

The Arousal Template

As a child matures, an arousal template is formed. Family messages, early sexual experiences, church influences, childhood abuse, magazines, television and movies, and a variety of other factors flow together to create an internal process called sexual arousal. Part of the arousal template is formed intentionally by church, culture, and family while other parts are formed quite accidentally, as we shall see. Remember that arousal is a physical phenomenon. As such, it will operate using the same principles your body does. Your immunological system scans for patterns of threatening microorganisms that fit the pattern of a threatening bacteria and it immediately organizes an attack on cells. Likewise, your brain constantly searches for patterns that are familiar in order to make sense of them. There is a sexual scan that occurs to see if a pattern fits. The arousal template for each person can be unique and quite specific. Here are some recent stories I have run across:

Jake's mom often walked nude in front of him when he was a child and an adolescent. As an adult, Jake developed a problem with voyeurism and in fact had two major relationships with strippers who took care of him and then left him for someone else.

Freddie's dad had a large pornography collection that he allowed his son to use. As an adult, Freddie took a part-time job for a time working as a bartender in a strip club. Often, he would have one-night stands with women who worked in the club. Soon thereafter, he discovered the Internet and began to access pornography Web sites. He was soon downloading pornography three hours a day and most of every weekend.

As a youngster, Sam became sexually fascinated with lingerie ads he stumbled across in a department store catalog. He would tear out the lingerie pages and stuff them under his mattress. When he learned to masturbate, he used these pages to stimulate himself. As an adult, Sam discovered the Internet and was soon spending about two hours every day downloading pictures of women in lingerie. When he came into treatment, he had more than a hundred CDs full of pictures of women in lingerie. He had met his then-current girlfriend in church. Her occupation? A sales representative for lingerie companies.

All three of these men had a problem with voyeurism, or visual sex. Did you notice, however, that the route each followed into his problem was different? They were each seeking out and following a different sexual pattern that had started early in life. Jake's preoccupation with women who strip and with abandonment started with his mother's behavior. Freddie learned at a young age about hoarding pornography. And Sam's fixation with lingerie really started in a family that never talked about sex—the catalog provided his only access to sexual “information.” They

each formed a template that filtered all sexual stimulation, allowed only certain patterns to enter, and thus limited their sexual options. Then came obsession and ritualization, and the addictive cycle was born. Disrupting this cycle starts with understanding the pattern-seeking characteristics of your body and how the arousal template was formed. In so doing, you can begin to broaden your sexual stimuli and to introduce new sexual options that are more functional and healthy.

The arousal template can already be discerned between the ages of five and eight; hence events early in life can have a profound impact on the emerging sexual self. Cybersex has already taught us that adults can experience significant alteration of their arousal template under the hypnotic influence of electronic sex. Thanks to cybersex, people rapidly form new obsessions that become so fixed, they have the power of early childhood experiences. This fact is very important because for many years we believed that the arousal templates were firmly fixed and unalterable. Now we realize they can be supplemented or even replaced. The downside is that the template can still lead to obsession. The upside is that change is possible. For change to take place, however, you must understand your current template, beginning with feelings, especially anger.

Sexualized Feelings

Consider the following:

Many Web sites dedicated to voyeurism frequently post nude pictures of spouses, ex-girlfriends, and ex-spouses submitted by men who report that these women do not know about the posting. To post a nude picture for others' sexual gratification without that person's knowledge or permission is an angry and vengeful act. The opposite also occurs. Angry "ex's" post nude pictures of themselves to retaliate for being rejected.

An airline pilot has a problem with compulsive affairs in an industry in which this problem is all too common. He comes, however, from a very devout and restrictive religious tradition and is tormented with shame and guilt. He is the father of three and a deacon in his church. But he also has had sex with more than five hundred women in about fifteen years. In therapy, he realizes that he has anger toward the church and anger toward his wife. His breakthrough came when he had a fight with his wife and immediately felt an extreme desire to be sexual outside the marriage. His therapist helped him see that his inability to adequately respond to his wife triggered the sexual acting out. He could get revenge without her knowing it and restore internal "equality" for himself. The pilot learned how dysfunctional his inability to get angry with his wife was, how his feelings about the church and its sexual teachings supercharged his acting out, and how his compulsive behavior was fueled in part by his sexualized rage.

