

## THE BIOLOGY OF PASSION: A REICHIAN VIEW OF SEX AND LOVE

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Our life force has been explored by every culture in Earth's history. Patriarchal societies called this energy "God." The Celts, Minoans and Sumerians worshipped the "Goddess." The Chinese inserted needles along acupuncture channels to cure illness by unblocking life energy (which they called "chi" or "qi"). Hindus focused this energy (called "kundalini") up the spine to produce enlightenment. At the beginning of the 19th century, German industrialist Karl von Reichenbach named the cosmic current "odic force," elaborating on what Frenchman Franz Anton Mesmer (the founder of hypnosis) had a century earlier termed "animal magnetism". And Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, called it "libido," viewing it as a primitive drive residing in the unconscious.

By the time Freud was born in 1856, the idea of our universe suffused with an energy force was replaced by the notion of the cosmos as a giant, well-run machine. Humans were minuscule parts of this system, though complete unto themselves. If a part broke down, it got fixed so the machine would run smoothly again. But if the universe was a giant machine, that made us soul-less robots. Emotional expressiveness was considered unimportant, even dangerous. This mechanistic philosophy encouraged people to live solely in their heads, disconnected from their bodies.

Freud's background in neurology, which taught him that nerve impulses are electrical, helped him understand that libido is not just an intellectual abstraction: the energy of sexual drive had to come from somewhere, and that "somewhere" was the body. Given the mechanistic climate in which Freud developed his psychoanalytic theories, his claim that libido was a naturally-occurring, quantifiable amount of energy was radical. But Freud, trapped by the social mores of his period, regarded this energy negatively. He taught that neurosis results from yielding to one's sexual impulses, a healthy psyche is based on one's ability to control the need for sex, and that society best flourishes when people rechannel their natural impulses into more "civilized" activities like work or artistic endeavors. Freud called the ability to harness the libido "sublimation" and said that if the sublimation was incomplete or not attained at all, neurosis also results. It was a no-win situation. Passion, which Freud conceded was inborn, nonetheless caused neurosis.

It was Freud's protégé, Wilhelm Reich, who re-unified the mind and body. Born in 1897 and raised on a farm, Reich viewed sex as a normal part of life. He enjoyed sexually relating and called the universal force "orgone." The young man appreciated Freud's insight that the libido was a physical, tangible thing, but he disputed that the libido required restraint. Sublimation did not support the normal human need for sensual satisfaction and communication through touch. And it did not concede the possibility that people can be sensual and civilized at the same time. "The overwhelming majority of sick people do not have the capacity for sublimation", Reich observed, doubting the wisdom and desirability of sublimation in the first place. Meanwhile, psychoanalysis was proving unsuccessful in helping people sublimate their sex drive.

Reich recognized that since people couldn't sublimate, they could be cured only by fully expressing their sexual potential. He developed an extraordinary psychotherapy based on the needs of the entire bodymind. Normally, an emotion consists of electrical impulses in the nervous system and hormones in the bloodstream, accompanied by vocalizing

(laughing, sobbing, etc.) along with movement or an act that expresses the feeling (hugging, hitting, etc.). Affection involves increased bioelectrical charge radiating from the heart out through the arms; the vocalization might be a sigh, moan or "I love you"; and the unsuppressed act is a friendly touch or gesture or a hug, which expresses and literally releases the energy. Anger, a different set of neurological impulses and hormones, is manifested by shouting and yelling or speaking firmly, together with the act of posturing the body in an aggressive manner or (in the extreme) striking out. Grief has its own combination of signals, and so on. But when someone holds back psychologically - through fear that their emotional states and needs might be ignored, trivialized or ridiculed - the bodily musculature is similarly contracted, with restricted breathing and energy flow. Over time the physical tension becomes automatic, hiding both the feeling and knowledge of the feeling from the person's conscious awareness.

In psychoanalytic therapy, people customarily spend lots of time talking about their feelings rather than experiencing them. They do not learn to integrate their body and emotions with their intellect. Reich addressed this by designing his therapy to reestablish "biopsychic motility through the dissolution of the [rigid] character and muscular armour". First, he verbally challenged clients' defensive attitudes and behaviours by relating how physical tension and body language mirror inner emotional states. If a person smiled but had an angry gaze, Reich asked what angry feelings she was masking with a false smile. If someone puffed out his chest, Reich inquired why he was protecting his heart from hurt.

