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The *come as you are* Workbook

a practical guide to the science of sex

A companion to the *New York Times* bestseller *Come As You Are*

SCRIBE

TWO

the dual control model

You might think sexual response happens between your legs, but it turns out where the action really happens is between your ears—and it's not as simple as most of us have been led to believe.

The mechanism in your brain that governs sexual response has *two* main parts. You can think of it like driving a car. One part is a sexual gas pedal or accelerator that notices all the sex-related stimuli—everything you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, think, feel, or believe—and sends the "turn-on" signal. It's functioning at a low level all the time. Even now, as you're reading this, a little bit of "turn-on" signal is being sent.

The other part is the sexual brakes, which notice all the good reasons not to be turned on right now—everything you see, hear, smell, touch, taste, think, feel, or believe that your brain interprets as a potential threat—and send the "turnoff" signal. The brakes, too, function at a low level all the time. Anything happening around you right now that makes it an inappropriate time to be aroused—the people you may be with, the location you're in, the stress you may be experiencing, even how you feel about your body and your sexuality—can keep the brakes on.

So the process of becoming aroused is the dual process of turning on all the ons and turning off all the offs. Which means:

1. It's 100 percent normal to experience *ambivalence* around sex. For example, you might like the way your partner is kissing your neck, but not like that it's happening in the middle of a party. Or you might not love the way they're kissing your neck but really enjoy that it's happening in public.
2. Sometimes one stimulus can both hit the brake and activate the accelerator at the same time, particularly if you've learned that sexuality is itself a threat. If you tried to drive a car with one foot on the accelerator and one foot on the brake, how would that go? You

might eventually get where you want to go, but it would take longer, use more fuel, and probably be pretty frustrating.

3. When a person struggles with sexual arousal, desire, or orgasm, the difficulty might be too little stimulation to the accelerator, or it might be too much stimulation to the brake—and it's usually *too much stimulation to the brake*.

To maximize your sexual wellbeing, notice what activates the accelerator and what hits the brakes, so you can begin shaping your life to turn on the ons and (especially) turn off the offs. In this chapter you'll find several exercises that will help you get to know your sexual brain, both the ways it can be turned on and the ways it can be turned off.

Just as everyone's genitals are made of the same parts, organized in a unique way, everyone has both brakes and an accelerator, but each of us has *different sensitivities* of brakes and accelerator.

Some people are high on both brakes and accelerator, others are low on both brakes and accelerator, some have high brakes but low accelerator, and some have high accelerator but low brakes. And lots of us are medium on both.

You can complete the following questionnaire to get a sense of how sensitive your own brakes and accelerator are. It's adapted and abbreviated from a formal survey used to assess brakes and accelerator in the research, but don't mistake this for actual science. It's intended to guide you in your understanding of how your internal sexual response mechanism may influence your response to sexual stimulation, but it is just an approximation.

exercise one

sexual temperament questionnaire

(adapted and abbreviated from the Sexual Excitation/Sexual Inhibition Inventory for Women and Men [SESII-W/M])

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

If I think that I am being used sexually it completely turns me off.

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.

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 very sexually attracted to someone, I don’t need to be in a relationship with that person 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

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) ____

score your sexual temperament questionnaire

Inhibitors

Low brakes (0–6)

You're not so sensitive to all the reasons not to be sexually aroused. You don't tend to worry about your own sexual functioning, and body image issues don't interfere too much with your sexuality. When you're sexually engaged, your attention is not very distractible and you wouldn't be inclined to describe yourself as "sexually shy." Most circumstances can be sexual for you. You may find that your main challenge around sexual functioning is holding yourself back. Staying aware of potential consequences can help with this.

Medium brakes (7–13)

You're right in the middle, along with more than half the women I've asked. This means that whether or not your sexual brakes engage will be largely dependent on context. Risky or novel situations, such as a new partner, might increase your concerns about your own sexual functioning, shyness, or your distractibility from sex. Contexts that easily arouse you are likely to be low risk and more familiar, and anytime your stress levels—including anxiety, overwhelm, exhaustion, depression—escalate, your brakes will reduce your interest in and response to sexual signals.

