



Bestselling author John Bradshaw has been a counsellor for over 40 years and has been called America's leading personal growth expert. He lives in Texas and is married with two children. His book *Post-Romantic Stress Disorder: What To Do When The Honeymoon Is Over* (Piatkus) is out now.

Happy New Year? Why is January a time when so many couples split? Spending concentrated time together can shine a light on underlying issues and cracks in a marriage. If things are going badly, you may be able to pretend in public, but in private you can't. That, coupled with the fact that New Year is a time when we naturally assess how life is going, can make people more determined to take action if relationships aren't going well.

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE honeymoon is over...

THE CHEMICALS OF LOVE

Most people describe the sex they had when they first got together with their partner as amazing, so it's easy to look back and wonder where all that passion went. However, there is actually a chemical change that takes place during that frenzied euphoria. Our brains are saturated with phenylethylamine (PEA) – also known as the “love drug”, an amphetamine-like neurotransmitter that releases dopamine and norepinephrine. Both of these reduce serotonin, which can be a cause of obsessive thinking. This PEA dopamine cocktail also raises blood pressure and glucose levels, leaving you feeling more energetic, alert and content. Most importantly, PEA elevates testosterone, which governs the sex drive. The result? Amazing sex. However, after 12 to 18 months, people tend to return to their normal, pre-romance levels.

What is Post-Romantic Stress Disorder?

Once being “in love” passes, we go from feeling inseparable, to feeling separate – the first Post-Romantic Stress. Also, when you're at the “in love” stage, you don't deal with your differences – you re-frame them instead. At first you might think it's endearing that your new man can't cook even a basic meal, but after a couple of years (especially once children arrive) it becomes infuriating. Then there are things like the differences between your two families, whether it's how they celebrate Christmas, or their sense of humour. As

you move out of the early “in love” stage, these things become more problematic.

Which couples are particularly vulnerable?

Those that don't understand the changing down of gear from those heady first days. All too often people conclude that if sexual desire is diminished, then they are not in love any more. But what's actually more real is the mature love that could and should replace being “in love”. Saddest is when people end perfectly good marriages because the sex had begun to diminish. The reason? They didn't talk about it.



WHAT TO DO WHEN THE honeymoon is over...

The good news is it's not just you - everyone's sex life wains after a while. The bad news? There is no bad news... as long as you keep talking about it

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Post-children blues: do kids spell the end of romance?

A famous study of 130 couples over 30 years by therapist and marriage expert John Gottman showed that 80 per cent of people said that their marriage got worse after their first child – and then progressively worse after the second. Exhaustion is one factor, but the main cause is the time spent focusing more on the child than on the marriage, especially if a child has health or behavioural problems. In some cases, this can be a way of avoiding addressing problems in the relationship. But if you stop nurturing your own relationship, it's all too easy to become ships that pass in the night.

What if you want sex... but he doesn't?

Discrepancy of sexual desire is the number one cause of conflict in couples I see. There's no easy answer to this, but some things can help:

➔ **Communicate.** Most people don't talk about their sex life enough. The more you can say “this is what I like” – and the more detail you can give about the way you like to be touched – the more likely it is to happen. No communication means no change.

➔ **Be determined.** If your partner doesn't want to have sex, they may also not want to talk about it. You need to overrule that and say: “This is critical – it's really important to me. I want to tell you how I feel and I need you to know how much this matters to me.”

➔ **Change yourself.** In order to change your partner you have to change yourself. Try something new – whether it's a new way of dressing, or a change in routine – and stick with it for a couple of months, to open the path for things to change.

What if he wants sex... but you've lost interest?

Again, you have to talk about it or nothing will change. The conversation may start with you confessing that you don't feel anything any more – but try not to accuse or blame. Use “I” rather than “you”, which can sound judgmental.

➔ **Act as if...** It's possible to change the way you feel by acting yourself into a

different way of thinking and feeling. Make the first move: the act of being sexual makes you more in the mood.

➔ **Be aware of the past.** It's worth bearing in mind that events in the past, often rooted in childhood, might affect your sex life. For example, you may have shut down in your marriage for reasons as oblique as that you hated the way your father treated your mother when you were a little girl.

TRY THIS: Agree to spend time in bed together just cuddling, gently touching and kissing for a minute before you go to sleep. This will put your bodies back in contact.



Re-light your fire...

5 ways to keep the spark going

➔ **Spend time together doing something enjoyable every week.**

This is a must, no matter what it takes. The idea of date night can become a pressure in itself, but it can be an afternoon or just lunch together. Of course this is difficult to arrange when you have young children or you both work very hard, but even just a couple of hours a week spent together as a couple is enough to create something special.

➔ **Make time for each other.** Remember how you used to talk all the time? Make a point of asking about each other's day and being interested in things beyond the family.

➔ **Don't sleep apart.** Sleeping in separate rooms can easily start if snoring (usually him!)

or hot flushes mean troubled nights, but this is a bad habit to get in to, as you slowly develop separate lives.

➔ **Do something new.** It may seem far-fetched that something so simple as taking a course together, like dancing or cooking lessons, or even just a weekend somewhere new, could be enough to stimulate romantic feelings, but it's true. Although you will never return to that initial period of romance, shared adventure can be uniting and exciting.

➔ **Cherish each other.** Make a point of practicing small, easy-to-do cherishing behaviours for short periods a few times a week. Give your partner 30 minutes to decompress when they get home, for example.

Are affairs all about exciting sex?

All the affairs I have counselled go back to the same thing: that desire to be “in love”. An affair can feel exciting and wonderful, and make you feel young. Levels of dopamine – and desire – are heightened by all that risk and secrecy. It's easy to think that you have found the one and only person you can be with; you communicate and tell secrets in a way you never have before. You forget that that was exactly how you felt with your spouse at the start. And if you exchange one spouse for another without doing anything to change yourself, then your second marriage will be exactly the same.

What if anger makes sex impossible?

People can recover from the betrayal of an affair, but only if they are honest about their feelings and those feelings are understood. If you want to save the marriage, tell your spouse: “I'm furious at you; you betrayed me and I need to grieve. It may take a long time. I have to get myself back together – and I can't imagine touching you right now.” Consider seeing a counsellor because you need an objective third person to acknowledge both how you have been wronged but also – and this is crucial – what role you may have played in the affair happening. **w&h**