

INSIGHTS



WHAT WE WANT

A surprising array of forces drive our everyday desires.



HOT PURSUIT

THE UNDERSTANDING OF our oldest pastime is constantly evolving. Investigators of desire explain what myth-busting research can teach us about our sex lives. —*Matt Huston*

MYTH MEN ALWAYS WANT IT MORE

Abuzz with passion, a man and woman decide to spend their lives together. Several years in, a rift emerges: One partner begins to crave sex more than the other. Must be the male, right? Not so. In long-term relationships, “men and women are equally likely to be the member of the couple with lower sexual desire,” says Kristen Mark, director of the Sexual Health Promotion Lab at the University of Kentucky. Such a gap in desire, she says, is “more of a feature in relationships than a bug.” Though desire typically peaks early and crests, it can rise again over time. Knowing that fluctuations are normal may help partners deal better with discrepancies.

MYTH A PINK PILL IS THE ONLY HOPE

For women, low sexual desire can go hand-in-hand with a feeling of disconnection, according to Lori Brotto, director of the Sexual Health Laboratory at the University of British Columbia. “Their bodies might be doing one thing, their minds something completely different,” she says. But the effects of a drug approved for use by women with low desire (flibanserin) are still “ambiguous,” Brotto says; she and others have more hope for behavioral treatments. “We’ve shown that mindfulness meditation improves sexual desire and sex-related distress, and those improvements can be maintained,” she says. The practice also takes aim at factors commonly associated with low desire, such as depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem.

MYTH FIRST COMES DESIRE, THEN COMES SEX

Desire is wrapped up with arousal and often emerges as partners have sex rather than before they start, says psychologist Nicole Prause, founder of the independent research institute Libereros, LLC. That’s why some experts encourage people in committed relationships to wade into sex, even if they’re not (yet) in the mood. “You can’t just wait to be struck by lightning,” Prause says. “If you don’t watch porn or fantasize, the stimulus may have to be your partner.” She acknowledges that this approach raises thorny questions: If you’re not raring to go, how do you know you really want to? Partners may establish that “Yes” means “Yes, for now,” leaving space to try to generate a spark—and to pause if one doesn’t feel like going further.

MYTH A TASTE FOR POWER PLAY IS ABNORMAL

Though “domination” and “submission” might evoke images of whips and bondage, the appeal of sexual power dynamics is widespread. In categorizing massive amounts of data on web users’ erotic search and consumption habits—a task chronicled in the book *A Billion Wicked Thoughts*—computational neuroscientists Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam concluded that a continuum exists between, say, fans of BDSM porn and readers of romance novels (in which protagonists surrender to macho men). “In most mainstream porn and erotica,” Ogas says, “one partner is clearly in control.”