



**LELO SEX CENSUS:  
2022**

## Foreword

Sex is often said to be the experience that ties all human beings together; whether we're having it, not having it, talking about it, watching it or avoiding it altogether. Our relationship to sex impacts our well-being and is intrinsically linked to other areas of our lives that, on the surface, may appear as if they have nothing to do with sex at all. Sexual trends influence law-making, arts and culture, social relations, economics, education and even our choice of clothing. Sexual attraction transcends all logic. If you look hard enough, sex is everywhere, which is also why, at LELO, we are committed to finding out as much as we can about this crucial part of human life and why people do what they do in the bedroom and beyond.

If there's one thing that the pandemic has reinforced, it's that sexual trends develop alongside society; when our environment drastically changes, so do our habits. In 2020, about six months into the pandemic, we published a report that revealed insight into Britain's sexual attitudes and lifestyles. Since then, we've seen a disruption to some of the most fundamental aspects of day-to-day life. Building on these findings, we conducted a new sex census in February 2022 with 4,000 participants in the UK, with a focus on finding out how the pandemic has altered our sexual lives further. By comparing the numbers to those found in our previous study, we investigate what, if any, permanent or temporary adjustments we have made as a result of this global crisis, as well as how this has impacted our collective mental health. Touching on this in a later chapter, we will see that the connection between sex, intimacy and mental health is more important than ever before, with over half of Brits telling us that declining mental health, such as depression and anxiety, has had a negative impact on their sexual well-being. We have also seen a dramatic shift in the relationship we have with our bodies, with many people contemplating their sexuality or gender identity/expression, and struggling with their body image.

With virtual dating and sex the only means of social contact for many people over the past 18 months, masturbation is also enjoying a moment in the sun, with sex toys aiding a pleasure revolution. However, as a result of more people moving online to satisfy their sexual appetites, Brits are reportedly having less sex as 'The Great Sexodus' takes hold. Interestingly, although our sex lives have slowed down, casual connections have increased, with eight in ten people having had a one-night-stand recently.

The sexual decline follows on from reflections made two years ago by LELO's in-house psychosexual and relationships therapist, Kate Moyle. The discoveries from our most recent census are compared against those in 2020, as well as third party research. But numbers only tell us so much; to gain a qualitative understanding of what these figures actually mean, we also consult with other experts as well as invite case studies to share their personal experiences.

We scrutinise the link between masturbation and shame (and how to tackle this stigma), explore how we're meeting our sexual partners – with social media sites such as Instagram and TikTok becoming de facto dating resources for Gen Z, millennials and Gen X – and offer advice on everything from how to introduce co-play, coping with a declining libido and how to talk to your sexual partner about this, and more. Additionally, we take a look into what the future holds, exploring emerging sex tech such as VR porn and sex robots, and contemplating how technology could alter the sexual landscape, observing the pros and cons of this new tech, including potential moral consequences.

This report aims to highlight, investigate and question the many facets of our romantic and sexual lives, with the hope to educate, inspire and above all empower people to be true to themselves and build a sex-positive space that allows them to do so.

# THE AUTHOR AND EXPERT

## Kate Moyle



Kate Moyle is an Accredited Psychosexual & Relationship Therapist and Certified Psycho-Sexologist. Alongside her therapy practice, much of which focuses on working with those in their twenties and thirties who are struggling with the impact of modern life on their sex lives and relationships; she hosts The Sexual Wellness Sessions Podcast, and is Sex Expert for LELO UK.

Kate works with people to understand themselves better sexually and helps them to focus in on how they define sex, how they think and feel about it and what they take that to mean about them as an individual or couple. She works with a biopsychosocial educational approach, taking a holistic view of sex lives and sexual experiences. She is a regular media contributor on the topic of sex and relationships and believes in taking the lessons from inside the therapy room, out into the mainstream to create a more sex positive culture.

## Almara Abgarian



Almara Abgarian is the news and lifestyle editor at Jam Press, but also works as a commentator, speaker and freelance journalist. She has specialised in sex, dating and relationships for the past decade, having written on these topics for some of the biggest publications in the UK such as Metro.co.uk, where she launched two series including a deep dive into weekly sexual habits and 'unusual' fetishes. Almara has a keen interest in what shapes our sex and love lives including emotional connections and attitudes towards this key part of life, having previously been an in-house expert for a UK dating app.

On a mission to find out what makes people tick, she isn't afraid to venture into unknown territories; from taking part in naked speed dating to visiting a London sex club, discussing orgies at a Jamaican swinger's resort and interviewing sex workers about the link between sex and money.

You can also find Almara on BBC channels, TV and podcasts discussing everything heart and bedroom-related, frequently championing self-pleasure, honest communication and the importance of comprehensive sexual health education.

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# THE GREAT SEXODUS



After two years of Covid-19, one thing has become evident: human beings crave connection, whether that be physical touch, companionship or conversation, or all of the above. However, the ripple effect of the pandemic on our social lives means that many of us have been forced to re-learn how to form connections with others. For many Brits, the pandemic has seen them stop having sex altogether or struggling to get back into a dating mindset post-lockdowns. In this section, we explore the Great British Sexodus including to what extent and why people have stopped having sex or being intimate in other ways.

## Have Brits stopped having sex?

To investigate how often people have sex, LELO asked 4,000 participants two main questions: when they last had sex and when they last kissed another person within the previous 18 months. The results support the sexodus theory, with **almost half (45%) of those surveyed saying they had less sex or no sex, while one in 10 participants (13%) had not kissed another person.**

- I have more sex now (21%)
- I have less sex now (29%)
- No change in my sex life (34%)
- I don't have sex / stopped having sex (15%)

The findings align with early studies during the pandemic, which reported a general decline in sexual well-being and functionality. However, a more recent psychology journal published by Stephanie E.M. Gauvin et. al in January 2022<sup>1</sup>, concluded that there was only a “slight decrease” in sexual activity compared to pre-Covid times. Furthermore, the research highlighted people’s “potential resiliency” when faced with having their social routines uprooted. It’s worth noting that this study focused on Canadian participants, while LELO’s study was conducted with UK participants.

