

Women Speak FOR THEMSELVES

Talking About Sex and Romance In Our Thirties

By Meg

This article is the third in a series about why women of all ages and stages in life need to talk about sex, and why it should be connected to marriage and kids. In our distorted sexual culture, it often feels easier to bow out of these discussions, even with people we hold dear. We can assume that they've heard our perspective before. But an "it doesn't matter" attitude, or an exaggerated modesty, can prevent many women in need from hearing the truth about sex from someone they respect.

It's difficult to talk to single women in their 30s about sex, dating, and marriage. The presumptions are: she's been dating a long time; she knows what she's doing; she will see the conversation as intrusive. As WSFT communications director Kat Talalas mentioned, many women have learned difficult lessons about love, sex, and dating through experiences—their own or their friends'—in their teens and twenties. These experiences, though scarring, have also given women in their thirties more confidence about who they are and what they need in a relationship. So women in their thirties don't often seek input about romantic relationships and sexual activity.

As you can imagine, I echo my colleagues' belief that the truth must not be kept to ourselves. But in order to avoid the perception that one is intruding, as mentioned above, we must meet our sisters where they are in their relationships.

Asking The Right Questions

What has helped me open the discussion on sex with my 30-something single friends is asking questions.

We can't speak from experiences we don't have, and for women who are not involved in sexual relationships, talking about a friend's sex life can feel uncomfortable or judgmental. Further, you can't know what might resonate with a friend until you know where she is in her romantic life, where sex fits into that equation. **Listening, not being intimidated by what we hear, and offering thoughtful questions for reflection** may be just the thing our sisters need to feel empowered to seek the best in their romantic relationships.

What you say in response to her answers to questions is less important. What's more important is how questions prompt reflection for her that no one else may be prompting. After all, a woman in her thirties has a lot of life experience to draw from, but her overextended life may not lend itself to the reflection she needs to trust her instincts.

Some examples of questions:

- *Is your friend dating? Do she and her boyfriend share views on important life values like faith, marriage, and sex outside of marriage? How does she feel about any differences in their views about sex?*
- *Have her regrets in her romantic life led her to changes in her current dating life? Are there changes she wishes she could make about her current dating life? What is keeping her from making those changes?*
- *Does the fact that sex makes babies ever make her wonder about her sexual activity and what would happen in her relationship were she to get pregnant? What has her boyfriend ever said about this? This is a very revealing topic...*
- *Has sex in her romantic life added, or taken away from, her security in love?*

What Is Keeping Her From Committed Love?

It's often the case that women in their thirties have given up on the hook-up scene, if ever they were in it. Many thirty-something women are in long term relationships—some even cohabitating—with the expectation that marriage is on the horizon. But for a sizeable percentage of these relationships, **their partners have given them no firm commitment in the form of an engagement ring and a wedding date.** After all, what's the motivator for the hassle of a wedding if you're already living like your married?

For many of these women, the thought of potentially forfeiting a partner and going back out into the dating scene is paralyzing. She bides her time instead of rocking the boat in the relationship— by moving out, or withholding sex until marriage.

Still, there are a number of ways to encourage women who are cohabiting **to seek the best from their relationships:**

- *Encourage your friend to talk with her boyfriend about what sex and cohabitation mean to each of them, and to the relationship. Studies suggest that men and women have different expectations and levels of commitment when they move in together, so communication about what cohabitation means to each party should be crucial. Is it a step closer to marriage, or just a way to share rent? Differences in expectations and commitment should be taken seriously.*
- *You can probe your friend about her personal timeline for marriage. If she expresses that she is not prepared financially, you can confidently reassure her that life is short and weddings don't have to be as elaborate and overdone as the "Wedding Industry" insists. Stories about gorgeous weddings on budgets and strict timelines prove that weddings*

can have Pinterest worthy details without the agony of a year of planning and thousands of dollars.

- *If your friend's partner has revealed a lack of desire to escalate the commitment, you might be compassionate about her fear of leaving — while also showing optimism about her future back "out there". The thought of starting over after a long-term sexual relationship or cohabitation can be painful, but it can be the beginning of a new story. Sharing stories of women who have cohabited, moved out, and even moved on to get married can give smart dating women perspective and strength in the face of potential heartbreak.*

The stakes are higher for a woman in her thirties. Biological constraints are no longer a faraway reality. Many friends have already coupled off, and the dating scene is getting tired. But studies suggest that the more premarital sexual partners one has the lower the relationship satisfaction is in marriage, and the higher the risk of divorce. **For long-term happiness, waiting is worth it.** Even if you have already been intimate with someone before, it's worth it.

As Kat mentioned, these conversations don't "have to be awkward or preachy, but can flow naturally out of the conversations we already have with the women we're close to." They can be empowering too, helping our sisters have confidence to seek what many women's hearts long for—lasting, committed love, sex, marriage, and children, together.