

Chapter Three

Awakening Your Sensuality

A Note from Elizabeth:

Laura came to me on the recommendation of a friend. She had recently attended an all-women's gathering where a lot of the conversation focused on the great sex the other women were having. Laura was shocked to hear her friends talking about having the best sex of their lives in their fifties. They talked about having multiple orgasms, joked about their headboards banging against the walls, and discussed the latest advancements in USB-chargeable vibrators. Laura found herself gripping her wine glass tighter and tighter, unable to relate. One friend had sensed Laura's discomfort and asked her to meet for coffee the next day. By the bottom of their first cup, Laura had my card in hand.

"I just never really got it, I guess," Laura told me. "I love my husband, and I'm glad we had our kids, so obviously sex is a good thing...but I don't understand what all the hype is about. After hearing my friends, though..." She laughed. "I want what they're having!"

I asked Laura about her early sexual experiences. While there was romance, the experiences weren't particularly titillating for Laura. She and her husband loved each and had sex regularly. He was able to bring her to orgasm, but there were no "fireworks"; rather, her orgasms were sort of ho-hum and brought more relief than actual pleasure. Though she enjoyed feeling intimate with him, the disparity between his pleasure and her own was palpable, and she often felt lonely afterward. "I'm having good sex, and I can come, so what am I complaining about?" she asked. When he traveled on business, Laura often used her ancient vibrator to

quickly reach orgasm. Even with that, she said, “The fireworks are still missing, but having an orgasm helps me fall asleep.”

Laura noted that she wasn't a “touchy-feely” person, and though she was raised in a loving household, her parents had avoided expressing their emotions and rarely touched each other, or her, in a show of affection. Her mother told her sex is for making babies and that men enjoyed it while women, more or less, had to tolerate it.

Laura described herself as socially active; she chaired events for the school association, did some fundraising, and was in a bridge club. I was happy to hear that Laura enjoyed her life but noticed that none of these hobbies involved much movement. Laura said she really didn't like exercising, yoga, or dancing. She told me she wasn't all that comfortable in her body and really didn't enjoy others' touch. As she spoke, her voice was devoid of excitement and her facial expression didn't change.

While it's always hard to determine the root of someone's problem in a single conversation, I began to develop a hunch that Laura was shut off from all of her senses. While she reported moderate amount of physical satisfaction with sex, she never described a sensual connection to it. In short, I felt that Laura had lost touch with her sensuality. It was natural that her sexuality was suffering as a result. As I asked her questions, Laura, too, noted that she was rarely tapped into her five senses—during sex, but also throughout her days. A certain spark was missing from her life, and she wanted it back. Together, we created a plan to help her find and express her unique form of sensuality.

Over the years, we have seen countless women who have trouble connecting to their sensuality. It keeps them from enjoying a wide variety of nonsexual pleasures and affects their sexuality as well. Sensuality is one way to experience pleasure. In our opinion, it's the best way because it requires us to shift our attention inward to focus on the experience of the five senses. When we actively engage with our senses, we come to realize that we can enjoy them twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week and that pleasure is available to us in every moment. But without sensuality, pleasure—sexual and otherwise—is often limited. When we don't experience the full range of our senses, we become disconnected from our sensuality and pleasure becomes more a set of thoughts than a set of experiences.

This chapter will explain what we mean by “disconnected.” It will delve into what sensuality is, how it differs from sexuality, and how it relates to pleasure. Then it will teach you how to reengage your own sensuality by coming back to your senses and restoring the pleasure in your body. It's about relishing in your senses—and by that, we mean all five of them: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Eventually, this will affect how you experience your sexuality, but in this chapter, we are focusing solely on finding nonsexual sensual pleasure.

We'll start by defining how we use the words *sensual* and *sensuality*. *Sensual* means something that is pleasing to the senses. *Sensuality* is the pleasurable pursuit and enjoyment of the senses. We experience sensuality for the sake of pleasure. Sensual pleasure happens when we feel positive sensations happening in our bodies, which occurs naturally when we're doing something we enjoy. That's what feeling good is all about!

