

*You  
Could Be  
Having  
Better  
Sex*



# ***You Could Be Having Better Sex***

**The Definitive Guide to a Healthier,  
Happier, and Hotter Sex Life**

**Nicole McNichols, PhD**

Advice from America's #1 Sex Professor

***Simon Element***

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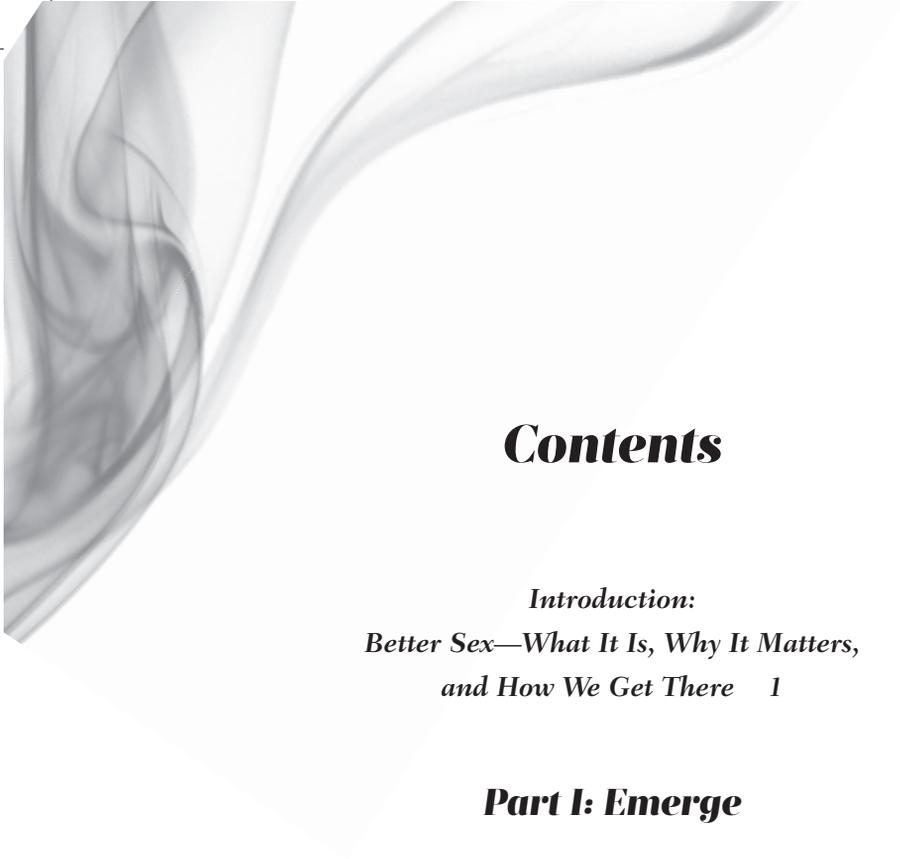
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*To my students, whose curiosity keeps me on my toes,  
and to the sex researchers whose wisdom provides the answers.*



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## ***Introduction***

# Better Sex— What It Is, Why It Matters, and How We Get There

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I certainly didn't grow up dreaming of becoming a professor of sex and sexuality. In hindsight, I believe sex found me. When I finished my PhD in social psychology in 2009, I thought I had a clear path laid out. I was a newly minted psychologist curious about human connection, isolation, and mental health. My dream was to help people struggling with loneliness, a topic taking on new urgency as the internet began replacing meaningful in-person connection. If someone had pulled me aside and told me that fourteen years later, I'd be famous on social media as "Nicole the Sex Professor," with videos that had amassed over fifty million views, I wouldn't have believed them.

But when I started my academic career, I didn't consider sex to be foundational to the sense of self, a meaningful contributor to happiness, or a powerful antidote to the very isolation I wanted to study. Like many people, I thought of sex as simply a fun treat. I bought into the same tropes that dominate today's sexual discourse—"Save room for dessert!" and "Get lucky!" This tells us how we value sex as a culture: Sex isn't the main course, and luck has a lot to do with it—whether you have it and whether you enjoy it.

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All of which, I would eventually learn, is wrong, wrong, wrong.