By definition, chronic muscle tightness becomes so habitual that one no longer knows how to loosen up, even if s/he is intellectually aware of being out of touch with feelings. After his clients acknowledged their defenses - yet were still unable to feel the emotions beneath their blocks - Reich further facilitated body awareness by directing them to breathe, move, shout or moan into their tension. He eventually touched the body to offer support or awaken stuck and numb areas. The release of long-held tension from muscles organically inspired the emotion corresponding to the impulse held in that portion of the person's bodymind. When the subject physically reached out, repressed love and longing - and sometimes sorrow at not having been loved - emerged. When Reich pressed and kneaded the tight abdominal musculature holding the diaphragm in spasm, the client would sob deeply. As Reich loosened tight muscles (or awakened flaccid ones), years of sadness, fear, terror, rage, sexual desire, joy and love were experienced directly instead of merely discussed. When the clients were physically touched by their therapist, their hearts became correspondingly touched and more open to loving and being loved. Once they released their stuck energy, they were control of their lives, no longer driven by unresolved emotions and traumas. Choice instead of compulsion directed their feelings and actions.

Reich's colleagues hailed him as a genius for his insights on human nature and psychoanalysis until he began touching his patients. If you think that body-oriented therapy is radical today, imagine the rumours circulating in uptight Vienna. Reich's good reputation began to decline as people wrongly gossiped that he was a sexual pervert.

Undaunted, Reich asked: what happens when someone is unable to sublimate sexual energy? Repressed sexual desire caused myriad problems when it remained stuck in the body. "Neurosis does not exist without genital disturbances and gross signs of sexual stasis [stagnation and imbalance]," he wrote. "The establishment of full genital organization and genital gratification [are] the essential and indispensable factor for a cure... Only genital gratification, as distinct from non-genital sexual drives [Freud's sublimated urges], is capable of dispelling sexual stasis, thus withdrawing the source of energy from neurotic symptoms." Neurosis remains "when treatment has not given the patient the capacity for satisfactory and regular sexual intercourse".

That people need genital gratification in order to become psychologically healthy was not what turn-of-the-century wealthy Viennese psychoanalysts - most of whom were sexually repressed themselves - wanted to hear. Once Reich insisted that it was their responsibility to help clients achieve sexual satisfaction, his reputation further plummeted. Now he was falsely accused of having sexual intercourse with his patients.

Nonetheless, Reich next tested heterosexual couples with laboratory equipment to measure their physiological, biological and psychological responses in various states of sexual arousal and non-arousal. He observed that people who were emotionally open and relaxed (and had deep easy breathing) routinely gave stronger millivoltmeter readings than contracted and emotionally repressed people (whose obstructed breathing accompanied their anxiety). Pleasure-seeking and pleasure-avoiding (pain-seeking) behaviours respectively and consistently correlated with high or low bioelectrical charge.

Reich also discovered that sexual intercourse for both sexes consists of pulsing energy movement in four beats: mechanical tension, bioelectric charge, bioelectric discharge, and relaxation. The entire body conducts electricity: all bodily cells radiate charge and the energy fields of the partners fuse. The positive and negative charge flow back and forth between the couple until the current equalizes. "The surface of the penis must be seen as one electrode and the vaginal mucosa [mucous membrane] as the other," Reich wrote. "The contact between the two is made by the acidic female secretion acting as an electrolyte [charged fluid functioning as a battery]." Moreover, the male and female genitalia were discovered to be analogous in form, function and sensitivity. "Orgastic phenomena in the healthy woman... fully resemble those of the man," Reich asserted. "Women are able to experience the same kind of rhythmic... convulsions of the involuntary muscles; they experience peripheral concentration of excitation before climax and centripetal draining and ebbing away of excitation after climax, exactly the way men do." Reich's description of "pleasurable tension" that is felt during sex might sound paradoxical, since bodily tension is normally an expression of armour (emotional repression). But there is a crucial difference between unobstructed sexual tension and the tension that results from emotional repression. "Certainly each new friction movement increases the electric surface potential" during sex, Reich wrote, "but at the same time, the ensuing spasmodic muscle contractions discharge this accumulated energy, and it is these contractions which render the experience of increasing tension as pleasurable rather than unpleasurable."

