

OSMO KONTULA

THE SEXUAL MIND

Exploring the Origins
of Arousal



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FOR THE READER

Nearly every person has an interest in sex and sexuality. This is why both receive plenty of attention in the public and the media. Yet sex is the most intimate, secret aspect of our lives, something we conceal from others and may find difficult to discuss openly even with an intimate partner. More secret still are the sexual images, desires and fantasies that we harbor inside ourselves. We may find it difficult to accept some of them, and often our intimate partners know next to nothing about them.

In addition to sex, talking about arousal can be equally awkward. When sudden arousal happens to us outside our private sphere, it is not something we are able to talk about and may even bring a feeling of shame. Why is arousal so difficult and awkward? This and many other issues connected to the sexuality of the mind have been largely left uncharted and unexplored. Yet proper arousal is critical to achieving deeper sexual pleasure.

This book approaches the sexual mind and arousal from multiple perspectives. Its central aim is to offer the reader information and perspectives that may be helpful in understanding why certain sexual matters are especially interesting or arousing to us, and why it is that they specifically inspire us most. Many of these secrets concerning ourselves are hidden in recesses of our subconscious. Taking a moment to consider these aspects of ourselves may yield interesting and surprising revelations, as well as tools for invigorating the sex life we experience in our relationship and for increasing our own sexual pleasure. This information in this book can also be used in working with clients and patients, particularly in the areas sexual counseling and therapy.

For me, writing this book has opened up several new and interesting perspectives on the sexuality of the mind. The information used in the book is based largely on my long experience as a researcher in the field of sexuality, as well as many of my own previous sexological publications. As an editor, I have also been able to continually glean new information on this subject by reading and reviewing submissions to the scientific periodical *Journal of Sex Research*, and by listening to hundreds of

presentations on dozens of relevant topics at international conferences. It is therefore not possible to list each individual source. Instead, the list of sources details the works that I read recently specifically from the perspectives of the sexuality of the mind and of arousal. They cover both research in the field and practical experiences accrued in the course of psychotherapeutic treatment work.

This book is a multifaceted and enthralling journey into the rich sexual and erotic spheres of the mind. Has it ever occurred to you to wonder what in your own sexuality is most important, or its core essence? That answer can be found inside your own mind. Most people discover or gain awareness of these matters only through painstaking exploration. For that journey of pleasure and enjoyment, I will offer in this book some useful tools.

I hope you will take this journey of sexual and erotic self-exploration, and in particular, develop your own peak sexual experiences. As a curious, tender and passionate seeker, you can explore your mind and identify the tantalizing clues that can lead you to the deepest reaches of your eroticism and arousal – and make your life truly worth living.

Helsinki, May 7, 2021

Osmo Kontula

THE MIND AS THE SOURCE AND BARRIER TO SEXUALITY

The sexual mind

The sexual mind is always active during the course of our daily lives – if we allow this for ourselves. A substantial portion of the processing of sexually evocative situations takes place in the subconscious. Our awareness of them depends partially on whether we are prepared in the given circumstances and moment to allow ourselves to have sexually charged thoughts. The mind may block this awareness because it is fastened onto something else – perhaps a grave or serious problem that immerses us.

New things are constantly being introduced in our sexual lives, for us to ponder in our various life situations and seek novel ways to implement. Many of us would like to discover ways to increase the pleasure we feel. Others wonder how they might preserve even the smallest spark of passion in their long-term relationship. Many others crave confirmation that they are sexually normal – whatever that means for each individual. Some want solutions to sexual problems, while others would like to understand why their minds and bodies do not travel in tandem with their own expectations of their sexual desire, or with their partner's desire. The sexual mind presents a major challenge and an enormous opportunity.

The mind is the conduit to the awakening of sexual interest and desire, and launches our individual processes of sexual arousal. The mind comprises both our conscious and unconscious interest in sexual matters. Exploring our own sexual mind helps to open new pathways to sexuality that often remain unknown even to ourselves. The exploration also gives us a deeper understanding of our sexual motives.

Sexuality is present in our lives from the moment of birth until death. Each of us is an expert in our own sexuality. It is therefore strange that we know the least and have the least awareness of the very things that are most important to us in terms of sexuality – for example, why we are especially captivated by certain sexual phenomena and not others, and why some of them are nearly irresistible to us. It will not

increase our understanding if we remain generally unwilling to talk about these matters, even with our long-term partner.

The biggest challenges related to sexuality are connected to the psychology of arousal. We need to have a better understanding of how the mind creates, enhances or inhibits our sexual excitement. If we understand what makes us feel desire and arousal, it opens up a wonderful opportunity to develop the way we interact with our partner and in many ways can improve our sexual wellbeing. Arousal is not something to be ashamed of, but a wonderful pathway to deeper, more memorable experiences.

Arousal stimulates good sex more than any other individual factor. Arousal is the spark. It is also the foundation for a sexuality built more on pleasure than performance. If you want sex that is more exciting and satisfying, the way to it is through stronger arousal.

The pursuit of understanding our own sexual desire prompts a host of questions in need of answers. Why do certain images, situations and people stimulate us so much more powerfully than others? Why are there such dramatic differences in individual preferences and behaviors? Why are most of us so attached to particular sources of arousal? What do the various sources of our arousal reveal about us and about what we seek?

Finding answers to these and other unanswered questions of individual sexuality is at the core of this book. In order to expand our understanding of the issues that are challenging in the area of sexuality, we have to expand our sphere of interest and examine the entire wide world of eroticism. We also need to explore the ways in which we evolved into sexual beings from childhood onward.

Surprisingly little has been written thus far on what sex ultimately means for human beings. For some, sex is a repeated source of frustration and problems, but for most people it enriches life or improves wellbeing. Sex adds dimension and texture to life, and it shapes interpersonal motivations. Sex can be a central aspect of identity and offer a way to express oneself and to build one's body image. Sex is also a significant promoter of happiness in couples. It motivates us to form relationships and binds partners to one another. Sex motivates people to seek one another's proximity

repeatedly. And when it isn't working, sex can be the decisive impetus for two people to part ways.

Sexiness absorbs us as a concept. What is it really? Who wouldn't want to feel sexy? The experience of sexiness is individual and multifaceted. One perspective on sexiness is that of erotic capital. Erotic capital consists of things like beauty, attractiveness, social skills, energy and sexual skills. Erotic capital promotes and empowers us to engage in the social and sexual interaction that enhance our wellbeing, and allows to share our life with others, especially our partner.

Journey of sexual self-exploration

The process of self-exploration helps identify the components that make certain sexual peak experiences particularly special to us. It also helps us to see that eroticism is something dynamic and paradoxical, often awakened through the interplay of our various preferences and the obstacles that stand in their way. It is clear that the challenges that we all face in childhood help form the foundation of our sexual and erotic lives.

Positive emotions can enhance sexual arousal, but the same effect can also derive from unexpected, more negative experiences, such as anxiety, guilt and anger. As our awareness grows, we are able to marvel at the ability of the sexual and erotic mind to transform life's unavoidable difficulties and even serious emotional damage into a source of arousal. The very same emotions that arouse, however, may also turn against us and block our access to pleasure. For example, in certain circumstances, anxiety can prevent all intimate interaction. We will examine these issues in detail in later chapters of the book.

The deepest erotic truths are not revealed, if the mind or the heart disapproves of them. The secrets of the erotic mind become visible only to those who consciously cultivate an ability to disavow their inner sexual critic for long enough to be able to discover what lies behind the secrets. Without this skill, any observations regarding sexual matters are necessarily skewed. Sex, as a state of consciousness, is where the past and the present, and the body, mind and spirit merge into a new reality that is

unlike any other experience in life. Depending on the given situation, sex can be physically or mentally satisfying, or alienating and unfulfilling. Sex is always an individual experience of your own sexuality and its relationship to the rest of the world.

One of the most valuable aspects of sex is that it serves as a gateway to the depths of the psyche and as a tool for self-understanding. When we discover our true sexual desires and possibilities, and perhaps their origins, sex becomes not just wonderful, but momentous. Sex can enhance your life – and also change it entirely.

Sex lets us enter the purview of ecstasy, casting off all of our immediate worries and trying out different roles, as children do. Just as we did as children, we can play now, through sex, in a way that removes us from the mundane toward a moment and a mood of uncommon intensity.

Scientists agree that regularly having sex can strengthen the heart and the immune system and help fend off pain. Sex alters the chemistry of the brain and the body by increasing the secretion of certain hormones and by keeping us youthful and lively. Sex can also modify states of mind by releasing endorphins, which work to counter stress, anxiety and depression.

One of the greatest healing miracles is our ability to use sexual fantasies to work through deeply rooted conflicts and to satisfy the unmet needs from our childhood. We will examine this more closely in later chapters.

Intimacy and empathy

For sexuality and eroticism to be rewarding, they must be accompanied by a strong feeling of intimacy and empathy. Intimacy means the ability to be close and to maintain a deep and honest relationship to another person. Sexuality that is paired with intimacy can enable very strong sexual feelings.

Intimacy consists of being in the proximity of another person and tolerating the tension of being in a relationship. The intimate nature of the relationship and the closeness that comes with it inevitably produce a certain degree of conflict between the partners. Intimate relationships are not fantasy, but real life. They are dynamic systems that force people to grow and to evolve.

Empathy is the ability to recognize, feel and experience the thoughts and moods of another person. A key factor in building intimacy is the ability to read and interpret a partner's thoughts and moods. There are two types of empathy: emotional empathy and cognitive empathy.

Emotional empathy encompasses the physiological sensations connected to the heart and intestines, by which we are able to recognize and sense another person's experience as though it were our own. Cognitive empathy stems from our thought regarding how we should react in particular situations. Bodily emotions are not included in it, rather, cognitive empathy concerns the idea of what we know to be socially polite, friendly and humane.

The power of imagination

With a little practice and patience, everyone can learn to apply their imagination to encourage erotic change. Succeeding requires having enough time to imagine and avoiding any prejudging of what the imagination brings up. People who believe that they must constantly be achieving things are often unwilling to let their imagination run freely.

Use of the imagination can be explored in the state of total relaxation. Recall a sexual experience that was especially positive and satisfying. Maybe you want to remember an earlier peak experience. Remember, however, that the most satisfying experiences are not necessarily the wildest.

Focus deeply on the thought that you are truly satisfied. Slowly review in your mind the details that brought you pleasure that time. Re-experience yourself during that situation, and afterwards. These experiences of sexual satisfaction help you define your goals and strengthen your motivations.

You can use your imagination, for example, to daydream what might happen if you allowed our erotic self to have an entirely new kind of adventure. Isn't it tempting?

Problems with sexual arousal are extremely common. Nearly all of them share one quality: in the end, they sabotage our relationship with our own body. The vast majority of arousal problems have their origin in sexually negative messages received in childhood that ruined the ability of a child or teenager to playfully express sexual curiosity toward their own body and the bodies of others.

Most people manage to develop various functional methods to express their sexuality, regardless of their sex-negative upbringing, which is an admirable and convincing testament to human perseverance. But too many continue as adults to be limited by the early sexual barriers and restrictions they learned as children. Subconsciously, they assign and define the boundaries for the type and degree of pleasure that they allow themselves to give and receive.

One pleasure-inhibiting strategy – so common that it is considered normal – is to focus all or most of our erotic attention on genitalia and other erotic regions. This limits the use of the sensual capacity of the rest of the body only in so-called foreplay – this is such a major part of lovemaking that the ‘fore’ prefix should be abandoned altogether. Lovemaking is a comprehensive process.

The positive feelings that are part of arousal can also merge with more painful and traumatic experiences. This may result in sexual inhibitions or compulsions that are difficult to handle. Men and women who have experienced sexual abuse as children or violence as adults may find that simple touching becomes associated so powerfully with previous trauma that it is impossible to derive pleasure from it.

Others may become stuck in highly ritualized behaviors or fantasies, or both, that are quite intense but offer little pleasure. It is not unusual for people who are caught in the cross-section of pleasure and pain to seek maximal genital stimulation and orgasmic intensity. Simultaneously, they may have an almost complete lack of interest in sensuality and affection.

Try to find the sensual capacity in all of your body. Your body contains a wisdom that surpasses thought and logic. Through your body, you can reconnect to the original sources of your eroticism.

Fantasies are a common way to seek sexual arousal. Some people are so committed to particular fantasies that they believe they are unable to become aroused or reach orgasm without them. For these people, sex may be more of a journey of the mind rather than a broader sensual experience.

The perspective of humanistic psychology

Humanistic psychologists emphasize the human potential and the capacity to evolve. Yet they have had surprisingly little to say regarding sex, and even less regarding eroticism. They prefer to speak of love and intimacy, but their view remains one-sided because they bypass our lustiest sexual impulses.

Masters and Johnson adopted from humanism the acceptance of sexual difference and the optimistic belief that in life, people will generally aim toward healthfulness. They viewed sex as a fundamentally straightforward and natural act. The precondition for a satisfying sex life was the removal of any psychological inhibitions that stood in its way. Among these, anxiety and guilt were most central.

Even today, many sex therapists grapple with how to remove inhibitions. They rarely give thought to what gives rise to sexual passion and arousal in the first place, and how they are strengthened. For instance, they assume that nice, no-frills sex is the best kind of sex. They may also believe that arousal and orgasm are enough to experience sexual pleasure. This is a good starting point, but it leaves out the possibility of harnessing the sexuality of the mind.

Becoming sexual

At some point during our teenage years, we subconsciously come to eroticize the unmet needs and unresolved conflicts we experienced as children. Early painful experiences and disappointments are transformed into pleasurable ones as a way for the mind to reduce their power and influence over the self. The process of developing to mature adulthood is characterized by striving for inner psychological reconciliation and dissolution of repression.

As we mature into adults, the possible childhood conflicts, which now come to have sexual associations, are coded into fantasies and desires, and sometimes also into sexual behavior. Through sexuality we attempt to gain control over our feelings of powerlessness, shame, guilt, fear and loneliness that might otherwise have too much power over us. For example, childhood experiences of powerlessness and abandonment can be processed through fantasies of initially imagining oneself as a prisoner, and then subsequently being freed.

By sexualizing the unmet needs and conflicts we experienced as children we transform past pain into pleasurable experiences. Our true sexual desires therefore often emerge in the form of subconscious attempts to process various deeply rooted, early emotions.

For many of us, our true desires and the meanings behind them remain hidden in the subconscious. When we do become aware of them, we see that often the shadow of shame lies upon them. We have a tendency to view our desires as deviant, perverse or sinful because we lack understanding of their meaning. We internalize into our thinking the lessons of what institutions such as the church or psychology have defined as correct when it comes to sexuality. We monitor, deny and restrict our erotic lives, or keep them mostly secret. This process prevents us from acknowledging an important part of what and who we are, and what we might become.

Even when things are going well for us sexually, we can easily lose the opportunity to expand our sexual horizons and use the full scope of our selves, if we do not share our deepest desires and most important fantasies with anyone else.

Fortunately, we can at least in theory select a partner with whom we can form a sexual and emotional union that satisfies our deepest needs. This enables us to enjoy sex that is imbued with intelligence and practice passion imbued with wisdom.

Fantasies are among the most useful weapons of the mind in the fight to resuscitate emotions and to reconcile difficult issues. We build fantasies in order to combat anxiety and pain, and to replace pleasure for the conflicts we encounter.

Examining childhood sexuality

Have you ever wondered why the figure of Eros is personified in a small child? Eros's childish appearance may be viewed as a symbol of the fact that the seeds of adult sexuality and eroticism are sown already in childhood and adolescence.

The experience of pleasurable sensuality does not stem merely from early and positive touch experiences. It is also based on our ability to give and receive admiration, and is connected additionally to how we were held, caressed and cared for as infants and small children. This is how the unique sexuality and eroticism of each one of us begins to develop.

The most serious damage to sexual development can occur when we are young. Beyond the effects of possible abandonment or abuse, damage can also occur when a child is regularly prevented from following natural human curiosity or taught that pleasurable experiences should be feared rather than enjoyed.

The greatest impact on sexual development comes from the daily clues and messages that children receive regarding the importance of their body and their sexuality. These messages are transmitted most powerfully through direct observation of touching and familial situations. There is no better sexual education for a child than observing an obvious and tender bond between their mother and father. All too many children have to forgo this experience.

Alongside the importance of adults creating a caring environment for the sexual development of a child is the importance of avoiding interfering in a child's sensual and sexual experimentation. This is particularly true when there is no justified reason to believe that they could somehow harm themselves either emotionally or physically. Children have a right to sexual privacy. They alone are in charge of building the process and adoption of their own eroticism.

Children do not want themselves or their friends to be asked about their sexual play. If the play is discovered by chance, it is good to confirm for the child that their games are part of natural curiosity and that they need not fear being punished in any way. If we encourage them to act counter to what they are actually feeling in that situation, we are committing a large injustice against them.

Most importantly, children must know that they themselves are in charge of their own body and have the right to enjoy the pleasure that it is capable of bringing. They also have the right to express it, if the way that they are being touched does not feel good. This applies as much to the wet kisses of an aunt as to the covert touches of an abusive individual.

A new direction for sexuality?

Sex is something we keep learning about our whole lives. Our earliest childhood experiences have given us information about things like intimacy, trust, gender and power. Most of these things we learn through observation, by watching how our parents treat one another and also how we ourselves are treated as children.

Some people grow up in families in which parents act as though sex did not even exist. Parents may have ignored their children's questions and sources of curiosity, as though sex were something it was best not to think about. Others may have had parents who were unable to experience themselves sexually in a positive way. We interpreted their attitudes as signs of sexual fear, shame or even disgust. All of these experiences shape our feelings about what we view as sexually responsible, correct or appropriate. Sometimes this can lead to rather strict definitions and conceptions about sexuality and the opportunities it offers.

In many families, the attitude modification toward a "correct" way to think about sex may have been so subtle and alienated from reality that we may not have ever properly examined what might be important and true for us when it comes to sexual matters. Instead, our attitudes about sex remain based in what we were taught and how we were expected to behave. Maybe it is time to turn the wheel and explore what it is that we genuinely believe is essential and valuable as far as sex goes.

Why is sex seen as dangerous or condemnable?

The mind often suppresses or inhibits certain aspects of sex and sexuality by applying various criteria. Certain sexual matters are considered improper because they are

viewed as generally questionable, or because we find the issue personally too sensitive or difficult. Some others are seen as downright sick or pathological.

Labeling sex as pathological is rooted in the concept of “sex is a sin”. The psychological counterpart to sin is perversion. Some sexual phenomena are assigned this label in a deceptively simple manner. Perverts are attracted to the wrong people, eroticize lifeless objects, and have the “wrong” kinds of orgasms. They may also experience child-like preferences, such as being overly interested in masturbation, or in oral or anal stimulation. Over time, these, among other behaviors, have been interpreted as pathological.

The sexual mind is inevitably affected by the media’s focus on the most problematic manifestations of sexuality, including sexual abuse and harassment, teen pregnancy, and sexual diseases. Sex is more often written about as something negative, as opposed to positive. No wonder, then, that so many people are somewhat embarrassed or simply confused when it comes to sex. We live in an era that boasts a lot of sexual promise but warns of many sexual dangers.

The mind is always actively analyzing the environment around us and will disapprove or directly condemn sexual phenomena that go beyond what our mind is accustomed to or has learned to accept. We are all simultaneously the objects of this type of control while also subjecting others in our environment to it. We do not always even know why we are so quick to disapprove of particular aspects of other people’s lives.

Moral viewpoints produce the most emotional condemnations of sex and sexuality. People reject and criticize acts and ideas that test or debase their own conceptions of right and wrong. Yet none of this type of condemnation has a true moral basis. Many people experience a similar sense of internal discomfort when their erotic experiences do not match up with their expectations. It can also be confusing to realize that what they are actually aroused by goes against the ideals that they espouse.

In the Finnish cultural sphere, moral viewpoints are of course influenced by a concept of sexuality that derives from the Christian tradition. In simple terms, Christianity has placed a much greater value on the soul and on love than on the body and sexuality. These values continue to permeate life in Finland. The ideal model and

norm for desirable love is a love that is spiritual and rational, and attraction is transferred from the body into the soul. Things like beauty have been seen as dangerous, and a desirous and admiring glance cast at another person seen as a form of adultery. It is therefore not surprising that an active sexual mind may also give rise to self-recrimination on the emotional level.

There is no doubt that self-recrimination can hinder and limit the ability to enjoy sexual experiences, even in a relationship. It is completely possible, however, to be liberated from a judgmental attitude toward sexuality by practicing in a safe environment, for example with one's partner. If we are able to let go of our judgmental stance even for a moment, we become immediately more open-minded and relaxed.

The first step when exploring your own critical stance is to recognize and acknowledge the things that trigger your critical reactions. You can evaluate and decide whether you want to continue the habitual reactions, or you can attempt to let go of them. The most important thing is to recognize the situations in which you are prone to pass critical or condemnatory judgments, especially if such judgments have previously happened instinctively.

Some people may believe or fear that by limiting or restricting their own judgmental assessments will lead to sexual immorality, or to being forced to question or reject sexual values that they have considered important thus far. It is possible, however, to recreate and revise the ethical value system you use to evaluate your own actions and choices, by courageously exploring the challenging questions and truths of your own erotic life.

Passion and sexual self-control

When someone resists a tempting sexual situation, this is connected to how capable the person is of cognitive control. A common assumption is that we behave according to various impulses. If you are experiencing strong emotions, such as passion, surpassing or rejecting the emotion requires actual mental effort. The more tempting the opportunity at hand, the more difficult it is to control the impulses that we experience and recognize in a particular moment.

Strong desire that is separate from rational love is usually known as passion. Passion satisfies the longing to want and be wanted. Passion can also involve dizzying arousal and letting oneself be overtaken by emotion within the bounds of one's capacity to do so. Passion is most likely to emerge when someone feels that they have met their ideal partner. The more one thinks of the other person as the fulfilment of one's dream, the more powerful the passion.

We dream of passion and we feel that it makes life worth living for. On the other hand, we also fear the power of passion, because when passion strikes, we are guided fully by our emotions, without self-control in the situations where it takes us, sometimes even for the rest of our lives. For this reason, people are usually cautious about letting passion run freely.

In recent years, neuropsychologists have isolated the regions of the brain that support self-control in the frontal lobe, which is also where our ability to plan, prevent and delay immediate reactions resides. This portion of the brain is active when we have to focus on a task and eliminate the factors that interfere with completing the task.

People with less cognitive control may create more fantasies about potential partners. Cognitive control is also connected to how much one's mind wanders in general. It may also play a role in how well someone is able to maintain an image of their partner while interacting with others.

When we are in a relationship, we carry around a cognitive character of it, reacting to other people in the manner prescribed by this shape. Being part of a couple in many ways restricts and defines what are considered appropriate ways to respond to other people, and particularly, appropriate ways to contend with our desire to put to use certain sexual images and emotions that emerge out of social situations.

Activation or suppression of the sexual mind

What activates sexual behavior and what restrains it? The mind naturally plays a key role. The operating environment of the mind is the brain. Most brain functions include processes that either activate or suppress sexual activity. Recent basic research

has focused more attention on the systems that activate, rather than inhibit, sexual activity. In the sexual context, heightened sexuality has been seen as a greater problem than thwarted sexuality.

The effects of sexual stimulation on behavior are transmitted through the psychological and neurophysiological characteristics of an individual. These characteristics are affected by genetic factors as well as lessons learned early in life. The final decision regarding how to respond to sexual stimuli, however, takes place in the brain. The process is complicated and occurs across multiple levels. Control happens when we make decisions based on what other people expect or perhaps require of us. Setting boundaries, on the other hand, refers to defining what feels safe to oneself.

Sexual response has been studied in the brain using the Dual Control Model. The model analyzes the ways in which sexual arousal and its suppression interact in the brain. This can also be called the activation and inhibition model of sexual behavior. Activation, here, refers to things like sexual arousal, and inhibition to sexual inhibitions or suppression. The Dual Control Model conceptualizes sexual arousal and sexual suppression as separate systems, unlike other models that approach the subject one-dimensionally. Instead of a single reaction tendency, in other words, two discrete systems play a role in sexual decision making.

Neurobiological suppression of sexual responses are part of the general response with which all living organisms adapt to their environment. Suppression reduces the likelihood of a sexual response. It takes into account the potentially disruptive and complicating impact of sexual arousal in situations where sexual activity would be unfavorable or possibly dangerous. Arousal in such a situation could be so distracting that the individual might not be able to behave appropriately, in a manner required by the social situation.

The Dual Control Model is also predicated on the assumption that some people have a low tendency for sexual arousal and an increased tendency for sexual suppression. They are therefore more likely than other people to have a weak response to sexual stimuli, which may manifest both as a low level of sexual desire and as functional disorders. Others, on the other hand, have an unusually heightened tendency toward sexual arousal, and lowered sexual suppression. Such people find it harder than

others to avoid responding to sexual stimuli, and they are more likely than others to engage in riskier sexual acts. Thus, a strong tendency for heightened sexual response or sexual suppression can both be a source of sexual problems.

The suppressive response can be illustrated through various models. Some analyze the way in which the brain processes the information it receives, either consciously or subconsciously. Others are based on a strong suppressive response to the brain's aroused state. In order for sexual arousal to be possible, this suppressive mechanism needs to be weakened. In the field of mental health, the effects of depression have been found to be connected to two processes occurring in the brain – namely, a reduction in depression in those with a tendency for arousal and an increase in those with a tendency to suppress.

We are motivated to exercise sexual suppression when, for example, we fear that our behavior will result in failure or lead to negative consequences. Women have traditionally been taught to say 'no'. Therefore, the mechanisms of sexual suppression have been essential for women, and further evolved than among men. For this reason, women have been more susceptible to suppressing their entire socio-sexual being. Some women have described the way in which they will, in a manner of speaking, apply the brakes in situations where they are sexually aroused, but they have the impression that the situation may be in some way disadvantageous for them, or even risky.

The arousal tendency can also be classified into different types or models. One such type is a special motivation in which a person wants to be desired. This is a particularly important model for some women.

Several studies have looked at the connections of the Dual Control Model to people's sexual lives. Among men, a stronger arousal tendency has been shown to be connected to more active masturbation and greater number of temporary sexual partners. These men do not, however, necessarily engage in more frequent lovemaking compared to other people. Men who had difficulty controlling their sexual behavior were also, as expected, more easily aroused, but their suppressive response was as strong as that of other men. These men were less likely than other people to be concerned with the external risk factors connected to their behavior. Among women, a

stronger-than-usual suppressive tendency was connected to lower sexual desire and difficulty reaching orgasm.

In studies using the Dual Control Model, compared to women, men had on average higher arousal scores and lower sexual suppression scores. While arousal scores for both sexes decline with age, in the case of women, the suppressive scores are not age dependent. For men, the suppressive tendency increased in tandem with fear of sexual failure. In other words, men became more likely to want to avoid situations in which they might experience sexual failure.

Studies have found that a greater tendency for sexual arousal is associated with general sexual sensitivity, sexual desire, uncontrolled behavior, temporary sexual partners and lifetime number of sexual partners. For women, level of arousal was connected to potential sexual risks. For men, the sexual suppressive tendency was a better predictor of behavior than of arousal. Women's greater tendency for sexual suppression was connected to difficulty reaching orgasm.

The brain's suppressive mechanism or tendency is motivated and triggered by various situational factors, especially in the following scenarios:

- Sexual activity in a particular situation is potentially dangerous or unfavorable (not limited to only physical risks; also includes the risk of negative consequences emotionally or in relation to one's relationship).
- Some kind of non-sexual challenge is activated, and the situation therefore necessitates curbing otherwise potentially disruptive responses, including sexual ones, in order to make it possible to focus on the appropriate survival response in the given situation.
- An inordinate emphasis on achieving sexual pleasure interferes with focusing on other important adaptation purposes.
- Social and environmental pressures result in thwarting of reproductive behavior, leading to a decline in population density (mostly not relevant to humans).
- The consequences of continual, abundant sexual behavior in men leads to a decline in fertility as a result of excessive ejaculations.

Of the five outlined considerations that promote sexual suppression, the first three pertain to women. Particularly important is the first one, including for reasons of pregnancy risk. One external risk is the threat of being heard or seen during sex. This does not include dangers related to a relationship or partner.

One of the consequences of a heightened suppressive tendency can be that, for many people who are undergoing stress, it can result in a lack of sexual sensitivity and normal responses. This may also involve weakened arousal.

When we strive to move towards something pleasurable and enjoyable, the behavioral activation system in our brain becomes activated. Interest and curiosity toward impending sex is awakened, and we are able to reject any potential responses involving distaste or avoidance.

Recollecting past sexual experiences

Luckily, our relationship to sexuality is rarely a product of exclusively negative experiences or disappointments. The sexual mind is especially titillated by recollecting and remembering previous positive emotions and experiences.

Studies have found the following to be the most memorable types of sexual experiences:

- First times, surprises
- Idyllic situations or ideal partners
- Exceeding the allotted time, having limited time

The most valued recollections of first touches rarely occurred in the context of youthful experimentation. They typically have to do with the initial experiences with a new partner, experimenting with new ways of having sex, or making love in a new type of environment. These experiences are characterized by an attraction to something new. They may also be remembrances or stories one tells oneself of when sex first became truly satisfying, or of experiencing the first orgasm with a particular partner.

A memorable experience may also be that one was surprised by a partner who was really active in that situation for the first time, maybe even in a way that we had previously dreamed of.

Men frequently recollect sexual experiences from times previous to meeting their present partner. But for both men and women, the especially powerful experiences often occurred with the person who later became their regular partner. These experiences were particularly intense, and no doubt also played a part in the decision to form an enduring relationship. Women, more than men, often connect their memorable experiences to romance and love.

A crucial question is whether recollecting previous peak experiences produces pressure to keep having those experiences in daily life. There is the risk that life may then appear as a series of disappointments, leading to greater frustration. It should be noted here that a peak experience means one of totally abandoning oneself in the moment; the utility of that moment is lost if the experience is compared to another one.

THE EROTIC AND ROMANTIC MIND

The essence of the erotic

Many whose approach to sex is somewhat awkward nevertheless speak positively and perhaps even admiringly of eroticism. There are at least two reasons for this. First, it is generally believed that eroticism infuses sexuality with spirituality and aestheticism. It also provides sex with a deeper meaning, by merging sex and intimacy. Eroticism opens one's eyes to recognize the partner as a man or a woman, but also as a sexual being. The beloved may resemble an idealized object of desire, and the best possible person to satisfy one's needs.

Second, eroticism as such does not in essence involve sexual activity. It contains only the dream or promise that the desired sexual proximity with the longed-for and desired person might be a possibility. This type of dream exploration reinforces what we ourselves value and consider beautiful.