At the heart of sensuality are the five senses. Humans get a tremendous amount of information through *sight*, our most dominant sense. Our eyes perceive rays of light, which the brain translates into colors, shapes, and more. The sense of *sound* comes through the inner ear,

which detects vibration that the brain converts into pitch, tone, and volume. Our sense of *smell* is closely linked with memory and emotion and helps us appreciate the flavor of food. Our mouths have the ability to recognize five basic *tastes*—salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and umami. And then we have the sense of *touch*, which is perceived primarily through the skin but also through the structures that lie beneath it.

When we take in sensory information, our brains immediately go to work categorizing, defining, and deciphering it. We decide whether it's appealing or not appealing and whether we want more or less of that sensation. When we're in touch with our senses, we generally gravitate toward what we like and away from what does not please us. It's instinctive; we don't have to think about it.

Despite our natural ability to experience things sensually, we often close the door on our senses. As a result, we stop paying attention to the sensations happening in our body. Our senses are always active. Every minute we make choices, whether we attune to them or not, both consciously and unconsciously. If we habitually tune them out, we have a tendency to get stuck in a rut.

So, if your sensuality is stuck on a low setting, we have good news for you: you can turn it up to high. We believe experiencing *all five* senses adds to your sensual well-being in numerous ways. We know this professionally from guiding women like Laura back home to their senses. The results have been, well, *sense-ational!*

As we progress through this chapter, we'll explore how women have disconnected from their senses. Then, we'll look at how this disconnect relates to both physical and emotional pain. Finally, we'll describe the connections between arousal, pleasure, and sensuality. You'll finish

this chapter with tools to help you rediscover your sensual pleasure, which is not only the precursor to getting in touch with sexual pleasure; it's also a simple shift in focus that will fundamentally change the way you experience life.

The Disconnect

Children's sensory exploration is natural and helps them navigate the world. In their innocence, they often cross the boundaries of what's safe. "Don't put that in your mouth!" a mother says to her toddler who's holding a penny in her hand. "Don't touch that!" warns a father who sees his child reaching for the hot stove. Innocently, kids make a mess finger painting and playing in the mud and cause lots of noise by banging on pots and pans. They wiggle in their chairs at school, enjoying movement and resist sitting still. And many children (both boys *and* girls) touch between their legs because it feels good and is soothing, not unlike rubbing their blanket on their noses as they go to sleep. Children are delightfully sensory—unless they are taught not to be.

Parents and childcare providers help young ones learn the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and how to avoid physical harm—the candle that burns or the fluffy dog who bites. In most cases, corrections are done in the best interest of the child and without ill intent; however, when a child is told they are bad or wrong even when doing something naturally and playfully childlike, the message can be confusing. Something different may land in the child's psyche. To them, corrections—positive or negative—may mean, "I am doing something

wrong or bad,” which is then perceived as, “I am wrong. I am bad.” Boom! There’s the disconnect from the innocent and natural enjoyment of our senses.

For many, a disconnect happens early and gets stronger over time. It is often solidified by the time of adolescence. Think of the self-conscious teenager whose father tells her that continuing to eat ice cream will make her fat. Shamed and embarrassed, she decides she’ll never eat ice cream again. What about the boy who swears off listening to the radio after his eighth-grade crush tells him he has terrible taste in music? These types of experiences can be damaging and contribute to a conscious disconnect from something that was otherwise pleasurable.

It’s important to point out that the disconnect can happen on either end of the spectrum. In other words, we can stuff ourselves with chocolate cake just as easily as we can deny ourselves any and all sweets. We want to be clear that getting in touch with your sensual nature doesn’t mean gorging yourself on fried food, dancing until blisters start to form, or—as one of Dee’s clients once did—having multiple orgasms till her toes went numb. It’s about reaching a healthy balance. Experiencing any one of the five senses doesn’t necessarily need to be extreme for us to notice it. To the contrary, if you’re in touch with your sensuality, the entire range is available for you to experience: subtle, neutral, and intense. When we’re sensually connected, we’ll seek out pleasure—but we’ll also have appropriate limits, because too much of a good thing can become something not so good. The prescriptions in this chapter aim to teach you that through personal experience. Our hope is that after working with them, you’ll order chocolate cake if you want it, enjoy each yummy bite until you’re satisfied, and then put the fork down, regardless of what chocolatey gooeyness is still on the plate.