A lovely college-educated African-American woman worked as a stripper. She had a history of extensive sexual and physical abuse by men in her family. She described to her therapist the sexual gratification she felt when men took out their wallets to get money to put on the stage or in her garter. In her view, she had humiliated them and saw them as despicable. She felt superior,

powerful, and sexual. Her therapist pointed out how this situation merely recycled the abuse experiences in her family. She became powerful and rageful when sexual. Nor was this dynamic restricted to her dancing. She had a history of being sexual with teachers, a college professor, and her doctor. Sex was the great equalizer with the many men with whom she had been sexual. Unfortunately, it also left her with suicidal feelings, a deep emptiness, a sexual addiction, and a pernicious drug habit.

A white accountant who had always lived by the rules discovered his wife had had a series of affairs with African-American men. He felt very betrayed and angry, but also obsessed about and aroused by what she had done. He reported that the hottest sex they had ever had was when he was gathering details of her exploits. He then discovered cybersex and went to the sites that featured African-American men with white women. He went downhill fast. He was averaging thirty hours a week doing cybersex and neglecting his job. He started to collect pornography of African-American and white couples and became a regular customer for prostitutes. His asking his wife for details became badgering and harassing. When he was asked by his therapist if he had stalked his wife, he said that he would never do that. The therapist rephrased the question and asked if he had followed his wife. "Absolutely," he responded. Actually, he had her under surveillance all the time. The therapist helped the patient understand the role of unresolved anger in his now-sexually compulsive pattern. In therapy, his wife also admitted that even her selection of African-American men was about her anger.

The wife of a high-profile man went to a therapist because of her extreme unhappiness and depression. She had been sexually acting out in many ways for more than a decade. She reported she had even had oral sex with a male stripper in public. Her husband did not know about this or her other activities. But that he could learn of it was erotic for her. This woman's therapist observed that it may have been erotic, but it was also angry. Such a public display was designed to humiliate and embarrass her successful partner. It was as if she was toying with his humiliation while not actually carrying it out. In addition, she could then obsess about it. Her therapist explained that the "perverse" part of perversion is often vengeful or defiant anger.

In each of these cases, anger and eroticism became intertwined or fused. The mechanisms for this process are easy to understand, but to begin, we have to look at arousal templates more closely.

As we grow up, we incorporate our life experiences and our sexual experiences with what we are told or learn about sex into a sexual belief system, or template. What we learn about relationships and family also becomes part of our template. This template builds on preferences already determined by our genetic code. Whether we like tall or short, blonds or redheads—all our preferences are determined by a mix of physiology and culturally-based learning. As we move through adolescence and into adulthood, this template becomes our guide to what we feel to be erotic. Much of this template remains at an unconscious level.

Almost anything can become part of the arousal template. A rural child growing up where there was no running water might have snuck up behind an outhouse to peer in and watch female family members urinate. Curiosity and arousal could then become connected with urination. As an adult, this person might view urination as a cue for arousal. Pornography of women urinating or spy-cams in rest rooms or prostitutes willing to give “golden showers” could all become extensions of that original scenario or story. Similarly, some men become fascinated as adolescents with girls who smoke. As adults, they seek restaurants or parks near high schools where they can watch girls smoke, or they might drive by areas where girls smoke. They might also take a short-cut by logging on to the net and seek out the many web sites dedicated to girls (who are not necessarily nude) smoking.