In 2014, I was teaching psychology full-time at the University of Washington in Seattle and raising three preschoolers. My husband and I still had sex, but we weren't exactly setting the curtains on fire. This was due to all the typical reasons that so many couples with young children give: Exhaustion. Feeling "touched out" by the end of the day. And the post-pregnancy changes that had left me feeling like a stranger in my own body. But with everything else I had on my plate, upping our sex game was nowhere on my to-do list.

And then I got an email that changed everything.

My mentor Lois McDermott had taught Psych 210: The Diversity of Human Sexuality at the University of Washington for the previous thirty years. This class covered the biology and psychology of human sexuality, with topics ranging from sexual health and behavior to cultural variations in attitudes toward sex. Students thought of it as the "Sex 101" course.

Lois had broken her leg right before the start of the quarter and an SOS went up in the psychology department for someone to take over. None of my colleagues volunteered. The prevailing wisdom was that it was a thankless assignment—awkward at best, humiliating at worst, and filled with students looking to check an easy box on their core-requirement rubric.

Because I was somewhat new and eager to please, I raised my hand and stepped forward, offering myself as "tribute," Katniss Everdeen-style, figuring I could earn some brownie points while the department found a permanent replacement. With only days before the start of term, I dived into the course material—and never left. Because the more I learned about sex and the more I realized how much I didn't know, the more curious I became. I quickly embraced sex's profound contribution to human connection and mental well-being. I was all in.

Over the years, I realized that what I love is teaching and speaking to large groups, which affords me the chance not only to help people

at an individual level but to spark meaningful conversations—those informed by science instead of stigma and acceptance rather than fear—that can help push change at a societal and cultural level as well. Today I routinely attend conferences, devour journal findings, and reach out to the leading researchers in the field for insight. I bring this information back to my students for conversations on topics ranging from gender identity, desire, and orgasm to casual sex, dating, long-term relationships, consensual non-monogamy, kink, and porn. My teachings emphasize a holistic sex-positive philosophy intended to counter shame and stigma, normalize open and frank conversations, and center sex as a pathway to the self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-expression that drives human thriving and happiness.

What I have learned and passed along to my students has changed my life and theirs. And I hope it is about to change yours.

Since I started teaching it, the course has grown to an enrollment of four thousand students annually, making it among the largest public human-sexuality classes in the United States. My students come from a wide range of backgrounds, but what almost all of them have in common is a dearth of knowledge about a foundational aspect of themselves. Like me a decade ago, they come to this material not knowing even the basic benefits of sex.

This is through no fault of their own; it goes back to well before they were born. In 1981, President Reagan's administration introduced the Adolescent Family Life Act, which funneled \$1.5 billion to programs promoting abstinence. Unsurprisingly, over the next two decades, the states with abstinence-only programs had the highest rates of teen pregnancy and STI transmissions. If you took sex ed in the 1980s or after, chances are that your education was incomplete at best, biased and inaccurate at worst. And plenty of people didn't get to take it at all. Although in the 2010s the Obama administration began defunding abstinence-only programs, as of this writing, there is no federally mandated sex-education curriculum, so

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sex-education programs across the United States vary significantly. Currently, thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia require some form of sex education, HIV education, or both. However, even in those states, there remains a large gap between the education students need and what they actually receive. According to the 2018 CDC School Health Profiles,<sup>1</sup> less than half of high schools and less than a quarter of middle schools cover all twenty topics the CDC considers essential for comprehensive sex education. These topics include how HIV and other STIs are transmitted and prevented and using communication skills to reduce sexual risks.

Unfortunately, the outlook for sex education only seems to be getting worse. Since the Supreme Court's June 2022 decision overturning the federal right to abortion, the United States has seen a significant rise in restrictive sex-education bills, legislation that seeks to limit discussions on sexual orientation, gender identity, and contraception and prioritizes abstinence-only instruction. Restrictive bills have become so common that they now outnumber legislation advocating for comprehensive sex education that addresses issues such as LGBTQ+ identities, consent, and healthy relationships. This is why it should come as no surprise that the United States has one of the highest STI and teen-pregnancy rates in the industrialized world.