Having a sex hiatus is normal; we all go through stages of wanting or not wanting sex. If done for the right reasons, taking a break from sex with others and/or yourself can be healthy, and even serve to reignite a declining libido. However, it’s important not to cut yourself off from all forms of intimacy and physical contact.

## Sexual partners

There are myriad reasons why people have no or less sex, such as mental health<sup>2</sup>, body image issues or just nerves. As a whole, our report showed that **those who had sex had on average three sexual partners in the past 18 months.** This figure could be linked to the rules that were in place in the UK at the time, which encouraged people to form social bubbles, effectively cutting them off from being able to find new sex partners. When split across age ranges, Gen Z (age 18-24) stood out; having had on average five sex partners.

## One-night stands

In LELO’s 2020 sex report, Gen Z had the least one-night-stands (52%) and the same applies in 2022, though this figure has increased somewhat. **Those aged 65+ had the most one-night-stands over the past 18 months,** with nine in ten (92%) having had one or more. As a whole, 61% of Brits had just one sexual partner in 2021-22.

*“I have had much less sex in the past year and with three different sexual partners, one of which was a one-night-stand,” a cisgender straight woman, aged 35, from London, told us. “At the height of the pandemic, I didn’t want to go near anyone and it took me ages to even consider kissing. That feeling disappeared over time but was replaced by a nervousness about my sexual prowess. On the other hand, lockdown saw my self-pleasure skyrocket. Having never really masturbated much in the past, I used it as an outlet and an opportunity to get to know my own body.”*

## Three steps to re-igniting your sex life post-pandemic

Like anything, sex requires practice and not just physically. **LELO’s survey found the biggest factor that negatively affects Brits’ sex lives is mental health (51%).** In other words, if you are feeling low, anxious or depressed, it makes complete sense that you don’t want to have sex or masturbate. Though, ironically, a 2021 study into the benefits of sexual activity showed that **those who were sexually active during lockdown experienced less anxiety**<sup>3</sup>. This makes sense as kissing, hugging, cuddling and having sex releases the ‘love hormone’ oxytocin.

But what should you do if you’re feeling out of practice in finding a sexual partner and/or taking the first step back into the bedroom? We share some advice on how to get back out there.

### 1 YOU SET THE PACE

Regardless if you’re in a relationship, dating or single, the most important thing is to take it slow while also encouraging yourself to step out of your comfort zone. What this can look like is individual to your needs; perhaps it’s downloading a dating app and taking a few swipes, striking up a conversation with a stranger or adjusting your mindset. We often make the mistake of only considering what our head is telling us but take cues from your body too; it’s an excellent indicator for what feels right or doesn’t. Like when you get a ‘flutter’ in your stomach when meeting someone you like or when our muscles tense up as we take a step that feels a bit too much, too soon. Tune into yourself. If you’re not sure where to start, it may help to write a list of personal goals and use these as a guide, but start small.

### 2 TALK TO SOMEONE

Spending extended periods alone can impact social skills and make you feel as if you’re the only one going through a ‘dry spell’. It’s important to talk about your emotions. This is easier said than done for many people, especially if we consider LELO’s research found over **half of Brits (55%) don’t feel comfortable discussing masturbation** with their friends. There is nothing shameful about pleasure and it’s only by talking that we can tackle this taboo. Reach out to a friend you trust and start a conversation. If talking about the juicy details feels too private, focus on your emotions.

### 3 PLAY BY YOURSELF BEFORE INVITING OTHERS

**In the past 18 months, one in ten Brits have used sex toys more,** which is encouraging news when you consider the many benefits from masturbation such as reduced stress, improved sleep and orgasms. A great way to breathe life back into your sex life is to invest in a sex toy. It’s recommended that you read up on the product you choose, as these have different functions to offer different experiences. As an example, LELO’s SILA Cruise is a clitoral massager with a gentle wave motion, while the SORAYA Wave is a rabbit massager that mimics the sensation you get from a partner’s fingers. Your pleasure should be a priority, not an afterthought.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8776387/#CR4>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6912629/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7584428/>

## Sex and dating

It's not just our sex lives that have changed over the past two years. How we date is also constantly evolving. In a Stylist article<sup>4</sup> titled Dating in 2022: all the dating terms you need to know, from 'wokefishing' to 'liberdating', relationship expert Tina Wilson describes a term dubbed Coronesty (Coronavirus meets honesty) and says that singles have "lost their patience for polite chit-chat". This could indicate a positive move towards more honest communication.

The 'Coronesty' formula can be applied to those who are or were coupled-up in this time period too, with the pandemic inadvertently pushing people into evaluating their relationships and sharing their emotional needs. As an example,

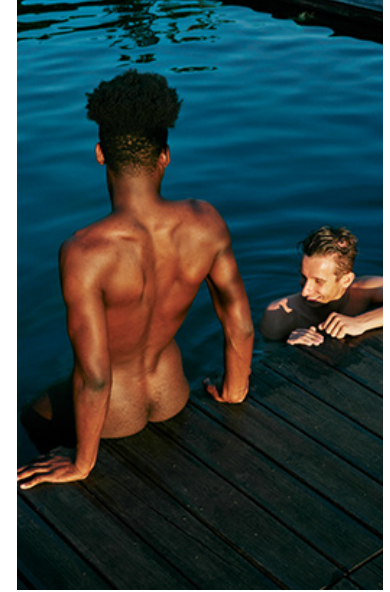
David\* and Emma\* from London, both in their 30s, saw their long-term relationship end a few months ago. They moved in together during lockdown. At first, things were going smoothly but Emma soon suffered severe depression and anxiety, with symptoms heightened by living with her partner. Her priorities also shifted due to lockdown, as she wanted to be closer to her family, who live in the north. David has family in the south and equally wanted to stay near to them, with the couple unable to find a suitable compromise. David also struggled with not being able to socialise with friends and not having a private space to unwind in. The chain of events led to a breakdown in intimacy, sex and romance, and the pair went their separate ways.



