

“Radical, compelling, vexing . . . I can’t stop thinking about this book.”

—JAY PHELAN, PhD, co-author of *Mean Genes*

# CUPID’S POISONED ARROW

FROM *Habit* TO *Harmony*  
IN *Sexual Relationships*

MARNIA ROBINSON

Foreword by

DOUGLAS WILE, PhD, author of *Art of the Bedchamber*

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North Atlantic Books  
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This book is lovingly dedicated to  
Gary Bruce Wilson,  
whose courage, insight, and open heart  
brought it to life.

This book could not have been compiled or published without the generous and dedicated efforts of many people over a fifteen-year period. For some reason, most of them prefer to remain anonymous. Nevertheless, there are a few bold people I would like to thank by name. Mary Sharpe has contributed countless insights, bits of relevant research, and practical suggestions for many years. She even returned to university to obtain a second advanced degree, in theology, at Cambridge in order to study and write about sexuality and the sacred. Her work led to many intriguing discoveries, some of which are in this book. Steve Coffin and Jay Moller have both shared hours of their precious time critiquing the text and asking shrewd, and sometimes awkward, questions, which strengthened it a great deal. Mari Petersen's loyal encouragement and insights about attachment were invaluable. Augustin Masquillier voluntarily spent hours recreating, and teaching me how to manage, my Web site, which opened portals for some amazing bloggers. Their willingness to experiment with the concepts in this book and offer their own stories were precious gifts—and an enjoyable experiment in oneness.

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I am deeply indebted to this chain of enthusiasts, loved ones, and guardians, which stretches around the globe, with special links in Australia, Belgium, Chile, England, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Taiwan, and the United States.

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NOTES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**M**arnia Robinson's book is the fulfillment of a dream I shared at the end of *Art of the Bedchamber*: that Asian sexual practices, developed under conditions of polygamy and proto-science, could be adapted for modern monogamy and gender equality. Asian male fantasies of achieving immortality by stealing female sexual essence and phobias of essence-stealing female fox fairies can now be explained by neurochemistry. But more than unraveling the mysteries of ancient Asian sexology, Robinson has employed a cinematographer's mastery of montage to craft a dazzling panorama of intimate personal experience, anecdote, ancient wisdom, philosophy, psychology, and medicine. The book's content richness will satisfy scholars and scientists in many fields, but its wit and style will rivet any thoughtful man or woman who has ever stopped to reflect upon the human sexual tragicomedy.

Like a thriller that reveals its climax at the beginning, Robinson's book leaves the reader intrigued by every twist and turn of autobiography and intellectual inquiry to discover what brought her to such a revolutionary conclusion. She does not bow down to the idols of "ancient wisdom" or mainstream scientific consensus, but stands courageously on the two feet of the truth of her own experience and the latest discoveries in neuroscience.

You may come to this book for advice on your sex life, but you will come away with something more like the Theory of Everything in human behavior. Robinson has brought so much humanity and humor to her quest that you may not even notice that she has skillfully used the most advanced scientific discoveries to salvage good old-fashioned romance.

Sex, avarice, and violence are the three two-edged swords of human evolution: how to tame sex without destroying love, how to tame avarice without destroying creativity, and how to tame violence without destroying courage have been the preoccupation of religion, politics, and philosophy from time immemorial. Somehow avarice and violence seem simple in comparison to sex, but Robinson has made, perhaps, the boldest and most thoroughgoing attempt to date. She aims to put your sex life on a diet, but like all good diets, it is not about eating less as much as eating smarter. The sciences and social sciences have polarized along a nature-nurture axis, but she has navigated a middle path between biological determinism and cultural construction to return to the Epicurean vision of using reason to refine pleasure.

—Douglas Wile, PhD, author of *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics Including Women's Solo Meditation Texts*

**M**y parents and my grandparents stayed married until death parted them. I, on the other hand, couldn't keep my relationships going for more than a few years, and I wasn't alone. The marriages of all three friends whose weddings I attended as a bridesmaid *also* ended in divorce. Why? Sociologist Kelly Musick says it's due to women's financial independence. "What's keeping people together is their love and commitment for each other, and that's fragile."<sup>1</sup>

Why were love and commitment becoming so fragile? Exactly how could the fact that I earned my own living *cause* disharmony? That made no sense. I was too much of a romantic to consider the possibility that sexual unions had *always* been fragile, and that women's increased financial independence simply enabled partners to move on with greater ease.

