

LIKE FINE  
WINE

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RECLAIMING SEXUALITY LATER IN LIFE



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# Letter From *the* Editor

Dear Reader,

When my mother went through menopause, she did not tell me--the tampons underneath her sink just disappeared one day. When I asked her why she'd gotten rid of them, she simply said she didn't need them anymore and never brought it up again. She made menopause seem like it wasn't a big deal. When I learned that menopause can last for years, cause women severe discomfort, and greatly impact their sex lives and the way they are perceived by the rest of society, I was shocked that my mother didn't complain about it more often. Menopause, aging female bodies, and older women's sexuality are topics that are not widely discussed, often engendering feelings of discomfort when brought up.

Welcome to the first edition of *Like Fine Wine*, a safe space devoted to honoring and exploring aging female bodies and what makes them feel good. We use the words "woman" and "female" throughout this issue to reference all female-identifying people. While none of the creators of this magazine are older women, each of us is inspired by older / post-menopausal women. We love, learn from, and enjoy being

in community with older women. The Redstockings, a radical feminist group founded in 1969, write about the importance of the lived experience in their manifesto, stating, "We regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation... We question every generalization and accept none that are not confirmed by our experience" (Redstockings, 193). Similarly, *Like Fine Wine* regards personal experience as a valid and crucial site for knowledge-making.

In conversation with anthropologist Kathleen Gogh's analysis of male power in societies, activist and essayist Adrienne Rich writes, "Characteristics of male power include the power of men to deny women [their own] sexuality." She goes on to reference ways in which this form of power is exercised, including through "denial of maternal and post-menopausal sensuality" (Rich, 299). While female sexuality has always been shrouded in taboo, with a rise in sex positivity, younger women are now being celebrated for choosing to engage in and discuss sex and self-pleasure openly and shamelessly. However, the sex positive movement targets young people almost exclusively, often leaving out older folks, especially older women. As argued by Adrienne Rich, ageism presents itself in most sex-related spaces. Older women

are often assumed to be asexual. And while some are, there are also many who are not, many who still enjoy having sex, and many who wish they could be enjoying sex in the way they used to.

Audre Lorde, self-proclaimed “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” writes, “As we move toward creating a society within which we can each flourish, ageism is another distortion of relationship which interferes with our vision. By ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes” (Lorde, 290). Lorde argues that ageism as a form of discrimination is harmful to entire societies, including young people. Without acknowledging and respecting the complexity and humanity of older women, we are doing our entire society an

injustice in Lorde’s eyes. Through highlighting personal narratives of older women and exploring society’s discomfort surrounding discussions of older women’s sexuality, we hope to encourage conversations that do not readily occur in public discourse, as well as illustrate the many ways that sexy transcends age.

Logan Smith  
she/her/hers

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Logan Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# Meet the Team



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## MISSION STATEMENT

OUR GOAL IS TO EMPOWER POST-MENOPAUSAL AND/OR OLDER FEMALE-IDENTIFYING PEOPLE IN RECLAIMING THEIR SEXUALITY BY HIGHLIGHTING PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND EXPLORING BARRIERS IN ORDER TO ILLUSTRATE HOW "SEXY" TRANSCENDS AGE.

# DEAR DOC

By Grace Tumavicus, with guidance from Dr. Megan Staton, OBGYN

I'm about a year post-menopause and living with my husband of 30 years. We've always had a very vibrant sex life and that's been an important pillar of our relationship. Lately, though, sex has been painful for me and it's really bumming us both out. Mentally, I feel like I am enjoying it, but physically, my body is not reacting in the way that it used to. I have heard that after menopause sex can become more painful and dry, but I guess I just never thought that would happen to us.

-Discouraged in Delaware

## DEAR DISCOURAGED,

First things first--what you are feeling, experiencing, and navigating with your partner is normal. Menopause changes all of our bodies and hormones, and with that comes new challenges and opportunities. One of the most common changes with menopause is vaginal dryness in relation to sexual activity. Your body is not producing the same hormones that it used to, and guess what? That's completely fine! That's why there are thousands of types of lubricants for you to experiment and play with. Some great over-the-counter

lubes that I recommend are KY Jelly and GLIDE. They are both water-based, so they are safe to use with condoms and easy to rinse off. They'll be in the feminine hygiene aisle at your local grocery store. I'm going to advise against using a scented or flavored lube, as they can cause irritation. You can also go the more natural route by using coconut oil as lube. If you give a variety of lubes the "old college try" and you are still experiencing dryness and pain, don't settle--there are more options. Talk to your doctor about using a vaginal estrogen supplement--this can look like a cream or a capsule. The bottom line, you deserve to be having good sex, and there is no shame whatsoever in going on that journey to find what works for you.



Staton, Megan. *InterMed*.

**I am five years post-menopause and living happily with my wife-- we're newly married! I've been on a mission to feel confident during sex my whole life, and have had a fairly high sex drive in the past. However, in the past few years, my sex drive has waned. I thought that once my wife and I got married, it would bring us closer and that our sex life would follow that same pattern, but I'm still feeling very "meh" when it comes to sex. I love her dearly and want to be able to share this special, sexual relationship with her, but I'm not always feeling it.**

**-Frustrated in Framingham**

**DEAR FRUSTRATED,**

To start, congratulations on tying the knot! Getting married post-menopausal comes with its own difficulties, but also with its own beauty, and I'm so happy that you were able to find that. About your waning sex drive--that is very common in post-menopausal people.

Evolutionarily, hormonal changes during one's period can be a huge drive for libido, and when we lose that, it can be confusing and frustrating. My question for you is: after you begin having sex, are you able to enjoy it and orgasm? Sometimes, the hardest part can be initiating sex. I would also take this time to do a bigger check-in on your relationship with your partner. Do you feel that you can be open and honest with your partner about what you want sexually and what makes you feel comfortable? Are they understanding and attentive to those needs? Getting to a place of confidence in sex starts with creating an environment that makes you feel at ease, loved, and most of all, sexy. It may just be your libido, but it could also be a good time to stop and reflect on what you need from your partner and your relationship.



I am 4 years post-menopause and I have multiple sexual partners. I don't like to be tied down and I love experimenting with new people. I don't mean to ask silly questions but I still get stressed about birth control and what to do about it! Because it's something that I feel like I should know, I'm a little embarrassed to ask my doctor. What are the ins and outs of birth control post menopause?

-Feeling Silly in Philly

**DEAR FEELING SILLY,**

First off, this question is not silly at all--in fact, it's pretty common! Birth control is stressful, and for those of us with uteruses, pregnancy is that much more stressful! After a life of birth control, it can be scary to ditch it. But I am here to tell you that, yes, throw those pills in the trash! Take that IUD out (obviously, not by yourself)! Take out that ring! Stop your shots! You are in the clear. No pregnancy scares for you. However--and this is really important--that does not mean that you can't contract STIs from your partners. It is still crucial to talk to your partners about their sexual health and history, and to use the proper protection (condoms, dental dams, etc). Experimenting is even more fun when you are safe about it!

