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# No Sex, Please, We're Married

## Are Stress, Kids and Work Killing Romance?

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**For married couples with kids and busy jobs, sex just isn't what**

**used to be. Ho**

# WE'RE NOT IN THE

How stress causes strife in the bedroom—and beyond.

# MOOD

BY KATHLEEN DEVENY

**F**OR MADDIE WEINREICH, SEX HAD ALWAYS BEEN A JOY. IT helped her recharge her batteries and reconnect with her husband, Roger. But teaching yoga, raising two kids and starting up a business—not to mention cooking, cleaning and renovating the house—left her exhausted. She often went to bed before her husband, and was asleep by the time he joined her. Their once steamy love life slowly cooled.

When Roger wanted to have sex, she would say she was too beat. He tried to be romantic; to set the mood he'd light a candle in their bedroom. "I would see it and say, 'Oh, God, not that candle,'" Maddie recalls. "It was just the feeling that I had to give something I didn't have."

Lately, it seems, we're just not in the mood. We're overworked, anxious about the economy—and we have to drive our kids to way too many T-Ball games. Or maybe it's all those libido-dimming antidepressants we're taking. We resent spouses who never pick up the groceries or their dirty socks. And if we actually find we have 20

minutes at the end of the day—after bath time and story time and juice-box time and e-mail time—who wouldn't rather zone out to Leno than have sex? Sure, passion ebbs and flows in even the healthiest of relationships, but judging from the conversation of the young moms at the next table at Starbucks, it sounds like we're in the midst of a long dry spell.

It's difficult to say exactly how many of the 113 million married Americans are too exhausted or

## Marriage

too grumpy to get it on, but some psychologists estimate that 15 to 20 percent of couples have sex no more than 10 times a year, which is how the experts define sexless marriage. And even couples who don't meet that definition still feel like they're not having sex as often as they used to. Despite the stereotype that women are more likely to dodge sex, it's often the men who decline. The number of sexless marriages is "a grossly underreported statistic," says therapist Michele Weiner Davis, author of "The Sex-Starved Marriage."