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stylist.co.uk/relationships/dating-love/dating-app-terms-trends-bumble-badoo/622419>

## Where we look to meet sexual partners

Findings from LELO's survey revealed another interesting development that links back to the pandemic, with more than **two in ten people saying it is harder to find a sexual partner post-lockdown**. There has been a noticeable shift from offline to online interaction, though it's worth noting this was during the height of the UK's pandemic, which saw a spike in virtual dating as reported by companies such as Match.com<sup>5</sup> (which also owns Tinder and Hinge). It remains to be seen if this trend will continue, with more research required down the line. The table below outlines where participants looked to meet a sexual partner in 2022 versus 2020.



Where do you look to meet sexual partners	2022	2020
Friends of friends	30%	42%
The pub/clubs	24%	37%
Dating apps	27%	26%
Work	14%	23%
Facebook	9%	10%
Instagram	8%	7%
Gym/sports club	7%	7%
Place of study	6%	13%
TikTok	4%	3%
LinkedIn	2%	1.7%
Other	24%	14%

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/f970c353-65e3-4515-a179-e94b89ce3775>

## Sex and social media

In 2020, LELO's in-house sex expert, Kate Moyle, touched on the connection between sex and social media including how people's social behaviours adjust to the environment they find themselves in, predicting that meeting online would become the most common way of finding a new partner. This trend is now further supported by our most recent statistics.

There was a substantial increase in Gen Z, millennials and Gen X using social media as a preferred medium to meet sexual partners. However, the choice of site varied depending on the age group. Gen Z favoured Instagram (16%) and TikTok (9%), while Facebook took the top spot among those aged 25-65+.

Gen Z's preference for finding sexual partners through video-centered platforms like TikTok is supported by general social media findings for the same group; Sprout's 2021 social index<sup>6</sup> says 87% of this generation have spent more time on social media in the past year.

When split across genders, nearly three in ten men (29%) used a social media site for dating or hook-ups, compared to women (17%). Those who identified as 'other' used social media to meet sexual partners the most (50%) but it is worth noting this group makes up of 0.2% of total survey participants.

## How to be safe when finding sexual partners on social media

Social media can be a great way to meet new people but it's crucial to look after yourself when chatting across a screen. Dating apps and social media sites usually have some protection measures in place, such as confirming people's identities with a valid ID or verifying accounts with a 'tick'. However, it is still recommended that you



take steps to protect yourself. Before arranging to meet up for the first time, ensure that the person you are speaking to is who they say they are. An easy way to do this is to have a video call or request a photo of them doing something specific (such as showing three fingers while smiling). When meeting up, do so in a public space and tell a friend the address and time, and consider sharing your date's account info with them too. This is even more crucial if you are planning to have a one-night-stand with someone you met online and it is highly recommended that you still meet them in public first, and not give out your home address.

Additionally, never share personal information such as bank account numbers or other identifying details on social media. In 2020 alone, the FBI reported 23,000 people having been catfished online<sup>7</sup>, sending scammers a collective sum of \$600 million.

# WHY BRITS AREN'T HAVING SEX



- Mental health, including anxiety **51%**
- Low self-esteem or body image **45%**
- Tiredness **33%**
- Looking after children **17%**
- Ageing **15%**
- Work pressures **12%**
- Performance anxiety **10%**

<sup>6</sup> [https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-use-by-generation-en\\_gb/](https://sproutsocial.com/insights/social-media-use-by-generation-en_gb/)  
<sup>7</sup> <https://morningconsult.com/2022/01/27/catfishing-fake-online-personas-scams-polling/>

## Tips for boosting a low libido

Experiencing a low sex drive is very common<sup>8</sup>. In 2020, analysing the results of a questionnaire with just over 12,000 participants, a team of researchers at the University of Glasgow<sup>9</sup> discovered that 34% of women and 15% of men didn't want to have sex. The subjects, all of whom were from the UK, were aged between 16-74 and included both singles and people in relationships. If you're struggling to get in the mood for sex, intimacy or solo play, we have some tips on how to boost your sex drive.



## Set the scene

Our sexual mood is affected by our environment. We encourage you to play with yourself whenever the mood takes your fancy but it can also be helpful to treat the moment as a special occasion by planning a few details in advance. Examples of easy ways to set the scene include changing the bedsheets, using mood lighting or candles, putting on your favourite music etc. Or perhaps you prefer to masturbate in the bathroom or hunched over the kitchen sink? You are the captain of this ship, so steer it wherever you choose.



## Tune out the world

Knowing that someone might catch you enjoying your body (like a parent or friend walking into the room) can add to the excitement. However, receiving endless app notifications and texts on your phone could serve to disrupt your solo play. Put the phone in a different room or turn it off altogether. If the idea of not being reachable makes you feel stressed, schedule a set time for your playtime like you would any other appointment. That way, you're telling your mind that this is an important booking that deserves your attention. It also means you can tell housemates or partners that you have a meeting and don't want to be bothered. You could also invite them to join you.

