

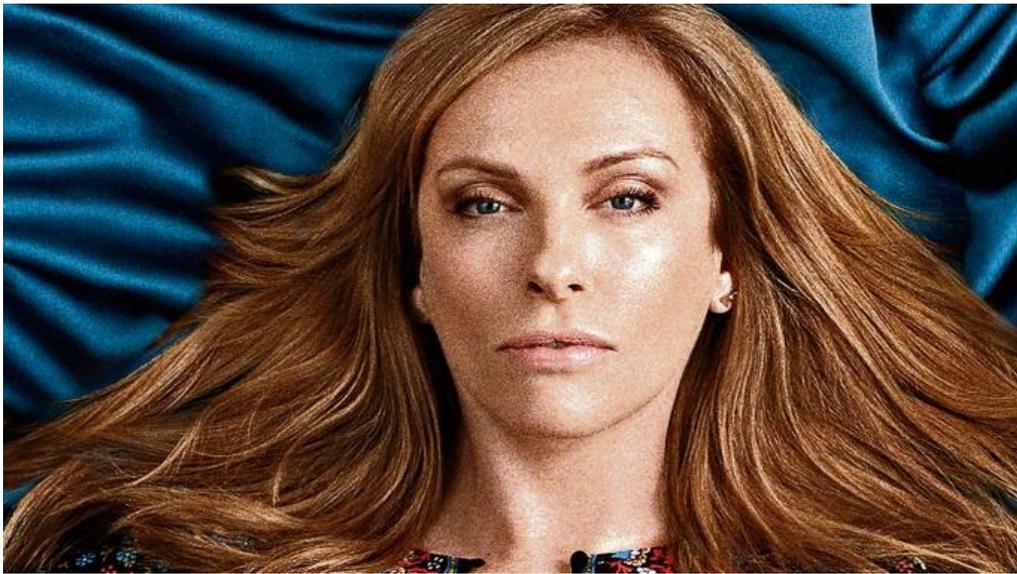
BODY & SOUL

A woman's midlife Wanderlust: 'My libido and desire came back in full force'

As a new TV drama focuses on middle-age sex drive, Karin Jones describes what happened to her at 49

Karin Jones

September 8 2018, 12:01am, The Times



Toni Collette in Wanderlust, the BBC One drama
BBC



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Typically, when I go walking in the wilderness, I think about the grandeur of the countryside, how good it feels to breathe clean air, or what I'm going to make for dinner. But a few years ago, while trekking across the boggy hills of Dartmoor National Park, something exceptional happened. A sensation took hold of me, vaguely familiar, although distant in my memory: lust.

It was as though I'd walked into a mountain mist of desire. I felt heat in my groin. The longer I spent rubbing my thighs together during the abjectly normal state of walking, the more unhinged I became. There were no visual stimuli to trigger these feelings:



Karin Jones sized up men for “shagability”

What I didn't realise at the time was this fever gripping me at the ripe age of 49 would not be going away after I'd found a way to satisfy myself. What had begun in the hinterland would dominate my days and nights for years to come. It would become the impetus for a way of living I'd never imagined and would transform the woman I was becoming as menopause approached.

There's no good data on how many women experience this unprovoked surge in their sexual desire well after they've had children and are about to enter what we think will be our sexual winter. Having had my one and only child at the age of 43, most of my new kid-centred friends were a good decade younger. They were still complaining of menstrual cramps. My periods were practically absent. So why was I feeling like a 20-year-old?

I began searching for information. Having spent many years in the medical field, I asked a seasoned women's health provider. “Have you ever heard of a woman's sex drive going from 0 to 60 at midlife without the benefit of oral hormones?” “Sure,” she replied. “But I've only ever seen it when she has a new lover.”

Yes, most of the women I knew having good sex had found their ardour within a new relationship. The one divorced friend I had

low opinion she'd held previously around her sexual appeal. "In a weird way," she wrote, "my midlife sex life has made me look at how I saw myself before — as a rather asexual being. Of course, I was married then. How awful for my husband to be partnered to somebody with such a low opinion of herself. And now it turns out I'm catnip to the middle-aged man. It's sad I wasted all that time!"

Another wrote: "After several years of bereavement and celibacy I met a man at 63. To my amazement I found my G-spot for the first time and had some of the best sex of my life."

There was no new love interest in my life getting my engines thrumming. In fact, just before the libido surge hit, I had separated from my husband. I was depressed. I could hardly get food on the table for my son and mostly drank wine for dinner. Dating wasn't even on my radar.

Lucy Batham-Read, the founder and director of the mind/body therapy resource LoveurSoul, wrote to me: "I would be willing to bet your central nervous system [in response to your separation] became 'unregulated' and your libido was your 'release'." Maybe. After all, it had been a while since I'd felt desired.

Monica Koehn, a doctoral candidate in women's hormones and sexuality at Western Sydney University in Australia, sent me a few studies that she had uncovered around issues of libido during menopause. One confirmed that sexual desire generally wanes after menopause, but sexual functioning had less to do with hormonal status than psychosocial issues. Another study, based on reports of sexual desire in conjunction with a woman's fertility, suggested that we engage in more sexual fantasy and intercourse as menopause approaches. A kind of showdown before the shutdown.

One woman did contact me to say she was in the middle of a similar state of frenzy. At 45 and postmenopausal, she could

from her sexual life in her twenties.

Eventually, while googling things such as “midlife lust” and “increased sexual desire at menopause”, I found what I needed. Hormones expert Joanna Meriwether calls it the Sex Surge™, and it happened to her too. On her website, joannameriwether.com, she spells out all the symptoms I had as though she knew exactly what was happening to my brain and body: dramatically increased libido, increased desire for touching and sensuality, thinking about sex a good portion of the time, and drawn-out or repetitive fantasising.

