

# Facing the Complexities of Women's Sexual Desire

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# Preface

This book represents a broad-based approach to a narrow but complex issue. The issue causes distress for many and has been instrumental in family disruption and divorce. Women's sexual desire—whether it is too little or too much—has become an issue of growing concern and vague promises for solution. In the meantime, the women are looking for answers, consulting professionals in the field of human sexuality, physicians or therapists, media advice and self-help books.

The material discussed in this book is not part of any structured research. The women encountered in the pages of this book have not been selected on a random basis. Some have been clients, some are volunteers from the general population and another group is made up of undergraduate college students. The college students came from a varied ethnic and cultural background while the clients mainly were of white and African American background. The volunteers were predominantly from a white middle-class population. There is no claim that the women are representative of all women in the general population.

Some of the stories (Wilma & Nellie, chapter 2; Cindy & Jenny, chapter 3; Eileen, chapter 4; Karen, Jane & Nancy, chapter 5; Jeff & Libby, chapter 6; Mary, chapter 7; Robert, chapter 9) are based on materials discussed in "Taking Control of Your Life" or "Single Again" personal growth groups that were offered to the general public. Others (Louise & Jenny, chapter 3; Marian & Denise, chapter 6) have been part of class discussions in psychology and human sexuality courses. Their names have been changed and their circumstances disguised for reasons of confidentiality.

# Acknowledgements

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# List of Tables

Table 9.1	Anxiety-Relief-Anxiety Cycle	159
Table 10.1	Things That Would Make Me Interested In Having Sex	184

# Contents

Preface	v
Acknowledgements	vii
List of Tables	ix
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PART I: Background and Explanations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 1:</b> Influences on Women's Sexual Experiences	5
<b>Chapter 2:</b> Desire-Phase Problems and the Search for Explanations	24
<b>Chapter 3:</b> Bio-Ethological and Social-Psychological Explanations	42
<b>PART II: The Women in Context</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Chapter 4:</b> Searching for Sexual Identity	65
<b>Chapter 5:</b> Symptom Manifestation Within Relationships	83
<b>Chapter 6:</b> Women's Relationships to Power	101
<b>Chapter 7:</b> Intra-Personal Considerations Relevant to Sex Therapy	120
<b>PART III: Toward Resolution</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Chapter 8:</b> Developments in Sexology and Sex Therapy	139
<b>Chapter 9:</b> Cognitive Behavioral Factors Relevant to Treatment	155
<b>Chapter 10:</b> A Practical Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment Approach	168
<b>Chapter 11:</b> Learning From the Past—Thoughts for the Future	185
<b>Appendix (A, B, C)</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Author Index</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>Subject Index</b>	<b>222</b>

# Introduction

This book is written from the perspective of a sex therapist having listened to many of the complaints and concerns women have in relationship to sex. But only a segment of sexual difficulties are covered here, those difficulties that are examples of concerns in the desire phase of the sexual response cycle. These are issues of sexual aversion, hyperactive sexual desire, and hypoactive sexual desire.

The content of the book is organized into three main parts: Part I: Background and Explanations gives an overview of constraining influences on women's sexual experiences including historical-cultural constraints, pharmacological agents affecting women's sexuality, and physical-biological factors, such as the role of hormones, pregnancy and aspects of aging. A description of the three problem areas in the desire phase of the sexual response cycle follows. A summary of the various multidisciplinary exploratory efforts in search of explanations and answers to the complaints with focus on the promises and effectiveness of pharmaceutical as well as non-pharmaceutical approaches concludes Part I.

Part II has as its main focus the woman herself in the context of various aspects of life, beginning with women's search for personal and sexual identity, followed by sexual difficulties manifested in relationships, women's position in the dynamics of power and sexual desire, and intra-personal considerations and personality characteristics relevant to individual women's sexuality and the expression thereof.

Part III is a view towards resolution. Beginning with a brief historical account, early approaches in sex therapy that have laid the foundation for today's knowledge and work are discussed along with exploration of current therapies. The "Anxiety-Relief-Anxiety Cycle" illustrates the intimate connection between women's thoughts, feelings and consequent behaviors. The following chapter (10) focuses on a particular practical cognitive-behavioral treatment model. Various application modalities of the model, such as individual, conjoint, group, or single-sided relationship therapy sessions, are demonstrated. Finally, lessons from the past and thoughts for the future conclude the content of the book.

All through the book case histories and examples are used to highlight concepts as well as theoretical and practical concerns. The circumstances of the particular individuals have been disguised to protect their anonymity. Some



of their stories have been combined to form composite characters. The women with their stories reflect a wide range of concerns common to many other women. The process of in-depth exploration of the contributing factors and search for increased pleasure and desire is a comprehensive one, involving various steps, which are described in detail.

Although the book is intended for use by professionals, such as sex therapists, sex educators, social worker-therapists, health psychologists, clinical psychologists, and advanced students in the mental health and human sexuality fields, the use of professional jargon has been avoided to make it accessible to readers not trained in psychology or counseling without watering down theoretical or professional concepts.

Therapists reading this book may feel they are recognizing some of their own clients in these pages and some female readers may derive comfort when they encounter other women struggling with concerns similar to their own.