

CHAPTER 21

Arousal

Many factors affect sexual desire - both positively and negatively. Firstly, sex drive depends on the hormones, testosterone and oxytocin, being present in sufficient quantity and acting appropriately. One's general health is also important. A large number of medical conditions impinge on sexual desire, as do a large number of drugs (most of them negatively). Sheer fatigue can make sex unthinkable. Sexual satiation can produce a temporary lack of interest in sex. On the other hand, as with food, one can accustom oneself to gluttony or to a 'starvation diet'. As with food, sexual desire also frequently contains an element of habit; we react to a situation or person we associate with sex. All of our five senses - sight, sound, smell, touch, taste - can act as triggers to desire.

Women tend to be less aroused by visual stimuli than men are but they can be turned on by erotic movies and videos with a storyline and romance - but turned off by images that are violent or degrading to women. In general, they are more likely to be turned on by erotic literature, where they can form their own images. However, the sight of their lover's body being slowly undressed can arouse both sexes.

Many women also find being read to from a sexy book quite arousing. And they appreciate being 'sweet-talked'. On the other hand, men get aroused by 'hot talk' (graphic sexual descriptions of what the woman wants or is going to do to him). The impact of such talk is increased by making and maintaining eye contact. Both sexes are likely to find the sounds of sex stimulating. Pant, moan and groan; use sounds to let your partner know he or she is getting it right; don't come quietly; express appreciation. Music can also help arousal, especially music of a repetitively rhythmic type, such as *Bolero* or *Golden Wedding*.

When a female crab on the verge of sexual maturity urinates way down the beach, a male crab forgets about hunting and comes running. A male silkworm moth unerringly homes in on a female flitting about several miles downwind. Both these females are secreting sexual pheromones which invariably compel males to locate and find the female.

Technically, a pheromone is a fragrant chemical secreted by an animal, which elicits biological or behavioural reactions from other members of the animal's species. There are pheromones which do not involve sex - such as the alarm pheromone emitted by ants to warn the colony an ant-eater is on the loose, or the 'come and join in' pheromone bees put out when they sting.

There are also sex pheromones other than those that tell males a female is ready for sex. For example, bees secrete a substance that stops the ovaries of female worker bees maturing, ensuring there will be only one queen. The sexual behaviour of numerous mammals is also regulated by pheromones. Male mice really know how to look after their own interests. Their urine contains a substance that gives the hurry-up to sexual maturation in juvenile females but retards it in young males. If a pregnant female cops a whiff of an unfamiliar male's urine, she will abort and then mate with the stranger. The reproductive life of sheep, goats and some monkeys is also regulated by male sexual pheromones. On the other hand, nothing so rouses the mammalian male as the odours put out by the vagina of the female on heat. These are practically irresistible to any able-bodied male dog, wolf, coyote, fox and a host of others, including some monkeys. Daub anything - a ball, a flashlight, whatever - with this scent and the male will try to mount it. Plug the nose of the animal and it will ignore the female in heat.

Enough about the crabs and the bees or even the dogs and the apes. What about us? Are humans turned on by pheromones? The roaring trade in used underwear in Tokyo would suggest that at least some are but, as a scientist, I'm ashamed to confess that scientists have largely neglected this vital area of study. There have been only a mere handful of studies, none of which was particularly well designed and all of which proved nothing much. The fact is that man is a remarkably smelly creature. There was even an unflattering suggestion that *Homo sapiens*

survived, not because of his intelligence or skills, but because he was too stinky for any self-respecting predator to touch. This certainly doesn't apply now and I don't know why it should have then.

However, we certainly are smelly - especially when we've been working or exercising hard and put forth sweat from the two million or so eccrine glands in our skin. Actually, when produced, sweat is odourless, but bacteria on the skin soon act to produce fatty acids which do smell. Strangely enough, these fatty acids are quite similar to the fatty acids produced by the vagina of the female mammal as a sexual pheromone for the male. Maybe that explains why women (except lesbians?) are turned off by male sweat, why men spend longer than they need to in locker rooms after football matches, why your dog is all over you when you're sweaty, and may be the real reason for the survival of *Homo sapiens* (he sweated with fear and the sabretoothed tiger didn't know whether to eat him or mount him). My theory is that it saves the poor sweaty, shagged-out male from doing himself an injury by attempting sex in that state. Be that as it may, we do have true scent glands - the sebaceous and apocrine glands. Unlike eccrine glands, which are present at birth, these only start work at puberty, with the growth of the associated hair. They are concentrated in the armpits, around the nipples, near the eyes, across the scalp, surrounding the anus, covering the scrotum and root of the penis in the male and the outer genitals in the female. However, the most important scent organ is probably the axillary organ, which secretes an oily sweat with a fragrant musky odour, containing androstene (a steroid similar in structure to the human sex hormones).

