

# THE SEXUAL RESPONSE CYCLE

Sex is an interesting aspect of our lives in that it tends to be everywhere and no where, all at once. Every person here is evidence that sex happens, and yet sex is something that we don't typically talk about. This means that deciphering what is "normal" when it comes to sex can be very tricky, because we have so little information other than what we gather from our life experiences, whether it be movies, the media, religion, or messages we received (or didn't receive) growing up.

This handouts talks about two examples of the "sexual response model". The sexual response model presents a "template" to help us better understand the pieces that we need to achieve a pleasurable sexual encounter. Remember that this is not a "one size fits all" type of model. Instead, this model is meant as a rough guide to help you better understand your own sexual response. You may be surprised that your model is less straightforward than you may have expected!

## The Linear Model (Masters and Johnson/Kaplan model)<sup>1,2</sup>

**Desire:** This model begins with the idea that an individual experiences desire, or the urge to engage in sexual activity. This desire may be spontaneous (out of nowhere), or responsive (after seeing something sexual or perhaps having a sexual thought).

**Arousal:** Once desire occurs, then the individual experiences sexual arousal. An individual usually gets more aroused with more sexual stimulation (which could be physical or mental).

**Plateau:** Sexual arousal may reach a steady state. There may also be some increases or decreases of arousal that happen along the way.

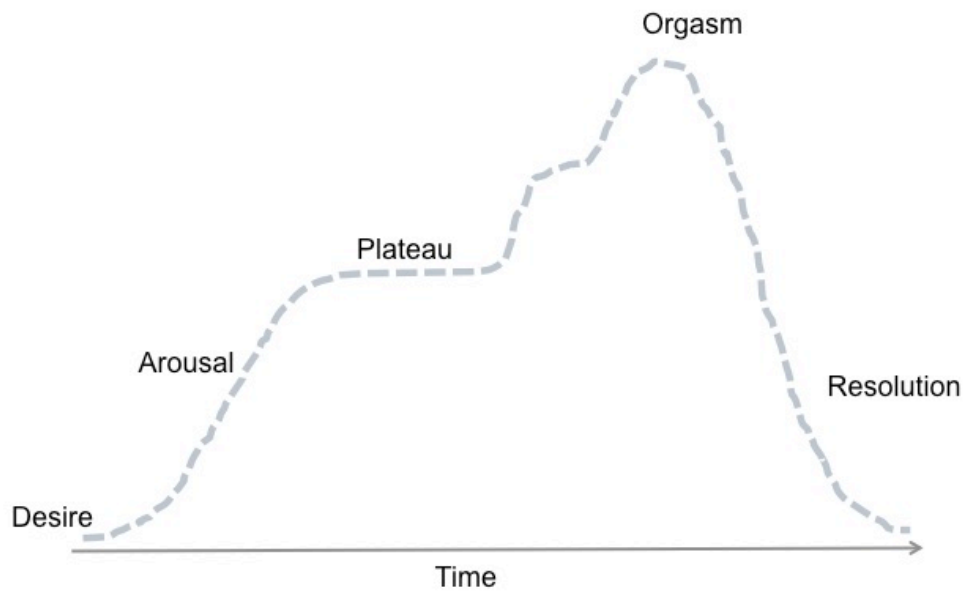
**Orgasm:** Once enough arousal is experienced, an orgasm occurs. An orgasm is typically considered the "peak" of arousal. In men, it is typical to have only a single orgasm, while women have been shown to be capable of multiple orgasms. However, there are men who have multiple orgasms and women who have single orgasms; there is a lot of individual variability!

**Resolution:** Once orgasm is reached, or perhaps when there is no more sexual stimulation, arousal decreases and returns to baseline.

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<sup>1</sup> Masters, W. H., & Masters, V. J. (1986). Human sexual response. Bantam Books.

<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, H. S. (1979). Hypoactive sexual desire. Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy, 3, 3-9



Pictured above: The linear model

### Circular Response Cycle (Basson Model)<sup>3</sup>

Now, the linear model doesn't seem to fit for everybody. For example, what happens if you don't experience sexual desire "out of the blue"? Or, perhaps your cycle used to begin with desire at one point in your life, maybe when you were younger or in the beginning of a new relationship, but it doesn't any more. In fact, research has shown that women and men with sexual dysfunction tend to relate better to the circular response cycle than the linear one.

**Reasons for sex:** A large body of research from different research centres worldwide have explored people's reasons for having sex, and the consensus is that there are *a lot* of different reasons people give for having sex! In other words, "desire" or "because I felt like it!" wasn't the only reason that people had sex! And while there was a large group of reasons that involved sexual pleasure or enjoyment, many individuals reported that they did not feel desire in the moment, but instead assumed that it would "come later", after they started sexual activity.

There are two group of "reasons" for sex: **approach reasons** (e.g., feeling close to your partner, wanting to show affection, to feel attractive, etc.) and **avoidance reasons** (e.g., "because my partner is intolerable if we don't do it regularly", to avoid fights, etc.). As you might imagine, approach reasons for sex are healthier than avoidance reasons, and are more likely to lead to pleasure.