## Make use of sex tools

Vibrators, dildos, suction toys, clitoris-focused toys, BDSM goodies, audio books and visual porn; these days, there is a smorgasbord of helpful tools at our sexual disposal. With most retailers, including LELO, now online, you can get products delivered to your door in a discreet package. Do your research and see which items excite you, if even just a tingle that can potentially build into something more. Try not to focus on orgasms; instead, simply get to know your body. If you are with a partner, you can also go to a live sex show or visit a sex club but we recommend starting on a smaller scale and working your way up to a public sex setting, as this can add pressure to an already sensitive situation.



## Mix things up

If you're in a relationship, it's easy to get stuck in a rut both romantically and sexually, which in turn can affect your sex drive or attraction to your partner. A good way to spice things up is to break existing patterns or evaluate which parts of your sex life you enjoy the most, and then find space to add in new activities. As an example, if you and your sexual partner have a tendency to head straight for the missionary position, suggest trying new sex positions for a month. You could also use a sex guide for inspiration or alternatively compile a list of your fantasies together and work your way through them.

## Focus on intimacy, not orgasms

When intimacy between two people breaks down, the urge to have sex often does too. To reignite the feeling of arousal, take penetrative sex (or all sex) off the menu completely. Set ground rules for what you can and can't do, focus on getting to know each other again while building up sexual tension. A few examples include organising a weekly date or activity that you haven't tried before or simply making time to cuddle, without intending to have sex. If you decide that some forms of sex are on the table, watching a partner masturbate can also be a thrilling experience that brings you closer together.

## Don't forget to talk

Aside from the more practical tips on this list, the most important thing to do is talking, because it can help you figure out what might be the cause of your declining sex drive. If speaking to your partner or a friend is too difficult, consider seeking help from a sex therapist, psychologist or other medical professional. Bear in mind that loss of libido can be caused by psychological and physical issues (such as menopause, erectile dysfunction, hormone levels) or a combination of factors.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/loss-of-libido/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.gla.ac.uk/researchinstitutes/healthwellbeing/research/mrccsocialandpublichealthsciencesunit/sharingourevidence/news/headline\\_704279\\_en.html](https://www.gla.ac.uk/researchinstitutes/healthwellbeing/research/mrccsocialandpublichealthsciencesunit/sharingourevidence/news/headline_704279_en.html)

# MASTURBATION



## Top 10 reasons Brits masturbate

- Sexual pleasure, **59%**
- To release sexual tension, **45%**
- To relieve stress, **35%**
- To relax, **33%**
- Boredom, **22%**
- To help with sleep, **22%**
- Because their partner isn't there, **20%**
- To get to know their body better, **9%**
- To improve performance, **7%**
- Pain relief, **4%**

In most categories, our report found people's reasons for masturbating to be fairly similar, barring one area; 100% of people who identify as 'other' said they masturbate for pleasure, compared to 63% of women and 55% of men (however, it's worth noting the sample group was considerably smaller).

## Masturbation and shame

Masturbation has long been considered a taboo topic. As a society, we have made great strides in helping people own their pleasure but many still struggle to discuss it. We've already mentioned that **half of Brits (55%) don't feel comfortable discussing masturbation but one in ten also feel embarrassed to do so**. Meanwhile people in relationships (including polyamorous couples) were found to masturbate more than single people.

Author and sex historian, Kate Lister, tells us that feelings of shame are nothing new; in fact, they are linked to the complicated history that humans have with masturbation and it's something we're still working through. "Shame about masturbation has a very long history indeed," she says. "The idea that masturbation was bad for you arose in the 18th century with the publication of Samuel Tissot's L'Onanisme in 1760. Tissot and a host of other medical experts genuinely believed masturbation was terribly bad for you and weakened the body. If you've ever heard the rumour that masturbation causes you to go blind, you can thank an 18th century physician. This nonsense has taken a very long time to shake off and doctors were still warning about the dangers of masturbation into the 20th century. So it's no wonder we still have a lot of issues around self love! We're undoing hundreds of years of anti-pleasure propaganda."



Women especially have long been discouraged from talking about self-pleasure or enjoying their bodies for themselves. Historically, much of this has been due to the information provided around female pleasure being at best incorrect and at worst, not available – and, more often than not, it is written by men. Research is also severely lacking in the area; as one author of an article published in Clinical Anatomy points out when discussing the clitoris, "while its significance has been reported for hundreds of years, no complete anatomical description was available until recently"<sup>10</sup>. Meanwhile, sex education taught to children and young adults in schools is severely lacking when it comes to discussing sexual pleasure and other key topics like consent, though this has improved in recent years.

Despite the vast differences in how self-pleasure has been viewed for men and women (not leaving out non-binary people, however research in this area is still new), our study revealed that, in 2022, **there is very little difference in how men and women feel about masturbation.**

♡ When asked about discussing masturbation within their social circle, 10% of men and 12% of women said they feel embarrassed to do so, while 44% (applies to both genders) feel masturbation is a private topic.

♡ Gen Z is most likely to open up about self-pleasure (27%), with millennials following close behind (24%).

♡ Least likely to talk about masturbation are those aged 55+.



## The masturbation gap

There is no clear-cut answer to where masturbation shame or guilt stems from for any one person as it is an individual experience; however, it can be linked to historical attitudes, childhood, social environments, sex education, physical conditions, self-confidence/body image issues etc.

What has been proven though is that **women are still, generally speaking and supported by recent findings, less likely to masturbate compared to men.** In recent years, the media and sex industry as a whole has focused heavily on “closing the orgasm gap” that exists between men and women, something sex expert Kate Moyle explored in our 2020 report, where she reported that 70% of men were comfortable masturbating in front of a partner, compared to just 40% of women.