Erotic thoughts are a kind of foreplay to sexual arousal and open up the pathways to our own sexual imagery and fantasies. They contain the promise of sexual union and fulfillment. The erotic offers and produces sexual tension, arousal and ultimately sexual desire. David Schnarch defines eroticism as the striving for and joy of achieving sexual pleasure.

As humans, we are born as sensual and sexual beings, but we become erotic beings only after we have received from our caretakers the public and hidden messages concerning the eroticism in ourselves. Over time, we integrate these messages into our experiences of touching, and to the very personal images and emotions that are connected to those touches.

At its most fundamental level, eroticism is the source of attraction between people; it is the longing for sexual love, or even lusting for it. Eroticism is best understood as a multifaceted process in which our internal erotic capital and our ability to become aroused are manifested, take shape, become concentrated, become pressurized, as we prepare to receive the longed-for reward.

The nature of eroticism is complicated. The landscape of the erotic is much wider, richer and more complicated than the mere physiology of sex or sexual technique. This erotic richness yields true passion. The most rewarding and the most powerful secrets of eroticism are not easily defined. They are highly individual and difficult to quantify. Through the enchantment of the erotic, sex and the emotional longing for intimacy become intertwined. Eroticism is at the complicated intersection of our hopes, expectations, efforts and anxieties – of everything that makes us human.

The erotic mind conjures images of wondrous love on the one and of lewd debauchery on the other hand. Because it is connected to every facet of our existence, Jack Morin defines eroticism as the interaction of sexual arousal with the challenges of life and of love.

Our conceptions of the erotic unavoidably reflect the seminal influence of Freud on sexual research. Freud made us aware of the fundamental impact of the subconscious on the formation of personality and thereby eroticism. He also forced us to acknowledge that children are sexual beings.

A large number of the processes related to personality and sexuality occur outside of our conscious awareness. By delving into the sexual mind, these processes can be brought to the level of awareness.

One objective of this book is to increase understanding and appreciation of the role of the erotic in our lives. Our most memorable experiences and encounters, and our most captivating fantasies offer glimpses into the erotic bounty of our lives and its many possibilities. It acts as a counterpoint to the feeling that things are not working and that it seems too difficult to even try. In the peak moments of arousal, the dynamic of the erotic emerges in our minds. It is in these moments that it is easiest to recognize and acknowledge.

Romance as inspiration for sexual desire

For some people, the sexuality of the mind is activated especially by the romantic feelings and hopes that they experience in a particular situation, toward a particular

person. In romance, the emotions of attraction and infatuation can be extremely intense and tantalizing – they literally seem to “knock us off our feet”.

One simplifying definition of romance and love is that one's own universe gets a new focus through the object of these feelings. Strong romantic feelings make everything recede and lose its meaning. You may feel that "There are only the two of us in this world, there is no one else – and nothing else matters”.

In romance, keeping the partner happy and satisfied is an important goal for which we are willing to take responsibility. We therefore typically evaluate a situation's success on the basis of our partner's happiness. In the grip of romantic feeling, we often agree to sex specifically for the sake of our partner, and we feel and bear guilt for the partner's possible sexual failures.

Romance is associated with the expectations and images of a perfect romantic scenario. Components of such a scenario include:

- Suitably relaxing and romantic background music, candles, occasionally also flowers, scents and sparkling wine
- An intense atmosphere filled with sensitive, loving and positive feelings
- A peaceful environment
- Dreams of a shared future, living together, getting married and having children
- The requirement of naturalness – that everything happens easily and of its own accord – in other words, naturally
- The body as mode of communication: facial expressions and gestures tell everything that is necessary – words are not always needed – believing that questions and answers can be read directly in the other person's eyes and gestures.

We carry numerous culturally and environmentally derived ideas and expectations regarding love and romance, with which we try to understand and evaluate our own and other people's emotions. We believe that we know how people in love are supposed to behave, also sexually. It is almost as though we were in a play in which we know to expect others to play certain roles. These roles are distinctively gender-based

and rather traditional. They steer women more toward seeking love over sex and to repress their desires and to strive toward pleasing men. The roles expected of men are the opposite in this regard.

Romantic expectations are uniquely shaped by the romantic literature that is aimed at women. The typical narrative in such romances intended for women takes place in the past, in exotic surroundings. The main character is a young, marriageable woman whose innocence is threatened by a sensual, older man. The woman and the man are engaged in a mental and physical power struggle. Ultimately, the heroine proves able to conquer and tame even a violent hero by using her physical attractiveness.

In between the initial lovemaking, which often occurs quite forcefully, and the tranquil, family-focused ending, the main characters advance through various adventures, occasionally encountering one another in the midst of it all. A particular ideal type is a woman who wants to meet an aggressively masculine and powerfully virile potential husband, whom she can control by using her power of attractiveness. This basic scenario was featured in the film *The Piano*, which is a favorite among women.

Romantic love and hormones

In romantic love, desire and sex meld together into one and give rise to a desire to form a bond with the other person. Desire is a selection process through which we seek another for the purpose of having sex. We have been programmed in this way also genetically. The rewards we obtain from sex reinforce this tendency and behavior.

The sexual mind is closely connected to hormonal secretion. When we fall in love, our sexual desire is initially in overdrive, because the novelty of the relationship increases the production of dopamine in our brain. This, on the other hand, stimulates the secretion of testosterone. When the novelty of the relationship subsides, we have to rely on a psychologically different and in some ways more mature mechanism by which our sexual interest in our partner becomes more enduring.

The sense of satisfying pleasure also involves another system of hormones inside us, this one with the tranquilizing and satisfying effect that results from endorphin secretion. Endorphins are intended to reduce stress, and they alleviate pain and can bring experiences of ecstasy. Mutual touching also activates the secretion of oxytocin, known as the “love hormone”. This hormone is much more lasting than those mentioned above and continues to remain effective even as the passionate heat of a relationship’s early stages begins to wane.

On intense stimulation and arousal, the brain emits dopamine, which leads to making irrational decisions. People under dopamine stimulation do not sleep at night, or think clearly, and may not be able to keep their lives in order. In certain situations, this can even lead to sexual dependency. Serotonin, on the other hand, works by putting on the brakes.

Sex-addicted individuals may walk away from a long-term marriage to form other relationships, because they feel that their needs are not being met. Their stories revolve around feeling that they are not being understood. They are perpetually seeking acceptance externally and require repeated sexual release to satisfy their mood and nervous system.

People with sex addiction may sound like this: “I did it because he/she didn’t want to have sex with me. He/she stopped having sex with me a long time ago. I tried, but he/she really didn’t do anything about it. That’s why I did it.”

Erotic self-esteem

Very few of us have learned to have full confidence in ourselves in the erotic realm. When young, we are taught to be cautious with our erotic selves just as our eroticism is still developing. Adults, too, who have heard those warnings and lessons many times over, are frequently hesitant to properly examine the content and purpose behind their arousal. It is not unexpected or surprising that people are at least in part consciously concerned that they might discover things in themselves that they would rather not know.

The best thing that you can do to improve your sexual self-esteem is to respect your own emotions regardless of how illogical they may seem, and to avoid disparaging or suppressing your emotions. Feeling uncomfortable about your emotions is not something you can change or eliminate instantaneously. The process can take years – and the more you believe in and trust yourself, the better the outcome of this work.

Try to remember the first time in your life that felt at least somewhat sexy or arousing. What were the circumstances?

In order to reveal the things that have buried in the unconscious for a long time, we have to be patient and gentle toward ourselves. We must allow the erotic mind to reveal itself at its own pace. This can be practiced by creating opportunities to see more, understand more, accept more and enjoy more.

If you want to fearlessly encounter your own erotic essence, at least three things can be helpful in the process:

- Give up criticizing yourself
- Trust yourself
- Adopt a gentle approach

As surely as passion seeks fulfillment, fulfillment too seeks passion. In between these two sexual core issues, the erotic comes alive.

In long-term relationships, lovers have to find creative ways to balance proximity with the difference that is needed for erotic excitement to occur. This will be discussed more later.

Pornography as part of the erotic

The use of pornography may bring many advantages to sexual life. It can re-ignite sexual desire in people whose eroticism has for one reason or another dozed off. For others, it makes it possible to integrate various imagery into fantasies, thereby

enhancing sexual arousal and a comprehensive sense of one's own sexual appeal. Others may use pornographic images as a tool to reach orgasm.

Many couples have together enjoyed the sexually stimulating effects of pornographic videos. Most commonly, however, pornography is used as a harmless masturbation tool. The use of porn stimulates the sexual mind, and for that reason it is also commonly used in sexual therapy.

Pornography is a kind of masculine counterpart to the romantic narratives of women. A central feature in pornographic narratives is a man having intercourse with an exotic or at least unfamiliar woman, who directly initiates sexual intercourse. Events like these are described by men as the peak moments of their sexual lives. Fundamentally, they concern the same desire as the narratives of women: it is alluring and tantalizing to be the object of someone's strong desire. It appears that people have not experienced these types of emotions frequently enough with their own partner.

Labeling pornography as a negative force in one's life and attempting to eliminate it is not useful in sexual and erotic terms. This kind of attitude and goal limits the opportunities to explore your own preferences more widely and to discover inspiration for renewal in your sexual life.

Erotic peak experiences

Among the most useful and pleasurable ways to open up the mysteries of sexuality and the erotic is to recollect the moments when you experienced the most heightened arousal. These sexual and erotic peaks occur when crucial elements – partner, situational factors (such as lack of hurry) and perhaps a tempting turn of events – produce a tantalizing whole, much like the different instruments in an orchestra, resulting in an accumulation of passion and arousal.

If you carefully examine the times when you experienced the most heightened arousal, you will no doubt feel that during those moments you were able to touch something deeply essential in your own life – something that approaches the essence

of existence itself. Experiences such as these reveal much about the way in which eroticism functions in our lives.

These peak experiences can be illustrated with the metaphor of an onion: peel away a layer, and you keep revealing new information, emotions and images that were not visible on the surface. Few things in life are as individual and multifaceted as sexual arousal.

Maslow, in his well-known hierarchy of needs, studied in particular people whom he termed self-actualized. They enjoy their own company, are relatively free from the neurotic conflicts of their past, and are prepared to meet the challenges of creativity and energy in their lives.

Maslow was impressed by various peak experiences, such as the ability to be overtaken by a painting or a piece of music, a special relationship to nature, reveling in bodily sensations, and the power of expression in dance or sports. During these moments of ecstasy, we are fully present in the moment and subconsciously expressing our deepest selves with ease, blissfully grateful for living life to the fullest. People who have had peak experiences describe them as extremely positive moments that can regenerate one's entire life.

During sexual peak experiences, and also following them, we momentarily encounter many of the characteristics of self-actualization. Peak experiences offer us glimpses of our most authentic and talented selves. In this way, they can instruct and guide us toward spiritual growth. The moments allow us to know who we really are and what we can become.

Peak experiences of sexual arousal are considered highly intimate matters and are rarely spontaneously shared even in the trust and safety of the therapeutic context. During therapy, people are more interested in talking about their various problems. Instead of focusing on them, we might learn more about sexuality and eroticism by delving into the best and most affecting experiences in our own lives. People who accept and integrate this premise in their therapeutic work progress more quickly in therapy. Every person who spends time exploring the details of their most powerful moments of arousal will achieve valuable insights into the ways in which the erotic mind expresses its internal needs and opportunities.

One way or another, erotic peak experiences always reveal hidden aspects of our sensitivity, internal conflicts and unresolved emotional wounds. Too often, people fear that if their deepest experiences of arousal were to be exposed, they would be considered abnormal. Exposing them, then, for most people is possible only in a where they can be completely sure that they will not be judged or ridiculed, thus avoiding the danger of self-recrimination.

Imagine a situation where you want to be sexually aroused, but for some reason are not. What kind of image or fantasy would be most likely to excite you? What are your thoughts about why this image or fantasy is so exciting or arousing? What is the peak of this image or fantasy like, and how does it resolve?

For many people, it is not most essential when recollecting a peak experience to also recollect the person who was the sexual partner. The memorable aspects of the experience are its lustful quality and especially its intensity. For one in four people, the memorable experience happened with a person they did not know at all or whom they had just met in that moment. Men are more likely than women to have had such experiences.

Some people's best sexual experiences took place with multiple sexual partners simultaneously. The most typical are threesomes, which bisexual women are more likely to recollect than others.

Emotions enable peak experiences

Emotions set off infatuation and arousal, and make sex meaningful. Without strong feelings, it is not possible to reach peak experiences.

The emotions that are most important in promoting peak experiences are divided into six types:

- A sense of abundance: joy, celebration, unexpectedness, freedom, euphoria and pride

- The feeling of being satisfied: satisfaction, happiness, relaxation and safety
- Intimacy: love, tenderness, affection, union, oneness and valuing the other
- Anxiety: fear, vulnerability, weakness, worry and nervousness
- Guilt: guilt pangs, meanness, dirtiness and shame
- Anger: hostility, contempt, hatred, resentment and vengeance

The first two types of emotion are central to peak experiences. The peaks themselves produce these openly positive feelings, which as a whole are more a product of a peak experience than its cause. They are also called counter emotions.

The other four types of emotion also produce arousal and peak experiences. Some of them are the ones we especially expect to precede sexual activity, such as love and tenderness.

In certain situations, however, emotions that appear to be negative can produce and yield at least as much energy as love, for example. They are unexpected “love potions” that can either interrupt sexual pleasure or enhance it. These are paradoxical or conflicting emotions.

Negative emotions can sometimes add more drama and dynamic to an arousing situation. The more you are able to recognize these unexpected promoters of sexual arousal, the more helpful it is to incorporate various emotions into passionate sex.

SEXUAL DESIRE AND AROUSAL

The source of sexual desire

Sexual desire is based on sexual interest and motivation. We want, wish and long to experience sexual intimacy and the resulting pleasure. Sexual desire can also be termed conscious longing for satisfying sexual activity with the object of our desire. Desire may give rise to psychological and physiological arousal, but desire can also be a consequence of recognizing that one is aroused. Sexual desire is a central motive in forming both short- and long-term relationships, and in maintaining them. In many cases, the relationship lasts only as long as the desire.

Women in particular may find it difficult to discern which they are feeling in a given moment, desire or arousal, or which emerged first. It has been generally thought that desire gives rise to arousal, but for aging women in particular, an active partner can awaken arousal even when desire was not initially present. Clinical studies, on the other hand, have shown that women often do not recognize or admit being aroused, even though physiological measurements clearly show them to be. The difference between desire and arousal can therefore be a rather complex matter at the individual level.

Where does sexual desire originate? This is one of the engrossing questions related to the sexual mind. At least the following factors can promote the emergence of desire, and its recognition: an interesting partner, sufficient mental and physical ability to perform, previous positive experiences, a suitable degree of selfishness during sex, sufficient sexual self-esteem and good sexual skills. Desire is also prompted by the ability to be consciously present, mutual sensitivity, and adapting to a partner's sexual desires. The mind and the body are gradually stimulated, and also hormonal secretion creates the need to be increasingly close to the other person.

Sexual desire also comprises many other aspects, such as sexual thoughts and imagery, arousing tension, anticipation and release. From the standpoint of desire, it is critical to achieve the experience of being accepted and desired. Then, it becomes easy to have exciting sexual thoughts and to get into a mood that is favorable to sex.

The challenge to desire and arousal is the ability to be consciously and erotically present. Instead of conscious presence, the mind can easily wander off into entirely other matters.

“When you have a thousand other things swirling around in your mind, it’s hard to focus on your own and your partner’s pleasure, which appears to be a major problem.”

There are innate individual differences among people when it comes to sexual desire. If the innate desires of the partners in a couple are comparable, it is easier for them to develop and maintain a mutually satisfying sex life. Of course, problems that emerge in the course of the relationship can have an effect on desire. One partner may become, at least temporarily, the partner with the least desire.

The partner with less desire has the most power in the relationship, basically able to decide when sex occurs so that the other partner has to make concessions. Studies conducted in the United States have found that an imbalance in desire can lead to sex becoming something that is traded, for example as payment for taking care of particular household chores.

Usually, lack of desire is easier for the partner who is less interested in sex. As the frequency of sex declines, this partner in essence gets what he or she wants. The situation may nevertheless cause guilt and worry, and the other partner’s greater desire may give rise to fears that one’s lack of desire presents a threat to the relationship. Perhaps the partner will look for someone else – someone with more desire?

Stories of missing sexual desire

Very often, the lack of desire has to do with someone actively or even consciously suppressing the internal emotions that spur desire. Negative thoughts can launch a series of automatic reactions and result in the need to somehow dispose of a situation that has been deemed threatening. Suppression seems to be frequently connected to a situation where the first message that we receive of the sexual initiative on the part of the other person is negative, or we modify or interpret the message as negative.

Sexual desire is by no means a mere conditional reflex, but also dependent on the will and cognition. Women in long-term relationships often describe sexual desire as

something that occurs as a result of the will, and associate waning desire to them not thinking about sex as often as they used to. But even the greatest will is not always enough to produce desire.

“The mind begins to warm up when you give it heat.”

“I would like to feel desire. I love this man, but I doubt the relationship can go on, because we aren’t able to talk about it.”

For some, waning desire is connected to a kind of giving up of hope that the situation could result in something rewarding for them. In long-term relationships in particular, a couple may drift to a situation where one partner has lost their desire, for example due to illness or medication. The other partner may find it difficult to freely express their desire when they have had to suppress it for a long time because of a lack of desire on their partner’s part. It may even feel embarrassing. For whatever reason, lack of desire in men appears to produce a feeling in women that they themselves are no longer attractive, desirable or sexy.

The connection between mood and sexual desire is undeniable and powerful. In particular, depression and lack of sexual desire go hand in hand. The problem of lacking desire is additionally reinforced by low self-esteem and experiences of oneself as worthless. Without a partner’s positive encouragement, desire may gradually become an impossibility.

“Recently, we discussed our lack of sex, and my husband said that when he gets to have sex with me, he starts to treat me with appreciation again. I, on the other hand, want him to appreciate me first so that I can agree to have sex with him; otherwise I just feel like a sexual slave.”

In a recent study conducted in Finland, looking at lack of sexual desire in women, women’s writings describe the personal, mental ideal or a kind of script according to which their sexuality is supposed to occur. Predictably, the scripts that define roles for the genders originate already in childhood. Many women’s writings spoke of disappointments in the content or outcome of such scripts, which is natural, since the topic of the writings was lack of sexual desire. Often, the problem had to do with

reconciling the attitudes and impressions of two different sexes in day-to-day life. Sexual scripts rarely come together in the bedroom if the courage to talk about them is lacking.

The writings also revealed certain emotional life traps in which writers had become stuck either consciously or unconsciously. Typical life traps included abandonment, i.e., fear of being abandoned; vulnerability, i.e., feeling under threat; emotional deprivation, i.e., lack of love; and subjugation, i.e., pleasing the other during sex.

The brain contains a system of brakes for when sex does not feel like a good idea. Stress, exhaustion, blackmail, threats, stipulations and other negative messages bring about a situation where the brake becomes activated, and may stay activated. This brake engages also whenever sex does not produce pleasure or when, in a negative sense, it only contains elements that please the partner. One's lack of sexual desire is a natural consequence in situations like these.

The writings clearly revealed the significant impact of exhaustion on sex. The lack of arousal in the central nervous system (spinal cord and brain) leads to the brain not being able to receive sexually excitable messages. When the state of sexual arousal is low, also cognition, observation and motor functions remain sluggish, and the sexual message is not acknowledged. We cannot always be in the mood. The body, as well as the brain and the central nervous system, needs to rest.

Cognitive function is the series of events by which we handle and process information. More concretely, in connection with sex, cognitive function is related to how we observe various things before, during or after sex. Of essence is whether our attention is fully engaged in the event. Also important are our recollections of the past, the lessons we have learned, or what we may have been led to believe regarding various sexual matters.

Our internal interpretive and functional model is what guides us also during sex. Inside the minds of many women seems to be a rather inflexible script that stipulates in advance how sex is supposed to go and whether the prognosis for it is good or bad. Preconceptions can easily lead us to erroneously select and misinterpret the things that occur during sex. The interpretations and observations of many of the writers were regrettably negative.

Hardly any of the women writing about their lack of sexual desire mentioned fantasies, which may be part of the reason why they had difficulty experiencing desire. Fantasies can be a useful tool and a form of sexual capital when our thoughts begin to wander and our emotions steep us into negative territory. Our own ideas and expectations regarding sex, and our own attitudes, are what decide in that situation.

Your own sexual script may also mean that for whatever reason, you have chosen a role that does not involve displaying open sexual interest. In historical times, this may have been a calculatedly virtuous role. Today, it may involve sexual abstinence, perhaps as a countermove toward one's partner – for example, by taking on the role of martyr.

“Maybe I should stop being a martyr and just throw myself in and let my passions take me?”

Shame is a significant emotion that can inhibit desire, particularly in new situations. An awareness of shame may hold us back from behaving freely and without inhibition in intimate situations, the basis for much of the decision making in sexual situations. Shame may stop us from experiencing pleasure and authentically encountering the other.

If we choose being accepting and being consciously present during sex, we are able to control the messages and interpretations that emerge in our mind. We can decide which messages to grab hold of and how to interpret them. We can also modify our emotions, especially those being fed by our negative mind. These can easily dampen our desire and arousal.

It is important to use our senses during sex. Our senses are free, and if we allow them to be, eager and sensitive to receive pleasure via various stimuli. The body begins to act through the messages transmitted by stimuli. Thoughts and fantasies can help with arousal. Being consciously present during sex enables us to understand the messages transmitted by our partner, even wordlessly. We are able to intuit how our partner is feeling and encountering the various aspects of sex.

It can never be overstated how important it is to bring up in speech to the partner the thoughts and images one is presently having with regard to the sex you are

engaged in. The images become amplified only when they are shared with the partner, which is not always easy. Positive responses to them can be crucial in increasing the level of desire.

From women writing about lack of sexual desire:

“I would need more praise and admiration to feel that I am beautiful and sexy. In a couple (at least ours), unfortunately, this kind of praise is rare. I too am guilty of this.”

“I am really bad at talking about sexual things with my husband, not to mention with an outsider. I can’t even think about going to a sex therapist. It would feel awful to expose my own intimate issues to an outsider. Talking would probably help unravel the blockages, but I wish that my husband and I would first know how to talk about things between the two of us.”

Responding to sexual stimuli

According to one model, sexual desire is a consequence of being subjected to sexual stimuli or of having sexually related thoughts. In other words, the mind can play a significant role in spurring desire. An interesting question to consider is what type of stimulus is effective or suitable enough to produce sexual desire. At the next level, what is decisive is how sensitive a person is to a particular stimulus – and their ability to respond to it. Something that acts as a powerful stimulant to one person can feel only neutral to another. This has been found to be true especially among women with low sexual desire.

In order to understand the process of desire and arousal, we need to understand for ourselves how we usually recognize something in our environment as sexual clues or stimuli. The next step is to determine our attitude toward these clues, and how we tend to respond to them, possibly repeatedly.

A particular sexual stimulus can easily lead to feeling desire and becoming aroused, if we are accustomed to associating it with rewarding sexual experiences. The same stimulus does not bring the same result, if it evokes negative thoughts or relates to previous, bad experiences. A previous personal history can assign a particular sexual stimulus completely opposite interpretations and reactions.

Conceptions about what constitutes sexual stimuli, and the ability to recognize them, differ on average between men and women. This explains why there seem to be more sexual stimuli available to men and why they are more likely to report them in sexual surveys. Because men observe more sexual stimuli in their environment than women do, it is not surprising that according to averages measured in surveys, men experience a significantly higher level of sexual desire compared to women. An alert, observant mind can keep the body, too, in a state of desire.

Obstacles to passion create arousal

One might imagine that the obstacles that stand in the way of acting on sexual thoughts would interfere with sexual matters, but the obstacles seem to have a surprisingly important role in increasing sexual motivation. In fact, various barriers in the way of a sexual goal seem to arouse at least as frequently as they inhibit arousal. It appears to be part of human nature to want what is not easy to get.

The most impassioned responses emerge in situations in which two competing forces are present. First, sexual attraction pulls you to approach the object of your desire. Perhaps part of that person's body, or even all of it, corresponds closely to our sexual ideals.

If we are genuinely interested in this person, we will note particular advantageous aspects of their character that we want "with the package". In addition, we want the object of our desire to see in us the characteristics that are valuable to that person. When these two things occur, the mutual attraction will be very dynamic.

Soon, or gradually, our attraction must encounter one or more obstacles that we must clear. This is the second requirement for creating an extremely strong erotic reaction. Perhaps the obstacle is not knowing whether the interest is mutual. Maybe

the person is unavailable, or in some other way unsuitable. If the attraction is romantic in nature, the possibility of being hurt may demand that we retreat. We may also be strangers to each other and come across one another only in passing. Maybe we only cast meaningful glances that never advance any further.

As with ocean tides, it is natural and typical for erotic experiences to consist of forces that attract and repel communication. This infuses the experience with energy and makes it interactive and possibly even dangerous. We are most intensely aroused when slightly off kilter and uncertain, mentally balancing on a kind of dangerous precipice between ecstasy and annihilation.

Eroticism is interplay between the various challenges of arousal and life and love. Each person learns to combine different obstacles to increase arousal. The combinations of things that produce more arousal are repeated, further cementing those pathways.

Feeling conflicted about a particular attraction or infatuation may make the object of our emotions appear even more desirable. A useful way of thinking about 'conflicted' in this sense is as an internal form of erotic equality. When we feel sexually conflicted attraction, two of the key ingredients of major sexual arousal – infatuation and obstacles – are activated simultaneously in one person. At the right ratio and in the right circumstances, the end result can be powerful arousal. Conflicting feelings are transformed into a focus on pleasure, and the conflicts are cast aside for the time being.

Rules and restrictions create prisoners and victims

Early-childhood moral upbringing is generally so thoroughly antierotic that it has little use in adulthood. The sad truth is that conventional morality helps us neither understand nor respect our eroticism. Instead, it demands that we treat certain sexual desires with critical disbelief while blindly clinging to particular, rigid rules of behavior. Most of the time, the rules target and center on forbidden acts, such as sex without the intention to procreate, parallel relationships, homosexuality, masturbation, oral or anal sex, and so on.

Conventional morality fails to help us understand the multidimensional nature of our eroticism. It invests and holds in vast amounts of energy in its fear of sexuality's disruptive and potentially harmful aspects. The outcome is that conventional morality often works more against a healthy eroticism than inspires it. However, we should not forget that rules and restrictions can also increase a person's temptation to engage in precisely the acts that the restrictions are aimed at suppressing.

We need our ability to convert our "naughtiness" into arousal. This process begins in childhood as creative adaptation to the unfortunate fact that the adults in charge of our wellbeing are generally unwilling to accept our sexual curiosity.

If being "naughty" brings you joy as an adult, you can appreciate the prohibitions that you encountered as a child. Your desires have finally overcome the forces that tried to thwart you when you were young. You have become sufficiently free to make use of the prohibitions for your own pleasure and enjoyment.

Unfortunately, many people grew up in a home that was so abundantly sex-negative that engaging in sex that defiantly flouts the old prohibitions becomes a central feature of their eroticism. People like this basically remain prisoners of those sexual prohibitions; it is no exaggeration to say that they have been turned into victims as surely as if they had been sexually harassed.

For people trapped by their prohibitions, every opportunity to experience enjoyment causes a violent internal conflict. When they experience arousal, they are easily able to tap into their feelings of guilt. If they do temporarily set aside their inhibitions for the sake of desire, they pay for it later in remorse and shame. The conflict is so unpleasant that some people develop a disgust toward sexuality in general, even largely trying to avoid arousal. In the most severe cases, an experience of perfectly normal sexual interest can trigger a panic attack.

Some people who are prisoners of prohibitions develop sexual obsessions and compulsively repeat the things that were most forbidden to them in childhood. They sustain their eroticism by engaging in a secret sexual life and thus avoiding any

potentially sex-negative assessments. If their secret sex lives are later revealed, it may be a shock to their friends, family and others in their close circle.

Flouting rules as sexual inspiration

Society's morals and various rules regarding sexual behavior set limitations on our lives that may not only produce inhibitions but also enhance our arousal in certain situations. This is connected to the observations we made in childhood and adolescence regarding how our parents, in particular, responded to sexually interesting and arousing situations. We learned models that determine whether arousal is seen as permissible and the kinds of situations in which it might be appropriate.

Breaking the rules may increase the risk of feeling guilt and shame. Especially early on in life, sexual prohibitions carry the threat of punishment and even denial of love, which can bring on a profound sense of shame for even the most innocent sexual desire.

People's erotic lives are balanced, however, by the fact that living in a sexually restrictive environment causes people to experience erotic arousal when they violate the various restrictions. The secrets and prohibitions make sexuality even more titillating.

Sometimes violating the prohibitions causes people to feel "naughty," dirty, guilty or afraid of possible punishment, which can limit their experimentation. At other times, these emotions can increase the sexual charge and the desire to repeat the acts that produce those emotions.

The convergence of breaking rules in youth and simultaneously experiencing arousal can dramatically increase the likelihood that, as part of their adult eroticism, a person will retain the tendency to become aroused by behaviors and fantasies that violate certain rules. Breaking such rules can even boost their self-esteem.

Some people find it especially exciting to take risks in their sexual lives, to feel naughty and disobedient. These risks include the risk of being discovered or caught in a morally questionable situation, or becoming infatuated with partners who are viewed as unsuitable.

Challenging and problematic emotions as a source of arousal

Each person's sexual core theme (more on this later) evolves gradually in response to the challenges and possible conflicts of early life. The erotic mind attempts to take charge of the problems by utilizing the barriers that stem from the problems as stimulants for desire and arousal. At the same time as many people become aroused by this means, they are also aware that these sexual scripts ultimately connect to the same problems that they have tried to solve their whole lives.

If you have been unlucky in your relationships, make a list of the people you were most infatuated with and think about what characteristics they have in common. It's important to be aware whether you are trying to work through the painful relationships that you had in the past by subconsciously choosing partners with whom you are in a way doomed to repeat them over and over again. You can solve this problem only by being openly conscious of your motives.

The particular purpose of the sexual scripts that fuel and guides our lives is to reinforce our own special value and desirability as the protagonist of these stories. Things go awry if sexual interest begins to develop during a stage of life when one happens to be beset by constant feelings of inferiority. Sometimes such deeply held beliefs become so inextricably entangled with the sources of our arousal that they can be simultaneously incredibly arousing as well as a reminder of our sense of inferiority. In practice, this means that sexual arousal has become melded into one's self-hatred. It may be very difficult for someone like this to accept the arousal-producing naughtiness in themselves.

