

# She has given me a 'free pass'

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Sex counsel

**Q** My wonderful wife and I have been married for 18 years and have three children — but our sex life is non-existent. She's just not interested and feels terrible about it. She has suggested I sleep with someone else "to keep everyone happy". Is it ever really possible for this to happen without damaging a relationship?

**A** If you have any plans to take your wife up on this offer, make sure you get her to put it in writing first. Although people can, and do, live successfully in open relationships, which is what this would be, they are very much the exception to the rule. I know couples who have had similar "theoretical" conversations about non-monogamy as a potential solution to one partner's lack of sexual interest or dysfunction. As discussions go, they can feel very positive. For the person who is not interested in or able to have sex, granting what is known as a "hall pass" can be a relief because it alleviates feelings of guilt. They stop feeling they are the "problem" and, drunk on their magnanimity, believe that, given their emotional maturity, this is a solution. Naturally, their partner protests. They couldn't. They wouldn't. Yet the unexpected gift of sexual liberty creates flutters of curiosity and excitement.

While all this is just words, no harm is done. In the "theoretical" conversation the hall pass is a dalliance with a

nameless, faceless stranger, whereas actual sexual liaisons occur with living, breathing human beings. This is where the harm arises. Even a person who has zero sexual interest in their partner will bristle at the thought of them having sex with someone else. And no matter how casual sex is, it can become an emotional connection and that can present an insurmountable threat to the marriage.

Sexlessness is a significant contributor to marital breakdown, yet all marriages cope with dry spells. Age, illness, depression, medication, menopause, pregnancy, stress, bereavement and relationship dissatisfaction all take their toll in the bedroom. When issues don't resolve themselves, counselling, medical help or therapy can help. The fact that your wife appears uninterested in resurrecting her libido suggests that she has given up on sex, but wants the marriage to remain as it is because it suits her. That's not on, and it's not what you both signed up for in the marriage.

When couples consider divorce, they don't whoop with delight. They think about all the benefits of being married they would lose. From companionship and financial security to extended family

and friends, in the short to medium term divorce takes much more than it gives. If a couple (or half of one) decides they no longer want to be married, but nor do they want to be divorced, they may search for a compromise to enable them to carry on and avoid the chaos and destruction of a permanent split. In your case, the compromise your wife has come up with is a hall pass, which allows her to remain married, while you seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere. It sounds simple. It is anything but.

It is such a high-risk strategy I urge you to talk to a good counsellor or a sex therapist first. They will help you communicate more openly so you have a clearer understanding of why you find yourselves in this situation. They will also be able to advise if one or both of you needs medical help. The therapy would work holistically. Although counselling focuses more on your relationship, it can have a transformative effect on your sex life. Similarly, sex therapy concentrates on sex, but can have a transformative effect on your relationship. You can find counsellors and sex therapists through [Relate](http://Relate), [welldoing.org](http://welldoing.org) and the *Psychology Today* counselling directory. Send your queries to [weekendsex@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:weekendsex@thetimes.co.uk)



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