

**Guest Speaker: Bettina Arndt** well known sex therapist. Subject: **“Why Older Wives Prefer Chocolate.”**

Introduced by Ray Hyslop Bettina is one of Australia’s first sex therapists. As a trained psychologist Bettina has taught medical students, doctors and other professionals and has talked endlessly about this fascinating subject to audiences all over Australia and overseas. Bettina is the author of the best selling book, “The Sex Diaries” and last year had published her new book “What Men Want”.

Bettina introduced her unusually titled talk by explaining that many older women prefer a good book or chocolates to sex. Many older women lose their desire and a mismatch occurs between them and their partner with wives talking of “wandering hands” and men feeling as though they have to grovel for sex.

*“If there was an OFF switch in the female body, mine was switched off years ago. My already low libido has pretty much disintegrated and sexual interest is right up there with algebra, housework and trying on bras”*

This is Judy, 58 from Bathurst, complaining sex has been the single most divisive issue in her 27-year marriage. Judy has plenty of company - low desire is the number one sexual problem plaguing women today. Over 55 per cent of women experience low libido, according to the *Sex in Australia* survey involving nearly twenty thousand participants.

To find out how couples deal with this, Bettina recruited (from 300 couples) ninety eight couples of all ages to keep diaries for her, recording their intimate negotiations over sex. The diaries revealed some amazing stories. One man reported making a statement he really regrets. Fed up with always having to initiate sex, he turned to his wife and said “I’ll make no more advances until you ask me.” That was eight years ago and they haven’t had sex since.

Many women are unhappy about constantly rejecting their partners, particularly when they so often report they couldn’t get enough of him at the start of their relationships. A few years down the track, it’s a very different story. One young mother of twins confessed she had apparently mastered saying ‘Get that thing away from me’ in her sleep!

The normal female sex drive is notoriously fragile, delicate, distractible and linked to emotional connection – which is why it is so easily dampened by everyday hassles, tiredness, stress and relationship problems. “I wrap up sex in all the garbage of the day,” a woman once said to Bettina. Most women do that. If they are worried about a baby waking up or distracted by mother-in-law in the next room or irritated with their partners, they won’t feel like having sex. And that’s why there’s a link between housework and sex. Resentment is a huge passion killer for women so if your man won’t help with the household chores, there’s little chance he’ll get the green light when the lights go out.

Testosterone-driven male drive is so very different, allowing them to use sex to relax, to get away from the stresses of the world. Research shows that at the start of relationships that fragile libido gets a dose of firelighters from the brain chemistry associated with being ‘in love’ but within a few years the firelighters usually disappear, leaving the female’s distractible drive a poor match for the male’s eternal flame. These are the common patterns, which cause so much strife in relationships. Of course there are many exceptions: Bettina also referred to couples who’d spent forty years lusting after each other; women with strong drives and men with none; and couples who both preferred to eat chocolate.

These days unless women want sex it often doesn’t happen. Having accepted the important idea that women have a right to say no, many of us now assume sex must wait until women are well and truly in the mood. But with the feeble female libido that’s a disaster for relationships. Yet there are solutions to this problem, including the controversial “just do it.” This idea, suggested by American Sex therapist Michele Weiner Davis, isn’t proposing women suffer through unwanted sex but simply that it is quite possible for women to enjoy sex without desire. Research by Professor Rosemary Basson from British Columbia has shown many can

experience arousal and orgasm without prior desire. She explains that provided there's a willingness to be receptive, the rest follows. Desire is a decision, argues Weiner Davis. Many women can find very good reasons why they don't feel like having sex but knowing why does nothing to boost desire or heal tensions in the relationship. Only by doing something about it, can you ease the pain of rejection for your partner and enjoy the closeness that comes through sexual intimacy.

Some people react with outrage to the just-do-it idea – one recent angry blog was entitled “Bettina Arndt rape cheerleader” - yet many women have written to Bettina to say it makes sense. “Many times over the years I have thought I didn't want sex but decided to relax and let it happen and it was always good,” one said. But it won't work for everyone – as Bettina's diarists showed. During Bettina's research the couples explored a wide range of different solutions to their desire problems but the amazing thing was how tension disappeared when they started talking and working together towards a more harmonious love life. The gulf war was finally over.

Bettina's new study, *What Men Want* is all about why sex matters so much to men. Over 150 men kept diaries for her, talking about what it is like to live with that constant sparking sexual energy—relentless, uncontrollable, all-consuming. Their painfully honest, confronting, often hilarious stories explain their quest for sexual adventure, their secret delights, the thrill of giving pleasure, why some men turn to pornography and men's delight in the Viagra revolution. The heart of this study is about the changing sexuality of older couples. With every second man over fifty dealing with erection problems, Bettina offered advice on the wondrous new treatments giving men a new lease of sexual life. Her diarists explained what it is like to pop the little blue pills, or inject their best friend, or face impotence after prostate cancer treatments. Extraordinary his-and-hers diaries reveal how partners react to this bumpy journey showing the fallout when a man seeks a new lease of sexual life when his wife just wants him to hang up his spurs. Here are the stories from the coalface as men—with many of their partners —reveal all about changes in their sex lives as they grow older. Bettina summed up her talk with a generic solution for all, in which good sexual relations between partners requires communication, good humour and discussion so that there can be “never too much information”.

Bill Butterell thanked Bettina for her very entertaining and informative presentation with recognition that we can talk about sex in our audience, a situation that would not have been possible that many years ago.