



Transcript Episode 7: Lust or Bust

Clare

Hello and welcome to the sex and relationships podcast. I'm so pleased you can join us. I'm Clare Prendergast and I'm here with my colleague Janet Eccles. Hi Janet.

Janet

Hello, Clare. How are you doing?

Clare

Yeah, I'm good. And as you know, this is the podcast where we draw on our years, years and years hey Janet now of experience.

Janet

Yes.

Clare

To give you some hopefully some insight, some advice, some top tips to guide you through your relationships and your sex lives.

Janet:

Where are we going today, Clare?

Clare

We're going to talk about, I'm going to go Mancunian now, luust or bust or in my accent, lust or bust.

Janet:

Exactly. I mean, I've got to give you three out of ten for the Mancunian accent there. I mean, if we're going to go full Tess Daly, I think it's luust or bust.

Clare

I'm rubbish at accents. I always, always, always been rubbish at them. Yeah, it's lust or bust.

Janet

So, tell me about this one.

Clare

Well, essentially, it's the realisation that I think every sexual partnership at some point goes through when those early days of sexual intimacy, I mean, this isn't 100% for everybody, but for a lot of people, the early days of sexual intimacy are falling off a log. Two people attracted to each other can't keep their hands off each other, and lust is in the room. And then a point comes somewhere down the line. For some couples, it's after six months. For some couples, it's after seven years. But a point comes where it isn't easy anymore. And in fact, I go so far as to say lust has evaporated. And couples sometimes then their minds click in with we must be done.

Janet: Yeah. And I think that's what we're addressing today. That period at the beginning of any new relationship you talk about, commonly known as, you know, the honeymoon period, it's probably an outdated phrase now because I think, you know, when couples are in long term relationship, I think there's more people don't get married now than actually do get married. So, you know, an antiquated term. But nonetheless, we kind of know what it means. It means that early time of romantic and sexual attraction for each other, where we think it will always be like this. And I guess what we're doing at those times as well is because it's all special and new and novel, and maybe we're sort of making plans for the longer term. We prioritise, we prioritise the

relationship, the other person, ourselves and the things that we do together because it's important.

Janet

And I guess what happens as time goes along is that we prioritise less and less and less because it becomes something that is just part of our lives. And, and life can get more difficult. And then we have the grown-up business of doing important things like getting jobs and finding somewhere to live. And we may choose to have a family, or we may decide that we want a family and then can't have a family. And, you know, there are 100 different reasons why parts of us disappear and that the central relationship, just doesn't get the same priority as it used to. And also, just that pure, carnal, animalistic 'God, I fancy you' that I mean, it does wane. It does. No one can keep that up for 30 or 40 years. It does wane. And that's fine. That's absolutely fine and normal. But what we can encourage, uh, you know, people to do is just, well, what do you do instead? What can you do to strengthen that physicality between you that isn't based purely on lust? And I think that's sort of where we're going today, isn't it?

Clare

I think so, but I nearly interrupted you there, Janet, but that bit where you were talking about all the other demands that come in on a couple. I was thinking, you know, one of the joys of long term, good, solid, intimate partnership is you can, at times of squeeze, take each other for granted. You can count on them. It's like I'm out caring for a diminishing mother, for example. But I know you've got my back. I know you're keeping the home fires burning. And when I get in, you'll offer me a cup of tea. And this is such a precious, precious resource. We can then fall into the trap of whilst we can take it for granted because we're busy doing X, Y, and Z, the trap we can fall into is then continue taking it for granted. And it's like we get out of practice. We get out of habit with the bits and bats that keep a couple close. And we're both just using our hands loads and you can't see us. But yes. Sorry, Janet, you were going to say something.

