

come as you are

The Surprising New Science that
Will Transform Your Sex Life

Emily Nagoski, Ph.D.

Inhibitors

Sometimes I have so many worries that I am unable to get aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Unless things are “just right,” it is difficult for me to become sexually aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

If I am uncertain how my partner feels about me, it is harder for me to get aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

If I am worried about taking too long to become aroused or to orgasm, this can interfere with my arousal.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Sometimes I feel so “shy” or self-conscious during sex that I cannot become fully aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Total (out of 20) _____

Exciters

Seeing a partner doing something that shows their talent or intelligence, or watching them interacting well with others can make me very sexually aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

When I think about someone I find sexually attractive or fantasize about sex, I easily become sexually aroused.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

If it is possible someone might see or hear us having sex, it is more difficult for me to get aroused.

4	3	2	1	0
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Particular scents are very arousing to me.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

I think about sex a lot when I am bored.

0	1	2	3	4
Not at all like me	Not much like me	Somewhat like me	A lot like me	Exactly like me

Total (out of 20) _____

sexy contexts

Think of a positive sexual experience from your past. Describe it here, with as many relevant details as you can recall:

Now consider what aspects of that experience made it positive:

Category	Description
Mental and physical wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical health• Body image• Mood• Anxiety• Distractibility• Worry about sexual functioning• Other	<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 168px;"></div>
Partner characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical appearance• Physical health• Smell• Mental state• Other	<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 116px;"></div>

Relationship characteristics

- Trust
- Power dynamic
- Emotional connection
- Feeling desired
- Frequency of sex

Setting

- Private/public (at home, work, vacation, etc.)
- Distance sex (phone, chat, etc.)
- See partner do something positive, like interact with family or do work

Other life circumstances

- Work-related stress
- Family-related stress
- Holiday, anniversary, "occasion"

Ludic factors/play

- Self-guided fantasy
- Partner-guided fantasy ("talking dirty")
- Body parts that were touched or not
- Oral sex on you/on partner
- Intercourse, etc.

Other

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Partner characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical appearance• Physical health• Smell• Mental state• Other	<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 115px;"></div>

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Other

not-so-sexy contexts

Think of a not-so-great sexual experience from your past—not a terrible one, just a not-so-great one. Describe it here, with as many relevant details as you can recall:

Now consider what aspects of that experience made it not-so-great:

Category	Description
Mental and physical wellbeing <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical health• Body image• Mood• Anxiety• Distractibility• Worry about sexual functioning• Other	<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 160px;"></div>
Partner characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical appearance• Physical health• Smell• Mental state• Other	<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 115px;"></div>

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Other

sexual cues assessment

Read through all your sexy and not-so-sexy contexts. What do you notice as reliable contexts for great sex and reliable contexts for not-so-great sex?

Contexts That Make Sex Great

Contexts That Make Sex Not-So-Great

Identify five things you and/or your partner could do if you decided to work toward creating more frequent and easier access to the contexts that improve your sexual functioning.

	Things to do	How much impact?	How easy?	How soon can you do it?
1.	_____	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____	_____

Now select the two or three that feel like the right combination of impact, ease, and immediacy, and list all the things that would have to happen in order for this change to occur. Be as **CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC** as you can. These should be **ACTIONS** rather than abstractions or ideas or attitudes. Ask yourself, “If we decide to create this change, what goes on our to-do list?”

Change 1

Change 2

Change 3

Finally, select just one change that you will actually implement. Choose a start date together that feels like good timing. Ideally this will be within the next month. Make your plan. **AND DO IT!**

appendix 1: therapeutic masturbation

If you are experiencing frustration around orgasm—whether you’re learning to orgasm, learning to orgasm with a partner, or learning to have more control over your orgasms—I offer these instructions.