Instead, I tried all the familiar recommendations for healing disharmony in intimate relationships: improved communication, finding a more "ideal" mate, more passion, loving my inner child, negotiation, and so forth. Yet these remedies did not arrest relationship deterioration when trouble started. Eventually I realized that they sometimes address only the *symptoms* of a more fundamental problem. That problem is right under our noses. It has always been there, but now that we can dissolve our marriages with greater ease, it is even more glaring. Once we acknowledge the problem, the solution is evident.

The trouble begins with sex. Not exciting sex versus boring sex, or too little sex versus too much, as most of us conclude, but rather fertilization behavior itself. After all, platonic friendships between men and women work fairly well. The trouble generally erupts after we become lovers. And what else begins then? For everyone? The quest to have our sexual needs met *as thoroughly as possible*.

Passion seems like our best friend, often the one indisputably good thing about an otherwise dysfunctional relationship. However, sexual satiety—that "I'm done!" feeling after sex—turns out to be a subconscious, surprisingly persuasive, mammalian signal. It urges us toward habituation (feeling fed up with a mate). Because we're unaware of this signal, we ascribe the friction in our relationships to other causes.

The more dissatisfied we grow, the less likely we are to stumble upon the *other* way of easing sexual tension: relaxed, gentle intercourse that soothes sexual frustration entirely differently.

### "WHO'S IN CHARGE?"

There's an optimistic belief that doing what your body is *inclined* to do will lead to well-being and contentment. Actually, given our unquenchable appetites, most of us would be healthier on a Paleolithic diet of whole foods (no refined starches and sugars). But a diet for our *several* lives? Surely if our early ancestors pursued sexual satiety whenever opportunity knocked, we'll be just fine doing the same thing.

This logic assumes that you're programmed for your own benefit. In fact, evolution has

wired you not for your individual welfare, but for your genes' success. What serves your genes? Two things. The first is lots of fertilization attempts. You experience this as the drive to exhaust yourself sexually when you can. The second is different parents for your offspring. You experience this as disenchantment with sexual exclusivity.

What serves *you* best? A solid emotional bond with a mate, harmony, lots of affectionate and generous touch, and a reliable way to ease sexual frustration. About thirteen percent of lucky couples find their way to this balance naturally,<sup>1a</sup> but most of us are no better “swans” than we are dieters.

So, how do our genes push us to exhaust our sexual desire for each other instead of promoting harmony? New advances in brain science (especially neuroendocrinology) are revealing that disillusionment between lovers may have less to do with communication or compatibility than we thought, and more to do with a primitive pathway that runs through our mammalian brains (limbic brains), known as our *reward circuitry*. This group of structures guarantees that we receive a powerful neurochemical “reward” when we pursue a new partner and engage in hot sex, or even think about either one.

The neurochemical payoff at the moment of orgasm feels like it promotes bonding. Yet such bonds are more fragile than we like to admit. At climax, a neurochemical blast triggers further events for approximately two weeks. These fluctuations deep in the brain drive us toward sexual satiety and subtle changes in mood, which often create emotional friction between lovers (Cupid's poison). Uneasiness also leaves us vulnerable to promises of quick relief—another potential mate (real or virtual) being one of the most alluring. Thus orgasm turns out to be related to making more babies *and* making them with more than one partner.

In essence, our scheming genes have subverted human will to their purposes. Once you understand the means they use, their unsuspected effects upon you and your unions, and a practical alternative for easing sexual tension and finding contentment, you will be in a better position to choose whether you wish to remain under their spell.

We humans are unique among mammals in that we have the capacity to comprehend our subconscious mating programming and choose to manage it consciously. This is a blessing because we are better off in harmonious relationships with high levels of trust than we are in mindless mating dances orchestrated to propel sperm to egg, bond us long enough for two caregivers to attach to any offspring, and then urge us onward to new partners.

Most of us sense that the gains from caring deeply about another person we trust are profound. In fact, as pair-bonding mammals, we've evolved to find such connections highly beneficial. Not only do trusted companionship and loving touch change our outlook on life for the better, they also improve physical health and reduce stress.