The thing about androstene is that it is excreted in appreciable amounts only by men between the ages of about 18 and 45, and that other female mammals need only a whiff of their own version of androstene to straighten their backs, set their hind legs slightly apart, and wait motionless for the male. Will this work for humans? Well, humans are different from other animals in a number of ways, and our sense of smell is one of them. For instance, a dog has in its nose some two hundred million cells specialised to receive scents, while a human has about thirty million. The olfactory lobes, the parts of the brain that process smells, are as big as golf balls in a hammerhead shark but only the size of match heads in humans. No wonder dogs can locate a bitch in heat while we guys are lucky to spot a receptive woman if we trip over one.

All in all, this may be to the good. If women broadcast their sexual readiness willy-nilly by scent and men were as receptive to it as the average male mammal, human life as we know it would be virtually impossible. Let's face it, in gregarious human society, blokes, being what they are, would be engaged in nearly continuous battle for mates. If men gave out pheromones irresistible to women, the consequences could be equally devastating. What if some cunning terrorist group discovered a true human pheromone, concentrated it and pumped it into the airconditioning at the cabinet room, police headquarters or even into a large shopping mall!

Perhaps fortunately, recent researches have shown that, while humans share with rodents and other mammals a gene encoding for a pheromone receptor in the nose, we apparently have only one functional gene while they have about a hundred. Most mammals have an organ, the vomeronasal organ, in the nose that is specialised for detecting pheromones. Humans too have this organ early in foetal life but it shrinks and stops working before birth. No wonder our capacities are so much less than those of other mammals.

What humans lack in acuity, however, they make up for in powers of discrimination. With a bit of training, the average person can distinguish somewhere between ten thousand and forty thousand odours, while the professional 'noses' (e.g., perfumers and whisky blenders) can get up to a hundred thousand. So, it is no wonder that the smell of a loved one can be as stimulating as the sight or sound of that person. Recent studies go further and suggest that men are biologically stimulated (to the extent of having their testosterone levels boosted by up to 150 percent) by the smell of the vaginal secretions of an ovulating woman, even though they may not consciously notice the smell or even find it unpleasant. On the other hand, ovulating women, while professing to find male smells unpleasant, are biologically turned on by them, while non-

ovulating women are not. Again, an experiment by Claus Wedekind at the University of Bern found that women found the scent of males with major histocompatibility complex genes (which play a major part in immunity) different to their own more attractive. From an evolutionary viewpoint, this makes sense, since the progeny of such a coupling are more likely to be resistant to more diseases.

Each person does have his or her own cachet, or signature smell, which is obvious not only to dogs but also to his or her intimates. The word 'cachet' has an interesting history. It comes from the French word and relates to the word 'cache', meaning a hiding place, which is also the romantic French word for the vagina. 'Cache' was also used to describe a kind of trinket box, whence came our slang word for the vagina.

The healthy vagina does have a pleasant odour - due to the metabolism of the predominant bacterium, *Lactobacillus*, living within it. This is the same bug - or closely related species - used to make yogurt; hence the old 'yogurt cure' to restore a smelly, itchy vagina to its proper state. *Lactobacillus* likes it acid, so another way of getting rid of the fishy odour the vagina acquires when other bacteria move in is to douche with dilute vinegar. The more modern, less messy, method is to use a proprietary preparation like Acigel. If necessary, doctors can also prescribe Flagyl to kill off the other bugs making that unpleasant odour.

Despite the propaganda of the makers of soaps, after shaves, perfumes, etc, the natural body odour of a healthy human is not unpleasant. The idea that it is arose sometime between the mid-1700s and the end of the nineteenth century, and probably had some validity in the days of the 'great unwashed' (water, when available, was often a poisonous stuff unsuitable even for washing).