As objects, situations, or scenarios become eroticized, so do feelings that accompany them. Many psychology experiments have consistently shown that people were viewed as more attractive when the subjects perceived fear or risk either to themselves or that person. Fear and risk is a well-documented neurochemical escalator of the sexual experience, as is pain. Many female victims of violent childhood sexual abuse report that as adults, they are unable to be orgasmic unless their male partner is hurting them. I have had many traumatized female clients tell me that they could not even masturbate unless they put astringent or abrasive materials in their vaginas. They could not even stimulate themselves without the pain.

Consider the very successful scientist who told of a violent childhood. He can remember his father battering his mother so badly, he could hear her body hit the wall in the next room. He would masturbate to comfort himself in his anxiety. He also had a problem wetting the bed and defecating in his nightclothes until he was six. As an adult, he found fear erotic—any kind of fear. He would compulsively seek high-risk sex. Even his own feces and urine were highly arousing. To use the clinical term, *coprophilia*, hardly captures the full picture of what happened to this man. Behind what many would call perverse behavior is a severely traumatized child.

In the same fashion, anger becomes eroticized. First, anger occurs in situations of high risk and fear. Anger adds intensity to the sexual experience and becomes a neurochemical escalator, just as fear does. Second, anger often lies at the core scenarios, stories, and beliefs embedded in the arousal template. Therefore, current sexual behavior can draw enormous energy from past wounds and experience. Finally, anger becomes the sexual stimulus for some people. In order to make sense of how anger can have such an effect, we have to break the situations down into component types or profiles.

Power and the Restoration of Self

In this profile, sex is used to restore power in some way. In the case above in which the husband could not deal with conflict with his spouse, he restored his sense of self by acting out in a way in which she had no control. He believed that he deserved sex because he was so misunderstood and that his wife deserved what he did because her behavior was so bad. How can this be retaliation if she never finds out what he's doing? The possibility that she might find out makes the behavior's value for her husband almost as great as if he had done it in front of her. (It is also important to note that their relationship also involved an intimacy disorder because their inability to create intimacy is part of their problem.) The husband's misguided attempt to deal with his frustrations resulted in the sexually compulsive behavior of a sex addict. Addiction is often the "solution" to an intimacy deficit.

Attempting to achieve relationship parity in this way is one of the most common profiles of eroticized rage. Coincidentally, it is also one of the most common causes of affairs. Consider the story of Tammy. While she was growing up, Tammy was often embarrassed by her father's frequent sexually inappropriate behaviors in public. Her father acted similarly at home, walking around in the nude, for example. He had many affairs and sexually abused Tammy's three sisters. Therein began Tammy's problem. Like many siblings of abused children, Tammy often asked herself why her father had not approached her for sex. He did, however, like to look at her body and often commented about her sexual development. Tammy would deliberately take showers in her father's bathroom so he would have the opportunity to observe her, even though she had a bathroom of her own to use.

Tammy grew into a statuesque, beautiful woman. When she was seventeen, she was caught shoplifting clothes. The shopkeeper pulled her into a back room and told her she could keep the clothes if she would show him her breasts. She did and he pleased himself. She left with the clothes and a unique feeling. She felt he had betrayed his vulnerability. Sex had reversed the situation in that she was no longer a desperate teenager about to be turned into the police by an authority figure. That power figure had instead become pathetic and disgusting in her eyes. Moreover, exhibiting her body was very sexually arousing and satisfying to her. And she had the clothes.

This scenario repeated over and over again in various ways in the coming years. As a high-powered advertising executive, Tammy kept accounts on several occasions where she was asked to have sex by a client. She would have relationships, usually with older men who were powerful and unattractive. She still felt that she was in control because of their sexual desperation. For a time she was engaged to a man who was much older and weighed three hundred pounds. She enjoyed sex with him. The best sex for her, however, came after they broke up when he would leave her money. Watching a man take money out of his wallet was very erotic for her, and she knew she had "won" at that point.

Tammy also liked to drive down the freeway with her dress hiked up to expose her genitals and her blouse open to expose her breasts. She would pull up next to trucks and feel great pleasure when truckers would pull their air-horn cords in approval. When Tammy got into recovery for alcoholism, she was extremely sexually active with men she met in A.A. meetings. The list goes on. Suffice it to say that Tammy's life was out of control and eventually, she became suicidal.

