

"My first time? Total car crash. So if you fancy helping me move on..."

Do you remember
YOUR
first
time?

Whether you lost your virginity with your first serious boyfriend or it was a one-night stand that's best forgotten, the first time you had sex can affect your love life forever...



"Yes, it is my first time. Today, anyway..."

TEARS BY KATE MONRO (E839); ICON BOOKS; VIRGINITY LOST: AN INTIMATE PORTRAIT OF FIRST SEXUAL EXPERIENCES BY LAURA CARPENTER (E1399, NYU PRESS); HOW TO LOSE YOUR VIRGINITY... AND HOW NOT TO BY SHAWN WICKENS (E815, BOOKSURGE PUBLISHING). SEE KATE MONRO'S BLOG AT VIRGINITYPROJECT.PAD.COM. FOR MORE ON SHIRLEE KAY, GO TO COUPLEWORKS.CO.UK. *NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED

friend, and will most likely have planned it. The stigmatised would have been so keen to lose it, the identity of the other person barely mattered. Pragmatists go with the flow; they wouldn't have expected the earth to move and, whoever it was with, they didn't place a huge emphasis on the situation.

The truth is, first-time sex comes with no guarantees. "It could have been with a long-term partner and was disappointing, or a sexy stranger who was considerate and took his time," says Kate.

Your age can also have an impact – studies show that the median age of virginity loss is 16, but your emotional maturity counts for more than actual years. "A girl's body may be mature in her early teens, but that doesn't mean she's emotionally ready to enter into a sexual relationship," says Shirlee. "And if she isn't ready, there's a risk she'll feel the first time was 'wrong,' 'disappointing,' 'shameful' and other feelings that can stay with her. Likewise, you may be in your late teens or early 20s but still feel shy and awkward."

Even the place where it happened can have a bearing too. A rushed session in a guy's car, for example, would have given few hints of how amazing sex can be when it's done slowly, with no fear of anyone walking in on you.

Learn from experience

If the sex was a disaster The good news is that it needn't dictate your sexual future. Shawn Wickens, author of *How To Lose Your Virginity*, says, "Most first-time experiences are underwhelming, but it does get better. Like a hangover, the best cure is time – it can turn those dreadful experiences into something we can laugh about later."

Talking to people years later normalises the situation. "There's a good chance most of them will have had a less-than-brilliant first time too," says Shirlee. "Remember, the first time is just the first time; you'll go on to experience so much more, and realising that will

help you put it into a 'bad experience' box and move on."

If you felt your virginity was 'taken' from you For some of us, our first time may have happened when we weren't planning it or didn't feel ready. "As a result, it can feel like your virginity was 'taken,'" says Kate. "The most natural reaction afterwards is a lack of trust in the bedroom. So, in future relationships, focus on finding partners you respect or are friends with first. Don't feel guilty about holding back until you're ready. In

my research the people who know their partner before, either as a boyfriend or good mate, can share any fears or nerves with them. In all cases, they chose someone they knew would respect them; that says they value themselves and want to have a good experience."

If it was planned, with someone you trust This shows you had respect for yourself and your body, but if your sex life after that has followed a similar pattern you might question whether you should be more 'on the edge' sexually. But, says Kate, "But don't feel like you should push the boundaries of what you're comfortable with just for the sake of it. Be happy that you're confident in knowing what you like and are doing it with people you trust."

If you waited until you were older (or the last in your group) "Women may berate themselves for being older than their friends when they lost it, but they shouldn't," explains Kate. "In fact, this indicates that they didn't and won't bow to pressure. Use this strength to your advantage – never compromise your values in the bedroom and always feel confident to ask for what you want. It'll lead to fulfilling sex."

However *your* first time played out – whether it was with a sexy stranger or a trusted friend – it's important not to have any regrets. Just remember that even the less mind-blowing experiences help you find out what you like and what to ask for. Sex is meant to be fun, after all.