Over the course of this period, perfumes became available to all but the very poor, and a degree of 'snob value' undoubtedly helped them become standard articles of use. Just about every material with a fragrant odour has been pressed into the service of perfumery, and countless synthetic compounds have been added to the list. According to the master perfume makers, the secret of allure lies in the right balance of notes. Many different essential oils, which have acquired a reputation over centuries, are used. Sandalwood, rose, orange blossom, jasmine, sage, oakmoss, patchouli, vetiver and angelica are regarded as particularly erotic, while coriander, cinnamon bark, ginger, clove, black pepper, elemi and rosemary are said to be generally stimulating, and ylang ylang, rose, sage, chamomile, jasmine, neroli, vanilla, frankincense, cedarwood, sandalwood, vetiver and patchouli are supposed to be narcotic in their effect (note some overlapping). On the other hand, while they smell pleasant to us, lavender, geranium, basil, bergamot, lemon, orange, lime, mandarin, grapefruit, pine, cypress, peppermint, juniper and petitgrain are said to turn us away from sex.

However, it is no accident that these perfumes, worn by both men and women and frequently having at least an enhancing effect on sexual attractiveness, all have as their basic ingredients mammalian pheromones - animal sex scents that, in pure form, smell like piss, shit or long-dead meat. Daubing, smearing or spraying these materials on yourself is unlikely to have every female you encounter getting ready to yank down her pants (if you are male) or every male you run into proving he's happy to see you (if you are female). However, immersed in a suitable vehicle and commingled with other appropriate scents, they just might at least nudge him or her a little bit closer towards ardent desire - as long as one or other of the blended odours does not arouse some negative emotional reaction.

For this is another outstanding thing about smells: they can be intimately bound with emotions and can stir memories as few other things can. A whiff of a former lover's favourite perfume can still stir memories and passions many years later. However, this same scent could just as easily make you feel violent if you associated it with a bitch boss who'd shafted you. Scents, whether natural or artificial, may bring us messages as basic and direct as sex pheromones do to other mammals but the message is usually muted and transmuted into a kind of private language and to speak your partner's language can add a further dimension to sex. The rousing

flower of a woman's sex is no less narcotic than the fragrance of a rose and should be enjoyed along with the rest of the gifts she brings.

Touch is perhaps the most arousing stimulus of all. More of that later; for now, I would just like to observe that massage with an oil containing some of the above-listed ingredients can be particularly stimulating.

Smell may also be wrapped up in the reputation of certain foods for stimulating sexual behaviour. These foods are said to contain chemicals which mimic pheromones. Thus, truffles, wild boar, asparagus, seeds and leaves of celery, parsnips, Cabernet Sauvignon and Shiraz and other oak-aged wines are all said to mimic androstene. Triethylamine is another supposed pheromone and is said to be mimicked by blachan and fish sauce, anchovy sauce and Bombay duck. Lime, peaches, bean sprouts, oysters, caviar, seafood generally and soft-ripened cheeses are all supposed to be reminiscent of vaginal odour to men and therefore, attractive to them. On the other hand, women are supposed to be aroused by semen-like smells emanating from peas, capsicum, persimmon, yams, mangoes and Sauvignon Blanc.

Whether all this is true or not, men can be turned on by a woman peeling and eating a banana, and women by a man eating a fig, peach, melon or mango, while both may find feeding each other grapes or strawberries or eating squashed fruit or ice cream off each other's bodies stimulating.

Other mental constructs - dreams, fantasies, memories - can also act as triggers. About seventy percent of women, and nearly all men, have sex dreams. Most men also have three to five erections related to dreams other than sex dreams during the night. Boys, of course, are well known for their nocturnal emissions, usually known as wet dreams - though nearly one in five boys never has one. About forty percent of women will also have an orgasm while sleeping at least once in their lives. Freud's view that everything we dream has some symbolic, usually sexual, meaning is basically rubbish; there is little hidden meaning in most sex (or other) dreams. Denise Linn, in her book *Dream Lover*, advocates programming yourself to create a dream lover, claiming that a dream lover can make you more creative, heal all your hurts, contribute to world peace, help you become more spiritually attuned and increase your sensual poise. Perhaps, but in any case it could be fun if you could do it.

