

I felt worn out and unsexy. But

here's how I got my mojo back

Like many women in their forties, **Bridget Harrison** was so exhausted by the demands of work and family life that she was rarely in the mood for sex. So she went on a £3,000 'sensual healing' retreat

I have lost my mojo. Five years of mummy-toddler groups and dashing to the school gate in an anorak with unwashed hair have obliterated my inner Monroe. Add to that a hectic family life, where the definition of a bedroom treat has become an early night with the Sunday papers spread across the duvet, and you get the picture.

It's not that I don't really enjoy sex when I get round to it, it's more that it's usually the furthest thing from my mind. Sometimes I delve into an erotic novel to try to get in the mood, or I summon up a favourite fantasy. Most of the time when I go to bed, I put my head on the pillow, start stressing about all I need to do tomorrow, then instantly fall asleep.

It wasn't like this ten years ago. In my early thirties I felt sexy. I craved sex. The idea that I wouldn't do it every night with a boyfriend was unthinkable. When alone in the house during the day, I'd get all tingly and nip upstairs for a quick session with *Cassandra's Conflict*, my favourite Black Lace story. When my husband and I first got together we once lay naked in each other's arms, incredulous at a statistic that most married couples only had sex once a month. How could they resist, we wondered. My predicament now, however, isn't so much about the actual number of nights I have sex, it's about my lack of need for it, about how I feel as a woman. I've lost my sexual energy.

When I talk to fellow mothers in their early forties it seems the lack of midlife mojo is a common problem. One friend told me that when she and her husband recently went away on a "romantic" weekend without their children, they actually made a pact before-

Bridget Harrison at home with her sons



“I don't want sex to become another thing on the 'must-do' list”

hand not to have sex. "I didn't want the pressure of it hanging over us, that we'd have to do it because we were in a hotel room," she told me. Another says she only feels like having sex when she's drunk. She calls it "booze passion". The rest of the time she feels too tired and self-conscious that her body has spread and slumped since she had children.

My post-children body doesn't look too different, but it certainly feels different. Before, it was a symbol of my sense of self, one I liked to dress in sassy clothes, slather in sweet-smelling body cream, wax, give pleasure to. Nowadays it is simply the engine that keeps the careering train of family life on the track. It is stuck in jeans because there's no time in the morning to plan an outfit. My boobs hang in limp, fading bras because I haven't had time to go to John Lewis to get remeasured. Waxing only happens before a holiday.

Losing our spark may be common, but it is worrying. I know of several marriages that have ended because couples gradually stopped having sex, then realised they were just "friends". It's frightening how quickly every conversation becomes about household logistics, often laden with resentment about who has done what. Reconnecting with a bit of raw passion is the antidote to this — but I don't want sex to become yet another thing on the "must-do" list. I want to have sex because I feel sexy. I want to have sex for me. So, to see if it is possible to reignite myself, I've handed myself to two women who have launched Britain's first women-only "sensuality retreat".

Lucy Arrowsmith, a personal trainer who used to swim for Britain, and Vikki van Someren, previously a high-flying commercial director, are on a crusade to help women to reawaken their sensual selves. No, this is not a creepy Tantric sex camp, they stress. Shh... (short for Sensual Healing Harmony) is "time out", where women can get back in touch with their bodies and rebuild confidence.

"Feeling truly sexy isn't about knowing all the moves in bed," says Vikki. "It's about how you hold yourself and the look of confidence in your eye. We've all seen that woman walk in the room who is not especially fit or beautiful, but oh my God, she's got it. That's because she is confident and comfortable in herself. We want that for every single woman out there."

This pair believe that far too many women are missing out on their full potential, or have let it fizzle out. "As a personal trainer, I'd often hear women talking about how they didn't feel sensual any more," says Lucy. "They'd tell me how they no longer felt connected to themselves or their partner. Many dreaded sex or saw it as a chore."

Today, she observes, many women attempt to address their body issues or lack of confidence by trying to lose weight or by having surgery. "But all this can be quite superficial; it doesn't get to the bottom of how they feel inside."

Lucy and Vikki, both 39, are earnest and girly when they greet me at the door of a pretty Georgian manor house in Dorset, the secret location for their retreat, where no men are allowed. You get the sense that they really do care about womankind.

"This is not a feminist retreat, more a feminine intervention," says Vikki. "We want to shift the taboos around women's sensuality and for all women to celebrate their feminine power."

The place is certainly a treat to the senses: Jo Malone candles flicker in every room and there are fresh flowers on the windowsills. My bedroom has a giant white bed and a bathroom with a marvellous copper bathtub surrounded by aromatherapy oils. Would all this be any different to a weekend in a posh spa-hotel, though? At £2,900 per retreat, it costs a lot more.

Vikki and Lucy's view is similar to my own experience, that the pressure most women are under to perform and give — as mothers, career women, wives — leaves them no time to give to themselves, or they feel too guilty to do so. They want women to feel supported, nurtured and listened-to again; to be reminded how their bodies feel, and to be helped to shift the "layers of negative energy" stored up from past traumas that make them feel insecure.

Therapy-speak this may be, but they've got a point. Even with no serious trauma behind me, I know that it's when I start to feel isolated and tired out that I become most resentful and withdrawn, and my libido flatlines. Then it's incredible how much better everything feels when my husband and I do get time out together to properly talk and fool around.

On the retreat, women who are mainly professionals with stressful jobs or high-pressure lives get to discuss their anxieties in group sessions with a sexologist, then try a range of cutting-edge treatments that focus on the body as well as the mind. Most are based on breathing techniques, acupressure, acupuncture and massage.

