

What To Do When The Red-Hot Attraction Cools

I was raised to believe in romance. When I was about 4, I remember a Frank Sinatra song called "The Tender Trap" that my dad would sing to my mom: "You see a pair of laughing eyes, and suddenly your sighing sighs . . . those eyes, those sighs, they're part of the tender trap. . . ." He'd usually conclude by giving her a big hug.



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INTIMACY, SEX
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A few years later, when I read the well-known children's story "Bambi," I learned about being "twitter-patted." The forest creatures described it this way — "You're walking along minding your own business; you're

looking neither to the left nor to the right, when all of a sudden you run smack into a pretty face. . . . You begin to get weak in the knees . . . you feel light as a feather, and before you know it, you're walking on air, you're knocked for a loop, and you completely lose your head!"

Whatever you call it, one thing is for certain: When you're love-struck, it defies description. You meet, you kiss — and wham, it hits you like a ton of bricks. You think you're in love, or maybe it's lust, but you're definitely hooked. Poets and other artists have been moved by it. It's an essence, an overwhelming emotion, a "je ne sais quoi" that inspires phrases like "love is intoxicating," "love is blind" or "love is sheer madness" — but when it comes to the heat of attraction, people bemoan the fact that it fades much too soon:

Dear Dr. Scantling: I can't believe I'm writing to you, but your article about why some men stop wanting sex sounded like you wrote it about me.

When I first met my girlfriend, I became attracted to her physically very quickly, but over the years, something has happened, and I have lost interest in having sex with her. My girlfriend hasn't changed, and as far as I can see, I haven't either. I have no health problems and am not taking any medication. My girlfriend loves me and often talks about "the day when we get married." And while I think she would make a wonderful wife, what kind of life could we have without sex? Why, then, did I feel strong "chemistry" when we first met, and how can we get it back? It used to be so easy. If you have any suggestions for me, I would appreciate it.

Stymied in Simsbury

Sexual chemistry is a mysterious thing. It comes, and then it goes — within about two years, according to most research. How does something so hot go cool so quickly? It has been hypothesized that the various hormones and neurotransmitters of sexual excitement are replaced by oxytocin, the hormone of "cuddling" or bonding (which is, incidentally, released during birthing, breastfeeding and orgasm. Oxytocin also has anti-stress functions that reduce anxiety and improve pain tolerance). Levels of a chemical messenger called nerve growth factor (NGF) also increase during the period of romantic intensity but return to "normal" (whatever that is), in fairly short order. There are also a host of invisible aromas (pheromones), tastes and other powerful signals that shape what we find to be attractive. The sensation of being high on love or feeling

"twitter-patted" is similar to other opiate highs. Those consumed by it may not want to eat or sleep, may lose their ability to concentrate on anything else, and often spend hours lost in thought about the object of their desire.

Much more research is needed before we can fully understand the implications of these findings; however, what psychologists and other scientists do know is that the psychology of attraction is not solely determined by chemistry. We select our life-partner for a variety of socio-cultural and evolutionary reasons. The top three determinants of attraction are proximity (geographic and otherwise), physical appearance and similarity (agreement with one's views). Opposites really do not attract — not in the long run. Birds of a feather actually do flock together. Ideas about love, marriage or who we find attractive are based on early experiences, parental observations, personality-fit, our peers, the media and numerous other factors. The more in love a person is with their partner, the more attractive they rate them to be. As disagreements surface, attraction takes a big hit.

Not everyone has naturally great chemistry. There are couples who have never had sizzling sex. It can be pleasant, comfortable, but not mind-blowing. Then there are those with whom you've had the sizzle, but it may have fizzled. Can you get it back? Absolutely.

Life may have gotten in the way — or you may have become too complacent about your intimacy. If you long for lasting, extraordinary passion, you need to be prepared to put in the required work. It reminds me of the old joke about the guy who broke his hand and then asked his doctor if he would be able to

play piano after surgery. "Certainly," the doctor replied. "Great," said the man, "I've always wanted to play piano."

If you've ever experienced a sexual "high" with your partner — even once — it's possible to revitalize your attraction. Begin by discussing the problem openly and honestly. If you're feeling the boredom, I'll bet you he or she is, too. You can keep raising the excitement bar by introducing something you haven't tried before, but that can become exhausting over time. Or you can accept the fact that the new-car smell doesn't last forever and find novelty in the familiar. Familiarity does not have to breed contempt; it can actually breed passion.

Mild forms of attraction usually have a less swift onset but are less volatile. Partners who keep their chemistry alive have usually mastered a deep and abiding affection, intimate communication and commitment that carries them across the inevitable ebbs and flows of relationships.

All beginnings are lovely, but if you take an exit when the tingle subsides, you're quitting too soon. Like puppies that quickly tire of their toys when the "squeakers" are broken, you may wind up with a collection of "lightly used" relationships if you're not careful.

Finding chemistry is one thing; keeping it is quite another. Every so often, perhaps during a walk on the beach, while on vacation or just sitting in front of the fire enjoying a favorite glass of wine or piece of music together, renew your tingle — in any way that suits you.

Passion is circular. It continues to reinvent itself if given a chance. If we keep our curiosity throughout our lives, we have the opportunity to learn — once

and again — how to stay exquisitely connected and in tune with one another.

As T.S. Eliot stated in the "Four Quartets":

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

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. 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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