

# MYSTERIES OF THE BIG 'O'

**B**ecause orgasms are so personal, few women talk about them — and we really don't have the language to describe them very well.

When I ask women if they've had an orgasm, many aren't sure. Some are brief and fleeting, like the visit of a butterfly. Others are more like a sneeze or a hiccup with a slight tension release.

Those are far cries from the cataclysmic, earth-moving portrayal faked by Meg Ryan in "When Harry Met Sally." But those are the mind-blowing orgasms that women feel they should be having most (if not all) the time — a transcendent out-of-body experience that literally shakes their world. Instead of feeling secure and satisfied after sex, many women are left feeling confused and ripped off — asking, "Is that all there is?"

Rachel, 41-year-old mother of four, discussed her sexual disappointments with me in one of our sessions. "I've read about all these women who have multiple orgasms, but I only have one," she complained, "And it's not the 'right' kind. Is there something I can do?" The fatigue in her voice was noticeable.

"What kind of orgasm would be the right kind?" I asked.

"The kind you have without any touching ... you know ... just with intercourse," she said sincerely.

Rachel is one of those multi-tasking dynamos who is one PTA meeting away from total burnout. To stay in good shape she wakes up at 6 a.m.

## To Ask A Question ...

Our intimate relationships and sexual health are intensely personal concerns that many people find difficult to discuss. Please think of this as a safe place to have those concerns addressed.

Write to me in confidence at:

**AskDrScantling@aol.com.**

Feel free to ask me whatever is on your mind regarding sexual wellness, health, intimacy and relationship — mind, body or spirit. The large volume of e-mail I receive makes answering individual letters impossible, but your questions will help me identify the subjects most important to you and other NE Magazine readers. Some readers' letters will be chosen for publication and reply in the column. They will be edited to eliminate names and other personal identifying information.



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Monday through Friday for her 3-mile run, drops the two youngest at the sitter and the older two at school and goes to work as a court stenographer. At the end of the day, she rounds up all the kids, picks up something for dinner (or maybe grabs takeout), helps the kids with their homework, does the dishes, cleans up, manages the kids' bedtime routines and answers her e-mail. Her husband works second shift, so they "squeeze in" sex when he gets home about 11 p.m. On weekends she cleans the house, coaches softball and volunteers for the church choir — and now she wants to be multi-orgasmic? In my opinion, the fact that she made time to think about orgasms with this kind of breakneck schedule is award-worthy.

So why do women give themselves such a tough time? We're great at worrying. Women worry about how long it will take them to orgasm and whether he'll last long enough until they do. They also worry that they won't climax at all — no matter how long he lasts — because they're not in the right frame of mind. Women worry about not wanting sex enough or fearing rejection by wanting it at the wrong times. They worry about taking too long to warm up — or too long to cool down. They worry about not being able to fall asleep without an orgasm or being tired the next morning. They worry that their partner will get bored during oral sex and worry about how they smell, look and taste. Women worry they're not pleasing their partner or that he's thinking about someone else (real or imaginary) when they're making love. They worry that they should want sex whenever their partner does — even if they're tired, pre-menstrual, pregnant or menopausal.

They worry about being too dry, too wet, too loose, too tight, too ticklish and too fat. It might be easier to list what women don't worry about. All in all, women, just like men, worry a lot about not measuring up to the largely fictionalized sexual standards all around them. By the way, the same pressures and concerns hold true for same-sex

lesbian and gay couples.

Like Rachel, there are still many women who buy into the old Freudian malarkey that asserts the superiority of vaginal "hands off" orgasms (through penetration alone) over the "inferior" clitoral orgasms. The fact is that most women orgasm through clitoral stimulation, however, there are a variety of orgasms and all of them are "right." Some women have orgasms in their sleep through imagination alone. Others orgasm while they're breast-feeding (a natural response to intense nipple stimulation that causes the uterus to contract) but may feel so guilty or embarrassed that they discontinue breast-feeding entirely.

I've talked to women who were afraid to tell their doctors the "real" reason they stopped breast-feeding, so they made something up. There are also women who are perfectly content not having an orgasm at all. I know that men have trouble believing that their partners could have satisfying sex without orgasms, but if they say they're happy, they're happy! When we come right down to it, it's the woman who is responsible for her own sexual pleasure. For those of you who like statistics, about 10-15 percent of women have never experienced an orgasm in any way and about 35 percent report orgasming during intercourse.

Of course it takes a certain set of skills to have a good orgasm — or good sex of any kind — especially with a partner. Unlike men, who have a point of no return, women are sometimes concerned that their orgasms won't complete. One woman described it as "surfing on an unpredictable wave of pleasure — at any moment the surf board could slip out from under me." Other women say that they can almost feel the orgasm go to the right when they take a left — really frustrating to get so close. Others describe getting genitally over-stimulated and feeling very little just before the "moment of truth." Staying focused, relaxed, and in touch with your pleasure in the here and now can take years of practice (but practicing can be fun).

What we don't know is how many women are distressed about the fact that they don't orgasm. If you're not distressed — or if your relationship isn't being negatively impacted, it's not a problem (regardless of what the media may try to tell you). Part of the problem with female sexuality is that

women are led to believe they have problems when they're just having normal variations in desire, arousal and response. After all, we're not robots who are always ready for action.

When it comes to the mysteries of the big "O," we know that female orgasm is a bit more elusive than its male counterpart. In general, the female sexual response is more complex, dynamic and "interior." With men, sex is more linear — a combination of friction and fantasy — insert tab A into slot B, think lovely thoughts and off you go. I'm not suggesting that men aren't tender or sensual — just that they have more predictable response patterns. Although we're born with all of the physiological mechanisms needed to orgasm, sharing an orgasm with your partner is a more challenging experience. Typical sex advice books say women "fail" to climax because they're anxious, uninformed and afraid to let go. I agree, but this isn't the entire explanation.

What we're not told is that it's sometimes smart to not let go. Women need to listen to the wisdom of their internal "voice" and respect its message. Inhibitions, self-doubt and social/relational pressures shouldn't be ignored. Learning to trust yourself is a prerequisite to trusting your partner. Remember, orgasm isn't a requirement for good sex.

So what is good sex and who gets to decide? You and your partner do. Instead of counting orgasms, maybe you could count moments of closeness. And, as always, enjoy!

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