An unobstructed orgasm consists of undulating unbroken energy waves moving rhythmically up and down the body. A person experiencing this has "the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, free of any inhibitions [and] the capacity to discharge completely the damned-up sexual excitation through involuntary, pleasurable convulsions of the body". Reich termed such a sexually healthy individual "orgastically potent." His meaning of the word "potency" was different from how the term might be used today in a macho, ego-inflated sense. Orgastic potency indicates the ability to surrender to one's own life force without self-conscious monitoring, fear, or attempts by the ego to control movements and feelings. Reich consistently noticed that an orgastically potent person feels tenderness and gratitude toward the partner as well as satiation. He repeatedly correlated an unobstructed biological/physiological sexual response with love, because the energetic and bodily expression of full orgasmic release and what we perceive as an emotion cannot be separated.

In order to further understand how completely our biological makeup determines sexual functioning, how unimpeded orgasmic release is connected to love, and how sexual pleasure is integrally tied to an overall sense of well-being, we need to know how the autonomic nervous system is involved during a full orgasmic release. The autonomic or involuntary nervous system, which functions independently of conscious will, is divided into

the sympathetic and parasympathetic components. The sympathetic nervous system governs contraction of the organism, which relates to feelings of displeasure. The parasympathetic nervous system governs expansion of the organism, which relates to feelings of pleasure. Unpleasant and pleasant responses span a continuum: on one end, terror to mild discomfort, becoming neutral at mid-point, gravitating to serenity and eventually a full body orgasm. The following chart is adapted from Reich's *The Function of the Orgasm* and his 1934 article, "The Basic Antithesis of Vegetative Life Functions."

<b>Parasympathetic Nervous System</b> <b>Relates to: Pleasure and Contentment,</b> <b>the result of Expansion</b>	<b>Sympathetic Nervous System</b> <b>Relates to: Unpleasure and Anxiety,</b> <b>the result of Contraction</b>
Activity of salivary glands to produce a moist mouth – a "mouth watering" situation	Inactivity of salivary glands to produce a dry mouth – where the mouth is "dry with fright"
The smooth muscle of the iris in the eye relaxes, allowing the pupil to constrict and less light to enter the eye (so the person literally sees more clearly)	The smooth muscle of the iris in the eye contracts, allowing the pupil to dilate and more light to enter the eye (so the person is literally blinded by fear)
Stimulation of the tear glands, producing moist and lubricated, glowing eyes: associated with joy	Inhibition of the tear glands, producing "dry eyes": associated with depression
Reduction of activity of sweat glands in face and body so that skin is dry: person feels "cool, calm and collected"	Stimulation of the sweat glands in face and body so that the skin is moist: person feels "clammy and cold with fear"
Activity of digestive movements and increased secretion of digestive fluids: being at ease fosters assimilation of nourishment	Reduction of digestive movements and secretion of digestive fluids: too anxiety-ridden to assimilate food well
Dilation of the arteries: blood flows to surface of skin, producing a healthy glow and psychologically and physiologically indicating warmth	Contraction of the arteries: blood flows away from surface of skin, producing a pallor and psychologically and physiologically indicating a coolness or coldness
Decreased secretion of adrenal hormones, indicating feelings of security and peace	Increased output of adrenal hormones (typical fight-or-flight response), indicating fear and anxiety
Scalp muscles are relaxed	Scalp muscles are excited, so hair literally "stands on end"

Potassium ion mineral group predominates	Calcium ion mineral group predominates
Increased secretion of alkaline fluids, which hydrate the system and stimulate good health	Increased secretion of acid fluids, which dehydrate the system and lead to illness
Increased susceptibility to electrical stimulation	Decreased susceptibility to electrical stimulation
Decreased oxygen consumption	Increased oxygen consumption
Decreased blood pressure	Increased blood pressure
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sex Organs (Female and Male)</i></p> Relaxation of smooth musculature (vagina and scrotum), stimulation of glandular secretions, increased blood supply, increase of sexual feeling	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Sex Organs (Female and Male)</i></p> Tightening of smooth musculature (vagina and scrotum), inhibition of glandular secretions, decrease of blood supply, reduction of sexual feeling

"Sexuality and anxiety are functions of the living organism operating in opposite directions: pleasurable expansion and anxious contraction," Reich observed. Simply put, when excitement is blocked, it transforms into anxiety. How can we practically use this knowledge?

Take a condition such as a heart attack. "Genital excitation and the anticipation of sexual pleasure produce the same phenomena in the heart and the vasomotor system as does anxiety," Reich wrote.

