SUMMARY

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DIRTY MINDS

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Summary of Dirty Minds by Kayt Sukel

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How your brain impacts your sex life.

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Introduction

Have you ever heard the phrase “get your mind out of the gutter?” What about the phrase “dirty minds?” These terms are commonly uttered in reference to profane or pornographic thought; they imply that our brains are engaging in sexually perverse or inappropriate activity. (Think along the lines of making sexual jokes in church or in a similarly inappropriate setting!) Given that we are so often encouraged to keep our minds away from sexual themes, it might surprise you to know that our brains are heavily involved in our perceptions of sex, romance, and attraction. In fact, many of the sensations that we attribute to pure physical lust actually originate in our brains! So, over the course of this summary, we’ll explore just how “dirty” our minds are and how our brains influence our sex lives.

Attraction Activates Our Happy Hormones

If you've ever had a crush on someone, then you're familiar with that giddy feeling you get every time you're around them. You know what it's like to get obsessed with silly, simple details-- like the fact that you ran into each other at the same coffee shop, that you both like pineapple on pizza, or that your birthdays fall on the same date. When you like someone romantically, you can convince yourself that these details add up to "fate" and therefore mean that you're meant to be together. And you probably also know that those thoughts aren't even on the same planet as your rational brain! Because once that swoony phase is over, all of a sudden, your crush is just a normal person. And then those all-important details are just coincidences that don't mean much at all.

But have you ever wondered how that happens? What triggers that gushy, lovesick phase? And what makes it go away? Both of these sensations are actually dependent upon the release-- or absence-- of certain chemicals in your brain. When you develop a crush on someone and find them physically or emotionally attractive, your brain produces a "happy hormone" called dopamine. You can think of dopamine as your reward hormone. It's produced whenever we experience something rewarding and it motivates us to pursue the activity that will produce increased bursts of the hormone. It also gives you a spurt of energy that encourages you to chase after the reward. In the case of physical attraction, that "reward" is often represented by winning the affection of another person or by pursuing a relationship with that person.

So, whenever we have a positive physical or emotional interaction with the object of our desire, that interaction triggers a surge of dopamine. Our brains then soak up the happy reward hormones and conclude that we need to repeat these actions if we want to experience that sensation again. The author observes that we can therefore conclude that dopamine plays a prominent role in conditioning our behavior because happy hormones motivate us to seek the same "reward." And although dopamine can be triggered by pleasurable sexual experiences, this chemical doesn't necessarily

characterize human sexual behavior. However, human sexual behavior is undeniably influenced by neurological cues-- scientists just don't know exactly how it works!

For example, if you're a woman who likes to go out clubbing and wear revealing clothing, there's nothing wrong with that. But you probably aren't aware of the hormonal responses that might be influencing your behavior. After all, if you're going out to have a good time, you're primarily interested in hanging out with your friends, meeting someone cute, and enjoying some tasty drinks. You probably didn't stop to think, "Hmm, am I ovulating tonight? Is the fact that I'm ovulating making me feel more sexual? Am I being driven by a biological urge to procreate?" It's a pretty safe bet that no one asks themselves those questions while getting ready for a night of clubbing. And yet, that might be truer than you know!

The research of social psychologist Kristina Durante indicates that the female ovulation cycle influences the decision to engage in more sexually adventurous or promiscuous behavior, even if a woman isn't consciously aware of doing so. In fact, when Durante compared and contrasted women who were ovulating with women who weren't, she found that women who were ovulating were twice as likely to go out clubbing and wear deliberately revealing clothing. Even when this was normal behavior for all the women being studied, she found that their desire to engage in these activities was markedly higher when they were ovulating. And as soon as their ovulation cycles were finished, these feelings and behaviors dropped down to more "average" levels. They also spiked again as soon as the next ovulation cycle occurred! So, from this study, we can conclude that sex hormones have a direct impact on our brain function and some of the choices we make.

What's Your Type?

My brother likes to date blonde, slim girls who dress in a specific style. In fact, his last three girlfriends could have been mistaken for carbon copies of each other! Although each was very different in terms of her personality and interests, they were all very physically similar. And it wasn't until his most recent relationship that my brother realized he has a type. In fact, many people do! Sometimes we're conscious of it and sometimes we're not. Sometimes, people freely and cheerfully articulate their "type" by saying something like, "I think redheads are really hot!" or "I really like guys who work out a lot." And sometimes, people are more like my brother-- they don't realize they have a physical or personality preference until they've dated several people who are very similar.