When we’ve lost interest in doing things that make us feel good, it’s often because we have ignored or disconnected from our five senses and the positive messages they provide. When

this happens, we don't relish in the sensory delights around us; rather, we go through our days somewhat numb.

A Note from Elizabeth:

Remember in Chapter Two when we talked about vigilance and feeling safe? It's important enough to mention again. When we feel unsafe or uncomfortable, it is hard to feel turned on. I know for myself the safer and more comfortable I feel, the more pleasure I experience.

What I'm talking about is emotional safety. Being there opens us to the possibility of pleasure. As reported by the BBC News, a study conducted in 2003 at the University of Groningen showed that wearing socks improved a woman's ability to achieve orgasm.¹ Uncomfortably cold feet triggered parts of a woman's brain associated with fear and anxiety. "Let them have socks," I say, and make socks the hot new accessory!

Here's the delicious rub: the connection also works another way—the more turned on we are, the safer and more comfortable we feel. When we're living a pleasure-filled life, we simply don't sweat the small stuff.

Turning yourself on through sensual pleasure on a regular basis helps tamp down vigilance, leaving you feeling more at home in your body, improving your self-esteem, and helping you be more in tune with the flow of life. Pleasure, while being a state of mind, lives in your body. Your partner, friends, and maybe even your kids might notice that you're calmer and at ease overall.

That's why embodying your senses is so important. It's about having a real body connection to the experiences and sensations you feel, along with the ability to weather them all.

How the Disconnect Relates to Sex and Pain

We can also experience disconnects in response to physical pain. This can include sexual pain as well as pain from other things. When there's any type of pain, pleasure takes a back seat and rightly so. It's hard to get excited and aroused when pain is getting you down. (In other words, "Not tonight, dear; I have a headache" is *real!*) Pain becomes the focus of our attention, overwhelming our every thought. We believe that emotional pain can sometimes exacerbate the physical pain many women have with sex. Pain has the capacity to take us totally out of our bodies.

A Note from Dee:

Chronic sexual pain can increase the disconnect. I've seen women who have disregarded their sensuality for a variety of reasons, such as poor body image, anxiety, or depression, causing psychological pain that contributes to this disconnect. What I want to talk about here is how chronic vulvar pain impacts a woman's connection to her sensual self.

When women experience pain at the vulva, the very thought of anything touching it and making the pain worse creates anxiety. Their world becomes smaller and smaller as they avoid anything that might increase their pain. They shy away from being touched sexually, sitting on a

bicycle seat, wearing tight clothing, or inserting a tampon. Like anyone with sexual pain, over time, this behavior becomes the accepted “norm.”

Women often withdraw from their partners just when they need tender and loving support the most. They distance themselves from any hugging, kissing, or touching in fear of inviting sexual intimacy. Rejecting their partners again and again wreaks havoc on the couple’s intimacy. Women find themselves avoiding sexy lingerie, making excuses to go to bed early and alone, and withdrawing completely from any type of touch, whether sexual or not.

On the flipside, women without partners often avoid relationships for all the same reasons. Even if they deeply desire to be with someone, they’re often too frightened to make themselves available. “Who wants to date somebody who can’t have sex?” was something I heard over and over again in my clinic. Pain with sex doesn’t just keep women from having sex; it keeps many from dating at all.

Women worry they’ll never get pregnant because they can’t have sex. If they make the decision to try to conceive, their anxiety over the pain it will cause is overwhelming. Many who have been able to have a child and want another, can’t bear the thought of their vulvar pain possibly worsening after the baby is born. Many women stop exercising because sweating is irritating to their tissues, stop swimming because the chemicals in the water burn their vulva, or stop walking briskly because the friction hurts too much. One woman I treated quit her job and became a recluse because her vulvar pain was so severe.