When we observe the vasomotor phenomena connected with the state of sexual excitation, we notice primarily the pounding of the heart and the physical sensation of warmth. There is also a sense of pleasurable and anxious anticipation intermingled, due to the fact that the pulse accelerates with the idea of impending danger just as it does with the expectation of sexual pleasure, producing the same specific sensation in the heart in both cases....[Also] a very brief cardiac dilation precedes acceleration of the pulse. Those kinesthetic sensations accompanying sexuality that are localized specifically in the cardiac area form the basis for numerous idioms such as..."to lose one's heart," "a [loving and] generous heart" (applied to someone who is easily approachable), and so forth.

"To the extent that no inhibition is present," the sexual excitement "subsequently shifts to the genital organ system, thus unburdening the cardiac system". However, note at which point the physiological similarities between sexual excitement and anxiety become differences. In a person unable to surrender to passion and love, the undischarged energy in the heart can remain stuck in the cardiovascular system; and if enough pressure accumulates it can weaken the heart muscle. The constricting, stifling feeling in the pericardium region during cardiac arrest is literally due to the tightening of the muscle. A psychological corollary might be someone who is afraid to express love, eventually becoming sick or dying from a broken heart.

There are many psychological and physiological manifestations of withholding one's love and not being able to "let go" sexually. Reich constantly observed in his armored clients how repressed sexual excitement manifests in distorted sexual behaviour. The "pathological counterpart" to tender and loving feelings is expressed in "the urge to produce violent frictions," "especially pronounced in sadistic compulsive characters who suffer from penis anaesthesia and the inability to discharge semen. Another example [of pathology] is the nervous haste of those who suffer from premature ejaculations." Reich also regarded the learned sexual passivity of women as dysfunctional. In short, "the orgasmically impotent person experiences a leaden exhaustion, disgust, repulsion, weariness, or indifference and, occasionally, hatred toward the partner". Either men or women could be orgasmically impotent.

Severe blockage can correlate with depression and self-effacement if the energy/impulse is turned inward against oneself, but for this discussion I want to focus on the anger, rage and outright sadism that occur when sexual energy is turned outward against others. The negative feelings toward their partners that Reich observed in sexually blocked people are evident in rape, wife battering and other sexual crimes. These all demonstrate the anger and frustration that result when expressions of love, passion and affection are obstructed. Prostitution illustrates the mind/body split of those who are unable to integrate their sexual self with their loving self. Pornography (as opposed to erotica) - which portrays people in sexual situations without a mutually respectful connection to each other - is the pictorial or written depiction of people with this mind/body split. No person fully connected to their ability to love would willingly engage in such acts.

Now I want to address sexual sadomasochism (S/M), bondage and other behaviours that are distortions of our sexual energy - despite the libertarian rhetoric of "consensual activity" and "sex is an abstract construct; we give sex its meaning." ("Libertarian" shares the same root as "libertine" and "lecherous"). The ritualized domination of one person by another that occurs in these sexual settings creates what contemporary author Riane Eisler calls the "dominator" rather than "partnership" model of relationships. The reason, however, for the pathology can be found in the biology and physiology of these practices. Sadomasochism is an effective catalyst for inducing excitement because in simulating a perception of life-threatening circumstances, it duplicates some of the conditions of sexual arousal: similar heart and vasomotor system activity, elevated blood pressure, increased pulse rate and respiration, higher skin temperature, and augmented muscular tension. (Whipping and smacking bring the circulation to the surface of the body, forcing sensation and response to an armored area in a person who has trouble feeling.) Contemporary psychiatrist Anthony Storr writes:

The Kinsey researchers point out that this close relation [fourteen identical physiological changes] between the two states of arousal may explain why frustrated sexual responses so often turn into rage, or conversely, why anger, fighting, and quarrels may suddenly turn into sexual responses. Subjectively, both states postpone fatigue and increase the individual's muscular tension and capacity, thus enhancing a sense of well-being and of vital participation in life. It is not surprising that adolescent males seek out situations like football games in which they become aggressively aroused, since such arousal is life-enhancing. Perhaps one reason "macho" displays and football violence are phenomena predominantly found amongst the young is that such activities, for individuals whose sexual life is not yet established, constitute alternative ways of seeking the excitement of physiological arousal.

We have all heard of lovers who need a good quarrel to get their sexual juices flowing. Sadomasochistic sex lies much further along the continuum, followed by torture, murder

and war. We violate our innate neurological, hormonal and emotional wiring when we accept violence or inflict it on others in a sexual setting. Erotic charge flows unimpeded in the body only in an atmosphere of complete safety, since fear or threat by definition cause muscular, energetic and emotional contraction that work against a full body orgasm. But S/M sex, even if presumed to be consensual, does not create an atmosphere of safety. It cannot, since by definition what gives S/M its sexual thrill is the implied danger or potential of danger.

