

Mindfulness and Sexual experience:

from **Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex**
by Mary Roach.

From the chapter, “*Mind over Vagina - Women are Complicated* (p. 245), addressing, among other things, “Why Viagra doesn’t work for many women . . .”

Roach describes studies done at the Female Sexual Psychophysiology Laboratory, part of the psychology department at the University of Texas at Austin. (The lab’s goal is “simple but complicated: to untangle the complex, quixotic interplay of body and mind as they pertain to female sexuality. You have no idea what a perplexing mess is female arousal. But then again, you may.)

The lab studies things like “female sexual arousal disorder” and the impact of anxiety disorders upon sexual responsiveness. Among other things, they use a device called the “arousometer”. For women with these difficulties, “” there can be a puzzling disconnect between mind and body.” -- The woman may actually be aroused physiologically, but be unable to attend to the fact -- her attention may be elsewhere, distracting her from perceiving the sexual feelings that are occurring in her body.

Here is where mindfulness comes in. Quoting Roach: (p. 251)

One needn’t suffer these particular anxieties to be distracted during sex. A thousand things can play on a woman’s mind: work, kids . . . **One non-pharmaceutical solution is to teach women to redirect their focus and pay more attention to physical sensations -- a practice called mindfulness.** A pilot study -- a preliminary investigation with no control group -- by Lori Brotto . . . at the University of British Columbia had promising results. 18 women with complaints about their ability to become aroused participated in mindfulness training. Afterward, there was a significant jump in their ratings of how aroused they’d been feeling during sexual encounters.

If it’s any solace, even female rats have trouble focusing. I give you . . . my favorite sentence in the entire oeuvre of Alfred Kinsey, from *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*: “Cheese crumbs spread in front of a copulating pair of rats may distract the female, but not the male.”

The importance of focus fits well with something that Masters and Johnson wrote about back in the 1970s. The team coined the term “spectatoring,” which refers to a tendency to observe oneself during sex. Not in an erotic, mirror-on-the-ceiling sort of way, but in a judgmental, critical way. Rather than focusing on the sensations of foreplay and sex, all the feel-good things happening in her body, a spectatoring woman worries about her performance or her appearance. A study . . . found that women who were more distracted during sex were -- relative to less distracted, more sensation-focused women -- less sexually satisfied. The questionnaire alone was

heartbreaking. Women had to rate how closely a set of statements was characteristic of themselves. Statements such as: “During sexual activity, I worry the whole time that my partner will get turned off by seeing my body without clothes.” “While engaged in sexual activity with a partner, I think too much about the way I am moving.”

Roach ends her book with a description of one of Masters and Johnson's later works, published in 1979, which describes the experiences of a group of lesbian, gay, and straight couples, committed and not, whom they invited to their labs and put under the microscope: (p. 300)

Ultimately, [Masters and Johnson] set aside their stopwatches and data charts and turned a qualitative eye upon their volunteers. What emerged were two portraits. There was efficient sex -- skillful, efficient, goal-directed, uninhibited, and with a very low "failure incidence" . . . gay, straight, committed or not . . . [they] tended to have, as they say, 100 percent orgasmic return . . .

But efficient sex was not amazing sex. The best sex going on in Masters and Johnson's lab was sex being had by the committed gay and lesbian couples. Not because they were practicing special secret homosexual techniques but because they "*took their time*" (301). They lost themselves -- in each other, and in sex. They “tended to move slowly . . . and to linger at . . . [each] stage of stimulative response, making each step in tension increment something to be appreciated . . .” They teased each other “in an obvious effort to prolong the stimulatee’s high levels of sexual excitement.”

Another difference was that the lesbians were almost as aroused by what they were doing to their partner as was the partner herself . . . Masters and Johnson’s heterosexuals failed to grasp that if you lost yourself in the tease -- in the pleasure and power of turning someone on -- that that could be as arousing as being teased and turned on oneself . . . The straight man, in most cases, “became so involved in his own sexual tensions that he seemed relatively unaware of the degree of his partner’s sexual involvement . . . The same criticisms applied to straight women: “This sense of goal orientation, of trying to get something done . . . was exhibited almost as frequently by the heterosexual women as by their male partners.”

Mindfulness training teaches non-judgmental, non-goal-driven awareness:

“Nowhere to go, nothing to do, no one to be” but to be fully present to the sensations of the moment both for one’s partner and oneself. For an interesting contemplation of what this might mean, check out

<http://amritayana.blogspot.com/2010/03/right-use-of-sexual-energy.html>