Janet

Well, no, I was just thinking about how that nicely fits into well, what does prioritising us and our relationship mean? And actually, on some weeks when life, when you're really up against it in life, that might mean just taking 20 minutes out to check in. Where you know your phones are off or you're uninterrupted or and you can just give each other

some proper time. It might be just going for a walk around the block for 20 minutes, you know, but it is just having that check in where you can scoop up everything that's happened in the week and you can say, you know, I've not I know I've been like away, away with the stars this week. But I have noticed, and I do thank you for everything that you've done for me. And that's all it needs. That's all it takes is just to show that you're noticing, or the other person has noticed what you're going through. Hence, they've stepped up the caring. But then it's not talked about. Nobody mentions it.

Clare

100%. Yeah.

MUSIC

Clare: So, lust or bust, the lust has dwindled. Your word was 'starts to fade', I said 'evaporated'. Do you know I mean I think you know it can be it has completely gone. It's like you find yourself looking at your dear beloved and thinking, you know, what did I ever see in you? You know, what was that? How could I have ever fancied you? I mean, it can be so absent at times in a long-term relationship. It doesn't mean it's gone for good. And this is where I think it's imperative that if you notice, you no longer find your partner attractive, you no longer want to devour their gorgeousness. It's to then interrogate what's going on, what's what is this about? Because sometimes it's exactly what you were just speaking to. You've been holding the fort while they've been off doing up the house or caring or whatever it is. They have been AWOL. You have been keeping everything afloat. They haven't noticed. And rather than call them out and say, 'oi! I've been doing a lot round here, could you please give me a little slap on the back and tell me you're grateful?' We go into resentment and then before we know it, something that is just a normal part of long-term relationships suddenly is becoming a massive gulf between you.

Janet

Yeah. And that's what can happen if the relationship isn't attended to over a long period of time. I mean, I guess you have gone into crisis mode where there is a lot of resentment and bitterness and feelings of being ignored and taken for granted around. But I'm hoping that one of the things that we can talk about today is how to notice when things are changing, I suppose before they get to the crisis point.

Clare

But I disagree. Janet, I don't think resentment is an indicator of crisis. I think resentment is insidious. I think it creeps in when you didn't say goodbye when you left for work this morning. It's like those little ouchies, rather than go, ouch, that really hurt. I need to send a text and say, you never said goodbye. We'd rather not do that because that makes us feel even more vulnerable. We manage it by just layering it with just a little sliver of just small resentment, which we then store up. And if that stores up over weeks or months, then yes, it then becomes a crisis. But I think it's something to be alert to on a day-to-day basis.

Janet

So, I suppose when couples find that they are either increasingly irritated or increasingly feeling resentful towards each other, for me then it's about, I mean, you can go down the defensive and 'it's not me, it's you' root. But you know what, where's that going to get you? But you know, just that flagging up, that noticing what's changed. 'Because, you know, when I, when I started my new job this time last year and things were tough, I'm sure I didn't feel like this' or 'you had that thing on and I know I stepped up', you know. And so, what is it that's changing? And as with so much in relationship work, it's not making assumptions about, okay, there's a decrease in desire to have sex with you, to be physically close or intimate with you. I've noticed there's a decrease in desire there. And sometimes that can just send panic, panic bells off. And actually, it's just a sign. You know, I think that's what I want to say.

Clare

It's just a sign that we need to chat.

Janet

Yes, exactly.

Clare

Lust is one of the first indicators that there may be something going on. And I love your example. You know, we could go defensive and say, it's not me, it's you. But I mean, equally, we could, you know, this is more my style. Go it's not you, it's me. Do you know which shuts it down? Yeah. It's like whilst we're either blaming the other or blaming

ourselves, the opportunity to kind of open it up and go, oh, let's have a chat. What's changed? And together we can cook up all sorts of potential solutions for meeting it. Like you've given the 20 minute walk round the block. It could be we haven't sat down and eaten together this week. And when we're busy, we can just end up with just fuelling. We're not actually using food as an opportunity to. 'How are you? What's going on in Janet land?', 'what's going on in your land?' And a chance for me to kind of go, 'God, you know what in Clare land there's dum dee dum dee dum'.