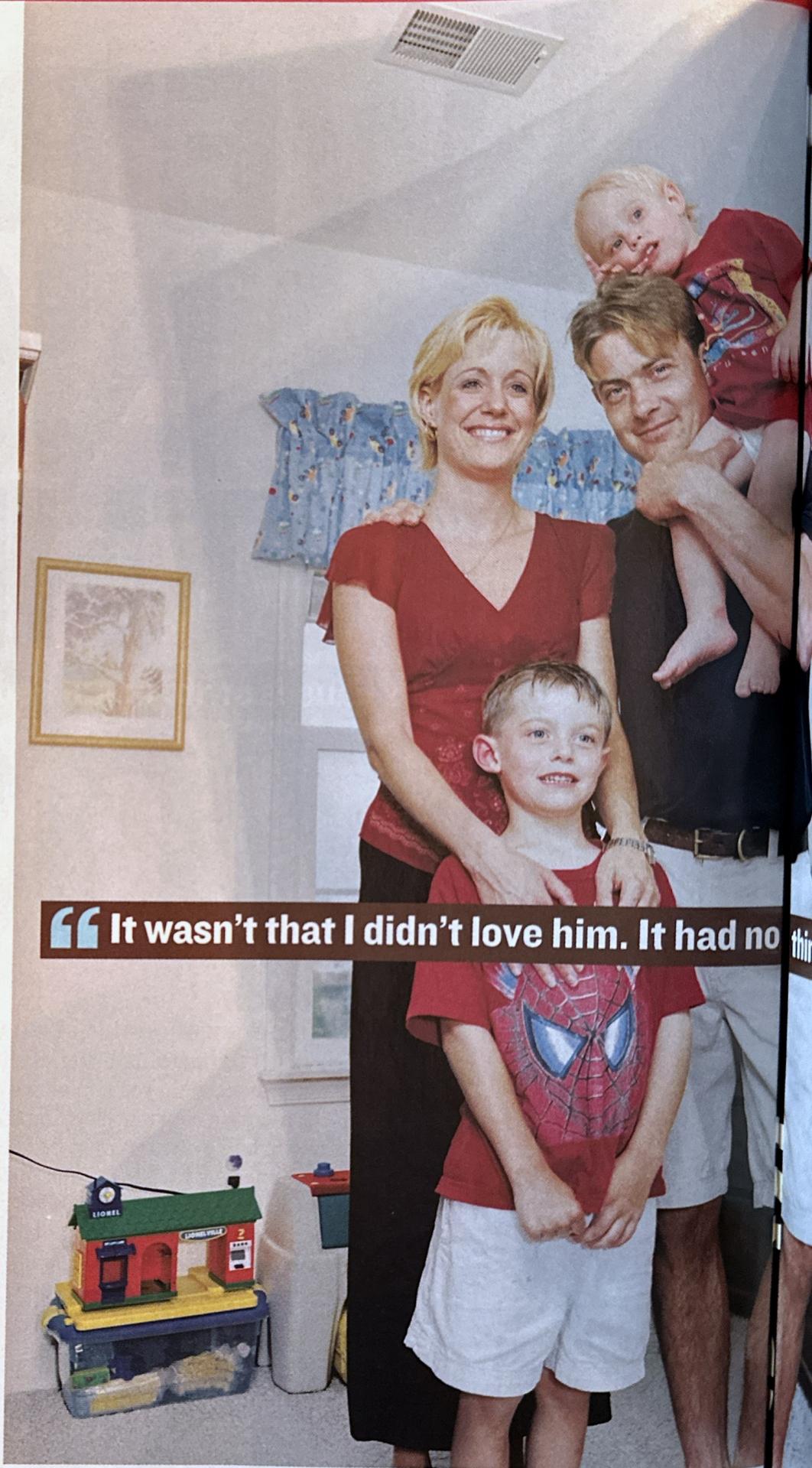
**I**F SO, THE PROBLEM MUST BE HUGE, given how much we already hear about it. Books like "The Sex-Starved Marriage," "Rekindling Desire: A Step-by-Step Program to Help Low-Sex and No-Sex Marriages" and "Resurrecting Sex" have become talk-show fodder. Dr. Phil has weighed in on the crisis; his Web site proclaims "the epidemic is undeniable." Avlimil, an herbal concoction that promises to help women put sex back into sexless marriage, had sales of 200,000 packages in January, its first month on the market. The company says it's swamped with as many as 3,000 calls a day from women who are desperately seeking desire. Not that the problem is confined to New Agers: former U.S. Labor secretary Robert Reich jokes about the pressure couples are under in speeches he gives on overworked Americans. Have you heard of DINS? he asks his audience. It stands for dual income, no sex.

Marriage counselors can't tell you how much sex you should be having, but most agree that you should be having *some*. Sex is only a small part of a good union, but happy marriages usually include it. Frequency of sex may be a measure of a marriage's long-term health; if it suddenly starts to decline, it can be a leading indicator of deeper problems, just like "those delicate green frogs that let us know when we're destroying the environment," says psychologist John Gottman, who runs the Family Research Lab (dubbed the Love Lab) at the University of Washington. Marriage pros say intimacy is often the glue that holds a couple together over time. If either member of a couple is miserable with the amount of sex in a marriage, it can cause devastating problems—and, in some cases, divorce. It can affect moods and spill over into all aspects of life—relationships with other family members, even performance in the office.

