Based on several recent national surveys and the perceptions of numerous social commentators there is still a great deal of both—sex and romance—in the lives of aging Baby Boomers. Although not necessarily paired, sex and romance boast large, enthusiastic fan clubs. Let’s start with a little history about sex in the 1960s, for those who missed out for one reason or another.

**America’s Sexual Revolution**

A number of converging forces in the 1960s ushered in a counterculture movement that fundamentally altered the social, political, and sexual landscapes of America. One of the historic outcomes triggered by this unprecedented level of societal turmoil was the so-called “sexual revolution” that found expression in many forms, including, the hippie movement, communal experiments, multiple sexual partners, premarital sex as acceptable behavior, rising teen pregnancy and the widespread availability of abortion services, and later, sexually transmitted disease as well as the resurgence and eventual normalization of pornography. Due to generational circumstances and simple timing, leading edge Baby Boomers, those individuals born between 1946 and 1955, were the sharp edge of the sword during these liberating years.

So what changed? According to the scholarly contributions of thirty-three experts writing in *Sexuality in America: Understanding Our Sexual Behavior and Values* (Francoeur, Koch, & Weis, 1998), this is the sexual direction in which our culture has been moving since the 1960s:

- Changing demographic patterns in America, including the “graying” phenomenon, along with more varied lifestyles, women working outside the home, popularity of co-habitation, and the growing disconnection between child–rearing and married life have all
contributed to alter fundamentally the experience of sexuality. At the same time, media representations (primarily TV) and institutionalized values of American sexuality remain largely stereotypical and have not kept pace with the reality of people’s private lives.

- While heterosexual marriage is still the dominant blueprint for sexual relations in the U.S., a sizable percentage of Americans depart from this norm and engage in non-martial sexual expressions—premarital, extramarital, same-gender, and unconventional sexual behaviors.
- Premarital virginity has largely disappeared in the U.S., dropping to about five percent since the 1950s.
- Sexual expression has become increasingly complex and diverse, and is best described as a “gender rainbow,” “gender flavors,” or “gender landscapes.”
- Gay men and lesbian women are the last large minority group in America and are waging a major campaign for legal recognition and protection.
- There have been many points of sexual conflict in America, with special interest groups imposing their moral standard on the general citizenry through social purity movements throughout our collective history. Dramatic recent examples include various iterations of “Comstock Laws” that have attempted to restrict access to information and services related to birth control and abortion (e.g., Communications Decency Act of 1996), an aggressive and well-supported Pro-Life (anti-abortion) movement throughout the country, federal funding of abstinence-only youth education under the Bush Administration, and a general decline in government funding for sexuality research. In some parts of the country school boards have abandoned sex education or postponed it until later grades despite the fact some young girls begin puberty by age 8 (the third grade). Nevertheless, the general trend has been toward greater openness and more discourse and information about sexuality, more sex education in schools, greater treatment of sexual issues and activities in video, music, and print media, more visibility and acceptance of homosexuality, and a greater percentage in society of unmarried adults who are pursuing non-traditional lifestyles while remaining sexually active.

Sex at Midlife and Beyond

What about the Baby Boomers who pushed the sexual agenda in the 1960s and 1970s, what are they up to today? Older adults are sexually active, particularly those in spousal or other intimate relationships. This is true for Baby Boomers, individuals now between the ages of 46 and 65 years in age, as well as their parents now in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. The prevalence of sexual activity is lower for women overall, and declines with age for both genders. However, a substantial number of older men and women engage in vaginal intercourse, oral sex, and masturbation even in the eighth and ninth decades of life.
About half of adults in the 45-49 age range report sexual frequency of at least once a week, with the percentage dropping a little for those in the 50-59 age range. However, kissing or hugging and sexual touching or caressing are the most frequently mentioned sexual activities, while masturbation and oral sex are the least frequent activities. The numbers are higher in all age ranges and activity categories for adults in partnered relationships, as is general satisfaction with life and an appreciation for the central role sex plays in high quality adult relationships.

