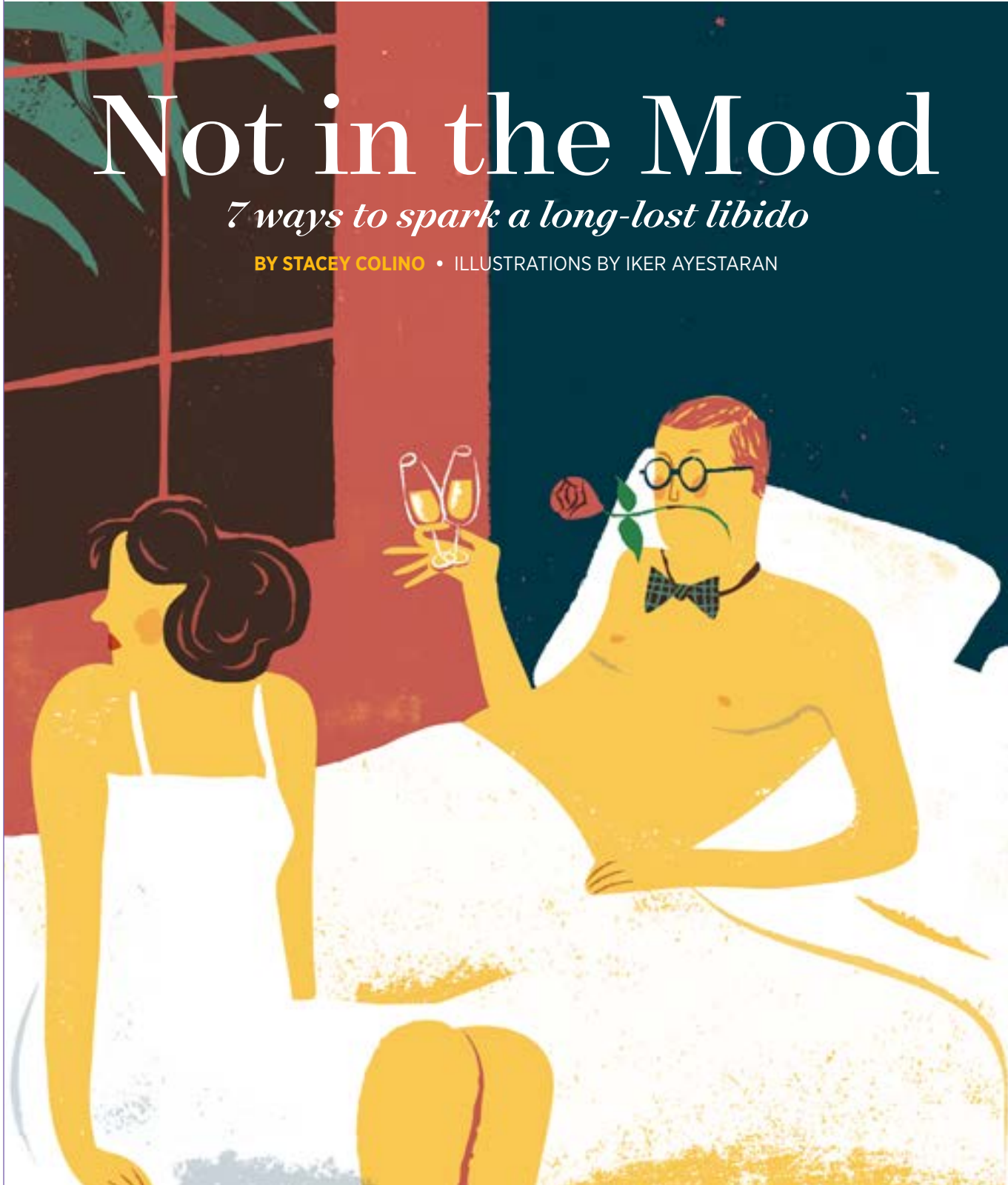


Not in the Mood

7 ways to spark a long-lost libido

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About seven years ago, while in the throes of perimenopause, my libido packed up and moved out. At the time, my husband and I were already feeling more like roommates. After two decades of marriage, the emotional intimacy between us had slowly burned down like a candle. We led largely separate lives except for the time we spent with the kids. In between, we would awkwardly bump into each other in the kitchen and communicate only about need-to-know info, like who was taking the dog to the vet. Sex? It was the last thing on my mind, and I blamed my mood swings and night sweats. But once we started couples counseling, I realized it wasn't because my hormones had gone haywire—it was because my state of mind and my marriage were out of whack.

“When a relationship is broken, it can turn off your sex drive,” explains Pepper Schwartz, PhD, co-author of *Snap Strategies for Couples*. “Many women would much rather blame the problem on hormones instead of other stuff that they might have to do something about, such as stress, anxiety, depression or anger.” Boom! That sounded like us. While we still loved each other, resentments and disappointments had built a brick wall right up the center of our bed. But it is possible to break down

that wall while reconstructing your marriage. Here's how.

1 Check your sexual pilot light.

Has it gone out? Is it just too low? If you're not sure, spend some time stimulating your libido. Megan Fleming, PhD, a certified relationship therapist in New York City, suggests some erotic reading (download it to your Kindle so no one will know) or a steamy movie. “It's ultimately your responsibility to keep your sexual pilot light on,” says Fleming.