In treatment, Tammy admitted that she had several standing arrangements with the owners of prestigious clothing stores on fashionable Rodeo Drive in Hollywood. She could pick out the clothes she wanted if she would strip for these merchants. They would pleasure themselves and she would walk away feeling superior. This behavior, as you can see, was simply a repetition of what had happened to her when she was a teenager. Her therapist helped Tammy understand that it also replicated her taking showers in her father's bathroom to get him to notice her. Tammy admitted that the clothing store where she loved to do this was around the corner from her father's upscale apartment. Something about his proximity made her sexual acting out even more compelling. It was then that she confessed to actually having sex with a man in her father's bed on the night of one of his weddings.

Tammy's story illustrates a common phenomenon among trauma survivors in that her behavior replicates the way she was abused as a child. Trauma specialists have described this as "repetition compulsion" or "addiction to the trauma." This sexually compulsive behavior provides a "rush" based on an arousal template she evolved while trying to make sense of her own relationship with her father. Note further, however, that Tammy was also trying to "complete" herself. It's also important to recognize the cyclic nature of her feelings during her sexual acting out. Tammy was desperate for her father's approval however she could get it. Though she was angry about his treatment of her and despised how he behaved, getting his attention and then feeling that she was a better person than he was by exposing him for what he was created the internal dynamic and payoff that drove her dysfunctional behavior. When Tammy finally understood all of this, she was able to arrest her compulsive cycles. She also realized that while on the surface she looked like a victim who was being used by men, at a deeper part she was actually the predator driven by her anger and hatred of men.

Sexualized anger can be used in an attempt to restore a sense of self, and when this happens, it commonly involves some form of abuse and power. In studies of women and sex addiction, this power dynamic and an attempt to "prop up" the self are frequently present. Sex-offender literature regularly describes parallel behaviors in offenders who attempt to compensate for poor self-image by replicating childhood abuse and a rage for women that comes out sexually. Sexualized anger becomes a vehicle for addicts to feel better about themselves by creating a new relationship parity using sex.

Humiliation, Vengeance, and Retaliation

You may have noticed that the examples we have used thus far in this discussion involve some form of humiliation or revenge. The attempt to restore the self via sexualized rage can extend to diminishing another person. This might be a sexual partner—the merchants to whom Tammy felt superior, for example, or a stripper feeling disgust for the men who tip her. This might also be a marital partner, such as in the woman who performed public oral sex. Further, it might be, again in Tammy's case, humiliating a parent in person or indirectly, such as despoiling his marital bed on his wedding night. Posting a nude picture of one's ex-wife for all to see without her permission has both a sexual and a vengeful component. Usually when sexualized rage becomes vengeful, the root issues are deep and profound. Consider this next example.

When Louise was sixteen, she became pregnant and gave up her son for adoption. Unknown to her, her son, Sam, was raised in a physically abusive home. He became a drug addict and went through several cycles of rehabilitation. When he was thirty-three years old, he conducted a successful search for his birth mother. Louise was thrilled to be able to have contact with her son. She was in a second marriage of sixteen years and had raised two children. She had settled into a middle-class, orderly life and had a somewhat matronly appearance. She still had many unresolved feelings, however, about having given up her son for adoption.

Louise went to visit her son while he was in an extended-care facility. In her hotel room, she massaged his shoulders which he said were hurting. The massage ended up with mother and son having sex. When Sam left the extended-care facility, he asked Louise if he could come to live with Louise and her husband until he found a job and got on his feet. Louise agreed, and within a month, their home had turned into chaos. Part of the cause stemmed from Louise and Sam continuing to have sex—which came to a stop when Louise's husband found them in bed together. Sam was asked to leave and Louise became suicidal and began using amphetamines. Her routine, uneventful, middle-class existence had evaporated.