"Orgasm does not usually occur in anger," Storr writes, echoing Reich; "nor do erection and other manifestations of vasodilatation. The increased glandular secretion connected with the sexual organs is generally absent in anger; and so are the rhythmical muscular movements characteristic of sexual excitement". It is these important differences between anger and sexual excitement that give sadomasochistic sex and sexual crimes such as rape their compulsive, addictive quality. Although bondage does help build a sexual charge and even induce orgasm, the original need to "let go" during sex is never truly satisfied because the release is incomplete. The person - unable to completely surrender to his/her own desire for connection and love, or to be aroused by being respectfully and passionately loved - continues to need situations of duress to experience release. As long as the origin of the stuck energy is not addressed, the tight (or abnormally flaccid) muscles and suppressed emotions remain.

On one level, participating in sexually distorted practices can be compassionately understood as someone's attempt to become whole by rectifying the past. Sadomasochistic sex, for instance, can simulate or invoke earlier traumas to which one tries to respond differently now by reversing or seizing control of a potentially harmful situation. I remember a client who reported becoming frozen when she was sexually assaulted as a child. She shrank in terror, hardly moving or making a sound. Later as an adult she enacted bondage scenes, insisting that the practice was under her control because it was consensual. "My father used to beat me," she said. "But now I get to choose who hits me, how hard and for how long. This way, I'm in charge of when it will stop." She did not want to admit that despite her apparent control over the smaller details, as long as she was still being hit she did not have control over her life. Moreover, using dominance/submission tactics to build up a sexual charge reinforces the very power dynamics that led to the original abuse in the first place. The patriarchal condition of dominance and power-over cannot be dismantled by duplicating the violence.

The damming up of passion profoundly affects the entire self. When energy in one part of the body becomes obstructed, the rest of the body/mind suffers. If someone is afraid to be emotionally open in some way, some aspect of the body becomes rigid. So it will part of the person's thinking, emotions and world view, since mind and body cannot be separated. Body armoring reflects and perpetuates mental and emotional blocks; and conversely, emotional blocks reflect and perpetuate body armoring. Armoring always occurs when our life force has only an indirect route of discharge. Denying passion means dividing ourselves into two people, a logical "mind" and an irrational "body." But this dis-integration leads us away from our true purpose. "Life is characterized by a remarkable rationality and purposefulness of instinctive, involuntary action. The life process is inherently 'rational.' It becomes distorted and grotesque when it is not allowed to develop freely," Reich wrote.

We function effectively only when our energy flows, not when it is stuck. Reich invented the term "sex-economy" to indicate the efficiency and grace with which people move, think, feel and interact when they are unarmored. The most efficient use of energy is love.

As long as sexual release is merged with anger and violence, we are neither sexually free nor loving. We cannot commune with ourselves, each other, or feel connected to the

universe if our life energy is blocked. Contemporary sex therapist Margo Anand writes how "body-to-body and soul-to-soul communion" brings ecstatic states. It is this ecstasy to which Reich referred when he wrote that the involuntary spiral streaming of orgonotic energy that exists in the upper atmosphere of the earth is the same energy in quality and movement that manifests in the unarmored pelvic musculature during sexual release. Heartfelt, connected sex is a genuine spiritual experience because the spiraling movements of life force in the human body mirror the spiralling energetic currents in the cosmos.

Understanding the biology of passion opens many doors. It helps us strive for complete sexual expression: open-hearted, full-body (full-bodied), mutual honouring during whatever time we relate as lovers. When we access our innate, biologically programmed loving nature, the desire to inflict pain on others is eliminated. As we strive for community (communion), we should ask ourselves: In what areas are we tight or fearful, angry or rigid? Do we try to defend ourselves against loving? Do we hold back sometimes, lash out at other times? Or do we allow our energy to flow; are we willing to risk being emotionally vulnerable? It can take a lifetime to discard the blocks that prevent us from expressing our loving nature, but as the Beatles once sang, "Love is all we need." Life is fundamentally simple. It is the blocking of love that makes our lives difficult.

Wilhelm Reich helped us understand that one of the most authentic ways of expressing love is in the physical act of unarmored, connected sex. For those of us who dream of adding more lovers into our family, may the quality of our love be as important as the quantity.

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