The erotic mind is very conscious of possible sexual restrictions and the potential to be hurt, and it tries to compensate for this by converting self-doubt into strength, weakness into power, pain into pleasure, and daily difficulties into erotic possibilities. Whatever internal or external obstacles get in the way don't matter, and the erotic impulses spring forth from a deep-seated desire to reinforce the self. This positive

process, however, requires one absolute precondition: that deep in the psyche, there is buried at least the seed of self-esteem.

Some people can be quite self-critical and concerned with achieving perfection. They are perpetually compiling evidence to prove their imperfection. Others have a driving need to win approval by trying to please everyone. Yet others become super-achievers, and regardless of how much they achieve, they always retain a conviction of their own worthlessness.

In most cases, self-hatred can nevertheless not erase the things that stimulate us. The erotic mind seeks pathways toward self-acceptance, and someone's sexual core theme can meet this challenge in a number of ways, primarily with the help of two strategies. In the first strategy, the self-hater becomes master of their own suffering by actively seeking out sexual situations that are humiliating. Strategy two involves creating the illusion of control: when the self-hater pushes onto others the same sources of degradation that are the sources of his or her own suffering, the victim turns into the victimizer.

Anxiety and guilt as sources of arousal

It may sound surprising that emotions such as anxiety and guilt can so frequently enhance sexual arousal. Anxiety increases arousal by way of its influence on the overall state of physical arousal. All kinds of arousal, both sexual and non-sexual, increase muscle tension, blood pressure and the frequency of heartbeats and breathing. The body responds in the same way to situations that induce either anxiety or sexual arousal.

The experience of anxiety is closely connected to defying restrictions. At least some of the arousal that stems from rule-breaking derives from the fear of being caught, becoming the target of some kind of disapproval, or the fear of being punished.

We are most likely to experience great arousal if we envision ourselves traveling along the knife edge between safety and perilousness. We know the risk, but tell ourselves that we are somehow protected from actual catastrophe.

After anxiety, guilt is the second-most common source and reinforcer of arousal on the emotional level. Guilt can sabotage sex in many ways, but it also serves as a great

motivator for sexual experiences. As a practical barrier, it can enhance the attractiveness of a situation and stimulate desire. This is a rather surprising paradox: guilt can serve as a powerful source of inspiration for sexual arousal.

When guilt provokes arousal, the reaction is usually a result of some emotional factor that is connected with breaking rule; in sex, as in other areas of life, certain things can be especially good specifically because they are so bad. This is manifested even in the way we speak, when we instantly know what it means when something is said to be “sinfully good”.

In the cycle of attraction, guilt, arousal and remorse, the mutual attraction between those things makes many “illegal” relationships almost irresistible. With a few exceptions, sexual activities and fantasies that involve inappropriate partners, prohibited acts or the risk of exposure are fueled at least in part by a sense of guilt.

Instead of merely suffering from guilt, people occasionally use it deliberately and playfully as a way to spice up their sex. Perhaps you and your partner decide to slip behind the garage during a party, to have a good time. Your slight nervousness about the possibility of getting caught adds to the enjoyment, as do thoughts along the lines of, “We shouldn’t be doing this” or “I’m going to be so messy afterwards” or maybe even “What would my mother think?” Perhaps you recall events from early childhood, when playing doctor behind the garage made you feel really guilty. These kinds of recollections can be deliciously exciting.

Crossing the boundaries of privacy and fantasy

Already when young, we learn to seek out privacy in order to avoid our parents’ all-seeing eyes – especially if we used to feel that they did not accept or understand us. As adults, most people want to engage in sexual activities within strictly private boundaries. However, for some adults, the struggle for autonomy in youth and the attempts to break the rules of privacy provide both a suitable framework and the inspiration for arousal – for example, from the titillating experience of streaking or flashing while naked, then hiding, and finally also risking discovery. Even for married couples it can be especially titillating to make love in a car in public. In reality,

they aren't really afraid of being caught or of possible punishment, but the atmosphere of partaking in forbidden fruit heightens the situation's erotic tension.

We often find irresistibly attractive those partners who draw our attention because of their inappropriate or even forbidden behavior. The relationship may feel threatening or disturbing, but we know that it is the forbidden nature of the relationship that makes it so immensely arousing – something that is not possible to achieve in long-term and committed relationships. The power of the erotic charge arises from the novelty of the relationship and from the heightened longing its newness entails, in combination with the sense that there is something “wrong” about the relationship.

Feeling “naughty” can provoke arousal that stems from our awareness of the interplay between desire and prohibition. Each person has internalized at least some of the restrictions that have been placed on our sexual lives, and adopted them as part of their values. Setting boundaries for one's sexual behavior may feel like the rational, right thing to do.

The realm of the sexual imagination is probably the place where we find it easiest to do away with the restrictive effects of the rules and taboos. Through our imagination, we can experience thrilling feelings about things that could otherwise be upsetting even to ourselves. Many people take things much further in their fantasies than in their actual lives – after all, fantasies can harm no one. At their most useful, they can free us from the constraints of our social, moral and practical limitations.

Most of us want to prove that we are better, that we have managed to detach from the rules that continue to restrict us even as adults. Perhaps that is why sexual intercourse and fantasies where we satisfy our desires with abandon can help us accept ourselves and feel pride in our ability to be daring.

Problems on the way to arousal

If you spend any time trying to understand erotic problems – also those you have not experienced – you may be surprised at how much this can deepen your appreciation for and interest in the erotic mind. Well-functioning eroticism is one where problems are not avoided – they are worked through and transformed.

A lot of things can go wrong when it comes to eroticism. The same things that enhance arousal can also interfere with it. On the other hand, what inhibits arousal can also strengthen it. Virtually any thought, feeling or circumstance can be either sexually stimulating or counteractive. Sexual feelings and arousal tendencies are largely individual and situational.

Sexual desire is now a major subject of sexual therapy. Desire is not easy to measure or detect – it is a very subjective state. In it converge, among other things, the biochemical effects of the situation and its interpretation, memories of past sexual experiences, anticipation of future opportunities, and the association of specific sexual preferences with everyday erotic events.

Individual differences, especially in terms of arousal, are significant. While you might be aroused by the idea of a neighbor witnessing you and your partner making love through an open window, your lover or spouse may feel insecure and awkward until complete privacy is restored. What may be a deliciously risky, arousal-building tidbit for you may provoke genuine concern in your partner regarding what a potential neighbor might think. Or worse: what the neighbor might later tell others. In your own private mind, however, you can keep the image of the peeping neighbor that is contributing to your arousal.

The experience of a powerful infatuation and attraction to a certain person can be a confusing combination that consists of gradually emerging observations, projections of one's fantasies, and also mere coincidence. They are so thoroughly intertwined that they cannot be separated by any method. Sometimes, the object of your attraction is exactly as they seemed. Other times, you feel betrayed when the person turns out to be someone completely different.

Most of us have occasionally become very infatuated with someone who is unavailable. Perhaps this person is already in a relationship, or too young, or not interested in you regardless of how strongly you feel about them. Or your partner is interested in you in a different way than you would like, for example, just for sex.

Some people protect themselves from the pain of their unfulfilled desire by quashing the desire or by acting as though they had no emotional needs. Others try to alleviate their longing by responding only to people who seek or chase them. They stay

clear of the people they would most want. The strategies protect these people from the pain of unrequited desire – but they pay a price in a reduction of their own vitality and spontaneity.

Longing as a source of arousal

For some people, the feeling and experience of longing is at the core of their eroticism. Without longing, there is no arousal. By observing certain subtle signs and through their highly sensitive instincts, they invariably become infatuated with people who are already taken, in some way awkward or complicated, or whose sexual orientation is unsuitable, or who lives too far away. Although certain infatuations can bring on problems and ultimately pain, they can be momentarily wonderfully successful in generating ecstatic longing and passion in the infatuated person.

Bonds based on longing are passionate, stormy and profoundly affecting. People sincerely seeking a long-term relationship find regrettably often that the powerful longing at the source of their arousal proves inconsistent with their main objective. The most difficult challenge in eroticism fueled by longing is not desire or arousal – those are easy – what is difficult is achieving the longed-for fulfillment.

We as people have the ability in our minds to form an image of something or someone that we want but do not yet have. Or, someone does not in fact exist in the way that we would want, or as often as we would want. This is an ability that develops in us soon after birth and stays with us permanently. When we long for someone, the reality of their absence or unobtainability constitutes an obstacle that we can try to overcome through recollection and fantasies.

Regardless of whether the object of our longing is real or imagined, longing is essentially a kind of fantasy that both children and adults engage in. When our longing for a particular person is intense, we not only form an internal image of the object of our desire – we actually feel what it felt like when we were near that person. Without our ability to create fantasies, the longing would simply not be possible.

As with imagination in general, longing is very selective. It focuses the mind on the most desired qualities of the longed-for person and ignores or minimizes the

unpleasant ones. If the relationship with the object of our longing is real, we greatly anticipate the opportunities to spend time together and enjoy any type of interaction with them.

There is a natural confluence between longing and romantic love. It is difficult to imagine infatuation without the feeling of worry that fills the hours when the lovers are apart. What is this worry but a particular kind of fantasy? When the lovers finally meet again and embrace, and exchange a passionate kiss or make love, their joy is usually short-lived. New obstacles soon emerge, and their longing continues.

Longing is more common in women than men. Serious longing is unquestionably integrally connected to romance. Those who experience intense longing often prefer to achieve arousal by visualizing a prolonged seduction or some other even more complicated path to fulfillment.

There is no denying the substantial erotic significance of longing. Yet one of the great paradoxes of erotic life is that while longing demands fulfillment, fulfillment inhibits longing. One example is a pair of colleagues who for years maintain a powerful but impossible mutual sexual curiosity. Perhaps they occasionally find satisfaction in a random interlude of sexual intercourse that may not even be very successful. Some erotic infatuations are founded on the inaccessibility of the other person, and they cannot survive if the longing is suddenly quenched.

In more complex infatuations, the longing is normally released in the course of a passionate encounter and also for some time afterwards. It returns when the lovers part. The longing renews their passion, at least for a while. On the other hand, predictable coexistence between cohabiting partners makes it increasingly difficult to maintain longing. For many lovers, the fulfillment of their longing presents a serious obstacle to the continuity of their desire.

Longing can also contain uncertainty and fear, for example regarding whether the infatuation is truly reciprocal. Will I ever see this person again? Do they feel the same way that I feel? Do they miss me as much as I miss them? Are we as sexually as compatible as I hope we are? Am I setting myself up for risk of disappointment or pain? Such feelings of insecurity tend to increase arousal when the lovers meet again.

Anticipation – short-term longing

Longing and anticipation are variations of the same theme. Both arise from a chasm between the desire and the reality of a given situation. Their difference is that longing generally has to overcome major obstacles – perhaps the partner is in another relationship, and you are obliged to wait for their rare phone call. Or the beloved lives in another town and because of the distance, the partners see each other only occasionally.

With anticipation, the waiting is nowhere near as prolonged or painful as with longing, because the fulfillment of desire seems relatively near. When we long for someone, we are intensely aware of being without something, whereas anticipation is almost entirely focused on the goal of once more being together.

Both longing and anticipation are particularly strong prior to sexual contact. Once sex has begun, anticipation generally recedes as one's focus turns on the pleasures of the moment.

Teasing introduces anticipation to the interaction between lovers even when all obstacles to their contact have already been overcome. Sensually skillful people learn to touch each other in ways that reinforce rather than reduce longing. This is about the slow and sensual build-up of arousal.

Intimacy and the desire to become one

All sexual experiences involve physical pleasure and self-expression, sometimes even a certain kind of self-exposure. Sharing sexual proclivities and “quirks” (as defined by our own minds) with another person always amounts to exposing oneself and is therefore an act of boldness. No wonder we feel accepted on a deep level, when our partner is so enamored with our show of genuine self-expression. Directed, powerful self-expression in combination with positive feedback from a treasured partner can evoke a powerful feeling of intimacy in virtually everyone and lead to a memorable sexual experience.

Feelings of intimacy are often accompanied by a strong desire to merge with the other person. During infatuation, this urge to become one can have a most dramatic

effect on arousal. The desire to be near the other person is so intense that the lovers basically merge in pleasure and a sense of mutual connection. For those in the grip of infatuation, love is without a doubt the best and, for many people, perhaps the only source of arousal.

But the intimacy of being close to the other person can also become a barrier to arousal. This can happen when intimacy becomes a demand or requirement, or if it threatens to blur the separation of the lovers as individuals, which is the central foundation of all attraction. If intimacy comes to resemble a task, something that must be done in place of natural satisfaction, for reasons of debt of gratitude or obligation, intimacy begins to inhibit arousal instead of encouraging it.

The erotic mind may eagerly move toward the risks associated with exposing ourselves on an intimate level. The subconscious does not distinguish between imagined and actual risks. As soon as we become convinced that we will not in fact be facing that particular risk or challenge, our enthusiasm may turn into avoidance. Many long-term partners share this same fate by allowing their intimacy to become a necessary compulsion as opposed to a pleasurable choice.

In the early stages of a romance, the desire for powerful merging, for union, draws the lovers irresistibly toward one another. Later, as they begin to do everything together, developing and processing emotions and opinions more as a unit than as two individual people, they are digging the ground underneath the sense of one another as different and separate which was the original source of their mutual attraction and excitement.

For both intimacy and passion to flourish for longer than beyond the initial infatuation in the relationship, it should be acknowledged that each stems from very different, and very specific, motives.

Intimacy involves the desire to know every detail about the other person's fears and dreams. Passion is born of regarding the loved one from afar and appreciating them as an individual who can never be fully known.

Romantic desire and arousal

The construction behind romance is a collective mythology that contains stories and dreams about love, spiritual union, closeness and intimacy. The identity of many women in particular is largely defined through intimate relationships. These relationships are expected to account for a significant portion of the purpose of one's life.

The specific objectives of lust are arousal and orgasm, whereas romantic infatuation always entails longing for a passionate bond with another person. These romantic impulses originate in the deepest recesses of the human psyche. Sometimes people long almost desperately for the loved one to feel as strongly about them as they feel about the loved one. This seems, even to a frightening extent, often to be the only alternative to rejection and loneliness. One's own existence may become completely dependent on the feelings that the beloved expresses for one.

In most cases, the object of romantic desire is just one very special person – no one else will do. We are infatuated with who this person is and what they think and feel, especially with regard to ourselves. The infatuation, of course, skews our observations. We pay attention only to everything that is charming and desirable in the object of our infatuation. The infatuation conspires to erase any negative characteristics, transforming them into delightful signs of the loved one's specialness. Once this one-sided fantasy subsequently recedes, we may feel betrayed and angry.

At the heart of erotic desire is the insistence on reciprocity from the person with whom we are infatuated. Yet the feeling of infatuation may not become crystallized without some experience of or doubt regarding the risk of rejection. Inevitably, love and romance both entail the desire of one lover to control the other. Critical emotional interests are at stake and must be protected. One's own wellbeing seems to be dependent on someone else's actions and feelings.

On wise, mature lust

Mature lust develops from childhood, from the simple examples and events that are connected to our awakening sexual and sensual curiosity. If adults prohibit sexual games between children, this is a signal to us that sexual curiosity is something bad.

Later, this can cause people to distrust their lustful feelings. Over-protected children are often unprepared to deal with the more demanding challenges of human relationships.

Our early emotional attachments are the antecedents to mature, adult love. They materialize first toward our mother, then the wider family, and finally communities of friends and acquaintances. Children practice these attachments when they play “house” or “doctor”. The interacting and negotiating that they engage in during play provide opportunities for the development of social skills.

One of the main challenges of our erotic lives is how to pleurably combine our lustful needs and our emotional relationship to our lover. The goal is to bring together affection and care on the one hand with passion on the other hand. But the people and situations that stimulate us sexually may be quite different from those that are involved in care and affection.

As a word, ‘lust’ may have a negative overtone, but there are many kinds of lust. “Wise lust” is the process by which we discover our true sexual desires. It also means boldly exploring what truly excites us. Afterwards, we can begin to consider where those desires originate and what they mean to us.

A pure lust, or lust for purely sexual pleasure, can be characterized as selfish lust. This type of passion for the object of our sexual interest takes precedence over all of our other endeavors. The image of this lust is soulless, stripped down, mechanical.

Wise lust, on the other hand, unites the body, the mind and the spirit, and gives and draws upon the physical pleasure that we experience via the deep emotional connection that we have to ourselves and to the other person. It is a process that involves a search for authenticity, harmony and meaning. It transcends simple desire and sexual satisfaction. Even in the absence of emotions, it is deliberate and a source of deep satisfaction and beauty.

Things that promote the adoption of wise lust:

- in the body: biological desire for physical pleasure and satisfaction; the adoption of our body as an erotic landscape

- in the mind: understanding our desires and respecting where they originate and what they mean; self-acceptance and awareness of one's self-worth; engaging imagination and intuition in the service of lust
- in the spirit: respect, dignity and grace vis-à-vis one's partner and oneself; the desire to achieve a higher purpose through deep sexual connection; encountering oneself and one's partner with an open heart.

Whether the shape that our fantasies take is traditional, such as a romantic seduction, or more unusual, for example certain extreme fantasies of subjugation, they allow us to connect physically, emotionally and spiritually to the deepest parts of our psyche. We resuscitate things that may have been repressed or lost in us, and in this process, we regenerate ourselves into whole beings.

Without the benefits of wise lust, we move from one relationship to the next, confused as to why they feel unsatisfactory and why they perhaps always fail. Detached from our true selves, we are more likely to suffer from sexual addiction, romantic obsessions, performance anxiety, lack of sexual interest, other sexual problems, or to exercise our lust impulsively or heedlessly. Without self-knowledge and self-acceptance, our imagination suffers from lack of diversity and we are unable to find real solutions to fill the emptiness and boredom of our relationships.

The core of sexuality and arousal

The core content of each person's sexual and erotic arousal is made up of different things. A powerful and satisfying arousal emerges when strong mutual attraction combines with ardent sensuality. Such an experience can be further enhanced by each individual's core sources of arousal, particularly those associated with our earliest arousal experiences.

As stated earlier, everything that can excite us can also, in different circumstances, quash our arousal. And nearly every factor that stops us from realizing our sexuality can later prove, after all, to be arousing. This illustrates how rich and complex our

sexual minds are, and how demanding a task it can be to become acquainted with the erotic core of our partner.

Very often, people's individual sex-related narratives contain a generous dose of drama. The invitation for release can come in the shape of, perhaps, a hint of depravity, teasing the other person by making them wait, or a domination-implying whisper in the other's ear. Also, longing and anticipation before sex always create an erotic tension, and rule-breaking, overcoming obstacles and power games during sex can all be quite arousing.

Situations that provoke special arousal are often observed and expressed only after a familiar situation or chain of events has been identified. They are like the script to a play, according to which we, at a certain point, unleash the emotions stipulated by our role and the moment. Lovers are always like two actors on the stage – they know how to proceed in the given situation and how to meet the other's expectations. Failure to do so can bring on a crisis.

Sometimes the script is about cultural rules, at others, about agreed-upon and perhaps conventional customs regarding relationships. Most often, however, arousal is a result of instinctively following the narrative of our internal scripts or subconsciously adopted habits. Many of us know the type of chain of events that we find particularly difficult to resist – our favorite sexual script.

The scripts used by the sexual mind are shaped by our sex and gender. Culture provides slightly different scripts for sex based on whether one is male or female. These scripts include deeply seated, sex-determined ideas and expectations regarding when, where, with whom, how, and how much sex should be had within the bounds of decency. Even people who rebel against sexual rules define their lives in relation to these cultural perceptions.

Cultural scripts are not of interest in terms of individual preferences, whereas the scripts related to interpersonal relationships and role expectations evolve gradually over time as we learn and adopt the social rules that prevail in our community. Our personalities play a major role in the learning process that leads to the emergence of different erotic styles. Despite this difference, people in various cultural subgroups share considerable similarities in terms of how they view sex, whom they consider

desirable, and the types of roles they are willing to assume in the context of sexual interaction.

The sexual mind contains the most personal of our scripts. While they are inevitably influenced by norms regarding culture and human relationships, the internal scripts of the sexual mind reflect, above all, each person's individual responses to their life experiences from childhood onward. Therefore, there are countless sexual themes and scripts in the world.

Sexual scripts can be intricately detailed, whereas sexual themes are more like light sketches of things or scenes in one's life. People may have numerous sexual scripts, but only a few themes that unite them.

The core theme of sexual lust and erotic arousal

Sexual peak experiences become possible when one's internal core theme of sexuality successfully meets its counterpart in the real world. The most electrifying sexual stimuli are lit up by a scenario that could be called the core theme of eroticism. It is the most brilliant and well-functioning product of the sexual and erotic mind – a search engine of the sexual mind that attaches the mind to the desired object, once one is found.

The sexual core theme begins its long road to development already in childhood. Initially it becomes sketched out in fantasies and daydreams that we have probably already forgotten as adults. Since these early images often derive from impulses and objects of attraction that have been perceived as inappropriate for children, we hide them as secrets.

Even as adults we may keep certain very personal, sexually stirring things carefully hidden from others, possibly even ourselves. It is definitely worth the risk to look into them more closely. Their significance is so enormous that even the tiniest discoveries may turn out to be useful and revealing.

At a basic level, the core theme of sexuality functions as a kind of amazingly powerful shorthand that encompasses the key teachings regarding the kinds of people, situations and imagery we can invoke to awaken our most powerful physiological and psychological sexual responses.

The special power of the sexual core theme lies in that it merges the most arousing situations of the present with the seminal challenges and also difficulties that derive from our past. The core theme contains the hidden formula for how the unfulfilled emotions of childhood and adolescence can be converted into arousal and pleasure in adulthood.

The same peak experiences that have yielded so much information about the inner workings of your eroticism are also valuable clues regarding your sexual core theme. As you recall an arousing experience and consider its tantalizing details and stirring emotions, try to understand why these experiences were so exciting. Investigate the matter closely, and you will most likely discover subtle memories connected to one bothersome problem or another.

It may seem illogical that especially exciting sex should have anything to do with unresolved problems of the past. But one of the most important sexual insights is that the strongest forms of arousal have their origins in the tension between long-lasting problems and their successful resolution. In psychotherapy, this is a widely accepted view. More discussion of this will follow in the next chapter.

That you are especially aroused in a particular situation is a sign that your sexual core theme is working in practice. Its aim is to use old mental wounds and past conflicts as sexual stimuli in your present life. Those who dive deeper into the core theme of their sexuality know to feel greater respect for their own sexuality. They gain a better ability to understand and influence their sexual choices.

The core sexual theme helps us to choose partners who value our strengths and compensate for our weaknesses. These choices are key elements of the “chemistry of love”. It can be especially rewarding to feel that you are desired or admired precisely for the things or traits that you are normally especially uncertain about.

Our core sexual theme and its connection to our deepest, most hidden sources of concern have a lot with daydreams. Both originate in the world of the subconscious,

unconstrained by logic, social rules or morals. A daydream is like a fabric on which you can paint anything. Sexual fantasies and daydreams are a shortcut to our core sexual theme. When we allow our fantasies to flow freely – particularly those that we repeatedly resort to when masturbating – the purest manifestations of our core sexual theme approach closer to our consciousness than at any other time.

For most people, fantasies reveal the sexual theme that is most tantalizing for them. Most fantasies are repeated in relatively similar form for decades, and they never become boring.

Pornography, eroticism and the sexual core theme

Certain external stimuli are used by both men and women, including reading or listening to raunchy narratives or using various visual imagery to light up the imagination. Those who enjoy such materials may gain valuable insights into the content of their core sexual themes by exploring the content and effects of those materials.

Visual porn is quite common, partly because the repetition of sex acts can serve as erotic instigation for a wide variety of fantasies, with pure, unadulterated lust at the center.

In trying to awaken lust, most men in the business of producing porn create situations with a frank and outspoken sexual atmosphere, to distinguish the situation from everyday life. It is common to have variations on the themes of domination and submission, male sexual performance (represented by large genitalia and plentiful semen), and group sex with two or three women. All of these visuals are meant to entertain men in particular. The camera zooms in on the erogenous zones that are in close contact with one another.

Pornography produced for women always has some type of narrative context. There is a preface or introduction that sets the mood, and people who are part of at least some kind of relationship, even when things like violence are part of the story. Women typically crave a romantic plot to be part of their erotica. Research shows, however, that when measured by genital arousal, women are just as aroused by direct-action sex as men are – they just don't always recognize or notice their arousal.

Erotic materials can help you to define your own sexual core theme in pinpointing the things that excite you. If the erotic materials are visual, focus on the kinds of bodies that appeal to you and consider what these body types represent for you. What kinds of attitudes do the most exciting personalities embody? What in it stimulates you? What kind of interaction are the characters engaged in with each other? What do you imagine they are thinking and feeling? This process of reflection works best if you relate what you see to your own fantasies.

The stories are more detailed and therefore offer more opportunities for exploring various personalities and situations that fit in with our own core sexual themes. If this idea feels like good one, select a set of sexual narratives or literary fantasies written by men and women. In reading them you can pay attention to which ones awaken a stronger erotic response in you. At this point, don't worry about why this or that thing is happening in your mind. When you are able to identify several stories or narratives that excite you repeatedly and intensely, make a list of the characteristics that unite them. This list can offer valuable clues to your own core sexual theme.

If you don't enjoy masturbation very often, or if you don't use fantasies to become aroused, your direct experience of what types of images and scenarios have the most powerful impact on your genitals may be limited. If your current sex life is wonderful, don't worry about it – keep enjoying it. But if you would like to better understand what excites you, you can make a conscious decision to pay more attention to the images that are associated with your arousal.

The core sexual theme is not a mind prison – it is a frame of reference that we can use to create scripts that titillate us. Often they are based on difficulties we experienced in childhood and adolescence. As this core theme evolves through the years, we make choices that further contribute to its form and content. Even right now,

perhaps, we are considering whether to accept our core theme with open arms, and try new variations to add to it, or whether we will try to fight it off or even reject it.

When people fall in love, or are overcome by lust, they either surrender to their feelings or try to run away from their desires. Some people mentally shield themselves from these risks – at the cost of limiting their own experience of pleasure.

Being aware increases the possibilities for making your own, free choices. A particular benefit of identifying our own core sexual theme is that as soon as you know what it is, how it came about and what you could still accomplish with it, you can also begin to work through it. You can shape it in directions that are consistent with where you want to go and proceed – it is the people who react according to their blind impulses who are the least free.

Some people feel a clear attraction to more than one type of erotic scenario. It is not uncommon to have a certain kind of script with a particular type of partner, and a completely different script with a different kind of partner, and still some other types of scenarios that are reserved for fantasies. But most people carry only one or two important sexual themes inside them. One of the reasons that these themes are so powerful is precisely that they are so highly specialized and specific.

You can help yourself decide whether you want one or more core sexual themes by asking yourself this question: Could there be some factor that I haven't yet realized, and that connects the various partners and situations I find arousing? For example, is it possible that a desire for variety is a key feature in your core theme? Perhaps you even try to manifest to others through your conduct that "I am a sex partner that you can't control?"

Even very well-established sexual scenarios can sometimes be activated only in certain situations. Fantasies, temporary relationships and committed intimate relationships are likely to produce significantly different emotional responses. Many people report that the core sexual themes that are self-evident in their fantasies and lust-

based relationships seem to evaporate when they begin a relationship with an emotional bond.

Emotional changes happen especially at the early stages of infatuation, when the joy of the romantic union forms the fundamental feeling and source of motivation. Later, when romantic passions cool, many find themselves longing for the lost sexual intensity. Some people return to their core themes in their fantasies either when masturbating or possibly when having sex with other lovers. The situation may feel awkward, especially if the content of their core theme seems incompatible with the tender feelings required in the relationship.

There are risks involved in expanding our sexual awareness. We may be shocked by some of the images that lurk in the hidden recesses of our subconscious, erotic mind. But it is unlikely that we will run into something that we cannot handle; the mind knows when to ignore something that is too powerful to confront.

So what if the specific purpose of the core sexual theme is to transform the conflicts of our early lives into arousal? If we encounter this conflict with an open mind and work through it, we may no longer need our core theme in the future, or at least not in the same way. We can modify our core theme or change the way we apply it in practice.

You do not have to share your sexual core theme with your partners. However, it may be in your own interest to share the things that excite you especially. But in the end, each person's core sexual theme is essentially a private matter.

SEXUAL FANTASIES AS A SOURCE OF AROUSAL

The purpose and healing power of fantasies

The contemporary psychotherapeutic perspective on the sexuality of the mind stems from the paradoxical view, already stated earlier, that the mind is continually drawing upon and working through past problematic experiences, transforming them into strengths that can produce sexual pleasure. This happens, for example, when we are willing to delve into the sexual fantasies that interest us. Fantasy, for many, is an opportunity to use the imagination to ensure sexual satisfaction. This paradoxical perspective on the sexuality of the mind is one that the psychotherapist Michael J. Bader and psychotherapist and researcher Brett Kahr, among others, have come to through their work and research.

The paradoxical approach to sex recognizes the pleasures of eroticism without denying the difficulties and risks that are also involved. This approach emphasizes that the very things that can prevent arousal in certain situations – such as anxiety and guilt – can in fact reinforce it in other circumstances. The sexual and erotic mind has different ways of transforming an idea or feeling into something else. This perspective is covered in detail in this chapter, with the aim of increasing our understanding of the origins and purpose of our sexual fantasies.

For many people, fantasies are the most hidden aspect of sexuality, but most of us have some sense of what excites us, even though we may not have expressed it in words or transformed it into actual mental images. We know what kinds of experiences excite us, the bodies that attract us, the style of kissing that arouses us, and where especially we like to be touched. But few of us know why we have these particular preferences or how well they actually serve us.

The core idea behind this book is to reflect on and analyze the healing and invigorating power of sexual desire. This idea is worth keeping in mind when reading. Our fantasies contain a kind of therapy, with a special meaning and purpose. Whether it is our desire to be dominated or tenderly loved, the fantasies associated with our

desires have often transformed the painful, confusing or unresolved feelings of our past into the manageable and enjoyable feelings of the present.

We use fantasies to transform helplessness into power, loneliness into emotional connection, the feeling of inadequacy into ability, and weakness into strength. When they are properly understood, we can use fantasies to increase our energy level, process and reconcile old psychic conflicts, and satisfy long-neglected needs. We should respect fantasies as a good and trusted friend.

What are sexual fantasies?