Sexual intimacy that can do all this is truly great sex. And to experience it continuously as we have to do is stay in love. Indeed, if logic ruled, we *would* stay in love. The problem arises when our genes rule and the aftereffects from their incentive plan (unbridled passion) separate lovers by causing them to exhaust their desire for each other. As my husband, Will, put it, “Evolution doesn't give a rat's rump about happiness, fidelity, or lifelong companionship.” This is why we inherit an uneasy tension between our *add-a-mate* program and our *pair-bonding* program.

To cope with this reality, ancient Chinese Taoists, among others, recommended learning to make love very calmly and *without orgasm*, unless conception is desired. This unfamiliar

approach doesn't trigger our subconscious mating program with its add-a-mate subtext. The gift of this approach is not just that it allows lovers to have intercourse often without buildup of sexual frustration. It also takes advantage of a second built-in mammalian program: attachment. Evolved to tie us to our children and parents, our bonding program can solidify and protect our romances, too. Using it is nearly effortless once we master (actually recall) a set of simple cues. Results include greater harmony and well-being, and, remarkably, less sexual frustration.

## ONWARD

The first part of this book explains why I chose to explore another way to make love, and recounts the discoveries that followed this decision. What began as a subjective, personal exploration of ancient wisdom about managing my love life unexpectedly expanded into the realm of objective scientific research once my husband and I began collaborating. I was astonished at how neatly recent research on the brain dovetailed with the observations and claims of ancient sages. This alignment of past wisdom, personal experience, and recent research has pushed me to share this information.

If you find that the material in this book brings your resistance and skepticism to the fore, you are not alone. You may even feel that you are being urged to try something against your will. I experienced these feelings myself—and more so during the two weeks after an orgasm. After all, this material confronts one of the most powerful programs in our brain: our mating program. Who wants to opt for generous, relaxed affection in the bedroom when our brain chemistry is all set up to “reward” us for being as driven as possible in that quarter?

On the other hand, the situation is not unlike driving a car with two pedals. Once we become aware of how our mating and bonding pedals operate, it's up to each of us to decide how we use them—depending upon our goals for a relationship. Should you decide you want to quiet the strident signals from your mating program for a few weeks to see what it yields, this book offers a way to make the experiment with a minimum of inner conflict. After all, other than passing up some orgasms, what have you got to lose?

Another goal of this book is to initiate a broader discussion of our subconscious mating and bonding programs and their unacknowledged roles in our lives. Armed with a deeper understanding of how sex actually bends our perceptions and priorities, we can start the process of steering consciously for better results. Like the sages of the past who carefully studied sex from the point of view of increased harmony and improved health, lovers can begin to make their own investigations with greater awareness. They can take into account what best keeps them making love contentedly throughout their unions. They can also address the natural potential of orgasm to become compulsive, and how best to cope.

Much of the text consists of real people's observations, although I've changed their names. I also could not resist peppering the pages with others' witticisms about the gender gap. Why not have a good laugh at the tricks our sneaky genes have played on us, and then get on with outsmarting *them*?

After all, probably ninety-nine percent of sexual encounters take place without the intention to fertilize an ovum. When we insist on engaging in sexual behavior that is fertilization-driven despite its drawbacks, it is like continuing to eat high-calorie dessert

because one percent of the population wants to gain weight.

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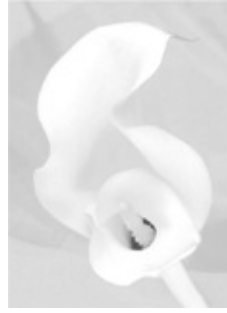


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I don't mind women leaving me, but they always have to tell you why.

—Richard Pryor

Now that the planet is teeming with underfed, underloved human beings, it may be time to master this ancient alternative and add it to our lovemaking repertoire. Sex and intimate relationships are two of life's most valuable treasures. Whatever your economic woes, I hope the information here will help you protect, and so benefit more than ever from, these widely available riches as you chart your ideal course. At the very least you will know more about how Cupid poisons his arrow as you work toward creating the intimate relationship for which your soul yearns.



---

*Those people are happy who relish love's pleasure  
Enjoying Aphrodite's sensual embrace  
As a ship riding easy on a calm sea,  
Avoiding the obsession that leads to disgrace.  
For sex, like a horsefly, can madden with its sting,  
And Eros [Cupid] has two arrows to his string...  
A mere scratch from the first brings lifelong joy,  
But the second wounds to death, and breeds despair.  
Goddess born in Cyprus [Aphrodite], keep my bedroom safe  
From the mortal arrow, make love in my life  
A steady, continuing delight,  
Not obsessional or destructive. Let me serve  
The great queen with ecstasy, as is her right,  
But commit no crimes for her, nor become her slave.*

—Euripides (ca. 480–406 BCE), *Iphigenia at Aulis*



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# BIOLOGY HAS PLANS FOR YOUR LOVE LIFE

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Having sex to the point of satiety (that “I’m done!” feeling) is a mammalian *mating* signal to lose interest in one mate, and find novel mates appealing.