"All the treatments are about moving the negative energy, tension and stress out of your body and getting you back in tune with your senses," says Lucy. Just by doing this your sex life will improve, she believes. "You'll be more present; you'll be able to really feel what is going on, instead of it just being something to do because it's a Saturday morning and your husband wants some action."

Long-time friends, Lucy and Vikki came up with the idea for the retreat after benefiting from similar "body-work" techniques that they had sought out for quite different reasons.

A few years ago Vikki, who grew up with an alcoholic mother, went on an intense therapy course, the Hoffman Process, because despite her high-flying career she felt a wreck inside. The course had a positive effect but left her feeling "stripped bare", she says. So she went looking for treatments that would help her feel good about herself again. "I asked: 'What does Vikki feeling happy, healthy, sensual, really look like?' How do I feel whole?"

Lucy, who started swimming competitively at the age of 9 and gave up at 24 to become a personal trainer, began trying breathing and acupressure techniques after suffering ME for six years. "I was ill and I had lost the sense of who I was. I thought I had to do something about it."

As well as helping her to get well, Lucy began to notice how much more sensual the techniques made her feel. "This had a



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huge impact on my relationship, on everything," she says.

"We are not at all whoo-who or New Age-y," insists Vikki, "but we thought, if these things helped us so much, what could happen if women experienced them all in a short space of time and in a well-thought-out programme?"

Back on the retreat, it takes just a few minutes into our group session with Greta the sexologist before I and two others, both professional women, are dishing the dirt on how we feel: too busy, too stressed out by work, too tired ever to feel horny, so depressed that we rarely initiate sex.

Our problem is that we are low on sexual energy, says Greta. This, she explains, can be drained by many things: anxiety, tiredness, fear, or when we are not comfortable with either our work or home life. So we start by listing things that sap our energy, and also what lifts us. Then we talk about practical steps we could take to lift ourselves — in my case, surprisingly simple things like organising my time better and getting out of the house for a run every day.

Then we turn to the importance of keeping sensuality at the top of our minds. "The more we cultivate our sexual energy, the more it stays alive," she says. "The way to do this is by 'self-pleasuring' or 'making love with ourselves'," she says, explaining that this is just as important when in a relationship as when single. I'll be honest: at this point I get a bit excited and wonder if we might get some practical tips on self-pleasuring. Perhaps a guide to the best vibrators, or recommendations for some decent erotic fiction?

Disappointingly, Greta wants to keep the session on the topic of sensuality rather than sexual technique. Instead we try a yoni meditation (yoni being the Sanskrit term for vagina). This involves imagining light and energy flooding into our pelvic area. It is a great way to bring us "into our bodies", Greta says. I immediately fall asleep. Next day this is followed by some pelvic-floor exercises. Anything else yoni-related we are left to practise in the privacy of our rooms.

It is the individual therapies, however, that have an unexpected effect on me. I try one called Transformational Breathing, which involves an hour of intense breathing while focusing on my pelvis, guided by a lovely "facilitator" who keeps whispering in my ear that it is OK to be me. It sounds corny but I find it strangely reassuring. As I breathe, I feel as though I am hyperventilating and it unleashes in me an avalanche of unexpected emotions. Suddenly I find myself sobbing about having given up my office job to be able to pick up my sons from school. I am clearly more unhappy about this than I had realised. Paradoxically, shortly afterwards, I find myself crying about how lucky I am to spend so much time with my sons. Afterwards I feel extraordinarily relieved and calm.

As I walk back past the flickering candles and fresh flowers to my bedroom, I feel quite "present". My vision is pin-sharp, my hearing up a notch, my body feels all floaty. A couple of hours later, this feeling of calm and heightened awareness is cemented when I have a pre-bedtime "body-work" massage.

This, explains my therapist at the beginning, is less about working the muscles and more about reminding me how lovely my body is and how good my skin feels when being rubbed with oil. It's about relaxing and focusing on myself, of being in the

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Left, the rejuvenated, post-retreat Bridget Harrison; below, Vikki van Someren (left) and Lucy Arrowsmith

moment, she says. It is here, lying naked in candlelight, that I have a revelation. I am just as sexy and womanly as I ever was. Suddenly I realise that it is all the usual anxious chatter in my head about what more I should be achieving professionally that kills my "glow".

I realise that I have been carrying simmering resentment towards my husband and sons caused by this constant insecurity. Now, suddenly, I am struck by how OK it is to be me — a mother at the school gate and a part-time journalist. In fact, I feel extraordinarily lucky.

Back home and this revelation has transformed my whole outlook. I feel unusually content and relaxed. Small things have stopped annoying me. I feel motivated to surround myself with sensual things. I tidy my bedroom, install a Diptyque candle by the bed and dig out my neglected La Prairie body lotion to use after the shower. I even find *Cassandra's Conflict*. Suddenly I want everything to look and feel attractive — especially me. My husband comments several times on how much more cheerful I am. We've started going to bed earlier, without the papers.

So would I say I've refound my mojo? Well yes, I probably would.

Vikki said to me on the retreat something that I rather dismissed as therapy-speak. "When you feel good about yourself and you've got your glow, you're going to have amazing sex — but it's not just about that. You'll have more patience and understanding in all parts of your life."

I have to agree with her; right now I feel pretty upbeat about life.

Of course, it may be hard to keep up this newfound bounce for ever. When it starts to fade, I will remind myself that feeling despondent, detached, unsexy is a state of mind. One that can be reversed.

From £2,900 for a four-day retreat. For more information, visit shhglobal.com

