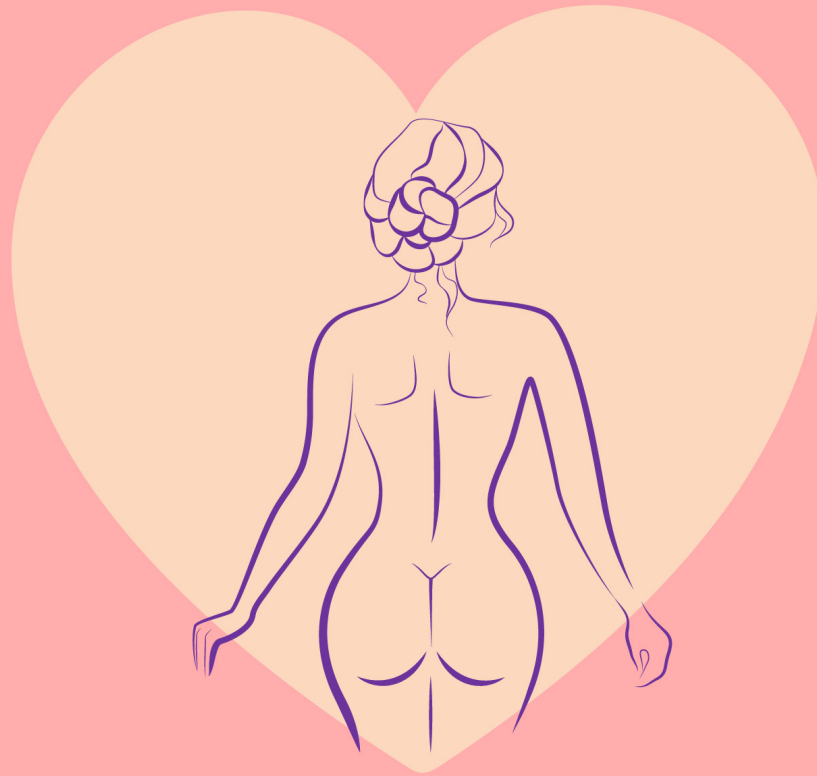


SUMMARY

COME AS YOU ARE

EMILY NAGOSKI



Summary of “Come as You Are” by Emily Nagoski

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Come as You Are blends wit, science, and psychology to help you discover the beauty of sex.

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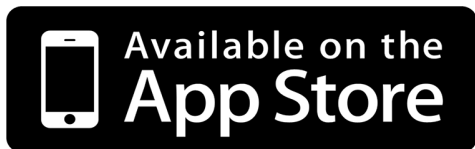


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Introduction

Let's imagine for a moment that a genie appears to make you a deal. You can have all the money you want, on one condition: from the moment you accept his offer, your sex life will never get any better than it already is.

Would you be okay with that? Or would you want to hold out in the hope that your sex life might one day improve? Many of us would have to choose the latter and that's okay; it just means you could benefit from learning a little more about your sexuality. Fortunately, that's where this summary comes in! Through the course of these chapters, we'll explore some scientific research which explains how context can enhance or inhibit your sexual experience and why people are so different when it comes to their levels of desire. You'll also learn:

- Why male and female genitalia aren't as different as you might think
- How seeing a lion can ruin your sexual experience (but not for the reasons you might think) and
- Why getting rid of your women's magazines will boost your sex life

Our Bodies Aren't as Different as You Might Think

If you compare the male and female anatomy, it might seem like we're primarily characterized by our differences. And where we do have commonalities, sometimes it just seems weird, like in the case of men having nipples. After all, why do they need them? On a female body, we can understand their purpose; female nipples help mothers nourish their babies. But what are men supposed to do with them? Well, the answer isn't actually as weird as you might think! That's because every human being is formed with the same basic body parts; those parts just rearrange themselves from person to person through a process known as homology.