It is also why most of us know more about the health benefits of caffeine and CBD than about the health benefits of sex. And there *are* health benefits. Sexual activity can relieve pain,<sup>2</sup> and individuals who engage in regular sexual activity have stronger immune systems and fewer ailments, are at less risk for cognitive decline,<sup>3</sup> and enjoy greater protection from heart disease.<sup>4</sup> Orgasms can even help you live longer! A famous study published in 1997 found that over the course of ten years, men who had low orgasmic frequency were twice as likely to die of any cause than men who had high orgasmic frequency.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps most important, though, sex provides a host of psychological and relational benefits in a way that other things that are good for us—like diet and exercise—simply can't. It's a relational and emotional experience that can improve our overall mental well-being<sup>6</sup> and our relationships.<sup>7</sup> Best of all, sex provides a powerful source of pleasure and positive emotions, two things that lead to resilience, self-expansion, and improved life satisfaction.<sup>8</sup> The research is clear: Pleasure is priceless.

Yet we are more likely to share our salaries or talk politics than discuss our sex lives. Culturally, we are sex-obsessed, yet we are also incredibly uncomfortable discussing our own sexual activity. We see sex everywhere, but it's taboo to bring up a nagging insecurity when talking with friends. We live in a seeming paradox.

You may scoff reading this. But when was the last time your medical provider asked you about the quality of your sexual activity?

A large driver of this is shame and embarrassment. I mistakenly thought that, because this generation introduced free bleeding during the London Marathon, embraces YouTube ads for products like Flex Discs that start "Hey, I'm Kara. I love to fuck," and produces Netflix shows like *How to Build a Sex Room* and songs entitled "Wet-Ass Pussy," that our society was now post-sexual shame. At the beginning of each quarter, I poll my students, and I'm always surprised and disheartened by the prevalence of sexual shame in their cohort. Sexual shame also fuels the majority of concerns and questions brought to me by my social media followers. They're ashamed about everything from their desire to their lack of desire, from the size and shape of their bodies to the size and shape of their genitals, from their fantasies to their kinks. This isn't even getting into performance issues. I am messaged every day by people concerned about having orgasms too quickly, never having had an orgasm, taking too long to orgasm, and not being able to get their partner to orgasm.

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The primary reason people worry about not measuring up has to do with the deluge of suggestions from TV, movies, and porn about how sex *should* happen. That message is that, after all the banter and seduction, when everyone finally gets down to it, sex should be effortlessly fabulous, everyone will instinctively know how to please everyone else, and there will be instant orgasms all around! Yes, porn *can* expand our sexual imaginations and in certain contexts be a great tool for intimacy. But porn can also make us feel terrible about our bodies and insecure about the sex we're having, and it can force us to hold ourselves to wildly unrealistic standards. In extreme situations, when porn is one's sole coping mechanism for stress, it can exacerbate anxiety and isolation.

Speaking of isolation: Since 2014, our lack of connection has gotten worse. According to a 2022 report from Harvard University, 36 percent of Americans feel "serious loneliness,"<sup>9</sup> which is linked to early mortality and issues ranging from depression to anxiety, heart disease, and substance abuse.<sup>10</sup> The biggest challenge in battling loneliness is that it self-reinforces. When we're lonely, we can feel afraid to say what we really want, need, or desire, because admitting we're missing something in our lives is a brave act of vulnerability, something that is almost impossible to do within the fragility of perceived isolation.

However, the great news is that if we work on reintegrating and reestablishing connection with our sexuality, which ties into the very essence of who we are, we can gradually invite connection into the rest of our lives as well. We can heal loneliness. It is not a coincidence that Dr. Ruth Westheimer, the OG sex therapist, devoted her last book, *The Joy of Connections*, to the topic of fighting loneliness. Sex is key. But not just any sex.

Enter *better sex*.

What actually is *better sex*? Does better sex require Olympian-level sexual positions? Is it about finding your G-spot or your P-spot or having multiple blended orgasms? What about . . . squirting? Does it in-

volve kink? Can it happen only in new relationships or with a stranger, when sexual tension runs high and novelty and uncertainty fuel desire?

Better sex might include some of those elements, but are they prerequisites for mind-blowing sex? *Absolutely not.*

Better sex is *connected* sex. It can happen in any context, from a casual hookup to a thirty-year marriage. It's authentic and vulnerable, never performative. It's fueled by curiosity and a willingness to learn. It relies on honest feedback, communication, and being mentally present. More concretely, it includes a broad range of sexual activities that extend beyond vaginal or anal penetration.

