

SECTION TWO: COLUMNS ABOUT MEN

SWEATY GUYS: A user's guide to Men in the 90s

From a social and sexual point of view, the 1990 have not been kind to men. Many, it seems, are in the grips of a global identity crisis as manifested by the new social phenomenon called "The Male Headache". As a new twist on an old theme it is men, not women, who are turning to their wives and partners in bedrooms across the world and uttering the immortal line: "Not tonight dear, I've got a headache."

According to sex therapists and researchers, the "Not Tonight Josephine" syndrome, or "Male Headache" has grown so acute over the past few years, it is having a crushing impact on the way men and women relate.

Several of the sex therapists I spoke to in Australia confirmed findings from abroad - that men en masse are saying "no" to sex, and frustrated women are bombarding them with complaints about tired or reluctant husbands and partners.

Contrary to popular myths about women not wanting as much sex as their husbands, it is married females who are now presenting as the highest growth-rate statistic in infidelity, according to Ian Macdonald executive director of Relationships Australia in Queensland, and marriages every where are beginning to feel the strain.

Theorists are at a loss to explain the phenomenon. Some maintain that changing gender roles are having a far greater impact on men than is commonly presumed. Some say men are feeling intimidated by women's burgeoning economic power. Others claim that women want too much of men. That the pendulum has swung too far off course and this is creating performance anxiety in males.

Women want men to behave like vibrators and keep going, when really it is men's biological imperative to ejaculate, says one of my favourite sources, sex therapist and original thinker, Dr Sandra Pertot. "Women's expectations of men have become unrealistic and this is contributing to the problem," she tells me.

"Bob" a patient of a sex therapist I interviewed, agrees he is suffering performance anxiety at home. "I do feel horny but not as often as my wife. But she makes me feel so bad about it, I end up avoiding sex altogether."

Other men just feel resentful in general. A letter I received recently from one of my readers gave a brief insight into male rage. "Given that the vast majority of men can only have one orgasm per act of intercourse, and many women experience multiple orgasms, it is obvious that men get a raw deal." Particularly with the amount of effort it takes to get women into bed, he added.

Meanwhile there are other great anxieties for males in the 90s which I examine in this chapter. The number of men rushing off to impotency clinics is on the rise, if nothing else is. More alarming is the number of men rushing off to the new breed of "dick-doctors" as they are jokingly called, having penis extension operations.

But just as women have been sorely wounded by the need to remain ever slim and youthful, I feel men have been severely damaged and disempowered by the emphasis in society on dick size and how long a male should keep it up. I think it's shameful that women are so vocal about being trapped in a beauty myth but rarely do we speak out to allay men's equally painful misconceptions about their penises.

Throughout my writings, I have attempted to put men out of their misery by announcing that for at least one horny female: "It ain't what you got but the way that you use it". Interesting to note that following publication of several articles I have

written on this topic, I received a tremendous amount of mail from men, pouring out their gratitude and passing valuable information on to other men.

Well-endowed Mr R.R from Perth wrote: "I have heard the female cry "bigger is better" many times before but have yet to meet a female who really enjoys having intercourse with an "enviable size penis". Most times, if not always, their eyes are far bigger than their vaginas."

Another West Australian reader, Mr "X" from Sorrento says: "I am a man with a ten-inch member. My wife was the only woman I ever met who could actually accommodate the length. She maintains that the banging on the bottom of her cervix is a pain she enjoys because it triggers a different type of orgasm. But had I not met my wife, I think my blessing would have been more of a frustration."

The 90's has also been a time of profound confusion for men in terms of interpersonal relationships. Men genuinely don't understand what women want of them. Perhaps that's because we are so confused about what we want. Socialised with one set of values, coming of age with another, we want bastards who do the ironing and talk to whales.

Glenn Wallace from Sanderson in the Northern Territory, one of my favourite and most prolific letter writers puts it thus.

"Now, according to your column we are supposed to be a refined combination of both a Neanderthal who clubs his woman on the head and drags her into his cave by the hair - but also a Sensitive New Age Guy who assumes the responsibility for her having an orgasm and turns emotional if she didn't enjoy it as much as he did. Of course men haven't changed since the days of the cave dweller. We are still totally mystified and perplexed as to just what women want from us in a relationship."

It all sounds very woeful for men, but before women start taking out their hankies and weeping, they'd better read the rest of the chapter. Visiting men in their natural habitats I have discovered that boys will always be boys - hot, crude, naughty and bursting with testosterone. And I, for one, love them for it!

DOES SIZE COUNT?

Does size matter? I was just reading an article in a New York magazine about a fellow who spent his entire inheritance so he could join an elite group of men in America who have humongous penises. Apparently before the operation his member was working very well, his girlfriend content. But because she only orgasmed every other time, the misguided fellow thought he was to blame and instead of talking to her, went to see a doctor to have his schlong enlarged.

Unfortunately the operation left the man considerably worse off, according to the report, sparking possible litigation.

If the story was not enough to make any feeling human being squirm in their chairs, a picture accompanying the article was worse. It showed a bloke with a 10lb weight hanging off his member.

Believe it or not, this technique - which sounds like a modern-day version of torture on the wrack - is gaining increasing attention across the US as a way of creating a longer schlong or at least preventing shrinkage. Apparently you are supposed to wear the weights or dumbbells for several hours a day: Ooooh!

After speculating about how any man would be able to find under-pants big enough to cover the weights (is that a 10lb dumbbell in your pocket or are you just

glad to see me?) I decided that enough is really enough. It was time to tackle the delicate issue of size and performance head on, so to speak.

From the letters I have been getting, it seems that most men are not certain the degree to which size, and length of time they can sustain an erection really matters to women. The saddest part of the letters is the shame and torment buried between the lines. "I'm too embarrassed to ask," wrote one 23 year old man after asking ME to tell him if his girlfriend was satisfied with his penis.

Meanwhile the plethora of impotency clinics now advertising every week has many men, even the most sturdy egoists, questioning their potency. Dr Michael Lowy of the Sydney Centre for Men's Health at St Luke's hospital says: "While it is wonderful these clinics are available to help men with erection problems, the down-side is that it makes many men doubt themselves.

"The promotional advertising for these clinics reinforces the idea that successful sex is solely dependent on the performance of the man's penis, which is false and just plays up to men's deepest fears and feelings of inadequacy."

So before men rush off to buy dumbbells, or to clinics to inject their penises so they can stay erect all night, here are women's views on male performance as written about in girl's glossy magazines (which men rarely get to read) and as told to me by countless women over the years.

Myth: size matters to most women. Wrong. Long schlongs are very aesthetically pleasing to women, I won't lie about this. I'm going on the record along with self-confessed lesbian activist Camille Paglia who recently wrote a surprising article in praise of the fulsome male member. But it all amounts to nothing much.

The size of a man's penis is, I would say, as relevant as a women having large and sensual breasts. Big boobs are great. Lovely to look at. But the majority of us females work just fine without them. Which leads me into the second greatest myth of the twentieth century: that larger penises give women more pleasure.

No, no, no, no and no. Anatomically inaccurate.

Every vagina is different. And as such responds to different stimulus. One of the smallest men I knew was fantastic in bed because he managed to hit my G-spot. As we girls say, "It ain't the size of the prize, it's the angle of the dangle," honey!

Some men with very big members lose erections early because of the amount of blood it takes to carry the hefty load. However, this is not always the case. Some long ones hit the cervix of women who have low-lying wombs. Some women absolutely love this sensation. Others hate it with equal passion. The message is clear. There is no "hard and fast" rule - if you'll pardon the pun.

Final myth: women want men who can keep it up all night. Wrong. Women want men who can make love all night. Two very different concepts. Long sex does not necessarily mean long intercourse. In fact, for many, the thought of a long session of intercourse brings to mind the "O" word - not orgasm, "Ouch!"

All jokes aside, these male torments are growing to epidemic proportion with the increasing social emphasis on getting it up. Whilst women grieve about aging, this new obsession with dickus erectus is fast shaping up to be the 1990s male equivalent to the female beauty myth, and just as tragic.

I'm waiting for Calvin Klein to release a range of designer under-pants that caters for those 10lb dumbbells. Then we'll all know we're in trouble.

