

## Women's Sexual Desire: The Emerging New Perspective

By Michael Castleman

Ever since the introduction of Viagra, “female sexual dysfunction,” also known as “low libido,” “inhibited desire disorder,” and “hypoactive desire disorder,” has generated a great deal of interest from drug companies intent on finding a pharmacological solution to this problem, which has been described as an epidemic.

### **An Epidemic of Low Libido?**

How bad is this problem? In 1999, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a survey of 3,000 American adults by distinguished sex researchers from the University of Chicago. It attempted to document sexual dysfunction in the U.S. The researchers revealed that one-third of women “lacked interest in sex,” while only around 15 percent of men reported this problem. Their conclusion: Compared with men, twice as many women suffer from low libido.

Or do they? Two women sex researchers working independently—Rosemary Basson, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of British Columbia, Canada, and Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas—have come up with very different ideas about women’s libido, views that challenge the conventional wisdom about female “sex drive.”

### **Most Women Don’t Have Male-Style Sex Drive**

Basson’s perspective on women’s sexual desire is based on five years of in-depth interviews with hundreds of women focused on their sexual arousal. Most men, Basson contends, describe the beginning of sexual arousal as a “drive,” a deep biological need for sex—often independent of a relationship or any need for emotional closeness with the partner. Many men just want sex, and soon, preferably now. In other words, for most men, desire precedes sex, and if they’re lucky leads to it.

But Basson has found that many women—perhaps most—don't feel a male-style "drive" for sex, especially as they become menopausal. These women approach lovemaking feeling sexually neutral. Then they begin making love, and the sensual and massage elements of lovemaking eventually kindle their erotic fires. In other words, for many women, sex leads to desire—the *opposite* of the male experience.

This gender difference explains why among heterosexuals, customers for prostitution are virtually always men. Desire drives men to obtain sexual release—even if they have to pay for it. Women, in Basson's view, don't experience the same need for sex, and as a result, almost never pay for it.

### **Why Do Women Have Sex?**

If women don't have a male-style sex drive, why do they have sex? For a variety of reasons, Basson contends: to feel close to their lover, to please him, to reassure themselves that they are sexually attractive, and to share the experience of intimacy with their lover. In other words, many (most?) women get their sexual motors running for reasons that are not strictly sexual.

Basson's view was confirmed by a study by University of Texas, at Austin. Psychologists Cindy Meston, Ph.D. and David Buss, Ph.D., asked 442 people, aged 17 to 52, just one question: "Please list all the reasons you can think of why you or someone you have known has engaged in sexual intercourse." They received 237 distinct reasons why people have sex.

### **Women's Top 10 Reasons (from most to least frequently expressed)**

1. I felt attracted to the person.
2. I wanted to experience the physical pleasure.
3. It feels good.
4. I wanted to show my affection for my partner.
5. I wanted to express my love for my partner.
6. I was sexually aroused and wanted the release.
7. I felt horny.
8. It's fun.
9. I realized I was in love.
10. I was swept up in the heat of the moment.

### **Men's Top 10 Reasons**

1. I was attracted to the person.

2. It feels good.
3. I wanted to experience the physical pleasure.
4. It's fun.
5. I wanted to show my affection for the person.
6. I was sexually aroused and wanted the release.
7. I felt horny.
8. I wanted to express my love for the person.
9. I wanted an orgasm.
10. I wanted to please my partner.

Notice that in both the women—and the men—only a few of the top 10 reasons for having sex are explicitly sexual.

What about early on in new relationships when men—and women—can't keep their hands off each other? Basson's model still holds. Men newly in love feel a drive for sex. Women newly in love feel a drive for physical and emotional closeness, which leads to lots of sex.

Of course, some men don't experience strong sex drives. And some women do experience male-style feelings of I-want-sex-now. But Basson's model of women's arousal goes a long way toward explaining why so many women report "low libido." The fact is, they don't have a libido in the conventional sense of a *drive* to experience sex. They have a desire for closeness and intimacy that finds expression in sex and eventually leads to sexual arousal and ultimately to sexual desire.

### **Beyond Intimacy: Women Want to Feel Desirable and Desired**

But if Basson is correct, if what fuels women's libido is not a drive for sex but rather relationship intimacy, the research should show this. Indeed, some studies do. But others show that many women in happy relationships who have normal androgen levels still don't have much libido.

Enter Meana. She agrees with Basson that many women don't have a male-style libido. But she contends that for some (many?) women, intimacy makes little difference to sexual desire.

Meana contends that many women's sexual desire is less active than *reactive*. In her view, many women get turned on when they see that they *turn men on*. In Meana's view, many women's desire is triggered by feeling desirable and desired. Implicit in their desire is an element of surrender to a man who wants them—or preferably is totally crazy about them.