In 2022, we investigate a different side to this issue: the “masturbation gap”. As previously mentioned, research about self-pleasure is severely lacking and more studies are required, however, there is recent evidence to support this issue. In 1993, Leitenberg et al. presented information on masturbation discrepancy between genders, sharing that twice as many men as women had ever masturbated, and men enjoyed three times more self-pleasure time<sup>11</sup>. In 2014, writer Mona Chalabi shared an infographic based off Indiana University’s National Survey Of Sexual Health And Behavior, revealing that 13.5% of men (in the US) masturbate four or more times per week, compared to 1.5% of women<sup>12</sup>.



## Women embrace self-pleasure

In an exciting development that could indicate that the masturbation gap is closing, more women are now embracing their self-pleasure and using sex tech to enhance their sexual experiences, with **16% of women using sex toys more in the past 18 months.** More women than men also use sex toys in general; 50% vs 32% respectively. Other figures suggest women are more likely to discuss masturbation (18% vs 15%) though men feel more comfortable doing so. **Around one in ten women also prefer to masturbate during sex with a partner.** Looking at masturbation habits across the UK, **Derry takes the top spot for masturbating the most during 2021-2022.**



## The mutual masturbation boom

As sexual attitudes develop, sex trends follow. Over the past decade, as stigma around self-pleasure slowly falls away, conversations around sex positivity and orgasms have stimulated a curiosity in masturbation. In 2022, according to our survey, mutual masturbation – touching yourself with a partner, whether offline or online – is enjoying a special moment, with findings indicating two in ten people want to try this with a sexual partner. Of those who already indulge in co-play, 26% do so often and 5% prefer it to sex. **Nearly one in ten Brits also find it easier to orgasm through mutual masturbation (9%).** It’s highly likely that this development is tied to the increase in virtual reality dating, and phone and video sex during the pandemic. Millions of people not able to touch their partners due to physical distance still needed to find ways to connect and be intimate: mutual masturbation became an obvious solution to this problem.

Jamie Finch, host of the sex podcast Let’s Talk About Sex, Jamie, tells us about his own experience with mutual masturbation: “I’ve never successfully done mutual masturbation in person. I have tried it but, for me, the idea of masturbating with a partner and watching them do it at the same time goes to a level of vulnerability that I’m not comfortable with. It’s interesting because I don’t have an issue with other acts that many people consider intimate, like anal sex. I’m not surprised that more people are trying mutual masturbation or want to do so. I believe lockdown is a big reason. As an avid ‘sexter’, when you’re sending nudes, it eventually escalates to video calls and that’s mutual masturbation in the virtual sense, which is probably the closest a lot of us came to sex during the pandemic. It’s also the closest kind of intimacy you can have online.”



<sup>11</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8476336/#:~:text=Despite%20the%20efforts%20in%20the,masturbate%20much%20less%20than%20men.>

<sup>12</sup> <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/dear-mona-i-masturbate-more-than-once-a-day-am-i-normal/>

## Resources on sex

The Sexual Wellness Sessions podcast with Kate Moyle

The Surprising Truth About Desire, a TED talk with Dr Karen Gurney

Sex Ed: A Guide For Adults, a book and podcast with Ruby Rare

Let's Talk About Sex, Jamie with Jamie Finch

## How to introduce co-play with a sexual partner

For those intrigued by mutual masturbation but not sure where to start, we talk to sex and relationship expert and author, Annabelle Knight, who shares some of her top advice on how to introduce co-play with a sexual partner.

## Don't be afraid to talk

"Keep the communication flowing. Not only will this guide you towards a more fulfilling experience, it will also keep consent and pleasure at the foreground," she says. If you feel embarrassed about asking your partner to play alongside you, start by simply discussing it as a fantasy and taking physical touch off the table. Lie flat on the bed together, close your eyes and tell each other what you'd like to do. If you're feeling bold, ask your partner to watch but not touch, and this might inspire them to eventually join in and play with themselves too. However, as Annabelle recommends, keep talking so you both feel safe and comfortable.

## Use sex toys to take the experience to a new level

"If you fancy mixing things up, choose a toy each. I'd always go for something petite and discrete so that you'll still be able to get a decent view of the action. For anyone with a clitoris, a bullet vibrator would be

perfect and for those with penises then a clear and textured masturbation sleeve is a must... just don't forget a good quality water based lube too!," Annabelle says. As you might've guessed, at LELO, we like sex toys (a lot) and they can be very helpful; our survey revealed **28% of women always or sometimes need a sex toy to help them reach climax**, while for men this figure stood at 15%.

## Build up to the moment

"Watch or listen to some erotica together. This will help to heighten your sexual state and increase your pleasure potential. Even the act of choosing something together can be a huge turn-on and helps to build positive anticipation. Ethical porn sites such as Frolic Me are a great place to start, as are audio porn platforms like Girl On the Net's blog site," Annabelle says. You could also read erotic novels out loud in bed, there are plenty of free e-books online, or listen to music that puts you in the mood. Whatever kind of erotica you go with, choose it together so that you both enjoy it.

## Remember to include intimacy

"Indulge in some after-play. This is like foreplay for the soul. Talking about what just happened, what worked for you, and what you'd like to do next time with your partner or partners is a hugely bonding experience, it helps to increase levels of emotional security within the relationship and is a great way to improve the quality of your sex life together in general," Annabelle says. In addition to checking in with your partner after mutual masturbation, tune into each other's needs during this act as well. Many people experience nerves when introducing something new in the bedroom and you might find that it's harder to climax until you're fully comfortable in the situation (or you may not climax at all, which is normal – not everyone orgasms during sex or masturbation). Let go of your expectations and focus on the sensations instead.