NOT TONIGHT JOSEPHINE

What has happened to male libidos? Have women's sex drives increased dramatically or have men just gone into a sudden decline en masse?

This is the question being asked around the world in reaction to the alarming statistics that show men are saying "NO" to sex in droves. No, non, nicht, are the sounds emanating from bedrooms across the globe, but contrary to the myth that it is wives and girlfriends who are turning a cold shoulder, it is male species who seem to have gone off sex.

Theorists, therapists and researchers are at a loss to explain why women are knocking their doors down complaining about feeling frustrated. But having heard the cry from horny females myself over the past year - from girlfriends and even relatives - I decided to take a couple of months off to research the phenomenon of The Male Headache.

What I discovered is this. Traditionally, women have had their sexual peak whilst stuck at home, burdened with children and bogged down in domestica. The environmental "curb" on women's sexuality generally suited the declining male.

Now more women are out in the workforce, exposed to attractive and stimulating people. Or they are freer in general as a result of child support, and such developments as HRT hormone replacement therapy which redresses many of the symptoms of Menopause and aging. Thus women are able to fully enjoy and indulge in their libidinous urges. They are feeling sexier for longer, and looking better too.

Men are not widely being offered HRT with testosterone, even though it is becoming clear that men may also suffer some sort of Andropause later in life. So medically speaking, older women may be biologically advantaged.

Away from hormones, and women are further spurred on by economic prosperity. In many cases women are now out-stripping their husbands financially. A recent article in the reputable publication Psychology Today says we can no longer sweep female power under the cultural rug. "Seven million American women earned more than their mates in 1993 and last year almost a quarter of all working wives out-earned their husbands."

The fact is that women have changed profoundly as a result of economic independence, women's magazines, readily-available child-care and hormonal treatments.

The consequences are two fold. Women have become more demanding both in bed and out. This in turn is causing men to experience feelings of inadequacy, anger and resentment, fear, apprehension, confusion and stress which is directly impacting on their sex lives, according to observers .

Psychologists quoted in Psychology Today say that many men are feeling "castrated" or "demoralised by changing roles". Says one: "I see in my practice an increase in the number of men who are reporting impotence and loss of sexual desire because they don't know how to behave any more."

One of the most out-spoken social commentators on this topic is Dr Sandra Pertot author of A Commonsense Guide to Sex and an expert on sexual desire.

Dr Pertot who has been a sex therapist since the 70s told me her theories.

"Although historically it has been women who have had the headache, in at least half the couples I now see it is the men with the headache. The truth is that across the western world men are avoiding sex in droves. I think it is because women have become too demanding."

Dr Pertot feels there has been no decline in male libido rather men are choosing to masturbate quietly in the privacy of their bathrooms. "They can relax, retreat into their fantasies. They don't have to talk a woman into bed, perform and go through the criticism afterwards."

"In my clinical work I have found that the majority of men avoiding sex are still randy but they say sex with their partners is just not worth the effort."

She says it is true that women are flocking to therapists and grizzling that their husbands don't want to have sex. But she says this is not a symptom of the problem. It is the cause of it. Whether a woman is working, or whether she has just fallen victim to the things she reads in women's magazines or sees at the movies, she is overwhelming men with her expectations. "Women want too much," she says.

"Men are being forced to compete with vibrators. One woman came to see me recently and criticised her man because he could only have sex for 20 minutes! "She didn't realise 20 minutes is very good. Most men can have sex from two to 10 minutes before there is some loss in erection, or ejaculation. Six minutes is quite normal."

"The average erection comes and goes - waxes and wanes. But women today aren't satisfied with this. They are taking more responsibility for their own sexual satisfaction but then they hold up their vibrators to their husbands and say: "Why can't you do this?" as if it is really his job."

"Nowadays women want orgasms with a cherry on top."

Dr Pertot says she is disturbed by women regularly coming to see her complaining in front of their partners. "This is creating a spotlight effect. The focus decreases male performance. And it is all wrong. What are we doing to our men? They feel like failures and inadequate because they can't last an hour."

She says that many women have forgotten what sex is for. The biological imperative for the male is to ejaculate to impregnate the female. "It is very hard for men to stop themselves ejaculating. Men are striving for physiological control all the time, whilst women strive to let go. We are putting unrealistic demands on men."

Dr Debbie Then, sexpert and psychology Ph. D from Stanford University in the USA, who was recently in Australia doing research on strip-clubs and male-female relationships, took me off to a strip-club to watch the men ogle the female talent.

Whilst we were observing the cheering throng she told me that she agrees that more men are choosing alternatives to sleeping with their wives or partners.

"There has been a dramatic increase around the western world in men seeing "professional girlfriends" as call-girls and prostitutes are now known, or frequenting lap-dancing and strip clubs. Men are losing interest in making it with their wives. Professional girlfriends are even replacing mistresses and affairs in many instances."

She agrees with Dr Pertot that women may be inadvertently intimidating men. "When women have their own money and independence it changes their whole way of behaving. "One of the most popular fantasies for men is the 'conquering' fantasy, deflowering the virgin, the man in charge, sweeping the woman off her feet."

"When a women becomes more confident and starts saying "move over there" or "I want it this way" it scares the shit out of men. They feel they are back under mummy's control and this is not very sexual for most men."

"For men, sex has as much to do with power and control as it does with pleasure and orgasm. Many men can't have sex unless they feel in control. The increase in women instigating sex, and of women the workforce is stripping men of this control."

She says that men are used to saying: "I make money, I make the rules." Now they are doing what women used to do. They are saying "no" to sex to recoup the power and recover control in relationships where they feel they have lost their status. "Turning you down means that they are calling the shots."

She says the great irony in all of this is that most powerful women still want and get turned on by men who are more powerful and successful and wealthier than they are. The confusion is driving men crazy.

She says female sexual experience is also terrifying men and leading to performance anxiety. "Before, only men were sexually experienced. Now men fear that a woman will judge him and find him incompetent or think that he's not doing it "right". With the stripper or "professional girlfriend" this is not the case. She is totally into him with no strings attached, no demands and no emotions. He doesn't have to perform," she said as the buxom female playmates in the strip-club pulled off their scanty tops and performed around us.

But not all agree that women are impacting so strongly on men. Dr Michael Lowy of the Australian Centre for Sexual Health who I went to talk to for a male perspective suggests that the high rate of men presenting with sexual problems could simply be because there are so many impotency clinics springing up. This means that more men and their partners are now talking openly about, and dealing with, problems that have always existed.

Whatever the case, all therapists I talked to agree there is a problem that needs a solution. But they equally agree it will take time for the ripples caused by changing gender roles to iron out and for both sexes to find some sort of balance and equilibrium. In the meantime Dr Sandra Pertot has a word of advise for both men and women: "Lighten up, for gods sake. Have some fun. It's only sex."

GNOCCHI MAN

My husband's version of events goes something like this. There he was minding his own business, quietly kneading his own gnocchi in the Italian cooking course he was attending, when a woman started to come on to him.

Not overtly. Just in the subtle way that single women in cooking course do. "Do you want some help banging your gnocchi's into shape?" she asked as he struggled with his mixture of flour and water.

"Ah, no," he allegedly said trying to avoid her piercing gaze as flour went everywhere.

He gets a lot of piercing gazes from women, my husband. For one simple reason. He is very interested in women. He is the proverbial SNAG - Sensitive New Age Guy. He listens in to my conversations with my girlfriends, always offering an opinion. He runs off on Saturdays and books himself in to courses called "Cooking with garlic"

or "Latin love songs". Last month he fair-dinkum did a course called: "A guide to tender, loving, intimate communications."

Not surprisingly, he attracts female patronage. Although he is indeed handsome and charming, I think it has more to do with the fact that he is usually the only man in the class.

Most men I know would rather be tortured with an electric cattle prod than attend a two-day seminar with 50 women bemoaning the fact that men don't listen to them - in fact, most men would actually see it as the same thing.

He does other warm and fuzzy things. Each morning before I stir, he takes our little girl down to the local park so she can play on the swings and slides under the watchful eye of other mothers.

There are always women on the phone who claim to have met my husband "down at the sand pit" who ring to chat with him and to invite our baby to their kiddies' parties.

He is a pleasure to be in a relationship with except that a lot of other women obviously agree.