Here's how it works: for the first six weeks of a pregnancy, all fetuses have identical tissue. Regardless of whether that fetus will grow up to have male, female, or intersex genitalia, everyone starts out with the same genital tissue. And once again, no matter how that fetus later develops, that tissue is also incredibly sensitive to stimulation. That's also why male bodies have nipples: because everyone starts out with the same basic set of parts, all fetuses form nipples. It's only much later that their genitalia develops in the womb and designates them as male. But the differences aren't just found in male and female genitals. In fact, every woman's vagina is unique and no two are formed exactly the same way.

Unfortunately, however, vaginas are digitally remastered for pornography to make the labia (or lips) less visible. This often gives people an unrealistic image of what a vagina should look like. But whether you're male or female, you should remember that all sizes and colors of vagina are normal (as long as these factors aren't influenced by an illness that causes you pain). And the same is true for the clitoris! This part of the female anatomy can vary from the size of a pea to that of a miniature pickle.

What's Your Sexual Personality?

Shortly after giving birth, one of the author's patients, Laurie, expressed that she had no desire to have sex with her husband. However, she still enjoyed pleasuring herself with a wand or vibrator, and she soon came to feel that there was something wrong with her lack of desire to have penetrative sex. Was there? Absolutely not! Here's why: you can think of the human brain as having a sexual gas pedal and a sexual break. Your brain is prompted to pump those breaks any time it detects a threat, real or imagined. That means that any stimuli-- from a thought to a smell to your partner's underwear-- can trigger your brain to believe that sex isn't a great idea at the moment and you then slam on the breaks.

So, how does that work? Well, as a general rule, a nervous system with easily triggered breaks is the most common reason for sexual hang-ups. For example, a 2008 study of 226 women found that respondents who struggled to become aroused or only experienced arousal under perfect circumstances suffered from significant sexual anxiety that impeded their experience. But these struggles shouldn't be a cause for concern; everyone's sexual breaks and accelerators have different levels of sensitivity and that's perfectly normal. In fact, these differences form each person's unique sexual personality. For example, another of the author's patients, Camilla, complained that she had a very low sex drive. She also didn't experience any feelings of arousal when looking at her partner or thinking of them in fantasies. But in her case, it wasn't because she was anxious about sex or distrustful of her partner. Instead, the problem was simply that Camilla has a weak sexual gas pedal, and it's actually not as much of a problem as you might think. It just means that she doesn't respond as rapidly to sexual stimulation as other people might and thus, she simply needs a little extra time to get warmed up.

Your Sexual Experience Depends on the Context

Does this story sound familiar? Two people meet, feel wildly excited about each other, and dive straight in to a passionate romance supercharged with sex. But it's not long before the excitement starts to wear off, and by the end of their second year together, the flames have died down to a mere flicker. Because this happens so frequently, many people get the idea that it's normal for their sex lives to simply fizzle out or for partners to lose interest in one another. But that's not necessarily true. In fact, whether a sensation feels exciting or just plain annoying is entirely dependent on the context of your sexual experience. And in the story described above, that context is the simple passage of time. But thankfully, context is subjective and it can be manipulated.

For example, let's say you're in a sexy mood and your partner tickles you. In that mood, this sensation probably feels tingly and exciting. But if you were concentrating on something important, you might be annoyed or even angry. This just goes to show that the context dictates whether a certain sensation is pleasurable or upsetting and, by extension, determines whether you and your partner have sex or not. In fact, studies show that if the mood is right, almost anything can feel erotic. For example, one study conducted on lab rats experimented with a small probe inserted into the rat's nucleus accumbens, which is located deep within the brain. In a neutral environment, the scientist tried stimulating the higher part of the nucleus and the rat responded with signs of heightened curiosity. But when the scientist stimulated the nucleus' lower region, the rat responded with avoidance.

