

relationship

# Peace Between the Sheets

discovering healing and  
transformation through intimacy

By Marnia Robinson

**H**ave you ever noticed that intimate relationships seem to be jinxed? You marry someone genuinely wonderful, whom you're certain you can love forever. Yet after a while a strange tension and distance has set in, and one or both of you are sure that you've chosen the wrong person or need 'space' in the relationship. You may stay married, and tolerate the status quo or you may divorce and begin the dance anew; the unwelcome pattern, however, remains.

The media assures us that we could correct the problem with better communication skills, regular counselling, or altered childhoods. In fact, we need to learn to make love differently. The source of our recurring malaise is an unconscious script lurking in the limbic system—a primitive part of every mammalian brain. Here we are neurochemically programmed to fall in love with intense passion, form temporary attachments, reproduce...and then fall out of love.

Why has evolution shaped us to make ourselves miserable? It hasn't—at least not directly. It has, however, molded us to increase the genetic variety of our offspring...by changing partners. Over the millennia of climactic changes and new strains of illness, this subtle program significantly increases the chances that genes survive their journey through countless generations. So successful is it (in evolution's eyes), that virtually no animals are monogamous. DNA tests reveal that even socially monogamous prairie voles and swans occasionally fool around when no one's looking.

The pattern of intense romantic attraction, brief affairs, and heartache from relationship turnover has also been observed in hunter-gatherer societies believed to be the best representatives of our ancestors, such as the Kung of the Kalahari and the Mehinaku of South America. Now that divorce is easier and carries less social stigma, our innate evolutionary program is rapidly reasserting itself worldwide.

## Beyond biology

Yet biology need not rule us, and it would be better for our individual wellbeing if it did not. Studies show that married people live longer with fewer addictions and lower rates of illness than their single counterparts. They tend to be better off financially. Stable families are also more beneficial for kids. (The pattern of churning relationships probably worked little hardship on children for the millions of years that we lived in tribes, but kids in today's insular families are quite vulnerable when parental bonds disintegrate.)

Material welfare isn't the only issue. Many of us have a yen to go beyond the script of our selfish genes and realise our full potential. It's an intrinsic desire for more in our lives than just propagation of the species—or even greater prosperity, health, and children's welfare. Call it a spiritual yearning...a fundamental knowing that sexual relationships offer untapped potential. As Taoist master Lao Tzu put it over 2300 years ago, we long for 'the opportunity for man and woman to lift each other into the realm of bliss and wholeness'.

Buried in the esoterica of diverse cultures (not just the ancient Chinese, but also the earliest Christians, and even some Western social pioneers of the 19th century) lies a way to outsmart this biological program—using sexual relationships. Now research on the neurochemistry of sex is pointing to the validity of this forgotten wisdom. Let's look at how the recommendations of the sex advisors of the past align with the recent neuroscience on the reward centre of the brain. Then we'll consider a formula that you can use to experiment with another way of making love.

## What, no jollies?

The key concept of the sexual sages is this: the many benefits of sex come from regular, affectionate intercourse, while the hidden risks stem from orgasm. Observing post-orgasmic fatigue and increased cravings following sex, the Taoists and Hindu/Tibetan tantra practitioners, logically concluded that semen loss was the culprit behind feelings of depletion/deprivation. Some therefore concluded that orgasm posed no problem for women, but that men had much to gain from controlled intercourse. Yet both traditions also retain whispers of the spiritual benefits to women from avoiding orgasm. And some Taoist lore (not taught by Lao Tzu) advises that a woman definitely loses energy through orgasm—which a clever lover can learn to 'steal' to strengthen himself at her expense.

But back to the semen-loss theory. However logical it seems, modern neuroscience reveals that it is flawed. Feelings of depletion, deprivation, irritability, and disharmony during the days after a passionate encounter are not due to semen loss. They stem from perfectly natural neurochemical changes in the brain, which accompany fertilisation-driven sex. The fallout is not confined to the 'roll over and snore' phenomenon. It can appear off and on for days, or even two weeks—and it can make women over-reactive, needy, and just plain hard to live with, too. Because the link between cause and effect is subtle and delayed, we don't make the connection.