I remember an episode of the TV show Seinfeld where one of the characters had "Kavorca" - a central European word meaning "the lure of the beast". The lure of bad, sexually charismatic men on women.

Although I previously wrote that women are powerfully drawn to mad, bad men, I think my husband has another curse. "Kavorci" the lure of the gentle, sensitive man, who likes to cook and read poetry and take children to the park and do self-help courses that plum the depth of the inner man. An irresistible force that drives women out of their sand-pits, and away from their gnocchi's.

So, back to my husband's version of events. There he was, trying hard to ignore this woman in his Italian cooking course. Even though she was extremely attractive. Even though he admits "her breasts were very pleasing to the eye." (Sorry girls. Even sensitive men notice.)

"You really need someone to show you how to squeeze those flour balls," she said leaving her own work bench and coming over to where he was making an unholy mess.

Having now studied intimate communication, he knew that he had to be very clear with this woman. "Women are apt to see the world through their own romantic eyes. A female's yearning for love may get her to misconstrue a hello for a Helllllooooo," he told me on returning from his intimate bonding class the week before.

But before he blinked, his gnocchi's were being pummelled skilfully into the workbench. She grabbed another lump of doe and glanced meaningful into his face. "You have to add more water to this so that it does not become too stiff," she said dribbling her water over his doe.

As he grew all flushed with male hormones she popped the question: "So do you cook for yourself?"

And this is where men get themselves into trouble - even men who do communications course. It's called male ego.

"Ummmm, I cook for myself and...ummmm....the other people in my house," he said, leaving the door wide open enough for her continued attentions.

So the next thing, I am surfing the net and go to read my mail, and there are these recipes for vegetarian dishes and a rather florid description of things my husband might want to do with them.

All from the gnocchi lady who in my husband's version of events "forced" his email address out of him as he "struggled to rush home" (presumably to the "other people" in the house) at the end of the course.

Kavorci. He certainly has it. It's hot and furious and dangerous stuff. To all the men who write into me every week asking where all the women are, my husband would like to offer you this advice.

If you can tolerate hours of studying poetry, massage, healing, self-help, communication, talking to whales or spending a few hours each week in the park with your neighbour's screaming kids, looking kind and sensitive, you will never have to worry about being lonely again. Although, on second thoughts, you may find being lonely a more preferable option.

LITTLE LIES

When I was young I dated a man who behaved most oddly when I used to visit. After we'd done the deed, he got out a dust buster and would start vacuuming the bed. He claimed to be allergic to hair.

It never occurred to me that there might be something a little odd in this behaviour. In fact, it wasn't until many months after we had broken up that I discovered that he was actually married to the woman he had claimed was "just" his "room mate".

When I confronted him on what I'd discovered he was unfazed claiming that he had not lied to me. He just failed to tell me something that he considered "irrelevant" at the time.

Likewise, he did not think his dalliance with me was something his wife needed to know about. "It would only upset her," he explained. "It was for her sake I was so careful. Why cause her unnecessary pain?"

This story came to mind last week when a very funny list found its way on to my desk called: "Most Frequent Lies Men Tell Women". I laughed so much I nearly fell off my chair. The list of porkies include:

"I'll call you"; "I've never felt this way about anyone"; "You're the only one I have sexual fantasies about"; "My wife and I lead separate lives"; "I've only slept with maybe ten women my entire life"; "I haven't seen her since she and I broke up"; "How could you think I'd be interested in her? She's your best friend!"

Some of my favourites include: "I've never had any trouble keeping an erection before"; "Your career is as important as mine"; "I spend everything I earn on you and the kids"; "No, I'm not having an affair"; "Of course I'm listening to what you're saying."

"Relax, she's just a friend"; "Of course I'm not bored with you"; "Come on in, and we'll just cuddle for a few minutes"; "How many times do I have to tell you. I'm not having an affair!"

I found it amusing to note that most male lies were linked to sex and fidelity.

Seems men lie an average of five to 15 times a week, according to a study done on male fibs that I reported on a couple of years ago. When I showed this figure to a number of men they were aghast, claiming that they never lied that much.

But they failed to take into account the "white lies" they told to save people's feelings. Particularly "women" people's feelings. "I love that dress on you"; "Of course you are beautiful"; "You don't look fat at all." They also generally forgot about "grey lies" which is where a man will simply omit to tell you something he deems unnecessary to the situation or which may cause pain to someone - usually himself.

Whilst it is not exclusively male to fib, it seems it is extremely male to deny one is actually doing it. Take for instance this following vignette. Very few of the men I showed this to, thought that the omission of detail was an outright "black" lie.

A man is consistently late home from work. His wife confronts him asking him if he is having an affair with someone in the office. "No," he says, passionately. He is not having an affair with someone from the office. He does not furnish her with the information that he is having an affair with someone he met at a recent party.

"Well, he was being factual," sniffed one male. "And he would only hurt her and cause an argument if he told the truth."

Our research has shown that not getting into trouble is the single most important motivating force in provoking men to tell lies. Faced with the prospect of an angry female face - indeed the face of mother - beaming down at them, or doing a sideward scuttle, the scuttle is indeed favoured.

Most men I talked to reckoned that "honesty" following a lie, particularly if accompanied by tears of remorse, negated the original lie.

But the people men seem to lie to most, is themselves. According to psychologists many men spend their lives denying their frailties, feelings and doubts in order to cope. "I'm okay," is the most common male fib.

The million dollar question is: Do men lie more than women or just differently?

Men are certainly more creative at the art. Take the scenario of scratch marks on the back. Here are three real-life excuses offered to women by men I know: One said he had rolled on to the cat in bed. One said he was raking the garden without a shirt on and was scratched by a low-hanging tree. But the final one is the best.

He said he scratched himself because he'd been bitten by a mosquito. He failed to see that his arms would have had to have been ten foot long to have created those marks - I guess about as long as the tall tales so many men tell us long, long suffering women.

LAPPING IT UP

The room is so filled with smoke you feel like you are about to be gobbled up. All around the walls are photos of naked female bodies. There is a surreal and almost eerie feeling to The Governor's Pleasure - a "lingerie" restaurant in the heart of Sydney.

With all the controversy that surrounded the latest spate of strip-tease movies and the raging world-wide resurgence of the art of stripping and lap dancing, I have decided to take a girlfriend along to see what goes on in one of these joints.

I am told that there will be a three-course meal served. Between each course the waitresses who are walking around in their under-wear, will strip down to bare essentials.

I am also informed that women like me rarely frequent the place despite its reputation as a more "up market" haunt situated in the centre of town to attract the corporate market. Apparently women feel "uncomfortable".

Despite the smoke, it is not hard to make out the waitresses. Clad in lacy bras that lift their bosoms to chin height, garter belts, G-strings, black stockings and lots of cascading hair, they lean provocatively over the customers and rub their tushes closer than most regular waitresses would ever dare.

Once my eyes have acclimatised to this extraordinary vision, I begin noticing the clientele. Blokes in loud shirts, with loud voices smoking and drinking vast quantities of alcohol. Slowly, I begin to notice that a room full of eyes are trained on my blonde girlfriend and I.

Trained and strained. Some are almost boggling out of their heads. It's like a scene from some spooky movie where the heroine suddenly realises that the walls are moving, crawling with something deadly. I realise that we are not journalists, mothers or people - merely women. Women with slightly more clothes on than the other 'creatures of pleasure' swanning around the room.

In here it isn't just clothing that is stripped away for females - it is the veneer of civilisation we pretend exists. In here men are at their most primordial and I am just a female genital with some bits and pieces attached to make movement possible.

"Aaahh!" a waitress screams, complaining she has been bitten on the bum. "Animal," she curses showing us the bruise. "They think because we're in our under-wear they can do anything to us."

Suddenly the lights go down, and eyes move away from us to the stage. One of the waitresses has started dancing - bumping and grinding on a long, gold pole.

She moves over to a table and asks one of the men to take off her top. He is trembling so much he can't unfasten her bra. "C'arn...you virgin," someone yells as the men wait in breathless anticipation and palpable frustration. As if seeing this breast, at this moment in time, is the most consuming, desperate need of their entire existence.

The clip unfastens. A loud sigh is heard across the room. A wave of pleasure and relief... "Aaaaaah", they moan together. "Ooooooh".