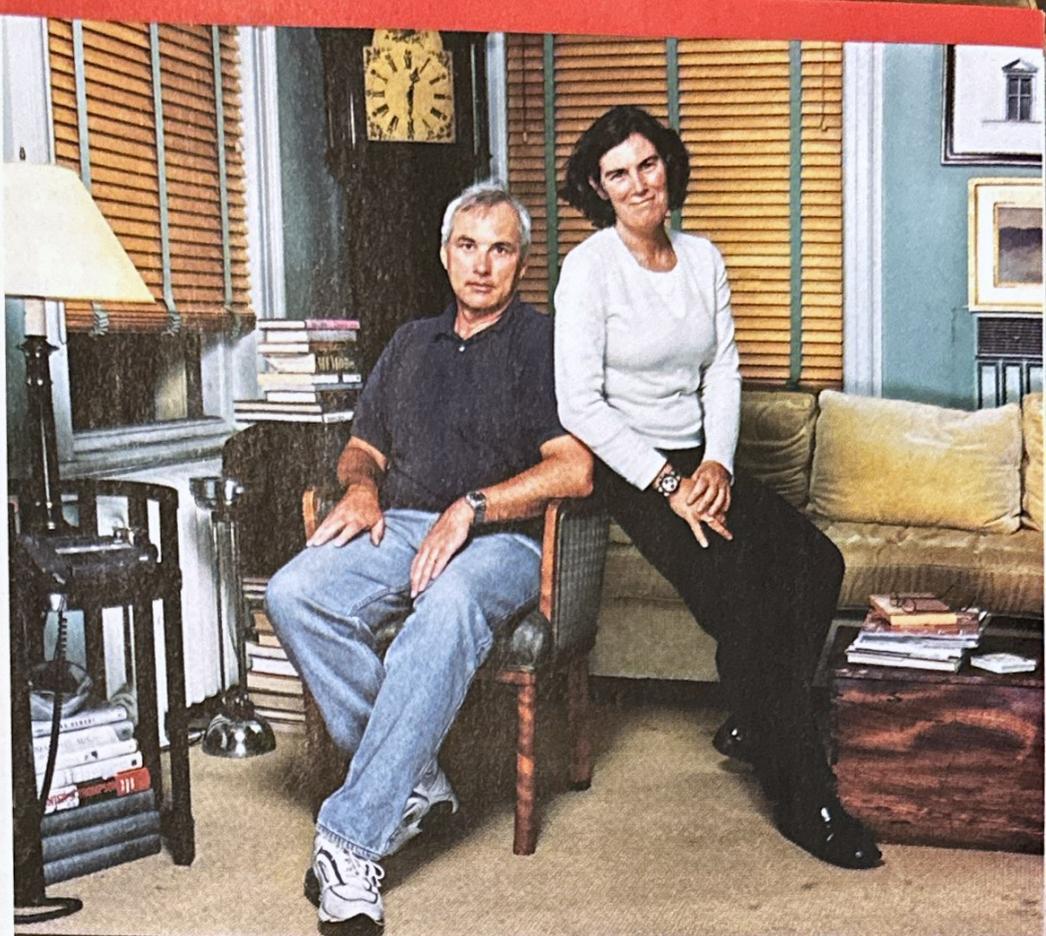
Best-selling novels and prime-time sit-



Join Kathleen Deveny for a Live Talk on Friday, June 27, at noon, ET, on Newsweek.MSNBC.com



“It wasn't that I didn't love him. It had no



**LOOKING FOR LOVE:** New Yorkers Rosemary Breslin and her husband, Tony Dunne, joke that they've shelved sex till 2004. Chris and Tara Paterson (left) with their family in Leesburg, Va.

comes only reinforce the idea that we're not having sex. In the opening pages of Allison Pearson's portrait of a frazzled working mom, "I Don't Know How She Does It," the novel's heroine, Kate Reddy, carefully brushes each of her molars 20 times. She's

room every night. Pretty soon, the dog starts whining to get on the bed, too. "At 3 or 4 a.m., I kick my husband out for snoring and he ends up sleeping in my daughter's princess twin bed with the Tinkerbell night light blinking in his face," she says.

## thing to do with him. What it boiled down to was being exhausted. ”



not fighting cavities. She's stalling in the hopes that her husband will fall asleep and won't try to have sex with her. (That way, she can skip a shower the next morning.) And what would Ray Romano joke about on his hit series "Everybody Loves Raymond" if he didn't have to wheedle sex out of his TV wife? Romano, who has four kids, including 10-year-old twins, says his comedy is inspired by real life. "After kids, everything changes," he told NEWSWEEK. "We're having sex about every three months. If I have sex, I know my quarterly estimated taxes must be due. And if it's oral sex, I know it's time to renew my driver's license."

Yet some couples seem to accept that sexless marriage is as much a part of modern life as traffic and e-mail. It's a given for Ann, a 39-year-old lawyer with two kids who lives in Brooklyn. When she and her husband were first married, they had sex almost every day. Now their 5-year-old daughter comes into their bed-

### —TARA PATERSON

"So how are we supposed to have sex?"