Nor, strictly speaking, is orgasm the trigger. The trigger is a surge (or surges) of dopamine. This powerful neurochemical, which drives the reward centre of the brain, is the 'foot on the gas' of our sex drive. It also impels all addictions. In the case of sex, high dopamine equates with intense, hungry arousal. It compels us to engage in fertilisation behaviour whatever the risks. This is not to say that dopamine is bad. At moderate levels it gives us a healthy appetite for food and water and a zest for all aspects of life. Too much of it, however, is not a good thing.

Mission accomplished at orgasm, dopamine levels plummet. This is our body's way of bringing us back into balance after over-stimulation. If dopamine stayed too high all the time, it could make us crazy; high levels of dopamine are associated with schizophrenia, fetishes, aggression and anxiety. However, when dopamine drops too low—which it tends to do after it has been too high—it can cause obsessive-compulsive symptoms, thought disorders, and anxiety and depressive symptoms. At the very least it can radically alter our moods and perception of each other. This is why the sexual sages of the past recommended the goal of balance rather than our familiar, addictive cycle of intense thrills...and hangovers. They learned that if you don't push your dopamine too high, then it doesn't drop too low. It fluctuates at comfortable levels that help you meet your goals and keep you cheerful and enthusiastic about life.

After orgasm, a second neurochemical, called prolactin, suppresses dopamine, acting as a sexual satiation mechanism in both men and women. Interestingly, our bodies produce 400 times more prolactin after orgasm with intercourse than with masturbation. In other words, masturbation leaves us feeling less sated than intercourse does, perhaps because we haven't accomplished our fertilisation mission.

Prolactin is not the only 'foot on the brake' of our sex drive—urging us to turn our attention to hunting/gathering and childrearing. After sexual satiation, androgen receptors (for testosterone) in the same part of the brain may decrease for up to a week, adversely affecting libido. (Testosterone governs libido for both men and women.) High prolactin and less (effect from) testosterone can alter moods, too. Patients whose prolactin is known to be high suffer from weight gain, anxiety,

impotence, and depression...the very things couples typically complain about as their relationships settle into the heartache of emotional separation.

Now do you see why you care what your neurochemistry is doing during and after sex? Neurochemicals govern how you feel—and how you feel determines what you see. When you're surging with dopamine in a state of high arousal, your lover looks like 'Mr. or Ms. Right'. When your hangover neurochemistry kicks in, however, you tend to see 'Mr. Hyde' or 'Medusa'. Of course, you don't necessarily project your post-passion distress onto your lover. You may instead find

## Transforming your relationship

### How to apply the principles of healing sexuality in every day life

Intrigued by this wisdom from the past, my husband and I decided to experiment. The benefits have been subtle, but powerful. No more yeast or urinary tract infections for me; an end to a long-term addiction and chronic depression for him.

Here's what we did to make the transition:

- We slept together every night, and the first two weeks we did not make love. (To strengthen our resolve, we actually kept our underwear and even a t-shirt on.) Each evening we engaged in an affectionate exchange of loving attention. For example, we took turns giving each other foot massages, meditated together, and even danced together. This

two-week period allowed us both to return to equilibrium before moving on to intercourse.

- When we did add intercourse—the third week—we made love on a schedule, skipping at least one or two days in between encounters. Every night we also continued some form of generous, non-foreplay exchange. The non-intercourse nights turned out to be vital to sticking with this way of making love. They serve to remind us (and our primitive brains) what a non-goal-oriented exchange of affection feels like, and how satisfying that, too, can be.

- Now that we are 'with the program', we continue to make love on a schedule. We also make it a point to exchange lots of affection on non-intercourse nights.