The stripper mounts the stage and again dances. A few wild cheers are heard but mainly there is a captivated silence. The men are awestruck. One man has been straining so hard to see, he has fallen out of his chair. Another is tilted vertically across the table to get a better view. The girl rubs oil into herself. The tension is rising. You can feel the heat, almost smell the oozing testosterone. It is like nothing I have ever felt before.

If you were alone you would be mauled alive. These are lions and the tamer has them transfixed, but for how long?

Then it happens. The G-string comes off. She is naked, and shiny and moving around in mesmerising rhythm.

I look around the room. The eyes are focused in worship. It is pure love. The yearning so strong, the emotions so high I think some men are about to cry. It is pure

adoration. It is religion. These men are in a trance. And then it dawns on me. I see the truth.

This woman, all women - we have power. And the power we wield is awesome and frightening. At this moment these men are slaves, docile in their worship. They would do anything: cross deserts, dive into shark infested waters, for one small grope of that breast. For one touch of that sacred spot from whenst they came.

"The power of the muff" one of my boyfriends used to call it. "It can lead men to war. No man can resist it. Women don't understand how truly powerful they are."

The light comes on, and as my girlfriend and I get up to leave, every eye is again on us, longingly, lustfully.

And I wonder what it is about this particular type of power - the power of female sexuality - that has disturbed feminists so greatly, they want to lock it up and denounce it. For this short moment, I strut proudly out of that restaurant, wielding the power of my sexuality with a deep, gleeful, guilty joy.

ALL NIGHT LONG

I've got to be honest here. I'm not the kind of babe that goes in for hours and hours of passion. For me sex is like eating chocolate. I make myself put the block down whilst I'm still wanting, so I can look forward to it the next time around.

There is nothing worse than scoffing down the entire family-sized block then feeling bad, over indulged, guilty, and ready to throw up.

So a recent book that crossed my path "How to Make Love All Night", by American sex therapist Barbara Keesling about how men can become multi-orgasmic and keep going all night, really had me wondering.

The premise of course it that everybody wants to make love all night. Everyone wants to just do it over and over again for hours and hours like a sexual Olympics marathon: "And they're going for Gold. Yes! Seventeen hours, ladies and gentlemen. A world record! What a wonderful moment for Australia!"

Apparently the book sold very well overseas, which has me stumped. I once did it all night when I was younger. Hours of unbridled passion until the dawn broke, burning lust, and then more burning lust. Burning being the operative word.

"Oouch!" was all I could say for the next week as I limped around Bali beach struggling to come to terms with the anatomical damage I had done to my person.

Because the sad truth is that no matter how happy and smirky Barbara Keesling looks on the dust jacket of the book, there is only so much passion a body can tolerate. Particularly female bodies that come with bladders inside.

Worse news is that when I rang a bookshop to find out the details of the book, I was told there is another book out on how to make love for several days straight. Non-stop. Bop until you drop (dead that is).

I suppose that if one's body made love all night, every night, one's body would eventually accommodate the rigours of sex, much the same way my fingertips learned to cope with my rampant guitar strumming by growing calluses.

But it begs the next question. Who has the time and energy to make love all night, every night, to get one's body acclimatised? Who even has the time to make love?

And it's all very well to write a book that helps men get more control over their bods so they can orgasm again and again. But do men really want multiple orgasms? Most of the men I have known tell me the best part of sex for them is the sleep afterwards.

Whilst women presumably like to bask in the afterglow, men tend to fall into a deep, relaxed state called "Post-Coital Somnambulance". In the dictionary this is described as a "comatose-state" resembling zombiism, "a hypnotic trance" and a "state of sleep-walk".

Men love this deep, sleep-like relaxation. It's like a beer at the end of a game of footy or tennis. It's the "Aaaaahhh" of intimacy. They make weird snoring noises and any further conversation or act of love is peacefully carried out with their eyes closed.

Now they are being told by books and women's magazines that they can have sex all night and maybe that they SHOULD be having sex all night - because that's what we multi-orgasmic, modern femmes want.

Well the truth of the matter is that women may indeed have the potential for endless bliss. But we're all so busy feeding children, running busy careers and households and exercising to stay beautiful and beat the aging process - in short being Superwoman - that we're more likely to be narcoleptic than orgasmic. Narcolepsy: "Sudden and uncontrollable episodes of deep sleep".

Most women I know can't even look at a bed without falling asleep. In fact, I think that Barbara Keesling has grossly under-estimated the intoxicating and irresistible lure of the Sand Man.

Anyway, for those who desperately do want to know the secret of making love all night, it is all in the muscles.

It is possible, according to the sexperts, for men to climax or have some sort of peak sexual experience, without ejaculating. Much of the current wisdom in this area has come from Eastern love-making traditions.

Keesling says that the way for the average man to gain control of his sexual responses is to do PC muscle exercises. Any man whose wife has had a baby will know about the old PC's. Women exercise them pre-natally to help control labour, and to stop incontinence and improve orgasm after labour.

Men have the same muscles and by exercising them for substantial periods of time every day, can apparently gain control over ejaculation and have multiple orgasms without the release of sperm. An excellent local book on this is Loving Longer, Loving Stronger by Kundan Misra (Gambol Books).

My poor, long-suffering husband has been practising these exercises stoically for the past two weeks so I could truthfully report to you on whether he became multi-orgasmic or not.

But sadly there has been a problem. He has put so much time and energy into exercising his PC muscles he is too exhausted to be "tested out". I've turned him into a multi-orgasmic Narcoleptic.

THE MALE PEACOCK

Any one a bit stumped by Paul Hogan's recent transformation from a rugged, bronzed Aussie with craggy good looks, to a somewhat smoother-faced dude who looks as if an iron has been run under his eyes, be consoled. Our very own Paul is not the only bloke to have seemingly tampered with what nature gave him in recent times.

Latest statistics from the Academy of Cosmetic Surgery show that men now account for over 25 per cent of face-lifts and plastic surgery patients in America, with doctors agreeing that the trend is fast catching on here.

One of the reasons for the trend is the fact that the workforce is getting younger by the minute, and now with down-sizing and out-sourcing, many men feel enormous pressure to look younger than their years to remain employable.

But the other reason is the increasingly common phenomenon of overt male vanity. It is a widely held myth that it is the females of the species who preen and are obsessed with physical beauty.

Not so. Just as it has always been the male peacock who has flashed his colored, throbbing bits during the mating dance, so too were the men of ancient Greece the ones who were consumed by the notion of aesthetic beauty. Now, over the past decade, there has been a dramatic resurgence in cosmetic alterations that help men appear more sexually potent.

According to a friend of mine who lives in L.A there is a significant hike in men having "ball-tucks" (scrotum tightening operations) to make their testicles look firmer and more inviting. I have written recently about penis extension operations that are thriving around the world for purposes of vanity rather than performance. Men are being injected with liposuctioned fat in the lower regions as well as using dumbbells to extend their members.

As for the illusion of grandeur, an amusing trend amongst gay males is now spreading to the straight community. This is where the male, before going out on the prowl, gets a large stone and rubs a huge white area into the crotch of his jeans to create the appearance of fulsome apparatus. At its most extreme, this also includes sewing a shoulder pad into the crotch.

For those in disbelief, I have had a personal experience with shoulder pads. One well-built and handsome fellow I dated for a while, always insisted on making love with his pyjama top on. I never objected because I accept that people have strange sexual habits. But he also always wore a Tshirt when sunbathing - in the days before skin cancer was an issue.

One day I dropped in unexpectedly whilst he was in the shower and noticed that his shirts, tshirts, jackets and even pyjama tops all had shoulder pads sewn in so it would always look as if he had a "hunky" body.

I have known many men who have sported beards. Often when you look at their childhood or teenage photos, you'll notice a not-entirely flattering chin structure.

I have dated at least two men who have used beauty creams before bed and one who, when his eyes got red from contact lenses or after a few too many drinks, would actually draw a faint brown line inside his eye and around it, with my eye-liner.

When I commented on a male friend's hair color recently, implying that the grey bits were a bit aging, he promptly went and got it dyed.

The fact is that there is no shame in male vanity. And it should become more socially acceptable. Men do age, and why shouldn't they also try to make the most of what nature gave them.