**Stimuli:** With good motivation to engage in sexual activity, how do we move from a "sexually neutral" position, to sexual arousal? We need sufficient sexual stimuli! These could be sights/mental images,

<sup>3</sup> Basson, R. (2000). The female sexual response: A different model. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 26, 51-65.

sounds, physical sensations, smells, or even tastes. Sometimes, individuals may bypass this part of a sexual encounter in the interest of “getting it over with”. By bypassing the stimuli important for making a sexual response or feelings of sexual arousal happen, this can break the sexual response cycle before it even has a chance to get going!

**Context:** Once there is enough stimulation to allow a sexual response to take place, there also needs to be a “safe space”. This can be literal or figurative. The **relationship context** is an important part for the sexual response cycle (e.g., it may be difficult to move from “neutral” to “aroused” in the middle of an argument with your partner, or if you are in an abusive relationship). The **physical context** is also important (e.g., fear that the kids might burst into the room at any moment is typically not a very “safe” context, or if the room is too hot or too cold, or you are too tired or full, or not feeling well it may be more difficult to move away from “neutral”).

**Brain:** What is the most important sexual organ? The brain! Brain imaging studies have shown that large areas of the brain need to be deactivated in order for sexual arousal or orgasm to occur. We break the “brain” category down into the **body** and **mind**. Signals from both the body and mind get sent to the brain for processing. Some signals give us the green light for a sexual response to occur, while some signals give our brain the red light that stops a sexual response. We need to have a green light in order to advance to the next stage, which is sexual arousal.

Note that the brain and body form a feedback loop. So there is feedback from the body that can impact the mind, and vice versa. A common example of this feedback loop is where the **body** says “my erection is moving from a 9/10 to an 8/10 firm”, and then the mind says “Oh no! This means I’m losing my erection and I won’t be able to get it back!”, then the body says “now my erection is at a 7/10, and my heart sure is beating faster!”, then the mind says “Now my erection is going away for sure! And my partner is going to judge me!” and on and on.

**Body:** Signals from the body get sent and processed to the brain from processing. When our health is in perfect order, a sexual response is easier to achieve. However, have you ever had a flu and found yourself thinking “Wow. I could really go for sex right about now”? Maybe, but typically when our body is not feeling well, a sexual response is harder to achieve. This also applies to feeling tired, experiencing chronic pain, or chronic illness. Age is also an element of the body that impacts sexual response; while sex is actually known to get better over time, the sexual response may not look the same at age 18 as it does at age 98.

**Mind:** When we consider the “mind”, we are talking about psychological processes. These include **mood**, as well as **stress**. We know that the physiological and neurochemical response to low mood (depression) or stress (anxiety) are *incompatible* with a sexual response. So being in a good place, mentally, is critical for a sexual response. Additionally, when our brain is busy thinking about other things, it is hard to achieve or maintain sexual arousal. Indeed, there are many **distractions** that can get in the way of sexual arousal or pleasure (e.g., distractions of work or other parts of your life, worry about the health of the relationship, pondering over a long ‘to do’ list when being sexual, etc.).

**Sexual arousal:** Only when all of the above elements are present (i.e., you have motivation to engage in sex, there is enough sexy stimuli, the context is right, and your mind is in the right space), is arousal likely

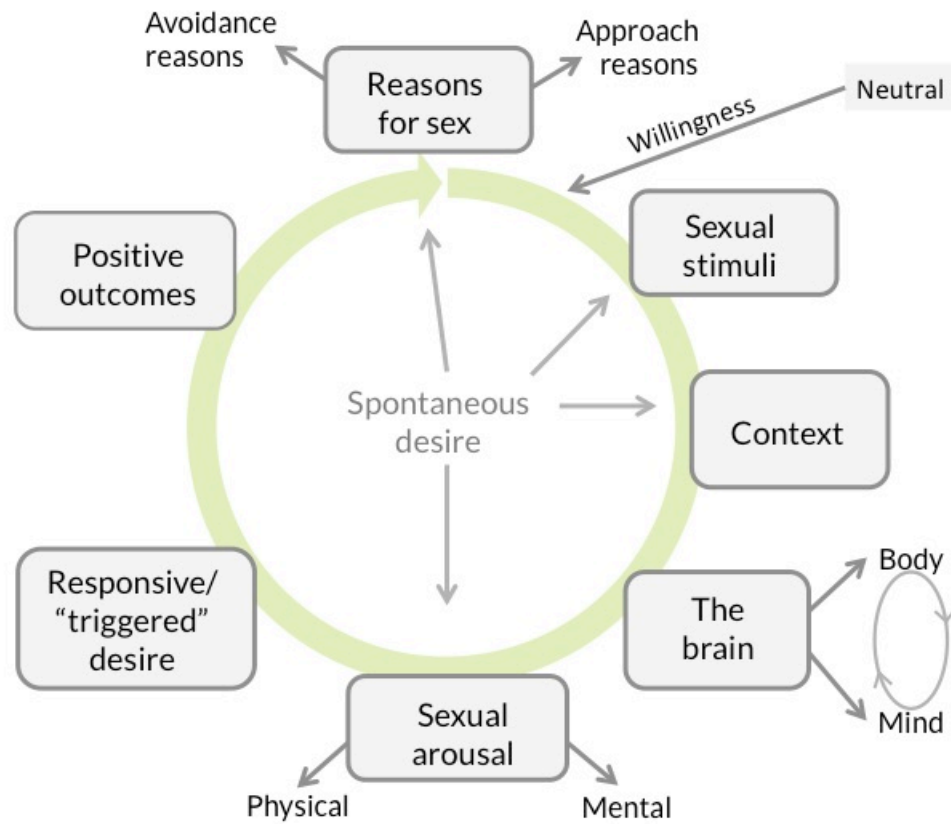
to happen. When we talk about sexual arousal, know that it is complicated because it can be **mental** or **physical**. And we know that mental and physical arousal do not always go hand in hand. For example, in the case of a man with nerve damage to his penis, he may feel very mentally aroused without an erection occurring. With that being said, even without an erection, there are physical signs of arousal (e.g., beating heart, feeling flush, some penile swelling).

