

Women's Many Possible Sexual Response Cycles: New Findings, New Insights

By Michael Castleman

Arousal, plateau, orgasm, resolution. These are the four classic phases of the sexual response cycle identified by William Masters, M.D., and Virginia Johnson in their pioneering sex research during the 1960's. This model works well for the vast majority of men—but unfortunately, not for many normal, healthy, orgasmic women. When asked to describe their own sexual response cycles, these women describe patterns of sexual arousal and response very different from the classic, four-stage, Masters and Johnson paradigm.

Since the 1990s, a few sex researchers have questioned the assumption that women's sexuality is governed by the four-stage response cycle. Now the insurgents are declaring themselves more boldly. A leader of the researchers calling for reconsideration of women's sexual response cycle is Rosemary Basson, M.D., of the departments of psychiatry and obstetrics and gynecology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. Based on in-depth interviews with hundreds of women, she has proposed a different model—actually *several* different models—of the range of normal, healthy women's sexual response. These new models should be a comfort to many women who know that they don't fit the classic, four-stage pattern.

Why Masters and Johnson Got Women Wrong

Before delving into these new models, it may help to explain why Masters and Johnson developed a sexual response cycle that describes only a fraction of women. The reason is that they studied a very particular subset of women—those willing to be observed and filmed having sex in their laboratory in the mid-1960s, who were also orgasmic from intercourse with Masters and Johnson's mechanized dildos. We now know that only 25 percent of women are consistently orgasmic from intercourse—and presumably an even smaller fraction are orgasmic from intercourse with dildoes while being observed (and filmed) in a laboratory. To experience orgasm, three-quarters of women need direct clitoral stimulation.

Masters and Johnson studied none of these women, so it should come as no surprise that they produced an unrealistically narrow view of women's sexual response.

The following observations come from Dr. Basson's surveys that asked women to describe what arouses them and how their sexual response cycles proceed.

Arousal Differences

Men, especially men under 40, typically describe the beginning of sexual arousal as a “drive,” a deep biological need for sex, often independent of the context and relationship. In other words, when men become sexually aroused, many can imagine having sex with just about any woman just about anywhere just about any time.

In the first blush of a passionate new relationship, women often feel a similar need for sex with the new lover. But often fairly quickly, women’s motivation for sex loses its strictly sexual dimension, and becomes more a desire for physical closeness and intimacy with the partner.

When men are exposed to sexual imagery—provocatively posed women, simulated sex, or pornography—they are usually well aware of feeling aroused. Many develop erections. Meanwhile, many studies show that women are often unaware of genital arousal when exposed to sexual imagery. For example, many studies show that women exposed to pornography experience increased blood flow to the clitoris and vaginal wall, a sign of arousal, but a significant proportion are unaware of it.

In other words, arousal is much more of a physical on-off switch for men than for women. Many women need to feel emotionally excited by a lover’s attention or desire for them, or touch before they can become sexually aroused. When they become aroused, what they desire most may not be the release of sexual excitement through orgasm, but rather physical intimacy with the lover.

These observations basically support an old saying about the sexual differences between men and women: Men become intimate to have sex. Women have sex to become intimate.

Orgasm Differences

In the Masters and Johnson model, after a period of intense arousal (the plateau phase), sexual excitement builds to a clearly discernible peak, orgasm. Again, this is what happens to the vast majority of men and to many women—but not to many other women.

Some women describe very mild, yet still satisfying orgasms. Others report several orgasms, either one after another, or periodically during sex. Some say they have satisfying sex without distinct orgasm. Others describe orgasm not as a peak moment, but rather as a higher plateau of arousal that may last quite a while.

In addition, many women describe completely different patterns of sexual response from masturbation and partner sex.

Bear in mind that the women who volunteered these descriptions were not in therapy for any sexual problem. Lack of orgasm or weak orgasm might certainly be experienced as a problem, but not necessarily. For some women, that's just the way they are.

Women: Enjoy Who You Are

These new models of women's sexual response may help many women accept and enjoy their own individual sexual responses. They may help the male partners of women who don't follow the Masters and Johnson pattern accept their lovers as sexually unique, but still normal. And they challenge sex therapists to expand the range of female sexuality they consider normal, and narrow the range they label dysfunctional.

Dr. Basson's bottom line for women: Experience your own individual sexual response in your own unique way. And enjoy it.

References:

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