It is folly for men to continually berate women for not sporting the body beautiful whilst they allow themselves to bloat and sag and look bad. A recent report on male obesity in this country was most alarming, revealing that a huge percentage of Aussie men are overweight and slobby. Guys wouldn't tolerate it from women.

Like women, aging men have all sorts of traits that make them unattractive. When men age their ears grow bigger and also become hairier. Older men often grow breasts, a funny yet sad phenomenon recently dealt with on the TV show Seinfeld where the characters were trying to design a bra for older men to help with this very embarrassing and prevalent problem.

It is common when you live with a man to find him with your tweezers up his nose, plucking out the sprouts of hair or trimming them.

And yet all this has to be done in stealth. Aussie men find it humiliating or a sign of weakness to buy their own tweezers, face creams, or even eye pencils, quite unlike Italian and European men who demand product ranges to adorn themselves and improve their innate beauty.

I am all for male vanity, as long as men don't take it too far. And I think most women would agree that it will be a great day when we no longer have to hide the tweezers and nail scissors for fear of where they may end up.

BASTARDS

There's been a lot of bleating and complaining by women recently behind board-room doors, and over executive lunches, that men have become a little too New Age. Too sensitive. "A bit like emotional jelly fish", one girlfriend complained. "Geldings", grumbled another.

In fact, women have been moaning to me that the whole experiment into New Age maleness has been a bit like a cake gone wrong. We wanted a dash of kindness and consideration and a smidgen of sweetness thrown into the ingredients to create a sort of New Age Neanderthal. A testosterone riddled male who would drag you by the hair into his cave and ravish you, then make you a cappuccino afterwards and discuss "the relationship".

But girls are now whispering to each other in the corridors of power that maybe someone misunderstood the recipe and poured too much syrup into the cake, leaving us with a sticky, spongy thing that won't rise to the occasion.

Well, girls you can relax and stop fretting. If a new survey just out of the United States is anything to go by most men haven't changed all that much, after all.

Although some men have gone a bit marshmallowy, prancing about on bonding weekends, weeping and dangling from trees in search of their manhood, the fact is that when it comes to bedroom manners and sexual etiquette most men are still dishing out the same old unreconstructed behaviour they are infamous for.

American Dialogue, a New York City research firm, that interviewed 1000 men across the country aged between 18-34 for Mademoiselle magazine, put the question: "You've been dating a fantastic woman and you know tonight is "the night". You also just heard that you are to be transferred indefinitely to your company's office in Australia. When do you break the news to her?"

Almost half of the males interviewed said they would wait till after they had sex with the poor woman before letting her in on the secret.

When asked what a man was able to do with another woman without feeling like a cheat: 64 per cent said they could flirt comfortably, 42 per cent could take another woman to dinner, 22 per cent could happily kiss another woman, 13 per cent could do everything but have intercourse whilst at least 7 per cent could happily have a drunken one-night stand without feeling bad.

When asked the question "You just slept with a woman for the first time at your place. She'd like to stay over but you want her to leave": 42 per cent would let her stay. But the majority said they would either tell her flatly to go or make up some excuse to get rid of her. Meanwhile the average time men thought they should continue cuddling a woman after sex was 20 minutes, and when it came to oral sex 64 per cent thought between one to 20 minutes was "a good faith effort" regardless of the outcome.

Almost half of men interviewed said that the only mistake Hugh Grant made was getting caught, with well over a quarter of men admitting to having visited a prostitute.

How long would a man wait before asking a woman's girlfriend on a date after a breakup? Most Sensitive New Age Guys would hit on the best friend within a few weeks to a few months, with only 28 per cent finding this off limits. As for the male competitive spirit - the majority of men would not stop trying to seduce a woman just because they saw a wedding ring on her finger.

Less than half of the men would tell a woman he had Herpes well before sexual contact (if he intended wearing a condom) while an alarming 55 per cent of men would not wear a condom with their partner after having an unsafe fling in case she became suspicious.

Nearly half of men interviewed felt entitled to pressure a woman from lightly to heavily for sex after they had paid for four consecutive dates, while a significant 43 per cent of men would stop seeing a woman if she had not "delivered" by the fifth date regardless of who was footing the bill.

Over 60 per cent of men had encouraged a woman to drink in order to increase his chances of having sex whilst over two thirds of men don't believe a man is obliged to see a woman again after having sex with her, if he's lost interest.

Another recent survey on sex and pornography found that a quarter of the male population read Playboy with many men admitting they read "girlie" magazines because they could "interact with an attractive woman without having to deal with a troublesome personality."

So it seems the sisterhood is grieving the loss of testosterone in the male species, prematurely. Or could it be that we've stopped trying to rid the world of bad male behaviour because the cure is far worse than the disease?

BOYS AND THEIR THINGS

Twice a year, when the moon is full and the mood is right, the men at one of Sydney's leading stockbroking firms throw away their grey business suits and partake in a very secret, very special ritual. It is a ritual much like those found in pagan times - a rite of manhood, a rite of sexual potency and prowess.

On these sacred days the partners of the firm and some of the senior analysts and dealers take their throbbing red and black Porsches, their sports cars and Mercs or European hot rods they have had brought in specially for the occasion, to a well-known race track in Sydney, hire the leading racing experts and pay for the track to be theirs for the afternoon.

And then, like ancient warriors, these fellows - who in real life drive very slowly so they can concentrate on their mobile telephone discussions - become untamed beasts who drive their machines round and round and round in ferocious circles, competing to see which man emerges as the meanest, fastest most macho driver, with the hottest, fastest, most powerful machine.

For weeks before the boys hold special meetings about the day which is fast approaching. As the event grows closer, so do the boys at the firm. A source tells me they start nestling together in groups or couples. Boasting and cooing about their machines as if they were describing the most passionate love of their life. Men who never talked together for any length of time are suddenly locked in intense dialogue about their driving technique, fast cars they have driven, horrific and near fatal accidents they have been involved in.

The older, more experienced partners take one of the younger dealers aside and with arm on shoulder and great poignancy and tenderness they whisper profound wisdom like: "Remember to cut the corners finely", "Just open the throttle and go."

Oh, boys with their toys. Men of the 90s may be learning to be deep and sensitive. They may wash dishes and cook exquisite meals for their executive wives. They may be caring and sharing to a degree. But deep down they are still more comfortable with "things" than feelings, still need hard objects or events to communicate with and through.

Talking shop, or sport, is still easier than ripping into the gut. Racing cars and competing is an easier testimony to success and selfhood than sharing information about your emotional life or inner self. Men still don't know how to let go of their "things", not when they are with women and certainly not when they are together.

I have noticed that when out with males, even the more communicative types, very early in the evening a thing will be brought out to impress me or distract me. A phallic symbol. A throbbing new red car. A house with a harbour view which then becomes the focus of conversation for the rest of the night.

Sensitive men will show you the painting they have just acquired, an antique copy of some famous novel they got at an auction, the expensive cast-iron French cooking pots that they had imported from Paris for their dinner parties.

If men haven't got their thing on them, they will describe it to you in vivid, loving detail: The horses they have sitting up at some farm, the valuable carving they dragged back from a trek in India. Their conquest.

How they handle the thing is very important. Control over the thing is paramount because it denotes performance and winning. So they'll describe mastery over their yacht, horse, tennis racket or cooking pots with great verve like the peacocks from the stockbroking firm bragging about their ability to drive round in circles, fast.

Time and time again men cling on to their thing while I struggle to lead conversation away from the thing into a more esoteric or intimate zone. But getting a man to let go his thing is not easy. He'll wince and keep coming back to it. Clutching on to it as if it is a life-raft which will help him stay afloat in the messy emotional chaos which is feelings, intimacy and women.

In my dating days I had to sit in the antique car of a male admirer as he drove it up and down the main drag of some outer suburb. I watched him fondling the gear stick with great pride. He kept turning to me and grinning. Later at home he made me help him polish the front of the machine.

When I felt sure he had made his statement and was feeling secure around his self image, I tried to find out how he was feeling since his girlfriend abandoned him and how he'd been coping emotionally. He promptly opened the lid of his car to demonstrate his knowledge of the little wires around the engine.

Three weeks of dating this man and I knew more about his gear box than his heart.

