time to sensation. Then, getting them to use similar skills with a partner. For anyone who's interested, we have an online workshop for this called, 'Train your Brain for Better Sex,' that's, kind of, a download on demand, with me talking people through a programme and the science behind it. We know from sex science that mindfulness has a distinct improvement in sexual function across all elements, so it can improve people's desire, it can improve people's orgasms, it can improve pain that people experience during sex. That's simply by modifying that attentional focus.

(TC: 00:37:32)

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Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing, that's so interesting.

(TC: 00:37:34)

Dr. Karen Gurney: It really is.

(TC: 00:37:36)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Another, kind of, common theme that comes is, as a relationship progresses, or you've been in a relationship for a very long time, the amount of sex tends to drop off and maybe sexual desire drops off as well. If there is a couple in that situation and they want to bring back some sexual desire into the relationship, what kind of advice can you give them?

(TC: 00:38:01)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Okay. So, my first bit of advice to them would be, find out how desire works, because it's both much more complex and much more simple than you think. You can have desire feature as much as you want in your relationship. Saying that, it's really normal for there to be a drop in spontaneous desire, particularly for women, regardless of the gender of their partner. So, women having sex with women, women having sex with men, we see a drop in spontaneous desire, which means feeling like it out of the blue, about eighteen months to two years into a relationship. It doesn't mean anything. It's just what happens and it's normal. But we don't see a drop in women's responsive desire, which means desire that you trigger by intentionally trying to stimulate it. So, you see a sex scene on TV that's quite hot, you read some erotica, you have a long passionate kiss with your partner, you go to bed naked together to chat for a while. Those types of things tend to trigger women's desire very easily.

What can happen though, in a long-term relationship, is what I call sexual currency, which means the charge between the two of you, that sexual outside-of-sex. So, you know, the glances, the passionate kissing, the flirtation, the texts, the looks at each other, the bum grabs, whatever it might be, the sexual currency tends to decline and we fall into other ways of relating that are less sexual, like flatmates, like friends, like co-parents and it can make it harder to see our partner as a sexual being. So, we have to work on sexual currency outside of sex to create that context, but also to provide stimuli to kickstart our responsive desire.

We can also see a decline in novelty, when we have sex with the same person again and again. So, if monogamous long-term relationships are your thing, you have to be aware that there will be a decline in novelty, because it's the same person you're having sex with,(TC 00:40:00) and it's really important to find ways to keep novelty. By novelty, I don't necessarily mean, you know, nipple tassels and swinging from chandeliers, although it's fine if that's what's your bag. By novelty, I mean making sure that sex doesn't always look the same, making sure that you get to express all sides of your sexual personality in sex, not just one type. So, the sex isn't always sensual, if you're also someone who likes quite frantic, passionate sex. Finding a way to check in with each other regularly about what you'd like to, kind of, grow into sexually.

So, I have an exercise around people understanding their conditions for good sex and that's something that they can do alone and then discuss it with a partner. It's a little bit of a, kind of, looking forward exercise in, 'What are the things I'd like more of?' and 'What am I interested in?' 'How can we navigate that together?' Our sexual wants and our sexuality is always changing, so if our long-term relationship can't keep adapting to those changes, then we risk a reduction in desire. Does that make sense?

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(TC: 00:41:10)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Yes, absolutely.

(TC: 00:41:12)

Dr. Karen Gurney: So, there are so many things, but I would say, probably, understanding desire is key. It doesn't work like you think it does, so learn that first. Increase sexual currency, and that will remind you that each other is a sexual being, and create lots of opportunities for responsive desire. Work on novelty, and predictability and pleasure. That's a good starting point.

(TC: 00:41:36)

Dr Hazel Wallace: So, is that the secret sauce to a long-term good sex life?

(TC: 00:41:42)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Yes. And I would like to add that it's really important that people know a decline in sexual satisfaction is not inevitable in a long-term relationship, but keeping sexual desire for the same person over decades without any intentional or purposeful effort isn't always realistic either. So, if people want a good sex life in a long-term relationship, they can have it, but they absolutely need to put some work in to that intentionally, just like you do your diet, you know. You can't just eat what you want and then expect to be healthy.

(TC: 00:42:16)

Dr Hazel Wallace: That's a good message. I think that's a good message to end on. Before we finish, I'd like to ask you three questions which we ask everyone and the first one is, your number one take-away from this podcast episode.

(TC: 00:42:29)

Dr. Karen Gurney: My number one take-away is learn as much as you can about sex and what's normal, because that will change everything.

(TC: 00:42:37)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing. The second one's a little bit different, if you could go back in time and tell your eighteen-year-old self something, what would it be?

(TC: 00:42:46)

Dr. Karen Gurney: It would be don't feel that you need to conform to people's expectations of how you need to be.

(TC: 00:42:54)

Dr Hazel Wallace: I love that. Finally, if you could recommend one book to everyone, what would it be and why?

(TC: 00:43:02)

Dr. Karen Gurney: It's obviously going to be my book. Obviously. Otherwise, I wouldn't have written it. I think that that's not entirely fair, so firstly my book, 'Mind the Gap.' After that, I would really recommend

Emily Nagoski's book, 'Come as You Are' which I think is a great accompaniment to 'Mind the Gap' and does a lot of good around quashing myths and giving information about sex.

(TC: 00:43:23)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing. Well, thank you for your time today.

(TC: 00:43:26)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Thank you.

(TC: 00:43:27)

Dr Hazel Wallace: If someone wants to come get more information from you, is social media your main place, Instagram?

(TC: 00:43:32)

Dr. Karen Gurney: That's right. So @thesexdoctor on Instagram and there's load of links to free resources and online workshops on things we talked about today, and my TED talk etc. in my bio. There's tonnes of stuff for people to access there.

(TC: 00:43:46)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Amazing. Thank you so much.

(TC: 00:43:48)

Dr. Karen Gurney: Thank you.

(TC: 00:43:51)

Dr Hazel Wallace: Okay. So, I know that was a bit of a different podcast topic than usual, but I really hope it was empowering and informative. As a doctor, I feel like we just don't talk about sex enough and personally I found it very liberating. So, thank you so much again for tuning in. Make sure to subscribe so you're the first to hear about any new episodes and if you would like to submit a question to the podcast, whether it's on health, fitness, nutrition or mindset, any of the topics that we cover on The Food Medic podcast, please make sure to send your voice-recorded questions to ellie@thefoodmedic.co.uk for your chance to feature in the podcast. Finally, if you are enjoying the show, I would love it if you could leave a rating and a review, hopefully five stars and share the episode with someone you think would enjoy the podcast. That's all from me, see you again next time.