I live with my partner of 12 years and just had a hysterectomy about a year ago. After my surgery, having sex was quite painful, and it made me not want to engage in that part of our relationship. I have friends who have had the same issue and they all recommended lube. I'm a total research junkie, so I looked up all different sorts of lube and vaginal creams to help ease the pain, but nothing worked. Certain sexual positions are consistently painful, and, as much as I hate to admit, I am having trouble controlling my bladder.

-Post-Op in Turlock

**DEAR POST-OP,**

I am glad your surgery went well! Hysterectomies are a unique menopausal situation, so I understand how that can be tricky. While I'm glad that your friends found luck in the lube department, we have to always remind ourselves that just because something works for others, doesn't mean it's going to work for us. It sounds like you are having pelvic floor dysfunction, which is completely normal. You can go about healing in a variety of ways, but I always suggest pelvic floor physical therapy. Call around to different therapists in your area, try out a few, and see what works for you. This can be a vulnerable subject, so make sure that you find someone who makes you feel comfortable. This is also something that I would recommend talking to your doctor about--they didn't go to all that school to not have the answers!

**I went through menopause 30 years ago and I would like to put myself out there a bit. All of my friends are married, with kids and grandkids, and I often feel out of place. It seems like no one my age is dating or having casual sex. Is it just too odd to start dating now?**

**-Single in Sacramento**

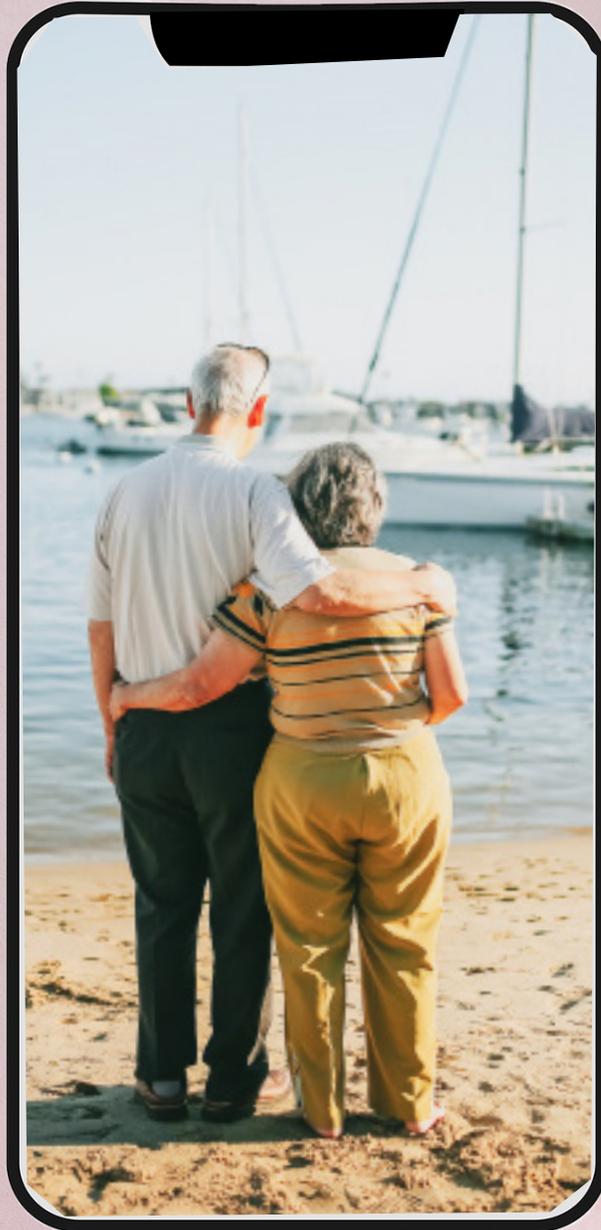
**DEAR SINGLE,**

Not at all. Full stop. Anyone, at any age, deserves to date, have good relationships (of any kind), and have good sex. It may seem like everyone is already growing old together, but really, there are so many people just getting out there. You don't need permission from anyone else in your life to date or have casual flings. Your sexual partners do not have to be from a serious relationship! If it's something you're interested in, I would suggest online dating. The online dating space is special because you can put exactly what you are looking for out there with no strings attached. Some recommendations: Match, Eharmony, and New Tricks--each app has its own pros and cons, so maybe try a few and see what you like. This is also something that your doctor might bring up with you. Do what you need to make yourself feel comfortable talking about it and putting it out there. The biggest piece of advice I can give about dating, relationships, and sex, is best put by this month's interviewee, Suki Dunham: "you deserve it." (flip to page 28 to read her full exclusive!)



Got questions? Send inquiries about sex, dating, and relationships to [deardoc@likefinewine.com](mailto:deardoc@likefinewine.com)

# New Tricks



As we age, our needs and wants shift. It's never too late for discovery. The New Tricks dating app helps people over 50 experiment with their sexuality and dating life.

# LOVING AFTER LOSS

Exploring sex, dating, and love later in life after the loss of a long-term partner  
By Alanna Jackson



**T**he hit Netflix show *Grace and Frankie* follows two older women who navigate mind-boggling complexities and confusion when both of their husbands come out as gay, admitting to having been in a relationship with each other... for over 20 years. Mannered yet sharp-tongued, Grace is a retired cosmetics businesswoman played by Jane Fonda. And Frankie is an eccentric, carefree art teacher played by Lily Tomlin. Forced into an unlikely friendship, they must come to terms with the loss of their life partners. While both must overcome unfathomable grief and anger, they find comradery in each other and excitement in their new outlook on life. They deal with every absurd thing life throws at them, from starting a vibrator business, to confronting medical scares, to rediscovering romance and sexual exploration (Kauffman and Morris).

Whether it's divorce, death, or—in the case of *Grace and Frankie*—a partner coming out after decades of marriage, naming your grief and deciding how to proceed can be a complicated process, as Judith Sills, PhD, a clinical psychologist and National Science Foundation fellow, addresses in her book *Getting Naked Again*. According to the Pew Research Center, while divorce of younger couples has been diminishing, so-called “gray divorce” is on the rise. The divorce rate for couples over 50 years old has doubled since the 1990s (Stepler). Additionally, women typically live longer than men, which is important when considering older heterosexual couples, since this means older women are more likely to be widowed within these relationships (World Health Organization).