High brakes (14–20)

You're pretty sensitive to all the reasons not to be sexually aroused. You need a setting of trust and relaxation in order to be aroused, and it's best if you don't feel rushed or pressured in any way. You might be easily distracted from sex. High brakes, regardless of accelerator, is the most strongly correlated factor with sexual problems, so if this is you, pay close attention to the "sexy contexts" worksheets in the chapters that follow.

Exciters

Low accelerator (0–6)

You're not so sensitive to sexually relevant stimuli and need to make a more deliberate effort to tune your attention to that wavelength. Novel situations are less likely to be sexy to you than familiar ones. You're a person whose sexual functioning will benefit from adding a greater intensity of stimulation (like a vibrator) and daily practice of paying attention to sensations. Lower accelerator is also associated with asexuality, so if you're very low accelerator, you might resonate with some aspects of the asexual identity.

Medium accelerator (7–13)

You're right in the middle, so whether or not you're sensitive to sexual stimuli probably depends on the context. In situations of high romance or eroticism, you tune in readily to sexual stimuli; and in situations of low romance or eroticism, it may be pretty challenging to move your attention to sexual things. Seventy percent of the women I've asked fall into this range.

High accelerator (14–20)

You're pretty sensitive to sexually relevant stimuli, maybe even things humans aren't generally very sensitive to, like smell and taste. A fairly wide range of contexts can be sexual for you, and novelty may be really exciting. You may be a person who likes having sex as a way to destress—higher accelerator is correlated with greater risk for sexual compulsivity, so you may benefit from paying attention to the ways you manage stress. Your sexual functioning may benefit by making sure you create lots of time and space for your partner; because you're sensitive, you can derive intense satisfaction from your partner's pleasure, so you'll both benefit! About 16 percent of the women I've asked fall into this group.

what “medium” means

Did you score right in the middle on both? More than half of people do. Being very high or very low on these traits is comparatively rare, so for the majority of people, the value of the dual control model lies not in the discovery that, “Wow, my brain is extra sensitive/not sensitive to this kind of stimulation, so I need to pay attention to that!” The value instead lies in the insight that the brakes and the accelerator are *two separate systems.* Some things in the world activate your accelerator, which makes you eager. Other things hit your brakes and slow down your arousal process. Some things hit both at once. Your partner may touch you in a way you really enjoy, but at a time when it’s not appropriate for you to be aroused (e.g., in public or when there’s risk of unwanted pregnancy).

Every score is “normal.” The key is to understand that your brain reacts with both “turning on the ons” and “turning off the offs.” Notice what hits your brakes or activates your accelerator, and you can begin to recalibrate your life to suit your brain.

exercise two

what turns on the ons, what turns off the offs?

Now that you've considered the sensitivities of your brakes and accelerator, let's consider what kinds of stimulation might hit your brakes or activate your accelerator.

Some common things that activate the accelerator: partner characteristics, feeling "wanted" by your partner, feeling connected to your partner, thinking about sex, reading erotica or looking at porn or otherwise consuming sexually explicit media, being touched just the "right" way, being in a setting you associate with sex (e.g., on vacation at a place where you previously had a positive sexual experience).

Some common things that hit the brake: stress, body image, shame, performance anxiety, fear of being interrupted or caught, relationship characteristics (especially trust), a history of sexual trauma, parenting (e.g., constantly being touched by your children, thus associating touch with parenting mode rather than sexy mode), worries about reputation, and feeling expected or obliged to have sex.

Think of a few sexual experiences you've had, whether solo or partnered, and write down what aspects of these experiences activated the accelerator, making it easy to get aroused. And think about times when you've struggled with arousal or desire, and write down what aspects of those experiences hit the brake.

Things that activate the accelerator

Things that hit the brakes

from the q & a vault

Q: What kind of questions can I ask to learn with my wife what hits her brakes and what hits mine?

A: The short answer to communication-related questions like this is, just talk about it. Just ask, “What hits your brakes?” The reality, though, is that you may feel like you don’t know what words to use or like you should already know the answer or you fear the answer you’ll get, or you’re worried your partner will judge you for even bringing it up or feel pressured to do something they don’t want to do. There are lots of reasons people don’t “just talk about it.”