Sexual frequency for adults in relationships between the ages of 65 and 75 is also surprisingly high—about 65 percent of both men and women report having sex at least 2-3 times per month. The relative frequency of sexual activity does not drop off substantially until after age 75. This robust level of activity seems to persist among those in the 57-74 age range despite the report of bothersome sexual problems, such as, difficulty in achieving or maintaining an erection, lack of interest, difficulty with lubrication, inability to climax, and anxiety about performance. About one quarter of sexually active older adults with a sexual problem report avoiding sex as a consequence.

Men and women, regardless of age, have different attitudes about sex and differ in their behaviors. For example, men think of sex and engage in sexual activities more frequently than women. Men are also more likely than women to have tried a variety of sex-related activities, including watching adult films with their partner, going to strip clubs, having sex in a public place, taking erotic photos/videos, and engaging in sex outside of marriage without spousal consent. Men are also more likely to use an array of medicines, hormones, and other treatments to enhance their sexual performance.

The frequency of erotic thoughts, dreams, and fantasies also varies, with 86 percent of males and more than 40 percent of females in the 45-59 age range reporting such thoughts at least once a week. Overall, women are more likely than men to report lack of interest as a reason for sexual inactivity. Lack of interest is especially true among adults not in a current relationship (51% of women vs. 24% of men).

Health status clearly affects sexual satisfaction, with physically active, healthy adults more likely to be sexually satisfied than those with a medical condition or taking prescription drugs for some condition. Health conditions that often affect sexual activity include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, arthritis or rheumatism, back problems, diabetes, clinical depression, and among men, impotence. Across all age groups—57-64, 65-74, 75-85—the most commonly reported reason for sexual inactivity for those in relationships is the male partner’s
physical health; 55% of men and 64% of women report this reason for a lack of sexual activity.

Sexual problems are widespread in contemporary society and are influenced by both health-related and psychosocial factors. Physical, social/emotional, and relationship factors all have a significant impact on the prevalence of one or more sexual problems, but these vary by gender, age, and demographic group. In addition, increasing age is more consistently associated with sexual problems among men, particularly erectile dysfunction. Sexual problems, however, are more common among women than men. Underscoring the public health implications of sexual dysfunction, only 38% of men and 22% of women report having discussed sex with a physician since the age of 50.

Challenges for Single Adult Women

There are also special challenges for single women in our society. About 36 percent of women in the 20-44 age range are single. However, nearly 60 percent of African American women in this age range are single, compared to 32 percent of white and Hispanic women. Single women are more likely to have had two or more sexual partners in the past year. Among sexually active women, the likelihood of having no health insurance is also greater for cohabitating (25 percent) and other single women (21 percent) than married women (12 percent). These findings suggest single, sexually active women may be less able than married women to obtain needed sexual and reproductive health services.

It is also clear aging affects the sexual lives of heterosexual women earlier and more adversely, beginning at age 50, than it affects the sexual lives of heterosexual men. Women were more than twice as likely as men to have had no partners (21.8% vs. 9.7%, respectively) over a 12-month period, whereas men were almost three times more likely than women to have had multiple partners (14.8% vs. 5.0%, respectively). The proportion of men and women with no sexual partners increases with age, while the proportion reporting two or more partners decreases. In an attempt to account for these marked gender differences in sexual activity, particularly after age 55, it has been suggested by some researchers that both ageism and sexism in American society currently promote a view of older women as undesirable or inappropriate sexual partners, even among women themselves. At the heart of these late life patterns of sexual inactivity are also educational attainment, beliefs about sexuality, and higher male mortality rates, which disproportionately limits the availability of sexual partners for older women.
Ending the “Curse from Heaven”

On balance, sex is alive and well in the adult world, with many but not all adults over the age of 60 participating in one form or another, and with some regularity. Evolving values and attitudes in America related to sexuality, pushed by the mass media, film and video, and an infinite array of Internet-based resources, have contributed to this new sexual reality by opening more minds and bedroom doors than ever before. Also adding to the excitement was the discovery and 1996 patent of Sildenafil citrate by a team of pharmacologists at drug giant Pfizer at a research facility in Sandwich, Kent (England). Viagra, as it came to be called, eliminated for substantial numbers of aging males the so-called “curse from heaven,” or erectile dysfunction. Will the wonders of modern chemistry never cease?