A rushed session in a guy's car gives no hint of how amazing sex can be when done slowly

Never compromise your values in the bedroom – feel confident to ask for what you want

Are you happy with your sex life? Do you feel totally in control, and happy to experiment and get the love life you deserve? Or do you lack the confidence to ask for what you want in bed? Whichever camp you sit in, the key factor behind it could be what happened when you lost your virginity.

A recent US study, *Gone But Not Forgotten: Virginity Loss And Current Sexual Satisfaction*, published in *The Journal Of Sex & Marital Therapy*, investigated how influential our first time can be. "We found those who'd had the best experiences also had the most fulfilling sex lives now," says co-author Carrie V Smith. "Whereas people with negative memories were less happy with their current sex lives."

Writer Kate Monro spent over a year gathering anecdotes for a book, *Losing It*, and her blog The Virginity Project. "If

there was one theme that linked most of them, it was disappointment," she says. But, of course your first time is unlikely to go 100% smoothly – after all, you've never done it before, and your partner might not have, either.

"When dealing with problems people have around sex, I explore their backgrounds," explains psychosexual therapist Shirlee Kay of Coupleworks. "I'll find out what they've been taught about sex, how it was dealt with by their parents, and so on. I've found that if you have a good sense of self, your first time is more likely to have been positive, even if the sex itself wasn't that great. How your first time and subsequent sex life play out is largely to do with how you already were as a person in terms of confidence and self-image."

Laura Carpenter, author of *Virginity Lost: An Intimate Portrait Of First Sexual Experiences*, identified the three groups we fall into when it comes to our first time:

1 Pragmatists, who know it won't be the best experience ever, but manage their expectations and have an OK time.

2 The stigmatised, who are embarrassed by their virgin status and are determined to lose it as soon as possible, however possible.

3 Gifters, who see their virginity as a precious item to be handled with care and reverence.

"I found that gifters were more likely to have felt devastated if anything went wrong," says Laura. "Likewise, those who felt virginity was a 'stigma' also took a 'negative' experience to heart, and often waited longer before having sex again. But the pragmatist sees it as just another life stage, and is more likely to have been satisfied, or at least have learnt from it and thus stood a better chance of getting what they wanted next time."

Feeling you had a free choice in the matter is also important in creating an ongoing feeling of empowerment. "It sets the template for your current sexual relationships," says Shirlee.

The sex factors

Gifters are more likely to have lost their virginity to a long-term partner or trusted

So how was your first time?

'I WAS GLAD IT WAS OVER WITH!'

"I was 15 when we met; he was four years older. He was a perfect gentleman when it came to doing it – I was 17 by then – and I totally trusted him and knew he respected me as we'd waited so long. It took a while for me to figure out what went where but, once I had, I was glad it was 'done!'" **Sophie*, 32, IT manager, Belfast**

'I NOW SEE SEX COMPLETELY DIFFERENTLY'

"I was nearly 16 when I got chatting to a guy at a party and exchanged numbers – he was a bit older and we arranged to meet up. I think we both sensed it would happen. We did it in his car behind my house, where no one could see us. I hated it and cried when I got home. I felt really let down by myself for doing it with someone I barely knew. It's affected my love life since. I've had a lot of people use me for sex. I've been with my current boyfriend for around a year, but we rarely have sex as I always feel used. I hope in time I can learn to trust him 100%." **Michelle, 21, dancer, Colchester**

'I FELT UTTERLY HUMILIATED'

"I met this bloke at a party; I'd had a lot to drink but was instantly attracted to him, and we were kissing for hours before he lured me upstairs. We came back down to a chorus of cheers, which was utterly humiliating. After that, I made sure I only had sex with someone if I knew we were alone." **Anna*, 28, teacher, Hull**

'THE TIMING JUST WASN'T RIGHT'

"At 16, I knew most of my friends were no longer virgins. So I asked a more experienced male friend to 'take' my virginity. He was lovely about it and I trusted him, but when it came to the big moment, I froze – I simply wasn't ready. It didn't happen until three years later, when the moment felt right." **Louisa*, 31, designer, Glasgow**