

# 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

**T**here'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And 74% agreed that society had an outdated view of sex and older people, regardless of whether they had a partner themselves; 66% agreed sex was important in a relationship, irrespective of age.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

**60%**

IN A  
RELATIONSHIP  
ARE SEXUALLY  
ACTIVE

**81%**  
KISS AND  
CUDDLE

**74%**  
SAY SOCIETY HAS  
AN OUTDATED  
VIEW OF  
OLDER SEX



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

RELATE/RANKIN



**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

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SAGA VOICES

Saga Voices - sex