

CHAPTER 20
Patterns of Sexual Response

Our primary understanding of the physiology of human sexual response stems from laboratory observational studies conducted by Masters and Johnson, the ultimate voyeurs, who spent more than ten years observing copulating couples. Later studies have tended merely to confirm or to modify details of the picture they presented in their book, *Human Sexual Response*, over thirty years ago.

They were able to delineate a sexual response cycle consisting of the same sequential phases in both sexes. This 'EPOR' model is still the standard version today.

According to this, the sex process goes through four stages:

- ? excitement, involving a gradual build-up of muscle tension, vaginal lubrication and engorgement of blood vessels in penis, clitoris and nipples;
- ? plateau, when the heart rate and respiration increase and the skin flushes;
- ? orgasm, involving a discharge of built-up tension, muscle contractions throughout the body, particularly in the genital area, ejaculation in the male and intense pleasure; and, finally,
- ? resolution, with diminishing tension and a rapid return to the unstimulated state.

A major difference between the male and female cycles is that, for the male, there is a refractory period after orgasm, when repeated sexual stimulation cannot trigger ejaculation again. On the other hand, females can experience several sequential orgasms without experiencing any intervening refractory period. Women take longer than men to respond sexually but their responses last longer.

In general, a woman's sexual responses are triggered by different stimuli from those of a man, and they are more dependent on closeness and affection. A man tends to initiate sex with the direct genital stimulation he enjoys, whereas a woman is more likely to respond to kisses and gentle caresses all over her body. As she becomes more aroused, the walls of her vagina begin to secrete lubrication, which some men mistakenly interpret as a sign of readiness for penetration. Lubrication is actually the first physiological sign of arousal in women and most women require a preliminary period of stimulation of the clitoris - their primary organ of sexual sensation - before intercourse takes place. If this stops too soon, many women not only fail to climax, they also lose their sensation of arousal altogether. Continued stimulation, however, eventually leads to a strong urge for penetration; inside, the vagina enlarges and lengthens and the woman is ready for orgasm. During orgasm, the entrance to the vagina contracts rhythmically and she experiences waves of intense pleasure.