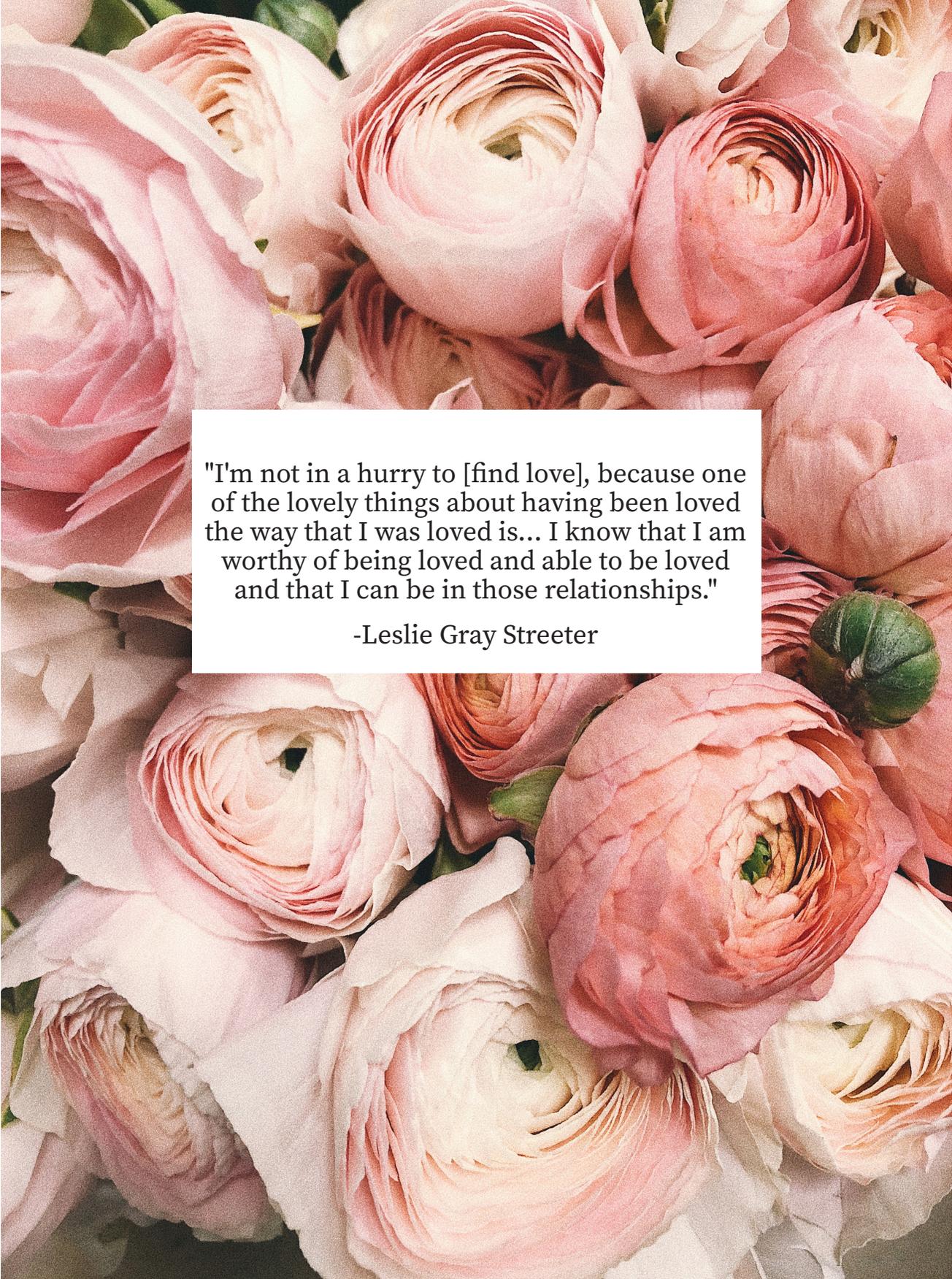
Poet and feminist Audre Lorde explains in her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” that each of us and the systems around us uphold the “mythical norm,” “which each of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me’” (Lorde, 290). This mythical norm is seen, at least in the United States, as white, skinny, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, financially secure, not disabled, cis-gendered, and neurotypical. Older women fall outside of this norm since they are neither young nor male. Grieving the loss of a partner can add another dimension to an older woman’s “outsider” identity. By not acknowledging difference, Lorde argues that we deplete each others’

energy and stunt our own creative intuition (Lorde, 290). Therefore, according to Lorde, acknowledging identity difference can be helpful for exploring how living within the intersections of old age, female-identification, and grief might shape someone’s identity in a unique way. Therefore, *Like Fine Wine* thought it was crucial to explore what it’s like as an older woman searching for romantic or sexual partners, seeing as coverage of this identity is usually outside of mainstream discourse.

So, are older women finding love after loss? How do they do it? What’s it like?



LLOYD, ROBERT. “GRACE AND FRANKIE.” *LOS ANGELES TIMES*, 8 MAY 2015, [HTTPS://WWW.LATIMES.COM/ENTERTAINMENT/TV/LA-ET-ST-GRACE-FRANKIE-FONDA-TOMLIN-NETFLIX-COMEDY-REVIEW-20150507-COLUMN.HTML](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-grace-frankie-fonda-tomlin-netflix-comedy-review-20150507-column.html)



"I'm not in a hurry to [find love], because one of the lovely things about having been loved the way that I was loved is... I know that I am worthy of being loved and able to be loved and that I can be in those relationships."

-Leslie Gray Streeter

## LOVING AFTER THE DEATH OF A PARTNER

According to Lizzie Cernik, a journalist for the Guardian who covers relationships and women's issues, older women grieving over the loss of a loved one can find love again (Cernik). Her article introduces older women finding new partners after losing a long term partner. One of the subjects, Carole (see next page), lost her husband, Kevin, to cancer. Eighteen months after her husband's death, Carole eased her way into the dating scene again, but she often found that the men she dated were turned off by her identity as a widow. In certain ways, Carole felt that she had to fragment herself for people to accept her and want to be with her. This connects with Audre Lorde's previously mentioned essay. Lorde expresses, "I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live" (Lorde, 292). This quotation provides an interesting lens for how many older women, like Carole, feel when they begin trying to find love again.

As seen with Carole's story,

no relationship truly stuck until she met someone--her current partner Ian--who honored her grief, allowed her to talk about Kevin openly, and embraced all parts of her. Widowed Moira and Thomas, another couple featured in the article, strengthened their relationship by navigating their grief together (Cernik). This sense of mutual exchange is crucial for fostering true friendship and understanding (Lugones and Spelman, 24). As Cernik shows in her article, respecting former and current partners is a balancing act for many widows during their quest to find love again.

This exploration of grief, age, and love is similarly discussed in the podcast *Death, Sex & Money* by WNYC Studios during an episode titled "A Widow's Guide to Grieving." The Host, Anna Sale, interviews Leslie Gray Streeter (see next page), whose husband, Scott, died of a heart attack. Leslie chronicles this in her book *Black Widow: A Sad-Funny Journey Through Grief for People Who Normally Avoid Books with Words like Journey in the Title*. Leslie discusses her anger, her use of comedy to cope, and her complicated relationship with love while navigating grief. During her interview, she speaks about the societal expectations of being an older

widowed woman when she states, “You're supposed to be sad enough but not so sad that you harsh the next party they invite you to. I remember thinking, you know what? I'm the widow now and I don't have to... I don't have to care what people think of me. I don't have to care about how people think that I'm grieving” (Sale). Additionally, Leslie’s story shows that after loss, loving another person doesn’t have to be a priority. Leslie explains, “I'm not in a hurry to [find love], because one of the lovely things about having been loved the way that I was loved is... I know that I am worthy of being loved and able to be loved and that I can be in those relationships. So, I don't need to be with someone to know that. I don't need the validation of another person to tell me that right now” (Sale).