I realized that many women avoid celebrating much of what it means to be a woman. Many of them used to be dancers, athletes, and enthusiastic lovers, while others only dreamed of the opportunity to be active and make love. One of the most heartbreaking emotions these women

express is their anguish over the fear of forever being alone. Fact is, women with vulvar pain don't just lose out on sex; they lose out on so much of life. Disconnecting from their bodies is a reasonable response to being trapped by pain in a place they'd rather not be. Unfortunately, there's often a trade-off that comes with that disconnect: food tastes bland, music sounds monotone, and touch feels like sandpaper on their skin. In the end, women lose the desire and ability to feel pleasure.

If you've used any of these coping strategies, I totally understand. We're here to help you become all you want to be.

When pain is chronic, attempting to avoid any and all sensations can feel like a perfectly good solution. If you are in chronic pain and experiencing a disconnect between you and the sensations in your body, please know this is common strategy. Our goal is to help you create pleasurable sensations throughout your body. Like a muscle that has grown weak from misuse, we want to help you reconnect to your body through your senses. We refer to that as *embodiment*.

Embodiment is the antidote to disconnect. It requires us to be fully aware of the body, and to be present to how it feels. It's about acknowledging high and low sensations and paying attention to them rather than ignoring them. Without such embodiment, life can be dull and depressing, keeping us from being present to what's happening moment by moment. This is especially true when it comes to sex.

Having sex when we aren't embodied can foster distrust, anxiety, and a sense of loneliness. If our partners are enjoying themselves and we aren't (or, worse, pretending that we

are), sex can be alienating and heartbreaking. Instead of bringing us closer, sex without pleasure can create distance between us. And when you compound that with a hypersexualized world where images of mind-blowing sex are used to sell everything from entertainment to health and hygiene, the realization that you're having mind-numbing sex can be emotionally painful. In order to have greater access to both arousal and pleasure, we need an embodied connection to our sensuality. Such a connection spurs a special kind of alchemy, something we call the *Feel-Good Triad*.

The Feel-Good Triad

Great synergy emerges when arousal, pleasure, and sensuality come together. The three working together form what we call the *Feel-Good Triad*. Discovering your own feel-good triad will help you become more embodied—and yes, eventually it will lead to better sex, though that's only a small part of our aim.

Arousal is a general term, but it is often used to describe sexual arousal. We'll cover that in the next chapter; here, we're talking about arousal as *the physiological and psychological state of being awakened or of sense organs being stimulated to a point of perception*. Becoming aroused wakes up any one sense to something that wasn't there before—anything at all, as simple as a friend putting her hand on our shoulder or a good smell wafting from a restaurant window as we walk by. Such stimuli, subtle or intense, put the brain in a state of readiness by sparking changes in the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system, making our heart rate increase, our breath quicken, and our hormones begin to flow. The goal of arousal is to wake

us up and make us wonder, “Hello! What’s that new stimulation?” In an attempt to answer the question, our sense organs become more active, receiving more and more input from the stimulus as our awareness increases.

From our perspective, the desired outcome of arousal is pleasure. In other words, it’s more pleasing to smell a blooming rose than it is to smell the garbage sitting in the trash can. *Pleasure* is physical and/or emotional enjoyment. It can be experienced either alone or with other people. It’s about joy, satisfaction, and personal fulfillment. And it’s good for you; it makes you smile! As sex therapist Stella Resnick writes, pleasure is everything from “Aliveness, Activity, Awe” to “Zestful, Zealous, Zippy”!²

Sensuality is the third leg of the triad. Think of it like the luscious alcohol that infuses the spongy layer of the best tiramisu. Sensuality truly saturates arousal and pleasure, making both richer. Our five senses can help us become aroused and experience pleasure while embodied, which opens the doorway to an array of positive experiences that are just not available when we’re disconnected.

Because sensuality plays such a key role, it’s imperative that we fire up the senses, habitually teaching ourselves to experience them more fully. We have to do this *despite all the forces* that keep us from doing so: our busy schedules; the intrusion of technology; the responsibilities of parenting, work, or both. It’s also important to dispel the cultural conditioning that tells us that exploring sensuality is silly and selfish.