A divorcee I met last year had lots of boys toys, things and gadgets around his home and he kept pressing buttons so his house would do tricks for me. As we spoke, drapes kept opening and shutting, music went on and off from speakers high above the room, a large video screen was touch activated.

When I tried to broach the delicate subject of his separation he pressed some button and said: "I bet you can't guess what that noise is," as the bubbles from a jacuzzi started to froth and foam in a distant room.

Things. Things. Barriers and more barriers. By the end of the evening I was exhausted. If women find it so difficult to develop intimacy with a man, if extracting emotional information feels like drawing teeth, then what hope have men got together?

I guess going anyone wandering down to the Sydney racecourse to watch macho stockbrokers doing wheelies, and playing with their things together, will find the answer to that question.

HEROES

As I have said, my husband is a Sensitive New Age Guy. He cooks, washes dishes, reads me poetry and performs lots of other touchy-feely type activities. But the minute an adventure film comes on the telly he is transformed into El Macho Supremo. He is Batman, he is Robin Hood, throwing himself about the apartment in commercial breaks with a puffed-out chest, speaking with a deeper voice about the time he held an Uzi gun, rode a horse or got stuck up a tree.

He may, for a while, after the movie, do manly type things like lift me in his arms for no apparent reason and toss me in the air. Or he will prance around the flat nominating things that need hammering and sawing, and asserting he will fix them in a "Trust-me-I'm-a-man" sort of voice.

Then, ultimately frustrated that there is no damsel to save, no maiden to impress and woo into the matrimonial bed, no arrow to shoot, no sword to wield - that the most heroic thing he can do is to help me unscrew the child-proof painkiller bottle lid - he will return to himself.

Like most boys he grew up with a host of TV and comic book idols: Superman (able to leap tall buildings in a single bound), Zorro, Mighty Mouse. And like most boys he is coming to a time in his life when he is realising he may never be Captain James Kirk of Star Trek's Starship Enterprise - boldly going where no man has ever gone before, seeking out new galaxies... which is where my story begins.

I am of the belief that most men don't suffer a mid-life crisis. It is in fact a "Captain Kirk" crisis. It is the culmination of years of disappointment and frustration at

never having saved a damsel, bedded a princess, ridden a horse into the sunset or saved a galaxy.

Which is why I took no notice of a tale my darling husband told me on my return from overseas.

He: "While you were away this whole building nearly burned down. There were flames everywhere. The sky was burning red." Then, thrusting out his chest. "I saved everyone's life...I single-handedly saved the building."

Me: "Wonderful, dear. You'll tell me about it later. Are there any urgent bills to attend?"

He: "I must tell you this story."

I looked at his face. The need to be Superman was intense. So I sat quietly on the couch while he enacted the scenario. Flames were licking the back of the building from a shed that was on fire below. Because of the density of trees in the area and the raging winds the flames would surely engulf the surrounding houses.

The firemen couldn't get to the flames because of obscured access. While they scurried about working out how to douse the soaring flames, my husband had a brilliant idea.

At this stage he dragged me to the window to view the charred remains of trees and the blackened facade of my building. I saw nothing but greenery and the usual array of flowers so I figured we were looking at an exaggeration somewhere in the vicinity of a million to one. That my darling had probably spotted a smouldering barbecue someone had forgotten to douse. But I forced an impressed look on to my female face.

He had the idea to drag the fire hose from our building through the window of a nearby apartment. While panic and pandemonium reigned below and the flames climbed higher into the night, he bravely turned on the hose. The water gushed on to the fire. The flames died. He saved hundreds of lives and millions of dollars of property single-handedly. The fire department and those standing below clapped and cheered him.

Unfortunately, it was dark, he said, so no one actually saw his face. No one actually knows the hero is him. He is an unsung hero but a hero nonetheless.

"Mmmmm..." I said. "Wonderful darling. Wonderful." Then I went off to attend to urgent letters leaving my unsung hero to face his Captain Kirk crisis alone.

Many months went by. But recently, as fate would have it, he and I were asked to attend a meeting of the neighbourhood to discuss a building proposal for our area. One neighbour said he objected to the new building which would be built in the park below our building, on the grounds that it was a fire hazard.

"Remember that fire a few months ago? The whole park nearly went up in smoke, and us along with it," he said.

"One man saved all our lives. He dangled bravely from that window up there. He put out the flames single-handedly. He is a hero. He deserves a bravery medal from the fire department. But no one knows who he is."

"It was that man!!" said one fellow, pointing to my husband. "I saw him from my flat over there." My darling was glowing.

"Yes," he said, stepping forward, his voice deepening again, "It was me."

Ten big men ran over and threw their arms around him. Twenty women thanked him for saving their families. The meeting was alive with praise.

"You could have died, dangling out of that window!" one woman said loudly.

"Yes," said my darling with his head held high. "I could have been killed... easily."

And I could see from the expression on his face and the way he was standing that this was the most precious, beautiful, fulfilling and perfect moment of his entire life.

DREAMING OF PAMMY

New American research has shown that every time a woman reads a glossy magazine, her adrenalin drops and she goes into a slight depression because of the beautiful bodies she sees. I don't know why. It is an undeniable, indisputable and awesomely strange fact: the more beautiful my single girlfriends, the less luck they seem to have getting men into bed.

I have taken strong note of this social phenomenon over the years, beginning my research in my wild single days.

We would go out for evenings, my single girlfriends and I, all dressed to kill, high-heeled, come-love-me shoes and lipstick painted on our lips having dieted for months to squeeze into our pencil-tight skirts so we could resemble the babes we saw in glossy magazines. We were a true bevy of beauties, but although men would circle us in night clubs giving us the greasy eye-ball, very few ever moved in for the kill.

But there was one girl in our clan who got lucky wherever we went, even if we were out drinking coffee.

Whilst we dieted ourselves into near oblivion, torturing our female bodies till we looked like boys in drag, this voluptuous creature ate, with gusto and verve, every morsel on her plate. And whilst she certainly would not have made it to the audition of Baywatch, amazingly, astoundingly, unbelievably, that woman had more sex than the six of us put together. Men simply adored her, drawn inexplicably to her abundant appetites, her infectious laughter and her happy demeanour.

Over the years I saw the situation recur. Whilst many of the beautiful women I knew, full of diet pills and high expectations, were whining about the lack of sex, or trouble they had with partners during sex - premmie ejaculators and the like - the simpler, plainer women I knew were very, very lucky in love.

So what does one make of this phenomenon? Having thought about it over the decades, I conclude that although we are all bombarded to the point of exhaustion with images of the blonde bimette and the honey-colored love child on TV commercials, in shows like Baywatch and in glossy magazines, which leave us feeling inadequate, this is not an image men want of us - not in reality, that is.

Men may fantasise about Pamela Anderson with her gorgeous boobs and long blonde hair but how many could actually feel, in their deepest hearts, that they could sustain an erection long enough and big enough to satisfy the sex goddess?

It would seem from talking to all the men I know that most of them have an issue with potency. They are terrified to death they won't perform. How much more terrifying to have to lie down with a perfectly-shaped babe who is no doubt expecting a magnificent performance? I think the reality is that most men would probably prefer to have a tooth extracted or a toenail torn off than to have to go through the humiliating agony of bedding an Elle.

My men friends tell me that when they are in the arms of a flawed creature, they can relax. They can stop tensing the muscles in their abdomens and let their tummies fall loose. They can hoist themselves up in a host of wonderful and highly unflattering positions and they don't even have to apologise if they pull a muscle in their backs or, god forbid, fail to raise the dead. Hey, everyone in this bed is only human right? (Well, one hopes.)

There is nothing hornier in the world than feeling relaxed and comfortable with your partner, so intimate you can let go totally. Let's face it, the sex act, with the light on and without vaseline on the camera lens, ain't very flattering to either parties.

Despite what women might think, I have found from personal experience that most men are truly oblivious to cellulite during the act. If anything, men like a bit of 'schmaltz' on the bum or hips in sex: something extra to grab on to in those slippery moments like those rubber bath-mats at the foot of a shower. An anchor of love, so to speak, to stop them rolling about too much or toppling off.

And anyway most men are not thinking about your thighs because they are too busy worrying about whether or not they are doing an okay job at it, poor bastards.