The idea that some (many? most?) women's desire involves a desire to surrender may seem politically incorrect in an age when men and women are supposed to be equals. But while women should have the same opportunities as men in education, employment, sports, human rights, etc., libido is fueled to a considerable extent by fantasy—and for many women, sexual fantasies contain a clear element of surrender to a man who is head-over-heels for them.

The importance of surrender to many women's desire explains why romance fiction is so popular. In the romance formula, a powerful man becomes so attracted to the woman protagonist that he can't control himself. He *must* have her. He overwhelms her, and “takes” her. She surrenders—and enjoys great sex, despite the fact that she's been pushed to the limits of consent, or beyond them. Romance fiction clearly contains elements of sexual assault. The man is powerful. He overwhelms the woman and ravishes her.

Romance fiction has been described as “porn for women.” Porn is all about fantasy. Mainstream porn illustrates men's fantasies: sexual abundance without responsibility or relationships, and lots of naked women thrilled to provide fellatio and have intercourse. Romance fiction represents the flip side of porn. It illustrates many women's fantasies: being so desirable that a powerful man loses control of himself and can't help but ravish the object of his obsessions—but without any danger or cost to the woman. In romance fiction, women are regularly pushed up against a wall and taken, but they never feel seriously threatened and are never hurt. But Meana contends that women who read romance novels don't really want to be raped. She insists that they want “a caveman who cares,” a loving man who is on fire for them, a man with whom they can surrender *safely*.

The importance of surrender to many women's feelings of sexual desire also explains the prevalence of women's rape fantasies. At first glance, such fantasies make no sense. Why fantasize about something you *don't* want to happen? But several studies have shown that rape fantasies are fairly common among women. Depending on the report, one-third to two-thirds of women have had at least one rape fantasy and more than 10 percent have them weekly. However fantasies that researchers call “rape” fantasies are not limited to wholly negative gun-to-the-head imaginings. Many of these fantasies have a clearly erotic component—like romance fiction, the woman imagines herself to be so desirable that the man can't control himself. He *must* have her, and he uses force to get what he can't live without.

Now, in fantasy, everything is permitted and nothing is wrong. Many men fantasize getting the girl by rescuing her from life-threatening danger without any real wish to face such danger. By the same token, many (most?) women's rape fantasies can be viewed as a safe way to play with being so alluring, so desirable that a powerful man can't control himself and forces her to surrender to him.

### **Does Sex Lead to Intimacy? Or Visa Versa?**

Basson's and Meana's views on women's libido have provocative implications for couples, especially couples with the most typical desire difference—the man wanting sex more often than the woman.

First, Basson's observations basically support an old saying about the sexual differences between men and women: For men sex leads to intimacy. For women, intimacy leads to sex.

But for women in good relationships who still experience little, if any, libido, perhaps Meana's observations apply. Perhaps these women need the men in their lives to tell them how special and desirable they are, how much the men want not just sex, but *them*.

Second, it's counterproductive to focus on women's "low libido," as the pharmaceutical industry is doing today. The term libido implies a male-style drive for sex that many women simply don't have. Asking about libido is, therefore, beside the point for many women. The questions the sex surveys should ask women are not: How often do you desire sex? And how strongly? The questions should be: Are you arousable? Under what circumstances?

Third, once we stop expecting women to have a male-style sex drive, it becomes clear that the high prevalence of "low libido" among women is not some medical condition that needs drug treatment, or some psychological disorder that needs psychotherapy or sex therapy. It's simply a reflection of the fact that, unlike most men, for many women, sex does not begin with libido. For many women, sex begins with a decision to become sexual for nonsexual reasons. For these women, sex begins with the woman feeling desirable and desired, and then progresses through physical closeness, emotional intimacy (declarations of love, confiding personal secrets, etc.), and sexual stimulation (kissing, touching, snuggling, erotica, sex toys, intercourse, etc.). Eventually, for many women, sexual experiences culminate in sexual desire as much as they culminate in orgasm.

Fourth, the conventional model, women suffering “low libido,” causes anxiety, guilt, and shame, interferes with women’s self-esteem and enjoyment of sex, and convinces them something is wrong with them, which in turn, depresses their ability to become aroused and eventually experience desire. We need to accept women for who they are, and not try to shoe-horn them into a sex style that doesn’t fit them.

Finally, while sex therapy has enjoyed remarkable success treating ejaculatory control problems in men and lack of orgasm in women, it has had less success dealing with desire discrepancies that typically result from men who want more sex with women plagued by “low libido.” Perhaps sex therapists would do better to stop seeing “low libido” as the problem. Perhaps they would do better to counsel couples that in many men, desire leads to sex, while in many women, sex leads to desire. From this perspective, a potentially productive way to treat desire differences might be to urge couples with desire differences to schedule sex, say, once a week. The question for the woman with “low libido” would not be: Do you desire sex? But rather: Are you arousable? What makes you feel aroused? Do you ultimately feel desire and enjoy the experience?

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