# SEX, GENDER AND SEXUALITY



It's only in recent years that people have felt comfortable and safe enough to experiment openly with their sexuality, thanks to a global cultural shift in how we view the human sexual experience (though we must mention that this applies predominantly to the west, with LGBTQ+ people still persecuted in certain parts of the world)<sup>13</sup>. Our research shows that more people are testing the boundaries of their sexuality; men in particular – nearly **one in three men (28%) who identify as straight had a same sex experience in the last 18 months** or are open to it. Looking at generations, **35% of Gen Z had a same-sex experience in the same time period**. Sharing some feedback to their answers, several previously straight survey participants said they have "accepted" their bisexuality in recent months, while others said they are "more open to trying things". One person said they were previously lesbian but now identified as straight.

<sup>13</sup><https://www.humandignitytrust.org/lgbt-the-law/map-of-criminalisation/>

In this same time period:

- 18% of women have had a same sex experience and 9% are open to it
- 3% of people across all genders want to change their sexuality, with Gen Z the highest percentile in this category (7%).

The feedback from participants, partnered with the statistics, shows that sexuality isn't linear and there is no time limit to decide what, or who, you desire. However, that doesn't mean that the prospect of experimentation isn't scary; it can bring great joy but it can also leave people grappling with feelings of guilt, shame or confusion as they navigate their emotions. It's important to remember that you don't need to define yourself or your experience if you don't want to, nor do you owe anyone an explanation for your preferences; whether it be changing your sexuality or choosing to forgo a label altogether because those available don't feel right to you.

Offering input on LELO's findings, a 24-year-old cisgender bisexual man who came out at 15, told us: "When I was younger, I worried about being gay because of my own internalised homophobia. There's still a stigma attached to it, especially for men who identify as bisexual. That Gen Z is the age group that has experienced the biggest 'change', for lack of a better word, doesn't surprise me in the slightest since this is often the time where we have our first sexual experiences, if not a bit earlier. On the other hand, I have so many friends in their 20s and beyond who identify as straight but still have sex with the same gender. Despite enjoying sex with another gender, because they can't see themselves romantically attracted to these same people, they conflate the two and split them into separate categories. From my experience, although many parts of the world have opened up to the LGBTQ+ community, men in particular have an internalised fear about being attracted to other men due to their own shame or worries about how people will react. The pandemic definitely shook up the sexual and romantic world, changing how we have sex and who with."

## Gen Z and gender identity

When looking at gender identity, we should differentiate between identity and expression. According to the UK's leading LGBTQ+ charity, Stonewall, these have fundamental differences; for instance, not all non-binary people are also trans, nor do all trans people consider themselves non-binary. Explaining this further, they state: "Gender identity refers to a person's clear sense of their own gender. This is not something which is governed by a person's physical attributes. Gender expression is how you express yourself and just like the rest of society, non-binary people have all sorts of ways to express themselves and their identity. They can present as masculine, feminine or in another way and this can change over time, but none of these expressions make their identity any less valid or worthy of respect."<sup>14</sup>

Referring to LELO's research, there were some key findings for Gen Z in particular. When asked if/how their gender identity had 'changed' over the past 18 months, 15% of 18-24-year-olds said they had either changed their gender identification or wanted to do so. A person's gender identity and expression is individual to them, and it's crucial to let others define themselves in their own way and to respect what this means to them, such as their choice of pronouns, gendered or non-gendered titles (Miss/Mrs/Mr vs Mx) and being an ally to the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.



## Advice

Experimentation isn't just about sexuality or labels; it can simply be about embracing your desires and fantasies, alone or with someone else. Afraid to dip your toe in? We speak to LELO's sex and relationships expert, Kate Moyle, to get some advice on how to begin.

"Sexual experimentation should be defined by you, and not by what you think it 'should' look or be like," she says. "Too many people get caught up in expectations or narratives that may not be helpful for them, when sexual experimentation can be whatever you want it to be. People can feel intimidated by the idea that they have to go to extremes, when in fact experimentation can be anything that is you breaking away from your usual routine and can be as simple as the idea of trying something different every time that you have sex, e.g., a change of position, using lube or not, introducing a toy, changing your location or clothing.

"If you are dipping your toe into experimenting then you can start to think about the dynamics that interest you for example power play, by one of you wearing an eye-mask or blindfold and allowing the other to be in control of touch and teasing - you don't have to jump into situations fully the first time you try them, but you can immerse yourself as slowly or as quickly as you like.

"If you don't know where to start, a good place can be trying a sex menu or a yes/no/ maybe list so that you know you're starting on the same page of what you want to try, and know each other's hard no's. If you're single then there are so many amazing products and apps aimed at improving sexual wellness including audio erotica and sensual stories like on Ferly App, and female-friendly sex-positive pornography such as by Erika Lust. Exploring your own body, sexuality and sensations doesn't require a partner; you can explore your erotic imagination and play with the senses."



<sup>14</sup> <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/10-ways-step-ally-non-binary-people#:~:text=Let's%20start%20with%20the%20basics,while%20others%20reject%20them%20entirely.>

## Mental health & body image

In earlier chapters, we reported some of the reasons why Brits aren't having sex, including the biggest factor: declining mental health – with 51% of Brits saying this affects their sex life negatively. The figure has risen substantially compared to previous years; in LELO's 2020 report, this number stood at 30%. It's no coincidence that this time period falls in line with the pandemic, which, as we've already discussed, had a strong impact on people's overall well-being. It is further supported by concerning research by the mental health charity, Mind, which revealed that one in three people of 12,000 participants found their mental health had worsened following the pandemic<sup>15</sup>. This is most likely only the tip of the iceberg, when considering this study only included people with existing mental health problems.