I'm not saying that men don't fantasise about Pamela Anderson whilst lying down with normal women. God, only knows I would if I were a bloke. There is nothing wrong with a bit of aesthetic yearning and lust in the privacy of ones head. I know too, from research I have done, that one of the favourite male fantasies is the deflowering or "conquering" fantasy in which the Pammy creature is all breathless and vulnerable and waiting for love.

In reality, of course, the Pammy creature has expectations and needs which terrify the average blokes half to death. Hence life experience has taught me that deep-down where it counts, men are contented with their women-folk just the way we are. In the privacy of their own bedrooms, they are voting with their bodies to allow us our curved bellies from child-bearing, our stretch-marks and the laugh and character lines on our faces. Otherwise none of us would be getting laid, right?

But out in public, it seems that men are as much victims of the same sad beauty myth that forces women to feel miserable every time they read a glossy magazine, and our teenager daughters to become anorexic.

They are almost forced to sport a drop-dead gorgeous, perfect specimen on their arm to impress their mates. Worse, men have to say things to each other each day like "God, I'd like to give 'er one," while pointing to some hapless female - an odd bonding ritual, equivalent to women saying to each other "Hello, how are you?"

We should change the rules and follow the European example where men overtly and publicly admire women at all stages and ages of life. Europeans celebrate the fecundity of the female form in all its Rubeneque loveliness. It's time our men found the courage and compassion to start speaking the truth - for all our sakes.

MALE MESSAGE

We are standing in a dimly lit room, my husband and I, waiting for an appointment with a man called Chester Mainard. My husband looks like a cat about to be handed over to the vet. I take his hand to give him reassurance that he is doing the right thing. He pulls away, muttering angrily to himself about being "forced" into this.

All weekend we have been fighting about this meeting. Mainard is an internationally-renowned sex educator, visiting Australia to teach men about their sexuality.

When I find out the maestro of male sexuality is in town I suggest that my husband go to a workshop or to a private session so I can report his experiences in this article. He gingerly agrees to do a one-on-one session with Mainard, then spends the next two days grizzling about it.

"What's he going to teach me that I don't already know?" he protests. I explain that from interviews I have been conducting with sex educators and male health experts across Australia, it is widely believed that men are very uneducated about the workings of their anatomies - particularly their genitals.

Mainard is a world expert in male private parts and their various functions. He can help men experience stronger orgasms, even multiple orgasms, I explain. He can teach men how to orgasm but not ejaculate. He is an expert on nerve endings in the lower regions of a man's body and can help increase pleasure.

My husband is sweating. Like most men, he has been conditioned since he was a boy to abstain from discussing his genitals or even admitting he has any. Whereas women sit on the telephone endlessly bemoaning their various complaints of the lower region, or discussing the latest Cosmo article on how to have simultaneous, multiple, G-spot orgasms, most men don't know the difference between their prostate and their perineum.

"What's he going to do to me?" my husband asks wincing.

He works through deep relaxation and massage. "Massage?" my husband yells. "Massage?" and with that he is out the door.

This is not an uncommon reaction from men, Mainard assures me over the phone when I ring to explain the difficulty I am having locating my husband.

"Many of the men who come to see me are sent by nagging wives or girlfriends who want to improve their sex lives by helping men get into their own bodies.

"It is a myth that most men are sexual beings. Men are not taught to be sexual in a way that allows them to enjoy their bodies, experience a deeper pleasure in an erotic, sensuous way. Many men are still very much into performing in bed rather than sensing and feeling."

US-born Mainard, is a somatic psychotherapist and certified body worker with a Masters of Science in education. For 14 years he instructed medical students at the University of Wisconsin in the art and science of male pelvic exams, and the physiology of the rectum. Mainard, like his mentor Joseph Kramer who pioneered the now-famous Body Electric School of body awareness in California, is one of a new band of male liberators who tour the world giving lectures and running workshops about the male body and it's potential for pleasure.

According to Mainard and many of his peers, this is the next step in the so-called men's movement. To get men out of their heads, and into their bodies. "Into their physical selves," he says. "The first stage was getting men to admit to their feelings but now they've got to learn how to feel those feelings, particularly in relation to sexuality."

He says when he first started talking about these things, very few men were listening. Now his business is so popular all over the world - amongst gay and straight men - he is run off his feet. "Just check out my frequent flyer points," he laughs.

The sudden explosion of interest in male sexuality in Australia is very much in keeping with the new world trend. Several books keep hitting the shelves with men yearning for information about their health, their sexuality and their bodies.

Men are yearning for information that women have been getting for years through books like *The Female Eunuch* and through magazines. They are ready for what book publishers describe as "the common-sense side of the male movement". Research in the publishing industry has shown that the market is ripe for picking.

Meanwhile Dr Michael Lowy from the Sydney Centre for Men's Health at St Luke's hospital in Sydney says that the sudden plethora of clinics for impotence or sexual problems indicates that men are finally prepared to be educated on the state of their bodies. "They are beginning to feel safe."

Gary Dowsett lecturer in Sociology at Macquarie University agrees. "You only have to look in the papers at all the ads for sexual clinics for men to see evidence of real change."

He says that although talking about erection problems is a long way from developing the deeper erotic skills Chester Mainard teaches, it is the first step towards men becoming informed and thus sexually whole.

"There is a definite changing consciousness out there about being a man. Images in the media have started to portray the male body as erotic and sensuous. Being objectified as sexual creatures has caused a crisis for many men who have had to change the way they see themselves. It is no longer good enough to be desiring, men now have to be desirable too," he says.

"As a result men are beginning to do something. It could be a workshop, or going to the gymnasium to improve their bodies, or visiting a clinic for a penis implant. But men are recognising that they need to be a sexual people too."

It is strange to hear repeatedly that men are not sexual beings given that the world has always viewed the male as the more sexual of the species.

Norman Dean Radican who among other things is men's health educator at the Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney says: "Men have sex but they don't see themselves as being sexual. Men don't masturbate to give themselves pleasure, but to get off. How many men take the time for pleasure? It would never enter their heads to light a candle, put on some music and get into the other parts of their body."

Meanwhile authors of *Sexual Secrets for Men*, Kerry and Diane Riley say that men are so busy trying to please women, they forget to please themselves. "It's gone from one extreme to the other. Things have got to be brought back into balance.

"Women have gone through an incredible transformation in sexual awareness and men are scared they can't meet everything that is required. Historically sex for men

has been simple - move until there is an explosion of energy. Now woman are inundated with information and they want to be satisfied on many different levels. Men's pleasure is often determined by how well their women are feeling. Sex is more than ever a performance issue."

Kerry Riley says: "Men have never been taught to explore their own sexuality - their own ecstasy - sex is defined in narrow terms of orgasm and intercourse." He says most men know little about areas such as the "million dollar spot" which when pressed stops men ejaculating during orgasm. They don't know about all the nerve endings in and around their genitals, and around the prostate region. He says the book is aimed at educating people about the sexual ecstasy men are capable of.

* * * *

So here we stand, my husband and I, waiting to see how Mainard puts his theories into practice and to see if sexual ecstasy is on the agenda.

We are now in a terrace in Sydney's Paddington where one of Mainard's proteges, masseuse and sex educator Andre Dussart, carries on the work while Mainard is travelling.

Out of a shadowy corner Mainard appears. He is gentle and modest in disposition. I see my husband relax. But as Mainard leads him to a massage table and asks him to undress, he again peers at me like a trapped animal. I am certain he's about to bite Chester's hand and run away. Instead he slips off his clothes and lies naked on the table.

"What are your fears?" Chester asks gently. My husband admits he is fearful of being touched by another man. He is fearful of the homosexual overtones of the work. He is fearful of losing control. I know, that like many other men, he is fearful of feeling.

"You will control how far we go, how we will work," Chester reassures him, kindly. "Close your eyes. This is not about who is giving you the massage. It is not about whether your teacher is male or female, straight or gay. This work is about unlocking the flow of energy inside you. I am here to help you explore yourself."

As he runs his hands over my husband's back, he gently explains that tension from the anger and frustration of living, are too often pushed deep inside of men with an emotional coffee plunger. As the emotions are suppressed, sexual energy is often pushed down with it.

