

Sex Ed for the Suddenly Single

Experts help the newly single cope with changing sexual attitudes.

By [Martin Downs](#)

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Jilted, bereaved, liberated, or just moving on, every year millions of men and women say goodbye to a long-term relationship -- often one they had been committed to for decades. For the newly single, starting to have sex with new partners can be fraught with hazards.

You maybe in for the time of your life, but you also face issues that probably haven't crossed your mind in a long time: disease risks, pregnancy risks, and the risk of embarrassment.

Remember all that? Welcome back.

Relearning the Ropes

There's no point in worrying you might catch something if you don't make a move on someone. Even if you were a smooth seducer way back when, you have to dust off your knowledge of how to initiate sex with someone else.

"Couples develop their own shorthand about almost everything," says Carol Queen, PhD, a sex educator and director of continuing education at Good Vibrations, the San Francisco sex-toy emporium.

You're used to communicating in the sexual shorthand of your old relationship. A certain look, phrase, or touch meant that sex was a go, or clearly meant no. When it comes to initiating sex with a new partner, you have to watch carefully for signals that things are headed that way.

What's more, prepare yourself for surprises once you get there.

"We come to think we know what sex means," Queen tells WebMD.

But you only know what sex means to you, and it's a definition you developed over many years with one person. Maybe to you sex is slow and tender, whereas for your new partner, it's loud and athletic. The differences can range from slight to vast, but there will be differences.

"Being with a new person is like learning to play a new instrument," Lou Paget, a sex educator and author of books such as *The Great Lover Playbook* and *Hot Mamas*, tells WebMD.

Brace for Culture Shock

During the years that you were out of circulation, you may not have registered some of the changes in people's attitudes about sex.

Yes, many people were sexually free back in the '70s. But Queen says she thinks even then, sex tended to center on men's pleasure. Over the past few decades, women's pleasure has moved closer to center stage. Thirty years ago, a man might have prided himself on knowing where the clitoris was located. Now he's got to be an expert on what to do with it.

"Women expect men to have an awareness of how to please her," Paget says.

Vibrators and other sex toys have recently gained much more widespread use and acceptance.

"Somebody who has been in a monogamous relationship with no sex toys anywhere might go to somebody's house and see a sex toy on the bedside table," Queen says.

It may not have been left out mistakenly. Your friend may be intending to use it with you.

"People should just get friendly with the idea," Queen says.

Another taboo that's now more comfortably discussed is anal sex. In the 1980s, with the spread of AIDS, it became necessary for the media and government to talk about anal sex publicly. All the talk about the practice stirred up interest in it.

Certainly plenty of couples, gay and straight, have always indulged. If, however, anal activity was never part of your sex life in the past, don't be shocked if a new partner offers or requests it.

Testing for AIDS

Testing for AIDS

"Before having sex with a new partner, it is your responsibility to know what you've got. Do not assume you're fine," Paget says.

At the very least, you should know your HIV status. Perhaps you and your previous partner got tested together 10 years ago. Or maybe you were in a monogamous relationship years before the HIV/AIDS pandemic struck. Even if that's the case, it is best to know your current status for certain.

Ask your new partner to get tested if he or she hasn't been recently. Being older or heterosexual doesn't mean you are not at risk. Most women with HIV get it through heterosexual contact. And in the year 2003 alone -- the latest year for which data from the CDC are available -- nearly 13,000 people aged 45-64 were diagnosed with AIDS in the U.S.

Home test kits are available at pharmacies. You take a blood sample from a finger stick and send it to a lab. You call a toll-free number for the result, and the process is completely anonymous. You can also go to a clinic to be tested for HIV and other STDs.

To find nearby testing locations, enter your ZIP code at www.hivtest.org, a referral service run by the CDC.

In addition to HIV, it's a good idea to get tested for:

- Chlamydia
- Genital herpes
- Gonorrhea
- Syphilis

These sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) don't always cause symptoms, so you may not know you're infected.

Safe Sex

Using a latex condom every time you have sex is the best way to protect yourself. That includes oral sex.

Many people balk at using condoms on the penis or a latex barrier (sometimes called a "dental dam") over the vulva for oral sex. But you can get or spread STDs if you don't. For example, herpes viruses can pass from the lips to the genitals, and vice versa.

The CDC estimates that one in five adolescents and adults in the U.S. has genital herpes.

Anyone intending to be sexually active should buy a box of condoms and keep it in the bedroom. If you go out and think you might go home with someone, take along a condom. Just don't make the mistake of keeping one in your wallet,

which over time breaks down the latex, or the bottom of your purse, where it might get holes poked in it.

"If you've never used condoms, get a condom out and play with it," Queen says. Familiarity lessens the likelihood of using them incorrectly.

Lastly, if there's anything you have questions about, get answers. There is no shortage of accurate and accessible sex information on the Internet. You could also take a class in sexuality at a college or a local health organization.

"If people haven't had a basic sex education, they should go out and get one," Queen says.

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SOURCES: Carol Queen, PhD, sex educator; director of continuing education, Good Vibrations, San Francisco. Lou Paget, sex educator; author, *The Great Lover Playbook* and *Hot Mamas*. CDC. American Social Health Association.
