

Putting a myth to rest

There's no such thing as "lesbian bed death"

Zelda had been in a few short-lived relationships with women before she became smitten with Amy, who was newly out and recently divorced from her husband of nine years. Amy was swept away by Zelda's take-charge attitude, both in and out of bed, and filled with enthusiasm about being a lesbian.

The two had been living together for about a year when, on her day off, Amy was flipping through pages at a women's bookstore and came upon a discussion of "lesbian bed death." A chill ran down her spine as she realized how much less frequently she and Zelda had sex during the past few months.

How could this "bed-death" thing have happened to them? They had been so passionate, so consumed with lovemaking when they first got together. Now, they often would kiss and cuddle, even make out. But orgasms had dwindled, and genital contact had become rare.

Before stumbling upon the disturbing term, Amy hadn't minded that the passion had cooled. It had seemed like a normal phase, which she assumed would be followed by other, more sexually active phases.

But now, Amy was worried. She didn't want to be "bed dead." She walked home briskly, lit some candles, put on a k.d. lang CD and a touchable T-shirt, and waited patiently for her honey.

When Zelda finally got home after a tough day at the office, she appreciated the music and the candlelight. She gave Amy a long, slow kiss, lovingly touched her touchable T-shirt, then walked off to collapse in front of the television.

Clearly, her lover wasn't seducible tonight. Amy tried to talk to Zelda about it, but she just chuckled and tried to be reassuring.

While snuggling in front of the television, Amy remembered Zelda once admitted her other relationships ended partially because the sex had waned. Amy's worrying quickly was becoming a full-fledged panic.

"Lesbian bed death" is a deadly, thoroughly unhelpful notion. Sure, we've been conditioned to know what "good girls" do and don't do.

We've learned what is "pretty" and "sexy" and that we don't measure up unless we lose more weight, drink the right soda pop and wear the right makeup. Add to that the number of women who have suffered sexual trauma as children or adults.

As a result of all this negativity connected to sexual feelings and experiences, many women—straight, gay or otherwise—have trouble initiating or even discussing sex, suffer low self-esteem and shame about their bodies and their sexual desires, and might "protect" themselves with an inhibited sexual drive. However, the "bed death" hypothesis stretches

these truthful contentions to maintain that a lesbian couple will run out of sexual steam faster and more profoundly than either a gay male or a straight couple.

Liar, liar, pants on fire! Probably because this nasty myth contains a few particles of truth, it took hold among lesbians with a vengeance.

We secretly fear it and are quick to remember it when our lover doesn't want to have sex when we do. The "bed death" notion also coincides with our internalized homophobia, which tells us two women making love are "missing something" (i.e., a penis).

The idea got an extra boost from the 1983 book *American Couples* by Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz. Their study indicated lesbian couples have less sex than any other type of couple (i.e., gay male and heterosexual married or unmarried).

The study asked couples, "About how often during the past year have you and your partner had sexual relations?" Not to get all Clintonesque about it, but nobody defined "sexual relations," measured duration or asked about pleasure. If they had, lesbians probably would've come out on top.

A more recent study, the 1995 *Advocate* Survey of Lesbian Sexuality and Relationships, showed we have more enjoyable sex than most women in the United States. This is consistent with several previous studies indicating lesbians

tend to be more sexually assertive, arousable and communicative about sexual needs than non-lesbians and more generally satisfied with the quality of their sexual lives.

Even in the Blumstein and Schwartz study, interviews showed lesbian couples valued non-genital contact (e.g., touching, hugging) not only as foreplay but as an end in itself. In other words, lesbian sex doesn't always have to lead to orgasm.

All that touching and kissing Zelda and Amy are engaged in matters. It counts.