Even though humans are pair-bonders, the habit of pursuing passion to the point of quenching desire can set off unsuspected mood swings, cause resentment toward a lover, and erode attraction (Cupid’s poison).



There are two fundamentally different ways of making love: one for fertilization, and one for triggering closer bonding (*karezza*).

**H**it by Cupid’s arrow! What an exhilarating, enviable state of affairs. Like everyone else, you want to believe that the key to lasting romantic bliss is a partner with whom you feel a passion so intense that it can never fade. Yet, have you ever fallen in love with total abandon, experienced wonderful lovemaking, been sure you wanted to stay together forever—and then noticed recurring emotional friction arising between you and your beloved? If you’re married, do you have a sense that the honeymoon is over? Perhaps one of you sometimes becomes clingy and demanding while the other feels devoured and needs “space.” Maybe you experience subtle, periodic irritation, or a sense of stagnation that gradually extinguishing your former delight in each other. Perhaps you engage in spectacular fights interspersed with passionate reconciliation.

This subconscious alienation—which mates so often encounter despite their desire to remain in love—is the result of an unsuspected poison on Cupid’s arrow. When we fall in love, a primitive part of our brain pierces us with a desire for great passion (Cupid’s dart). An orgasm feels great, and if it were the end of the story, lovers would be able to do what comes naturally in the bedroom *and* live happily ever after. The problem is that sex—especially the kind with lots of orgasms all around, leading to that feeling of “I’m definitely done!” (sexual satiety)—isn’t an isolated event. Orgasm is the peak of a much longer *cycle* of subsequent changes deep in the brain. These lingering effects, and the unwelcome feelings they evoke, can poison our relationship without our conscious awareness. Remarkably, such diverse symptoms as selfishness, unfulfilled needs, communication problems, infidelity, and sexless marriages can all originate in these hidden commands.

In some of us this “poison” takes effect so rapidly that we part after a single tryst. More often there is a period of relative relationship happiness, supported by a short-lived love potion. This honeymoon harmony (or lust) encourages us to bond for a while. On average it

long enough for mates to produce and attach to a child, even if they do not, in fact procreate.

Creeping disillusionment, born of Cupid's poison, then motivates us to merge our genes with exciting new partners as well (even though we may choose to grit our teeth and resist temptation). Why? Our genes are programmed for their own immortality, and they don't politely wait for opportunity to knock. These little wisps of DNA urge us toward lots of pregnancies *and* a variety of partners. The more dissimilar our offspring, the better the odds that some of them will survive changed conditions or epidemics in order to procreate. Our willingness to shop for unfamiliar genes would once have helped protect small populations from the dangers of inbreeding.

Moreover, our genes do their best to keep us to a tight schedule. Anthropologist Helen Fisher estimates that we're molded to stay together for about four years. Across fifty-eight diverse cultures, she found that divorce rates peak then.<sup>2</sup> However, in Muslim countries where divorce was easy to arrange, marriages tended to end even sooner.

In short, both the sweet and sour phases of romance improve the chances that our genes will make it into the next generation—even if we are left cynical or brokenhearted. Our genetic mating program is working brilliantly. It just doesn't have *our* best interests in mind. As pair-bonding mammals, we benefit in surprising ways from trusted companionship with a mate, and when we sacrifice those benefits to our genetic success, it hurts.

Usually when Cupid's poison curdles a romance, we conclude that we either chose the wrong mate or that men and women are just hopelessly different. Yet it's not our differences that cause this distress. It is what we have in common: involuntary, biological responses that are as unconscious as blinking. We are *programmed* for this painful unraveling just as surely as we are programmed to fall deliriously in love in the first place.



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Most of us tend to wear intellectual blinders, often failing to recognize something until we first have an explanation for it ... or at least, an expectation of it. Believing is seeing.