## LOVING AFTER DIVORCE FROM A PARTNER

In a study conducted by the University of Georgia School of Social Work, older women were interviewed in order to better understand the relationship between their recent divorce and their sexuality. The study focused on 16 older, white, middle- to upper- class divorced women between the ages of 57 and 91. Instead of focusing on the more heteronormative idea of sexual intercourse, this study defined sex as “individual or relational activity, such as penetrative intercourse, masturbation, oral sex, intimate contact like mutual masturbation, handholding, dressing up, dancing, engaging with fantasy material like pornography or erotica” and as an “integration of emotional,



CERNIK, LIZZIE. “CAROL AND IAN.” *THE GAURDIAN*, 22

APRIL 2019



STREETER, LESLIE GRAY. “AUTHOR'S IMAGE.” LESLIE GRAY STREETER, [HTTPS://LESLIEGRAYSTREETER.COM/](https://lesliegraystreeter.com/).

social, intellectual, and somatic experiences” (Morrissey Stahl et al., 660-661). This idea of sexual fluidity and ambiguity connects with scholar and writer of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory Gloria Anzaldúa’s call to action of the “creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet” (Anzaldúa, 103).

The study found that with divorce came the increase in sexual exploration and transformational learning, which includes “describing phases of growth that happen through life events, including disorientation, critical appraisal, transformation, and bringing new meanings” (Morrissey Stahl et al., 665). The study found that for the majority of the women, their divorce was sexually empowering, allowing divorcees to challenge social norms, find new freedom, and engage in more experimentation. For some, it was the first time having pleasurable sex in their lives. One participant stated, “It was such an awakening... I was just going off like a volcano or something” (Morrissey Stahl et al., 667).

The study suggested that the lack of discourse concerning older women and their sexuality contributes to their portrayal as asexual beings (Morrissey Stahl et al., 660). This lack of attention and production of knowledge bars older women from recognizing themselves within “the woman’s voice,” which is, as Argentinian feminist philosopher and activist Maria C. Lugones explains,

widely accepted and voiced women experiences. Lugones stresses that the “woman’s voice” rarely encompasses all women, perpetuating the exclusion and silencing of women of color, older women, non-Christian women, lower class women, etc. Lugones notes, “We try to use it to communicate our world of experience. But since your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion” (Lugones and Spelman, 19).

#### WHAT’S THE BIG TAKEAWAY?

Older women are continuing to find love after the loss of a loved one (Brody). Whether they are connecting with others who are widowed, taking their time, or prioritizing sexual exploration over “going steady”, the stories of women loving despite their grief show how this can be an empowering time (Morrissey Stahl et al., 668). Just like Grace and Frankie demonstrate, loss can be a kind of rebirth. A time for self-love. For handholding. For orgasming. For canoodling. And for reclaiming.



Like Fine Wine

# GLIDE

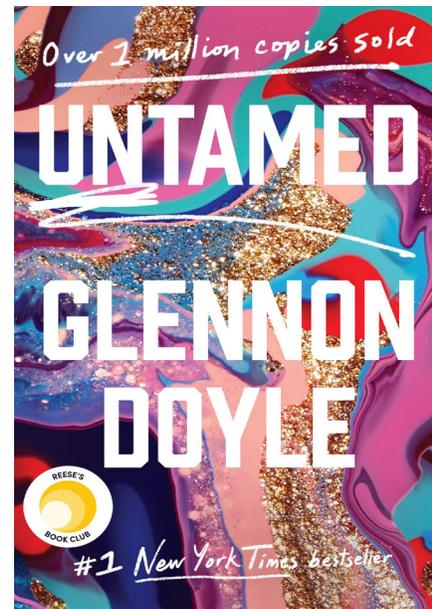
THE WORLD'S LEADING LUBE BRAND FOR  
POSTMENOPAUSAL WOMEN. BUY ONE FULL SIZE  
BOTTLE AND GET ONE COMPLIMENTARY TRAVEL  
BOTTLE WITH YOUR FIRST PURCHASE.



# BOOK CLUB

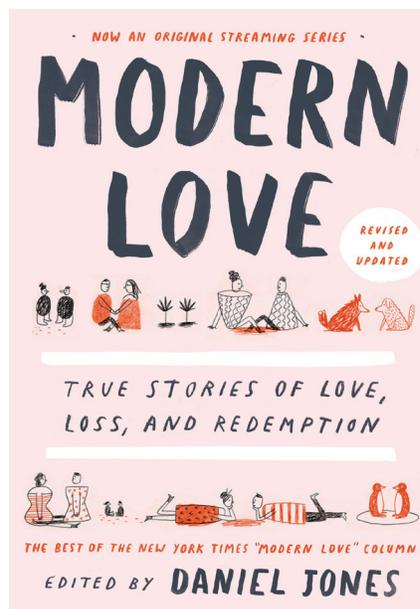
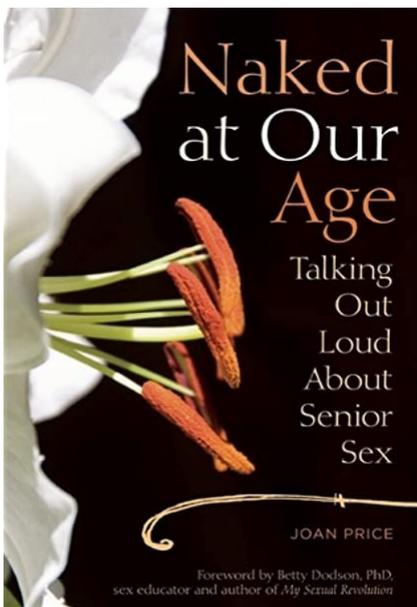
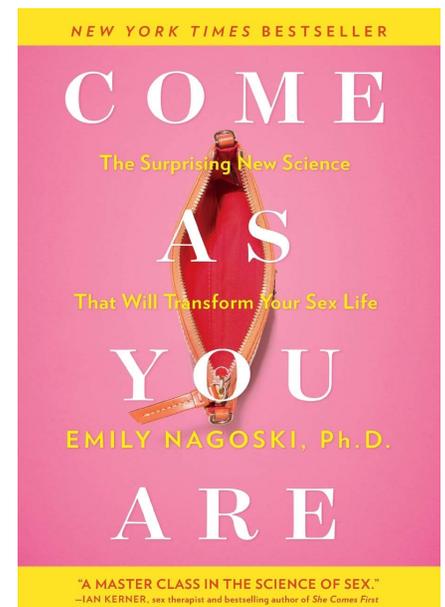
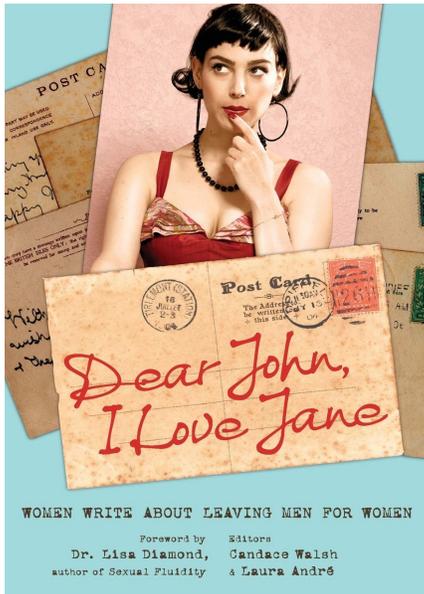
Finding time to read each month can be difficult. And when you have limited time, you want to get the most out of the books you choose. That's why each month, members of the *Like Fine Wine* team pick their favorite books that correspond to the current issue's theme.