Once you embrace your senses, you’ll join the ranks of countless women who have embodied their pleasure and whose arousal went through the roof. This shift into their sensuality has had a significant impact on the rest of their lives. These women know, deep in their bones,

what they want to say, do, be, and ultimately achieve. And once found, their embodied pleasure is the catalyst that helps them become who they truly want to be. Through the Feel-Good Triad, they successfully found themselves.

By the way, we're not alone in knowing this; there are some amazing teachers out there who call embodied pleasure *turn-on*. Elizabeth notes that tantric and Taoist practitioners have been talking about it for centuries, which she'll tell you more about in Chapter Four. Our take on it is that turn-on is all about developing a deep and ongoing relationship with the Feel-Good Triad.

Do you see the gravity of what we're suggesting here? We hope so, because what we're recommending is actually quite major. We're asking you to shift your personal paradigm. We want you to live fully embodied by intentionally stoking your arousal, pleasure, and sensuality. And eventually, we want living this way to become second nature.

So, from this point forward, we're going to teach you how to connect with and embody your senses. We believe it will change your relationship with pain, sex, your partner, and *your whole life*. But lest we get ahead of ourselves, we'll start with a few preliminary prescriptions, listed below.

Prescription 4: Explore Your Senses

The purpose of this exercise is to help you start identifying what you like and don't like through your five senses. Instead of sitting down in one go and exploring everything at once, try focusing on one sense per day. The goal is to go about your day as normal, integrating the awareness of that sense into everything you do.

What You'll Need:

- A journal and a pen.

Let's Get Started!

- This is a five-day prescription. Use these prompts, one for each day:

1. Sight: Identify what you like visually. Perhaps you prefer sculpture to painting, bright colors to earth tones, the sights of the city skyscraper or country fields awash with spring flowers. How about a star-filled sky at night? Pay attention to what you like for aesthetic reasons alone.

2. Smell: Journey through your spice rack, the perfume counter at the local department store, or the floral section at the grocery store and identify which scents you enjoy.

Which ones do you avoid?

3. Taste: Do you enjoy spicy or sour? Sweet or salty? Does your taste change during the day or depending on your mood? Experiment with strong and subtle flavors to determine what you like most.

4. Sound: Do you gravitate toward hip-hop or rap? Country versus classical? Loud or soft noises? Do windchimes relax or annoy you? Take notice of the background noises that fill your everyday life.

5. Touch: What fabrics do you like against your skin? How does it feel when you shampoo your hair, dry your body with a towel, or rub lotion into your skin? What speed

and pressure do you naturally use to do these daily activities? Pay particular attention to how it feels when you're naked, as bare skin is more sensitive to touch.

- In the morning, take a moment to jot down which of the five senses you'll be working with for that day.
- Then, put heightened awareness on that sense throughout the day. Notice the intricacies of what attracts and repels you. Notice what you naturally gravitate toward. Notice when you like things in an extreme way (maybe it's not just that you like things spicy, you like the burn inside your mouth!) and how what you like changes with circumstances throughout the day. Do you like to play loud music in your car—but reach to turn it down when trying to find a parking spot? Notice how your mood affects what you like. Simply notice. Don't make any judgments.
- At the end of each day, write down what you noticed. What did you learn about that particular sense? What did you learn about yourself? What did you enjoy the most? The least? How did you feel during the exploration? Was it fun? Was it boring? Did any memories come to the surface? Any emotions? Everything is OK, remember, it's an exercise to awaken you to your senses.
- Repeat this five-day process as many times as you like! Practice, practice, practice. It will make a difference and the more you do it, the more you'll enjoy it.

Prescription 5: Wake Up Your Pelvis

This sensory practice will increase both your psychological and physiological arousal. Psychologically, it feels good (well, at first it usually feels awkward...but you'll get there!) and brings your awareness to the pelvic region. Physiologically, it increases the blood flow in all the muscles of the pelvic floor, and that is the start of arousal.

What You'll Need:

- Fifteen-plus minutes of complete privacy.
- A stereo and access to some fun music. Play around on a streaming service or create your own playlist that suites your fancy.
- Enough space to move; you don't need a full dance studio but pushing some furniture back in your living room may be useful.
- Optional: A yoga mat.