The most common fantasy for men and women is making love with someone other than one's regular partner. For men, this is most commonly the two woman fantasy; for women, it is intercourse with a famous man. Fantasising about sex in idyllic surroundings is more common for women than for men. Other common fantasies are: spontaneous sex with a stranger; forced sex; performing some taboo sex act; exhibitionist; voyeuristic; homosexual encounter. Men have sex fantasies about twice as often as women but about seventy percent of both sexes who fantasise use it to heighten sexual arousal and about one percent of women can actually bring themselves to orgasm through fantasy alone.

Mental factors can also inhibit desire; these may include a general bad mood, anger, preoccupation with some problem, lack of self-esteem, guilt or shame.

It needs to be remembered that sexual desire is not just a biological drive. We also have sex because it makes us feel good, makes us feel loved and valued. And a complex set of variables related to the whole history of the relationship interact to enhance or inhibit sex within any relationship.

Where problems arise in a relationship is when there are widely disparate levels of desire between the partners. This happens from time to time with every couple and can best be handled by being a more attentive lover and by not being too demanding. When the difference is more or less permanent, it is something that just has to be accepted. The more interested partner may have to resort to masturbation or fantasy to satisfy himself or herself, but can also become more adept at arousal and can concentrate on other ways of being close. The less interested partner can also play a part by using self-arousal, encouraging touching, and spelling out his/her conditions for ideal sex.

Desire itself does not produce any specific physical changes.

Desire does not always translate into arousal. Many people of both sexes want to have sex but just can't get very excited. All the factors that affect desire can also affect arousal. A major difficulty is frequently that either or both partners fail to take account of the difference in arousal patterns between males and females. The main secret is usually just to slow down. Masturbation can help both partners; the male can use it to practise delaying his response cycle, while the female can experiment with ways of intensifying her responses. Fantasy can also help both partners. The female can also help by varying the forms of stimulation she applies to her partner and using a light, teasing touch. Males also respond strongly to visual stimulation and anything that enhances this (lights on, erotic clothing, being able to observe their partner's excitement) can increase their arousal. Women usually benefit from an extended period of foreplay. If all else fails, a vibrator can quickly increase a woman's arousal level.

The first physiological change to arise as a consequence of effective physical or psychological sexual stimulation is that blood begins to flow more rapidly around the body as heart rate increases, so that specific tissues become engorged.

The obvious sign of arousal in the male is, of course, the erection. Many things can influence a male's ability to achieve an erection. Age is a factor; a guy who got an erection in ten seconds flat as a teenager may take ten minutes of special attention to do so as a sixty year old. It is not uncommon for a male to lose an erection. Age is again a factor here; whereas a teenage boy may be able to keep it up for an hour, the seventy year old may have difficulty doing so for much more than five minutes. However, it also not uncommonly happens to younger males. This should be no big deal; given the right stimulation and a relaxed attitude, it will very likely revive. In any case, sex (including intercourse) is often possible without a full erection. A partner's actions, or lack of them, may sometimes contribute: if so, he should guide her to what is needed; if not, he should reassure her that it is not so and accept that it is just a fact of life. The only harm likely to be caused is by pressure to maintain a firm erection, since this kind of performance anxiety can lead to impotence.

As he becomes excited, the male's scrotum begins to thicken and the scrotal folds to disappear; his testes begin to elevate; his nipples may become erect; his heart rate and blood pressure increase; and his general neuromuscular tension increases.

Erect nipples are usually the first outward sign of sexual arousal in a woman. As she becomes more aroused, breast size increases modestly.

However, this is not the earliest sign of sexual arousal and/or interest. The exact equivalent in the female of the male's erection is actually vaginal lubrication. Increasing vasocongestion in the tissues of the vaginal wall creates a type of sweating response on the surface of the walls of the vaginal barrel, which accumulates to form the lubrication of sexual arousal. After this, the vaginal barrel lengthens and increases its diameter considerably, ballooning in its upper third. The colour of the vaginal wall becomes darker, the outer lips of the vagina flatten and move back from the vaginal opening, the inner lips of the vagina thicken, the clitoris enlarges, and the cervix and uterus move upward. Heart rate, blood pressure and general neuromuscular tension increase. Late in this phase, a sex flush may appear.