Here you can find seven sex positive works that address sexuality and age from a variety of authors and perspectives. Included are: *Untamed* by Glennon Doyle, *Modern Love* by Daniel Jones, *Come As You Are* by Emily Nagoski, *Big Sex Little Death* by Susie Bright, *Naked at Our Age* by Joan Price, *Pleasure Activism* by Adrienne Maree Brown, and *Dear John I Love Jane* by Candace Walsh and Laura Andre. We love to hear from our readers and we welcome emails on your thoughts and recommendations for themes you'd like to explore in the future. We love these books and we hope you will too!



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THIS MONTH'S THEME: RECLAIMING SEXUALITY





Sanders, Wren. "A Secret Love." *them*, 1 May 2020, <https://www.them.us/story/a-secret-love-netflix-pat-henchel-interview>



# REDISCOVERY: COMING OUT LATER IN LIFE

by Grace Tumavicus

In recent years, coming out stories have slowly begun to trickle into American mainstream media. Shows, books, and movies show LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) high school-aged kids navigating their first kiss, their first prom, their first sexual experience, and unique challenges that their straight classmates don't experience. Coming out as gay is often depicted in media as an unchanging self-actualization moment, just waiting to be uncovered as soon as one hits adolescence. However, Melissa Frichle, active sex educator and holistic psychotherapist, argues that the reality is that "sexuality is something that evolves with us through life transitions, changing as we step into different roles and phases" (Frichle, 2). So, what happens when you rediscover your sexuality after you've been married for 20 years? After you've raised three kids with a loving husband? After you've lived a long, heterosexual life? Though this experience isn't always validated in the media, older people everywhere are navigating the unique challenges and opportunities that arise amidst the journey of coming out later in life. *Like Fine Wine* delved into research

and personal narratives to explore the ways in which older women are maneuvering their coming out process.

## THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY WITH PAT HENSCHEL AND TERRY DONAHUE

Came out at 80 and 83,  
respectively

Pat and Terry were life partners for over 70 years, but only came out to their families in the last decade of their lives. When Terry was first experimenting with other women as a young adult, she was terrified of her parents catching her. Though Terry denied being gay as a young woman, her family was suspicious of her sexuality and did not hide their disapproval. As Terry grew up, began living independently from her parents, and distanced herself from her immediate family, she was able to be more open about her sexuality, especially as she and Pat immersed themselves in gay communities. However, as she aged and subsequently needed more familial support, Terry and Pat made the decision to officially come out to their extended families. Though familial factors can affect anyone who is coming out as gay, there are unique

considerations when it comes to family and coming out as an older person (Bolan). Terry remembers how afraid she was of her parents' acceptance of her identity as a lesbian when she was growing up. She believed that her mother would disown her if she uncovered the truth. Jaroslava Hasmanova Marhánková, a sociology professor at the University of West Bohemia, writes that this stressor can actually be alleviated as we grow older--our parents aren't around forever (Marhánková, 13). And even if they are still in our lives, as we age, we become less and less dependent on parental support and can find familial love in other spaces.

Another familial challenge unique to coming out as gay later in life is the responsibility many older folks have to their children. Coming out to a heterosexual family of your own--a husband and kids--carries the stress of splitting a household. However, as children grow up and leave the roost, this stressor can be, to a certain extent, alleviated (Marhánková, 13). When children go off to live independently, parents' responsibilities to them change, and this can make it easier to prioritize one's own sexual and romantic well-being, instead of always maintaining a family-first mentality (Marhánková, 13). Similarly, many individuals who come out later in life have been or are currently in heterosexual marriages. Most women who are now reaching old age spent their twenties searching for a husband and settling down. It was not as culturally acceptable in the mid-twentieth century for women to explore personal career goals, much less their sexuality. Betty Friedan, American feminist author and activist, wrote that,

in 1963, media, experts, and culture were all "telling women [that] their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers" (172). Pat, Terry's wife, was nearly married to three different men before she could even start to figure out her sexuality for herself. Pat remembers feeling out of place in heterosexual relationships, but she wasn't given the freedom to figure out why that might be. Pat recalls thinking, "This is not what I was supposed to do. That was before I met Terry. That changed everything." Terry also wasn't given room for sexual exploration. "I didn't know what to think, until I met Pat. I don't know what happened, but that was it" (Bolan). Cultural disapproval has led many women who grew up in the mid-twentieth century to marry men without thinking twice. Due to this societal pressure, some older women of today are in the process of rediscovering their sexuality while involved in long-term heterosexual marriages.

#### FINDING COMMUNITY WITH ELAINE WEBBER

Came out at 79

Elaine lived the majority of her life as a heterosexual woman--she had been married from the time she was 24 until her husband died while she was in her 70s. She explains her sexual journey: "God knew I was going to be gay. It just took me a little longer to come out" (Brooke and Alda). She admits that it's hard to find other lesbians over 80, but she has found great love and acceptance in her 'gay family', a community of like-minded people of all genders who support her and provide guidance and insight. Even if the immediate family is accepting of one's sexuality, having a

space to be completely understood and related to can be incredibly empowering and beneficial, especially for individuals who have newly come out. Being exposed to this kind of acceptance and communal love can also help individuals along in their coming out process (Magee, 158). Robert Magee, licensed psychologist and principal founder of the Access Institute, a mental health service site in California, remembers meeting out and proud older couples when he was discovering his own sexuality. “The fact that they lived fully gay adult lives did offer me reassurance that, as we say today, ‘it gets better’” (Magee, 158). Being exposed to these communities can be a great way to gain needed support in one’s own sexual rediscovery process. Put simply, yet beautifully by Elaine, “I feel good in my skin. I love my family. And I love my gay family. I just want to have fun” (Brooke and Alda).

### BEING OUT WITH CATHY JAMBROSIC

Came out at 57

Cathy and Michelle, partners of 24 years, live in Kansas and are newly married, thanks to the U.S. legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015. Though they have been together for many years, Cathy and Michelle are still cautious about disclosing their sexuality to their greater community due to the traditional views of their region. Though it can seem like there is a clean line between life in the closet and life as someone who is openly gay, coming out doesn’t always follow a linear pattern, especially for people who are older (Marhánková, 15). Marhánková recognizes that coming out is not “a clearly defined life transition,”



"THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG WAY TO BE OUT, JUST AS THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG WAY TO BE GAY."