The statistical evidence would seem to show everything is fine. Married couples *say* they have sex 68.5 times a year, or slightly more than once a week, according to a 2002 study by the highly respected National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, and the NORC numbers haven't changed much over the past 10 years. At least according to what people tell researchers, DINS are most likely an urban myth: working women appear to have sex just as often as their stay-at-home counterparts. And for what it's worth, married people have 6.9 more sexual encounters a year than people who have never been married. After all, you can't underestimate the value of having an (occasionally) willing partner conveniently located in bed next to you.

But any efforts to quantify our love lives

must be taken with a shaker of salt. The problem, not surprisingly, is that people aren't very candid about how often they have sex. Who wants to sound like a loser when he's trying to make a contribution to social science? When pressed, nearly everyone defaults to a respectable "once or twice a week," a benchmark that probably seeped into our collective consciousness with the 1953 Kinsey Report, a study that's considered flawed because of its unrepresentative, volunteer sample.

"As a result, we have no idea what's 'normal,'" says Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist and author of "Everything You Know About Love and Sex Is Wrong." Her best guess: three times a week during the first year of marriage, much less over time. When people believe they have permission to complain, she says, they often admit to having sex less than once a month: "And these are couples who like each other!"

In fact, the problem may be just as much perception as reality. Because we have the 100-times-a-year myth in our minds, and be-

cause there are so many movies and TV shows out there with characters who frequently have better-than-you-get sex, it's easy to think that everybody else is having more fun. Forget the four hotties on HBO's "Sex and the City." Even Ruth Fisher, the frumpy, middle-aged widow on the network's "Six Feet Under," gets lucky week after week. Armed with birth-control pills and dog-eared copies of "The Sensuous Woman," boomers were the front line of the sexual revolution. They practically invented guilt-free, premarital sex, and they know what they're missing better than any previous generation in history. "Boomers are the first generation to imagine that they can have exciting monogamous sex through old age," says Marty Klein, a marriage and sex therapist in Palo Alto, Calif. "The collision between that expectation and reality is pretty upsetting for most people."

And sexlessness has a long and rich tradition. In Aristophanes' bawdy play "Lysistrata," written in 411 B.C., Spartan and Athenian women agree to withhold sex

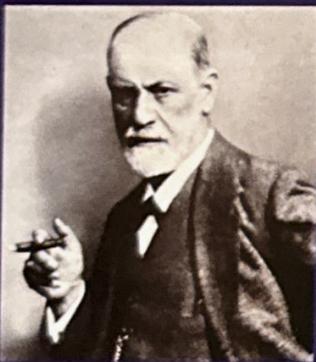
from their husbands until the two warring city-states make peace. Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway was in a sexless marriage; it's likely Dorothea Brooke and Edward Casaubon, characters in George Eliot's "Middlemarch," were, too. And what about the "frigid" housewives of the 1950s?

Marriage experts say there's no single reason we're suddenly so unhappy with our sex lives. Many of us are depressed; last year Americans filled more than 200 million prescriptions for antidepressants. The sexual landscape may have been transformed in the last 40 years by birth control, legalized abortion and a better understanding of women's sexuality. But women have changed, too. Since they surged into the workplace in the 1970s, their economic power has grown steadily. Women now make up 47 percent of the work force; they're awarded 57 percent of all bachelor's degrees. About 30 percent of working women now earn more than their husbands.

Like never before, women have the financial clout to leave their husbands if they

## Sex and the Century: A History

Over the past 100 years, our understanding of sexual behavior has changed dramatically—and it's still evolving. From Sigmund to Sarah Jessica and Lucy to Lorena, here are some of the highlights:



**1905** Sigmund Freud's 'Three Essays on Sexuality' misinform generations about the nature of the female orgasm.

**1934** Henry Miller's 'Tropic of Cancer,' a semfictional memoir, debuts in Paris. But the expatriate's libidinous adventures get banned in the United States.

**1952** Lucille Ball is the first pregnant woman to play a mother-to-be in a sitcom—but she isn't allowed to say the word 'pregnancy' on TV.

**1953** Alfred Kinsey publishes 'Sexual Behavior in the Human Female,' the first major U.S. survey on women's sexual habits. He finds that Americans' attitudes don't match their behavior—50 percent have had premarital sex.

**December 1953** Marilyn Monroe takes it all off in the first issue of Playboy, Hugh Hefner's open love letter to bachelorhood.

