

# A Lack of Sexual Desire Emerges as a Contemporary Condition

By GEORGIA DULLEA

Their sex lives never measure up to those superlative examples reported in the surveys. They are alternately intimidated and bored by the sex manuals. The truth is, they have stopped having sexual relations, at least for a while, although one hesitates to admit such a thing in the midst of a sexual revolution.

As a New York therapist put it: "People will go on TV and talk for hours about their homosexuality or their bisexuality, but who wants to talk about their asexuality?"

Asexuality is, of course, a term used by the public, not the professionals, who stress that no one is truly sexless. At the same time, however, the professionals do acknowledge that the chief symptom of self-styled asexuals — a lack of interest in sexual intercourse — is being expressed with growing frequency at clinics around the country.

Indeed, there was much discussion and one or two scholarly papers on "desire dysfunction" at last month's convention of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists. According to Shirley Zussman, New York co-director and vice president of the association, some members reported that "a lack of desire" seemed to be the prime problem with at least 50 percent of their patients. In the past, she said, the most prevalent complaints were premature ejaculation, impotence and failure to achieve orgasm.

## Low Interest Among Young People

"Older people have always reported low interest for cultural, psychological and sometimes physical reasons," Mrs. Zussman said. "But now we're seeing more and more of this among young people, males and females in their late 20's and early 30's."

Lacking research on the phenomenon, the experts are not sure if this means that more people are actually experiencing less desire for sex or simply that more people are willing to acknowledge it. Among proponents of the latter theory is the dean of sex therapy, Dr. William Masters.

"We are seeing an increase of people with reduced sex interest," he noted at the Reproductive Biology Research Foundation in St. Louis, "but then more people are coming for help, period. At one time, who dared admit to impotency or to nonorgasm? Now that we're past that, people are coming in with other distresses. Not all sexual distresses have to do with facility of function."

On the other hand, not everyone now living the celibate life speaks of distress. For a number of single men and women interviewed, all in their late 20's or 30's, all with reasonably active sexual histories, a period without sex with a partner offers a comforting antidote to such contemporary ills as traumatic divorces, traumatic affairs, random sex and the pressure to "score" — in bed as well as on the job and on the tennis court.

"My ex-wife would never believe this, but I haven't slept with a woman for three, maybe four months. I lost count,"

said an advertising space salesman, who attributed his marital breakup to "her low sex drive, not mine."

"I was always cheating on her," he recalled. "Since the separation I've had relationships with several women, none I gave a damn about. You might say I'm taking a sabbatical from sex now, to sort out my feelings. I'm also going to the shrink twice a week."

A divorced actress drifted into celibacy two years ago, for much the same reason: "I had just broken up with another man and I thought, 'My God, when is this going to end?' You know, you start out with something good, then, slowly, it begins to unwind, and there you are back with the same old pain."

Unlike most of those interviewed, the actress, who has since become a disciple of yoga and meditation, seemed to regard celibacy more as a way of life than a temporary shield against its pains.

"No, I didn't take a vow or anything," she insisted. "My sexual appetite just fell away. It's like I no longer drink. I no longer smoke. I no longer take dope. I'm a vegetarian." She laughed. "I don't mean to equate sex with addiction, but it's not a bad analogy."

## Preoccupied With Other Things

Other people spoke of losing interest in sex during periods of illness, stress or preoccupation with work. To their surprise, they felt ambivalent about becoming active again once those periods had passed.

"When you don't have it, you don't miss it. Now I know how nuns and priests must feel," said a writer who gave up sexual relations because of abdominal surgery and has still not resumed them, nearly a year after her recovery. "It's not that I haven't had the opportunity," she said with a shrug.

A social scientist recalled being so caught up in a research project that four months went by before he realized, "Hey, I haven't had sex with anybody for a long time."

"That seemed O.K.," he said, "and I didn't feel the need for a romantic relationship with a woman until six months later. It wasn't that difficult. What I missed most was not sex, but the closeness you feel in a primary relationship. I learned a lot about myself and sex."

Contrary to popular belief, abstinent men are not usually plagued by "consuming sexual appetites," according to Bernie Zilbergeld, a clinical psychologist in the human sexuality program at the University of California in San Francisco: "Abstinence need not rule out masturbation."

## Less Permissible for Men

Mr. Zilbergeld, whose new book, "Male Sexuality," includes interviews with men who found temporary abstinence an instructive and even "gratifying" experience, said he had talked to more men who were contemplating abstinence than actually practicing it.

"The idea is still too strange for most guys," he explained. "They are afraid they'll end up thinking more about sex than they already are or that it will take

up more of their time. With women, it's somehow more permissible, but for a man it's still considered 'weird.'"

Shere Hite agreed. "For centuries, men have been told they ought to have sex as often as possible. Otherwise, they would lose their virility," said Miss Hite, now working on a male sequel to "The Hite Report," a book on female sexuality, which was based on the experiences of 3,000 women.

"In the 60's," she went on, "society began pushing and pressuring women into having sex. I think a lot of people were having more sex than they wanted. It's only natural to have a reaction in the opposite direction."

Some are reacting by joining what

they jokingly call "The Chastity Underground," if only for a time. "It's not a movement, of course," Shirley Zussman said, laughing at the idea. "But just as there was pressure among younger people a few years ago to be sexual, now there's a kind of support for saying 'no.' It's okay not to sleep with anyone who asks you."

## Attendance at Sex Therapy Clinics

Others react by visiting the sex therapy clinics. In general, these patients fall into one of two categories: those with low interest and low response; those with low interest but good response.

As Dr. Leon Zussman, a gynecologist

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Joan Hall

ual pleasure, are seeking therapy because their lack of desire is causing marital stress.

Although the authorities tend to agree that depressed sexual desire in a younger person is generally a sign of pathology — "a symptom, not a fact," as Dr. Masters put it — they do not necessarily recommend increased sexual activity as a cure.

Said Dr. Helen Singer Kaplan, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center: "For some people, sex is fraught with so much anxiety, anger and negative emotion that it may be a better adaption not to risk it."