-Andrew King



but more of a process, whether it comes to personal attraction or expressing that attraction to others. There are different levels of being out: to yourself, to your partners, your friends and family, your workplace, etcetera. Because announcing your sexuality can be a very vulnerable moment, Marhánková recognizes that comfortability in coming out can be heavily swayed by social contexts, historical factors, and timing. Andrew King, a lecturer in sociology at the University of Surrey, writes that there is no right or wrong way to be out, just as there is no right or wrong way to be gay. Though society may disproportionately highlight it, sexuality does not have to be one's main identifier (King). Gloria Anzaldúa, an American author and scholar of Chicana, queer, and feminist theory, challenges us to recognize ourselves as individuals with many intersecting identities--being gay can be part of who you are, but it doesn't have to be all of it.

Cathy and Michelle's comfort in being out is influenced by the political and social climate that they live in. While talking about living in Kansas, Cathy explains, "If you're in a community where you feel like people are not as open... then you're not going to find it as easy to talk about who you are" (Brooke and Alda). Unique to coming out as an older person, Marhánková explains what he calls, 'complicit coming out'--no pivotal moment of expression, but more living one's life as a gay person without directly revealing their sexuality. For Cathy and Michelle, this is how they implicitly express their sexuality to their community. They live together as a couple and they interact

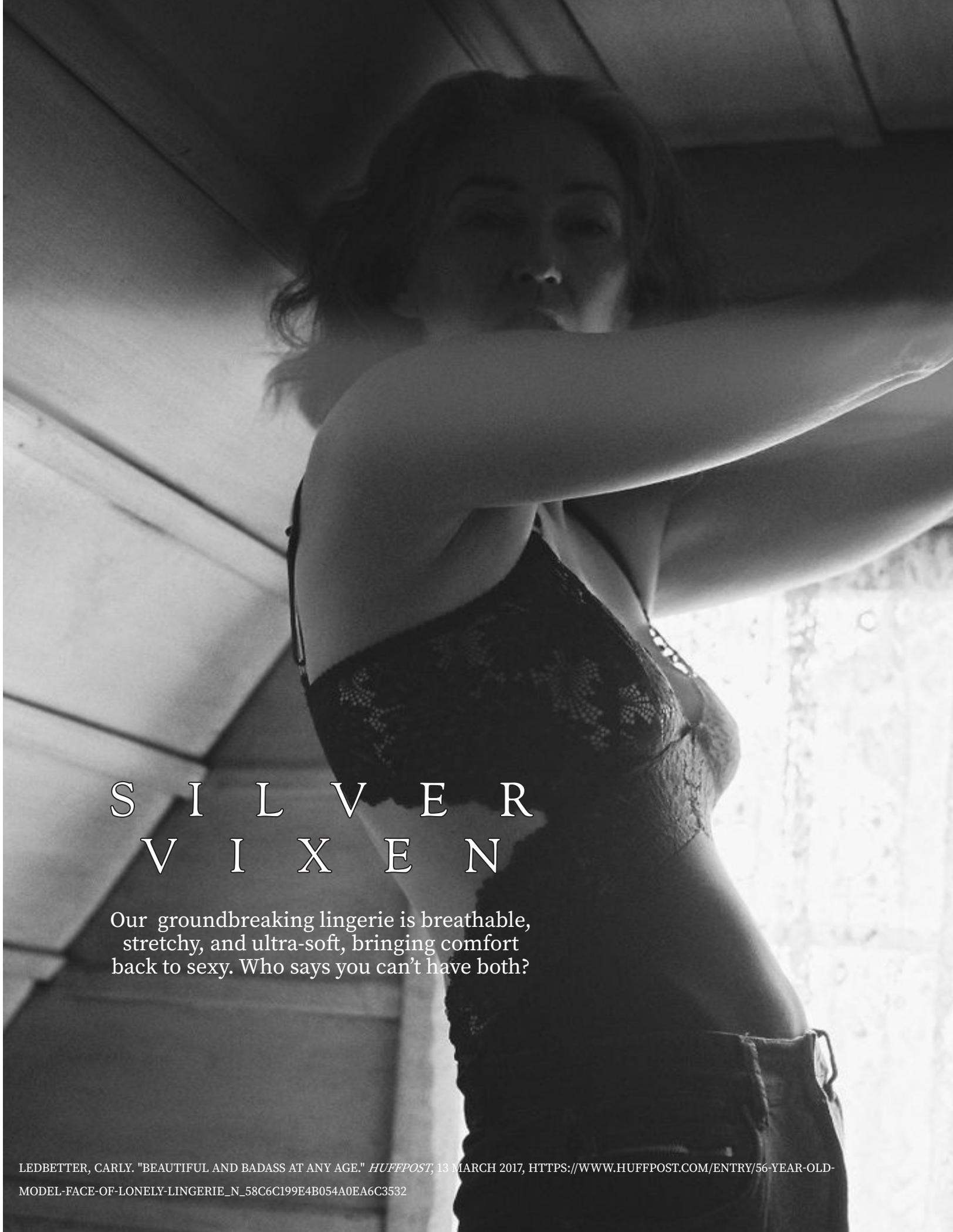
with the gay community, but they don't necessarily date publicly. When they got married, it was a four-guest ceremony outside of the country. Neither Cathy nor Michelle is explicitly out in their workplace, but they have found comfort in their 'complicit coming-out.'

## CONCLUSION

Coming out can be daunting and difficult at any age. As one grows older, their responsibilities to their family change, their communities shift, and their desire evolves, all making the process of coming out unique. As Jack Harmer, an expert of LGBT seniors, advises, "Don't settle for acceptance, don't settle for tolerance. Learn to celebrate yourself as a good and important and unique human being, and then expect others to do that with you" (Brooke and Alda).



"A SECRET LOVE." NETFLIX, 29 APRIL 2020, [HTTPS://WWW.NETFLIX.COM/SEARCH?Q=A%20SECRET%20](https://www.netflix.com/search?q=A%20SECRET%20)



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Our groundbreaking lingerie is breathable, stretchy, and ultra-soft, bringing comfort back to sexy. Who says you can't have both?

# SUKI DUNHAM: VIBING TO YOUR OWN TUNE

Founder of OhMiBod, on reclaiming self pleasure: an exclusive interview by Grace Tumavicus and Alanna Jackson



DUNHAM, SUKI. OHMIBOD.



If you Google “vibrators” or “sex toys,” the results that pop up feature images of thin, conventionally beautiful young people grasping their toy or wrapped around a partner of the opposite sex, in absolute bliss. But what about the older people? Are sex toys being made for older people? Why aren’t they being featured?