**1960** The Food and Drug Administration OKs the birth-control pill, fueling the sexual revolution.



**1962** Helen Gurley Brown publishes her best-selling book 'Sex and the Single Girl.'

**1965** In *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court rules that the government cannot regulate a married couple's use of birth control.

**1966** William Masters and Virginia Johnson's 'Human Sexual Response' finds that half of all U.S. marriages are plagued by some kind of sexual inadequacy.

**1970** Female college students nationwide adopt 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' as their bible on health and sexuality.

**1973** In *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decides that a woman's right to privacy encompasses her decision to terminate a pregnancy.

**1981** State Supreme Court cases in Massachusetts and New Jersey rule that husbands can be prosecuted for raping their wives—overturning the centuries-old marital-rape exception.

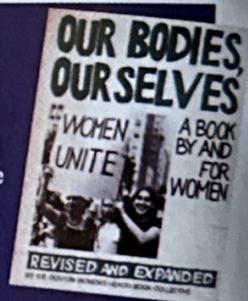
**1984** Researchers isolate the virus responsible for causing AIDS.

**1987** In 'Fatal Attraction,' Michael Douglas and Glenn Close share a one-night stand that turns mighty ugly. Mmm, rabbit.

**1993** Lorena Bobbitt cuts off her husband's penis with a kitchen knife. Men nationwide cross their legs a little tighter.

**June 2003** HBO's 'Sex and the City,' which candidly chronicles the love lives of four professional, single women in New York City, kicks off its final season.

—MELISSA BREWSTER



choose. In his new book, "Mismatch: The Growing Gulf Between Women and Men," sociologist Andrew Hacker says women are less and less inclined to stay married when they're not emotionally satisfied. Wives say they were the driving force in 56.2 percent of divorces, according to Hacker, while men say they were the ones who wanted out only 23.3 percent of the time. When women have those kinds of choices, marital "duties" become options and the debate over how much, or how little, sex to have is fundamentally altered.

**M**EANWHILE, FAMILIES have changed. The year after the first child is born has always been a hazardous time for marriages—more divorces happen during those sleepless months than at any other time in a marriage, except for the very first year. But some researchers say parents are now obsessed with their children in a way that can be unhealthy. Kids used to go to dance class or take piano lessons once a week; now parents organize an array of activities—French classes, cello lessons and three different sports—that would make an air-traffic controller dizzy. And do you remember being a child at a restaurant with your parents and having every adult at the table focus on your happiness? No? That's probably because you weren't taken along.

Working parents who wish they could spend more time with their kids often compensate by dragging their brood everywhere with them. That means couples are sacrificing sleep and companionship. Parents of infants sometimes stop thinking of themselves as sexual beings altogether. Gottman recalls treating a couple with a 4-month-old; the wife was nursing. One morning the husband reached over



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE LEVITT FOR NEWSWEEK

**TAKE A MEETING:** Regena and Bruce Thomashauer work together in their New York City home

the act itself. For many couples, consciously or not, sex has become a weapon. A lot of women out there are mad. Working mothers, stay-at-home moms, even women without kids. They're mad that their husband couldn't find the babysitter's home

Researchers say women have some legitimate gripes. Most two-income couples without children divide up the household chores pretty evenly. After the kids come, however, men may be happy to play with Junior, but they actually do *less* around the

**“We say, ‘Meet me in the bedroom at noon.’ We put on music and light candles and take some time to enjoy each other.”**

and caressed his wife's breast. The woman sat bolt upright in bed and said, "Those are for Jonathan." "They laugh about it now," Gottman says. "But you can understand why a guy might withdraw in that kind of situation."

There's another theme winding through popular culture and private conversations. Because let's face it: no one is *really* too tired to have sex. Arguing over whether you should have sex can easily take longer than

number if his life depended on it. Mad that he would never think to pick up diapers or milk on his way home. Mad that he doesn't have to sing all the verses of "The Wheels on the Bus" while trying to blow-dry his hair. Those of us who were weaned on "Fear of Flying" or "Our Bodies, Ourselves" understand that we're responsible for our own orgasms. But then couldn't somebody else take responsibility for the laundry once in a while?