Mental health and body image are often closely linked and so it is unsurprising that nearly **half of Brits (44%) also told LELO their sexual well-being had been impacted by their body image or low self-esteem**. Anxiety and depression, among other mental health conditions, can leave you feeling lethargic, restless and having a difficult time sleeping<sup>16</sup>, making it harder to look after your body or making healthier choices with food, socialising etc. When you're suffering an internal struggle, small acts such as making the bed or even showering can feel like huge mountains to climb, while sex can trigger vulnerabilities. A person's negative thoughts can get compounded by how they feel about your body, and it goes round and round and round. Here's the good news: there is a way to stop this vicious cycle. The first step is asking for help when you need it, regardless if that is from your own social circle or a professional, and acknowledging your emotions. We all go through stages of feeling more or less attractive and when we are in a negative headspace, it's all too easy to be mean to ourselves, which is why turning to someone else can help jolt us out of this mindset. These people can also remind you of how amazing you are, whatever your body shape.

With lockdowns shutting fitness spaces such as gyms and confining people to their homes for months on end, it became harder for some people to remain active. Now that the UK has opened up again, having removed all Covid-19 restrictions, we recommend trying to get back to your previous routine or even giving new hobbies a go. It's not about forcing yourself into the gym five times a week to look attractive for sex but to give yourself some structure and a plan, and aid you in getting back to a point where you feel happy in yourself and your body.

A word of warning; if you are concerned about a partner's health, be careful how and when you bring this up. Avoid descriptive phrases about their body and focus on their well-being, not their appearance. Offer to do activities together or make meals at home instead of going out and avoid or cut out alcohol, which can contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety.

- ♡ One in three women (34%) said their negative body image and low self-esteem (28%) impacted their sex life.
- ♡ Among men, tiredness (24%), ageing (19%) and anxiety (17%) ranked as the biggest reasons for not wanting to have sex.
- ♡ More than seven in ten people who identify as non-binary or 'other' said tiredness was the biggest negative factor on their sex life (75%).
- ♡ Comparing singles vs those in relationships, there were few differences, barring one; **almost half of Brits living with a partner listed tiredness as the biggest factor to a declining sex life** or libido (45%). For singles, this stood at 20%.

## How to talk to your partner if you have different sex drives



If you are in a relationship or dating, having different sex drives can seem like an impossible situation but this needn't be the case. At the risk of repeating ourselves: talking is key. But do so in a safe and loving environment (rather than blurting out your respective feelings during an argument or in the bedroom).

Kate Moyle adds a few extra tips, saying: "In terms of talking to your partner, use affirmative and positive language. The minute you start the conversation with anything that resembles criticism, your partner will be feeling defensive and will respond in that way. How we understand desire plays a huge part in this, as when we start to learn that it can be triggered and responsive rather than that it's always spontaneous, then we can start to take control of the situations and create opportunities to trigger desire."

Neither partner's needs take priority; this isn't about who 'wins' (sex is not a scoreboard) but about having understanding and empathy for each other, and working together to find a solution that you're both happy with.

"Sex is not a drive," says Kate, "it's a motivation so the key is working out how to make it work for you, and therefore motivate you – in simple terms, if you enjoy what you are doing, then you are going to want to experience it more. This has to be combined with a conscious effort to make the opportunities for it to happen in. Like everything else in life the changes won't just magically happen on their own, and again this pushes back on the idea that 'spontaneous sex is best' the focus should be on pleasure and fun, and it doesn't matter if you have blocked out an evening to spend time together and that sex happens then, because what it actually shows is that you are prioritising that side of your relationship and that can only be a good thing."

It might feel uncomfortable discussing your libido and sexual pleasure but know that you are not alone in feeling like this. We recommend making use of online resources (such as those in our chapter on masturbation) or you may also find it helpful to speak to a relationships counsellor or sex therapist.

<sup>15</sup><https://www.mind.org.uk/coronavirus-we-are-here-for-you/coronavirus-research/>  
<sup>16</sup><https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/anxiety-disorder-signs/>

## Porn habits

Porn can often be a controversial issue to talk about. On the one hand, it is a useful tool for people who want to explore their fantasies and boundaries, while on the other, there are problematic areas in the industry that need to be addressed. This is also why more research into porn and sexual attitudes is needed. Our study unearthed some very interesting discoveries; firstly, **Brits watch a lot of porn**. Four in 10 participants watch porn regularly and of those, 16% have consumed more porn in the past 18 months, with men doing so more than women (21% vs 12%).

**Of the 39% who don't watch porn at all, over half are women.** With the industry catering primarily to the male gaze, it is understandable that women are consuming less of a product that wasn't designed with their needs or pleasure in mind. In a positive move, there has been an emergence of 'ethical' porn in recent years, with female film producers carving out a new niche of porn focused on female pleasure, as well as more realistic (and consent-focused) scenarios.

### Other interesting porn habit findings:

- Gen Z has seen the biggest increase in porn consumption (29%).
- Gen X (65+) is most likely not to watch porn (58%).



# SEX TECH, ROBOTS AND VIRTUAL REALITY PORN



## What is VR porn?

Sex technology, or sex tech, has seen some exciting developments in recent decades, including across the porn industry where experts are predicting the future to be in virtual reality (VR). A forecast by top analyst firm Piper Jaffray predicts that the VR porn business will be worth \$1bn by as soon as 2025. Meanwhile LELO's research discovered that **39% of men would like to or have tried VR porn**. Comparatively, this figure stands at 16% for women.