Contradictory to what popular adverts depict, products are being made for older people and older people are using them. The culture surrounding the self pleasure industry highlights young people as the face of sexual exploration and self pleasure euphoria. Due to the media’s emphasis on youthfulness, older people are underrepresented in advertisements and often stereotyped either as nonsexual or as “overly” sexual beings (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 150). According to “Ageism and Sexuality” in the *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism* journal, there are innumerable myths and harmful perceptions in the media regarding aging and sexuality, such as the noted two extremes: a profuse lack of sexual desire in older people or the cougar or MILF (Mom I’d Like to Fuck) tropes that oversexualize older people, namely older women (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 150-151). Assistant professor of advertising at Bond University, Dr. Sven Brodmerkel, argues that one of the main drivers of these distorted representations is the overwhelming lack of older

creatives in the advertisement industry (Brodmerkel and Barker 1390-1392). So, how are older creatives working to reclaim older people’s sexuality? What is the relationship between the sex toy industry and older people?

By connecting with Suki Dunham, founder of OhMiBod, we delved into these burning questions. Suki and her partner, Brian, founded OhMiBod after Brian gifted Suki with a vibrator and an iPod for Christmas back in 2004 (OhMiBod). Suki, a former Apple marketing executive, wondered what it would be like to capture the experience of music through physical feeling, thus, OhMiBod was born. The first vibrator Suki put on the market connected to iPods and MP3 players. Over time, the company has evolved to create kegels (toys for exercising pelvic floor muscles and helping with uncomfortable menopausal symptoms like pelvic pain, lack of bladder control, and painful sexual intercourse, etc.) and vibrators (or “vibes” as Suki affectionately calls them) that are both more approachable and accessible.

OhMiBod—praised in *Forbes*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Women’s Health*—caters predominantly to female-identifying users (Burns). The product that drew us to OhMiBod is the Lovelife Rev, which was created to meet the needs of adults of all ages and abilities, especially those with dexterity

difficulties like arthritis. In 2019, the Lovelife Rev “vibe” was featured on Refinery29’s list of “Most Innovative Sex Toys of the Decade” (Smith). OhMiBod hopes to challenge the norms of the sex toy industry to help people of all genders, bodies, ages, and abilities feel empowered, liberated, and sexy.

Suki (she/her) lives in New Hampshire and is 52 years old. During our interview, she spoke about her own experiences as an older woman and self pleasure business owner. We were extremely excited to interview Suki because of her company’s sex-positive, self-love mission. Continue reading to hear about OhMiBod and Suki’s take on love and sex, especially for older women as they age like fine wine.

**OTHER THAN THE INSPIRATION OF YOUR 2004 HOLIDAY GIFT, WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO FOUND THIS BUSINESS?**

Suki Duhman: It's interesting--I didn't know a lot about this space at all, in fact, my first vibrator was a gift. It wasn't something that I actually purchased myself, which is kind of interesting. When we [Suki and her husband] came up with the idea of music-driven vibration--a music-driven vibe--and we started doing research in the space and the industry, we found that everything was very male focused, basically that these products weren't being made for people with vulvas that were interested in toys. They were designed by men. They were made for men. The images represented on the front of the package are to attract a male audience, and not necessarily

for the vulva owner that would be using them. I thought that we [could] make a difference here, that we could make these products approachable. Part of OhMiBod's mission has always been to help to shift cultural attitudes towards these products, and to make them more accessible and approachable to people.

**AS A BUSINESS OWNER, HOW DO YOU MAKE SEX TOYS MORE ACCESSIBLE AND COMFORTABLE, SPECIFICALLY FOR OLDER WOMEN, AND ESPECIALLY FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVEN'T USED THEM BEFORE?**

SD: Our products have always come about out of personal experience, or [with the intention of] solv[ing] a customer problem or issue, so I think the best products that come about are those that are born out of necessity or a need, or to serve a particular purpose. It's not made just to be made, but to serve a purpose. So a couple of years ago, as I've aged personally, I've been seeing a lot of ageism in sex, and I've been starting to pay more attention to that because now it's becoming part of my world, just personally. I wanted to start to address that because, again, in this industry--in the pleasure products industry--nobody was paying attention to that. Before, all of the products were marketed to men, to appeal to men, and now they're all marketed, in my mind, or a lot of times, to young people because it's like, “only young people have sex,” “only young people are enjoying themselves in the bedroom or through self pleasure,” or whatever. So, as I have aged, I see that ageism in the way we advertise in our industry and in the products that we

develop, and I decided that it would be great to do a product that was developed, for instance, for somebody who's older and who might have arthritis and can't hold the device in their hands. This particular device, called Lovelife Rev, slides over the fingers so that the user doesn't have to grip it and hold it. I actually did a focus group at The Villages, which is a large retirement community in Florida. We got a bunch of people together. I just asked them questions and I showed them marketing images. That was fascinating for me because what I found is that, in a way, youthfulness is a way to [fantasize], as you age. It's really funny, because one of the women that I interviewed--I have this image of this couple, and they in my mind were a sexy couple, but they were older. I asked people, "How does the image make you feel?" "Do you think it's sexy?" "What does it bring up?" And the one woman said to me, "Well, I mean, it's okay but I think that the man should be like, younger, a lot younger." I thought that was interesting. So that's why we started to develop products that were more inclusive, at least as it relates to kind of dexterity and, along with dexterity, comes the age thing, and that was part of it for me.

**SO WHEN YOU ADVERTISE, IS IT SPECIFIC TO MAKING VIBRATORS MORE COMFORTABLE? ESPECIALLY SINCE FEMALE-IDENTIFYING MASTURBATION IS SO STIGMATIZED, HOW DO YOU WORK WITH THAT IN ADVERTISING?**

SD: I think part of it just as a brand is to set guidelines for yourself. Pornography

exists, and I think it's up to a person to decide whether that's their thing or not. As a brand, because sex toys have been tied to porn, and they are two very different things, we've tried to separate ourselves from that as much as possible to create this idea that this is just a wellness product. Everything that we do as a brand has been focused on that. So, yes, we might use a sexy image but very different from the "old days" of what was portrayed and how it was portrayed. We do a lot of messaging around the benefits of self-pleasure and things like that. I think everybody in society, obviously, plays a role in how we remove these stigmas. We've been in business almost 15 years now, and I can see the change that's occurred. If I think about it generationally, my mother's generation, so somebody in the 70+ category, you'll have people that talk about vibrators, but the majority of people are a little bit more conservative, at least in my anecdotal experience. For people who are younger, the feelings towards pleasure products change. For Gen-Z-ers and millennials, there's just such a difference in how pleasure is viewed, especially how female pleasure is viewed. I have actually been watching *Bridgerton* and *The Grace*. What is interesting to me is how much there is this portrayal of pleasure for the woman, and giving pleasure to the woman, which has not been a part of even the media, really ever. It's always the opposite. And so I just think all of these little tiny bits of information are now making their way into people's psyches and that's what's going to eventually remove all the stigma.

**SO, REGARDING THE VIBRATOR FOR PEOPLE WITH ARTHRITIS, LOVE LIFE REV, HOW DO SPECIFIC VIBRATORS BETTER CATER TO THE NEEDS OF OLDER WOMEN, PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY?**

SD: Physically, they help with the blood flow. The vulva area, after you pass menopause, lacks the blood flow that it used to have, so using a vibrator can bring blood to that area. It can help to prime if you're going to have intercourse with somebody. It's a physicality thing where men have a harder time holding or having an erection, and women have problems with blood flow and dryness of the vagina that happens when you get past menopause. That has to do with the lowering of the hormones in the body. Mentally, orgasming, in general, is good for everybody. There's all these very great, positive mental things that happen from orgasming.