- When we moved away from this routine, we noticed that



Photograph by Donatella Parrisini-Lowry

biology tended to take over, heating us up and leaving us frustrated. In short, we were once again producing too much dopamine—and too little oxytocin to soothe the attendant cravings. Dopamine is the 'gambling' neurochemical, so spontaneous sex tends to increase levels of dopamine. By contrast, knowing when you'll make love is like knowing when you'll have a good meal; it makes it easier to wait with delicious anticipation, but without frustration—or the sense that you must grab at every opportunity.

- Perhaps the most important contribution to our consistency was a strong motivation to change. We were thoroughly tired of the carousel of relationship highs and lows and longed for harmonious intimacy.

your boss impossible or snap at your kids.

Usually, however, our romances follow an addictive cycle, which leads to a phenomenon observed in various mammals and both sexes. Scientists call it 'the Coolidge Effect'. It is the tendency of mates to find a novel partner more sexually interesting than one with which they have experienced sexual satiation.

This evolutionary program, of course, increases the genetic variety of our offspring.

In humans, the Coolidge Effect often looks like this: for a while, we use each other to get a reliable 'fix' of dopamine whenever we feel the effects of a sexual hangover. The honeymoon ends, however, on the day we begin to imagine that our mate is the source of our uneasiness. Psychologists call this tendency

to see others through the light of our own state of mind 'projection'.

To summarise, levels of dopamine (and other neurochemicals) govern attraction—and repulsion. When you choose fertilisation-driven sex, you take a neurochemical roller-coaster ride. None of this happens in the logical part of your brain. The subtle, emotional brain automatically alters your perception.

This evolutionary program is virtually the same in all mammals. Attraction/pursuit (dopamine) leads to fertilisation. Post-orgasmic neurochemicals (drop in dopamine and testosterone) lead to desire for separation. Think of a big holiday dinner. Beforehand you are hungry with anticipation; afterward you never want to see another piece of pie.

This is how biology makes you fall in...and out...of love. Neurochemistry determines your desire for monogamy, and by choosing balance and lots of affection you can strengthen and maintain your attraction for each other. In addition to mutual abstinence from orgasm, generous touch (as opposed to hungry, grabby touch) aids in achieving equilibrium because it increases the production of another important neurochemical: oxytocin.

Dubbed the 'cuddle hormone', oxytocin protects and heals the body and soul. Originally known to stimulate labour and milk ejection, it can also induce anti-stress-like effects such as reduction of blood pressure and cortisol (stress hormone) levels. This, in turn, increases immunity to disease. Oxytocin increases pain thresholds, calms, and stimulates various types of positive social interaction—including deep emotional bonds. In addition, it promotes growth and healing. When injected into rodents addicted to drugs of abuse, oxytocin also eases addictions and withdrawal symptoms. Repeated exposure to oxytocin causes long-lasting beneficial effects.

Incidentally, when dopamine drops too low (after a passion bout), so does oxytocin—and lovers lose their desire for closeness. By contrast, when dopamine stays at ideal levels, it helps maintain oxytocin levels as well.

### Sexologists of the past

Earlier observers grasped the weak point in our design as well as the potential gains from overcoming it with gentle, affectionate sex. For example, Lao Tzu taught in the *Hua Hu Ching* that ordinary sexual intercourse is a 'great backward leap' because lovers place all their emphasis upon the sexual organs. Whatever physical energy they accumulate is summarily discharged (instead of benefiting them). He also noted that regular sex 'dissipates and disorders the subtle energies'—foreshadowing by 2300 years the neurochemical findings outlined above.

The solution? Make leisurely love without striving for orgasm. The result of this practice, he states, is 'improved health, harmonised emotions, the cessation of cravings and impulses, and, at the highest level, the transcendent integration of the entire energy body'. While my husband and I can't yet claim transcendence, we have experienced all of the other benefits he lists.

John Humphrey Noyes, an American social pioneer of the mid-19th century, reached the same conclusions independently of Lao Tzu. In *Male Continence* he wrote that if ordinary sexual intercourse 'begins in spirit it soon ends in flesh and feelings of exhaustion'. This accounts for the process of 'cooling off' which takes place between lovers after marriage and often ends in indifference and disgust.

In contrast with all this, lovers who use their sexual

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## Healing with sexual relationships

Peace  
Between  
the  
Sheets

exploring the striking parallels between current neuroscience and ancient sacred sex texts

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organs simply as the servants of their spiritual natures, abstaining from the propagative act except when procreation is intended, may enjoy the highest bliss of sexual fellowship for any length of time, without satiety or exhaustion; and thus married life may become permanently sweeter than courtship or even the honeymoon.

Alice Bunker Stockham, MD (Karezza: *Ethics of Marriage*, 1902) and J. William Lloyd (*The Karezza Method*, 1931) expanded on Noyes' observations, clarifying that women, too, benefit by avoiding orgasm. Says Lloyd, 'After her orgasm the woman is less magnetic, enthused and delightful as a partner...and quite often soon becomes indifferent, depressed or irritable.'

Ancient texts even record that Jesus taught this wisdom—and its hidden spiritual potential. For example, The Gospel of Philip, one of the Gnostic gospels discovered in Upper Egypt about 60 years ago, says:

*In this world the union is man and woman, the place of the power and the weakness.*

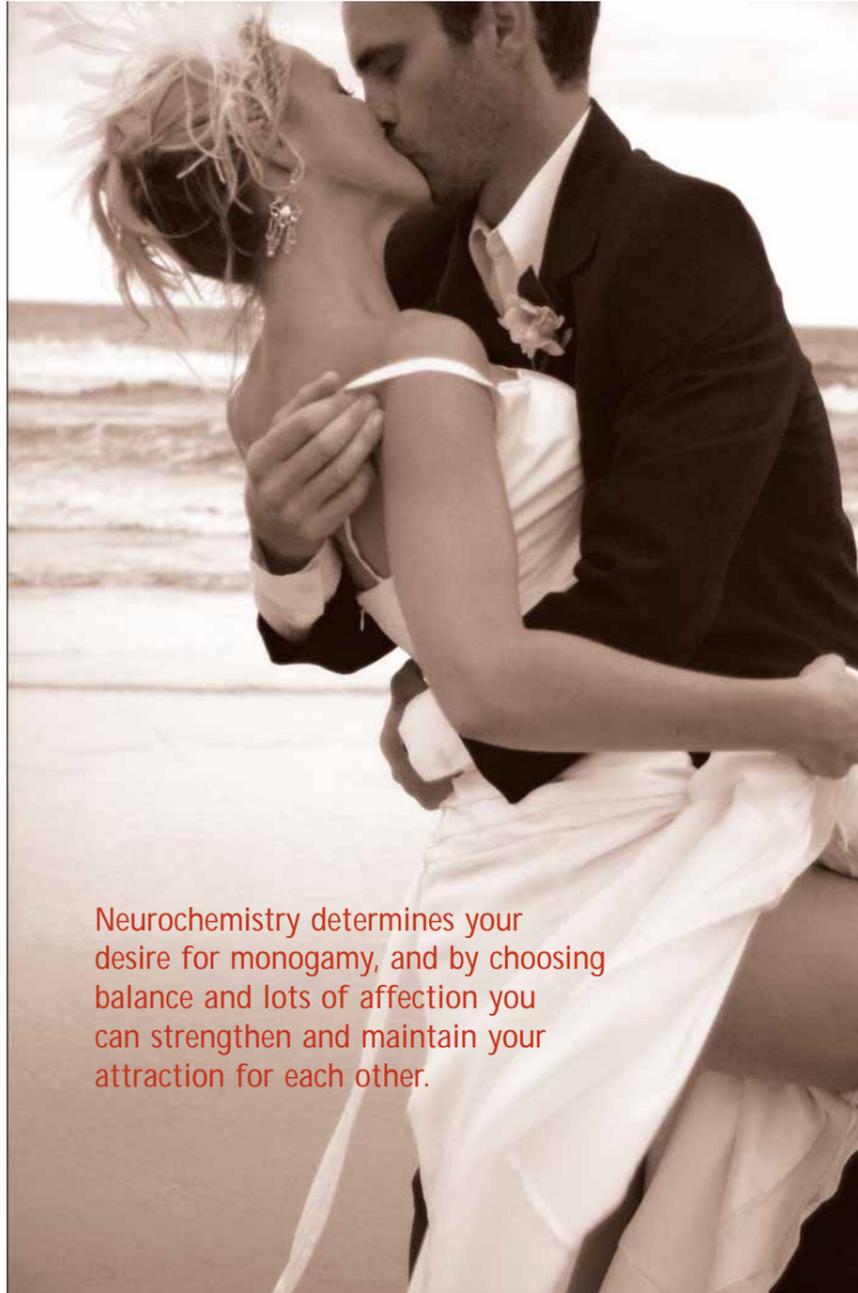
*All will be clothed in light when they enter into the mystery of the sacred embrace. ... [The Sacrament of the Bridal Chamber], the embrace that incarnates the hidden union...is not only a reality of the flesh, for there is silence in this embrace. It does not arise from impulse or desire; it is an act of will.*

## Try something old

Today's sex therapists help lovers have ordinary sex, with an emphasis on foreplay and orgasm. Their training ensures that they disregard, or modify, the deep-rooted wisdom outlined above to conform to norms they have defined. However, the rapid deterioration of intimate relationships suggests that we might be wise to look beyond what feels good (briefly) to our brain's reward centre, and consider its longer-term effect on our unions.

The reward centre of the brain evolved many millions of years ago. It was designed to drive our ancestors to grab high calorie foods, procreation opportunities, additional mates, and short-term gains in environments where such options were often scarce. This primitive centre of the brain is not well equipped for the constant enticement of dopamine-exciting temptations of modern life: abundant fast food, pornography, lots of potential mates, credit cards, and so forth. Just as we must choose our diets with an eye to balance despite the ready availability of our favourite desserts, we benefit from choosing balance in our love lives.

Otherwise, we become unwitting puppets of the powerful



Neurochemistry determines your desire for monogamy, and by choosing balance and lots of affection you can strengthen and maintain your attraction for each other.

Photograph by Lisa la Violette Engeman

evolutionary program of the primitive brain. Its loud signals mislead us. Our wellbeing does not lie in more thrills and partners. This is because the sexual cycle is not simply foreplay and orgasm. The underlying program actually drives us towards foreplay, reckless procreation, neurochemical hangover, emotional separation—and frequently a determination to seek 'happiness' in the form of a new neurochemical joyride (novel partner).

Fortunately, as others have discovered through the ages, we can learn to sustain monogamy from within. In the words of J. William Lloyd, tender lovemaking without orgasm, 'makes marriage more delicious than courtship, more romantic than wooing, and maintains an endless, satisfying honeymoon'. ☺

A former corporate lawyer, **Marnia Robinson** wrote *Peace Between the Sheets: Healing with Sexual Relationships*, with the collaboration of her husband Gary, a human sciences teacher. Sign up for their free monthly newsletter at [www.reuniting.info](http://www.reuniting.info)

# healthandwellbeing

## Mumps

We have been looking at common childhood illnesses over the last three issues, covering chicken pox, measles and whooping cough. These illnesses we see frequently in the clinic at Mullumbimby Herbals and have had a lot of experience guiding parents through them. Two weeks ago I had been thinking that I had not seen any mumps for a long time and then, hey presto, in walks a mother asking for advice on mumps! So let's refresh on mumps.

Mumps is a paramyxovirus, related to the flu virus. It helps us to know it is viral so we can pull out all our great antiviral herbs and immune stimulators. The upside of contracting mumps is that it usually gives immunity for life.

This illness is spread by droplet infection, coughing and sneezing. The onset of the illness is usually a fever of up to 39 degrees C, a headache, loss of appetite, and swelling and pain of the parotid glands which are at the back of the cheeks. These glands produce saliva for the mouth, therefore it can be quite painful for the patient to eat or talk. Mumps can also affect other glands. In adolescent and adult men one or both of the testicles may become inflamed and swollen. Abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting may be experienced. Sterility is a rare complication of this inflammation of the testes. The ovaries (in rare cases) can be affected in women and the pancreas may also be involved.

Mumps is contagious from about two days before symptoms begin to around six days after symptoms. Sometimes people can have no symptoms yet still pass on the disease.

It can take from 12 to 25 days from the day of contact until the day of symptoms appearing (this is known as incubation) and the illness usually lasts for 10 to 12 days.

Watch out for a very stiff neck, convulsions and extreme drowsiness, nausea, vomiting and severe headache. These symptoms are rare yet may indicate inflammation of the brain or its membranes. Consult your health practitioner if these are noticed.

## So what can we do for the mumps?

To start with, we now know it is viral so forget antibiotics. We have a number of great antiviral herbs; echinacea, cats claw, hypericum, elderflower, reishi mushroom and the powerful andrographis all work as anti virals and to stimulate immune function. Using lymphatic herbs for mumps is helpful to bring down swelling; poke root, clivers, red clover, blue flag and baptisia are all good for this.

If there is high fever try our YEP tea, which is a combination of yarrow, elderflower and peppermint and can reduce fever while tasting yummy (add a little honey or a squeeze of lemon).

Externally you can apply a potato poultice to the swollen areas (simply grate raw potato into a mush and apply for an hour or so), or poke root cream is easy to rub on and is also quite effective.

Diet should be kept light and nourishing. Keep meals small and well cut up, as chewing may be difficult with mumps. Adzuki beans reduce swelling and clear heat; mung beans cool and detoxify the body, so cook up these yummy beans and serve them mashed up with a little sea salt and herbs (of course they need to be soaked first). Watercress is another herb we can use as a food to reduce glandular swelling; chop into beans or serve on the side. Broth or a light vegetable soup can be easy to eat and nourishing. Fresh fruit juices and veggie juices such as carrot, celery and cucumber with a dash of apple to sweeten are also great. Lots of fresh water, of course, is good.

Herbal teas sipped warm or cool taste yummy and help in moving on the disease. Try lemon myrtle, for calming the spirit, rosehips for vitamin C, nettle to cool the body and increase iron to fight illness, red clover to clear the lymph and blood, and mullein to sooth a cough. Don't forget Mrs. Rabbit's favourite, chamomile tea, for that sore tummy!!

With Jacinta and Elvian at Mullumbimby Herbals

## Homoeopathic remedies

As we have mentioned before, choosing a homoeopathic remedy depends on finding the remedy which most closely matches the symptoms of the patient. The potency depends on the closeness of the match and the strength of the illness. The frequency of the dose is dependent on the response.

Parotidinum is a remedy made from mumps itself. We call this a nosode. This remedy can be given before the disease is contracted, when you hear it is in the area, as a protection. It won't prevent the disease, but can aid the immune system to meet the illness better.

Pilocarpine can be used for all general mumps symptoms.

Merc sol is a remedy indicated particularly when the breath is very smelly, with a heavily coated tongue and there is a lot of sweating and exhaustion.

Belladonna is for high fever, and it is also good for swollen glands and red, flushed appearance; there may also be great thirst and sensitivity to light.

Phytolacca can be used when pains shoot into the ear and when swallowing is painful, also for the swelling of any of the glands.

Pulsatilla is always a handy remedy to have in all the childhood illnesses. If the child is teary, clingy and changeable in moods, consider pulsatilla.

Other remedies may be indicated in treating your child's individual case, so talk to a practitioner and learn with them so you can make choices as a wise, informed and empowered parent.

Making a comfortable, beautiful space for your child to convalesce in will nurture the spirit. They may not be so ill that they want to stay in bed, so having coloured pencils, paints and paper, jigsaws and fun books to read is healthier than too much television.

Nearly every childhood illness signifies a positive change in the child's mindbody or emotional growth. Watch out for the changes, subtle or otherwise, and be present for them. It is all so precious, so don't miss a thing especially the opportunity to nurture them through these difficult yet important times.