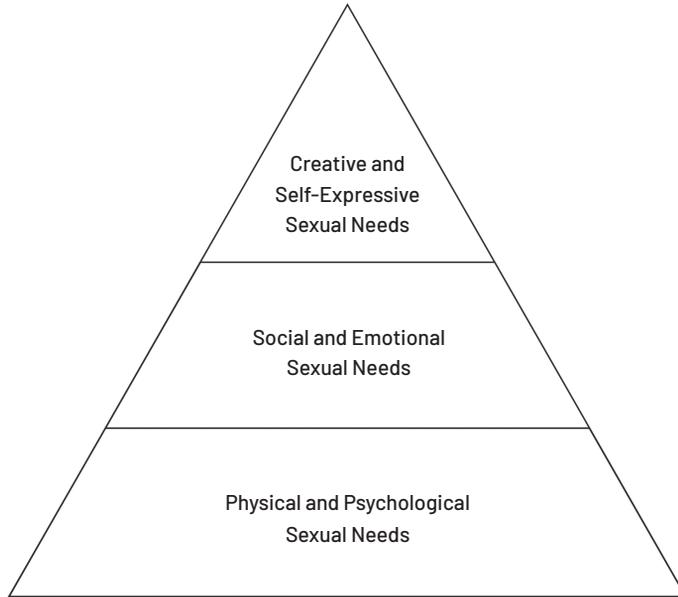
But primarily, better sex is simply real. When we perform sex from a disembodied place, more concerned with how we look than how we feel, it increases our sense of isolation. When we are in tune with and expressing our honest desires and receiving and meeting the desires of a partner, it can transform us.

Though this book does *not* purport to solve the entire loneliness pandemic, it *does* offer a critical and effective path to a sexually integrated self. And it's a path that balances sexual self-acceptance with a tolerance of being a work in progress. A path rooted in the belief that each of us can create and choose the sexual experiences that feel like the best fit. It is confident enough to recognize that sexuality is nuanced and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. And it frees us from the sexual narratives, scripts, and expectations that currently hold us back. The key is building this integrated sexual self through a layered approach.

The question then can be: Where do I even begin?

It can feel overwhelming to contemplate all the sexual areas that you might want to explore. What if you suspect that you missed out on learning the nuances of sexual anatomy or feel helpless when it comes to sexual technique? What if you're not good at asking for what you need to get turned on, or asking for feedback? What if you're curious about kink, but have no idea where to start? What then? This is why I created a hierarchy of sexual needs:

### McNichols Hierarchy of Sexual Needs



Sexual needs go far beyond the mere physical. They include psychological, social, emotional, self-expressive, and creative aspects as well. Given their complexity, sexual needs require an organizational structure that encourages growth and progression and provides a safe space for change. In this hierarchy, and in this book, we prioritize learning foundational knowledge such as anatomy before advancing to an exploration of consensual non-monogamy. We meet the needs for physical and emotional safety by mastering the basics of consent and healthy partnered sex before exploring the need for novelty and kink. This book is organized to follow this same progression from the foundational to the aspirational.

In part 1, “Emerge,” we’ll address your physical and psychological need to achieve sexual self-connection and integration. To do this, we explore the anatomy of pleasure. Forget what you might

have seen in porn. We're going to look at how your sexual anatomy really looks and functions and provide the latest research on the techniques and positions that lead to pleasure and orgasm IRL. We will also look at the exciting interplay between the mind and sex. (Yes, the brain is the master sex organ, running the show.) And we'll learn that in order to enjoy better sex, you need first to mentally carve out what I refer to as your "erotic space" by hacking into your pleasure cycle and clearing out inaccurate beliefs, thoughts, and myths that are getting in your way.

In part 2, "Engage," we build on the foundation of your sexual self by exploring your social and emotional sexual needs—which you have, whether you are single, with a casual partner, or in a twenty-year relationship. No matter your relationship status, having better sex requires you to master your sexual-communication skills while embracing a holistic definition of *consent* that protects you physically and emotionally. For those in long-term relationships, we explore cultivating eroticism and maintaining desire for the duration.