Romance

Soft candlelight, fresh pasta, the beating of two hearts, a private moment together . . . the stuff of dreams, the magic of romance.

Romance tiptoes into many lives, often uninvited but welcome nonetheless. It may not stay long, and really doesn’t have to once it imparts its joyful pleasures of the heart.

But what is it? For many, it is a pleasurable feeling of excitement, desire, and wonder toward another person, usually associated with love. It takes many forms and can be predictable or unpredictable, intense, consuming, platonic, passionate, divine, even irrational. But this may be one of those cases in which it is actually easier to describe something than define it. Here are a couple of versions, from female and male perspectives. You do the math.

Female Perspective
Romance is a fancy steak dinner for two in a room lit purely by candles. It's flowers on a random day and falling asleep in your lover's T-shirt that smells like his cologne. It's a date to a famous children's bookstore and a shared slice of cherry pie—a stroll through a crowded
museum that doesn't feel crowded at all. It's making toast for someone in the morning and drawing a heart in the butter, then watching it soak into the bread like it was never there at all, but you know it was. It's handing him a towel for the shower and sopping up the water on the floor, not nagging him about it. It's kissing in the rain, in the snow, in the sunshine, on a street corner after you just met. It's wine and mouths that taste like wine. It's being mistaken as a couple when you're not. A plane ticket to nowhere special, just somewhere together. It's waking up next to someone and smelling their skin and liking that smell—now familiar—even if it's only been a few days. It's a warm body pressed against yours that fits like a puzzle piece. It's talking about nothing for an hour and feeling like you've solved a murder mystery together.

--Christine Coppa

Male Perspective
Romance is flowers and candy on Valentines Day. Letting her hold the remote. Washing and waxing her car without being asked. Taking the trash out without being asked. Paying the bills without being asked. Enjoying the Super Bowl together over a couple of cold beers and some salty snacks. Putting extra funds into the joint 401(k). Telling her how good she looks and dropping other nice compliments from time-to-time. Oh, and dinner out once in a while.

--Anonymous male, age 58

There are, of course, gender differences in beliefs about sex, love, true love, and romance, perpetuating the notion that “men are from Mars, women are from Venus,” the title of a very popular book published in 1992 by John Gray. But the differences might not be quite as wide or deep as you think.

AARP conducted an Internet survey in 2009 on love, relationships, romance. When asked whether romance was an essential component of love, men and women were in near agreement with 42 percent saying “yes.” About 32 percent of both genders stated romance was more important as the relationship continues—but they might have entirely different expectations and definitions of romance as we have seen above. On the question of sex, 76 percent said true love could exist without an active sex life, with women more in agreement with this than men (80% vs. 71%). Only 3 percent of men and women in this survey did not believe in true love.

“Soul meets soul on lovers' lips.”

--Percy Bysshe Shelley
Biology and Chemistry of Romance

Rutgers University anthropologist Helen Fisher has looked even deeper into the nature of romantic love. Based on her own research she argues that romantic love is one of three primordial brain networks that evolved in humans to assure mating and successful species reproduction. *Lust*, the craving for sexual gratification that is associated with dopamine which cranks up testosterone levels in both genders, motivates us to seek out a partner. This is what Homer called the “pulsing rush of Longing.” *Romantic love*, the physical high, pounding heart, sweaty palms, and involuntary obsession that accompany “being in love,” enables us to focus courtship attention on one person at a time. This is an evolutionary trait because it conserves mating time and intense energy, and is connected to a specific brain region and three other powerful neurotransmitters--dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. *Attachment* between a male and female—the feeling of calm, peace, and security that often arise from staying in a long-term relationship—evolved to keep breeding pairs together long enough to raise their offspring. Only three percent of mammals pair up for child-rearing, by the way, and humans are among those on this short list. The brain circuitry for attachment therefore differs from romantic love, as do the heavy involvement of two “cuddle hormones” in our brain chemistry, oxytocin and vasopressin.