**Responsive or “triggered” desire:** This is the “wanting” or the “urge” to experience sexual enjoyment. Notice that in this circular model, responsive desire appears much later in the cycle than in the previously mentioned linear model. This responsive desire is only likely to happen when the other criteria are met, such as enough sexy stimuli and sexual arousal. This tends to be a big surprise to a lot of people; the fact that sexual desire isn’t always spontaneous. If we believe that desire should just come out of the blue, we can hold off on engaging in sex because we are waiting for “the urge to strike”. Given the fact that sexual desire – or the urge to engage in sex – often doesn’t happen until we check all of the preceding boxes of the sexual response cycle, this misbelief can get us into trouble. We’ll be waiting... forever!

**Positive outcomes:** There are *many* positive outcomes to having sex, whatever that “sex” may look like (e.g., feeling close to your partner, good physical sensations, stress reduction, etc.). This piece is especially important in maintaining motivation (reasons) to engage in sex again in the future. You can imagine that without positive outcomes, the motivation to engage in sex may dwindle with time.

**Spontaneous desire:** In this model, we consider spontaneous desire like a “supercharger” for the sexual response cycle. It can help strengthen sexual response at some points in the cycle, but fortunately, the cycle can continue in its absence. This is good news, as spontaneous desire becomes less frequent with age for many men and women, and for some people (especially women), spontaneous desire is rarely present at all.

**Neutral/Willingness:** We all start from a place of being “sexually neutral”. This is one of the things that set people apart from animals; we don’t necessarily just stop and have sex whenever the occasion strikes. So in order to enter into the sexual response cycle, we need to be *willing*. This willingness is also critical for partners, in the case of partnered sex. It is much more enjoyable to be intimate with someone who wants to be intimate with you.



**In summary**, for many individuals, the sexual response cycle does not work like it is shown in the movies; that is, a person is walking down the street and then BAM! They are hit with sexual desire (or an urge for sexual activity) that kicks the sexual response cycle into action. In fact, it is not uncommon for sexual desire to be low – or even absent – until sexual arousal occurs (and remember that sexual arousal can be either physical arousal or mental arousal).

In the absence of sexual desire, some individuals may bypass important steps of the sexual response cycle, such as the stimuli required to experience a pleasurable sexual response. So they may engage in sex, miss many of the enjoyable parts about sex, and in turn arousal and “responsive desire” may not kick in. You can imagine that, in this scenario, there will not be many positive outcomes from this type of encounter, and in turn, few if any positive outcomes can be expected to act as motivators to engage in sex the next time! By remembering that sexual desire oftentimes doesn’t arise until later in the sexual response cycle, this can increase an individual and couple’s chance of having a pleasurable sexual encounter, which will produce more positive outcomes and lead to greater motivation to have sex in the future.

## MY SEXUAL RESPONSE CYCLE

Use the space below to complete your own sexual response cycle. Know that this can change over the years or even days. What does your sexual response cycle look like right now?

	What helps?	What hurts?
<b>Reasons for Sex</b> <i>(Remember approach vs avoidance reasons)</i>		
<b>Sexual Stimuli</b> <i>(Smell, touch, sound, taste, sight - be specific and detailed)</i>		
<b>Context</b> <i>(Environment, self, relationship)</i>		
<b>The Body</b> <i>(What experiences in the body help/hurt a sexual response?)</i>		
<b>The Mind</b> <i>(What thoughts, images, or memories help/hurt a sexual response?)</i>		
<b>Sexual Arousal</b> <i>(How do you know that you're mentally/physically aroused?)</i>		
<b>Responsive desire</b> <i>(Signs that I have desire)</i>		
<b>Positive outcomes</b>		