—Barash and Lipton, *The Myth of Monogamy*

Of course, resentment and issues in intimate relationships can also come from other factors, such as money-management differences, childhood trauma, and personal eccentricities. Yet this hidden biological factor could prove the most reliable when it comes to churning up recurring relationship friction. At the very least, it can make other challenges more difficult to resolve.

One clue that emotional distance is programmed into our intimacy is that marital happiness typically erodes over time.<sup>3</sup> Mysteriously, however, friendships or other close family relationships are *immune* to this programmed deterioration.<sup>4</sup> Could this be because romantic relationships plunge us into passion to the point of “enough already!” while other close relationships do not? Sounds farfetched. Yet for most mammals *frenzied mating to the point of disinterest (surfeit) is the signal to become restless and move on* to another dance partner. Could our mammalian heritage have saddled us with similar subconscious responses to sexu-

satiety, which also make *us* restless? Are we wired to grow apart from a familiar mate—even though we're still programmed to seek the benefits of long-term companionship?

More important, what can we do if we wish to protect our relationships from Cupid's poison? We can manage our sexual encounters differently, so we're less susceptible to Cupid's maddening sting, and more inclined to find love a steady, continuing delight. Both ancient wisdom and modern scientific findings point to how we can achieve this end, but to benefit from this information we need to see clearly what we're up against.

## THE COOLIDGE EFFECT

Consider what happens when you drop a male rat into a cage with a receptive female rat. First you'll see a frenzy of copulation. (Possibly it gets lonely in the lab, given experiments like this one.) After a while, the fireworks stop. Mr. Rat heads for the recliner, toting the remote. As a result of his changed body chemistry, Mrs. Rat now looks uninteresting to him. However, if Miss Ratty (a new female) shows up, his exhaustion will miraculously fade long enough for him to gallantly attempt his fertilization duties.

A rodent's renewable virility is not indicative of an insatiable libido. Nor does it increase his well-being—although it may look (and temporarily feel to him) that way. His behavior correlates with surges of neurochemicals in his tiny brain, which command him to leave a willing female unfertilized.

Conniving genes can be slave drivers in this regard. Males of the furry little marsupial species (*Antechinus stuartii*) are so preoccupied with copulation that they destroy their own immune systems, and die of various diseases at the conclusion of mating season.<sup>6</sup> When scientists furnish the animals with some artificial will power by tempering their male sex hormones, their immune systems keep them in working order.

True love ends even more abruptly for the male praying mantis (at least for those unlucky enough to “get it on” in captivity). The female causes the male to deliver his sperm by chewing off his head. (Suggestion: Never “do lunch” with a female mantis.)

Animals that are less concerned about closure simply identify and reject those with which they have already sexually satiated themselves. Scientists know this reflex as the “Coolidge effect.” It earned its name many years ago when President Coolidge and his wife were touring a farm. While the president was elsewhere, the farmer proudly showed Mrs. Coolidge a rooster that “could copulate with hens all day long, day after day.” Mrs. Coolidge coyly suggested that the farmer share that impressive feat with Mr. Coolidge, which he did.

The president thought for a moment and then inquired, “With the same hen?”

“No, sir,” replied the farmer.

“Tell that to Mrs. Coolidge,” retorted the president.

The Coolidge effect has been widely observed among mammals, even in females. Some female rodents, for example, flirt a lot more—arching in inviting displays—with unfamiliar partners than with those with which they've already copulated.<sup>7</sup>

Does a variation of the Coolidge effect show up in human behavior? I recall a conversation I once had with a man who had grown up in Los Angeles. “I quit counting at 350 lovers,” he confessed, “and I guess there must be something terribly wrong with me because I always lose interest in them sexually so quickly. Some of those women are really beautiful, too.” At the

time of our chat his third wife had just left him for a Frenchman and he was discouraged. She had lost interest in him.

Women sometimes report that their taste in men changes around ovulation, as does the way they see men. They say they're more drawn to Don Juans, and less likely to relate to a man as a person. In short, they're more likely to see him as a tempting hunka burnin' genes.