Thus, romantic love is hard-wired into the architecture and chemistry of the human brain. To prove the point, Fisher and her colleagues put 49 adults “madly in love” into a brain scanner and mapped the specific brain circuitry associated with romantic love. They also administered a special survey on romantic love to several-hundred test subjects. The results revealed an extremely high level agreement on the survey statements regardless of the individual’s age, gender, religious affiliation, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. For example, on 82 percent of the survey questions people in different age groups gave the same answers, heterosexuals and homosexuals responded similarly 86 percent of the time, males and females responded virtually alike 87 percent of the time. Adults over the age of forty-five reported being just as passionate about their lovers as those under the age of twenty-five.

Other biological processes are also involved in mating rituals, romantic love, and sex. Smell, taste, immune system, physical appearance and configuration, posture, and voice have all been shown to be important factors in mate assessment and selection. According to Psychologist Gordon Gallup at SUNY, Albany, there are hardwired mechanisms in the human brain that process all of these diverse cues,
and the cumulative effect either draws two people nearer or pushes them farther apart.

The Business of Romance

Romance is also big business. In 2008, romance fiction sales in the U.S. were $1.37 billion dollars, the largest share of the consumer book market at 13.5 percent. With 7,311 new romances published in the same year, no fiction category rivals Romance in terms of sheer size and reader loyalty. These paperback books are marketed mostly to women (90.5 percent of romance novel readers) who average 44 years in age and are well educated, half are married, and about one-third are over the age of 45. The ideal target population for book sales is women ranging in age from 31-49 who are currently in a romantic relationship.

Romance fiction can be defined as a work of prose with a formulaic story chronicling the gradual development of a relationship between a man and a woman, and which has a happy ending. Under this definition, the well-known and highly regarded works of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, E.M. Forster, George Eliot, and many others could be redefined as Romances. There are some in the literary world who take umbrage with linking works like Pride and Prejudice or A Room with a View with pulp fiction and petticoat porn, as it is sometimes referred. Feminists have also been noisy critics, taking exception to the message in Historical Romances that perpetuate the oppression of women by dominant men. But the remarkable popularity of this genre and consistent annual sales truly have the last word. The reasons most frequently mentioned by readers of romance fiction are for escape from personal problems and relaxation during one’s private time. Good reasons.

The Kiss

"You liked it
When I had to stand
On tippy-Toes
Just to kiss you.
Then I'd come crashing
Down,
Smiling
Like I
Had saved the world."
another's mouths, fox’s face lick, certain insects do funny things with their legs and mouths, and dogs, cats, and bears engage in a wide range of affectionate snuggling and smooching.

Charles Darwin thought that kissing was a natural instinct but others argue it is learned behavior. Here is one view of its origin:

The kiss.
It too has evolved over millions of years, like our neocortex and immune system
starting as a ferocious snarl or a vicious snap, then a fleshy bite
that likely drew blood out of ruthless self-interest.
The touching of human lips in this century is an unheralded luxury
a gentle firmness inviting trust without a single growl
a break from the daily battle to hunt, eat, survive
a lingering moment in the embrace of the species
a sensual devouring of complex tastes as if eating a soft ripe strawberry.
Next time slow it down, linger a little longer, probe a little deeper
marvel at this gift of intimacy from our ancestors, this evolutionary miracle.
Barnes (2010, p. 9)

Kisses are offered or exchanged for many purposes but among them the love kiss, “rich in promise, bestows an intoxicating feeling of infinite happiness, courage, and youth, therefore surpasses all other earthly joys in sublimity…” (Nyrop, 1901, p. 30). Clearly, kissing is a complex behavior that requires exacting muscular coordination, a total of 34 facial muscles and 112 postural muscles are required. Even more if the tongue is involved.