MUSIC

Janet

So, noticing it as a clue and then noticing what is your attitude towards sex or physical intimacy. And, you know, I'm going to keep banging on about this probably every time we speak, Clare, you know. And I when we talk about sex and maybe the people who are listening to this think about sex as, as often as intercourse or some kind of penetration and that's not how, how we generally think about sex, is it? It's generally about being sexual with each other. And so, if you think about what is your attitude to sex and you're thinking, you know, if you are male and female in a couple together, then I guess what you might be thinking of is penis and vagina sex. And you've got the kids to collect and you've got to do Tesco shop and you've got to go and see your parents and your and it's like, 'oh my God, the thought of that, forget it'. But if you think about it in a much broader sense of as in sex for us, I think, and certainly the way we encourage people to think about it is, it's sort of sex in the ether. So basically, whatever you're not going to do with your auntie or your mother-in-law.

Clare

Or your neighbour

Janet

So, you know, a casual touch in the kitchen, a quick hug - I've had a terrible day and you know and hold me for 10s. Do you know, it's all of the things that say you're in a physically intimate sexual relationship, but you don't have to have sex to have a sexual relationship. And it doesn't matter if you have what, what you would, you know, normally, you know what maybe what you thought back to in the early days and the kind of sexual relationship that you had when you first got together. If that only happens once

a year, twice a year, once a month. But all the other things are happening around it, you know, the cuddles on the sofa, the bit of flirty banter in the kitchen or the cheeky tap on the backside or whatever, then you can still have a fulfilling and pleasurable sexual relationship without thinking, 'oh my God, it's Tuesday night, 11:00. I'm gonna have to do that'. You know, because no one wants that sex life. No one wants that.

Clare

No. And I honestly, I could count I mean, I wouldn't have enough fingers and toes or anything to count the amount of times a couple have presented where one of them is doing obligation sex. There's a different sex drive, and one of them sees sex as, as a, as a kind of requirement of the partnership. It's part of the deal. And the other one sees it as their duty. And this is not a gender thing. This happens both ways and sex on demand because it's my job. It's the antithesis of everything you want to be co-creating for a long term, intimate partnership, which is the things you're describing. A space where you've got each other's back, you're each other's special person. You have a kind of insider perspective on each other's lives. You know, the problem with sort of demand sex like that is, it's not connecting. It's not intimate. You're not engaging with the person you're with. You're engaging with a function and that is just that just makes the gulf bigger and bigger and bigger, and lust will just not come back into the room if you do sex like that. Whereas if you could just find it within your willingness to show kindness to your partner, you know, that might be you run them a bath or, or you offer to make tea that evening or whatever, you know, whatever it is. But you show kindness. It's like leading a hand in.

Janet

It's that it's that attention, isn't it? And I guess when we first get together, a lot of the attention and, and pleasure is given through physical touch and sexual touch. And that's what makes us feel amazing. And, and I suppose as, as we go through life with everything that entails, but also as we age, our physical and sexual needs will change. You know, I was just thinking about it in terms of physical exercise. And when I was 14. I used to run for the school, and I was known to, you know, jump over a hurdle or two. And I was just thinking about the idea of me running around a track now and trying to jump over hurdles and, and what a dog's dinner that would look like. And so, what do I do now? Well, I go for brisk walks and I walk up hills and I get out into the natural world because that's what makes me feel amazing. And I suppose it's that evolution and it's

changing. You know, our tastes change as we go through life. So why do we expect our sex lives, our sexual relationships, to stay the same? Because there always seems to be this fixed idea of what we had in the beginning was the best. And if we're not doing that, then, you know, then it's not as good and nothing else in life works like that. And of course, the physical sexual relationship, but also there's the physical and sexual *us* doesn't work like that either. But redefining and allowing each other to evolve and change, like, 'okay, I don't want to do that anymore, but let's give this a go' or 'I'd like to try that now' and take the pressure of sex off and just start doing things that give you some pleasure.