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*The biological self is petty and quite cruel, and strangely enough very easily finds imperfections while at the same time caving in to really low standards. Some of the petty crap in my head about my boyfriend says: he's so WHITE, I need a dark, exotic, and mysterious man! His hair is thin; I don't want my children to have thin hair. The voice inside assesses and rejects one's current mate based on self-serving, shallow ideas that have to do with physical characteristics or status. —Lisa*

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Strictly speaking, humans may not experience the immediacy of the Coolidge effect (unless they're at an orgy). For us, habituation more often takes the form of *decreased sexual responsiveness with long-term mates*. We may be more like monkeys. When male monkeys were paired repeatedly with the same females (who were *always* in the mood, thanks to daily hormone injections), the males copulated less and less frequently, and with declining enthusiasm, over a three-and-a-half-year period. Yet these slackers hurriedly changed their ways when novel females showed up.<sup>8</sup>

Could our mammalian brains be meddling with our capacity for sustaining intimate relationships? (The mammalian brain lies beneath the rational brain. It governs sex and love and is surprisingly similar in *all* mammals.) Most mammals do not form pair-bonds as stable as ours. Yet even among our few monogamous mammalian cousins, no species is *sexually exclusive*. They burrow together and co-parent, but they are frequently impelled to gather genes from strangers on the side. Those enterprising genes like to keep gene pools nice and fresh. Habituation to one's partner apparently serves evolution's goals by making novel partners look *tempting*. Think of it this way: If sexual fidelity guaranteed more and fitter offspring, no mammals would fool around.

Mammals generally have rigid periods of being in heat, dictated by hormones, while humans can have sex whenever the urge arises. However, our hormones, too, regulate us. Unfortunately our version seems to be like starting and stopping in heavy traffic. Between passion bouts, we're likely to find a mate increasingly exhausting, jealous, or impossible to please. And our mate is likely to find us self-absorbed, unhelpful, or unaffectionate—except when pursuing sex.

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*At the start of our marriage, we slept together nude. Soon she started wearing underclothes. She gradually stopped enjoying having me put my arm around her or cuddle up to her. Sometimes, with little or no provocation, she would sleep in another room, which seemed rather callous, and left me feeling lonely and frustrated. Sex grew less and less frequent, and finally she moved into another room, permanently. I was going on the assumption that if she could just enjoy sex more, i.e., have more orgasms, we would have sex more often and my needs would be better satisfied. So, I was always trying to give her a good pounding. Oh well....—Brent*

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Research confirms that as the duration of partnership increases, sexual desire declines

women—while desire for tenderness declines in men.<sup>9</sup> This miserable program can keep us partner-hopping, adding mating opportunities on the side—or just plain frustrated, baffled, and bad tempered. And we never suspect that the drive to *exhaust* sexual desire is playing a role in this familiar pattern. Instead, we believe that sexual satiety is a good bonding strategy for mates. As we'll see, there is reason to suspect that it actually speeds the process of habituation, subtly shifting lovers' perceptions of each other for the worse.

Remarkably, past sages of various traditions observed that sexual satiety indeed drove partners apart, causing feelings of depletion and disharmony. They also discovered a way around the problem. They recognized that there are *two* fundamentally different approaches to lovemaking, depending upon its purpose.

Fertilization-driven sex is for procreation. Climax launches sperm to meet egg. In contrast, bonding-based sex has harmony and well-being as its primary objectives. *Both methods entail intercourse* to ease sexual tension effectively. Fertilization-driven sex achieves this goal with a neurochemical crash followed by a surprisingly slow return to homeostasis (that is, pre-orgasm balance). Bonding-based sex eases sexual tension via gentle intercourse mingled with deep relaxation and lots of soothing affection, leading to refreshing feelings of satisfaction and lingering equilibrium.

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*Making love is like inflating a balloon. Having an orgasm is like popping the balloon, but if you finish without an orgasm you are like a balloon that takes several days to gradually deflate, leaving you much longer to enjoy the inflated feeling.—Rob*

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## HOW DID THAT WORK OUT?

Theory is great, but after years of fitful explorations I was lucky enough to meet a partner willing to experiment open-mindedly with this unfamiliar approach to intercourse. When we got together ten years ago, my husband, Will, and I began our relationship with bonding-centered lovemaking. We emphasized generous affection, and did not pursue orgasm (although orgasm still occurred on rare occasions). This type of lovemaking is an ancient practice that is hinted at in various traditions. I now think of it as *karezza* (from the Italian for “caress,” pronounced ka-RET-za), a term coined almost a century ago by a Quaker doctor.