**—REGENA THOMASHAUER**

house. Men's contributions to household chores increased dramatically in the '70s and '80s, but haven't changed much since then, according to Andrew Cherlin, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins. And it isn't just that Dad isn't doing the dishes. Researchers say many new fathers—55 percent—actually start spending *more time* at work after a child is born. Experts can only speculate on



**THE WAY WE WERE:** Maddie and Roger Weinreich worked hard to improve their love life

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALISON ALIANO FOR NEWSWEEK

why: fathers may suddenly take their role as breadwinner more seriously. Others may feel slighted by how much attention their wives lavish on the new baby.

But men are mad, too. "The big loser between job, kids and the dogs is me," says Alex, a 35-year-old financial executive from Manhattan. "I need more sex, but that's not the whole story. I want more time alone with my wife and I want more attention." They may not be perfect, but most husbands today do far more around the house than their fathers would have ever dreamed of doing. They're also more involved than ever in their children's lives. And they want

Saturday rolled around, she was too tired to go out. They missed the next week's appointment, too. She's tired, she says, but resentful, too. "I get angry because he doesn't help around the house enough or with the kids. He sees the groceries sitting on the counter. Why doesn't he take them out of the bag and put them away? How can I get sexy when I'm ticked off all the time?"

Advice on how to stay connected, however, varies widely. Traditionally, marriage counselors have focused on bridging emotional gaps between husbands and wives, with the idea that better sex flows out of bet-

Gena's Owner's and Operator's Guide to Men," agrees that scheduling time together is essential. Use the time to have sex, she urges. Michele and Marcelo Sandoval, 40 and 42, respectively, sought help from Thomashauer when they were expecting their first child; now they make two "dates" a week. "We call them dates," says Marcelo, "but we know it means sex, and we make it a priority."

Author Weiner Davis has a similar strategy: just do it. Don't wait until you're in the mood. And view thoughtful gestures, such as letting your spouse sleep in, as foreplay. Chris Paterson, 31, and his wife, Tara, 29, say Weiner Davis has helped them. Early in their marriage, they had sex nearly every night. But after she gave birth to their first child, Tara lost interest. Their nightly sessions became infrequent events. In addition to raising the kids, now 6 and 2, both Tara and Chris run their own businesses—she has a Web site called justformom.com and he's a general contractor. Tara says she's just exhausted. Chris also shoulders part of the blame. "I haven't always been the most romantic, getting-her-in-the-mood kind of individual," he says. Since talking to Weiner Davis and reading her book, Chris and Tara say they now have sex almost once a week, when they "try really hard."

Most therapists do agree on one thing. You can't force a sexy situation. There's nothing wrong with dressing up like a cowgirl or answering the front door in "black mesh stockings, and an apron—that's all," à la Marabel Morgan's 1973 classic, "Total Woman." But if it feels silly, it won't work. Rosemary Breslin, 45, a writer and filmmaker in New York, says she still has a great relationship with her husband, Tony Dunne. "But one of the things I ask him is, 'Are we going to have sex in 2003 or are we shelving it to 2004?' I asked him

## “ When you have young children and you're working, your husband goes from the top of the food chain to the bottom. ”

points for it, points they're not getting.

Experts say very few women openly withhold sex. More often, lingering resentments slowly drive a wedge between partners. After two kids and 10 years of marriage, Bill, an actor in his 50s, loves his wife, Laurie (not their real names), though he'd like to have sex more often than the once or twice a month they average now. Laurie, a graphic designer in her 40s, agreed to hire a babysitter and make a standing Saturday-night date. But when

ter communication. More important than a fancy meal at a restaurant (where you can still have a rip-roaring fight, of course) is to just make time to sit down and talk. The Weinreichs managed to rekindle romance after their sons, now 18 and 21, got a little older. All it really took, Maddie says, was being more committed to intimacy.

But a new breed of marriage therapists take a more action-oriented approach. Regena Thomashauer, a relationship counselor and author of "Mama

—MADDIE WEINREICH

what he would do if I put on a black negligee, and he said he would laugh." Maybe she should persuade him to help out a little more around the house. After all, we know there's nothing sexier these days than a man who takes out the trash without being asked.

With HOLLY PETERSON, PAT WINGERT, KAREN SPRINGEN, JULIE SCELFO, MELISSA BREWSTER, TARA WEINGARTEN and JOAN RAYMOND