

Let's talk... love and affection

Each month our insight team conducts an in-depth poll of Saga customers to find out what you're thinking.
This month: love, sex and intimacy

There's a book, *Sex after 60* ('New Condensed Edition!' it boasts on the cover). When you open it, all the pages are blank. Yes, it's a pretty funny joke – but, of course, it only works because that's exactly what society likes to believe about sex and older people: a big blank.

That's not the reality, and not what we found in our latest survey of 1,800 customers. Of those in a relationship (72%), 67% in their 60s were sexually active, 56% of those in their 70s, and 34% of over-80s.

And 74% agreed that society had an outdated view of sex and older people, regardless of whether they had a partner themselves; 66% agreed sex was important in a relationship, irrespective of age.

Our results might surprise the greetings card industry, but they don't surprise the experts. The rise of the 'young old' and the fact that more older people are looking for new partners (marriages among over-65s rose by 46% in a decade, according to 2017 figures) means more sexual activity. 'I find it's health not age that impacts on whether people are sexually active,' says Professor Trish Hafford-Letchfield at Strathclyde University, a leading researcher on sex and relationships in later life. 'I gave the nurse at my GP practice a right old lecture when she suggested that people over 60 like me don't have much sex!'

So why do these myths persist? She suspects it's ageism; society is pretty squeamish about older sex, which probably goes back to our childhoods when we reacted with horror to the thought that our parents 'did it'. 'There's a belief that sex is associated with youth and an aesthetic beauty – the idea that

you have to have this perfect body to be able to have a satisfying sex life. We don't see beauty in an older body with wrinkles.'

Older people internalise that ageism, she believes. 'People feel censored by society and perhaps by themselves, and they feel ashamed to talk about their sex lives or admit they want to find a new sexual partner in later life.' That censorship also means older people are less likely to ask advice

on sexual health, and the result is a rising rate of STIs in older age groups. Older people aren't getting enough advice on medication, either, she says – such as whether taking Viagra for erectile dysfunction could aggravate a heart condition or high blood pressure. 51% of our over-60s have experienced difficulties with sexual functioning.

'Generally, the research shows that health practitioners are pretty uptight about giving advice, and older people sense this discomfort,' she says. 'There's a lot to do to make services accessible to older people. Going to a sexual health clinic can be awkward when you're older. The assumption is, "urgh – there are dirty old men in the waiting room".

'We need more challenging of these stereotypes, to see more images of older people being intimate, and for those in the baby boomer generation to be vocal about what they need.'

That was the aim of last year's Relate campaign, Let's Talk the Joy of Later Life Sex, in which photographer Rankin took pictures of five older couples and

one woman in intimate poses. Each had eyebrow-raising captions such as 'you're never too old to play with toys' or 'Things can take longer when you're older. Brilliant'.

Ammanda Major, Relate head of service quality, says the response to the campaign was overwhelmingly positive. 'People remarked how bold it was and how it brought this whole topic out of the shadows.'

However, she wouldn't like anyone to feel that

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
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editor@saga.co.uk or
write to us at the
address on p5

GIVE US A KISS
One of Rankin's
shots for the
Relate campaign



67%
OF
60-SOMETHINGS
IN A RELATIONSHIP
ARE SEXUALLY
ACTIVE

74%
SAY IT'S FINE FOR
OLDER COUPLES TO
KISS AND CUDDLE IN
PUBLIC

70%
FEEL EMOTIONAL
CONNECTION IS
MORE IMPORTANT
THAN PHYSICAL
INTIMACY

57%
WANT TO SEE
MORE MEDIA
IMAGES OF OLDER
PEOPLE IN LOVING
RELATIONSHIPS

57%
FEEL THEY CAN
TALK OPENLY
WITH A PARTNER
ABOUT SEX

you can only be happy if you're having plenty of sex. 'The question you need to pose is what do you mean by sex? That can change over time. Is it penetrative sex, or is it intimacy, however expressed? For some people, creating a connectedness, being held and cuddled, feels sexual and helps them feel very close; the power of touch is enormous.'

You get a sense of that in our survey: 70% feel that companionship and emotional connection are more important than physical intimacy, and 62% said that affectionate and intimate behaviours were more important to them now than sexual intercourse (rising to 66% of people in their 70s and 79% over 80). In a sign that some clichés perhaps have a grain of truth, more women than men agree with that statement (70% vs 57%).

There seems to be no shortage of affection, either: 84% still hold hands with their partner (55% regularly, 29% occasionally) and 81% kiss and cuddle their partner (47% regularly, 34% occasionally).

'It's out there that we should all be having sex, and lots of it, but for some couples it simply isn't as important,' says Ammanda. 'For them it's a quieter conversation about how to feel connected. It's all about what makes you feel good about yourselves as a couple – and that needn't necessarily be sex.'

Researcher Dr Sharron Hinchliff says she's found older couples increase acts of intimacy when and if their sexual activity declines. 'They speak about the benefits of intimacy to their psychological wellbeing and to the relationship. Intimacy allows that emotional connection, it's a way to express our feelings, our love, for one another. And of course

the 'love hormone' oxytocin is released during these interactions, which benefits health – reducing stress and improving mood.'

A big part of her work at the University of Sheffield is to encourage older people to have more open conversations about intimacy and sex. Over half in our survey (57%) felt they could talk to their partners about sexual matters – although more men than women felt that way (61% vs 52%). Back in 2019, Dr Hinchliff launched the UK's first 'Age of love' cafes – discussion groups about sex and relationships for over-60s. She's hoping to relaunch them once the pandemic is over. 'The cafes were well received and people enjoyed the safe social space to talk about all things related to intimacy, or to listen,' she says.

'Sex is private so it's natural that not everyone wants to talk about it. But we know from your survey, and others, that lots of people are sexually active in their 60s and beyond. Social attitudes are at last changing, although change is slow.'

RELATE/RANKIN