Between sentences, Mainard breaths deeply, indicating my husband should follow. The emphasis is on the in-breath like sucking in a drink through a straw. I recognise the breath to be one used in Tantric ritual to help raise energy. In many circles it is known as the re-birth breath because people are known to go into strange, primal regressive states after such sessions.

Mainard says he uses the breath to help men deal with their issues before bringing them into focus with their sexuality.

I watch my husband relax into a euphoric state as the breathing quickens in tempo. Mainard then asks me to leave the room. This is men's stuff. Men's business. I sit reading in another room without concentrating.

An eternity later, my husband emerges. He looks serene. He stares out of the window in a trance. "How was it?" I ask. "Incredible," he says but will not elaborate for days. When he finally speaks he talks of an odd euphoria which swept over his body. "I have never felt so relaxed before in my life. I felt aware of every nerve in my body. I

felt sad because too much of my life I've been afraid to really let go. When I did, I felt charges of electricity shoot through my body. It was amazing."

Norman Dean Radican says that while he knows of and admires the work being done by Chester Mainard, Joseph Kramer and other sex educators around the world, he says he does not believe mainstream men are ready for such work. In his view, most men he speaks to are still very blocked about sexuality.

The Riley's believe women can help lead men into sexual health. Certainly, with the rate of male mortality on a steep rise, helping men get in touch with their bodies can only be a very positive thing. And as a personal tip - the sex afterwards is absolutely worth the effort.

COMING OUT

There is much to learn in life, I tell my mother who simply doesn't want to know all there is to know. She says most things are better left unknown, or at least unspoken.

My mum is English by birth and her philosophy is very much part of the English way of life. Life behind the closet door. Stiff upper lip, and all that.

The "qualities" she admires include: decorum, discretion, good manners, delicacy, and above all modesty, none of which are part of my general demeanor and certainly not part of my column, she often reminds me.

She also reveres neatness and as I am visiting Melbourne for the weekend, she has dragged me off to her hairdresser to have my "scruffy", "untamed" hair cut into shape.

The salon - situated in the middle-class "borscht belt" of Melbourne - is run by two crazy gay guys, though no one really admits they are gay. The clientele, mostly discreet, elegant ladies in their senior years, ignore the posters of muscled young boys that line the spaces between the mirrors.

They ignore the little comments like: "Ooooh what a spunk," when a young man wanders past the window, and make no mention of the fact that Trevor often wears earrings and makeup to work.

Not me. As mother sadly knows, I never ignore anything. And last time she dragged me there, I couldn't help prizing information out of Rodney and Trevor about their infinitely fascinating sex lives. How often? How much? or simply: How?

"Stop asking such outrageous questions," she huffed at me as I tried to discover everything you ever wanted to know about being gay but had no one to ask. "You are a disgrace," she muttered as I interrogated Rodney about his former marriage and his coming out.

"You have no discretion at all! You don't even know the meaning of the word privacy! Well how could you, airing all your business in the paper every weekend?"

My mother is very fond of Rodney and Trevor. She is not the slightest bit fazed by their homosexuality. She just doesn't want to know the sordid details. Which is all I ever want to know. Sordid details and more sordid details. The sordid bits are the intoxicating spice of life. They also bring one closer to the truth. If you want to know how someone really thinks and feels, you have to know about the raw, exposed bits. The bits that are not on public display. The bits in the proverbial closet. The bits my mother sees as private.

Anyway we walk into the salon. Immediately my mother pushes me in front of the old Italian and Jewish women sitting there. "Here is my beautiful daughter," she brags as they coo, smile, and launch into their own interrogations: Are you married? Will you have babies? My mum answers for me because nice questions are not prying. I smile sweetly, the perfect child. Every mother's dream. Pleasant as a picture.

Half an hour later I am having my hair blow-waved by Rodney. I can't hear how loud I am speaking: "So do you like to give it or receive it?" I bellow. My mother turns the color of beet-root. I can see her in the mirror and realise I am speaking too loud. All the women are straining to hear what they have never had the audacity or opportunity to ask.

"I love to give it. Wouldn't you?" bellows Rodney. "My boyfriend is the girl in our relationship," he informs me, pulling my hair with venomous delight. "He...she... prefers it that way."

By now everyone has popped their heads out of the dryers. It is clear all conversation has stopped dead.

"Brian, my partner, has been a girl since about eight when her father died. She started dressing up in her mother's clothes. Oh! She wore the most gorgeous dress last night. We had people for dinner. It was a long tomato-red dress with shimmering, red shoes. She was dazzling, divine, walking down the stairs. I was so turned on."

My mother comes storming up. "Enough Ruth. Please. Have you no shame?"

All my life I've had to answer that question, particularly since I started my column. But the answer is as evident to me as it is to Rodney, who is now so proudly parading his identity to us all, having spent 30 years of his life trapped inside the big lie. There is no shame to being human. And there is nothing particularly private to the experience.

Doesn't everyone make love? Cry? Feel insecure? Have outrageous fantasies? Failures? Moments of loneliness and humiliation? Suffer confusion about their identity, sexuality or relationships? Why be ashamed to admit it?

We are bombarded by lies, of perfect people living enviable and perfect lives. Our role models rarely confess to their humanness because in our society, it is important to make others envy our lives to validate a mediocre existence that we were promised would be far more special. So we all end up in the closet, one way or another, unable to speak the truth. Particularly in Anglo Saxon cultures.

"I had my legs waxed yesterday, what do you think," says Trevor coming over to me, lifting up his trousers and running his hand down his leg.

Suddenly Mrs Goldfarb says: "Very nice Trevor. You look very nice darlingk. Make safe sex Trevor. You don't want no AIDS darlingk. You too Rodney."

And all of a sudden it's out. The truth. And ten relieved women have joined in the discussion. It is a cacophony of conversation. Stories about gay friends of their sons, questions galore as fears and misconceptions are aired. The room is bubbling with a rare sharing and honesty, rare even for a hairdressing salon.

Some fabulous stories are offered by the women in exchange: confessions about sex after 70, secret lovers. Rodney and Trevor have gone wild at the attention, the acceptance. Even my mother is drawn in at last to the real, messy and very indiscreet world of humans. What a joy. What a liberation! We are all out of the closet at last!

READER'S LETTERS

Dear Ruth

For those ladies out there who's men are having problems getting an erection, buy one of those small, studded leather dog collars from a market and strap it on at the base. Be quick, the response is unbelievable. Anon. QLD

Dearest Ruth,

You mentioned men having "ball tucks" or scrotum tightening operations, to make testicles look firmer and more inviting. Inviting testicles! Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Lorraine, Marcoola Beach, QLD

Dear Ruth,

Why are condoms so annoyingly big? They remind me of being a child at about eight, playing dressups in my father's clothes. You couldn't take two steps without your strides falling down. Having a small penis does have its problems. Someone wrote to you suggesting using the tongue as a great alternative. For whom? It ain't exactly a culinary delight - peaches and cream it's not. R.S. Sydney, NSW.

Dear Ruth,

I am an old-age pensioner who thinks this generation's morals are going to the dogs because of its promiscuity, but for the life of me I really can't see why some people consider oral sex as depraved and unhealthy. Surely merely talking about sex has more virtue than actually participating in it. Gordon, Clontarf, QLD

Dear Ruth,

I was cosily reading your segment on Sunday whilst my fiancé was snoozing heavily beside me. So I asked him, "What do you like better than sex?". Straight away he said: "Driving my boat really fast over the waves" - without even changing his sleepy facial expression. You had to be there! Love your column. Robyn, Noosa Junction, QLD

Dear Ruth,

SNAGs never get anywhere in their relationship with women. Eventually, the day arrives when the woman will sit the man down, and in her best intimate communicative mode possible, start the conversation with... "You're a nice guy, but..." Don't Call Me A Nice Guy, NT

Dear Ruth,

I have a noticeably bent dick. Of course, it was the subject of much name calling and hysterical laughter at boarding school in the showers - all very cruel. But my parents assured me that "everything would be all right on the night". This proved true. When erect it curves upwards and contacts the female's G-spot more readily than a straight penis. I certainly haven't had too many complaints from women, just a gasp of horror when I drop my trousers. Mr B, Arrawarra Beach, NSW.