Clare

I do find it helpful though, when that yearning for how it was in the beginning comes into the room to sort of deconstruct what are the component parts of your intimate life at the beginning. So, it was like I always made an effort when I was going to see you. I thought about what I was going to wear. I spent ages on my hair. I spent ages researching restaurants to find just the right place for us to go and eat. Or I heard you say you particularly like asparagus. And I found this place that does really good asparagus. Do you know, it was like a consistent process of recognition occurring between the two of you? You're listening. You're listening attentively, and you're responding with suggestions to that. Now, those examples I've just given, those aren't what we think about as sex, but they are the ingredients that build intimacy. And it's making time for us. And in this time, poor time, which I think, you know, it is a first world thing. It's a Western thing, you know, this, this kind of crazy attachment to busy, busy, busy and growth and big economies or whatever, and just kind of being able to step back from that and go actually hanging out with you without having to be anywhere else. I mean, that is essentially what sex is. It's like the two of us being in a space without anywhere else to be.

Janet

Yeah, it's play, isn't it? It's a way of playing with someone you really care about. And if you're not getting the fun or the pleasure or the comfort from that play, then then you're playing the wrong game, you know, and it's time to switch it up or down.

Clare: But when we sort of get hooked into, we need I need to be feeling lust for this relationship to be viable. We miss all those other steps along the way. And the irony is, I

mean, particularly I mean, speaking as a woman now as I've aged, I love your analogy with exercise. As I age, and particularly as I went into and through the menopause kind of gateway, desire just evaporated. So, lust was I mean, it just was like 'what's that?' It was that I mean, it was just an intellectual or academic notion. It wasn't a physical experience in my body, but that didn't mean I wasn't able to generate feelings of lust if all the right ingredients were put in place to let it arrive. And I think that's the bit that in long term relationships we can forget.

Janet

I think it's important to say that that's not the same for all menopausal women, but it's very common amongst menopausal women. But also, it happens with men, you know, if for whatever reason, illness or weight or stress or, you know, a hundred different reasons that, you know, the sort of testosterone, the androgens, the hormone levels of men begin to decrease for some. It's exactly the same, that I haven't got that spontaneous fire for you that I had, and that worries me. And then I'll start worrying about that instead of, okay, well, it's still very, very possible to have a fulfilling and pleasurable and connected sexual relationship without feeling spontaneous sexual desire.

Clare

Yes.

MUSIC

Janet

I think one of the things that I see commonly that people struggle with commonly is if we are physically intimate in any way, if we say, get naked together and have a bath or a shower together, I am worried that they will think that this then is going to lead to sex. So, I want to cut that off right now because I don't want to do that. So, I will deny us and deny me everything that comes before that, because I don't want there to be any assumptions. And I just think it's so sad.

Clare

And this is where both of us being able to sit down together and go, 'oh gosh, I've noticed. I'm not feeling it can we talk about it?' In the sort of growing collaborative

process of this is *our* problem, this isn't your problem or my problem. This is *our* problem. You can build a way of communicating with each other, whereby you could be playing in the shower, and either one of you at any point can say, I'm really not feeling it, I'm going to get out. And the temptation, this is why I brought resentment in earlier, saying it can be the tiny things it doesn't have to be a massive thing. It's just what we need to be awake to is the disappointment. 'Because actually I was really feeling it. We were messing in the shower just then. I was really feeling it. And you've said, I'm not feeling it and I'm disappointed'. The work for me is to not weaponise that disappointment and turn it into something it doesn't need to be. It's like, 'yeah, I'm disappointed. It's like, you've gone, here I am in the shower on my own. Shucks, I really thought this was going somewhere. What am I going to do to manage my disappointment?' That isn't going to turn it into something toxic and weaponised and gets a rift between us, but actually allows you to be true to you. You're not feeling it and you want to stop, and that is okay.