Recent research has also uncovered a more practical side to kissing. There is a rich and complex exchange of postural, tactile, and chemical cues connected with kissing. Human saliva, for instance, contains a number of important compounds. One, known as the major histocompatibility complex (MHC), influences tissue rejection. Two people with closely matching MHC are not good breeding partners. A wet kiss can quickly signal MHC incompatibility, Anthropologist Helen Fisher tells us there may be a lot more going on through kissing in terms of receiving and interpreting chemical signals. A woman subconsciously tries to choose a man whose susceptibility to disease complements her own, leading to children with a broad immunity to infection. A kiss can help with that determination. Men, on the other hand, are looking for traces of estrogen in a women’s saliva to determine fertility based on where she is in her menstrual cycle. At the same time, they are passing their testosterone onto their partner in hopes of stimulating sexual interest. One study found that 66% of women and 59% of men ended a relationship after the first kiss (Hughes, Harrison, & Gallup, 2007). Thus, kissing might be an efficient though unconscious taste test, form of relationship quality control that permits us to screen potential partners.
before investing time, money and emotions in a long-term relationship. And if you kiss the right person, it can be the beginning (or continuation) of true love.

The love kiss gleams like a cut diamond with a thousand hues; it is eternally changing as the sun’s shimmer on the waves, and expresses the most diverse states and moods, ranging from humble affection to burning desire.” (Nyrop, 1901, p. 45)

**Falling in Love at 60, 70, and 80**

Can Baby Boomers still fall in love—well, of course. A better question is, “What is it like falling in love at age 60, 70, and 80?” For those who have not yet done so, falling in love is pretty much the same at any age: butterflies in the stomach, uncontrollable longing, you smile a lot, you can’t stop thinking about the other person, and wonder if they are thinking about you, you feel like a silly teenager but know you are not.

Abigail Trafford, a Washington Post columnist recently published a book on this very topic, *As Time Goes By: Boomerang Marriages, Serial Spouses, Throwback Couples, and Other Romantic Adventures in an Age of Longevity*. But she warns, “It's wonderful to realize that you're never too old to fall in love, but wise to remember that you're never too old to fall apart in love.” The book is based on interviews with Boomer couples over the age of 50. Here is one of her insightful observations:

The biggest difference is you have some experience. You already have a love story inside you. You're a lot freer. You've completed your adult tasks, which are to raise a family and establish yourself in the community. In your 20s, 30s, and 40s, you have a really long to-do list. By the time you get into your 60s and 70s, you have a kind of confidence that comes with experience. You are freer to define the kind of life you want to lead. That's a wonderful bonus for relationships. You put a premium not on scoring with someone, but on connecting with someone and being who you really are. When you're young, there's a lot of pressure to find your mate and settle down. Once you're in your 50s and 60s, you don't have that pressure. The urgency is to make friends. You're dating for fun.

Falling in love later in life is made possible by the Boomer gift of longevity, coupled by a generational determination to live fully. Put those two ingredients together and—Bam!—just about anything can happen. And love—the kind you give and get back in return—is transformational, especially when its wrapped in romance. Most Baby Boomers, two out of three, keep the flame of romance in their
relationships by telling their partner frequently, “I love you.” About the same percentage take the time to recognize and celebrate special occasions, like birthdays and anniversaries. Over one third take a romantic vacation together at least once a year just to enjoy each other’s company (AARP, 2010). Love, romance, and sex are out there just waiting for you. And don’t forget to do a lot of kissing—that tireless gift of intimacy from our ancestors that can help you pick the right one!

Additional Reading


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