During treatment, Louise was stunned to realize how she had violated her own value system and hurt her husband, whom she dearly loved. Using the details of her sexual experience with her son—that it was more angry than passionate and that she was naked while he remained mostly dressed, for example—Louise's therapist and group helped her realize that it was intended to degrade and humiliate her. Sam's anger at being abandoned was compounded by his physical abuse in the home in which he was raised. Sex became a vehicle for his rage. Louise said she actually understood this at the time, which added to her amazement at her continuing to have sex with him. Her therapist then introduced her to the concept of traumatic bonding, explaining how Sam's presence induced fear and drew power from the guilt and sadness of an old wound. This new understanding allowed Louise to begin to see which parts of this sad situation she was responsible for and those for which she was not.

What happened to Sam and Louise actually happens to many people. Anger and pain related to old betrayals and abuse can be carried into adulthood sexually. Sam blamed his mother for what happened to him, when in fact Louise had taken a responsible action in trying to give him a better life. Sam's perception was, obviously, different and he acted out sexually in an attempt to humiliate his mother. Yet having sex with one's mother only brings up another dimension of sexualized rage: perversion.

Perversion

One of the great researchers on perversion, Robert Stoller, tells the story of his initial investigation into the pornography industry. Every pornography producer he interviewed said that if pornography were legal and had widespread acceptance (or even tolerance), they would never have bothered to become involved. These producers essentially said that the thrill in making sexually explicit movies came from finding pleasure in disapproval. By putting sex in "its face," they were striking back at our culture for its control and rigidity. This rebelliousness or defiance of convention also grows out of anger.

Individual sexual behavior is sometimes simply perverse. For the wife of a public official to publicly perform oral sex on male strippers is perverse. To barter sex for clothes at a store just around the corner from the residence of a controlling father is perverse. To have sex with your mother is more than just an act of defiance. To have many affairs behind the back of the woman with whom you live in a restrictive and judgmental religious community is clearly to break the rules. This perversity also sends a message about convention, control, and relationships. Notice, however, that such perversity is often a private joke. By acting out sexually, one is toying with the possibility that the person with whom you are angry might discover your actions. In this sense, it has elements of a gambling obsession. All of this behavior also clearly adds to the risk and intensity of the act. Perversion works best if it outrages others. Perverse behaviors outrage only when they are very "unusual," yet there is irony here because we know that such behaviors are, in fact, quite common.

Obsession

Anger can also fuel sexual obsession. This occurs especially in cases of betrayal and jealousy. In the case we examined earlier in which a man's wife had had affairs with African-American men, he tortured himself with his preoccupation about her behavior. This obsession was intensely sexual and overtly hostile. That it evolved into stalking behavior is not at all unusual, either. When obsessive anger is present, conventional societal rules are suspended. The stalkers, for example, justify their behavior because they keep "building their case" against the person who they believe betrayed them. Sex addiction coaddicts can also justify stalking. They can become sexually obsessed with the sex addict's behaviors and will then go to the extreme of breaking their spouse's

privacy by, for example, hiring a private detective to spy on the spouse, go through personal papers and diaries, and review bills and credit card statements.

There is even a web site dedicated to helping people with this type of surveillance. A woman had discovered that her husband was using their computer for cybersex. When she learned that he was having affairs via email and downloading pornography, she was outraged. She found a surveillance web site that was designed to track men who cheat on the web. From it, she learned how to use her work computer to disguise her identity and then initiated a torrid chatroom affair with her husband. She also installed a surveillance system on their home computer that automatically tallied and emailed to her work computer a description of everything he did on his computer. She was aware of all his online behavior while he had no idea that this was happening. She also discovered and regularly visited a web site whose participants (approximately three thousand people per week) talked about what their husbands were currently up to. Anger, perversity, getting even, finding revenge, and obsessiveness—all the components of eroticized rage were there. And she completed the charade by continuing to have sex with her husband as though nothing had changed.

