

Ah, for the elation of flirtation

By Ruth Ostrow

A FEW years ago, I cut this item out of one of the newspapers. "A female clerk has been awarded more than \$15,000 after the president of a golf club rubbed his penis against her leg while dancing at a Christmas party.

"The woman dismissed suggestions she mistook an asthma puffer in the man's pocket for his penis.

"'Look, I have been married 21 years. I know the difference between a penis and a puffer,' she told the NSW Equal Opportunities Tribunal."

The story went on to say that the tribunal had found both the club and its former president jointly liable for sexual harassment.

Which must have put hairs on the chests of all those males who read the story. Because at this time of year, at office parties all over Australia, a lot of women are asking their colleagues: "Is that an asthma puffer in your pocket or are you just glad to see me?"

After which she sues him for sexual harassment and he sues her for defamation of puffer, and the lawyers get richer and richer from what used to be commonly known in polite circles as flirting.

Flirting is one of life's greatest pleasures, particularly during the festive season. And I can't help lament the sad and tragic loss of this wonderful art form due to the tyranny of political correctness. Indeed I fondly remember the good ol' days when Christmas parties would end with a bit of groping in the stationery cupboard or naughty bits being photocopied and handed around the office.

It was all serious fun, a release of so much pent-up sexual tension from rubbing shoulders and working intimately with people all year. A reminder that we are human beings with bodies, not simply cogs in the system.

And all that fabulous, raunchy flirting was explained away in the morning as having had a few too many drinks, and everyone would blush and grin and go away for a few days' holiday, only to return in the new year feeling invigorated and refreshed.

Ah, but this was in the days before women became recognised by law as the fragile, vulnerable damsels we really are, and men were formally deemed beastly perverts. All of which would have the Italians falling about on the floor, laughing. Unimpeded by the hang-ups and repressions of Anglo-Saxon mores, Italians learn flirting from the time they are knee-high and continue practising this mandatory pastime in the workplace, in the streets, in coffee shops, groping women, cuddling, rubbing, grinding and basically celebrating female beauty in all its various forms, shapes and colours, at all stages of a woman's life.

Having visited various Latin countries, I can certainly vouch for the fact that the women look a lot happier for it.

As one friend said: "I felt, like, so sexy just walking the streets. I was 'Bella!' and I so loved and enjoyed all that male attention. I felt so womanly. It's very sad coming home here where men are too scared to even lift their eyes and look at you for fear of a legal action."

Which brings me to the point of the article. It's summertime. Such a warm, sultry time. And we all want to flirt, need to flirt, to be erotic beings, to be alive. Even those of us who are married enjoy the innocent, provocative art of wooing and dancing under the moon at parties with mysterious strangers.

Far from ruining relationships, I have always believed flirting stirs our juices, brings us back into our bodies and turns us on.

If we are then lucky enough to be in partnerships, we can take this lovely energy back to our beloved and it can help spark the fires of love, which can often get diminished and doused in the day-to-day tedium of domestic life. As the saying goes: Doesn't matter where you get your appetite, as long as you eat at home.

Watching our partners flirt can also be a much-needed boost to a long-term relationship. We often take our partners for granted, getting caught up with them in the minutiae of dirty dishes, children and obligations. But seeing our mates through someone else's lustful eyes can be a real wake-up call. A little bit of jealousy goes a long way.

Flirting at office parties is always the most fun because of the dynamism lurking beneath relationships created through intense interaction. But one can flirt gleefully with neighbours, friends or the motor mechanic.

Jo-Anne Baker, sex counsellor and author of the international hot seller *Sex Tips* (Allen & Unwin), says that people are scared to flirt because they think it will lead to affairs or aberrant behaviour.

"That's all scare tactics. Flirting can simply be enjoyed as a natural, expressive and fun pastime. It is also confidence building. In my experience, people who allow themselves to be playful with the opposite sex while setting clear boundaries have less relationship problems.

"A client I treated a year ago is a good case in question. Married young, he never had a chance to flirt and express himself sensuously. His wife was a very possessive woman and he was too frightened to separate from her at parties.

"He told me he was feeling very deprived and that he needed to experience himself as an erotic being by interacting more with women. Because his wife was so forbidding, he ended up leaving her.

"In this particular instance I believe that had she supported his need to be more playful, their relationship would have deepened - largely as a result of his honesty," she says.

"Conversely, I have one couple who give each other freedom to flirt with others. They have very clear boundaries about cheating but are comfortable with the joy that comes from a flirt, and they are really growing together, feeling closer because there is more light and air in their marriage."

She says couples need to learn to flirt with each other, too. One exercise she recommends is that people in long-term relationships go out to the pub or to

dinner and pretend they have just met, fantasising about each other in different roles. "This can really spice things up," she laughs.

"We live in an Anglo-Saxon culture that often makes us feel desexed and ashamed. We need to lighten up and learn to play," she says. "And we shouldn't forget that we are sensual, sexual beings until the day we die."

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