The technique is not based on control. [During intercourse] you are not seeking to avoid orgasm or to manipulate your bodily energies; you are merely closing your eyes, feeling those energies stream into your heart, head and genitals and those of your lover, and allowing them to circulate.... You are always relaxing, relaxing, falling back into the heart. Effortless awareness is the key. All your energies will be drawn upward, diffused throughout the body.... As this takes place, lustful tendencies will be transmuted into feelings of love and the need for conventional orgasm will lessen.<sup>10</sup>

When we looked back a year after beginning this practice, we had to admit that we were amazed. Life wasn't perfect, but there were definite, positive changes. No more yeast infections or urinary tract infections for me, no more alcohol abuse or chronic depression (and prescription antidepressants) for Will. Lovemaking was less intense, but left us more



contented. Even now, we never seem to tire of each other's touch, and actually enjoy helping each other. Best of all, there is a very welcome, lighthearted playfulness in our relationship which allows us to laugh about, and resolve, most sources of friction effortlessly.

As a human sciences teacher who cheerfully pores over medical abstracts for hours at a time, Will was curious to see if science could shed any light on these improvements. He delved into research about oxytocin, the so-called "cuddle hormone." This material went far toward explaining why selfless, non-goal-oriented lovemaking might have enhanced our health and countered depression<sup>11</sup> and addiction.<sup>12</sup> For example, HIV-positive patients survive longer when in relationship.<sup>13</sup> Wounds heal twice as fast with companionship, compared with isolation.<sup>14</sup> In primates, the caregiving parent, male or female, lives longer. Oxytocin is probably the chief hormonal player behind all of these gains.

My husband also realized that, by taking it easy and avoiding climax during our karezza lovemaking, we were apparently benefiting from less dramatic fluctuations in our brain chemistry. This is because orgasm is experienced in the brain. It's a complex sequence of neurochemical-hormonal events even more than a genital event. For example, you can stimulate an electrode in someone's brain, or spinal cord, and produce the sensation of orgasm without touching *any* genitals.

Instead of an electrode, the body uses a spike of neurochemicals to trigger the sensation of orgasm. What goes up at the moment of orgasm must come down. Although scientists aren't generally acknowledging that there is a post-orgasmic letdown, evidence of it has already turned up in the research of those seeking to develop sexual enhancement drugs. The subconscious cascade of neurochemical events, which appears to take a full two weeks to return to homeostasis, is behind the ability of Cupid's poison to sour our relationships.



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Forget breast implants. It's never about big or little, or short or tall, or blonde or brunette. It's only about "old" and "new." Hugh Grant had Elizabeth Hurley at home, and he wanted Marvin Hagler in a wig.

—Bill Maher, comedian

During this recovery phase lovers may feel needy, irritable, anxious, depleted, or desperate for another orgasm (to ease related symptoms). They don't realize that they are temporarily off balance. This is a recurring trigger for disharmony and compulsive behavior, and it's built right into our romantic relationships. Yet this recovery phase is nearly invisible to sexual active adults, because at first we typically try to resolve any uneasiness with *another* orgasm. This instinctive response pushes us toward further sexual satiety—and subsequent emotional distance. You have to hand it to those genes of ours. It's a clever way of making sure we engage in as much fertilization-driven sex as possible—before losing our desire to remain sexually exclusive with a mate.

Thanks to this innate program, we seldom discover the sense of well-being and contentment that accompanies the move toward equilibrium using karezza, that is, bonding-centered lovemaking. Instead we tend to focus on blaming each other for our changing feelings. "If only he would be more affectionate or supportive." "If only she would stop

processing her feelings and just have sex.”

As we will see, this post-orgasmic recovery period is likely to underlie such diverse phenomena as the one-night stand, the sexless marriage, infidelity, and porn addiction. contributes to the common experience that the honeymoon seldom lasts longer than a year. is why close friendships that bloom into love affairs often turn sour.

The bottom line is that the subconscious mating program behind our spontaneous sexual appetite works perfectly for maximum gene proliferation. It just doesn't happen to have our individual well-being at heart. Dutch scientist Gert Holstege, who reported that his brain scans of men ejaculating look like brain scans of people shooting heroin,<sup>16</sup> once remarked that we are all addicted to sex.<sup>17</sup> He was acknowledging that sexual impulsiveness *natural* leads in the direction of satiety—and, given opportunity, even compulsion.