Addicts and co-addicts are surprised to learn that anger is a component of their sexual behavior. They overlook the obvious for several reasons. First, they are aware of the sex, but not of the anger. People caught up in compulsive cycles or repetitive patterns are especially prone to this trap. No feelings—anger, fear, sadness, or pain—survive their obsession. Second, these people have created a complex web of thought distortions and rationalizations that preclude feeling any responsibility whatsoever for their actions. When an activity is not viewed as your fault, any feelings of guilt or remorse or shame are hidden.

Addicts need the help of their group, their sponsor, and a therapist to discover the dynamics of their family or the legacy of abuse in their life. Typically, addicts do not initially welcome these realizations, but over time they can see them as the breakthrough events they truly are.

Anatomy of Arousal

To gain a greater understanding of your own behavior patterns, you must begin by making them explicit. The following exercises will help you do so. First, embedded in most arousal templates is an ideal fantasy that needs to be understood. The following exercises will also help you discover this. In addition, you will be asked to examine those ideal fantasies and determine where the fantasies come from. This is difficult work and is best done in consultation with your support network.

Remember that fantasies are a way of “envisioning” the future. Recovering people recognize that specific fantasies are key components of the obsessive preoccupation that leads to relapse. Examining these fantasies to discover how they started and to acknowledge their probable outcomes helps diminish their power. Begin by describing the fantasy and specify what makes it

ideal. Let us use the example of Art, a man who came to treatment because he was caught in his best friend's home masturbating with the underclothes of his friend's wife. Here is his fantasy:

Fantasy: Sneaking into a woman's home and watching pornography on her TV. Going into her bedroom, finding undergarments, and masturbating.

When asked what would make the fantasy ideal he said: The home would be of someone whom I knew and was attracted to. I would bring my own videos, but the ultimate would be if I could find pornographic videos used or viewed by this person. It would be incredible if these tapes contained home videos of this person. The very best would happen when I next saw the person and I could tell she had undergarments on that I had touched. The whole idea is to be very sexual around this person without her knowing I'd been using her stuff. I am the perfect sex burglar.

When asked whether such a fantasy was possible to achieve, Art wrote: It is possible and I have done it. But it has never been perfect. The chances of finding other people's home videos are pretty remote. Never happened for me. The truth is that it takes a tremendous amount of work for little payoff, even if you set aside the legal risks.

When asked about the risks and the most likely result, Art wrote: Exactly what happened. I got caught and now all my friends know. In part, it has cost me my marriage and all the friendships I had. The possibility of doing this without a problem is zero. Plus, I still have the legal problems.

Every sexual fantasy has embedded in it a story or scenario. It is critical to understand where that story comes from and what it has done to your life. The hardest part for some is just to see the story. Once the story is clear, you must next ask where this came from? Family? Childhood abuse? Accidental discovery? And why do you think it is so compelling? When Art was asked these questions, he wrote:

About the story: Basically, it is about sneaking in and being sexual with that person without her knowing.

About where it came from: When I was a kid, I was left alone at a friend's house where I discovered his father's pornography and watched it. I was so aroused that I went through his mom's dresser, found her panties and bras, and masturbated. Later on, I found it very *intimate*; something she had on that I had looked at. My ideal fantasy virtually replicates the whole event that occurred when I was thirteen.

About impact on life: The biggest loss is not my family and friends, although that is huge. This fantasy changed everything. I did not relate to women except as homeowners. To be sexual, sex had to be stolen.

The following pages include fantasy worksheets that will ask you to describe a fantasy, the ideal, the probability of it happening, the risks involved in doing so, the history, and the impact.

Before you begin, it would be a good idea for you to return to Chapter 6 and examine the worksheets you did there on relapse scenarios (pages 186-188) Start by reviewing the fantasy driving each relapse scenario you diagrammed in that chapter. If other fantasies are part of your addictive obsession, complete worksheets on them as well. Use your therapy and support group to discuss the results of this work. Remember, this can be triggering material. Do not work on this alone, and pay attention to the painful feelings this work brings out in you.