Janet

And there are a few ways to manage that situation, aren't there? I mean, you know, I guess in one of your connecting chats, you could say, let's have a shower, let's have a massage. But with the understanding that it's not going to lead to anything sexual unless I specifically say that my feelings have changed and, you know, and those feelings are starting to kick in for me. You know, it's not going to kill you, is it? If you're starting to feel aroused and your partner, the person you're with, isn't in the mood for sex, you know, it's like, well, great. You can go and sort yourself out for five minutes afterwards. There's no law against that. So, there are ways of managing it. But like you say, Clare, the real trick of it is not to feel hard done to and then to punish your partner for them not feeling the same as you.

Janet

Can I just say, I know that we're using this PIV term a lot for this idea of intercourse for penetration in some way, but I suppose I just wanted to make it really clear that this is not. We're not just talking about relationships where it's one male and one female. These same issues happen when there's women or females together, two men together, two bisexual people. You know that these are not straight issues. These are relationship issues.

MUSIC

Clare

I'm going to change the subject. Is that all right? Um, I mean, not change the subject. Stay on topic, but from the point you're making, which is, for those of you listening who are potentially feeling a little bit alienated because you're not having sex and you're not wanting to have sex, I want to really put out there that it's absolutely okay to have a sex free relationship. That there are many, many, many couples who are enjoying intimate, extended, long term relationships. They have come to a place where, whilst they might be happy to sit in a bath together, if the tub is deep enough and big enough, they actually don't want to do sexual as in twiddling nips or playing with genitals. They just don't want to do that anymore. And both of them are happy with that. They've talked about it. I just want, if you're listening to us and you fall into that camp, I just want you to know that that is absolutely okay. It is not a criteria of intimate adult relationships that you are sexually active.

Janet

Well, that's a crucial part, isn't it, if you both feel the same way. And I suppose problems come when one feels that way and the other person doesn't, you know, and of course, there are ways of negotiating that in a relationship. You know, some couples would even give a partner permission to get sexual needs met elsewhere. Lots of people wouldn't be comfortable with that, uh, and wouldn't be happy about that. That would be a deal breaker. But you know, and again, it's whatever works works for you. The worst thing that you can do, I think, is to deceive and lie, uh, because that's going to come up and bite you on the nose.

Clare

Well, it's a bit like that thing we were saying before about. Well, I was saying before about, you know, the sort of slippery nature of resentment it can snuck in on a tiny thing. I think that sort of if we could find ourselves, I'm going to use the A word which we were going to speak about. You know, if you find yourself your attachment to the relationship is so great that the fact that your partner's just said, actually, I think we've not had sex for six months and I feel really good on it. I'd like us to stop being a sexual couple. If my partner says that to me and I agree because the relationship is too important to lose, the work in that instance is to find the courage to speak up and articulate that actually isn't

okay with me. I want a sex life with you. And that's where we have, you know, in clinical speak, we call it Mismatch desire. And then, you know, it might be helpful to come and see one of us or one of our colleagues because Mismatch desire is so common and is really, really surmountable. It is something that can be resolved. You've given a kind of extreme solution there, Janet, you know, in terms of outsourcing your desire, but it can be managed within a partnership as well. But it does require both of you telling the truth.

Janet

But then we're right back to well define sex then in your relationship. Because when you say, I don't want to have sex anymore, you saying you don't want to be touched anymore, you don't have cuddles anymore because, you know, we need to be clear about this. Or actually, is it okay to have physically intimate touch up to a point? And therefore if that is the case, where is that point?

Clare

Absolutely. And I guess, I mean, I am just thinking about what you coined the title for today, you know, Lust or Bust and I just want to give a little bid, really, for the value of hanging in through the tough times. I mean, we're coming out of it now, but I think we've had at least two, if not three decades of this really disposable culture. And I think we've got caught in doing that with our relationships as well. And when we're experiencing this diminishing of lust or complete evaporation of lust, I think culturally we're kind of predisposed to jump into bust rather than taking the time to go 'Look, hang on a minute. Do I really want to call time on this for that? Or do I want to just take stock?' And I think relationships do have sell by dates, and sometimes the work is about coming to terms with the fact that we are done. This relationship is dead in the water. It's time to let it go. But often it is just we've got some work to do.