Because sexual fantasies are private, and independent of our partner and their presence, they can reveal more than sexual behavior itself about the differences between sexes, various individual sexual scripts, and specific views and perceptions regarding sexual matters. They can expose our deepest sexual desires and dreams, and through them, we can seek the courage to try something new by visualizing it first in our mind.

Sexual fantasies are guided by cognitive processes such as perception, memory, learning and thinking. Fantasies can stimulate sexual arousal, but arousal can in turn stimulate fantasies. They can be triggered or shaped by something we read or see, or they can be innate – or a combination of all of these.

Fantasies are thoughts and images that we can use to stimulate and enhance sexual pleasure. They can consist of recollections of past sexual experiences, imaginings of desired future sexual experiences, immersions in wishful thinking, or daydreams with sexually exciting images. Fantasies can also be used to compensate for the lack of other forms of enjoyable sexual stimulation.

Generally speaking, fantasies or daydreams are a function of the imagination. They are thoughts or images that are not simply reactions to external stimulation, nor are they intended to solve an actual problem or to work through a task.

A sexual fantasy can be a complex narrative or a fleeting thought of a romantic or sexual event or activity. A fantasy can contain very strange imaginings or be quite mundane and realistic. It may contain memories of past events or be an entirely

imaginary event. It may happen spontaneously or be deliberately imagined. It may be provoked by other thoughts, feelings or perceptions.

A sexual fantasy refers to almost any kind of mental image that is erotic or sexually arousing to someone. Fantasies may emerge in solitude, when masturbating, as well as while making love to a partner.

Sexual fantasies are quite common during lovemaking for both men and women. Overall, men have more sexual fantasies than women, including in connection with masturbation. This difference between the sexes has been assumed to be related to differences in testosterone levels as well as interest in and susceptibility to making visual observations of sexually arousing objects.

Fantasies have also been seen as reflecting the advanced sexuality of humans. They are a normal form of sexual stimulation used to produce sexual arousal and pleasure. In sex therapy, it is common to encourage women who have trouble reaching orgasm to employ fantasies while masturbating and during sexual intercourse. The use of fantasies is also recommended if lack of sexual desire is a problem.

The people with the most active sex lives also have the most fantasies. In studies, active use of fantasies has been linked to greater sexual desire, more regular orgasms during intercourse, stronger arousal, less frequent sexual problems and generally greater sexual pleasure. In part, this connection may arise from pleasurable sex giving rise to fantasies about the continuation of the pleasure, or by stimulating a search for new enjoyable experiences.

Many people feel guilty about their sex fantasies. People need to be taught how to handle such feelings. The less experienced the person, the more likely it is that they experience guilt with regard to their fantasies. They may believe that fantasies are immoral, socially unacceptable, abnormal or at least unusual, especially during intercourse. They may also fear that fantasies will negatively affect their sexuality and character and their relationship with their partner. In such cases, it is quite understandable for someone not to want to share their fantasies even with an intimate partner.

The main reason why sexual fantasies and preferences rarely change over a lifetime – even when the motives for creating them may change – is that it is precisely

those particular fantasies that someone finds most pleasurable. Many fantasies and sexual scenarios involve thoughts about our other, hidden self that is free to be unabashedly erotic in ways that were impossible when we were children.

Behind many a sexual fantasy is the unhappy martyr mom or absent, irritable father who provided the backdrop for their children's growth. Their children had to experience guilt, worry, shame and helplessness, feelings that later prevent people from investing sufficiently in their own sexual pleasure, and that they have to work through and alleviate through various sexual fantasies.

Even when someone has few or no fantasies at all, they can still explore which particular aspects of drama might stimulate and enhance their passion. This exploration can zero in on the content of their most fundamental sexual preferences and the aspects of the sexual experiences that yield the strongest arousal.

People who claim that they have no fantasies are often the same ones who say they don't remember their dreams. They tend not to pay enough attention to such things. Women in particular often have sexual thoughts that they do not view as actual fantasies – the difference between a sexual thought and a fantasy can be subtle and open to interpretation.

For most of us, the most titillating fantasies are closely related to each person's core sexual theme. It can be a challenge to identify the connecting factors between these fantasies and the unresolved emotional issues that the fantasies are trying to solve.

A theoretical view of fantasies

Psychological understanding can help explain sexual arousal and fantasies. The imaginative power of the sexual mind is capable of transforming our biological capacity into experiences of sexual pleasure. In sexual pleasure, the mind and the body become one.

Fantasies are mental sexual stimuli. The desires associated with our fantasies are like a window into the deepest recesses of our psyche. If we understand the logic and purpose of our fantasies, we also come to understand something meaningful about the essential undertones of our personality. Sexual fantasies provide a keyhole through which we can see into our true selves, in a new way.

A theoretical examination of fantasies can help couples understand their sexual compatibility as well as their possible sexual boredom. Fantasies can offer couples who are frustrated with their sex lives better tools for exploring and communicating their true feelings to each other. This approach draws upon both psychoanalysis and cognitive theory.

Biological alertness and the socialization process each influences our propensity for recognizing certain environmental cues as sexual. One hypothesis is that innate conditioning experiences may play an important role in the development of our preferences in the context of sexual fantasies.

Sex often comes up in psychotherapy because the pleasures associated with it are simultaneously desirable and forbidden. This contradiction can instill psychic anxiety in people. Through sex, we forge or reject emotional connections, reinforce or downplay our experiences of masculinity or femininity, and find release for everyday anxieties and pressures. Our feelings regarding how and why sexual arousal is born offer a view into our deepest psyche. They are also the original sources of our experiences of suffering and pleasure.

A sexual stimulus and the response it evokes are connected by a multi-stage process. An exciting image, narrative, position or behavior may not be exciting in itself, but excites us for some specific reason. The reasons stem from the realm of the mind. One person may be aroused by a particular image or body type, while another finds them inconsequential. The mind stirs up arousal by associating the images or sensations with whatever particular meanings happen to produce the pleasure we wish to experience.

In Michael Bader's theoretical and clinical perspective, sexual fantasies and arousal stem from a subconscious attempt to resolve problems that have accumulated during previous life stages. Sexual preferences, then, are sexual fantasies of the mind that find expression in the external world.

Compared to the privacy of a daydream, sexual behavior is of course more subject to social prohibitions and sexual restraint stemming from self-consciousness. Sex with a partner requires compromises and adaptation that are not necessary in a fantasy. There is always a notable conflict between our private desires and our public

behavior. Fundamentally, however, the things that we would most like to do, albeit sometimes in secret, originate in exactly the same mind source as the things that we like to fantasize about. Also, the deepest roots of our pleasure are the same ones that give rise to our most private daydreams.

We are always vulnerable and ashamed in facing our sexual feelings and fantasies, especially when we don't fully understand them. Freud believed that the cause of sexual arousal lay in the subconscious. Perhaps we feel that it is a disgrace to our sense of vanity and pride that something as personal and natural as sexual arousal can be caused by something that is outside our own conscious awareness.

Our previous experiences of sexual arousal may have been connected to a wide variety of things and people. These experiences become something that we can replicate and exploit later on, especially when masturbating. A new experience can either reinforce a previous experience and the fantasy associated with it, or it can lead to an entirely new fantasy. Some fantasies form deeper roots because they are constantly reinforced through sexual arousal and various pleasurable experiences.

Exposure to interesting visual or written erotic imagery can stimulate fantasies along the lines of what we have just seen or read. People tend to create fantasies about things that are familiar to them, and as they accumulate different sexual experiences, their repertoire of sexual fantasies grows ever larger.

The content of fantasies may also be shaped by boredom with past experiences. Young, unmarried women typically create fantasies around their current lover, whereas married women tend to entertain fantasies about other men. Unhappy wives have been shown to have more fantasies compared to other women.

In general, sexual fantasies are not a result of an inactive sexual life. The usual motive for fantasies seems to be connected to a desire and effort to stimulate or enhance one's sexual arousal rather than to compensating for frustration stemming from a lack of sexual experiences.

Fantasies are important for awakening, maintaining and enhancing sexual desire, and as refreshing, erotic dreams. Sometimes they express sexual need and longing; at other times they stoke already ignited desire or enhance arousal in order to reach

climax. Fantasies can also be a momentary pleasure in the midst of the tedium of everyday life.

Psychological significance of fantasies

Sexual fantasies can be compared to a microchip in which complex data has been reduced and packed into a tiny, near-invisible space. A simple fantasy contains a vast amount of psychological information – just because something appears natural and instinctive, it can also be complicated and full of psychological significance.

When people learn to understand their sexual preferences and fantasies, they not only begin to be less embarrassed but also gain tremendous insights into other areas of their personalities. They come to understand that the forces that shape the specific targets of their sexual infatuation and attract them to particular sexual scenarios are the same forces that also affect their professional ambitions, their capacity to love and their various states of mind.

The purpose of many fantasies is to provide a safe enough situation for sexual arousal. Safety is a key concept through which to comprehend the meaning of particular fantasies. Our brains and propensities are paving the way so that we choose to love the kinds of people who will take responsibility for our wellbeing.

Beliefs are not merely thoughts – they also manifest as sensations. When a pathological belief of ours inhibits our sexual arousal, it does so with great force because of its capacity to contain emotions such as guilt and worry. The guilt is based on our conscious or subconscious belief that we are bad because we have hurt someone else in some way. The worry, on the other hand, means we are anxious about perhaps a pathological belief that someone important to us is hurt or fragile. The guilt and worry usually occur concurrently: we worry that we will hurt others and we feel guilty about it.

The purpose of sexual fantasies is to dispel the beliefs and emotions that interfere with sexual arousal and to ensure both our safety and our pleasure. The fantasies reassure us that we are not harming or deceiving anyone and that once we are fully aroused, no one will suffer from it.

When thinking of a fantasy, we tend to think in terms of narratives. In that sense, fantasies resemble daydreams – they are little stories that we use in order to bring about arousal. In a sexual fantasy, we always find a way to turn the “no” caused by guilt into the “yes” of pleasure.

We like to perform certain scenarios in bed – certain positions, seductions, ways of talking, aesthetic flourishes, ways of dressing and role play. This is because the details connected to these acts and expressions have a special symbolic significance for us in counteracting the psychological forces that may inhibit our desire.

Sexual arousal requires that we momentarily behave selfishly and stop worrying about someone else’s pleasure. In order for us to abandon ourselves to our own pleasure, we must temporarily cease worrying about hurting another person or somehow rejecting them through our behavior. The experience of unrestrained pleasure requires a certain directness and deliberateness. Anything that breeds worry or guilt about the wellbeing of another reduces our own arousal.

Maximizing sexual arousal also requires a certain amount of objectification of our partner. The ability to exploit either a real or imagined partner in a challenging way is essential for breaking free of our inhibitions. This is not to say that objectification or being selfish should be viewed as a sexual ideal. However, a certain tension between selfishness and being caring is necessary, as is the tension between exploiting and pleasing the other. Problems can arise if either of these counterparts is missing.

A common problem is the situation where one or both partners is unable to act decisively and with purpose when it comes to sex. Familiarity may increase the intimacy between us, but it can also lead to our human tendency to feel unnecessary concern and guilt vis-à-vis our loved one.

One way to work towards undoing this problem is to sustain an image of the partner as someone so powerful and selfish that they could not possibly be hurt or wounded by you. This lets us surrender to our own arousal without guilt or an excessive sense of duty.

Sexual identification

Identification is integral in sexual fantasies and arousal. We align with the energy of our sexual partner in bed as well as in our mind. We merge with them a little and may even follow the same beat with them.

Sexual ecstasy is often described as an experience of merging – our own boundaries disappear, and we merge with the other person, become part of them. In this sense, identification works in the opposite direction compared to decisiveness and purposefulness. In identification, we allow our emotions to be powerfully influenced by our partner’s feelings. Being purposeful or decisive, on the other hand, entails the feeling of being separate from the partner. Identification means merging – we see ourselves in the other. Being purposeful involves objectifying the other person. Both processes can increase sexual arousal, and both can also threaten it.

Identification interacts with idealization in a significant way. When we are sexually aroused by another person, we initially idealize them. It seems to us that the object of our desire has exclusively positive qualities: their body is gorgeous, their personality dazzling, their behavior and style exciting, and so on.

Desire makes us blind to the shortcomings of the partner or the object of our dreams and overemphasizes their virtues. At the same time, the exciting, idealized new partner draws us toward even greater identification. The more we know about each other and the more we reveal of ourselves to the other person, the more important they become to us.

We want to be as close to the idealized person as possible. It’s as if our subconscious mind were saying, “They have a hot body and therefore my body gets excited especially with this person. I bet they love sex – and I, too, can cast away my inhibitions and also love it.” If they’re rough with me, I can do the same. They’re amazing, so if I have sex with them, that too will be amazing.”

At its best, identification increases arousal, at its worst, inhibits it. If our partner is sad, identifying with them can lead us, too, to feel sad. Sadness is counteractive to sexual arousal. If our partner is worried or otherwise feeling low, we may begin to feel the same way. We often experience problems with arousal if we identify with another's misfortune. In fact, what we are doing is identifying with our own image of the other person.

Some fantasies seem to be geared toward guilt and worry, others toward shame, helplessness and rejection, and others still toward problems of excessive identification and emotional transference. In real life, sexual fantasies and preferences are not easily categorized; people can be simultaneously battling a number of different, perhaps even pathological, beliefs.

Through sexual fantasies, we often seek a resolution for the guilt that we feel as a result of the conflict entailed in being part of a family, growing out of the family, and our desire for happiness. Women are particularly prone to feeling this type of guilt. They have been taught to be sensitive to the needs of their partner and more often to be the object of desire rather than its subject. Therefore, they may find it difficult to surrender to their arousal and be sexually decisive.

A heightened sense of empathy and sensitivity between two partners can lead to mutual feelings of guilt and concern to such an extent that they dampen sexual arousal. When our ability to be sexually direct and decisive is thwarted, we may feel that we are now at the mercy of our partner's desires. We may lose touch with our own full experience of desire. Sexual fantasies and preferences can offer an elegant solution to the problems of lack of decisiveness, guilt and worry.

Transforming negative emotions into sexual fantasies

Rejection

Many people have had the experience of feeling abandoned by at least one parent. This may have been due to illness, alcoholism, divorce, or such. Even if the situation was later resolved, we may continue to live in constant fear of losing our loved one again or re-experiencing the distressing feelings caused by the original loss.

If our parents were overly critical and judgmental, it is no surprise if, later in life, we find ourselves “hunting” for men or women who abandon us. We may also tend to engage in impossible relationships where our partner constantly prioritizes their own needs. It’s not that we actually dream of being abandoned, but that we subconsciously find something mysteriously arousing in the absent partner.

How can you develop a deeper intimacy with someone if you feel separate and detached from other people? Some people harbor a powerful conviction that they are insignificant and unworthy – someone that no one could possibly want to be with. If they enter a possible relationship, they may feel that the safest thing is to become an object and the passive partner in the relationship.

Some people rebel against these childhood experiences of abandonment, and as a counter response, develop sexual fantasies in which they are highly desired and sought after. These themes often feature romantic scenarios where they are pursued by exceptional men and women. Sometimes they also include three-way or group sex where they are the center of everyone’s desire, admired and even worshipped for their beauty, charm, intelligence or sexiness. With these fantasies, we are symbolically resuscitating our self-esteem.

Anger and aggression

Some of us were bullied by schoolmates or siblings, or our parents monitored and controlled our behavior by inflicting punishments and physical discipline. For these reasons, among others, we may have grown up into angry or overly sensitive people. We may deal with our anger either through aggressive overreaction or by withdrawing in fear from the possible consequences of our anger.

To overcome the threat of real or imagined punishment, we learn not to trust ourselves and to censor our thoughts, emotions and actions according to what the moral code prescribes in terms of good vs. evil, sinful vs. decent, normal vs. sick.

Because repression never really works, the forbidden thoughts and emotions break into our sexual fantasies and desires. Perhaps we imagine being kidnapped and dragged to a foreign land, or tied up and forced into sex for which we cannot be held responsible. Or we are aroused by fantasies where we receive punishment for our

anger and aggression. We imagine ourselves being humiliated, disciplined, blindfolded, bound and gagged, distraught, with a hood over our heads, tortured with electric shock, and so forth.

Guilt and shame

All kinds of self-critical and avoidant feelings can stand as obstacles to our opportunities to experience pleasure. Mental health experts estimate that loss of sexual interest is one of the first symptoms of depression. However, there are specific fantasies that can counteract depressive emotions in the same way that other kinds of fantasies can reduce guilt.

The underlying assumption in the experience of guilt is that we are hurting someone else, whereas in shame, it is we who are somehow exposed and found worthless in the eyes of others. Guilt is activated when we reject someone, and shame when we ourselves are rejected. Sexual arousal is incompatible with both guilt and shame. If we do not like ourselves and assume that others think of us the same way, it is difficult to see oneself as valuable enough for either experiencing sexual desire or being the object of someone else's desire.

Feeling rejected by those we love and to whom we are close automatically brings on shame. Most people have experienced some degree of shame and abandonment. As a result, all of us are plagued by certain pathological convictions about our fundamental worthlessness. The inability to experience sexual pleasure is so strongly associated with low self-esteem that it is used as one of the key criteria in the diagnosis of depression.

It is not possible to experience shame and arousal simultaneously. We cannot feel weak and helpless and simultaneously truly aroused. We may pretend to experience shame and helplessness during an enjoyable sexual act, but the reality is always different. Shame and rejection are such common experiences that many of our sexual fantasies are designed to undo and counteract them.

Men commonly fabricate fantasies in which they manage to get a cold, self-controlled and domineering woman into a state where she wants him with total, animal passion. In this fantasy, he is not the one who is begging – she is.

Fantasies of genital worship are frequently solutions to the problem of shame, as are acts of exposing oneself in general. The idea of the fantasy is that the other person is absolutely wild about our body, and when our sexuality manages to make others wild, it offers us protection from the shame and rejection we have experienced.

For a woman, undressing becomes a particular pleasure if she is certain that a man is aroused by her body. Arousal then acts as a counterweight to all the feelings of shame that she may harbor, and the scenario allows her to experience pleasure instead.

For men, a woman undressing is arousing in turn because it signals to them that the woman is unabashedly proud of her sexuality and her body. This goes counter to men's everyday experiences of women as sexually inhibited and enveloped in shame. A man's tendency to feel guilt and concern for women's sexuality is turned on its head momentarily as he obtains clear evidence that the woman undressing in front of him is in fact proud of her body. This allows him, too, to let go of his inhibitions.

For some of us, parents, teachers or church representatives instilled in us already as children and young people an abundance of guilt and shame through their teachings, and through the ways in which they influenced or controlled us in various situations.

In order to deal with these emotions, we sexualize the emotions and encode them to match the themes in our fantasies. We get aroused when we think of ourselves as naughty boys or girls who are engaging in secret and forbidden sexual acts. We may also be aroused by the deserved punishment or tongue-lashing we receive for our misconduct. We may even imagine being bound and forced into a sexual act; with no choice but to surrender, we can indulge in sex and pleasure without feeling guilty.

Sexual activity can provide a pleasurable release from self-loathing. Someone in the grip of sexual excitement and arousal does not tend to feel deficient, or recount their mistakes, or be embarrassed by things like, for example, their weight. The experience of pleasure cannot occur simultaneously with shame or depression, and the cognitive sensations associated with pleasure are also incompatible with them.

The feeling of shame contains the feeling that we are distasteful to others, whereas sexual arousal brings on a feeling of being joined with another person. Shame implies

that we are being critically judged by outsiders. Sexual arousal, on the other hand, is like a powerful current that carries us along. We feel shame when someone expresses contempt for us. We feel aroused when someone wants us. Shame makes us want to hide, arousal invites us to come out and play.

Shame is only one component of low self-esteem. Other components include feelings rejection, worthlessness, inferiority, self-loathing and helplessness. All of these inhibit arousal.

Many people try to collect assurances from their surroundings to prove that their self-criticism is in error; the positive assessments of outsiders help compensate for the inner weakness of their self-esteem.

A boy who grows up feeling guilty for despising or being ashamed of his mother turns the painful situation on its head by making himself the object of contempt and shame. Urine and feces may become symbolic representations of the hostile feelings that were once directed at the mother, a woman, who now becomes the object.

Helplessness and humiliation

Helplessness has an oppositional relationship to sexuality. Helplessness is the feeling that we are unable to influence the world around us. Sexual arousal is usually part of an intimate give and take with actual or imagined partner. The feeling of helplessness makes us want to give up, whereas sexual arousal makes us love life.

Since in many masochistic fantasies, the feeling of helplessness is in itself arousing, it is essential to draw a distinction between real helplessness and its fantasy version. The helplessness of a masochist, bound or forced to submit, has been scripted. The situation has been fabricated onto imagination's stage, and is completely controlled and, despite being exciting, makes the masochist feel safe. Being truly helpless is a whole other matter.

In some cases, masochism includes the desire to be humiliated. The erotic fantasy of being humiliated is often born of the effort to control one's own unacknowledged feelings of guilt. When someone allows another person to degrade and humiliate them, they can convince themselves that they are not the kind of person who would

do that to another. The subconscious logic is a kind of golden rule of perversion: “Let others do unto you what you would feel guilty doing unto others.”

In situations where a fantasy involves humiliation, someone may experience guilt as a result of feeling proud or better than other people. When they are then rendered helpless in their own fantasy, the guilt over their belief that they are too strong is alleviated because, in the fantasy they are weak and helpless, and this may appease their conscience sufficiently for sexual arousal to feel acceptable and acknowledgeable.

Some men feel guilty about their masculinity and the power and selfishness associated with it. Men like this can get excited, for example, when wearing women’s underwear. When they are able to identify with women, toward whom they feel the guilt, they are subconsciously relieved of the responsibility of belonging to the other, overly privileged sex. Women’s underwear, here, represent a subconscious symbol and an assurance directed at women – originally at the men’s mothers – that men are no different or better than women. Boys or men like this become secret allies of women.

Suffocation fantasies are more typical among women than among men. The fantasies approach the boundaries of consciousness, and the helplessness associated with the situation produces strong arousal. A woman being suffocated like this at her own request has, in the same way as the tied-up masochist, handed over the control to another person. It must be remembered, however, that all of this occurs strictly in accordance with a previously agreed-upon script.

The subconscious intent behind the type of arousal described above, and the pleasure associated with it, is to overcome one’s feelings of guilt and worry. The people with these types of fantasies may be people who believe that they are too strong. By turning the situation on its head and placing themselves in a helpless situation, under someone else’s full control, they can stop worrying and abandon themselves to arousal.

By fashioning particular sexual fantasies and preferences, we can dispel our self-stigmatizing beliefs and feelings and enable sexual arousal. To become aroused, we must occasionally transform ourselves from frogs into princes and princesses. Sexual

fantasies abolish the rejection we have experienced, and turn helplessness into power, incinerate our feelings of immobilizing worthlessness, and even dissolve some of our depressive tendencies. At least for a brief moment, we can feel sexually vigorous.

Insecurity, loneliness and weakness

For some of us, childhood was full of emotional chaos and uncertainty. Perhaps our parents were emotionally unbalanced, alcoholic or chronically ill. We were never sure what to expect next and could not trust that our parents' love would last.

As we mature sexually, we indulge in fantasies where a handsome suitor carries us away toward a life that is less stressful than the one we have known. We sexualize in our minds ideas such as stability and security, and personify them in the figure of a tender, loving spouse. Or we marry for money so that we never again have to worry about livelihood or security.

It is equally likely that we sexualize a role familiar from childhood – that of the “obedient caregiver”. We are aroused by being needed. In our fantasies, we work to please, to give advice and to serve. Sometimes we dress up as the responsible teacher, the nice boss, the helpful doctor or nurse who goes a little beyond their professional boundaries.

For some men and women, the desire for tenderness and intense emotional connection stems from experiences of loneliness and isolation. These feelings can be connected to a particular situation, such as following a divorce, or they can be long-term and have their basis in long-ago experiences.

Some of us eroticize longing. We entertain fantasies of love, affection, romance and tenderness. We crave a sense of merging with another person, and perhaps of being “corrupted” sexually. We imagine that one day we will find a kindred spirit or soul mate from whom we are inseparable.

In childhood, perhaps we developed more slowly than our peers, did worse in school, were unpopular among friends and lagged behind others in sports – and perhaps were bullied for it. Our parents may have added to rather than lightened this

social burden. It is no wonder, then, if a child in this kind of situation feels small, vulnerable and weak.

As adults, we come to sexualize the difficult emotions that characterized our childhood. In our fantasies, we imagine being submissive and surrendering to the authority and power of a bigger, stronger partner. This alleviates our long-held feelings of inferiority. Sometimes our solution is to fetishize parts of the body, especially the penis, muscles or breasts.

Sometimes, as a counter response to our feelings of inferiority, we create a fantasy in which we are the one who is dominant and powerful. We demand, command and control, invoking pleasure, pain or humiliation in our sexual partner in whatever way we want.

Sexual fantasies of women and men

Do the things that men and women are interested in sexually differ? If so, then these differences may be more visible when there is no need to deny or conceal them from others. In practice, people conceal their true interests as part of the compromises in which they engage so as to ensure the continuation of their relationships. A fantasy allows us to imagine whatever we want without being constrained by social conventions, practical or legal obstacles, or fear of possible embarrassment, criticism or rejection. Therefore, fantasies may provide a clearer and deeper view into what men and women find truly erotic and desirable.

Men are more likely than women to fantasize about someone other than their partner. Among women, fantasies involving their own partner are more common than fantasies about another man. Neither men nor women rarely fantasize about a previous relationship or sex partner. However, the longer the present relationship has lasted, the more likely it is that fantasies come to focus on someone other than the current partner. The effect of the relationship's duration is the same for both women and men.

People who have had more sexual partners than others are more likely to fantasize about someone other than their current partner. Even for them, less than a third of

fantasies are connected to previous partners. For women compared to men, the number of previous partners is relatively correlated with an increased likelihood of fantasizing about previous partners. People who create fantasies about people other than their partner are more likely to be unfaithful – the mind conjures temptations that are sometimes difficult to resist.

Among women, the prevalence of fantasies is associated with greater unconventionality and liberalism, creativity, independence, activity and impulsiveness. Sexual fantasies are less common among women who are more traditional than average, including in their gender roles, more passive and inclined to be joined to another, and more willing to be caregivers.

The most typical sexual fantasies contain:

- fairly conventional intimate imagery about past, present or imaginary lovers, usually familiar to the person recollecting or creating the fantasy
- scenes that allude to sexual power play and one's own irresistibility (typically involving various scenarios of seduction and multiple partners simultaneously)
- scenarios involving varying or "forbidden" sexual imagery (different backdrops, positions, practices and "questionable" partners)
- submission-dominance scenarios involving some physical force or sadomasochistic imagination.

The most popular fantasies for both men and women involve recollecting a particularly exciting sexual experience, imagining having sex with one's current partner (while they are absent) and imagining sex with someone else while making love with one's partner. Other popular fantasies include oral sex, sex in a romantic place, allusions to sexual power play, imagining one's own irresistibility and imagining being forced into sex.

Men are more likely than women to imagine performing a sexual act on someone (for example, the female subject in a porn movie), while women are more likely to imagine having something done to them (for example, as a starting point, being the subject of a man's gaze). Men are more likely than women to fantasize about having

sex with multiple partners, also simultaneously. Men, more frequently than women, visually imagine and graphically picture the exact anatomical details of a partner, whereas women are more prone to imagining affection, emotions and a particular, clear narrative. Men are more likely than women to swap their fantasy partners for others in the course of a single lovemaking.

Common fantasies among women are those in which they are forced to submit to sex. However, if they do realize these images in their sexual play, they retain complete control of the sex in their own hands. In the typical erotic fantasy of being forced or raped, a woman imagines that a sexually attractive man is gripped by an irresistible passion and desire for her because of her sexual desirability. In this fantasy, the man uses just enough force to overcome her resistance and to get her sexually aroused.

Submission fantasies are usually more about sexual strength and power rather than about weakness, because the woman imagines herself so desirable that a man is unable to resist her. Her desirableness gets a man into a state in which he cannot control himself. In a way, he is compelled to have this woman, regardless of her resistance.

For a woman, imagining that she is being forced into something that is usually considered inappropriate sexual behavior, she may experience less guilt. She is not responsible for what is happening and can therefore enjoy the fantasy and associated sex more.

Men are aroused by fantasies of coercion or rape in which the woman at first resists. Gradually, she becomes aroused, changes her mind and begins to enjoy the sex she was initially reluctant about. If a man is strong and determined enough, she is unable to resist his masculine power and determination, and she cannot help but want him. When the roles are reversed, he cannot resist her desirability and personality. These fantasies have a certain linkage to the conceptions of the sexes in the theory of evolution.

Men's fantasies tend to be more sexually active than women's and to focus more on the female body (in comparison with women fantasizing about the male body), and what he might want to do to her. Women's fantasies are more passive than those

of men and focus on what they think men would want to do with their body. Men's fantasies are also more focused, compared to women's, on particular sexual activities, naked bodies and physical satisfaction. Women's sexual fantasies are characteristically more focused on a certain emotional context and romance. Men, more often than women, create fantasies about multiple partners and group sex. These differences reflect men's and women's different sexual scripts.

Women are more likely than men to entertain submission fantasies, and men more likely than women to entertain fantasies involving dominance. Each approach essentially serves the same purpose: they convince one of one's own sexual prowess (virility) and irresistibility.

Among men, a basic daydream is fantasizing about several women who are instantly ready for any kind of sex he wants. The women never reject him and his sexual initiatives. On the other hand, a typical romance imagined by women involves a fantasy about a woman who attracts and seduces the desired man into a life-long love in the grip of flaming passion, and against all odds. The strong, dominant man can do nothing in the face of his love for her, and she can happily yield to the temptation and secure both love and desire for herself.

Favorite fantasies

Many people, women more than men, are unaware of their sexual fantasies or daydreams, or at least they will not divulge them. The fantasies of many of us derive mainly from exciting events in our pasts. A common and popular fantasy is to imagine sex that one hopes to experience one day. Fantasies need not have any connection to real life, and not every fantasy involves sexual arousal. Many people entertain fantasies in their minds while making love with their partners.

Make note of the special details that enhance your favorite fantasies. You may notice that there are differences in terms of what kinds of things or details excite you in real life versus in fantasies. For example, in real-life experiences, the details that are arousing are often the result of unexpected, fortuitous coincidences. They

are opportunities that came your way and that you gladly seized upon, even if you did not actively create them. In a fantasy, it is you who selects and controls all of the exciting events. In the realm of the erotic imagination, you are both screenwriter and director, with the power to steer the sexual images in exactly the direction you wish.