But it might surprise you to learn that no one really knows why! In fact, scientists have been unable to identify a singular factor that distinguishes or motivates human lust. Some studies have been conducted which indicate that people are attracted to the smells of different hormones and pheromones. But these studies were ultimately inconclusive in their attempts to identify a single, comprehensive answer. That's because the truth of human attraction is ultimately more complex than anyone can really pin down. So, if you have a "type," it might be as simple as the fact that you just really like redheads. But at this point in time, science can't really offer an explanation for why you think redheads are hotter than blondes. Similarly, if you are attracted to personality traits or characteristics like people who are very studious or passionate, science can't explain that either. In those cases, it usually comes down to something that's too personal to be measured by a test. For example, maybe you love the passion and nerdiness that drives smart people to hide away in libraries, in pursuit of higher intellectual thought. Or maybe you think girls in glasses are super cute. Ultimately, it's all up to your individual, personal preference!

Why Are Humans Monogamous?

As you've probably noticed, our society expects human relationships to be fairly monogamous. If you have multiple sexual or romantic partners throughout your life, you might find that people talk about you in a negative way or act as if you are unscrupulous. By contrast, people who marry their high-school sweetheart or stay married for 50+ years are often celebrated as having achieved the highest pinnacle of romance. But is monogamy really a realistic goal for humans? The author's research indicates that the answer is rather complex. In the animal kingdom, monogamy is not always the norm. Many species will have multiple partners and form short, purely sexual relationships. And when monogamy does occur, it is driven primarily by hormones. As a result, what they experience is not necessarily "love" as we know it, but lust. Their hormones have simply convinced their brains that what they feel is a deep and lasting bond.

Scientific research indicates that the same is similar of humans, although the specifics are difficult to pin down. As we saw in the previous chapters, our perception of love and sexual attraction is heavily influenced by surges of dopamine. Yale researcher Ilanit Gordon concurs with their theory that substantial amounts of oxytocin are also present in long-lasting human relationships. This led Gordon to conclude that oxytocin is an essential component of successful relationships. However, this discovery has generated another scientific mystery, as researchers are unable to determine whether happy relationships produce surges in oxytocin or whether oxytocin must first be present to generate a sense of lasting compatibility.

Love and Hate are Two Sides of the Same Coin

If you've listened to Ellie Goulding's popular song, "Hate Me," you might have noticed that the lyrics portray love and hate as being two sides of the same coin. Although the song makes it clear that there is a great deal of animosity between the partners, it is evident that they were once attracted to each other. As a result, listeners can infer that love and hate are closely intertwined; a slight variation in circumstances or hormones could cause one to morph into another. In this respect, popular culture has hit upon an important neurological truth: love and hate are indeed closely related. Because they are polar opposites, we tend to assume that they exist at vastly different ends of the spectrum. But scientific research indicates that they are actually very similar.

In the previous chapters, we considered the impact of dopamine and oxytocin on human relationships. But new research-- like that of Carson De Dreu, a researcher at the University of Amsterdam-- indicates that love and hate are simply fluctuations of a certain hormone. Specifically, the hormone oxytocin. De Dreu conducted an experiment in which participants were asked to inhale oxytocin before facing an ethical dilemma. In the context of this dilemma, participants were given some money and a choice. They could either keep all of the money for themselves, give all of it away, or donate a small portion of it to a worthy cause while retaining some for themselves. De dreu found that the participants who had inhaled oxytocin were kinder and more generous that their counterparts in the control group who did not partake of oxytocin.

This led him to believe that oxytocin causes people to feel more loving and generous. But he also noticed that, when challenged, the participants who had inhaled oxytocin were also more aggressive. This indicates that oxytocin heavily influences our experience with love and hate; essentially, these emotions are two sides of the same coin that can be triggered by fluctuations of the same hormone. From this study, we can conclude that our emotional experiences may not be as independent or as personal as we think. Rather

than being governed by our deep-seated feelings, they are more likely to be influenced by surges of oxytocin in response to certain stimuli.

Final Summary

When we think about love and sex, we often assume that our feelings are our own. We believe that our attraction to another person is the result of genuine and deeply-held feelings. But we often fail to consider the role our brains and hormones play in our relationship with attraction. For example, when some women are excessively drawn to the allure of clubbing and revealing clothing, it is often as a result of ovulation. Likewise, our attraction to a certain “type” of person is driven by our brain chemistry.

Similarly, our monogamous relationships and our perception of love and hate are heavily influenced by hormonsl fluctuations like the surge of oxytocin and dopamine. However, scientists have only begun to scratch the surface of the impact our brain chemistry has on our romantic and sexual relationships. Existing research has only laid the groundwork for new questions that remain to be answered by the neurologists and scientists of the future.