In part 3, "Evolve," we learn how to become self-actualized as sexual beings by addressing our creative and self-expressive sexual needs. This section pushes you to challenge stale cultural narratives about what people, sex, and relationships ought to look like by digging into topics such as kink, consensual non-monogamy, and sexual identity and how all of these can fuel well-being through connected sex. The section isn't equating being evolved with being kinky, consensually nonmonogamous, or a consumer of ethical porn. It is asserting, however, that to be a sexually evolved person today, you need to understand these ideas and process how small parts of each might relate to some element of your sexuality, no matter how straight, vanilla, and monogamous you may or may not be.

The structure of this book is designed to guide you through each of these stages so that ultimately you feel a total sense of connection to your sexual body, your sexual mind, your sexual emotional life,

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and your sexual curiosities. I promise that by the end, you will feel more comfortable, less ambivalent, more intentional, more confident, and more optimistic not only about the full array of your own sexual needs but also about your ability to seek out and actively create more connected sexual experiences.

My own sexual journey since I became Nicole the Sex Professor has been transformative. However, to manage your expectations, and much to the massive disappointment of my students, I have not become a dominatrix; I don't deliver my class lectures and then go home to my tied-to-the-bed husband. I don't spend my weekends having orgies or threesomes. I don't have an OnlyFans account, nor do I star in any porn. I don't have a leather fetish (not in connection to sex, though I might have one for shoes). I would describe my sex life as vibrant and fulfilling, but (again, sorry!) I don't have sex every day.

Before you start sighing with disappointment, here's what I *do* have. I possess a thorough understanding of anatomy, pleasure, and orgasm that makes me feel less self-conscious about my body, more comfortable initiating new things in the bedroom, and better able to have honest, open conversations with my husband. I may not identify as kinky, but thanks to the literature and a dominatrix who visits my class each quarter, I know how to leverage the implicit dynamics of erotic power play to bring some heat. I've been in a very happy monogamous marriage for over twenty years, but after devouring journal articles and hearing from the numerous consensual non-monogamous (CNM) guests who have spoken in my class, I truly believe CNM is a great choice for many. I'm also clearer on how to meet the challenges of monogamy (or any relationship structure) and how to define the dynamics in my own marriage in a way that works for me. I'm not a porn director, but I know how to use ethical porn and erotica to spice things up and add perhaps the most critical ingredient for great sex in any long-term relationship: novelty. I am

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cisgender and identify as straight, but I've come to understand that those labels can't provide a comprehensive description of gender expression or sexual orientation for anyone, including myself.

This is just some of what I hope you can achieve on your own journey to better sex. No matter who you are, whether you're partnered or single, queer or straight, kinky or vanilla, monogamous or open, and no matter what you're into or who you want to do it with or in what context you want to do it in—this book will do for you what becoming a sex professor has done for me. I promise that what comes next will empower you, inform you, challenge you, and open your mind. As a result, you'll come away feeling more integrated, more evolved, more connected, and, hopefully, less lonely. You'll be having better sex.

Class dismissed.





**Part I**

# ***Emerge***



## **Chapter One**

# How Do I Create Connection with My Body?

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## ***The Anatomy of Pleasure***

**I**n one of her more popular sets, the comedian Janeane Garofalo says something to the effect of “We all want to think we’re great in bed and have great taste—and we can’t all be right.” This joke hits a nerve that I witness on a daily basis. What I have found over the past decade of teaching is that no human act provokes more insecurity, shame, or doubt than sex, especially with a new partner. We all want to be irresistible fantastic lovers! And the idea that we might not be strikes fear in our hearts. Certainly, some people compensate for that with a lot of bravado, but strip that away and you expose the same insecurities. *What if I can’t make my partner orgasm? What if I take too long? What if I come too quickly? What if my fantasies and turn-ons are just too weird? What if my penis is too small? What if I can’t get wet?* The list is infinite and exhausting!

What compounds this innate insecurity is a dominant narrative in entertainment that if you are with the right partner, hot sex and mind-blowing orgasms are effortless and intuitive. People expect their bodies to easily turn on and quickly respond to the touch of a partner with earth-shattering waves of pleasure. This is, at the very least, a fantasy fed to us by entertainment and the media. Case in

point: On spicy Netflix shows, there seems to be an industry standard for how long it will take a female character to cry out in ecstasy from penetrative sex in the missionary position with a new partner. Typically, it's twenty to thirty seconds.

