

Cultivating Sexual Desire and Arousal

Sexual desire and sexual arousal are responses involving biological, psychological, emotional and social elements. The frequency and intensity of desire and arousal will vary, depending on various factors such as biological urge, degree of intimacy and connection with one's partner, frame of mind/erotic mood, sexual environment, and sexual touch and activities. Variables such as stress, fatigue, pain, depression, anxiety, medications, negative sexual self-view and/or lack of sexual confidence can hinder the magic of sexual desire and arousal. This may leave the couple feeling disconnected, especially if they are not able to talk about the situation or their thoughts and feelings. The sexual side-effects of prostate cancer treatment can have a major impact on sexual desire and arousal by possibly creating feelings of inadequacy or embarrassment. These feelings can lead to avoidance behavior.

For some individuals, that spontaneous sexual urge or desire is rare, so they may be sexually neutral or thoughts of sex are not on their mind. This can happen when men are on Androgen Deprivation Therapy (ADT). ADT will suppress the production of testosterone, which is fuel for sexual desire. This can be challenging, especially if the individual on ADT was the initiator of sex.

Sexual arousal usually begins in the brain (sometimes called the body's largest sexual organ). That is, your brain is responding to a thought/image, having a feeling of closeness or affection toward a partner, or the touch of a partner. It does this by sending signals to the rest of your body, especially the genital area. Physiological responses to sexual arousal include – most obviously – an erection for males and the swelling of nipples, vulva and clitoris, and increase in vaginal lubrication for females. For both males and females, the heartbeat quickens, blood pressure increases, and breathing becomes more rapid. Sexual arousal reaches its climax during an orgasm.

According to Dr. Bianca Rucker, "Sexual desire is the gateway into a sexual experience. The sexual experience may include kissing, caressing, sexual stimulation of varying sorts, and intercourse. Rather than the traditional term foreplay, followed by intercourse as the main event, it is more flexible to consider all sexual experiences as loveplay or sex. Certainly everyone is entitled to their favourite activities, but becoming too narrow in focus can increase the risk of sex becoming boring." This is where it is important to be open minded especially if intercourse cannot be achieved.

Cultivating Sexual Desire

- It is important to identify the factors negatively affecting sexual desire and deal with them. For example, managing pain or changing medications (anti-depressants) that may be decreasing your sexual desire
- Practice Mindfulness
- Carving out dedicated time for one's self and especially time to be together
- Get in the mood – discover and use "erotic bridges"
- Have more physical contact (touching, caressing, massaging); try the 30 second daily hug
- Focus on what each partner likes the most sexually
- Communicate and give each other feedback
- Explore and enjoy sensuousness: gratification through the senses
- Enhance emotional contact before and during sex - make the sexual experience more than just physical
- Be more active during sex to help maintain interest
- Address partnership sexual desire discrepancies as a couple or through therapy
- Recall positive erotic experiences and bring that energy to current experiences

Cultivating Sexual Arousal

Two techniques that may increase sexual arousal include exercises called ‘simmering’ and ‘sensate focus’.

Simmering is the process of nurturing a conscious thought around something that is sexually appealing. Throughout the day, there are different bursts of sexual energy that a person can experience, but sometimes because of busy schedules, pain or fatigue, one may not be in tuned to the sexual messages. Anything can stir sexual energy; a thought, a sound, a touch, a smell or a certain visual. Once you are aware of the sexual energy, begin to allow a fantasy to grow in your mind. Let the sexual thoughts fade and after some time, bring the thoughts back and allow the fantasy to grow more in your mind. If this is done a few times, your sexual appetite/interest can grow. When you choose to be sexual with yourself or in a partnered situation, there is a stronger chance that sexual arousal and desire will be present, allowing for the sexual response cycle to begin.

Sensate Focus is where an individual, with or without their partner, explores their own or each other’s body using different types of stimulation while being aware of all of their senses; this allows for discovery of what is pleasurable. This is a mindful exercise which can help identify areas on both partner’s bodies that are more receptive to pleasurable touch, moving away from any pressures, expectations and demands you have on yourself or the experience. You can request a copy of our guidelines for Sensate Focus.

Additional Resources

Simmering

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/all-about-sex/201809/simmering-easy-enjoyable-way-ignite-sexual-arousal>
- <https://getmaude.com/blogs/themaudern/the-art-of-simmering> and
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sexualitytoday/201012/sexual-survival-in-the-modern-world>

Desire/Libido/Drive/Arousal

- <https://www.sexandu.ca/sexual-activity/sexual-arousal/>
- Bianca Rucker’s Model of Intimate Sex: Understanding the Process of Sexual Desire
https://biancarucker.com/articles/rucker_model.pdf
- Dr. Cheryl Fraser’s Passion Plan Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=um6ng7aqp6o&feature=youtu.be>
- Hardcopy of Passion Plan:
<http://www.drcherylfraser.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Your-Passion-Plan.pdf>

Desire/Drive Discrepancy:

- Link to video with Linda Weiner discussing how to manage sexual drive discrepancy
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPYppcytox>
- TED talk explaining how successful couples maintain desire:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sa0RUmGTCYY>