In their sexually idyllic stories and recollections, men often praise the perfection of a partner's body. They pay less attention to the rest of the surroundings – it is simply that the situation feels primed for fantastic sex.

The best real-life experiences often take place in new, unexpected surroundings. We tend to enjoy being sexually surprised. People's favorite fantasies, however, often revolve around familiar habitats. Through repeated experiments or experiences, we have defined the fantasies to represent elements that are meaningful to us in terms of the things we need in order to be aroused. Erotic fantasies have an astonishing ability to sustain our desire and arousal despite the fact that we may be repeating the same image over and over again.

Many of our arousing sexual imagery has to do with being on holiday. A vacation allows us to break free from inhibitions, take risks and possibly start a new romance, once we are free of our familiar surroundings and scenarios and the myriad distractions of everyday life.

One of the most common fantasies among both men and women is making love with two or three partners simultaneously. Usually, the person who dreams up this scenario is at the center of this desired event. The role of the others is to respond to this person's every whim and reinforce their irresistibility. The person steering the fantasy is always in complete control of the situation, regardless of whether their chosen role in the fantasy is dominant or submissive, or whether they are observing two others having sex.

Fantasies about temporary and anonymous partners are also common. Whereas in real life, sex usually entails some kind of emotional connection, this basic component vanishes almost entirely in the context of fantasy sex. This is a reminder that in the

realm of the erotic imagination, we are at least occasionally free of the values and preferences that guide our actual behavior. Fantasies often go against the cultural ideal that sex is best or most arousing in a bond forged of love.

In many fantasies by women, an aggressive man manages to penetrate the heroine's resistance, freeing her from her usual reticence into becoming someone who is wild and full of lust. When this kind of sexuality is in full force, a woman not only ignites a burning desire in her lover but also manages to transform his aggression into a perfect blend of animal passion, sensuality and gentleness. In these fantasies, her enjoyment becomes the man's main focus, and she, in return, shows him the path to love.

Creating fantasies about an unknown partner is a kind of pure pleasure, akin to entertainment. We picture having anonymous sex with a stranger we will probably never see again. It's exciting, but it's safe.

In some women's fantasies, their own power to captivate, and their attractiveness and skillfulness are limitless. The dream of having the ability to bring someone else to their knees with your own charm, at the drop of a hat, is powerfully alluring. A particularly inspiring scenario is seducing an influential man, allowing a woman, too, to feel special and influential; she feels fantastic because this particular man has chosen her.

The seduction of an influential man is a general strategy for a woman to help overcome her shame. She is aroused by having such a man wanting her in particular. It means that, as a woman, she is worth it. A relationship with an ordinary man may feel boring to her. It is difficult to find a relationship that is both stable and exciting.

An essential aspect of a relationship like this is that a woman feels she has power over the man. Men seem to lose control when they desire a desirable woman; they can seem almost pitifully helpless. If a man like this has a grip on power in public life, it is she in turn who wields power in the bedroom.

After pregnancy and childbirth, many women feel that their bodies are no longer sexually desirable. They may even suffer from self-loathing. As a countermeasure, they can resort to a fantasy in which two men desire them feverishly at the same time.

The woman is the subject of very intense sexual attention, and in the fantasy, she fully deserves this attention and does not have to feel ashamed of it.

In a similar fantasy among men, he manages to seduce a woman who at first seems completely unattainable. In another related fantasy, this kind of woman is so attracted to him that she is the one who seduces him.

The fantasies of both men and women share the similarity that the erotic desirability of the fantasy's "author" is so irresistible and extraordinary that the other person will do anything to join him or her sexually.

Among women, having active sexual fantasies has generally been associated with greater sexual satisfaction and less sexual guilt. Fantasies can be a gateway for women to explore and take charge of their sexuality, free of the usual restrictions. An active world of sexual fantasy can be a helpful tool for reinforcing a good sex life.

Sexual fantasies and arousal

People can become aroused and even reach orgasm by merely fantasizing or thinking about sexually arousing experiences. Usually, however, people need some kind of sensory stimulation to become fully aroused. In any case, sexual fantasies and memories of sexually arousing experiences have been found to trigger or facilitate sexual arousal. Fantasies have been described as a learned thought process that allows someone to create mental images for themselves. Men have been shown to have sexual fantasies more often than women and to be more physically aroused by their sexual thoughts, compared to women. The subjects of a study, men and women who listened to an audio recording in an experimental situation, became more aroused by recordings in which the initiator was a woman compared to a man taking the initiative. This speaks to the cultural interpretations of roles that are seen as arousing.

Some researchers have explored the links between mental images and mindfulness and sexual arousal. People experience more subjective sexual arousal from erotic texts, images or sexual fantasies if they were attentive to both the sexual situations associated with these stimuli and to the sexual feelings they were simultaneously experiencing.

The degree of physiological and subjective arousal in men was found to be higher in the experimental situation, when watching pornographic film clips and simultaneously engaging in participatory or emotionally oriented mindfulness, as opposed to being focused on observing or concentrating on the stimulation occurring onscreen. This illustrates the active possibilities available to the mind to utilize sexual stimuli.

In the experimental situation, men's sexual arousal was also dependent on the perceived attractiveness of the female actor and her sexual motives, and on whether a man imagined himself as a participant in the action versus an observer. For women, arousal was increased only by imagining herself as a participant in the action. In general, women tend to situate themselves as part of the action.

For women, the imagery in their minds preceding an erotic situation has a greater effect on arousal than it does for men. Women who recollected a pleasurable sexual experience in the experimental situation prior to watching the pornographic film became more aroused from watching the film than did other women. Among men, no such difference was observed between those who recollected an experience before watching the film and those who did not. Based on this, sexual images can have a significant impact on women's arousal and the quality of their sexual experiences.

A vast number of people need spoken words to support their arousal. Some, on the other hand, may feel quite uncomfortable speaking or using outspoken sexual language. They believe such language to be potentially derogatory to their partner. The same people, however, may feel very aroused if their partner suddenly addresses them "lewdly", without understanding why they feel so aroused.

Some fantasies are arousing particularly because of the "dirty" sex talk or "name calling" that they include. Sometimes this kind of speech can contain words that would be otherwise derogatory, such as "whore" or "pig". Words that are inappropriate in the context of a general discussion can be extremely exciting during sex. A lot of people are excited and aroused by direct, raunchy talk along the lines of "you make me so hard," "I'm so wet" or explicit words such as "cock" or "cunt".

Fantasies and pornography

Pornography is commercially successful because of its ability to closely respond to so many men's sexual fantasies. Similarly, romantic narratives find commercial success because they are more closely aligned with women's fantasies and dreams of a happy life.

Fantasies provide the most believable snapshots of our true sexual desires. Men's fantasies tend to often more be visual and graphic compared to women's. Women's fantasies, on the other hand, contain more tangible and verbal stimulation. Men's fantasies are characterized by hastening the action toward faster release, whereas women's spend more time preparing and drawing out the action in more plentiful foreplay. Men tend to focus on specific body parts and sexual activities, while women fantasize more about the partner's personal characteristics.

Pornography is a representation of both the cause and the consequence of sexual fantasies. It is used only to the extent that it reflects the sexual preferences of its users and provides the imagery that they can incorporate into their own fantasies. Male pornography is largely devoid of specific storylines and relationship complexities.

Women's pornography or erotica has traditionally been expressed in the form of romantic narratives. In these narratives, sex is always subordinate to a relationship and usually involves some kind of plot, allusion and seduction rather than actual sexual activity. The character traits of the hero are at least as important as his physiological merits.

Men like to visit traditional porn sites with pictures and videos. Women prefer sexually explicit online chatrooms where their fantasies can be presented and contrasted to those of other people. Men's fantasies are more likely to be voyeuristic while women are more likely to imagine exposing themselves. These are average generalizations – individual men and women deviate from this basic formula in substantial ways.

Dreaming of multiple partners

In real life, people's sex lives are usually focused on one partner at a time. In fantasies and the imagination, there are no limits to the number of partners. Both men and women commonly fantasize about various group sex scenarios, including those in which someone is a voyeur of sex between others.

In the fantasies described above, we want to enjoy the image of being worshipped or admired by several partners who cannot keep their hands off of us. The situation gives us the kind of physical pleasure that we could not get from just one person. All of our erogenous zones are being stimulated as we are being stimulated by people whose desire for us is irresistible.

Threesomes and having sex with someone outside the relationship while one's spouse looks on is especially popular. Partner swapping is also popular in fantasies. One of the most common fantasies among men is being with two women at once. Typical fantasies for women involve being with a man and a woman, of whom the woman in particular knows exactly how to satisfy the woman whose fantasy it is.

Imagining more than one sexual partner simultaneously basically means getting at least double the sexual attention. This way, the person with the fantasy is often able to powerfully refute the perhaps pathological belief that they do not deserve to be admired, cared for or loved. Fantasies about group sex alleviate low self-esteem and can also provide sexual release.

The presence of more than one partner in a fantasy can assuage the guilt that some people feel about burdening their partner too much with various sexual expectations. A woman who feels guilty about the intensity of her desire can give rest to her sexual worries and inhibitions if the fantasy features more than one partner who is "taking care" of her.

A man may try to use his fantasies to control his stressful feelings of responsibility and guilt vis-à-vis women, especially the obligation he feels to satisfy them and make them happy. If another man joins him in the same bed, he no longer has to bear all of the responsibility, as he now gets to share it with a second man.

A voyeur may imagine being the man whom he is currently observing having sex. Now, he himself has no obligation to satisfy the woman sexually, and he can enjoy sex without any worry or guilt. At the same time, the risk of him being rejected is also reduced. When ensuring the satisfaction of another person is relegated to a kind of teamwork, it isn't necessary to analyze or criticize one's own performance. The distribution of responsibility not only dispels accusations but also eliminates the risk of being rejected.

In voyeuristic fantasies, men are aroused by the mystery of a woman's naked body being revealed for visual examination. There is something of the excitement of the forbidden fruit about it. In his mind, she is reluctantly exposing her intimate secrets. A voyeur may feel guilt regarding his interest in women's bodies because he thinks a woman might get upset about it. But in the fantasy, the object of his voyeurism is not aware of being watched and cannot therefore display resistance or resentment. The man derives pleasure from "stealing" the forbidden intimacy of another person. Because the situation alleviates his guilt, he doesn't have to fear rejection and is free to be aroused.

Similarly, a man watching two women making love can become aroused by identifying with the role of either woman, again without the burden of guilt or the obligation to please anyone. He is not directly engaged with the women and therefore cannot fail sexually. When a man is watching two women, he is able to enjoy a pleasant fantasy in which he is having sex with these women without having to worry about any possibly unpleasant effects associated with his masculinity. His masculinity cannot provoke the women because it is not physically present.

In some fantasies, we see ourselves as truly irresistible. We imagine being so tantalizing that our partners are willing to do anything to be able to touch us or have sex with us. In a way, this feeling takes us into the core of masculinity and femininity.

Exposing oneself, voyeurism and fetishes

Exposing oneself and enjoying the attention

A lot of people find it exciting to expose themselves, including in fantasies. The arousal derives, for example, from the knowledge that one is being photographed during sex. The person being photographed is pleased with the attention they receive, feeling important and worthy of being the subject of such special consideration. Perhaps this is the only time someone has truly considered him or her worthy of attention.

In some fantasies, we are especially aroused by the idea of having an audience. We enjoy the fact that someone else is deriving pleasure from watching us engage in various sexual acts. Sometimes this involves the idea that we are exposing ourselves and drawing attention to ourselves, for example by showing ourselves naked (possibly in public), exposing our behind, or lifting up our shirt. Part of the excitement comes from breaking the rules.

On a more general level, the kind of self-exposure described above is often motivated by an attempt to control one's feelings of rejection and neglect. Exposing oneself may serve to counteract a childhood feeling of not being deserving of special attention. If exposing oneself upends these old feelings, it can allow someone to become sexually aroused.

In men, a similar type of arousal arises largely from the shock and fear they at least hope to invoke in women when exposing their penis. By exposing themselves like this, they are trying to resolve their feelings of shame and neglect. A man ashamed of himself and especially of his masculinity may momentarily overcome this feeling by displaying to a woman its physical source. By revealing himself, a previously neglected man may feel that he is no longer invisible or inconspicuous. Since he is no longer neglected in this regard, he subconsciously feels calmed and safe enough to become sexually aroused.

For women, exposing one's breasts is quite common both in fantasy and in reality. Large breasts can symbolize a woman who has a lot to give. This image can negate

her experience of being isolated and exploited and allow her sexual pleasure to flourish.

A large penis is commonly seen as a symbol of strength. If a woman requires that a man be psychologically strong enough to eclipse the guilt felt by the couple, she can assist in this by paying positive attention to the size of his penis. In addition, some women talk about the feeling of being “filled” by a man’s large penis. In this respect, a large penis means that she is, as it were, well fed and cared for, which can counter someone’s feeling of deprivation.

Voyeurism’s thrill

In voyeurism, we enjoy watching more than doing. We can be sexual without having to physically participate. For many, the idea behind voyeurism is to enjoy watching someone who cannot see themselves. For example, it may be enough to imagine looking at someone in a one-directional mirror. One fantasy involves being invisible and spying on another person as they are getting dressed.

Some men have identified in voyeurism its essential issue being in women’s inability to see them while they at the same time are free to observe women’s bodies with shy curiosity. In addition, they are free to lust after these women and perhaps imagine touching them. That is why we imagine voyeuristic situations in which we are looking through the neighbor’s window, or at lovers in the park, or group sex.

Some men are afraid that if a woman were to see the extent of the man’s lust, she might feel hurt by it. She might be offended that he is primarily aroused by her body, and not her mind. It might also feel offensive for him to want to caress her and stare at her genitals, and to use her body for his pleasure. Another insult could be that he does not always want to kiss her and be tender but have sex with her without taking into account her wishes. A man may experience shame and fear that in fulfilling his own desires he might appear distasteful from a woman’s perspective.

A man’s rational mind may be aware and understand that a woman has specifically opened herself up to him in a certain situation, so that he can objectify her and use part of her body for his arousal with no expectation of being “respected”. But his subconscious may reject this awareness or observation, and he may therefore feel that

he is humiliating the woman regardless. He may know that the feeling is irrational yet be unable to do anything about it. His mind is preventing him from throwing himself in, in the way that the situation requires or makes possible.

Voyeurs symbolically penetrate their objects and form connections to their dream partners without their knowledge. The objects of their desire, therefore, cannot resist, resent or retaliate in any way. It is safe for both parties.

Voyeur fantasies are exploited, for example, in peep shows, where men enter into private booths and satisfy themselves as they watch naked women moving their bodies on the other side of a peep hole or one-way mirror. This is a commercial application of voyeurism.

Other people indulge in fantasies where their partner's eyes are bound. Having eye contact may be connected to subconscious or unacknowledged dangers – if someone can see you, they can judge you and recognize in your own eyes your actual, perhaps dubious motivations. Having one's own eyes bound, on the other hand, can free us to indulge in exciting fantasies that suit the situation.

Some men have trouble believing that any woman could want him to exert sexual decisiveness, masculinity and even aggression. For them, women are sensitive creatures and easily injured. The man then becomes, as it were, one of the "girls" in terms of his behavior. This is his way to reassure a woman that he poses no threat to her. He might believe that his mere sexual interest in her could threaten her, unless it is balanced by a similar motivation from the woman's inner world. Shamelessly staring at a woman's breasts or genitals would be fundamentally repulsive to a woman because she would interpret the interest as selfish indifference regarding other aspects of her life.

Sexual voyeur fantasies fulfill their function perfectly in that they enable arousal. By removing himself from a woman's direct observations and awareness, a man can feel sufficiently safe in staring at her, to his delight. He can be as sexually excited and self-centered as he wants to be without in any way hurting or injuring the woman.

Fantasies with fetishes

Some fantasies center around inanimate objects and items that are not considered sexual, such as shoes, eyeglasses or clothing. For some people, they can have a special symbolic value sexually and can therefore be termed fetishes.

Fetishes can be helpful in dealing with guilt and certain sexual anxieties. When we reduce a particular human trait into an object or imbue objects with a number of human traits, they may even become objects of worship to us. Fetishes are often used for arousal purposes. Their function is to eliminate any guilt or anxiety that could interfere with sexual arousal. A fetish can help shut out any possible feelings that might arise toward another person.

Some women's dreams of animals can form a kind of fetish. The fantasy's object could be, for example, the size of an animal's penis or, more generally, the animal nature of desire. We imagine animal passion as being intense and not obeying social rules or obstacles. It is pure sex. The essential component is that there is no pretense of any type of interaction between two people who either agree or are reluctant to have sex. It allows a woman to surrender to her sexual passion without the negative consequences of certain emotions.

A man can use animals as the target of a fetish and in this way avoid having to take care of his partner, because it is not human. An animal's passion and genitals can be fetish objects. The fantasy of engaging in sex with an animal eliminates any irrational beliefs regarding having to feel empathy or responsibility for someone else's states of mind. Having to worry about beliefs or expectations of responsibility tend to dampen sexual arousal.

In a shoe fetish, it is not the shoe itself that excites, but what the shoe represents. In the subconscious sense, the shoe in the fetish usually represents a strong, powerful woman. Sometimes a woman like this is known as a 'phallic woman' because in our culture, a powerful woman has been seen as having an edge of masculinity. High heels are a particular fetish in that the long, tapered shape of the heel can represent a subconscious image of the penis. In the mind of a shoe fetishist, the phallic woman's femininity is strict and scolding.

The shoe is merely a hint of the psychological tip of the iceberg. In fact, men are aroused by the fantasy of the powerful woman because a woman that powerful is able to respond to his intense sexual desire. She is not a woman on whose behalf he has to feel guilt or concern. The masculine hardness that the high-heeled woman represents helps the fetishist feel safe and frees him from the crippling effects of the guilt he feels toward women.

Some people are fascinated by shiny leather, rubber or latex clothing that seems to form almost a second, extra layer of skin, tight, hard and shiny. This affords some people the fantasy that they are strong and invulnerable instead of how they actually feel – weak and uncertain.

Some men constantly choose large-breasted women because breasts like that symbolize for them a woman who wants to give men pleasure, or a woman who has a lot to give a man.

Some women are aroused only when they feel that they are dealing with a “bad boy”. Others find a certain kind of sexual directness appealing, but don’t need it to become aroused.

Sexual power games

Power and sexuality

As children, we eventually try to move from the defenselessness of early childhood toward a strong and well-defined sense of self. The goal is to have a strong self that can stand on its own in a world that sometimes seems hostile and indifferent. If we did not succeed, at least to some extent, in building this strength, we would be forced to live in a constant state of submissive dependence.

Luckily, as we develop, we learn new strategies, such as the ability to express our wishes clearly and confidently. Differences in views can lead to having different types of power relations with others. In terms of fantasies, women are twice as likely as men to create imaginary scenarios that are in some way power-related, in comparison to their actual behavior. We can derive illuminating knowledge regarding our

own sexuality if we think back and try to recollect the power relations between ourselves and our own earliest infatuations.

Regardless of the strategies we use, the pursuit of power or influence always requires overcoming the obstacles that result from the collision of different wills. Actual or imagined power dynamics that occurred in our early lives often coincided with experiences of arousal, perhaps strengthening our sexual reactions. Long before we reach adulthood, the themes of dominance and submission establish themselves as powerful sources of arousal.

When our earliest fantasies involve power roles, the person having the fantasy is led, persuaded or forced into sensual or sexual experimentation. Despite apparent submissiveness, the fantasies are almost always described as positive and very arousing but can later lead to feelings of guilt. Young people in particular draw upon the feeling of being defenseless to add erotic potential to their sex lives.

A partner who tries to force us embodies through their passion the special value and desirability of the submissive person. The reverse is also true: a submissive partner manifests through their surrender the erotic irresistibility of the dominant party. Both the submissive and the dominant person experience the situation powerfully and reinforce their self-esteem.

Social sexual roles often involve unequal power relations. These roles include, for example, those of teacher and student, parent and child, older sibling and younger sibling, doctor and patient, police and criminal, master and slave, prisoner and guard, boss and underling, and so on. They often provide the setting for particularly memorable arousal.

Society tries to restrict sexual relations when it comes to socially unequal situations. Instead of restrictions, however, the result can turn into increased erotic tensions between the couples, especially when the imbalance of power is combined with the “naughtiness” of one or the other.

Domination and role play

In fantasies about domination, we happily surrender and submit to a more active and dominant partner. In submitting we agree to undertake various acts, both sexual and

nonsexual. These include loyalty toward this partner, “dominator” or lover. The situation is nevertheless characterized more by a sense of freedom than any kind of fear, even if the fantasist lets themselves go and allows someone else to fully control the situation. In our imaginations, we make ourselves fully available to the partner and their enjoyment in these situations. We hope, however, that our partner allows us to experience some pleasure as well.

Sometimes, in these imaginings, we operate on the borderline between pain and pleasure, and the fantasies may include being a slave, in sexual slavery, being forced into the role of the other sex, and even installing skin rings.

In order to understand the deeper meaning of the images and narratives contained in domination fantasies, we need to go back to the past and to the family dynamics that shaped them. The emotions that we have eroticized have certain archetypal roots in our family experiences but also in the culture in which we live.

The feeling of being helpless is a natural part of our childhood experiences. Our wellbeing depended on how well our parents nourished and cared for us on the way from childhood innocence to the maturity of a young adult.

When a parent abuses their authority in an effort to control or influence our choices, we grow into an adult with low self-esteem. When a relationship with parents is based more on a dominant parent–child relationship than on understanding, compassion and trust, we do not feel cared for and respond fearfully to the challenges that life presents.

Some people sexualize their feelings of powerlessness, helplessness or worthlessness as a subconscious attempt to minimize their pain. We learn to derive sexual pleasure from fantasies and acts that involve submission, punishment, discipline or humiliation. In our fantasies, we imagine giving up all control. If in the past we were the helpless victims of our childhood experiences, we now encounter these feelings of powerlessness and turn them into pleasure, paradoxically gaining control of them.

Other people react in reverse to the family dynamics described above. Instead of eroticizing submissiveness, they identify with the dominator, experiencing satisfaction and reinforcing our self-control by dominating someone else. We are aroused by having full control over the situation, and we transform our childhood feelings of

helplessness into strength, enthusiasm and exciting experiences. In our fantasies, we demand, command or even humiliate our partner into submission. Some people's fantasies go so far as to imagine the partner as a slave. This is a symbolic way to dispel the feelings from childhood, of being treated as one who is enslaved.

Bondage fantasies are a form of domination in which we are made physically helpless by restricting our freedom with things such as ropes, handcuffs or leather straps. As with domination fantasies, bondage fantasies do not necessarily involve actual sexual acts. They are often more about liberating the mind through helplessness. It is also common to sexually arouse, "exploit" or pleasure the bound person. Sometimes arousing the other person involves denying them the use of certain senses, and the use of gags or chastity belts, or even the mummification of the object.

Domination fantasies in which the "victim" is not harmed but aroused instead can dismantle the beliefs inside us that cause guilt in a meaningful way, by freeing us to sexual arousal. A key element to understanding this process is that a sadist or "master" confers pain and humiliation onto a victim, who does not actually feel like a victim but is instead sexually aroused by the scenario.

Some women, in order to reach orgasm, need the fantasy of being dominated by a stranger. They may socialize and live with nice men who are sensitive, if not downright maternal, to their needs. A woman's attitude toward a man like this can become critical if his sensitivity and compassion begin to feel like weakness, which can lead to the awkwardness of sexual tedium. A woman may test his strength by criticizing him and observing how he tolerates it and how he responds. In a sexual fantasy, this problem is solved by creating a man who is so strong that he cannot be hurt. This remedy is also appropriate for assuaging the guilt a woman may feel because she thinks she is too powerful in bed. She may deal with her guilt, for example, by entertaining a fantasy of being with two men at the same time. Together, they are a match for her power.

Some men use bondage fantasies during lovemaking in order to convince themselves that they will not cause harm to their partner. They may also be concerned for their partner during lovemaking because they worry the partner may have agreed to have sex only to appease them. To deal with these emotions, a man finds it helpful to

fantasize about a strong and happy woman who ties him up and has playful and teasing sex with him. Thanks to this fantasy, he can feel that he is in no way a danger to her. This feeling and scenario may have been prompted by a childhood experience that felt exciting.

The man or woman being dominated is subconsciously convinced they are not harming the dominant partner, and not responsible for their happiness – sex, for them, cannot be about performance. Free from guilt, responsibility and worry, the submissive partner can delve deep into their feelings and experience intense sexual pleasure.

Some men may feel that their needs might be too much of a burden to their partner, that they might even exhaust a woman. For that reason, they may resort to phone sex, pornography or prostitution, imagining that this will also suit the needs of their partner.

If a man reveals the type of fear described above to his wife, she may in some cases react understandingly. Perhaps she will one night receive her husband dressed in a sexy outfit, telling him that he has no say regarding what happens that evening in bed, because today, she is in control. By doing this, she is giving her husband the same feeling he gets through, for example, phone sex: he can embrace his pleasure with no responsibility for the situation, without having to make the woman on the other end of the line happy, and with no associated worry or guilt. This kind of sex can also be exciting and arousing for his wife.

Women who have experienced sexual harassment often develop fantasies in which they are sexually debased, humiliated or otherwise play the role of a masochist. Other women with similar experiences reverse the roles and turn into a cruel dominatrix in their fantasies. Children who were terrorized or beaten in some nonsexual way also often incorporate aspects of their helplessness into their sexual daydreams and preferences.

One form of domination and masochist role play is the scenario of master and slave. In this fantasy or sexual game, the master has full control and power over the slave. The master appears to act with complete selfishness and directness, without any negative consequences. The master's behavior causes him no qualms – he has

conquered his guilt and sexual pleasure is his reward. The slave, on the other hand, seeks and longs for a master, and experiences pleasure in finding him.

The master and slave also offer each other special attention and recognition (the same is true of many other fantasies), a counterweight to the true feeling inside each person that they are inconsequential, invisible and worthless. For the master, the complete surrender of the slave to his power is proof that he himself is valuable and the center of the slave's world. For the slave, the master's attention gives him the feeling that he is valuable enough to the master for the master to want to control or even hurt him. In this type of case, people prefer being the target of negative attention rather than being invisible. The close, mutual connection alleviates feelings of loneliness and worthlessness.

Fantasies of coercion and rape

One of the great taboos of sexuality includes any form of sexual coercion, which goes counter to the sexual sovereignty of each human being. It may seem peculiar therefore that people's fantasies so often include images of sexual coercion and even rape that they experience as arousing. This goes back to the general premise of all fantasies. i.e., that because sexual fantasies are relatively free of any social consequences, they can reveal underlying psychological processes, motives, emotions and tendencies that cannot otherwise be properly expressed or understood and are sometimes difficult to acknowledge even to oneself.

Though it may seem surprising, one of the most common sexual fantasies for women during intercourse is of being forcibly taken. Focusing on this feeling increases their arousal and pleasure. The paradox between the fantasy world and real life deserves closer attention.

According to research, about one in two women in the United States has had rape fantasies, and nearly as many have had them while having intercourse. The prevalence of these fantasies has not fluctuated much over the last decades. They have consistently been among women's most popular fantasies. For some women, they are purely sexual and erotic, but for others, they can also feel in some ways frightening

and disgusting. In the latter case, the men who appear in the fantasies are older, unknown and unpleasant.

In an active rape fantasy, a person is raped or conquered. The object at first resists but eventually comes to enjoy it. She is fully engaged in the sex and achieves sexual ecstasy. The purpose of fantasy is that the rapist is trying to control his feelings of guilt for hurting others. This works through a fantasy in which he appears to be hurting another person without actually doing so.

Among men, fantasies about raping women are not very commonplace. A significant proportion of men, on the other hand, indulge in fantasies in which women force them into sex. Some men may act as the dominant partner in coercive fantasies, forcing the defiant or reluctant partner into having sex with him. In fantasies of gang rapes, the responsibility is shifted from the individual to a group. This serves to reduce guilt and allow arousal to blossom.

Fantasies involving sexual coercion usually include passion and putting pressure on someone, but rarely outright violence or pain. Sometimes they involve fighting off an attacker, at other times simply obeying one. People are aroused by certain images associated with coercion, or they imagine detailed stories of being kidnapped or held captive in a prison cell, basement, cave or Arabian tent. The sex that occurs in these spaces is often wild and “dirty”. The most important aspect of these fantasies is that we have been deprived of the opportunity to choose whether we want sex in the given situation or not, and that we are helpless and powerless. This situation is rather antithetical to the ideals of romantic sex.

Rape in romantic narratives

It is not uncommon for the romantic narratives favored by women to include variations of the rape theme. Both romantic narratives and rape fantasies are creative fiction. In a romantic narrative that includes rape, the reader identifies with the female protagonist and experiences the rape vicariously. The pain that the protagonist in the story experiences as a result of the man’s abuse increases the emotional intensity of the story. In an erotic rape fantasy, the built-in idea behind the story may be that the

woman ultimately conquers the heart of the rapist who is an interesting person in several other respects.

The male hero of a romantic story must be not only handsome, but also to some extent cruel. Men who are allowed to serve as protagonists must be strong, masculine, sexually insensitive and, within certain limits, dangerous.

It is the challenge of the romantic narrative's heroine to conquer the heart of a powerful man and seduce him so that he falls in love with her. The other challenge is to get him to voluntarily commit to a lifelong relationship with her. In addition, she has to transform the man's obvious badness and cruelty into some socially acceptable form, without, however, eroding his powerful masculinity. In these romantic narratives, rape is used as an effective way to make the story more arousing and dramatically exciting.

In erotic fantasies, too, the protagonist is typically an attractive, dominant man who is in the grip of his passion, and he uses force and pressure to conquer the woman he wants and in order to penetrate her despite her possible resistance.

Explanations for women's coercion fantasies

Many people wonder what kind of arousal women can possibly derive from imagining rape. The idea seems completely contrary to a woman's self-determination and sexual rights, and fits particularly poorly with feminist ideals and objectives, though the women who espouse those ideals have been shown to have as many fantasies of rape as other women.

There must be a theory that can explain why so many women actively use rape fantasies to achieve pleasure and erotic arousal, when their dominant reaction to actual rape is that of revulsion and fear. Within the frame of reference of biological theories, it has been commented that among animals males are typically dominant and females submissive. It has therefore been argued that women have a natural tendency to surrender to a selected dominant man. For some women, their tendency for masochism may therefore explain their attraction to rape fantasies.