However, when the rat was out of that neutral environment and in one it found uniquely positive-- a setting with a variety of pleasant smells and no light-- it no longer mattered which part of the nucleus the scientist tested. As long as it was in that enjoyable environment, the rat remained happy and engaged. And the same is true for humans! Because even if you don't enjoy tickling or pain in your everyday environment, under the right

circumstances (like an environment that feels both safe and sexy), even being whipped or chained up can feel erotic.

Stress is a Sex-Killer

But, let's be honest, we all knew that already, right? And if you need any extra help in visualizing it, let's just imagine that your partner's popped into your work for a quickie and the two of you are fumbling your way down the hall, looking for the first available private place when all of a sudden, you run into your supervisor and catch a hard, reprimanding stare. The kind of stare that says she knows what you're up to and is warning you not to try it. And after that, it would be pretty tough to try and reclaim the mood.

That's because stress makes sex sound like one of the most unappealing things in the world. And unfortunately, you can't put your body's stress response on pause or hurry through the process of decompressing. We even see this response in the animal kingdom because, for instance, if an antelope is being chased by a lion, they basically have three options: run, fight, or play dead. And no matter what option they choose, even if it helps them survive, their troubles aren't over. Instead, they'll continue to experience signs of stress like full-body tremors or spasms long after the lion is gone.

These are classic symptoms of stress leaving the body and it's known as decompressing or completing the stress response cycle. And the same is true for you. So, even if you're not being chased by a lion, the stress of your work, family, or relationships can still hunt you down and leave you shaking. And trying to have sex while you're going through the stress process is a terrible idea because you won't be able to enjoy it until the cycle is complete. So, what do you do if you want to hurry through the process and start having fun again? Well, you can't rush the cycle, but you can try some healthy outlets for expressing your stress that may help it dissipate sooner. For example, you can release tension through exercise, sleep, relaxing in whatever way makes you feel most comfortable, or even crying or screaming.

However, while these outlets work for most people, the process may be a little more complicated for those who have suffered sexual trauma. In fact, many survivors continue to feel stressed in any sexually charged situation long after the danger is over. So, if you've been through a traumatic experience and your instinct in any sexual situation is to basically play dead, that's normal. But unfortunately, that can also prolong your cycle of healing, which means that it will take longer for you to find closure. And until you do, it's highly likely that you'll perceive almost any sexual situation as threatening. However, it is possible to calm down and attain a sense of peace while you're trying to have sex and practicing mindfulness can help with that.

Pop Culture Can Ruin Our Sex Lives

What person-- male or female-- hasn't snuck a glance at the tabloids which line the supermarket checkout counters? After all, they're so in your face, you can't really help it! But unfortunately, our interaction with pop culture can have lasting negative impressions on our sex lives. For example, it's no secret that the media bears a great deal of responsibility for feeding negative body image and insecurity in women. And because women's bodies are perpetually portrayed in highly unrealistic ways, it's no surprise that many women feel insecure in the bedroom because they're measuring themselves against photoshopped standards of "ideal female beauty." And it's pretty hard to feel sexy when you're overwhelmed by feelings of disgust about your own body!

But the misrepresentation doesn't stop at a woman's physical appearance. The female sexual experience is also heavily manipulated by the media's message that women should enjoy every sexual position, every naughty little kink, and every piece of lingerie Victoria's Secret has to offer. This generates a uniquely repulsive catch-22, however, because if you do enjoy the things that are so aggressively pushed on you, you're considered slutty. But if you don't, you're frigid or a prude. And if you look at the wealth of mixed messages which are targeting women, it becomes readily apparent that every aspect of the way female sexuality is represented in the media isn't just confusing-- it's completely off base.