1. Find your clitoris (instructions in chapter 1).
2. Create a great context. You can use your worksheets from chapter 3 to help with this. In general, it’ll be a context where you have no concern about being interrupted for about thirty minutes, where you feel safe and private and undistracted by outside worries.
3. Touch your body and notice how that feels. Touch your feet and legs and arms and hands and neck and scalp. At first, when you’re learning to have an orgasm, stop here. Spend your thirty minutes just doing this. Do it a few times a week for a couple weeks. Gradually incorporate your breasts, lower abdomen, inner thighs.
4. Now stimulate your clitoris indirectly. The most indirect stimulation is simply to think about your clitoris. Just give it quiet, loving attention. Try rocking or rotating your hips, to bring your attention to your pelvis. You may or may not notice some emotions emerging as you attend to your clitoris. That’s normal. Allow any feelings and practice feeling affectionate and compassionate toward yourself, your genitals, and all those feelings.

When you feel ready (and you may not feel ready for days or weeks—that’s okay), move to “distal” stimulation, which means indirect, round-about stimulation. Try any of these, or whatever else feels right:

- Gently pinch your labia between your thumbs and forefingers, stretch the labia out, and tug from side to side. This will put very indirect pressure on the clitoris and move the skin over the clitoris (the clitoral hood).
- With your palm over your mons, press down a little and pull upward, toward your abdomen. Again, this will put gentle pressure on the clit and move the skin around it. Try different pressures, different speeds of tugging (e.g., one long slow tug, several quick tugs in a row), or rotating your palm in a circle.
- Place your palms against your inner thighs, so that the outside edges of your thumbs are pressing against your labia, possibly even squeezing them together. Rock your hips against the pressure of your hands.

Some people prefer indirect stimulation over direct stimulation. You may notice as you try these techniques that the muscles in your arms, legs, butt, and/or abdomen get tense. That's a normal part of the body arousal process. You might even find yourself feeling like you don't want to stop doing a particular kind of stimulation. I humbly suggest you go with your gut; don't stop. Keep going for as long as it feels good, just keep paying attention to the pleasurable sensations without trying to change them or even understand them.

5. Try direct stimulation. For most people this is pleasurable only when arousal has already started up, so once you're feeling pretty pleasurable and warm, try any of these:
 - With the flat of one or two or three fingertips, lightly touch the head of the clitoris with a steady back-and-forth motion. Try slow, fast, or anything in between that feels good, and with light, brushing touch, light pressure, deep pressure . . . try different combinations of speeds and pressures.
 - With as many fingertips as feels comfortable, rub circles directly over your clitoris—fast or slow, light touch or deep pressure, or anything in between.
 - Again with varying numbers of fingers, and with different pressures and speeds, tug upward on the clitoris, from the clitoral hood.
 - With whatever variation on fingers, speed, and pressure you want to try, flick upward from just under the head of the clitoris.

As your arousal level changes, notice and observe what happens to your body. Don't try to make it change. If you notice that your brain starts whirring away at anxieties or fears, notice that, too, know that you can worry about all that some other time, release those thoughts, and return your attention to the sensations inside your body.

6. Keep breathing. As you experience sexual pleasure, your muscles will tense, and often people find themselves holding their breath or breathing more shallowly. Periodically check in with your breathing, relax your abdominal muscles, and allow yourself to breathe.

Don't try to make anything happen, just allow yourself to notice what it feels like and let your body do what it wants. If you feel worried that you're losing control of your body, relax into that fear, reassure yourself that you're safe, know that you can stop anytime you choose. And of course, if it gets to be too much, feel free to stop anytime you like. The more you keep going, the more the pleasure and tension will spread through your body, and it will cross some intense threshold, and explode . . . eventually.

If you're learning to orgasm with a partner, do all of this alone for a week (or three), then do it with a photo of your partner sitting beside you. Do that for a week (or three). Then do it with them maybe on the phone or in the next room. Then with them in the room but far away, in the dark, blindfolded, and facing the other way. Gradually increase their proximity and even the light.

Once you're orgasming with your partner on the bed with you, begin showing them what feels good to you. Move your partner's hands on your body to show them what you like.

And always, notice if you're getting frustrated and remember that you are already at the goal: pleasure.

appendix 2: extended orgasm

Extending and expanding your orgasms is a kind of meditation. If you've never meditated in nonsexual ways, it might be easiest if you begin by practicing outside the context of sexuality. Here's how.

Begin with a simple breathing exercise like the one I describe in the spectating section in chapter 8.

Inhale through your nose for five seconds.

Then exhale through your mouth for ten seconds.