Most attempts to explain women's rape fantasies go along the lines of explaining that the fantasies allow women to avoid guilt or responsibility for their sexual acts and experiences. When a woman realizes her sexual fantasy in the form of rape, she is being forced to do something that she does not (supposedly) want to do, and therefore she cannot be blamed for what takes place. When her reluctance is combined with a man using force, she avoids any reproaches toward her own behavior and experiences less guilt and shame, which enhances her sexual pleasure, compared to if she were using a fantasy with mutually consenting sex.

Women no doubt often indulge in violent fantasies to alleviate the guilt they would experience if they were held responsible for their sexual desire and activities. It follows that the more guilt a woman experiences, the more likely she would be to have violent fantasies, allowing her to ease her guilt and enjoy her sexual experiences more.

From the perspective of the guilt or responsibility theory, it is problematic that nearly all women who are aroused by rape fantasies also use fantasies about consent-based sex. Research has found that women's rape fantasies during intercourse correlate with marital satisfaction and erotic arousal leading to orgasm.

An alternative theory for explaining women's violent sexual fantasies is that women who experience less guilt are perhaps more open to different sexual experiences and stimulation than women who feel more guilt. This openness allows these women to experiment with a variety of sexual thoughts and acts and to entertain themselves more actively than other women with fantasies involving coercion, along with other fantasies. Not only do women with less guilt report a richer repertoire and more numerous fantasies compared to other women, but they also have more varied and abundant sexual experiences and generally experience more sexual pleasure.

Researchers have interpreted the observation related to activity to indicate that when women have more sexual experiences, the diversity of their fantasies also increases, and that rape fantasies represent just one type. The likelihood of these women experiencing actual rape does not, however, increase.

Sexual experiences can mediate the connection between sexual guilt and violent fantasies. Women who feel less guilt about sexual matters engage in more numerous

and varied sexual experiences. This may expand the scope of their sexual fantasies as well, including violent fantasies. For women who experience less guilt, all kinds of desire and eroticism have been found to be more important.

In one study, the women who wrote about fantasies of sexual coercion also mentioned group sex and sex with strangers more often than other women. They had read more soft pornography than other women and watched more porn movies compared to women who did not mention forced sex in their written fantasies. The women who wrote about sexual coercion were more sexually experienced in terms of their sex habits and number of partners and had a more positive attitude toward sexual stimulation. Compared to other women, the women whose fantasies involved thoughts about forced sex were, in many ways, more willing to have sex, including having a greater interest in sexual stimuli and activities.

In another study, women who reported rape fantasies had more sexual experiences, but they also had more fantasies that did not involve coercion. These women also had more positive feelings and expectations vis-à-vis sexual stimuli than other women. Rape fantasies seem to be just one among many manifestations of a generally open, positive, unrestricted and relatively guilt-free sexuality.

The explanations for women's rape fantasies have also considered the connections and effects of the fantasies on women's perceptions of their own sexual attractiveness and desirability. The essential idea is that the rape fantasy reflects a woman as such a charming, seductive and desirable being that a man loses all control, transgressing the boundary of what is proper and decent in order to get her. In this interpretation, rape is evidence of a woman's attractiveness and sexual power. The fantasy serves to both increase her self-esteem and get her aroused.

Avoidance of internal accusations and a general openness to different experiences can be valid explanations for various women's rape fantasies. Separate and competing explanations for rape fantasies may be based in the cultural and biological factors that may be necessary to properly understand the fantasies.

The theory about avoidance of internal sexual accusations may apply to women who have a lot of rape fantasies. Openness to different experiences seems fitting for women who have occasional rape fantasies. Also the theory regarding a woman's

(excessive) desirability seems to explain one of the factors that activate rape fantasies. In addition, activation of the sympathetic nervous system may lead to increased susceptibility to sexual arousal, and thus to a possibly increased desire for one's actual partner. This perspective provides a certain physical foundation on which to understand the way in a fantasy can enhance sexual arousal and improve a relationship.

Of the above theories to explain the popularity of the rape fantasy among women, six are of a psychosocial nature. These also include biological explanations for the behavior. The theory of sympathetic activation does not compete with these.

Based on qualitative interviews, two different types of women had fantasies about rape and a third type had no sexual fantasies during intercourse.

The first type of woman had rape fantasies very often during sexual intercourse. They were described as very erotic and usually led to an orgasm. Women in this group were characterized as dependent, modest, controlled, serious, curious and conventional.

Women in the second group experienced various fantasies during intercourse. One type of fantasy involved rape. These women were characterized as impulsive, independent, active and open-minded. They generally had an active and exploratory approach to sex and were not sexually repressed.

The third type of woman who had no sexual fantasies during intercourse had been raised to suppress the expression of her sexuality. These women had difficulty getting sexually aroused and having an orgasm. This indicates that a sexually restrictive upbringing can extinguish perhaps any and all fantasies during intercourse.

Women in the study whose values were more oriented in feminism had more positive feelings regarding sexuality because they tended to experience less sexual guilt. No direct connection was found between having feminist values and sexual fantasies, including violent ones. Having a feminist worldview thus does not substantially change what women find sexually arousing or exciting.

Putting fantasies into practice

The theory that emphasizes the role of sexual fantasies in sexual arousal has significant merit in the context of seeking to overcome barriers to pleasure. It is fundamentally humane in the sense that it views people as problem solvers and not as some kind of “bad” people who basically enjoy being anti-social. Our ability to use our imagination is like a portable first-aid kit for the psyche, allowing us to alleviate pain, circumvent guilt and make it easier to open the gates toward fuller enjoyment.

It is important to distinguish our actual behavior from our various forms of internal experience, including thinking, imagination, fantasies, dreams and daydreams. Much more happens in the sexual mind than is ever manifested in our behavior.

The human psyche has the creative power to develop the widest possible range of pleasure-producing phenomena, also in unusual ways that nevertheless keep us safe. Many fantasies deviate substantially from social conventions and prevailing sexual norms, and some people also experiment with these fantasies in practice.

Via the internet, people today can more easily find others who correspond to their fantasies. The selection of such a partner can be a very careful process, as if selecting an actor created just for us, for the script we wrote.

Our key fantasies, especially those related to our core sexuality, are expressions of the overriding emotional issues that affect how we see ourselves and others, and how we behave. Erotically skilled people not only enjoy their fantasies but also utilize them to gain insight into their own feelings and motivations.

Putting sexual fantasies into practice requires that we leave behind our normal state of being and dive in, as deeply as possible, into the past, present and future. When we are fully present in the moment, our actions, thoughts and fantasies are all interconnected. The sex that ensues from this has the potential to satisfy previously unfulfilled needs, resolve childhood conflicts and create a future for us that is authentic and satisfying. We cannot fully understand the significance of our fantasies and desires until we have put them into practice.

Transforming fantasy into a real experience can be challenging. Our erotic desires can be confusing and disturbing. We may find them too unmediated and even

shocking. The farther our desires deviate from convention, the more afraid and disbelieving we are regarding their suitability in practice.

Some experts even argue that fantasies should never be brought into reality because they can bring up feelings of guilt, jealousy, competitiveness and betrayal. But in order to grow our personas we need to try to expand our lives by overcoming our fears and inhibitions.

Some people like stories of the mind that are fragmentary, disjointed. Others prefer a well-structured script. Below are some helpful tips for how to create a rich, liberated and imaginative encounter:

- Share with your partner exactly what you want, what you are willing to do, and what you are not willing to do.
- For the sake of safety, create common sexual rules and boundaries.
- Create the language you need for sex: words or signals that tell your partner to keep going or to stop.
- Decide what sex tools or toys you will use.
- Select a backdrop. Does it matter where the action takes place? Think about the time of day or whether you want a particular backdrop or props for the situation.
- Set limits on the degree of roughness, control and pain for the activity.
- Create a script – as vague or detailed as you want – for how the encounter should unfold. If a particular dialogue increases the eroticism of the experience, ask your partner to practice it.

- Switch roles. Decide when it's each one's turn.
-

If we realize a fantasy with the consent of both partners or as a private daydream, we are in a way writing a script or acting in an agreed role. The end result is theater that can be important for our mental wellbeing.

Only when we see our sexuality as a product of the human mind, as something socially constructed and not built into our chromosomes in some way, can we really imagine changing it. If, on the other hand, we want to change our sexual fantasies, we must first eliminate the shame that surrounds them.

Each person should independently take the necessary development steps on the road to a lust that is founded in wisdom. We need privacy in order to bring order to what we really feel, think and believe with regard to sex. Only then should we share our findings with a partner. Often, at first, our thoughts consists of only a few whims and it can take time for them to crystallize, and time for us to feel confident and secure about our own conclusions. It is better not to share them prematurely.

Our sexual fantasies and desires remain relatively permanent through our lifetime. This is because the conflicts that stem from our unmet needs remain unresolved, and our needs therefore unsatisfied. You should therefore consider sharing them with your partner.

SEXUAL MATING AND PRESERVING PASSION

Infatuation and sexual chemistry

In terms of happiness, it is interesting as well as important to better understand why we fall in love with a particular person or repeatedly with certain types of people. In everyday, practical situations, we automatically observe or “scan” the people in our environment. We respond to them according to the assessment based on our monitoring. We are constantly, though mostly subconsciously, reading the facial expressions, manners and tones of voice of other people to obtain clues about what they are presently feeling and in all likelihood planning to do. If we did not do this, we would not really be connected to the world around us.

The process of monitoring and assessing other people involves a large amount of filtering of various internal information regarding human relationships and deciphering the various associated social codes. On the basis of these assessments, we quickly draw conclusions from the situation and prepare for an appropriate response, as quickly as within the space of a single heartbeat. This kind of unconscious thought is much quicker and more effective than any conscious thinking process and occurs in the brain just below the cortex.

Sometimes people claim to know even before the first touch that sex with a particular person would be tame and unexciting. Other times it is said that one need not even speak with another person to be able to know that the sexual chemistry will be good. In these situations, people feel certain that a particular person could be suitable for fulfilling their sexual daydreams. This sexual intuition is not at all unusual, and it can cause people leave their previous lives and relationships regardless of the subsequent inconveniences.

A less romantic explanation for the infatuation reaction is the activation of the sympathetic nervous system prior to the situation, as a result of physical exercise, for example. In a sexual situation, this increases one’s temptation for an attractive person and lessens interest in less attractive people. The temptation is unavoidable, but it is another thing to decide how to respond to it.

A man may feel subconsciously that certain qualities in a particular woman's appearance and habits are a good fit for him. He finds himself infatuated with the woman but does not know why. It is as if he were able to tune in to a particular channel that other people cannot see or hear. Other men, on the other hand, have their special preferences, which is why so many men and women are able to find a special object of infatuation.

The unconscious mind of the man described in the paragraph above has read all of the clues available about a particular woman and has quickly put them together. The compiled clues alert him that this particular woman would seem to be a match for his individualized desires. The end result of this complex process is the experience of infatuation, which to him feels completely spontaneous. This is sometimes called the experience of chemical compatibility.

In connection with infatuation and mating, it is now common to speak of sexual chemistry. Even though we might prefer to believe otherwise, sexual chemistry is not something mystical or based solely on our assessment of a partner's attractiveness as a reproductive partner. Sexual chemistry begins in our thoughts. The subconscious mind is constantly registering the signals and symbols in our environment, usually concerning another person's physical traits and recurrent habits, and makes interpretations of these in terms of our own individual fantasies.

The other person's body inspires our imagination. The way we observe it replicates important psychological themes. We formulate an "image story" of their body on the basis of our own history of experience. In practice, this happens so quickly and immediately that we remain unaware of the details of this process. When a compatibility forms between our fantasy and the special psychological meaning that we have assigned to the other person's physical traits, we feel arousal.

From time to time we meet a person who, from the very first meeting, causes our heart to pound with excitement. If and when we are able to actually get to know this person, we may find that their personality is in fact incompatible with their physical appearance. Their behavior may also be discord with the fantasies that inspire us, and the attraction we feel quickly dissipates. We have read and interpreted the initial signals incorrectly.

People talk about someone being or not being their type. The person we feel represents our type has qualities that we find particularly attractive. However, we may not be able to explain why this is so. When we come across the right kind of signals, our fantasies are set in motion. This can happen so suddenly that we are hardly aware of it. Through practice, we can develop our ability to tune in to sexual cues and the meaning behind them. We can also become better at deciphering whether the cues are compatible with our true desires. With this knowledge and skill, we increase our chances of choosing a partner with whom we are truly sexually compatible.

In terms of sexual compatibility, numerous physical issues can prove significant. A basic question is whether the bodies of the two partners feel like a natural fit. Is the other person too big or heavy, or too small and slender from the other's perspective? Is one partner lean and athletic where the other is out of shape and weaker? Does the penis feel like it's the right size and the vagina suitably snug? Is the other person's scent and sweat attractive or arousing, or does it feel distasteful? Does your partner like the same lovemaking positions as you or find them physically too challenging? Does one partner get tired much sooner than the other? Does one partner have much greater difficulty reaching orgasm than the other? And does the desired timing of sexual play coincide between the two partners on the same time of day or point in the week? These and many, many other practical things can produce at least minor challenges to sexual compatibility. An easy and perfect-seeming compatibility is almost like winning the lottery.

Once we feel attracted to someone, we usually start flirting or getting to know one another, a process that can last anywhere from one minute to many hours. During this initial phase we assess how well the potential partner fits into the sexual fantasy we have placed them in. We are more or less aroused by some of the subtle cues that we perceive, for example, in intense eye contact, the way the other person moves their body, their manner of speech and intelligence, the pitch of their voice, their personality, and so on.

As we observe the way in which this person matches up to the imaginary narrative we have developed, the object of our interest is busy gathering information about us to determine whether we measure up to their fantasies or desires.

Masculinity and femininity

Parts of our subconscious continues to work through mythical notions of masculinity and femininity, inspired by the traditions and imagery of classical Greek mythology. Associated with the female component of sexuality is Eros, the god of love, and Dionysus, the god of passion and crazed love. In addition, the myths of femininity have been formed through Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, fertility and sex, whom the Romans called Venus. The male component of sexuality, on the other hand, is associated with Priapus, the god of power, and Pan, the god of aggression and sexual desire. Phallos represented the mystical power of fertility, manifested, for example, in the immense and fully erect penis of Priapus. Throughout history, these mythical models have been successfully offered up as building blocks for masculinity and femininity. They tell us that we are to expect different things from men and women.

As boys grow into men, they must psychologically detach themselves in a decisive way from the femininity that their mother represented for them in childhood. Some men may feel guilty if they feel that they are better than women. In this case, intimacy and identification with a woman can seem dangerous. Not only does intimacy open the door to feelings of guilt and responsibility, it also exposes a man to the danger of losing the psychic limits of the masculinity he has worked so hard to establish. He would become merged with his partner, and their differences would begin to evaporate. Men may view a relationship as threatening if it associates intimacy with identification, causing anxiety.

Men have grown up associating masculinity with independence and autonomy. From the perspective of a man's subjective experience, he has more to lose if he is pulled emotionally too close to a woman, as opposed to otherwise being close to her. In the subconscious minds of many men, lowering their emotional shield in this way means that they will feel small, weak and even feminine. They can therefore never be truly independent again.

Love and intimacy open the door to guilt, identification and merging with another person. These feelings cause anxiety in many men and therefore work against sexual arousal. Sex for the sake of sex itself guarantees the men a feeling of difference and

emotional separation. When men separate sex from intimacy, they can safely experience and express sexual determination and refute any attacks or threats from their conscience against their feelings of separation. There is no doubt that men tend to see women as objects; this is to protect their own masculinity, not because they want to hurt women.

Without reassurances of an emotional connection with their partner, many women experience vulnerability before and after sex as well as during it. Women use objectification less than men and are often equally aroused by a man's character and personality as his physical qualities. Many women do, however, like sex for its own sake, and are attracted to both the male body and the appearance of their partner.

The economic vulnerability that is more common for women than for men creates a social situation in which the idea of being rejected can easily produce anxiety. When sex combines with love, this strengthens the relationship and brings a woman a sense of security. In a way, women are trading sex for love, which is why they need safety in the context of sexual arousal.

Women, too, feel guilty about breaking away from their mothers. In women, this guilt can lead to a subconscious belief that they do not deserve intense sexual pleasure. Many women feel guilty about enjoying sex more than their mothers did. There is no doubt that women like to combine sex and love. The purpose of this goal is to reduce their guilt sufficiently to enable a better quality of intimacy.

In Finnish sexual autobiographies, many women described how a man's masculinity and personality had created sexually charged situations. Their dream men could vary widely. Some women had had particularly good experiences with large, masculine, "dangerous," self-confident and outspoken men – "real" men. On the other hand, they had dreamed of men who were equal, safe, close and tender – men who would know how to take care of a woman right down to reading her thoughts. These expectations fluctuated depending on how sexually aroused a woman was in a given moment.

Basic mating styles

There are a few key mating styles:

- Passionate couples, who live intensely and whose strong sense of passion is created and sustained by the fact of being opposites.
- Companionable couples, whose relationship is based on mutual understanding, compassion and comfort.
- Pragmatic couples, who focus on practical issues such as availability, money, appreciation and social acceptance.

Because passionate relationships originate in and are motivated by the attraction of opposites, they are most likely to be strengthened, at least initially, through explosions of lust. These moments are characterized by heart-throbbing infatuation. The lovers feel so alive that practical questions regarding possible compatibility are largely ignored for the time being.

The passion between two people can also initiate a lifelong and mutually beneficial adventure. Many of us would never have thrown ourselves into our current relationship without some kind of passion being unleashed at the outset. Passion helps us to overcome the fears and inhibitions we harbor regarding long-term relationships sufficiently long enough for us to be truly joined with our partner.

When passion originates in partners who are opposites, it is a question of a kind of chemistry. A different chemistry – equally strong but less intense – occurs when companion couples enjoy the joys and mutual reciprocity that their profound similarity creates. These partners typically describe each other as soul mates or best friends.

Companion lovers behave like friends, and they also view each other as such. Most of them, especially at first, enjoy sex, but they find that they lack the great intensity that they may recall from their previous, slightly more turbulent relationships. At first, it does not bother the couple because their similarity brings a beautiful and quiet kind of sensuality to their lovemaking. They are often amazed at how easy it is to be together and are able to live comfortably without feelings of insecurity.

Friendships are often very romantic, but some are not particularly sexual. A significant portion of companion relationships turn into friendships where one or both partners seek passion outside the relationship. If they remain together, they often become very stable partners.

Some of the practical aspects of mating are not romantic at all. Some pragmatic partners seek out a relationship for convenience and because the other person happens to be available. Neither partner is glowing with passion or brings out a special compassion in the other. Practical assessments and considerations may include things like one partner being a good breadwinner, a reliable partner or a reliable parent to children. Because pragmatic relationships begin in the mind and not in the heart, they do not tend to contain great magic or excitement. In extreme cases, a relationship like this may have the feel of calculated advantage.

Despite the limitations of the premise, some pragmatic partners manage to form long-lasting relationships. In part this is because they are relatively free of the high expectations and fantasies that, if unfulfilled, typically disappoint other couples. This kind of relationship may develop over time into genuine emotional commitment and mutual respect.

When the initial contact and the relationship arise purely out of passion, much of what we believe we see and experience may turn out to be a projection of the fantasy that our mind formulated of the loved one. We also see in that person possibilities and qualities that have not yet materialized. The eyes of those who are in love look at the beloved past the realities of the world around them. In terms of the moment or the outcome of the relationship, this can be as much a blessing as a curse.

At some point, people either express openly or they quietly state to one another that they are committed to each other. The resulting, general expectations include spending time together regularly, sticking to plans and promises, being present when the other person needs it or is having some kind of problem, and a commitment to sexual fidelity. The commitment provides security and allows for sexual pleasure by calming fears of rejection.

Most couples develop sexual routines that to some feel acceptable and even comfortable, especially if they occasionally include a few surprises. Others get so tired of

the routines that they find it increasingly difficult to get excited enough for arousal and orgasm. Yet others grow so close that they function together more like siblings instead of lovers.

Partners in a companion-type relationship are typically the first to feel the loss of sexual arousal. This is partly because they may have already been in that situation early on in the relationship, and partly because their mutual comfort became stabilized so quickly. Some people do not experience this as a particular problem. They never had great erotic intensity and are enjoying the simple pleasures of sensuality and affection. Others may experience the situation as a serious crisis, especially if one partner, or both, develops a sexual problem or loses sexual interest in the other altogether.

In a relationship, the experience of becoming one can be very stimulating sexually, but functioning as one is not – at least not over a long time. In every long-term relationship, one or both partners feels the tension between the ideas of “I” and “us”. The relationship may come to a point where the balance shifts too far in the direction of common interests, overriding private interests. At this stage, for the sake of the relationship and of sexual desire, it may be necessary for the partners to focus on their own private needs.

Being together and merging are highly effective ways to strengthen a couple’s bond, but true intimacy requires two separate individuals who are able and willing to balance individualism and interdependence. In a relationship, we must also take care of our personal interests.

A changing relationship and sexual intimacy

The early stages of a relationship are usually characterized by an active, perhaps passionate sex life. There is no need to negotiate about sex or to worry about whether your partner is willing. Everything happens without thinking, naturally. The partner’s overtures are welcomed with open arms. The sexual mind is expressing itself freely.

The sex life of a relationship enters into a new phase when either partner declines the other’s sexual overtures for the first time. Suddenly, the other person’s desire or

lack thereof must be taken into account and one must be prepared to negotiate the willingness of the other person. Certain preconditions for sexual activity may be established, which must be met for a favorable situation to emerge. One such condition may be that the situation needs to contain a certain kind of intimacy.

As already shown above, intimacy and intimate sex are not always easy. Intimate sex can be quite vulnerable, something to which we must give in with abandon. It means having to surrender, without a thought, to close, personal and loving feelings in order to embrace our erotic, animal nature without shame. Intimate sex trusts and relies on self-love, care and the willingness to feel deeply.

Most people believe that being vulnerable equals being weak, as if one were in need of protection against an attacker. But it also means being open to experiences and sensations. Our vulnerability is an important pathway to intimacy and eroticism.

In intimate sexuality, being vulnerable means being open to receiving and giving love from the bottom of one's heart. A vulnerable heart that is capable of authenticity becomes a source of strength. We trust the other person enough so that we don't need any protection from them. We willingly risk everything to speak our truth and are rewarded with delightful conversations with our partner. Here, 'delightful' does not mean easy – but speaking the truth will create a long and lasting relationship with a solid foundation.

When we are open to being vulnerable and listen to our partner and see them as a sexual being, new information is transmitted through our brains and bodies about one each other and ourselves. This new knowledge can create a sense of renewal between the partners and generate and enhance their sexual attraction.

The keys to passion, and sensual sex

Building lust by objectifying the partner

Objectification of another person is generally considered erotically undesirable, but things are not so simple when it comes to lust. At best, objectification can be an effective resource in assessing another person and the acceptability of a situation. If the desired partner senses us as the object of their desire, this can feel flattering and

invigorating. Both men and women crave these opportunities of being treated as sexual objects, and many people rue how rarely it happens. This is why we spend so much money and time in our society to make ourselves look like appealing sex objects.

When we see someone who looks sexy, we may believe that this person could make us feel aroused. In reality, the source of arousal lies within our own mind and body. Someone sexy is merely a sexual stimulus and to some extent also an object. We are always the subject of our own arousal. A fetish is a special example of the objectification related to lust.

Viewing another person as an object also means externalizing – recognizing the desired object as separate from oneself. This means that we clearly recognize that the desired object is external to ourselves. The experience of this otherness is a fundamental aspect of falling in love. Not only is the object separate from us, but they are also valuable enough to be worth pursuing.

Having strong sexual preferences tends to make the desired object into something of an object, especially during stages of strong arousal. Contrary to the beliefs of some critics, this kind of objectification can be equally arousing to and appreciated by both partners. Positive objectification emphasizes the other's separateness by using one or more of the other's characteristics or traits as a source of one's passionate enthusiasm. Problems arise only when someone is seen only as an object of desire with no regard for their feelings, preferences or rights – if there is not a sufficient, basic level of respect for them.

The desire to join with another person originates in this experience of being separate, because only two individuals who are separate from one another can share mutual intimacy. When an exciting and romantic response from the other person awakens an immediate desire to merge with them, most of us never completely forget that "I and my partner" will always remain two separate beings. This is true even when we rejoice in the sense of shared oneness. When partners lose sight of each other's individuality and one of them treats the other only as a kind of supplement, the relationship will ultimately falter. Both partners will feel that they are being drained rather than fulfilled by their interaction.

Although the need for consensus is recognized as part of the mutual giving and receiving in a couple, there is always some ambiguity. Some lovers are ambivalent – they both so and don't want to have sex. Others enjoy being seduced while pretending not to want sex. Some are reluctant to give verbal permission to their partner for having sex. For example, they may want their partner to take full control of the situation, provided the partner is capable enough of interpreting their subtle, nonverbal cues.

Igniting lust

A challenging question to answer is why we are sexually attracted to certain people, but not at all to some others, in a world proliferating with countless variations of human beings with different characteristics and physiques. This is one of life's great mysteries and one that many people actually fear to unravel. They worry that their attraction might be ruined if they understood the real reasons behind it. Most people, however, find that a closer examination of their infatuation deepens and enriches their lives.

There are two main types of infatuation: lust and romance. Each stems from different motives and gives rise to a different kind of passion. People who aspire to a rewarding erotic life need to develop a functional relationship that is based on both types of infatuation. Both are needed as the building blocks of a satisfying relationship.

Lust can be seen as enjoyable pleasure that is part of our sensual appetite. Its secondary meaning can be understood as strong enthusiasm, as in the saying 'lust for life'. Most people consider this kind of lust admirable. In the other extreme, lust can be viewed as uninhibited or even lewd surrender to carnal lusts, which is why talking about lust in social situations can be awkward. Between two people, it can be sexually very inspiring.

Our erotic wellbeing requires that there is room for lust because it enables the kind of enthusiasm that makes sex fun and reinforces the self. Socially speaking, it is important that we not forgo lust regardless of how many warnings we hear regarding it

or how much we may fear it. When inhibitions get in the way of lust, the inevitable effect on us will be negative.

At the heart of lustful infatuation is a desire for sexual arousal and the experience of an orgasm, to put it plainly. The desire can be profound, or completely meaningless, or it can be playful, loving or hostile. In its most intense forms, lust has animal qualities that can feel either invigorating or frightening, or both. When we experience lust, we focus above all on what it is that we want, and on the things that can produce or intensify our arousal, especially in the genital area.

Infatuation is, inherently, the primary activator of sexuality. Men express lust more than women. This may be explained by the penis by which men receive immediate, observational and direct feedback on their arousal – it cannot go unnoticed. For women, the signs of arousal are less obvious and do not necessarily affect their genitals as directly. It's good to keep in mind that we are not always aware of the things that excite us.

Sometimes the foundation of arousal lies somewhere on the edges of the subconscious as a tiny impulse that we need not think about. But this impulse can act as a pathway to a world of pleasure.

Sexual communication and sensual sex

Building a good sexual relationship is always based on open and active communication. Sexual communication has a dual meaning. Not only does it convey vital information about what we want and do not want or might want to try, but it is also important in boosting – or at least in not undermining – our partner's sexual self-esteem. There is no doubt that we are at our best when our partner makes us feel that we have a special ability to make them aroused. Conversely, we are at our least sexy when told that we can do nothing right, especially in bed.

If you want to continue being in a relationship with your partner, never belittle, make fun of or disparage them sexually, no matter how upset you are. Damaging your sex life is too high a price to

pay for the small moment of satisfaction that you may achieve from verbally slapping down your partner even more brutally than they did to you. It's much better to talk with sincerity about how you feel, even if you have to wait long enough to have properly calmed down. It's extremely difficult to take back or undo a sexual insult.

Make it a habit to regularly give your partner positive verbal and nonverbal feedback on what you feel is particularly good about your relationship and your love. This builds their self-confidence and increases the chances that you can get more of what you like. The more you give, the more you get.

Bring up sexual issues and sources of dissatisfaction when you feel close to your partner. Do not do it when you're feeling defensive, tired or worried about something. One of the best moments can be during or especially after a shared, enjoyable experience. The goal is to establish a connection in both of your minds about how good feelings and talking about sex can be successfully combined.

If talking directly feels too difficult, write a message to your loved one. This method allows you to take time with processing the message you want to convey and gives your partner plenty of time to digest it without having to react immediately. Describe your motive to your companion precisely, as in, "I appreciate our sexual relationship so much that I've been thinking about how to make it even better."

It is helpful to specifically ask about your partner's experience, and how you could contribute more to their enjoyment. The goal of these subtle questions is to give your partner permission to express themselves without making you feel like you're making demands. You may also touch your partner in a few different ways and ask what feels best.

In order to preserve the opportunity for lustful and passionate sex, long-term couples in successful relationships have developed the ability to enjoy sensual sex. Instead of a more intense focus, warm sex centers on somewhat calmer feelings and experiences, such as sensuality, affection, enjoyment and playfulness. Although

warm sex involves genital arousal, too, the focus is not specifically on achieving intense arousal or an orgasm.

Erotic crises and tools for change

At some point in every relationship, an erotic crisis will emerge. It begins with the realization that the demands and temptations of one's mind and one's self-esteem, and the repetitive and ordinary sexual habits in the relationship, have become incompatible. One may wake up to the realization of being dissatisfied with one's erotic life. Each erotic crisis inevitably comes to a point where painful truths must be confronted, and life-changing decisions have to be thought through and made.

If we are aware that we generally judge ourselves in a negative light, we may very well feel similar feelings also vis-à-vis our eroticism. Paradoxically, those who suffer the most from their unsatisfactory sexual habits often feel the most compelled to repeat them over and over again.

There are four different ways in which basic negative beliefs about yourself can contribute to ruining your erotic experiences:

- by sabotaging your ability to accept sexual pleasure
- by creating an intense and compelling desire to implement ritualized scenarios
- by pulling you into relationships and situations that lead to failures
- by preventing you from developing to your full potential, not only sexually but also in other areas of life.

A useful exercise is to recall as vividly as possible how you felt when you first became aware of your sexual curiosity or desire. If you considered yourself ugly, worthless for love or believed that your destiny was to become despised and rejected, it is very possible that these beliefs became part of your erotic development. By researching the roots of your eroticism and keeping an eye on how you felt about yourself back then, you can obtain valuable clues about the core beliefs, both negative and positive, that have shaped your personality into the person you are today.

An erotic crisis always contains the opportunity for change. It is important to understand that change is a starting point and basic component of erotic adventures and fulfillment. As we find new ways to enjoy, our sexual repertoire naturally expands to include these new rewarding pathways as well.

Elements of positive change:

- Clarify your goals and motives.
- Refine your self-esteem.
- Focus your mind on the gray areas.
- Acknowledge your losses and mourn them.
- Try to come to your senses.
- Take risks with unusual experiences.
- Collate your findings.