2 Confess your secrets.

“Resentment was a big factor in my low desire,” admits Suzy Olds, 48, an engineering professor and mother of two who lives outside Chicago. “I was working full-time, picking up the lion's share of the household duties and taking care of the kids' needs while my husband's life barely changed.” If you have unresolved issues with your spouse—especially latent anger or disappointment—choose a quiet time when you can discuss your feelings in a nonconfrontational manner. “Those

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issues need to be addressed for the sake of sex and the marriage,” says Michele Weiner-Davis, MSW, author of *The Sex-Starved Marriage*. “Shutting down emotionally can shut you down sexually too.” Don't be accusatory. Simply describe how you feel and what you'd like to change using “I” statements. If you're not comfortable broaching the subject on your own, suggest going to counseling together to work through these issues.

3 Relive the passionate past.

Think about a time when your sex drive was stronger and ask yourself: “How was the relationship different back then? How was my life different? Which aspects of each could I resurrect?” Contemplating these questions can often offer clues to what was working in your relationship and what's missing now. “For many women, emotional intimacy is a prerequisite for being close physically,” explains Weiner-Davis. By restoring the emotional connection and spark to your relationship, you'll increase your chances of rekindling desire and passion.

4 Offer up some praise. When there are five times as many positive interactions between partners as there are negative ones, the relationship is likely to be stable, according to the Gottman Institute, a Seattle-based organization that runs couples workshops and conducts marriage research. “Push the balance in the right direction by making sure that whenever you note something negative about your partner, you counter it by remembering five positive things about him,” suggests Fleming. Brandy Miller, 40, restored her sexual desire by focusing her attention on what her husband was doing well rather than on what she wasn't getting from him. The turning point came when Brandy, a creative consultant in Dallas and mother of one, was feeling particularly miserable and wrote out a list of complaints about her husband. Instead of sharing it with him, she chose to write and give him a different letter, which detailed all the things he'd said or done over the years

If emotional issues aren't at the root of your intimacy problems, go to familycircle.com/sexualhealing for four physical issues that may be to blame.





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same time and snuggle every night. Soon they were spooning on the couch while watching TV or holding hands while walking the dog. "Touching each other in nonsexual ways led us to want to touch each other sexually," she explains. Warm physical contact between two people triggers the release of oxytocin (often referred to as the bonding hormone or the love hormone), which promotes trust, connection and attachment. "All it takes is hugging for 30 seconds or more to stimulate oxytocin," Kerner says.

7 Talk dirty. "In committed sexual relationships, there's a lot less honesty than people think there is—about what pleases them, what they fantasize about and how they want to experiment," says Schwartz. "If you have sex the same way all the time, which is what most people do, it gets old." The simple solution is to tell the hot and bothered truth. Think about what would create a night of steamy sex and then talk to your partner about it. You might just be pleasantly surprised.

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My personal story has a happy ending, but it's not the one you're expecting. Through couples counseling, my husband and I tried to hash out our differences and strengthen our bond, but after two years of striving to fix our broken marriage, we realized we couldn't. And we divorced. But that wasn't the end of intimacy for me. Fast-forward to today: My libido is alive and kicking again, though I still get the occasional night sweat. After the divorce I gradually emerged from my emotional stupor, began dating an amazing man and fell in love. Looking back, I realize that, like many women, I needed a strong emotional connection for my sex drive to thrive. While I wasn't able to reclaim that with my ex, I did find it with the man who became my second husband last November.

Still have questions about igniting a dormant sex drive? Email us at health@familycircle.com to share your own experience. We may answer your letter in an online story.

that made her feel loved and valued. "Focusing more on the positive helped me open myself up to him emotionally and physically," says Brandy.

5 Stop playing it safe. Skip the usual dinner and a movie and plan for spontaneity to add surprise to your couple time—perhaps a wine tasting, dancing or couples massage. "Once husbands and wives get into their 40s or 50s, they're often functioning more in the roles of mother and father and they're not really connected as individuals or feeling special in the eyes of their partner," says Ian Kerner, PhD, a couples therapist in New York City. "Connecting with your spouse can restore positivity to the relationship."

6 Get a contact high. "Sex was just another thing on my to-do list," recalls Christine Egan, 47, a writer on Long Island, NY. Between caring for her three kids and working, her stress level had depleted her desire. To bring back that loving feeling, she and her husband had a cuddling commitment—they made a conscious decision to go to bed at the

A Drop in Desire

To figure out whether discontent in your romantic relationship is responsible for your low sex drive, ask yourself these probing questions.

- **Am I angry with my partner? Has he said things that have hurt or offended me?**
- **Do I feel loved and supported by my partner?**
- **Do I often ruminate about unresolved issues with my spouse?**
- **How do I love my partner? Am I truly in love with him, or is he more of a good friend?**
- **When was the last time I felt spontaneously affectionate toward my partner?**
- **Does the idea of snuggling or holding hands appeal to me or turn me off?**

Once you have a pulse on these issues, it's time to roll up your sleeves and try to enhance the quality of your relationship. "It can be painful to face the truth," admits Pepper Schwartz, PhD, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington. But it can also be rewarding. After all, having a mutually respectful, fully engaged relationship with your partner is the best aphrodisiac.