Clare

There's been some unnoticed ruptures along the way. There're some repairs required, there's some new techniques, maybe around how we talk to each other, but to kind of be open to the possibility that mending and hanging in can deliver dividends beyond imagination really, when we're caught in that disposable trap of it's not working, bin it off, get a new one. And the other thing I did want to say about that, in terms of risking a long-term partnership, is the sex we had at the beginning and the sex we're having now. It isn't necessarily the sex we're going to be having tomorrow. That actually in the ebb

and flow of a long-term relationship, we might be going through a particularly dry patch, even a desert patch. But it isn't data that this is the future. It's just data about today. And that's where the rich kind of if it was a really rich, glorious beginning, there's juice to be pulled from that because you quite likely have a rich and glorious future. It's just right now it's a bit tricky.

Janet

Yeah, and that actually, Clare made me think back to, you know, you mentioned attachment before. And you're absolutely right in that people's attachment styles can help them or influence them in terms of how to read the situation when you're hitting a drought or a desert patch. And if somebody has, say, a particular attachment style where they're very sensitive to rejection or a threat of abandonment and their partner goes off sex with them, then all of those sort of threat responses about being abandoned or rejected are going to kick in. And therefore, they're going to fall down the trap of, you know, being resentful and angry and you don't want me anymore. And goodness, you know, maybe even I'm going to look elsewhere all on the basis of you've got a, you know, very sensitive to, to a sort of threat of rejection in your attachment.

Clare

Goodness. Yes. So, attachment theory, that is, um, a really incredibly useful lens, I think, to look at intimate partnerships through. But my word, it's a big one. So, I suggest, Janet, we loop back to this in another episode. Maybe we'll do a whole episode on attachment.

Janet:

I think that would be a really good idea, Clare, because there's so much to say about, uh, sex and attachment. So, yeah, let's do that.

Clare:

And just as a little teaser for that, um, I do want to reassure you, lovely listeners, that attachment styles are not like star signs. It's not when you identify your style, you're then that's you doomed for life. It is purely a lens to notice why you do what you do when in extremis, or even not in extremis, just in little kind of incidents your attachment style will show up. And the other thing that we've alluded to a couple of times today is, uh, what I think I refer to as outsourcing sexual needs. And one thing we didn't speak

about was the use of porn as a way of outsourcing. And so, I think that as well we'll do an episode exclusively looking at outsourcing as a way of managing mismatched sexual desire in a relationship.

Janet

Yeah. So that's definitely we'll come back to that one as, as well, Clare, because there's lots to say. But coming back to today, what do you think your takeaway is from where we've been today?

Clare

I think my top tip of all we've talked about is to be awake to what I'm doing in response to the fact that this has left my relationship with you. So, I'm no longer feeling lust. What meanings am I cooking up? What stories am I telling? How am I coping with that notice? Am I retreating into resentment? Am I avoiding? Am I shutting down? Do you know because those are all, all those sort of sublevels of it are what get in the way and make a very fixable difficulty very hard to fix.

Janet

Yeah. And I suppose part of that is don't panic. Notice don't panic. Because those, those things that you talked about going down that rabbit hole, that's all the catastrophising, you know, which is, oh my God, I'm not feeling this anymore. That means our relationship is in crisis. It's in trouble. And like you said, just don't panic. Take a calm look, take what you're doing with that, and you can start doing something about it because there is lots to be done.

Clare

Do you want to add anything or.....

Janet:

Yeah, I think my takeaway today is just being sexual is not just having sex. It's all the other things that surround it and are around it, and that you only do with your partner or your lover.

Clare

Yeah foot massages on the sofa count as sex.

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And on the site you'll find a section where you can leave questions for us to explore in our chats. We really, really, really want to hear from you. We're only relevant if we're in partnership with you, so please let us know what's on your mind.

Lovely chatting Janet, until next time bye, bye.

Janet

Bye, Clare. See you next time.