It's good to keep the objectives of change simple and narrow enough.

A personal goal can be, for example, the following idea:

"I want to be able to enjoy sex with someone I love."

"I want to learn how to get aroused without feeling anxious!"

Excessive self-criticism hampers our ability to change or learn something new. Another mistake is to invest in what you do not really want. Instead, we should focus on thinking about why we need change and what rewarding things we can achieve through it. These are motives that encourage change. Counter-motives to change include, for example, various fears and resistance to change in your living environment.

Sexual tedium and couples

One of the biggest challenges for the sexual mind is how to maintain genuine sexual interest toward a long-term partner. It is more difficult to be constantly aroused by

someone we see in both sickness and in health, at their best and their worst, and also when they are grumpy, irritable, depressed, tired or tense, as much as they are sunny, charming, fun, empathetic and strong.

Continued intimacy must be able to face and tolerate the complexity of the relationship experience. Intimacy and sexual desire can be, and in practice often are, awkward partners. Getting married sometimes immediately eradicates the “dirtiness” of sex: “As soon as I was married, sex began to feel completely different. It’s normal and fine now, a kind of duty – and it’s boring!”

For some people, sexual desires fade as a result of repeated sexual frustration. This happens, for example, when a partner repeatedly refuses sexual overtures, has repeated difficulties in achieving an erection, or if, as a rule, they reach climax very quickly. Many women appear to lose their desire in the relationship because they interpret their husband’s erectile problems as being a sign that he no longer wants her. A relationship that seems to them one-sided no longer inspires them.

One of the biggest reasons for sexual boredom in a relationship is when you feel that you have to invest significantly more in the relationship also sexually, compared to your partner. This makes the relationship seem unfair. You may feel that your investment in the relationship is not reciprocated or rewarded, and the resulting negative emotions may prevent you from feeling physiological sexual arousal. These emotions can quash the emergence of arousing sexual images and fantasies in your mind. The outcome is that you do not want or dare to express your desires to your partner. During possible lovemaking, your focus suffers, and your thoughts may wander to entirely other things.

Experts often argue that fading passion is the result of poor communication skills, lack of intimacy and trust, or unresolved conflicts. Even though all of these can lead to unsatisfying sex, it is important to recognize that a good relationship does not automatically lead to good sex. In fact, passion is often the hardest thing to achieve in the best of relationships.

The greatest erotic tension flourishes in new relationships and marriages, and those plagued or ravaged by various conflicts or even fighting. The ways in which the

partners complement each other and how suited they are in terms of their characters and habits, have not yet become honed and established.

An important stage of change in relationship formation is the stage when the mind begins to perceive things through the concept of “us”. In this process, the sense of ourselves and the other is changing. Occasionally, two people may know from the first glance that their lives are fated to be intertwined. But the “we” feeling that gradually comes to form the core of a lasting relationship builds slowly, in the course of the endless ups and downs of a relationship.

A couple’s sexual relationship does not necessarily have to deteriorate even after many years together, if the channel that opens up to their mutual lust and desire has not been ruined by things like worry, guilt, shame, self-doubt or helplessness.

The way we idealize our partner is most exaggerated when falling in love. We exaggerate in our minds their beauty, sexuality, capacity for passion, intelligence, wit, empathy, strength, altruism and courage, seeing only the positive aspects. We overlook any kind of weaknesses and downplay their significance or rationalize them away.

Brand-new lovers are on the one hand completely enjoined and on the other hand very separate. They feel that they have merged together as a result of the strong identification that follows infatuation, yet they also feel quite separate because their actual lives are not yet characterized by constant reciprocity.

There is a psychological distance between those newly in love that undergirds even the blindest, most infatuated couples. The distance allows each person to safely throw themselves into each other’s experiences, including sexual ones, without the risk of either of them losing themselves as a result. The feeling of powerful merging is based on the very fact of psychological separation. The intense, subjective experience of being enjoined to the other person is merely an idealized version of them, and not their entire, actual personality.

Intimacy and sexual directness

One consequence of the sense of psychological separation that prevails at the beginning of a relationship is the strong ability and still-present capacity for sexual directness. This directness also includes the kind of sexual arousal where we are still completely selfish and unconcerned about the partner's arousal or wellbeing.

Directness is a quality of the kind of desire that allows us to surrender completely to our own pleasure. We are aroused without guilt, worry or shame. Without this particular "ruthlessness" we become enslaved to the other's emotions and cannot become maximally aroused, sometimes not even minimally.

If we feel that we are merging with our "perfect" partner, our own value automatically increases in our own minds. In addition, the greater the psychological distance and the greater our sense of being separate from the partner, the safer it is for us to treat them as a sexual object. Distance and separation create the optimal conditions for sexual directness.

Over time, partners in a couple become very familiar with each other's bodies. They also repeatedly encounter them in less perfect, less sexy circumstances. As they get used to each other's bodies, they also become accustomed to each other emotionally. They become familiar with the other person's preferences, fears and vulnerabilities, and know which topics of conversation are safe in a relationship, and what to avoid.

As the couple becomes increasingly and intimately familiar with one another, the boundaries of their personalities become more blurred and the partners merge and identify with one another ever more. Each one believes they really know the other person in both the good and the bad. It is no longer clear where one person ends and the other begins. Their shared habits create a sense of mutual understanding and increasingly lead to a process of identification with the partner. In the meantime, both partners are constantly hiding various things from each other. They regularly misinterpret each other, draw the wrong conclusions, project their own feelings to the other, blame them for what they themselves feel guilty about, and are unaware of particular blind points in their relationship.

Knowing the other person and being understood form the foundation of intimacy. But awareness of the partner's faults can create problematic identification. One partner may begin to feel concern, responsibility, resentment and guilt toward the other. These feelings are detrimental to sexual arousal because they dampen the sexual directness that is necessary for proper arousal. Familiarity can thus have the effect of suppressing sexual arousal in a potentially otherwise well-functioning relationship.

As a couple becomes more intimate and harmonious in their relationship, both become better at seeing and recognizing the vulnerability in the other caused by the shame and self-criticism that partner feels. What may initially seem charming shyness may gradually come to feel more like neurotic insecurity.

People often subconsciously recognize the vulnerability and weakness in a loved one, as if they were one's own emotions. A partner's feelings of shame may turn into their own shame. The partner who would like to make love with all the lights on may accommodate the other who is ashamed of it, and in turn also become more reserved in that respect. The partner who would like to give their loved one oral sex subconsciously identifies with the love done, who is ashamed of their genitals, and in turn also becomes self-restrained and ashamed.

In the early stages of a relationship, the intensity of sexual desire often casts aside feelings of shame and self-doubt. As the relationship continues, the other person's barriers and sources of shame begin to erode the spontaneity and passion that the couple have shared. The couple becomes too intimate, and a partner who is too closely identifying with their inhibited partner finds themselves changing in a similar direction.

Sexual desire is a highly sensitive measure of the ups and downs of our psychological lives. Our sexual partners must fulfill the same function as our sexual fantasies. They need to provide safe enough conditions to allow us to become sexually aroused. A good sexual relationship is much like a good sexual fantasy: it's exciting because subconsciously you know that it's safe.

The way we awaken to another person's sexual attractiveness often occurs in a flash – it is not a conscious process. The original attraction to the partner is largely based on subconscious perceptions and information processing. For example, we

may worry about offending our partners with the intensity of our sexual desire. If we then manage to find someone who seems to enjoy our overwhelming displays of sexual intensity, we feel safe enough to be aroused freely.

In relationships, there are certain types of conflicts that increase sexual passion. Couples often initially foment controversy in order to create emotional distance. It is safe, then, for sexual arousal to occur safely, helping the couple to establish a new kind of relationship with each other.

As a result of the mutual differentiation spurred by the couple's conflicts, sexual tension becomes more possible again. The risk of merging into the other is reduced and sexual directness becomes possible again. Sexual arousal is safe again. The couple is motivated to seek arousal because, as a result of the conflicts, there is a risk of losing the other and of being rejected. Merging and identifying with the other produces the need to quarrel, which in turn creates the need for sex. This circle can be repeated ad infinitum.

Preserving sexual desire in long-term unions

The autonomy of two partners is key factor in the preservation of a well-functioning relationship. This means being committed to making choices that nourish the couple's togetherness at the same time as understanding what is in one's own best interests. This process is called differentiation. It is the ability to maintain one's separateness and identity while being in a close relationship with another person. It also involves balancing between individuality and togetherness without being dependent on the other's approval or their acceptance of a particular activity. This can free us from the fear of being cast aside or, alternatively, of becoming repressed and overly dependent.

In a relationship, people who are differentiated are able to tolerate variations in the rhythm of their mutual intimacy and distance without feeling threatened. They are flexible, meaning they have the ability not to overreact, for example, to a shock experienced by their partner. They are able to act autonomously, even though their partner may want them to do things their way.

Erotic partners adopt simple means or tricks to refresh their own desire. These are techniques that, if revealed, might provoke or offend their partner. For example, many men and women constantly engage in harmless flirtation with others. If their partners were to witness the flirting, some at least might become jealous. Many partners of flirtatious people receive the erotic bounty of their partner's flirtation by having a very stimulating lover as a result, without having to consider all the reasons why this is so.

There are, of course, also couples who perform the mutual sexual acts out of a sense of duty, even though they get only minimal pleasure from it themselves. For them, sex is something that is essential to maintain, much the same way as, for example, laundry and shopping. This arrangement works well for many couples.

Many other couples have an active and satisfying sex life despite their chronic disagreements and quarrels. Some of these couples, after starting to cooperate better and argue less, have found their sex lives unexpectedly declining. They obviously needed a degree of mutual conflict to fuel their passion.

The key question in a long-term relationship is how to keep sexual desire and attraction between the partners alive. Partners are usually most powerfully stimulated by someone or something new, unknown and unattainable – the kind of stimulation that is difficult to achieve and maintain in a long-term relationship.

The problem of the waning of a couple's sexual relationship can be addressed in at least two ways:

- First, you can try to retain a sense of the original attraction toward your partner – the thing that brought you together in the first place. It is worth expending energy on recollecting this properly. These vital memories may have been forgotten amid later conflicts and problems.
- Second, it is worth noting the new sources of attraction that have emerged as the relationship has developed and focusing on recollecting these.
- Most erotic partners rely on a combination of both of the above.

At least as important as being aware of the things that promote mutual attraction is the ability to reinforce in your partner the sense of their own attractiveness. This can

be done by giving positive comments and by accepting and appreciating the partner's conceptions of themselves.

You probably want your partner's attractiveness to affect you? It is therefore your duty to be actively open and receptive and eagerly acknowledge your lover's beauty. The biggest enemy of someone's attraction or appeal is the tendency to no longer care to pay attention to it. An invisible partner certainly cannot feel attractive, and erotic partners can learn to view their loved one with new eyes.

Some people are bothered when their partner seems to believe that they deserve perpetual admiration even when they are not taking care of themselves. If you do not comment on your loved one while watching as they have perhaps given up on tending to their attractiveness, this amounts to tacitly accepting that their appearance no longer matters to you.

Masturbation and relationships

Some people think that if a relationship is working, there is no room or need for masturbation. However, masturbation does not diminish love or desire for a long-term partner. In fact, many people find that private sexual activity and pleasure are essential parts of maintaining their own erotic vitality. Masturbation also helps numerous couples even out their different desires, with masturbation contributing to the much-needed sexual activity in the relationship.

Erotic couples respect each other's sexual privacy, and there may be no need to discuss masturbation. Sharing it with a partner, on the other hand, can be a shared and stimulating form of play.

Erotic fantasies typically associated with masturbation often provide a direct connection to the core of someone's sexuality or the inner source of their passion. Even when one's increased desire is focused on a fantasy partner, the actual relationship in many cases benefits from this.

Sometimes in relationships one partner discovers the hiding place of their partner's erotic magazines or videos and becomes deeply upset that the partner is fantasizing about someone else. This can arouse jealousy. Others may even be convinced that masturbation is a sign that there is something wrong with their relationship.

Some couples also argue about vibrators and sex toys, especially with regard to their amazing ability to produce even multiple orgasms. Many women find the intensity of vibrators very engaging, especially when reinforced by fantasies. Their partners can sometimes find the devices threatening because they feel they cannot compete with the pleasure that the devices are able to bring.

For adventurous couples, joint masturbation can be a powerful and memorable experience. Each can demonstrate to the other how they like to be touched. What better way to learn exactly what your partner particularly enjoys? After possible initial awkwardness, the private lesson can be quite tantalizingly erotic.

Sharing erotic fantasies can be more difficult than masturbation. The close connection between masturbation and fantasies is a major reason why masturbation is usually seen as a private matter. Many people cannot practice masturbation without fantasies, and in the presence of a partner it can be difficult to immerse oneself freely in fantasies. Even though we all know that men and women often have fantasies about other people while making love to their partners, how many of us ultimately wants to hear what their partner is fantasizing about?

Women's desire, men's desire

Perhaps the biggest challenge in the sexual life of a couple is that the sexual desires of men and women are so likely to differ. This is, in fact, the largest average difference between men and women in sexual matters. In a Finnish study, men reported a desire to have sexual intercourse two to three times more often than women, and also needing more frequent intercourse than women to feel sexually satisfied. Interestingly, men's sexual desire coincides with the desire of women who are on average twenty years younger than they are. Contrary to what people want and believe, this sex gap has not narrowed in recent years or decades.

The flip side of sexual desire is lack of desire. Women are four times more likely to report frequent lack of sexual desire, compared to men. Lack of sexual desire is also common in young women and in relationships that have lasted up to only a few years.

It is therefore not just a sexual problem that typically occurs in relationships between long-term partners.

According to letters sent in by women, their lack of sexual desire is very often associated, for one reason or another, with weak or impaired feminine or sexual self-esteem. A woman no longer feels sexy or sexually desirable. For many, this feeling is activated after having children, when changes occur in the body that make it feel foreign. Some women may even experience a sense of self-loathing. The situation becomes further inflamed and exacerbated if she receives less positive feedback from her spouse regarding herself. Low self-esteem is also more often associated with difficulty concentrating and the presence of various distracting thoughts during love-making. Understandably, these women have difficulty getting sexually aroused.

The other larger set of topics behind women's lack of desire is related in one way or another to problematic relationships. For surprisingly many women, sexual desire wanes pretty soon after a relationship becomes established, with no consciously identifiable reason. It is as if the job of desire in these cases had been merely to secure the relationship – afterwards, it no longer serves a purpose for them.

Behind women's lack of sexual desire are also stories about the stressful lives of the women in relationships, and a lack of time spent together with their partner. Some women do not always have enough energy left over for sex. In some cases, they have a controlling and violent spouse. The lack of desire also stems from bad and boring sex with the spouse, as well as a partner's possible infidelity.

Sexual desire and arousal are connected to functional ability, which can be plagued by various health problems. Women who wrote about their lack of sexual desire had experienced, among other things, certain illnesses, post-operative conditions, chronic pain, depression, anorexia and medication side-effects that negatively affected their desire. These had prevented or at least restricted women from using their sexual capacity in their sexual lives.

In a psychological sense, a woman's desire derives first from her own differentiation and her confidence in her own sexuality. A woman's sexual desire is activated from the experience of knowing that her partner wants her. A constant bond manifested through touching, smells and sounds (such as her partner whispering in her

ear) makes her feel that she is enjoined with her partner and she is loved. This excites her because she believes and feels that her partner really cares about her. When a woman feels that she is being taken care of, she feels safe. This feeling of safety allows her to be more uninhibited than before and brings out her true sexual nature or core.

A man's sexual desire also arises from his own differentiation and his confidence in himself. Free of shame, his sexual desire becomes activated when he knows that his partner wants him. His partner's appearance and playful and seductive actions (such as touching) make him become more powerfully enjoined with and loving of his partner.

Ways to enhance sensuality

1. Focus on yourself and your partner and pay attention to what you are thinking, how you feel and what clues your partner is giving you.
 2. Breathe consciously for a moment. Deep breathing helps us to be strongly present and to recognize the sensations in our bodies.
 3. Focus on being in united with your partner, and you will feel conscious enjoyment.
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Sex addicts are constantly objectifying and sexualizing other people. They say they are looking at their bodies, not at people as individuals. It is quite another thing to see your partner as the beautiful and marvelous sexual being that they really are; then, sex is not motivated by a fantasy or by genitals but by what is actually happening between two people – the sex is relationship dependent. It therefore pays to share with your partner how you feel and how much you appreciate him or her as a wonderfully delightful sexual being.

The bed is a great place to talk about sexual issues. Pillow-talk can spur entirely new ways of interacting together. You don't have to transcend your own boundaries – you can always say 'no', if necessary. Each moment contains an opportunity to be

heard and accepted and to say 'yes', as well as to do things that have been previously agreed upon. Another possibility is to draw up and present an alternative plan together, if what was just discussed does not feel right at that particular moment.

Since shame has probably had a stranglehold of our sexuality for a long time, we need courage to respond to our partner more authentically and without the need to protect ourselves.

These tools can be helpful:

1. Listen to your partner with an open mind and heart: no accusations, no shame. Be aware of the risk your partner is having to take in telling you what they want.
2. Take time to contemplate your partner's suggestion to try some new technique that you may not be in the right mood for at the moment.
3. Don't ever judge the sexual things that your partner desires. Saying "that's disgusting" or "that's immoral" or rolling your eyes will do nothing to reduce your own fears, discomfort or limitations regarding sexual behavior. If you project your own inner condemnation onto your partner, it will only embarrass them and lessen your ability to look out for yourself.
4. It is always acceptable to say 'no' to the other person but be careful about how you say it. For example, if your partner wants oral sex and you do not, disregard honesty in that moment and instead offer up an alternative plan: "I'm delighted that you are excited by the idea, but I'm tired and would like sex to be quicker today. Can I take your reservation on that for this weekend?" Another answer could be, "I understand that you are aroused by sex from behind, and I may want to try it with you later, but I'm not sure

if you're really connected to me in that position. I want to wait until I trust you more."

One of the most violent awakenings of lovers to reality is the realization that, contrary to your expectations, your partner's deepest erotic desires are very different from your own. This calls for a moment of mutual self-examination.

Erotic sex

The word 'erotic' often refers to an attempt to elevate sexual desire in yourself or your partner. Arousal is active then, and the erotic becomes manifested in activities or sexual allusions that can be subtle experiences enjoyed separately or shared by the partners. Sex becomes genuinely erotic when we surrender to a loving relationship with the other. A loving connection transforms a regular sexual experience into an erotic experience.

Erotic sex is best achieved when both partners are differentiated. This means that you have expressed what you yourself are in a sexual sense. You are clear about this and have also revealed it to your partner. You and your partner have engaged in conscious, mutual conversations and have been honest with each other about your feelings and your favorite sexual activities and experiences.

Separateness is the balance between individualism and togetherness. As we move toward erotic sex, we are making a commitment to relieving our anxiety. We are relaxed, not spurred by fear or giving something up or, conversely, fear of being suppressed or becoming dependent.

There is a certain paradox between individuality and becoming joined. We need to hold on to the concept of the self – that we have worked so hard to develop and put

into practice – as we are merging with our partner during sex. This rather simple sounding but not necessarily easy method of operating provides ample room for practicing good, erotically powered sex. When you reveal your most vulnerable self while being connected emotionally to your partner, you can also unleash your carnal, animal desires. The end result is the experience of a deep love, a new way to experience yourself and also some very nice, hot sex.

Once you achieve a sufficient level of self-awareness, you can allow your animal passions to come out. Accept your wildness fully and trust that your open and uninhibited self-expression will lead to spiritual connection.

People who do not maintain their separateness in a relationship often tire of each other due to their rigid ways and their unwillingness to work through the kinds of conflicts that would enable them to grow and change. Fully separate people, on the other hand, are willing to live in a world that incorporates the unknown. They challenge each other to tell the truth about who they really are. This courage increases the opportunities for new kinds of experiences with your partner.

Using the senses

The sexually receptive mind is also the sensual mind. Sensuality is the heightening of the experience of being present through all of our senses: focusing on touch, awakening to scents, immersing oneself in tastes, hearing the silence. A sensory, sensual presence is easier when making love without any pressure or particular objective.

During sex, all of our senses are usually alert and receptive. As our partner approaches us, their gaze, voice, the way they touch us, and their scent all have a major impact on what is about to happen; whether sexual desire is awakened or withers for one reason or another.

Sight

Our eyes connect our brain and our body to the external world. Humans are visual beings, and we look at everything that moves or that we happen to cast our eyes upon. Because our brain is stimulated by what we see, the newer something seems, the

more interesting and arousing it is for both our brain and our body. This explains in part why we are so curious about everything new.

The optic nerves are connected to both the central nervous system and the autonomic nervous system, and they function as a kind of periscope for the brain and the body, contributing to the way sexual arousal and stimulation function in us.

Voice

It is well-recognized how important and arousing it can be for a woman to hear words of love and erotic appreciation. Most men, on the other hand, feel that their partner's voice emitting sounds of sexual satisfaction during lovemaking is a fantastically effective erectile aid.

Sounds of enjoyment made during sex elevate our experience especially if they are also paired with words of something imagined that also please the listener. Deep sighs and low moans that resonate with sexual pleasure are very contagious. Those sounds that come from the emotional and primitive part of the brain send particularly arousing signals to the partner.

Both men and women perceive such sounds as positive. They want their partners to emit them and believe they signal sexual pleasure. When women give men verbal instructions such as "deeper, harder, faster," men find it very arousing.

Taste and scent

The scents that attract the opposite sex are called pheromones. Their main source in humans is our skin. Our ability to smell our partner is astounding, and someone's individual scent can even be crucial to whether we find them attractive. Some people can get downright intoxicated by the odors secreted by their partner's genitals.

During foreplay, you can combine the scents that appeal to you. You can also add various erotic flavors, such as chocolate on the skin, involving both taste and smell when licking and tasting.

Touch

Touch is, of course, a key element of eroticism. Touch can excite, but it also produces affection and feelings of intimacy, and it relaxes us. Touch provides reassurance that

you are being noticed and that you are taken care of, and it builds our self-esteem. It helps us to take in the other person and to trust the other.

Touch attracts us in part because it causes the secretion of a chemical called oxytocin and makes us want more and more touching. Oxytocin creates a feedback loop where touch and pleasure increase the desire to be touched and satisfied. When women are touched, the combination of oxytocin and estrogen enhances several pleasurable reactions, such as the sensitivity of nipples and genitals to stimulation.

Kissing

Being kissed on different parts of one's body signals to us that our partner is arousing to us. Tasting your partner, exchanging saliva, the scent of your partner, and their hot breath can be arousing, as long as shame does not interfere with these sensations. When you surrender yourself to the sensations associated with kissing your loved one, you find that the thinking that may have attempted to disrupt the situation will cease.

Kissing is a kind of dance, where a slow progression is erotic and fast licking can cause an orgasm. You should experiment with nibbling, licking with your tongue, licking slowly, biting gently, kissing softly, and deeper and longer kissing. Let your partner know what you like especially while you explore the deep arousal that kissing can bring to both of you.

Sensual toys

Sensual toys, including sex toys and vibrators, as well as sensual activities, are good for arousal if they are suitable for both you and your partner. Try using feathers, silk, skin powders or washable body paint. Take hot baths together before and after making love. Use your imagination in your fantasies, but always be clear about where the boundaries of your desires lie.

Playing with sexual fantasies

Make sure you do your best to observe your sexual fantasies. Everyone's mind wanders during sex – it just has to be accepted. The essential question is where the mind wanders. Are you possibly ecstatic about past sex experiences? Do you hide fantasies

and dreams of future experiences with someone you wouldn't tell your partner about? Maybe you are thinking about children or worried about work. Wondering when the sex will be over? Thoughts like this mean you are not really present with your partner.

Focusing on the moment at hand is easier when you breathe carefully, look closely at your partner and talk to them. Tell your partner that your thoughts wandered a bit and then focus on being together.

Tasks to help you tune your erotic mood:

- Read sexy stories, such as romantic stories or erotica, together.
- Read suggestive or romantic poetry to your partner as you lie on your bed.
- Watch a sexually arousing movie together.
- Take turns drawing pictures of what you would like to do to one another.
- Pamper yourself with sexual fantasies throughout the day or just before falling asleep.
- Recollect situations in which you were particularly aroused by your partner shortly after you first met.
- Get yourself excited using your hand or a vibrator.
- Express your affection toward your partner with kisses, hugs, touches and massages.
- Write out a fantasy that really excites you.

- Dance together on a regular weekday, even if only for a moment, very close.
 - Activate your bodies so that you are fully energized, by dancing or running.
 - Maintain an erotic vibe together throughout the day with emotion-laden and arousing messages and calls.
-

Spiritualized sex

Some people become also mentally aroused during sex. Transforming sex into something mental and spiritual is a kind of movement of our internal energy, of moods and emotions that come from within ourselves. They are manifested in our sexual physicality as vibrant, tender, erotic or passionate expression. Our bodies move without inhibition so that all of the energy flows out of us and spreads between us and our partner. We allow our spiritual energy to reveal its “dance” through us and become a shared experience.

Sit face to face while looking into each other’s eyes and breathe deeply. Listen to your inner voice and tell your partner what purpose and goal you would like to assign to this particular lovemaking.

- Be present and stay present without judging whether your sexual experience is sweet and tender, or wild and carnal. Accept all expressions that spring forth from you.
- Worship the bodies of each of you. Allow yourself to feel your own masculine and feminine sides, as well as your giving and receiving sides.

- Allow yourself to express your joy freely and permit your intense bursts of energy.
 - Add your lust and your love into your overall human, spiritualized state.
 - Treat all of your experiences with respect.
-

Spiritualized sex can give you the feeling that you are connected to something larger than what you and your partner are as separate beings. Many spiritual teachers have said that an orgasm is closest to the spiritualized experience that humans are capable of. Part of this is the momentary feeling of losing yourself.

EXTRAORDINARY SEXUAL EXPERIENCES AND UNFORGETTABLE SEX PARTNERS

This chapter includes a compilation of research data on the kinds of sexual experiences and partners that people have considered to be their most spectacular or memorable. These are often referred to as our peak experiences, or peak eroticism. These recollections from other people can offer clues to our own sexual mind about specific areas of sexuality and eroticism that we may have not yet conquered.

This chapter will also certainly provide hints about the things that your partner (if you currently have one) may have dreamed of, but that, for one reason or another, they have not dared to tell you about – at least not yet. You could initiate a conversation with your partner regarding these things. Even though there are a lot of individual differences between us in terms of sexual and erotic dreams and fantasies, there is a lot of universality in the experiences reported in this chapter, making them very suitable as guidelines for extraordinary sex, or at least as a tip sheet for each and every one of us.

Toward erotic fulfillment

Many people dream of erotic fulfillment, but what might it be like? Maslow realized that the joy and impact of erotic peaks stem not from the events themselves but from the emotions inside each of us. Maslow's insight is equally well suited as a perspective on peak erotic experiences. Unless we have a deeply personal emotional reaction to a particular situation, even the sexiest partner or situation can end up feeling merely interesting – and therefore probably not very memorable.

The most important of our personal sexual reactions are:

- The intensity of our sensuality and orgasm
- The waning of our inhibitions
- Giving and receiving appreciation
- Reciprocity and compatibility

- The experience of transcendence and transcending personal boundaries.

The five reactions outlined above form the core of erotic peak experiences. They represent the desires and needs that accompany us on our erotic adventures and offer the keys to our erotic fulfillment.

Sexual experience is basically an expression of our physical selves. Without our innate capacity to receive and process sensory stimulation in an aroused state and to build simultaneous muscle tension and then release it all through an orgasm, the eroticism we experience would not be possible. During a peak sexual experience, our whole body and all of its senses come alive.

Our reaction to touch develops in a particular way – an outsider might not be able to detect that anything extraordinary is happening. But from a purely subjective point of view, our receptivity progresses from a neutral state to, at best, a hyper-sensual consciousness. It adds the kind of richness to stimulation that under more ordinary circumstances might even feel mundane to us.

In this state of sensitive touch, our responses are much more heightened than usual because we are completely immersed in something arousing while sifting through all of the external stimulation we are receiving. This kind of targeted focus is a different level of consciousness, in a way that is similar to hypnosis. You can also think of it as a kind of sexual trance.

People often describe being attuned to a kind of animal nature inside them during intense arousal. It is not uncommon for people to be surprised by their own sexual ability and strength. For some women, their ability to experience multiple orgasms within a short timespan comes to symbolize their special sexual sensitivity and ability. Psychologically, experiences like these cause permanent changes in people.

For many people, the road to erotic fulfillment is long and narrow. Without being conscious of it in any way, we may have learned to restrict the free flow of our erotic energy in our bodies through the subconscious process of internal bodily regulation that Wilhelm Reich called muscle armor. If, when you were a child, your guardian conveyed wordlessly to their environment, through their postures and with their muscles, that physical pleasure was unpleasant, you may as an adult still be imitating

what you perceived as a child. To some extent, you may still be locking yourself into certain positions, squeezing your breath and restricting the range of your motions. As a result, you are narrowing your capacity for sensual enjoyment and, as an adult, continuing to subconsciously obey the physical and sexual restrictions that you adopted from your early education.

During peak experiences, the body is miraculously able to release itself from its rigid postures, as all of our emotional worries evaporate in that moment quite spontaneously. Somehow we are capable of woozily frolicking for a moment, childlike in our freedom. During a peak experience we are free of inhibitions, playfully experimental and able to be extremely expressive. Without a doubt, at least one of the above is always a prerequisite for a peak sexual experience.

In sex, the things that we remember for a long time afterwards often involve sexual surprises. The wonderful aspect of a sexual surprise is that it can eradicate our inhibitions and take us by storm before we have a chance to defend ourselves. We must keep our senses alert to these surprises.

The importance of giving and receiving appreciation

Part of a peak erotic experience is that such satisfying sex leaves us with a sense of spiritual reinforcement and our own desirability. It makes us feel worth all the effort and specially accepted. It is therefore worth focusing on the warm and glowing feeling of fulfillment that follows greatest arousal. You will probably recognize both the good feeling in and about yourself as well as your absolute appreciation for your partner. If you and your partner also care for each other, reciprocally, the recognition you both receive means even more.

In psychotherapy, some gentle persuading is often needed before clients shift their attention away from the details of their sexual experiences and focus instead on how their increased self-esteem feels, or how their partner's admiration for them feels. These feeling are expressed, for example, in the following comments:

"She was the sexiest woman I have ever been with."

"Masterful lover!"

"I was really hot that night – and I wasn't afraid to show it."

"He/she made me feel beautiful."