**WHAT ARE SOME COMMON MYTHS ABOUT BEING A SEXUALLY ACTIVE OLDER WOMAN?**

SD: I think one of the myths is that older people aren't interested in having sex or don't want to have sex. This was several years ago, but I love to tell this story because it made an impact on me. I was already in the business and I went to AASECT, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists. They had different breakout sessions and they had this speaker, Joan Price. Joan did this exercise in that breakout session. There were probably about 12 of us. She had us stand in a circle and we were passing a ball to one another. She said, "I'm going to describe older adults in a

certain situation and when I do it, you're going to throw the ball and the person that catches it has to say immediately what comes to their mind." So she would say something like, "two older people holding hands," and somebody would throw it and the other person would catch it and they'd say, "cute." And she would say, "older individuals having sex," and somebody would throw the ball and maybe that other person would say, "weird" or "not sexy", or whatever the term was. The point of the exercise was to talk about how we view sexuality in aging from the perspective of the onlooker. It was really interesting to see that perspective. I had never thought about it. Now, whenever I see two older people canoodling or cuddling or whatever, I'm not going to say, "oh they're so cute," because if it were two younger people, everybody would be like, "oh, that's hot." So, why isn't it hot when the two older people do it? It's just fascinating.

**HOW CAN SEX TOYS HELP OLDER WOMAN EXPERIMENT WITH AND DISCOVER CHANGING SEXUAL PREFERENCES?**

SD: I would say that what I see, qualitatively, is that older women are using devices to enhance what could be missing for their sexual needs or to supplement them. I think it's really lovely when you have a couple where the older man can't have an erection anymore but they really want to please their partner and so toys are a part of that, which is very cool. And I think that takes a lot of guts when you look at all of the societal stuff tied into that, right in the masculinity part of that puzzle. So, that's really cool. I mean in terms of exploring, again, because I'm

looking at it from today and looking at a generation like my mother's, I don't really see them as--and not to categorize kind of a whole generation--but I see less of an exploration of the sexual boundaries.

**WHAT DO YOU FIND EMPOWERING ABOUT MASTURBATION, ESPECIALLY IN RELATION TO OLDER WOMEN?**

SD: What I'm seeing is that older women know that if they have a partner that isn't able to function anymore in a certain way, they can meet their own needs. I also see that people that are even in nursing homes or care facilities are using vibrators. Studies about sex show in general, whether it's with yourself or with a partner, if you continue to have sex throughout your life, it correlates to longevity. So people that are having sex are living longer. I think in the older generation, again speaking from my perspective, there are women that use vibes, always have used vibes, and love them. And there's a group that is saying, "Oh wow, maybe I should get myself one of those." And then there's a group that will never get there because of the generation that they grew up in. Whereas, in your generation, what I see is that when you guys reach this point of aging, it might be much more fluid. The idea of trying something new like a vibrator will be less of a hurdle than it might be today

**WHAT DOES BEING SEXY MEAN TO YOU?**

SD: Wow. Well, being sexy to me definitely is empowering. And another thing that's

sexy to me is when a partner wants to please their partner, like, no matter the gender. When the person isn't always just focused on their own needs, but they're focused on their partner's needs, I think that's super sexy. I think experimentation is sexy when there's real communication around it. I think that exploration can be very sexy as well and not scary, which is what it can be for many people. I think if there's lots of conversation around that, that can be very, very sexy.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OLDER WOMEN WHO WANT TO EXPERIMENT MORE WITH SOMETHING LIKE A SEX TOY OR JUST EXPLORE MORE WITH THEIR SEXUALITY IN GENERAL?**

SD: I would say, first of all, you deserve it. And it is not a bad thing--it's a very healthy thing. What I would probably do for that age group would be to present the actual medical and health benefits of orgasming and toy use. And it's not even toy use, it's really about self pleasure. Toys just can help people along a little easier sometimes than just using your hands or other ways.

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The sex toy market is now a \$15 billion industry (Burns). There are all kinds of toys--waterproof vibes, pleasure panties, clitoris suction toys--of all shapes and sizes. The internet has expanded access to toys, allowing people to surf the net for new styles, purchase toys without leaving their homes, and find instructions about the toys they do have (Burns). (OhMiBod has videos that show how their toys work, available on their website!) Evident from

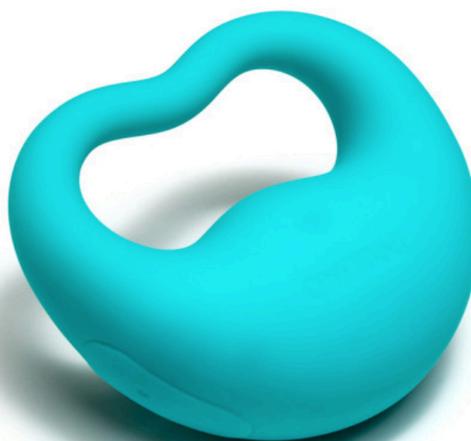
our interview with Suki, the increased acceptance around self pleasure and female-identifying people's empowerment both play vital roles in the rapid growth of this industry (BBC). Yet, it is crucial to examine how ageism, defined as prejudice on the grounds of age, manifests in this industry.

As Audre Lorde--Black feminist and poet--explains in her essay, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", oftentimes in Western societies, human differences are organized within a hierarchy and "some group[s] of people, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the space of [the] dehumanized inferior" (289). Social worker and certified sex therapist, Dr. Ateret Gewirtz-Meydan, argues that this also applies to age, as young people are seen as superior and older people are seen as inferior, excess, or unworthy (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 150). These rigid hierarchical binaries can be harmful, which is noted in "La Conciencia de La Mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness" written by Gloria Anzaldúa, scholar and writer of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory. She argues, "A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (102). Anzaldúa suggests that challenging the harmful results of binary thinking, such as those that assume universality in the sexuality of older people, can lead to liberation and the banishment of violence.

Transcendence from dualistic thinking of "young = good and old = bad" is exactly

what Suki's company does. OhMiBod intends to help older people feel sexy and deserving--a powerful reclamation of body and self. Brands like Suki's seek to shatter perceptions of older people as either asexual or "overly" sexual beings and debunk common myths or worries about having sex as an older woman. (For more guidance about having post-menopausal sex, check out our "Dear Doc" column!) Older women as CEOs, product designers, and experts within the self pleasure industry provide an important lens for understanding the industry's complex landscape and how older women are commonly represented within it.

Suki continually works to lift the taboo around older women's sexuality and to inspire older women to feel deserving of the pleasure that they seek. We were moved by Suki's openness to our questions, her insights about being an older woman, and her inspiring advice to our readers. We hope you enjoyed her interview as much as we did!



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"Sexy to me definitely is  
empowering"  
-Suki Dunham

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