Let's Get Started!

- First, repeat the stretches in Prescription 3. These will help you warm up.
- Then, come to all fours with your knees as wide as your hips, your feet directly behind your knees, and your hips at a right angle. Your elbows should be slightly bent so they don't lock. You can spread your fingers out wide with your palms on the floor or, if that hurts your wrists, prop yourself up on your fists with your wrists straight. If getting on your hands and knees is difficult, you can always lean forward against a counter to do the exercise.
- Begin to do the yoga pose known as "cat/cow." As you inhale, allow your belly to relax toward the floor as your shoulders and hips move upward, arching your back. Your pelvic floor muscles relax a bit as you do this. Without straining your neck, look up. Then, as you exhale, lift upward from the center of your spine and tuck your tailbone under as your pelvic floor muscles tighten. Look down and back toward your breasts. You should look like a cat from a Halloween

decoration. Continue to move back and forth like this with your breath. It should feel nice and relaxing.

- After a few minutes, get up and start your music. You may also want to lower the lights.
- With your feet hip-distance apart, start moving your hips to the music in a circle, as if you were hula-hooping. Experiment by going in both directions, making your hip movements large and small. Close your eyes if you can keep your balance while doing so; if not, just relax your eyelids so you aren't really focusing on anything in particular. Relax your jaw and let your mouth stay comfortably open. Allow yourself to be totally present to the sensation in your hips, feeling them sway to the music. Try moving your hips in a figure-eight, making sure to go in both directions.
- Let your feet start moving with your hips. Move back and forth across the room, exploring whatever space is available to you.
- After a few minutes, begin to write the letters of the alphabet with your hips. See your tailbone as a pencil pointing toward the floor and move your hips in the shape of each letter, one by one.
- Now, it gets really fun. Think of the words that you used to describe the wonderful sensual things you found in Prescription 4 and "write" them in the air with your hips.
- Allow yourself to be silly or goofy; if you have any inclination to laugh out loud, please follow it! This is supposed to be fun.
- Let yourself go. Feel the sensations deep in your pelvis every step of the way.
- When you're finished, move back to small circles, paying attention to each movement.
- Then turn the music off and lie back down on the floor to absorb all the great work you just did.
- Stay there for several minutes, just feeling the *aliveness* in your pelvic area. Breathe into this. And promise yourself you'll keep going, because *this feeling of aliveness is what you have been waiting for.*

Starting a Sensual Revolution

In this chapter, we introduced the idea that reconnecting to sensuality is imperative to rediscovering your sexual pleasure—it's the beginning of your own personal sexual revolution. We began by exploring why you may have disconnected from your senses. You then learned about the link between this disconnect and pain—both physical and emotional. We went on to explain the Feel-Good Triad of arousal, pleasure, and sensuality. Finally, we offered you prescriptions to help you embrace your senses again. These prescriptions were extremely helpful to Laura as she slowly moved toward embodied sensuality.

This is the beginning of a journey toward sensual pleasure and embodiment. The lessons from this chapter will continue throughout the book, as you naturally disconnect and reconnect to your sensory experience, again and again. It's a worthy endeavor that will change your life.

Once you are fully embodied, sexuality can really begin to flourish. Sexual expression is a natural result of sensual awareness. And it's the topic of the next chapter. We'll start by taking a closer look at how sensuality is an essential precursor to sexuality. Then we'll discuss the topic of self-pleasuring and the importance of making it an integral part of your journey. We'll then talk about orgasm—one of the many potential benefits of a self-pleasure practice. Finally, you'll be guided through pleasure calibration. If the thought of self-pleasuring doesn't float your boat just yet, hang tight. It's our hope that you'll climb aboard and enjoy the sail soon enough.

Chapter Three

1. Michelle Roberts, "Scan Spots Women Faking Orgasms," *BBC News*, June 20, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4111360.stm>.
2. Resnick, Stella. "The ABC's of Pleasure," February 20, 2020, <https://www.drstellaresnick.com/post/the-abc-s-of-pleasure>.