Do that eight times, for a total of two minutes.

As you breathe, your mind will wander to other things. That is normal and healthy! The point is not to prevent your mind from wandering but to notice when that happens, let those thoughts go for the moment, and gently return your attention to your breathing.

The breathing is good for you, but the noticing that your mind wandered and returning your attention to your breath is the crucial skill.

Do this every day, and gradually you'll notice yourself noticing what you're paying attention to all the time. Once that's happening spontaneously, you're ready to begin moving toward extended orgasm.

When you're ready, create a context where you have lots of time on your own (or with a partner you trust) without interruption or distraction. You'll need an hour or two—and if you're thinking, “I don't have an hour or two to have an orgasm,” that's totally fair! Extended orgasm is the sex equivalent of running a marathon. You can be as healthy as anyone needs to be and never run a marathon. Just jog a few times a week, that's great! But sometimes you have the opportunity to set an ambitious goal and dedicate some time and attention to

it. Whether it's a marathon or ecstasy, it's always a choice you make, depending on what fits your life.

So. Create a context. And begin with the breathing exercise for two minutes, practicing returning your attention to your breath when it strays.

Then begin a little sensory exploration, paying attention to how your body feels, using all the techniques in the therapeutic masturbation approach (appendix 1).

Imagine that arousal happens on a scale of 0–10, where 0 is no arousal and 10 is orgasm. Start at 0 and allow your arousal to grow up to 5, which is definitely turned on, definitely interested.

Then back down to 1. Allow the tension in your muscles to dissipate.

Go up to 6, and then back down to 2.

Of course, as you go through this process, notice when your attention strays to outside thoughts, let those thoughts go, and return your attention to the sensations of your body. And don't forget to breathe.

Up to 7, down to 3.

7 is pretty aroused. By the time you get to 7, your body may become reluctant to stop moving toward orgasm. This is where the crucial skill of taking your foot off the accelerator without putting it on the brakes comes in. Just turn off the ons without turning on the offs. Allow your muscles to relax, allow the arousal to dissipate softly.

Up to 8, down to 4.

Up to 9, down to 5.

9 is a very, very high level of arousal, and your body is very much on the train at this point. It wants to move forward to its destination. So it may be difficult, on your first attempts, to relax your abdominal, thigh, and buttock muscles enough to ease your arousal down. When you do, you may experience a kind of spreading warmth or tingling. Whereas fast orgasms are generally focused right in the genitals, these slower orgasms spread out over your whole body. Let that happen.

Still notice when your thoughts stray and return your attention to the sensations in your body.

Up to 9½, down to 6.

9½ is the bittersweet screaming edge of orgasm. At first, it may be difficult to take pressure off the accelerator. Feel free not to the first few times you try this—the worst that can happen is you'll have an orgasm!

But once you learn the knack, allow your arousal to reach 6, go back to 9½, then down to 7.

You'll need to make a deliberate effort to ease tension away from your abdomen, buttocks, and thigh muscles, because that tension can push you over the edge. As you relax, you'll sense the arousal spreading from your genitals, radiating into the rest of your body.

Back to 9½, down to 8.

Back to 9½, down to 9. By now, you're constantly hovering around orgasm, holding yourself at the peak sexual tension your body can contain. That's extended orgasm. Congratulations! With practice, you can stay there as long as you like, as long as your body can sustain, always noticing what you're paying attention to and gently nudging your attention toward your body sensations. You're a bit like a bathtub at this point, where the tension is trickling into you at exactly the same rate that it's draining out. If it begins to trickle just a little bit more quickly than it's draining out, you'll cross the threshold and overflow. If it begins to drain just a bit more quickly than it's trickling in, you'll drift away from the peak. There is no such thing as failure here, only different kinds of success, because it's all intense pleasure.

This whole process might take forty-five minutes or an hour, and there will be feelings, make no mistake. And even if you don't have an extended orgasm, you'll still have loads of pleasure!

The great thing about ecstatic pleasure is that it cannot coexist with shame, stress, fear, anger, bitterness, rage, or exhaustion. Practicing ecstasy is practicing living outside all of those things, learning how to release them. It's as good for you as vegetables, jogging, sleep, and breathing.