Describing what this emerging sex tech entails, Daniel Goldin, vice president at Dreamcam, which offers live VR streaming with adult cam models, says it can provide a more "interactive" sexual experience. "Porn isn't a spiritless picture you see on the flat screen anymore – now it's a process. There are a ton of benefits VR porn provides. One such benefit is that it enhances your family life, granting you the opportunity to cheat without actually 'cheating'. It does not depend on one's physical traits but creates an all-suitable virtual sex experience. Recent studies show VR porn could be even considered a sort of psychological support for people with higher anxiety and depression."

VR porn could allow sexual partners a new way to connect with each other, while simultaneously incorporating advanced tech such as dual pleasure sex toys, like LELO's TIANI, which offers wireless control. VR also opens up opportunities to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. However, it's important to acknowledge the limitations of VR in its current state<sup>17</sup>. As an example, the technology cannot yet replicate sign language fully and not enough research has been done in the area to determine long-term psychological effects on users.

3D animator Rosie Summers has created incredible virtual universes, from forest scenes to galactic art, and even used the medium to make powerful statements on normalising periods for a project with Indian transmedia artist and activist Poulomi Basu. For her, VR's greatest asset



is its "ability to deliver a greater feeling of immersion and presence, allowing people to connect across the physical confines of their own world". She also points out it could potentially help people dealing with gender dysphoria.

"This [VR] could allow users who are otherwise housebound to go on virtual dates to places and experience they never could do in the real world," Rosie says. "Avatars also let users present themselves in a different way to their physical selves, which could allow them to be who they truly want to be."

## Sex robots and artificial intelligence: the future of sex tech

Another growing area in sex tech is artificial intelligence. Sex robots have already been around for a few years; like Henry, the first sex robot designed for female consumers in mind (though he could serve the same purpose for male or non-binary buyers) and Harmony 3.0, both released by a company called Realbotix in 2018 and 2017 respectively. Technologically-speaking, the sex robots are fairly advanced; Henry can recite poetry and tell jokes and has a customisable silicone penis, while Harmony's features include a self-lubricating vagina and touch sensors that allows her to react with movement and sound. However, this is still new technology that is constantly being improved, and there is not yet an affordable option for the average consumer.

We are likely still a long way off seeing these products sold in mainstream retailers. Looking at demand however, there is certainly curiosity for AI sex tech as **our research shows two in ten people**

**(22%) would consider using a sex robot.** Despite only 39 of 4,000 participants saying they have already used a sex robot, this is still an indication of growing demand, considering Henry and Harmony can set you back £5,000+.

Nearly **three times more men would consider using a sex robot compared to women**, while people who identify as bicurious, bisexual or fluid are more open to the possibility of trying one, compared to people who are straight.

Putting the technology aside, there are ethical and psychological impacts<sup>18</sup> of sex robots to consider too. A research article titled The Ethics of Sex Robots<sup>19</sup> features a compelling argument<sup>20</sup> by law professor Jeannie Suk Gersen, who states "In the context of sex robots, the idea of forced servitude is especially disturbing because, for many people, the sexual realm is a site of our deepest ideals about personal autonomy and personal relationships." We should also consider how sex robots might impact our social and cultural behaviour and attitudes. More discussion and research is needed to determine a likely outcome.



<sup>17</sup> <https://www.boia.org/blog/what-the-future-of-virtual-reality-means-for-accessibility>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/17/8924>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348250386\\_The\\_Ethics\\_of\\_Sex\\_Robots](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348250386_The_Ethics_of_Sex_Robots)

<sup>20</sup> <https://columbialawreview.org/content/sex-lex-machina-intimacy-and-artificial-intelligence/>



# CONCLUSION

Reflecting on how the pandemic has changed the UK's sexual landscape, it becomes clear that people are still redefining what this looks like for them individually. Half of Brits (45%) had less sex or gave it up altogether, with a decline in mental health playing a huge role in our collective libido, alongside low self-esteem and a negative body image (45%).

Taking sex with others off the table has however presented some positive developments as many people tuned into their bodies and explored masturbation; women in particular, with 16% using sex toys more, and over half of British women masturbating regularly. We champion self-pleasure for all people, but this is an indicator that the 'masturbation gap' between genders is closing, as historically men have been more comfortable with self-pleasure. Despite this positive movement, stigma around solo play still exists with people reluctant to discuss this openly with friends and partners, though our findings showed an optimistic outlook for the future.

While confined in their homes, more people went online to find sexual partners and virtual dating became the norm, which in turn saw mutual masturbation soar for 26% of Brits, and 9% found it easier to orgasm this way. This shift to online dating and sex, especially among those under 45, influenced how we're meeting sexual partners as well. 'Sliding into DMs' on social media continues to be a growing trend; 18-24s prefer Instagram (16%) and TikTok (9%), while participants aged 24-45 use Facebook the most.

On the whole, the nation is not only having less sex but also doing so with fewer sexual partners, around three per year in all age groups except Gen Z, with 18-24's having had five partners on average. Meanwhile those 65+ have enjoyed one-night-stands the most.

Looking inward saw many people consider their sexuality and gender identity too. Men were at the forefront of this development; 28% who previously identified as straight reported having had a same sex experience or being open towards it, with 35% aged 18-24. In this same age group, 15% reported having 'changed' or wanting to change their gender identity.

Furthermore, the results gave us insight on the future of sex tech such as artificial intelligence, VR porn and sex robots. We still appear to be on the cusp of this emerging science but there's a distinct curiosity for this area of sexuality and hopefully it will serve to further boost sexual well-being and open new ways for pleasure.

Our relationship with our bodies, sex, love and intimacy, is influenced by myriad aspects of our lives – some of which are difficult or impossible to control. However, our sex census findings have revealed just how resilient people are in finding new ways to connect with each other during a crisis and the importance of doing so. Taking the time to delve into our own sexual and mental well-being has been crucial and for many, this has opened up a new understanding of their needs, and allowed them to get to know themselves better.

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