In order for us to understand the importance of the feeling of being accepted that is associated with peak erotic experiences, we must remember the role of our own insecurity in the sexual acts and situations that arouse us the most. One of the functions of our sexual core is to help us encounter and demonstrate our own worth and desirability and to keep resisting our persistent, negative beliefs about ourselves. Part of the reason why sexual peak experiences are so deeply satisfying is that they provide an enormous boost to our self-esteem and convince us that we can renew our finest experiences.

From sharing a common tune to achieving transcendence

Many of us mistakenly assume that our partner would know for sure how, where and when we want to be touched. This may be because we have had encounters – and especially fantasies – in which our partner magically knew immediately and exactly what pleased us. Most of the time, our peak experiences include, at least to some extent, perfect timing and perfectly coinciding touches and a shared rhythm.

In the best cases, lovemaking follows a shared tune and rhythm. In many of the stories of people's peak sexual experiences, music and dance have paved the way to a building sense of connection. Others mention prolonged embracing, kissing and caressing.

Men and women both crave the opportunity to bridge the chasm that separates us all from each other as separate and therefore ultimately lonely individuals. In peak erotic experiences, lovers find a common arena in which to play and express their mutual desires. These moments help alleviate our fundamental loneliness.

"My partner read my body as if it were an open book."

"It felt like all of my secrets were self-evident."

"I played my partner like a violin and they loved it."

"Our movements were perfectly synchronized."

"He/she wanted everything I did."

Many women have been taught, directly or indirectly, that a real man knows more about his sexuality than she knows about herself. Women may therefore wait for a man's initiative without expressing directly what it is that they would actually need. It is not worth it to rely on our partner's ability to read our thoughts.

The best sexual experiences involve transcending our personal psychic boundaries. In an extraordinary sexual experience, you may become so expressive and distinctly aware of who you are and what you want that your self-awareness actually expands. You can transcend the boundaries of your habits and your identity and move toward an altered state of consciousness known as transcendence.

"I felt like I was part of the universe."

"The whole universe became erotic."

Because the experience of transcendence is so difficult to describe, there are probably many who have experienced it but do not have the words to describe it. The experience of transcendence connects us in an extraordinary and arresting way to the great mysteries of life. People who experience transcendence during extraordinary sex probably did not consciously seek such an experience, which can open up so freely and profoundly and affectingly that one's self is all of a sudden freed from its normal limitations.

Transcendent moments can sometimes lead to spiritual growth because of the way they destabilize and expand our perceptions of ourselves and our lives, making us able to tolerate and combine the obvious conflicts. When and if we surrender to a transcendental experience, we are able to glimpse universal visions and transcend the limitations of the self and its illusion of our own separateness. One of the great paradoxes of transcendence is that when self-awareness disappears completely, we are able to know who we are, and to know it very clearly, more than at any other moment.

Even though transcendental eroticism usually occurs as if by accident, as an unexpected gift, there are certain techniques that can help anyone to actively explore the mystical dimensions of eroticism. One of the best-known approaches is Tantra, which

is said to have evolved thousands of years before Christianity as a derivative of Indian Hinduism. It was originally the counterpoint to the belief that the denial of sexuality was necessary to achieve enlightenment. Tantra recognizes Eros as the primary life force and seeks to mobilize and be aware of, rather than restrict, eroticism's energies as a pathway to the divine.

Tantra's practitioners believe that ecstasy is most likely to occur when both relaxation and a high level of arousal are present, as opposed to building tension until it culminates in orgasm. Tantra speaks of relaxing into arousal. It advocates on behalf of cycling through our erotic energies for an extended period of time and sometimes produces orgasms that are long-lasting and not exclusively focused on the genitals.

Peak erotic experiences are perfectly aligned with transcendence because they sweep us along completely. They expand our self-awareness by connecting us to another person as well as to the normally hidden dimensions of our self. They expand our perceptions and our consciousness.

In order to learn more about what erotic fulfillment would look like for each one of us, it is a good idea to make a list of your various sexual responses and experiences. It is useful to start with the ones you reminisce about most frequently. Then, add the ones you remember less often. Obviously, the things at the top of your list play a key role when you want to feel sexual fulfillment.

The next time you engage in an enjoyable experience or fantasy, take it upon yourself to observe and record the subjective responses that seem striking to you. By focusing on your favorite responses, you can experience more fully the things you already enjoy. If you happen to notice any unusual reactions, you can begin to open up an opportunity to transform the quality of your experience. Your unusual reactions may be the best opportunities to develop your erotic capacity.

As an experiment, pick one or two things from your list of erotic responses. Get into a comfortable position, close your eyes and remember one of your favorite experiences or fantasies. Imagine how your experience would have been different if you had been more aware of your responses in that situation. Is it possible that

you might have enjoyed it even more if you had become accustomed to them?

By repeating this simple exercise and using different memories, you can gradually practice becoming aware of an ever-greater range of your erotic responses and the emotions associated with them and enrich your eroticism.

Ideal lovemaking

If you find yourself thinking about how much time is elapsing during lovemaking, the game is lost in terms of reaching a peak experience. During the best experiences, the sense of time can disappear almost completely, apart perhaps from a fleeting wish that this special moment would never end.

People comment on their greatest experiences along the lines of, “It felt like it lasted for an eternity – we made love all night.” Dedicating plenty of time to making love is an indication of its importance and significance, while time itself becomes insignificant.

Sometimes time is in a central role, for example when stealing brief moments for a secret love – a quick hug in the elevator, a brief encounter outside or quickie-sex before rushing to work. What unites these experiences is that time is extremely limited; one intense minute can feel like it lasts a whole day.

Bored lovers often develop the unfortunate tendency to lose the opportunities for erotic surprises because they are no longer paying attention to the small things. Too many people are simply waiting and hoping that their partner, or some idyllic situation, would suddenly introduce something especially arousing. Passionate lovers understand that those fortuitous moments are more likely to come to those who consciously plan situations that are conducive to such arousal. The opportunities for erotic peak experiences are always largely in your own hands.

Give yourself permission for sexual pleasure

Many people have problems with their partner because they have very little sexual desire. In this kind of situation, you should try various ways to reignite the desire. A few suggestions are outlined below.

Often when our self-esteem has suffered, we begin to feel undesirable. We may also feel that we are ugly or that we don't even deserve to experience pleasure. However, we can always work to allow ourselves to enjoy sex despite the reasons that led to our loss of sexual interest. Sex may not seem like a priority at the moment, but it is something we should not deny ourselves because it has so many healing effects. When we manage to make a breakthrough and rediscover sex for ourselves, the sex too tends to develop favorably on its own again.

Create a free zone, especially for masturbation

Set a regular time and place for masturbation no matter how you feel at that moment. Banish everything else out of your mind and focus on sex. Use masturbation and bring in your fantasies and your desires. Once your sexual interest has returned, initiate sex with your partner.

Stop worrying about what you look like

You can try to relax and be merciful to yourself by appreciating the deeper nature of sex instead of thinking about the way you look.

Use your fantasies

Even if you have difficulty getting an erection or suffer from vaginal dryness or some medical condition, you can look for ways to bring out the ways to express yourself sexually that currently satisfy you. There are many ways to have sex without intercourse. Consider, for example, gentle touching, wordplay, prolonged

kisses, massage, wrestling, bondage, tantric sex and many other imaginative ways to connect that can be hugely rewarding. You can use a possible erectile problem or vaginal dryness as an opportunity to explore sexual options that might not have occurred to you otherwise.

Talk to your partner

Initiate a discussion with your partner about your experience. Ask them to help restart your sexual relationship in a new way that could arouse you. This can help create a framework for loving support and cooperation. Your partner is likely to be sexually restrained as a response to the lack of your sexual desire and may therefore find the discussion exciting.

What kind of sex is the best sex?

The sexual mind is often preoccupied with trying to figure out what might be the best type of sex for us. Some people already have wonderful experiences in their sexual histories – seminal sexual moments that they can look back on. Others are only dreaming of exciting experiences that they hope and long for. Their dreams can take the shape of sexual fantasies. A typical dream is of being especially sexually desirable and skilled in someone else's eyes and receiving positive feedback that confirms this; people are repeatedly preoccupied with how “good” they are in bed.

An interview study in Canada was designed to find out what optimal sex has meant for people in practice. The researchers invited participants who felt that they had experienced extraordinary sex at least at some point in their lives. Many of them were older people who had had a lifetime's worth of opportunities to collect wonderful experiences. The stories that emerged in the interviews were assigned into six primary themes that I will present below and that were devised with the help of sex therapists.

Sexual dreams and real life come together in the descriptions that different people give of the best sexual experiences of their lives. For some, this comprised sexual

exploration for no specific purpose. For others, the fantastic experience came about by pure chance. And some people had consciously embarked on a path that enabled their peak experiences.

1. Fully present in the situation

The most essential feature of extraordinary sex seems to be that one is fully present in the situation or completely willing to surrender to the moment. Everything feels like it's happening in a slow-motion movie. Many describe feeling as if the connection between two people has turned into something that comes to surround them, and that they are being carried along.

Study subjects have described intensifying bodily sensations and the awareness of emptying their minds. They were fully physically engaged, and in touch with their sensory experiences, intense feelings of pleasure, and in harmony with each moment. They let themselves go so that they could fully surrender to their bodily experience: "My body is moving, but I'm not moving it." They surrendered, in a way, to a sensory overdose and reached a point where thinking succumbed to arousal. In people's experiences, extraordinary sex was sex that you didn't have to think about. Paradoxically, the sexual mind acted without the mind's guidance.

The hallmark of extraordinary sex was that people were fully alive in their own bodies without the interference of the mind. They were in a perpetually orgasmic state, even without an orgasm.

2. Authenticity and genuineness

Good sex is characterized by the feeling that we are free to be ourselves with our partner, and at the same time also honest with ourselves. Honesty and openness regarding one's own desires were essential conditions for having extraordinary sex. You can only share your desires if you are aware of them. In addition, the interviewees' feeling of being free and uninhibited was felt as sexually liberating and arousing. They spoke of feeling uninhibited or having decided to turn off all of their filters. They felt free from self-censorship and were able to genuinely express their own erotic desires.

The interviewees repeatedly termed it a ‘gift’ to experience the emotional strength that comes from being seen and known in an authentic way. “I’m strongest when I’m at my most vulnerable.”

Poets and pornographers both recognize the power of shamelessness. “Always divulge as much as you can – and then, reveal a little more.” Erotic intimacy simply helps shift attention from performance to conscious awareness while being recognized by its authenticity. The main requirement for having extraordinary sex is to be yourself. It is a journey without a destination.

A sexual encounter offers a unique and valuable opportunity for growth and encountering the unknown. In this, the partner is the catalyst that helps us in an effective sexual self-examination.

3. Emotional connection

The third theme among peak sexual experiences involved the reported increased intimacy during lovemaking. All extraordinary sex involves a strong sense of an intimate bond, although many people report experiences of extraordinary sex outside their normal and long-lasting relationships. This may have been with, for example, a good friend, teammate or a new romantic partner. Good sex is characterized by intense emotional contact that lasts throughout the encounter.

Good sex was determined by the level of joining, energy, excitement and flexibility between the partners. Core components were being deeply empathetic, “in sync” and part of a shared experience, reinforced by a moment-by-moment awareness of how to respond and react to the other person. Being present with the partner means being emotionally fully available.

Interviewees talked about trust, idolizing one another, sharing, accepting, being worthy and desiring as much as they felt desired. They described easily alternating between giving and receiving and stimulation and pleasure. In feeling valued by their partner, they were able to expand the bounds of their previous comfort zones.

4. Sexual and emotional intimacy

Fabulous sex was marked by mutual bonding from one moment to the next and a feeling of strengthening intimacy in the relationship. Subjects talked about the importance of a strong sense of mutual caring and getting to know the other person really well, physically, emotionally and in terms of their erotic desires. This allowed access to their inner world and the experience of a mutual emotional and sexual generosity. Part of the fabulousness of the sex also came from the partners giving each other permission to both pamper and be pampered.

Intimacy made a crucial difference in the emotional experience of the sex. The sexual intimacy was built on an emotional bond and was especially instrumental in forming the commitment. It made people feel that they mattered. Many mentioned spontaneous kissing as a measure of intimacy. If a couple stops kissing, it is a sign of the end of extraordinary sex.

A lot of people mentioned the intoxicating combination of pleasure and danger in connection with a peak sexual experience. In order to surrender to the power of their encounter, the couple needed to feel safe in order to be vulnerable, to share their bodies and emotions, and take risks.

5. Open communication

A successful encounter and fantastic sex require excellent communication. Before someone is able to communicate sexually with another person, they must face the responsibility of feeling their own arousal properly. Many people are not well enough acquainted with their own bodies. Wonderful sex requires a sensual ability to be present and attuned to what you find physically arousing and erotically exciting.

One must be willing to talk to one's partner openly about sex, appreciate pleasure and express one's desires. Effective sexual communication requires a balance between opening one's inner world and allowing desires to come forward without restriction. It also requires a capacity to be open with a partner.

Good communication includes the ability to listen and respond and the ability to give and receive feedback while avoiding judgment. It also involves the ability to

express positive appreciation and thereby inspire the partner to give similar feedback in return.

For the subjects, more important than general communication was the ability to recognize a partner's reactions through one's own body, and especially through touch. The success of this ability requires that lovers develop their mutual empathy in such a way that they can place themselves in the other person's shoes, enabling them to cultivate their mutual sexual play.

For some people, talking and making uninhibited sounds during sex are an important part of it. This includes unabashedly erotic or raunchy sex talk that approaches a particular, forbidden area and may therefore feel like an arousing game. This kind of talk creates conditions in which the partners can feel as if they were transcending their usual boundaries to try new things.

6. Transcendental awareness

Extraordinary sex, according to research, seems to comprise an elevated and altered mental, emotional, physical, relationship-related and spiritualized state of oneness with the other. This is very similar to what Maslow describes as a peak experience.

For the subjects, a high-quality experience included the willingness to be transported into a certain state of altered consciousness. People described this as detaching from everyday life, being as if stoned, going into a trance and as a gateway to some other reality. Some felt it was similar to ascending to a new mindset in meditation. Extraordinary sex left people mentally larger than they had been before and opened up previously hidden things and allowed people to connect to certain essential truths about themselves.

Some people had a need to draw a parallel between sexual and religious imagery. They found it difficult to describe what they experienced in anything other than religious terms. The words they used included 'infinity', 'divine', 'eternal', 'a moment of devotion'. Extraordinary sex was equated with the sacred, as experiencing divinity, a gift from God and a way to realize one's spiritual path.

The basic dimensions of extraordinary sex

To recap, the six most notable components or dimensions of extraordinary sex, as described by the Canadian interviewees, were being present, authenticity, intense emotional connection, sexual and erotic intimacy, communication and transcendence. Various sexual acts or techniques were not significant in extraordinary sex. In other words, you can have wonderful sex even if you experience certain functional sexual problems. This is an important observation. Age does not remove the opportunity for good sexual experiences.

The ability to experience sex perceived as extraordinary had developed in the subjects gradually over time and with growing experience. Their perception of good or wonderful sex had also changed along with their experience and personal growth. In the area of human relations, sexual intercourse was viewed as a metaphor for ultimate merging.

One conclusion to draw from the descriptions of extraordinary sex experiences is that, in therapy, it would be useful to promote clients' ability to be fully present and immersed in a particular moment, and to teach them how to turn off thinking completely, to be fully focused in the moment and immersed in their own bodily sensations. This should go beyond what cognitive therapy usually teaches in terms of concentration.

The people who had experienced extraordinary sex had usually experienced it repeatedly. This speaks of a more enduring ability that had been immensely important in these people's quality of life. Positive experiences seem to have a certain tendency to accumulate.

Extraordinary sex is fostered by the capacity to be emotionally bare at a psychic level, which goes far beyond what is required in normal interpersonal communication (such as active listening, self-expression). Optimal sexuality requires advanced interpersonal skills that can be used to interpret the most primitive sensations and reactions to discover one's own and one's partner's desires and their meanings.

The summary of the study and the resulting model was that an optimal sexual experience can include moments of deep engagement where partners are

psychologically and sexually authentic, approachable, fully carnal, intimately connected, responding to everything between them and another person. This is a kind of prolonged timelessness; the awareness of time passing is inconsistent with extraordinary sex.

Finnish stories of best lovers and lovemakings

The summaries from the Canadian research presented above certainly predict quite well the reports of Finnish people regarding their most wonderful sexual experiences. The argument has already been confirmed to some extent. In the 1990s, I myself collected quite extensive nationwide letter materials on the sexual autobiographies of Finns. The results provide valuable clues regarding the kinds of lovemaking and partners that women and men reported as their best experiences in writing about them in their sexual autobiographies.

One in ten women and men who sent in their sexual autobiographies described a particularly satisfying sexual experience, or even a peak experience. While no direct conclusions can be drawn from this regarding the prevalence of such experiences, they at least do not seem to be that common. Among Finns, they represented positive but exceptional experiences – however, with the proviso that some of the participants in the writing competition might not have understood or dared to write about such experiences.

The especially satisfying sexual experiences among Finns were divided into five sub-themes:

- Sexual play or games, or a special kind of intercourse
- Mental or spiritual experiences resulting from, for example, prolonged caressing
- Long-lasting intercourse and the desire to keep having more
- Many consecutive releases or physical tremors
- Dreamlike sexual intercourse just like in the movies.

Compared to the Canadian study presented above, the Finnish experiences show a much greater emphasis on wonderful experiences that are related to direct physical enjoyment. However, more spiritual sexual narratives were also included.

The writers' stories also revealed a number of interesting experiences in terms of the sexuality of the mind, of using imagery and fantasies quite successfully to increase sexual arousal during lovemaking. Fantasies are, for very many people, a substantial means of activating arousal during sexual intercourse. Women reported using it more often than men.

"If I use arousing imagery, I can come really fast, and if I say it out loud, it gets my man hard really fast."

"Fantasies were flooding my mind. The hardest part was to choose the most pleasing and arousing among all that abundance...My body was shaking all over, the convulsive contractions intensifying in my vagina until I came over and over."

"...I started imagining all kinds of raunchy things and at the same time I felt an indescribable feeling spreading between my legs and in my stomach, and it was as I had died for the space of one, wonderful eternity. I was just a trembling body, I couldn't think about anything, my whole consciousness went to experiencing this feeling and prolonging it."

"With you, I have achieved a rarity: we share our secret, sexual fantasies – we know how to talk about them and to create even more."

Quite often, an especially arousing experience stemmed from some kind of surprise. One woman was greatly aroused when her man had unexpectedly shaved her legs smooth. One man became very aroused when his wife had suddenly gotten undressed already in the hallway, relishing her beauty. This shows that memorable sexual surprises need not be extraordinary in themselves. The most important thing is that they

have something in common with the imagery that one partner or another has dreamed of.

Men's erotic interests have been claimed to be largely visual. This was confirmed by many of the men's writings. Some men said they greatly enjoyed watching pretty women and others eloquently praised the beauty of the naked female body and genitals. Two of the men longed for a "tight" woman [vagina] and some others worshiped women's legs. For some women, a large penis was an important factor in the intensity of their orgasm.

A woman whose body is the object of her partner's worship thus receives wonderful reinforcement for her sexual self-esteem, and she and her partner may easily reach the erotic mood that the situation may require.

"...because I think nothing in the world is as beautiful as the naked female body..."

"...the only woman whose body I've downright worshiped..."

Women appreciate men who ask what she likes. Many women are turned on by plentiful touching, kissing and long-lasting caresses. The best is when a man is in no hurry, but kisses her head to toe, even for hours on end. Women have reported wanting a man insanely after foreplay lasting hours. This may have led to the "lovemaking of all lovemakings", lasting several incredible hours. By throwing oneself into the moment, the mind has set off on a journey toward such ecstasy that it is hard to find the words to describe it.

"Things were hot for 4 to 5 hours. An incredible man, keeps going and going even though he just came...it was wonderful frolicking."

"I thought I was going to go crazy that very instant, sank into the kind of ecstasy I had never been in with anyone before. I was

shaking uncontrollably...No lie, it felt like I was close to fainting or nirvana, or something.”

Some women had experienced deep spiritual experiences during lovemaking that had included prolonged caresses and sometimes hours of foreplay. These experiences had led to a constant intensification of passion. Various sex games had also been very arousing, including erotic outfits, sharing various images, erotic games, quickie-sex and making love in front of a mirror.

“The sexual charge was so intense that I trembled like an aspen leaf, I was like wax.”

“He got me to say the kind of words and do the kinds of things sexually that I’m now sometimes ashamed of – he brought out the animal in me.”

The things that ranked as peak sexual experiences for Finns included the first orgasm experienced during intercourse, the first multiple orgasm and long-lasting lovemaking. The latter kind of lovemaking had included ever-increasing desire, an almost breathtaking passion and lovemaking that lasted at least for hours and possibly all night and the roughest lovemaking of that person’s life. Long-lasting lovemaking often seems to be particularly memorable.

“Now we made love free from all inhibitions...It was almost scary to see my ability to give pleasure to a woman.”

Memorable experiences of lovemaking included, for example, multiple climaxes, near-celestial stacking orgasms, and whole-body arousal tremors, which is a strong sign that someone has dared to surrender completely to their emotions. A woman who experienced such amazing pleasure may have felt herself becoming enslaved to

the man who gave it to her. Men, too, were excited by a woman experiencing multiple orgasms.

“...I came and came and came and came and came. A kind of sky-high chain orgasm that erased my consciousness.”

In some fortuitous cases, one sexual mind had found its erotic counterpart in another. Sometimes this resulted in extraordinarily positive feedback.

“...now I realize I never even met a man (before this).”

For many women, a man’s masculinity and personality created a highly positive, sexually arousing situation. In their sexual lives, these women had experienced a man’s sensuality as particularly positive. Their stories relay experiences of sensitivity, powerful emotions related to the other’s presence, openness, spontaneity and romance. For some women, meeting a man like this had led to rampant passion, shared fantasies and wanting him more and more. These fortunate women had encountered the counterpart of their sexual mind.

THE SEXUAL MIND IS AN AMAZING RESOURCE

Our journey into the world of the sexual mind has probably shown what a wonderful resource it can be for our entire lives. At any moment, the sexual mind can add brilliant color to our everyday life and lead us to arousing and pleasurable experiences. It also makes our potential relationships truly worthwhile experiences. I have previously shown with my research how significantly connected sexual satisfaction is with relationship happiness, and even lifetime happiness. Even just the sheer numeric frequency of sexual intercourse on an individual level has an undeniable, positive correlation with relationship happiness and happiness in life in general. It is no exaggeration to say that the sexuality of the mind plays a major role in how happy we feel in our lives.

An important theme in this book has been to discover and identify the most important core issues of one's sexuality. These are the key things that are especially interesting, cherished and arousing to oneself. All our lives, we seek to match them up with how we live and who we select as partners. Gaining access to these experiences, so central to our personality and inner longing, can produce especially deep arousal, satisfaction and happiness. Even simply recollecting such experiences can give us the feeling that our life has not been wasted.

You can have a substantial impact on your own sex life and pleasure by learning through thinking and concentrating. In cognitive psychotherapy, this is called the mindfulness method. Studies show clear evidence that cognitive distraction or indifference to sexual stimuli alone has been associated in women with difficulties reaching orgasm and experiencing pleasure, and with a tendency to pretend to orgasm. Understandably, it is difficult for a sexually indifferent person to achieve sufficient emotional space to experience pleasure.

Negative thoughts can lead to negative emotions and inhibition of enjoyment. These thoughts function like anti-fantasies. Difficulties in having an orgasm during sexual intercourse have often been related to the absence of erotic thoughts as well as to having negative thoughts. Examples of negative thoughts include things such as

believing that one doesn't look good in the partner's eyes, fear of one's own sexual failure and thoughts of being passive, controlled, exploited, detached and lacking affection. If someone is not properly focused on sexual stimuli, adequate arousal and the elevation of emotion to the level of an orgasm may not occur. All of this speaks to the immense erotic power of thought and the mind.

The body can be a major challenge, especially for the sexual mind of women. The women in the study who wrote about lack of sexual desire sometimes said that their minds wanted to want, but their bodies refused to go along. It is as if these women's mental and physical essences had become partially differentiated. In addition, some laboratory tests have found that there are women who are aroused by what they see or hear in a given situation, but that their minds do not recognize the arousal. In men, a similar break between mind and body has not been observed in studies.

We should remember that erotic interaction is always an exchange. We invest in our relationships to receive from our partners the emotional and sexual rewards we hope and long for. Throwing ourselves into our emotions can wipe away everyday worries and other distracting thoughts. Focusing on fantasies or touching without any specific goal is the best form of personal sexual therapy.

There is a certain paradox in that so many people are willing to engage in sexual experimentation and adventures – at least on the level of imagination and fantasy – outside their regular relationship, but in that relationship, the same people may be sexually quite tame and even puritanical. They are in a kind of erotic paralysis. When they deny themselves, in their own relationship, the freedom of imagination and expression, they detach from the relationship to imagine themselves free from its limitations and commitments. We have safety in our relationship and outside, we glean the much-needed passion.

An especially intriguing question is whether we believe eroticism to generally belong to marriage. If yes, what about sexual desire and “naughtiness”? What about porn and dirty talk? Can there really be room for them in an “honorable” marriage? The propriety and impropriety of these things is, of course, dependent only on our sexual mind and the possible limitations imprinted on it.

Is our mind capable of combining marriage and open sexual experimentation and adventures with our long-term partner? Or is it simply impossible? Can you find the reason for why you might want more of the safe yet regrettably boring sex with your partner? Is it worth it for you to suppress your sexual capacity and your meaningful sexual desires simply because you have lived with your partner for a long time already?

While love is the self-evident foundation for a functioning relationship, it can also become a burden. If every lovemaking must amount to a convincing testimony of and testament to the power of the love between the couple, what a burden of proof this can turn into! The requirement that sex be always saturated with overflowing love gradually turns into a performance and an outright nuisance in the relationship. This psychic requirement can signal that other kinds of arousing emotions and playfulness have been banned from the lovemaking.

All experiences of love entail dependence. In fact, dependence is an essential component of enjoyment, of union. It can also produce severe anxiety because it means that our loved one has undisputed power over us – they have the power to love us but also the power to reject us. Romantic love includes the fear of being criticized, rejected and abandoned. It makes things particularly risky, and us vulnerable, that our loved one alone has the power to reject us. Maybe we don't want to take sexual risks with our partner and reveal all of our true desires and hopes, so instead we stick to the familiar and even boring script of the relationship. We fear that our hopes will go beyond what our partner might accept.

It is important that sex be alluring and enjoyable, not an obligation. Love entails both safety and adventure. Committing ourselves to another at least offers plenty of time together to make use of. And marriage does not have to be the end of a romance – it can also be the beginning. It is a story that two people write together, and neither knows how it will end. The key to a relationship is creating safety, but it must also be an open door into the unknown. In a good relationship, intimacy is cultivated, privacy is respected, and separateness and togetherness alternate.

The challenging question is how spontaneous do we think sex should be with our partner? One of the expectations or ideals of our sexual mind may be that sex should

always be natural, easy and spontaneous. It should therefore not be planned in advance or even prepared for in any way. People can experience sexual situations while in the grip of suddenly arising emotions, but it is unreasonable to expect this to happen over and over again. A mythical expectation like this can nullify our desires when they do not fit in with the ideal of spontaneity. The mind should allow and enable a couple to consciously and systematically anticipate what will happen and to properly prepare for their lovemaking.

When you anticipate in advance the wonderful things that can happen, it tends to increase arousal and intensity the upcoming experience. Longing, waiting and wanting are important positive components of long-term relationships as well. This type of anticipation is also common in popular romantic narratives. Planned desire is valuable and pleasurable when it does take place. It is worthwhile to trust the ability of the sexual mind to create arousing moments.

When people complain of the tedium of their sex lives, their central complaint is not necessarily the amount of sex but that its quality could be improved. The sex does not feel erotic or affecting enough. People need some intensity and a certain kind of glow or radiance in their sex. Basically, what eroticism means is that, by way of our imagination, it turns sexuality into an experience that is affecting. And beyond that, it is shared play and the cultivation of arousal.

Particularly satisfying lovemaking happens when both partners have been able to prepare for it in their minds. The proper mood and arousal require mental foreplay. It is therefore useful to lead your partner to think about sexual activity – erotic thoughts awaken desire. The idea activates the nervous system and blood circulation, and the sensations of arousal and pleasure in the genital area in turn excite the brain. With sexy words, we can lead the other person to locate the true objects of their desire. This is a resource that is inherent in the sexual mind.

Many men are concerned about how best to respond sexually to a woman's wishes. Perhaps the most important characteristic of a good lover is that he treat a woman as unique and as the most important thing in his life. Every woman wants to be number one in the heart and bed of her lover, and he must remember to express this to her often enough. The same, of course, applies to women in relation to men.

Seduction is a natural way to express to your partner the emotions and interests of your sexual mind. Who wouldn't want to be seduced over and over again? Seduction is a relationship skill that shows a partner one's need for love and sex. Seduction helps maintain a sense of love and sexual desire in the relationship and, in a way, to idealize one's partner as well as the relationship. The aim of seduction is to increase the other's arousal and thereby also the desire that initially awakened in oneself. Lack of seduction, on the other hand, can reduce sexual desire in the other person. A woman or man who is not being seduced is like a plant that is not being watered.

Seduction is the ability to awaken in one's partner's small, specific dreams about how to realize one's own and the partner's wishes and intentions. The seduced person feels tantalizing – more beautiful and self-confident in that they possess erotic power over the seducer. Seducing one's partner and recreating a shared intimacy over and over again is possible by developing one's skills and daring to put them into practice – even daily.

Many people in relationships may object to the idea that they would have to seduce their partner all over again. They may wonder why, when they have already successfully done it once before. Wasn't that effort enough? They do not realize that all this kind of seduction might require is a little playfulness outside the sphere of the ordinary. This might make them want each other more again, and to be more physically and sensually engaged. They should view their partner's seduction as an end in itself, not merely as a tool for some other objective. And best of all, seducing one's partner can only bring positive effects to oneself.

It is said that couples who play together stay together. This can be anything from classic board games to sexual games. You can chase each other around the house and the winner can receive a pleasing, previously agreed-upon prize. The play can be seductive, funny or competitive, whatever suits your personalities. The key is to have fun together.

One of life's wisdoms is that those who want what they already have are the ones who are satisfied. Dissatisfaction and suffering arise when we want something that we cannot have. This principle applies also to sexual life. Finally, if you feel that your partner wants you because you have something special and unique about you, you are truly lucky. Why not make your partner happy by telling them the same thing?

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