So, how can you purge your life of these toxic influences? One great place to start is by tossing the magazines and celebrating your own beauty. Acknowledging that your body, your vagina, and your feelings are normal is an awesome first step towards self-acceptance. And it may also help to know that, in 2012, scientists combed through 20 years of research on the correlation between body image and sexual experience and concluded that your self-image influences every single aspect of your feelings about sex. From arousal to desire to your orgasm, how you feel about your body will determine how good you feel in bed, even down to your willingness to take

risks and open up to your partner. So, if you take away only one thing from this chapter, it should be the fact that practicing self-acceptance and improving your body image can literally save your sex life (not to mention your mental health!).

Just Because Your Genitals Are Responding, It Doesn't Mean You're Aroused

If you're like most people, your partner's arousal is probably one of your favorite parts about sex. After all, it feels pretty good to know that you can bring them so much pleasure. But did you know that a physical response can sometimes be involuntary and doesn't actually mean your partner is aroused? This is especially true in the case of women, as studies which measured blood flow to the vagina have shown that textbook "arousal responses" aren't always a good indicator of your partner's true satisfaction. In this study, scientists measured the arousal responses of both men and women while they were watching pornographic videos. The participants were asked to report how aroused they felt in any given moment by turning a dial.

The researchers then found that for male participants, the correlation between their level of arousal and the amount of blood flow to their genitals was 50%. But for women, it was lower than 10%! So, what can we learn from this exercise? One key takeaway might be that if you're confused about whether your female partner is actually enjoying your experience, you should ask her rather than taking her physical response as a cue. Because in many cases, an arousal response in a woman simply indicates that she finds the current stimuli sexually relevant. Rather than genuinely enjoying it, it might simply be that her vagina recognizes that something is happening to that sensitive area of the body and responding accordingly.

This is also important to keep in mind when it comes to traumatic sexual experiences like rape. For example, many survivors feel guilt or shame because their vagina responded while they were being assaulted. Many even believe this means that they "deserved" or "wanted" it when that is definitely not the case. Likewise, many men feel shame because they unintentionally become aroused when witnessing a rape scene in a movie. But this shouldn't continue to cause unnecessary exercise for men or women. In both cases, there is absolutely nothing abnormal or shameful

about your response. Just as you can demonstrate an arousal response during a consensual experience you're not enjoying, the same is true of non-consensual sex acts. If your body involuntarily responds to viewing or receiving sexual stimuli, it doesn't mean that you're a bad person, that you want to be assaulted, or that you want to inflict sexual violence on others. Instead, your body is simply responding in a manner that has nothing to do with your true feelings.

Final Summary

Our lives are often guided by common misinterpretations about sex and this can lead to a great deal of anxiety and confusion. For example, many people worry that their vagina is abnormally shaped, that they're not experiencing the "right" levels of arousal, or that their sex drive is too low. But the truth is that our bodies are more complex than we've been led to believe and the media is responsible for feeding our insecurities and misunderstandings. In fact, vaginas come in a variety of shapes and colors and there's no such thing as a "sex drive."

Rather, this is a common misconception which occurs because we categorize sex as a need like food or shelter and assume we're motivated to pursue it by an evolutionary "drive." But sex is actually a desire rather than something we need to survive and this means that we don't have a "sex drive" so much as a set of accelerators and breaks. The speed with which we get into gear or slam on the breaks depends on a wide variety of stimuli which is determined by context. So, whether your context involves the passage of time, the recent birth of a child, or significant amount of stress, it's important to know that your response is normal and it's okay if you're not in the mood right now. It's also completely normal to be slow in responding to any sexual stimulation and it doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. Instead, you might simply need some extra time, extra foreplay, or the ability to slowly warm up to sexual feelings through the progression of a romantic atmosphere and intimate conversation.

You should also remember that stress and media representation have a significant impact on the sex lives of men and women alike. Because feelings of tension or a sense of dissatisfaction with our bodies can quickly kill the mood, it's understandable if you need time to practice self-acceptance and cycle through the stress process before you're able to have enjoyable intercourse. But no matter what you struggle with, Nagoski invites readers to remember that everyone is free to grow and explore their sexuality.



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