

Continued from Page 25

adds. "It's [just] when we lose ourselves in our coupledom that it becomes problematic."

Portland licensed clinical therapist Gwenn Cody says: "I call it depolarization and over-domestication. Domestic harmony calls for minimizing differences at least to the point of cheerful negotiations...around issues that are mundane, concrete...those aren't exactly the best conditions for sexual intensity."

For example, the 43-year-old says, "Try keeping your erotic interest up with your partner of four years while waiting in line at the

"What about...?"

Other contributing factors

• **History of sexual abuse:** "One of the most difficult factors to manage in an adult sex life/physical intimacy is a history of abuse," says Portland licensed clinical social worker Beth Richman.

• **Cultural issues:** "Two women from different cultures are going to bring different issues and feelings about sex...stuff that you got back from your grandma that you have to remember and own," says Wendy Blenning, a licensed clinical social worker in Portland.

• **Stress and time constraints:** Life is hectic. At the end of a long day, it can be difficult to muster the energy to have sex.

• **Poor—if any—role models:** "Because of the ways in which we are in the sexual spotlight as lesbians...I think that many of us are highly cautious of having our representations of sexuality appropriated by the media," says Richman.

grocery store to purchase your last-minute items for a dinner party."

Richman calls it enmeshment, which means the couple become too close. "Lesbians—due to homophobia, sexism and possibly other forms of oppression—have typically had to be private about their love and sex lives. This has created a dynamic where lesbian couples can become closer than what we typically see in other couples."

Physiology and chemistry: "It takes me forever to orgasm"

In human pair-bonding, the initial phases of the relationship are rife with a lovely chemical called PEA that creates much of the initial 'in love' feelings, including intense sexual desire," says Cody, who is bisexual.

But once the chemicals die down and you're ensconced in a relationship, Cody says the waning PEA levels can "lead to shutting down the avenues of intense intimate contact." According to Cody, this means we often settle instead "for the intimacy of domesticity over passionate connection and deeper exploration of who we really are and what is really possible between us."

Richman believes hormone levels can also greatly affect libido.

Cody agrees: "Testosterone matters!" Likewise, she says, "Chronic pain, fibromyalgia and other chronic illness also can put quite a damper on sexual desire."



"The more you can make a safe space to explore fantasies, wishes and turn-ons, the better"

—Beth Richman

"This can produce feelings of resentment and shame either that your partner doesn't want you or that your affection means you are in increased danger of violence."

Blenning says internalized homophobia is hard to face. "We don't like to admit that we have it, especially when you've been out for a long time," she says. "We have to recognize it and deal with it."

Even in the bedroom when it's just you and your lover, homophobia comes through the crack in the door. "The cultural message we hear is that sex between two women is immoral, dirty, disgusting. Lesbian sex is profoundly affected by this message," writes Loulan, who notes that our beds aren't big enough to hold our families, politicians, society and our lover.

Selflessness: "She's been down there forever, I wonder if she's bored"

Have you ever apologized for how long it took you to orgasm? *I'm almost there, I swear. Are you OK? I'm sorry.*

"I spend a lot of time working with women on that issue," says Blenning. "Being selfish, really identifying for themselves what they need and feeling OK about asking for and getting what they need...[is not what] we're taught to do."

Blenning says one of the reasons can be found in the way women are socialized to become mothers. "Little girls I know still have that goal of being mom and caretaker of others. Just by definition that is putting someone else first. We internalize that...and that's a big problem."

So, too, can the aging process. "[If] we're going through peri-menopausal symptoms, we don't lubricate the same way we did, we don't get turned on to the same things," says 47-year-old Blenning. "Our bodies are aging, and so it will sometimes take us longer to reach orgasm."

Internalized homophobia: "Don't hold my hand in public"

According to Richman, there are many ways homophobia can seep into a relationship. One major factor is the reduction of space where you can be affectionate.

"It can be very dangerous to have public displays of affection for lesbians," she says.

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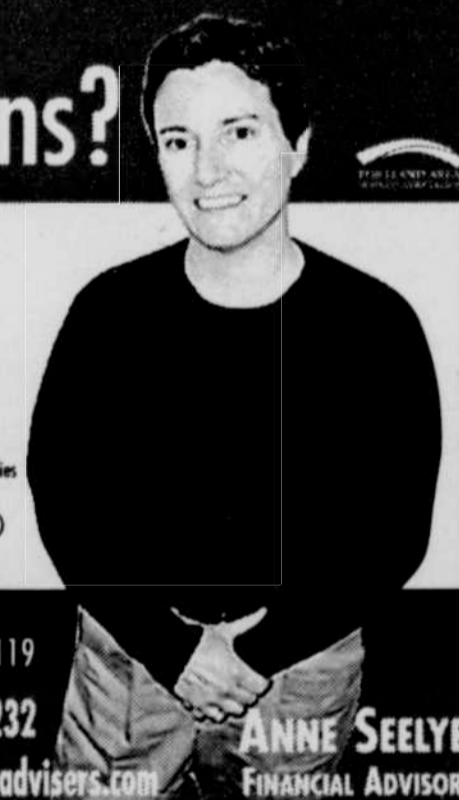


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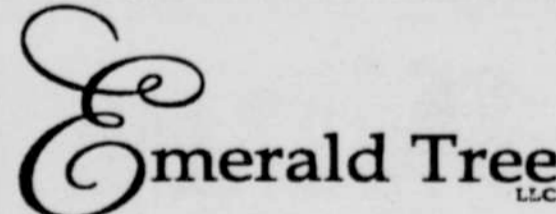




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