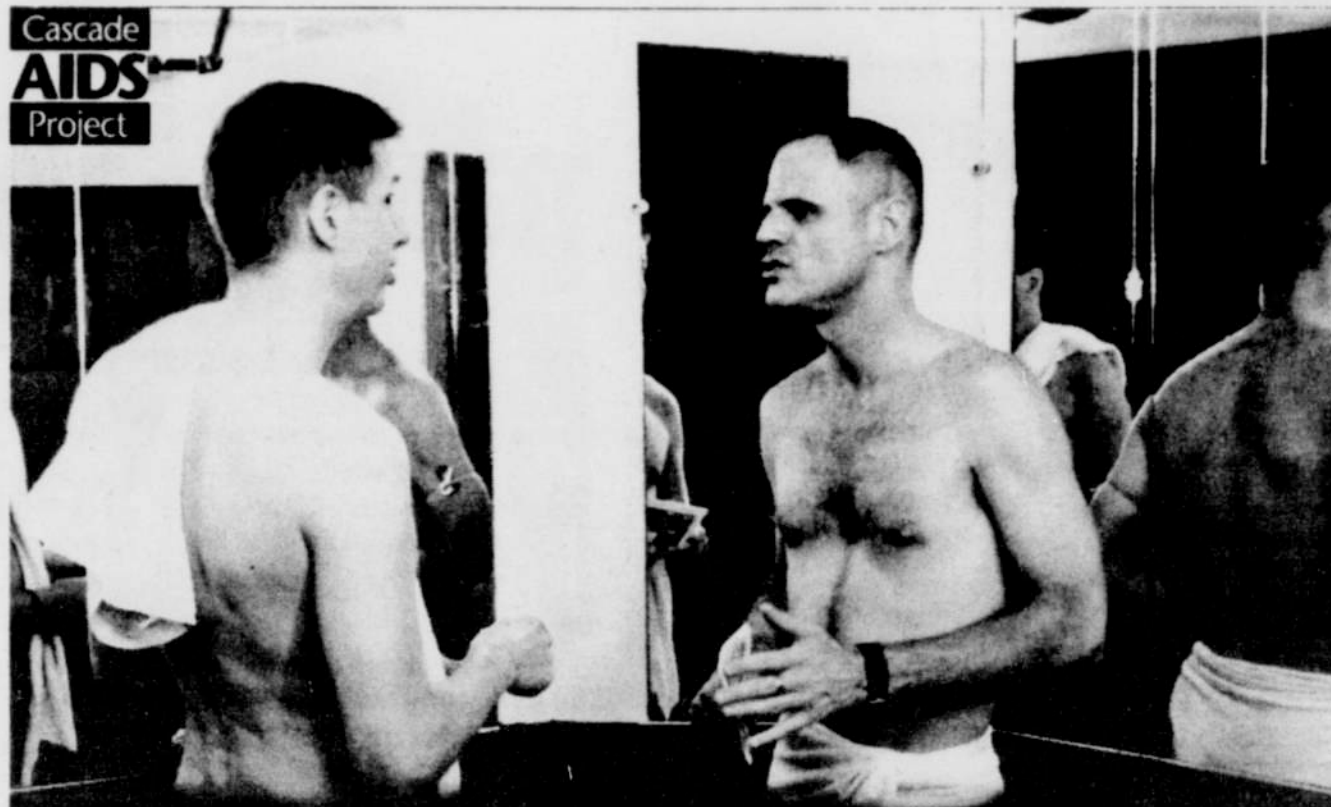
Plus, according to this study along with many others, including analyses of brain chemistry and the facts you'd get from honest friends in couples, "It is completely normal for sexual frequency to drop off in long-term relationships, regardless of gender or sexual orientation." People have demanding lives, get tired, get accustomed to each other and forget to make love.

That said, psychological blocks still can be a factor if a person is experiencing true sexual aversion. And couples are a "system" of two people who might be using sex unconsciously as an arena for their battles. Therapy can be useful in these cases.

But Amy and Zelda? They seem to be just fine—that is, provided Amy starts adding a grain of salt (or maybe a whole shaker) to whatever she reads about lesbian relationships. **J**

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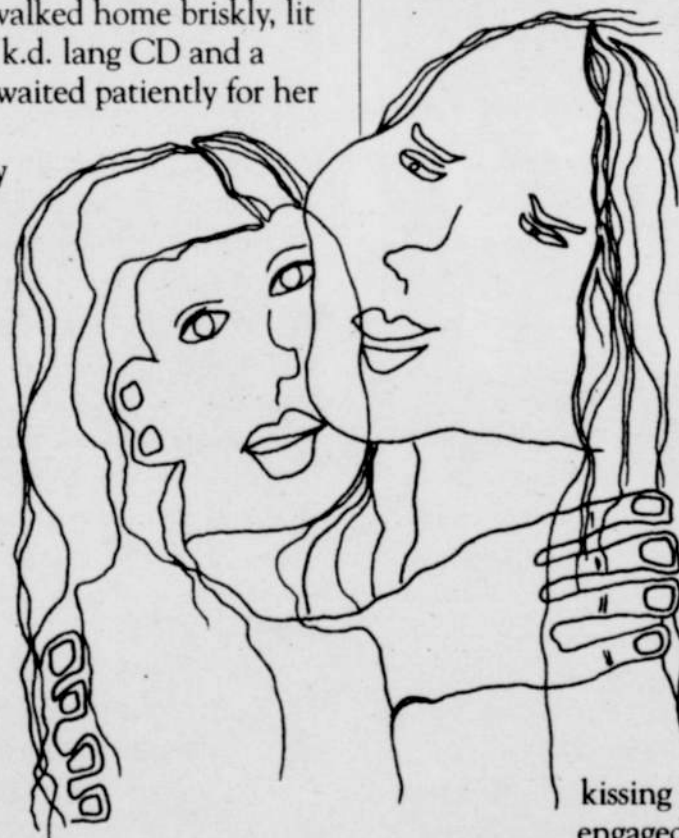
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