## MATING AND BONDING, THE TWO PEDALS

If we do what we've always done, we'll get what we've always gotten. We're wired that way. Yet we don't just possess a mating program. We also possess a bonding program. It originated as a mechanism for bonding infant mammals to their caregivers, but it has also evolved to encourage us to fall in love—for a while (pair-bond). It works on a mutual exchange of subconscious cues, behaviors that we're encoded to find pleasurable at any age. As we will see, we can refine our innate inclinations by using these bonding behaviors to strengthen our enthusiasm for lasting intimacy indefinitely—especially if we're willing to transform intercourse itself into a bonding behavior when procreation is not desired.

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*Lack of cuddling eventually leads to lack of desire for it, whether through laziness, habit, resentment, or indifference. Cuddling (all affection included) causes the desire for more. It is a beneficent biofeedback machine, just as the absence of affection seems to be the opposite. Everyone will be familiar with young lovers seeming unable to get near enough to each other. Well, although we've been married for ages, we've experienced the same, repeatedly, as a result of initially scheduling cuddling—even a minute a day—and watching it snowball.—Keith*

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Humans experiencing companionate love feel calm and secure and experience social comfort and emotional union.<sup>18</sup> Given the powerful psychological and health benefits of a happy union, karezza lovemaking may prove surprisingly beneficial for socially monogamous mammals like us.

I now think of our mating and bonding programs like two pedals that drive our intimate relationships. The mating program (the urge to exhaust ourselves sexually as thoroughly as possible) is the “habituation pedal,” because it so often causes partners to get fed up with (habituate to) each other. The bonding program, on the other hand, is the “harmony pedal” because it makes togetherness more deeply satisfying. With this simple knowledge, we can steer for the results we want.

While Will was learning about the hidden endocrine cycle of sexual satiety, I continued to root around in the esoteric attics of some of the planet's most influential religions. There's a surprising amount of lore about how intimate relationships can serve as a path to deeper union and clearer spiritual perception. We don't hear much about this material because the

better-known religious directives focus almost exclusively on social conventions and generating more believers.

In the familiar doctrines, the concept of continence equates with the sexual abstinence of monks and nuns. Yet it appears that some of our most inspiring spiritual teachers have alluded to the transcendental power of sexual continence during intercourse, within intimate relationships. I'll share some of what I found in the Wisdom segments between chapters.

## WHY NOW?

Obviously, humanity's subconscious mating agenda is not a new challenge, but there are two developments that make it more urgent to cultivate authentic harmony between couples. First, our culture has changed. Until recently, across much of the globe, church and state kept a rein on sexual expression. Marriages were often arranged. Divorce was first impossible, and then heavily censored. Birth control was unavailable or prohibited. And unsanctioned relationships were strictly punished. All these features of life ensured that any emotional separation between partners was partly masked by the fact that they had to continue to live together and raise their inevitable children. These circumstances also meant that there was just plain less fooling around after the honeymoon period (in most couples' lives). That led to relationships stagnant but less volatile.

Today social and civil sanctions in the West cannot hold mates in artificial bondage. That means that our underlying mammalian mating programming is ripping couples, and families apart with increasing efficiency. As we no longer live in tribes based on mutual support, the outcome is agonizing for all concerned.

Moreover, with each new generation there may be fewer "swans" (couples who escape habituation). When researchers looked at marital happiness across generational groups, they discovered that the oldest couples were more likely to be somewhat happier. Analysts put this down to the fact that older couples married when people held more pragmatic views about marriage, support for marriage was stronger, and couples were more committed to the norm of lifelong marriage.<sup>19</sup>

However, there may be a second very potent, but unacknowledged, factor at work. We are guinea pigs in a massive international experiment. Today's titillating media routinely evoke supranormal (that is, above-normal) sexual stimulation in our brains. Consider these titles from mainstream men's and women's magazines: "Sex with Someone New—Every Night" (vocalizing out sexual fantasy) and "How to Find *His* G-Spot." Or Chile's precocious under-eighteen youth, whose enthusiasm for casual sex is boggling minds like nothing the country has witnessed before.<sup>20</sup>

This focus on sexual gratification speeds up the involuntary workings of our mating program by urging ever-more-rapid sexual surfeit (and subsequent disinterest) between lovers. The result is often shorter intimate connections, and increasing distrust between the sexes—frequently leading to despair about relationships and unhealthy isolation. In essence, our innate program for genetic success is working so efficiently that it's finally on the verge of backfiring. The wedge of mistrust and disillusionment between the genders is widening.





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