Just as I'd come across her sympathetic information, as though on cue, I developed a crush on a local businessman so deep and distracting that I'd spend hours fantasising about having him: in his closet, his car, his countertop. Within a few minutes of waking up, to the moment I shut my eyes at night, I was obsessed with this inappropriate and unreciprocated crush. My brain was so addled I thought we might have been soul mates, despite him being married and never having made a pass at me.

It wasn't just him. My desire was indiscriminate. I sized up nearly every man for his shagability: men walking down the street, men picking up the rubbish, even men in white robes leading church services. Every man was in the crosshairs of my desire overdrive. Meriwether wrote that her husband said it sounded as though, like a man in his youth, she wanted to “tap the herd”.

“It made me have backwards compassion for my teenage years and what my boyfriends were going through,” Meriwether told me when I contacted her. She believes the Surge is an unusual hormonal shift that strikes some women during their mid-thirties to mid-sixties. In her practice, counselling women who are struggling with changes around midlife, she has seen many manifestations. “One woman decided at 45 to become a doctor. The Surge for her was about ambition, not sex.”

making process. “Having a boatload of sexual energy running through you without outlets is frustrating, to say the least. It’s important that we’re having fun with all the sexual energy instead of feeling overwhelmed by it.”

Indeed, after the Dartmoor experience I was happier, albeit exhausted at times. I was alert and hungry. I would masturbate in the morning, when I tucked in for the night and, if I couldn’t do the shopping without my knees buckling, I’d duck into a public restroom.

It wasn’t just my body that was on fire. Like some of Meriwether’s clients, my brain was raging as well. Ideas would clamour for my attentions the moment I stepped into the shower. I’d mentally plan new book chapters and extended holidays. And then, once I’d towelled off, I’d think again about sex.

It wasn’t long before I was on several dating websites and hooking up with men. I was living the life I’d never had in my twenties because, back then, I’d accepted our cultural belief that “sleeping around”, especially for women, was a symptom of unexcavated psychological problems. Now I rejected that. Being driven by desire was a conduit for succeeding in the world of men.

The bloody-minded drive to get laid leaves little room for self-reflection. But with it came a refreshing ability to experience the world with a brash confidence I’d rarely felt as a younger woman. I was energised, vitalised, skipping through the world cracking jokes with strangers. No doubt I was, at times, a pain in the arse.

When I was first confronted with the prejudice around female lust I was corresponding with a man through the online dating website OkCupid. It had been nearly a year since my sexual mania hit and I was confessing to him my pattern of casual

suggested that I read a book called *Women, Sex, and Addiction* and for the first time I felt a twinge of shame. Addicted? I took quick stock of my life: my rent was paid on time, my son was doing well, I remembered to eat. The only difference now was I was happier, more motivated and having more orgasms. Doesn't addiction assume consequences?

I confronted this man. "Wait a minute. If a man is not assaulting me and I'm not assaulting him and we're having fun in the sack, where's the problem?" And although I didn't say it out loud, what I was thinking was: "Maybe you need to read a book called *Male Insecurity Over Female Sexual Exuberance*."

What most surprised me about the Surge was my shift in perspective. Being preoccupied with sex must be what it feels like to be a man. What I was going through gave me a fresh empathy for what most men experience throughout their lives: a fixation with sex and getting sex. And although there is never an excuse for allowing this drive to cross a line into inappropriate behaviour or assault, I understand well the power of lust.

I'm 52 now and no longer driven by my libido. It faded gradually around year three, even though I continue to have new partners. Although I miss it at times, I'm relieved that I'm no longer consumed relentlessly with desire. The only consequence of my appetites were the times I hurt men who wanted me to be exclusive.

If I were to operate under the influence of this kind of energy for most of my life, it's possible I'd be more professionally successful, but my personal relationships might suffer. A few of my friends were put off by my apparent single-mindedness, and even after I apologised for what I felt was simply a phase, I lost some of them. Bravado does have its downside.

women to admit that they are wild about sex and, sadly, most I corresponded with have asked that I keep their identity hidden for fear of professional judgment. Acknowledging the Surge as a thing might help to dispel any shame around it and prepare us for the consequences of the decisions we might make during this kind of gusto. But I think, in general, we should all talk more about sex.

What I took from the adventure was less disrupting than liberating. I revelled in a sexual and intellectual confidence I hadn't possessed during my younger days. I'd never walked across a room thinking I was the bomb. Until the Surge hit. And although my libido is no longer front and centre, I'm still feeling focused, confident and taking new risks in love and work. I don't feel guilty or regretful for enjoying a cracking sex life, especially at my age. The only thing I regret is not having this mindset earlier.

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Wow! Looking forward to the movie.

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Dr. Helga Lees · 9 SEPTEMBER

The 'surge' affects many healthy women on and off forever even after the menopause. What I find interesting is this extraordinary energy and obsession in other things Karin mentions, writing a book etc.

As she was suffering from depression before and suddenly flipped into being hyper I wonder whether there was some other i.e medical reason for it.
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Blimey if you feel the surge coming back I'm your man.

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No doubt I would be considered too old for you but as you are discovering it is an absolute fact that age is a number and does

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Antony Martin · 8 SEPTEMBER

Very interesting. I suspect the #metoo brigade will be all over this like a rash, denouncing the very idea that men are more sexually liberated than women (in general). Indeed, Jordan Peterson's views on the differences between male and female success in the workplace centres on the idea that it simply comes down to DNA. In other words, despite all of the outrage buzzing around the ether at the moment, there is unlikely to be any fundamental change to who we are. A shame, the world could do with more women who are liberated (sexually or otherwise) at a younger age in order to compete on more favourable terms in a 'man's world'.

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