Well, sorry to burst your Hollywood bubble, but sex does not work that way. It is a skill that requires practice and experimentation to master—like all skills. I can hear protests along the lines of *But what about Domingo, the guy I hooked up with when I was studying abroad in Brazil, who did that thing with his tongue?* I'm not claiming sexual unicorns don't exist. Just as some people have innate gifts that make them better suited for a career in, say, dance or football, some people might have great instincts in this department. (We all suspect this is true of Pete Davidson.) But most of us are not professional athletes or porn stars. We must humble ourselves at the start of the learning curve and admit that we don't know what we don't know.

## Angela

I have a group of female colleagues on campus I regularly go out with to blow off steam and bond over our various work/life imbalances. A few years ago, one of them invited a newer colleague, Angela, to join us. She was recently divorced from her husband of twenty years and finding her first forays into online dating disappointing, and my friends were hoping that I, the resident sex expert, might have some suggestions.

Even on that first night out with her, we could tell that, as a beautiful Black woman in her forties, she was getting plenty of swipes. But she shared that she wasn't loving where they led. As she put it, "I got married to my ex young and had our daughter almost right away. Then we were both so focused on our careers, we kind of became more roommates than lovers. So now I'm excited to get

out and have some fun. I *want* to find out what I've been missing. I *want* to be sexually adventurous. But the reality is that after some nice conversation and a good meal, most of the sex I'm having with my dates is, well . . . meh."

"Describe *meh*," I said to Angela, curious for details to guide our discussion.

"Well, first of all, foreplay is typically quick. I don't always feel like I'm even getting all the way turned on. Then we jump right to the sex, and I can't tell if they're expecting something I don't know about. It feels like these guys have a script for what they think I'm going to like, and then it's just plug and play." She laughed. "Forgive the metaphor—I'm in the computer science department. Anyway, I knew it would take a long time to find someone I might want to share my life with again, but I thought at least in the meantime I'd be having some hot sex. News flash: I am not."

After we ordered another round of margaritas, my friends looked to me to give Angela some guidance.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, Angela," I said, "it sounds like there are a lot of layers here. I'm hearing a need for better sexual communication and a willingness on your end to give feedback and ask for what you want in the moment during sex. But . . ." I paused for a moment, taking in Angela, who looked both eager for answers and a bit nervous. "*None* of that is going to be possible until *you* do your homework."

"You mean masturbate?" she asked.

"Well, yes. But with a goal of not only pleasuring yourself but *reconnecting* to yourself. Do you have a vibrator?"

"Some friends gave me one for my thirtieth birthday, but my husband had issues with it—I think he felt threatened, which is absurd. But it wasn't worth the tension, and I tossed it in a drawer somewhere."

"That's no problem. The world of self-pleasure has expanded so much in the past few years. There are toys for your clitoris, toys

for your G-spot, toys for your butt, toys you operate remotely—you name it.”

“Nicole, slow down. I am not entirely sure what the G-spot is or if I even have one!”

“Not to worry,” I said. “Come by my office and we’ll get into all the latest findings. There is a lot of fun stuff to learn.”

Here’s the reality of sex and pleasure that most people try to deny: We are *not* born knowing which sensations and which types of sexual activities we will one day enjoy, just as we’re not born knowing which foods we’ll like and what kinds of entertainment we’ll prefer. We learn about our sexual likes and dislikes the same way we learn about what pleases us in other areas of life—through experimentation. And those preferences can change over the course of your life. Receiving oral sex might do nothing for you in your twenties—and blow your mind in your forties. You may love certain techniques and sexual positions when you’re younger and different ones as you age. Turn-ons and pleasure zones evolve throughout your entire lifetime.

For Angela’s dates to expect all bodies to enjoy the same types of touch, the same rhythm of movement, the same sequence of activities is just as unrealistic as expecting everyone to love the same restaurant, even if it’s a popular one. There is nothing on this earth that is *universally* loved. Not even chocolate.

Yet we are all taught to believe otherwise, partly due to the erroneous idea that sexual pleasure exists only in a biological realm. We think that how people experience sexual pleasure, turn-ons, fantasies, and kinks should vary about as much as kidney function. The truth is that bodies are beautifully diverse. What feels good to one person might do nothing for the next. One person’s hottest sexual fantasy might be another person’s worst nightmare—literally.

One of the biggest reasons people’s physiological responses to sexual touch differs is that all humans vary slightly in the size, shape, and positioning of their anatomy. For example, take the cli-