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JOYFUL MUSINGS

By Joy Birnbach Dunstan, MA, LPC, MAC

The Chemistry of Love

Remember that exhilarating, dreamy, floating-in-air feeling of a new love? You've just met Mr. or Miss Perfect, and you can't think about anything else. A simple kiss sends a tingle through your whole body; making love is magical. Then, as often happens, months and years go by, and one or maybe both of you, would just as soon watch a Seinfeld re-run as wrestle naked between the sheets.

What happens that changes a lusty new romance into an occasional half-hearted marital duty? Contrary to fanciful notions perfect love, recent research is uncovering evidence that the euphoria of romantic love is truly an altered state of consciousness brought on by the action of phenylethylamine (PEA), a naturally occurring, amphetamine-like neurotransmitter. When we come into contact with someone who highly attracts us, our brains become saturated with PEA and several other excitatory neurotransmitters, including dopamine. While there is no question that passion is influenced by a long list of other factors, such as relationship conflicts, depression, stress, past relationships, and physical status, these chemicals create a powerful love cocktail that feeds a new relationship.

It is in this frenzy of infatuation that we see the "love is blind" thinking so typical of the newly smitten. Have you ever reminded a lovestruck friend to consider the fact that the new partner is a practicing alcoholic, has lost three jobs in a row, and has been divorced just two months only to be told, "No problem, we can work that out." Studies show that while infatuated individuals have no trouble identifying shortcomings in their lovers, they often tend to downplay the most serious liabilities as trivial and even charming.

Besides with this delusional thinking, the potent combination of PEA and dopamine stimulates libido and mobilizes people to actively pursue the pleasure of lovemaking. With our erotic thermostat set way high, we can't get enough of our partner. It must be true love.

But like any drug-induced state, over time we develop a tolerance to its effects. Numerous studies have shown that this passionate bliss burns out after about 18 to 36 months. Levels of PEA and related substances begin to drop and couples either move on to renew the excitement elsewhere or must learn to function without the adrenaline-like boost.

Along with these changing PEA levels, sexual desire in individuals is strongly affected by a second widely varying chemical, testosterone. Both men *and* women produce testosterone, although men produce it in much higher quantity. All individuals have a natural baseline level of testosterone, with the so-called "high-T" individuals tending to be significantly more sexually interested and responsive than the "low-Ts." When a low-T partner is coupled with a high-T partner, and they are faced with this inevitable drop in PEA levels, a previously hidden desire discrepancy can become very apparent. The high-T partner may feel disappointed or betrayed by the developing lack of interest in their mate. The low-T partner, meanwhile, is likely to feel bewildered by the loss of their previously supercharged libido as well as pressured by what now seems like an insensitive, pushy partner. Mutual anger, disappointment, and sadness can infuse what was a loving and passionate relationship and further reduce desire with arguments, negativity, and power struggles.

So what does all this basic chemistry really mean in terms of maintaining harmonious loving relationships? We can't do much to change our innate body chemistry, but we can become aware that we are physically different from one another and learn to honor our differences instead of fight them. Recognizing that much of our sexual passion is rooted in our natural body rhythms allows us to let go of the guilt, shame, and blame that might otherwise occur. If the old thrill is gone, or is different for each of you, neither of you have failed or deceived the other. Desire discrepancies don't necessarily indicate a difference in depth of love and commitment; it may be just a reflection of our basic biological makeup. When the blame-shame game is ended, there is an opportunity to focus on learning ways to satisfy the needs of both partners without ignoring their basic differences. The difference in desire is no longer a personal assault, and hope is renewed for a loving partnership.

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