Here are a couple of tips to make it easier:

First, ask your partner if now might be a good time to talk about what makes sex good or great between you. If they say no, ask to set up a time when you can talk together, no pressure or expectations, just talk, about what makes sex good or great between you.

Many people find it easiest to begin with the positive stuff. Ask your partner, “When we’ve had great sex, what was going on in our lives, in our relationship, in that sexual encounter?” People also often find it easier to communicate clearly when they start with a concrete, specific example, rather than trying to talk in general terms.

If you’re the one initiating the conversation, be sure to let your partner tell you about what hits their brakes before you talk about what hits yours. If you launch into, “You know what really doesn’t work for me . . .” it can too easily feel like a laundry list of complaints, which will just shut the person down or escalate the conversation into an argument. Instead, ask, “What are some things that get in the way of great sex?”

And finally, never end a conversation about sex without expressing gratitude that you have the kind of relationship where you can talk about these things without judgment or shame or fear. Your sex life together is something you share, like a kid or a mortgage or the chores. It’s so easy not to talk about sex, to let your erotic connection dissolve into entropy, so

make sure you let your partner know how glad you are they’re willing to spend time paying attention to what it takes to make your sexual connection good.

exercise three

how did you learn?

How do we learn what counts as a “sex-related stimulus”? Are we born being turned on by red high heels or black lace bras? Of course not; these things are learned. Our early experiences with sexual response shape how our body responds to the world.

And that experience is more complex than just “I saw some porn and my body responded.” It’s more like a toddler learning to walk. When a toddler falls down, her first reaction is to look up at the faces of the adults around her, as though to say, “Something happened! How should I feel about it?” When the adults are calm and chirp, “You fell down. You’re okay!” the toddler gets back up and keeps going. But if the adults panic and run over, exclaiming, “Be careful, you could get hurt!” the toddler panics, too, and bursts into tears.

In the same way, you learn what’s “sex-related” not just because your genitals respond to something, but because you noticed your *environment*, especially the other people there with you in the situation.

So in this exercise, you’ll note as many experiences of sexual learning as you can recall, beginning with your earliest memories. This can include:

- Formal education in a classroom setting.
- Explicit sexual messages you received elsewhere.
- Porn and other sexually explicit media.
- Implicit sexual messages, such as messages about what clothes were appropriate.
- Solo sexual experiences.
- Sexual experiences with others.

You might want to organize this history of sexual learning in terms of what trained your accelerator and what trained your brake, or you might find that too many of your experiences were ambivalent, teaching both at the same time. You may prefer to make a straightforward list or chronology.

Take your time with this, and know that you can come back as you remember more experiences. This history will form the beginning of your "sexual mental model," and we'll come back to it in more detail in later chapters. Include specific incidents, conversations, and feelings you remember experiencing as these moments happened. For example, if a family member gave you "the talk," include how you felt at the time, how you imagine they felt, how you feel now as you remember it, and how that conversation affected you later.

Birth through childhood—your earliest memories of sex. Were you curious about sex? What sexual play did you engage in as a child? How did that feel for you? Were the other people involved your peers (other children) or not? How did the adults around you respond, if they knew about it?

Puberty through adolescence—your development toward sexual adulthood. When did you first see porn, and how did you feel about it? What kinds of porn have you been accidentally exposed to, and what have you sought? Did you first masturbate during this stage? Where? And how? How did you feel about it? If you were ever "caught," how did that experience feel?

Adulthood through the present—the sexual person you are and the person you're "supposed" to be. What have been some defining moments in your development as a sexual adult? When has it been a source of joy and pleasure in your life? Have you ever felt out of control in your sexuality? This might be compulsive masturbation, persistent arousal, or seeking partners you didn't really want or like but simply felt compelled, from an internal discomfort, to seek out sex. Or it might be an experience where someone else took away your control over your body or you were coerced into things you didn't want or like.

The exercises from this chapter will inform many of the exercises in the coming chapters, so feel free to come back and add to or change them as you learn more about your sexuality.

one important thing

Take a moment to look back at the exercises in this chapter. Write down one important thing you learned, whether it's about sex in general or about your

sexuality in particular: