

What Brings Us Together
and Drives Us Apart, and the
Science of Connection

THE
FORMULA
OF
Desire

Anna Elton, PhD



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Preface

Dear reader,

If you're holding this book, you might be here to understand your relationship better, to reconnect with your partner, or to make sense of why desire doesn't feel the way it used to. Whatever your starting point, this book is here to support you.

In many ways, this book began long before I ever planned to write one. After years of hearing the stories of couples in love, in crisis, fighting to stay connected, and those who had given up, I noticed the same fear resurfacing in different ways. Not “Do we love each other?” but “Can we still want each other?” And inevitably, “What happened to us?” or “Is this normal?”

During my doctoral studies in clinical sexology, one theme kept coming up: the concept of low desire. While some couples manage to maintain their passion throughout the years, others slowly drift into emotional distance. I wanted to understand why this happens and how desire shapes not only intimacy but also our sense of self and connection with the person we choose to spend our lives with.

For me, this question wasn't simply academic. It was undeniably personal. My husband and I have been together since high school,

nearly twenty-five years now. We've grown up side by side, raised three children, and through all the ups and downs, we've managed to stay connected and excited to be with each other. Saying our journey has been smooth would be far from true. We've had our moments of disconnection and exhaustion, yet those very struggles taught us that love and desire can be sustained through effort and reflection.

One evening, I saw him reading a draft chapter. He was frowning in concentration. "Wait," he said, "do I do this? I mean...Am I doing enough of what you're talking about here?" He was genuinely curious and self-checking. In the weeks that followed, small things began to change and appear, like a bouquet of flowers on the table, just because. He was paying attention in a new way. Reading the words meant for my readers had prompted him to reflect on his role in our story too.

Seeing that shift reminded me of what I hope this book can do for others as well. My goal is to bridge science with application and translate insight into action. I want readers to leave with more than information. Psychoeducation is important, but so is something you can use right away. Theory becomes meaningful when it helps you create change.

And keep in mind, these ideas aren't only for couples in crisis. Many partners who feel they're doing "just fine" discover that learning relationship tools early makes connection easier to maintain and far more rewarding.

Let this book serve as a reminder of why you chose each other, and why you continue to choose each other. May it help you notice what keeps you connected and, if you find yourselves in a difficult place, guide you back to the desire you thought was lost.

—Anna Elton, PhD, LMFT

Introduction

In the streets of early twentieth-century Tbilisi, a Georgian painter named Niko Pirosmani found himself captivated by an extraordinary love.¹ He made a living painting tavern signs and portraits in exchange for food or shelter, living on the margins of art and recognition. When Marguerite de Sèvres, a French actress touring with her theater troupe, arrived in the city, she brought with her a world far beyond his own and quickly captured his heart.

Unlike her many admirers, Niko expressed his love in a way as grand as it was unique. He sold everything he owned to buy red roses (some say nearly a million) and lined the streets leading to Marguerite's residence with them. This was his way of conveying a love that words could not capture. When Marguerite opened her window, she was overwhelmed. But despite the breathtaking display, their love was not meant to be. Their lives were too far apart, and soon, Marguerite left Tbilisi, leaving Niko to return to his solitary world.

The roses wilted, but the story stayed, becoming a legend told throughout decades. It is a tale that speaks to the universal desire for a love that is bold, all-consuming, and unforgettable. At the same time, it shows how desire can be strongest in the wanting and how easily passion can be mistaken for intimacy. Such stories remind us that

desire often burns brightest in the beginning or in the fantasy of what could be. But what happens years later, when the legend meets the reality of everyday life?

Are We Okay...Or Just Getting By

A soft knock on the door distracted me from that thought. "Come in," I said.

A young woman stepped inside, hesitating at the doorway. Her eyes nervously scanned the room before finally settling on me.

"Where should I start?" she asked, almost in a whisper. She hesitated, twisting the ring on her finger. "I'm engaged...We've been together for over seven years and everything seems perfect. We communicate well, share the same values, and really enjoy being together. But..." She paused, biting her lip. Her eyes filled with tears that she was trying to hold back. "The desire is gone," she said at last, voicing what she had struggled to admit even to herself. "That excitement we used to have...The passion...It's just not there anymore. And I keep thinking, *Is this how it's going to be for the rest of my life?* Do I have to settle for a passionless marriage and find happiness somewhere else?"

I had heard these worries before, but I didn't expect to hear them from someone so young, just beginning what should have been an exciting new chapter in life. As she continued, her story made me think about what it really means to desire and be desired.

Over the past fifteen years, I've sat down with more than seven hundred couples, each at a different stage in their relationship. I listened to their stories, their struggles, and their hopes. I didn't just focus on couples in crisis or those coming to therapy because things weren't working; I was equally curious about the ones who managed to thrive even after years together. I wanted to know what made that possible and what set them apart. Most couples recalled that the beginning

of their relationship was filled with closeness and excitement, as so many beginnings are. Some remained connected through the years. Others eventually found themselves going through the motions, unsure of where their desire had gone or how they had grown apart. And that contrast made me curious. I wanted to understand what helped people find their way back. Through thousands of conversations, I began to see consistent patterns—patterns that form the foundation for this book.

Although the focus is on desire, you'll notice I often talk about love too. That's because the two are connected, but they're not the same. *Love* is the bond, both subjective and moral in nature. It's a way of seeing your partner as irreplaceable in your life, beyond any individual qualities they possess.² Love is what holds people together over time. *Desire*, by contrast, is the pull that brings us closer, emotionally, physically, or both. *The Formula of Desire* goes beyond attraction, reflecting the motivation and willingness to be in a relationship with your partner.

You may also notice that while I talk extensively about desire, love, and intimacy, I don't define passion as a standalone concept. Passion is often treated as something that simply appears or disappears on its own. Instead, this book looks at the conditions that tend to create it: attention, emotional safety, novelty, and the ongoing exchange of desire. When those elements are present, passion tends to appear. When they're missing, it fades, even when love endures.

Because these experiences are intertwined, couples sometimes mistake low desire or fading passion for a loss of love, when in reality their bond may still be strong. Understanding the difference matters because it helps us see what needs attention, whether it's closeness, attraction, or commitment. Throughout this book, I will return to this distinction because the health of a relationship depends on how both love and desire rise, dip, and return across time.

Book Structure and How to Use It

The chapters ahead offer a blend of understanding and application. We begin with the foundation—love, desire, and attraction—so you have the psychoeducation that supports the rest of the book. Then we turn to emotional closeness and, finally, to physical connection, examining how each layer shapes long-term intimacy.

The stories and examples in these pages are composites drawn from recurring patterns I've seen in my work. They bring the material to life, protect privacy, and reflect a range of genders, sexualities, and relationship structures. While many examples feature heterosexual couples, the dynamics apply broadly to anyone navigating desire.

You don't have to read this book from cover to cover. Use it in whatever way feels most helpful, whether that means jumping to an exercise, reading with your partner, or returning to certain chapters when new questions arise. Here's a simple way to choose where to begin.

A READER'S GUIDE TO DESIRE AND CONNECTION

Part One: If you want to understand desire...

- **Chapter 1** → what desire is and how it differs from love
- **Chapter 2** → how attraction works and why certain people catch your attention
- **Chapter 3** → how to assess desire in your relationship

Part Two: If your emotional connection needs attention...

- **Chapter 4** → when relationships enter a period of stagnation or emotional distance
- **Chapter 5** → when you've lost yourself in roles or routines
- **Chapter 6** → when you feel more like roommates than romantic partners
- **Chapter 7** → when communication breaks down despite good intentions
- **Chapter 8** → when the same arguments keep coming back

Part Three: If things feel less intimate or not intimate at all...

- **Chapter 9** → when desire rises, falls, or feels unpredictable
- **Chapter 10** → when sex feels pressured, uneven, or no longer exciting
- **Chapter 11** → when desire is mismatched or insecurity gets in the way
- **Chapter 12** → when you want more curiosity, mystery, or play
- **Chapter 13** → when attention or attraction moves outside the relationship
- **Chapter 14** → when you want simple, daily practices to sustain connection

Throughout, you'll find exercises, journal prompts, worksheets, and digital tools designed to help you bring the material into daily life. You can find exercises and worksheets at <http://www.newharbinger.com/58788>.

For additional interactive tools, including educational videos, extended assessments, and a curated collection of digital resources designed for everyday practice, visit *The Desire Lab* at www.theformulaofdesire.com.



PART ONE

Getting to Know
Desire

CHAPTER 1

Life, Love, and Desire

Since the dawn of time, humanity has been captivated by the idea of love. We weave it into legends, immortalize it in fairy tales, and dedicate entire holidays to its celebration. Across history, people have gone to extraordinary lengths to find connection, turning to symbols, rituals, and even sacred places, believing that something larger than themselves could help them find their destiny.

And in one small corner of the world, long before apps promised to guide us to “the one,” that search started in a very unexpected place. Deep in a German forest stands a five-hundred-year-old tree called Die Bräutigamseiche, or the Bridegroom’s Oak, which has helped people find love for over a century.³ It all began in 1890, when a young woman named Minna fell in love with Wilhelm, a chocolate maker’s son. But Minna’s father met their sweet, forbidden love with firm disapproval. Separated by circumstance but not by heart, they began exchanging letters through the hollow of the ancient trunk, as if the forest itself were carrying their love between them. When Minna’s father finally gave his blessing, they were married beneath the same oak on June 2, 1891. Their story spread across Germany, and soon others began writing to the tree, leaving behind confessions, dreams, and invitations for love. By 1927, the tradition had grown so beloved

that the German postal service gave the tree its own address and a dedicated mail carrier. Every year, close to a thousand letters still arrive from romantics around the world, hoping the tree (or perhaps fate itself) will guide them to their soulmate.

Stories like this stay with us, shaping what we imagine love should look like. Most of us absorbed these ideas when we were young, at a time when connection and romance felt both possible and irresistible. From books, movies, and the people around us (yes, social media influencers included), we learned that once we meet “the one,” everything will fall into place. We grow up, find love, and maybe get married. And years later, sitting across the dinner table after a long day, the silence feels different than expected. What once felt clear now feels uncertain—was it the wrong choice, or was the story too good to be true? To understand why so many relationships feel different over time, we have to look earlier, before commitment, before routines, before love itself.

Desire on the Horizon

Before there was love, there was desire. It begins before there’s a story to tell or vows to make. Unlike love, which grows through familiarity and trust, desire is driven by mystery and distance.

At a summer wedding, under strings of lights swaying in the warm night air, Selene was talking politely with a friend of a friend. She nodded along, only half-listening, when someone across the dance floor caught her eye. Selene didn’t know him. She only noticed the way he leaned back when he laughed, the easy looseness of his posture, the glass resting in his hand. And then, for a split second, his eyes met hers. The music, the conversation, and the whole crowd seemed to dim. Her breath hitched, her pulse quickened, and she felt an unmistakable pull toward a stranger she had never spoken to.

That was desire. It arrives suddenly, drawn to what is not yet known. The word itself comes from the Latin *dēsiderāre*, meaning “to long for” or “to miss,” and some trace it further back to *sidus*, “a star on the horizon.” Desire shines from a distance, hard to reach and impossible to look away from.

Love and desire are often treated as the same thing, but they work differently. Anthropologist Helen Fisher, known for her research on romantic love, describes three interacting systems in the brain: *lust* as the sex drive, *attraction* as the excitement and infatuation of romance, and *attachment* as the comfort and bond of long-term connection.⁴ These systems can overlap, but they do not move in sync. You may feel securely attached to your partner, but a song, scent, or passing face can suddenly trigger romantic excitement for someone else. In that moment, your attachment system points one way while desire flares in another.

In the early stages of romantic relationships, lust, attraction, and attachment often surge together. However, during periods of burnout, stress, or major transitions such as parenthood, these systems may decouple. Attachment often remains stable, preserving the emotional bond, while lust and attraction tend to decline. Partners may still feel connected, yet find themselves out of sync physically or romantically.

This separation does not mean that desire and attachment are unrelated. When conditions allow, sexual desire and emotional attachment typically move together, reinforcing and reshaping one another over time. Wanting your partner means craving closeness and connection, not simply seeking physical proof that they still find you irresistible, though that’s certainly welcome. As sexual and emotional bonding interact, they help sustain the relationship.⁵ Pleasure, in this context, is a byproduct of desire, a *reinforcement signal* that tells the brain the relationship is safe and worth investing in. This process reflects the natural sequence of motivation and reward. Desire compels connection, and pleasure signals fulfillment.⁶

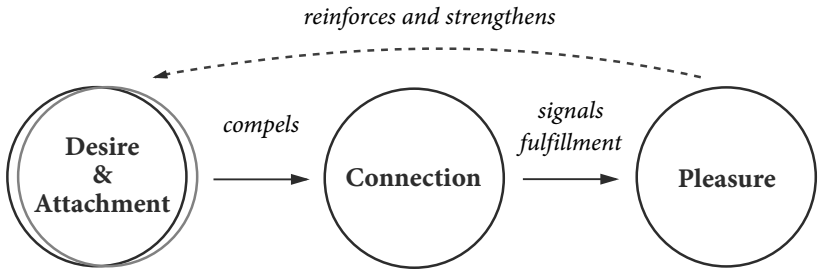


Figure 1: The Desire Cycle

Desire itself is dynamic, moving like an emotional ripple that extends beyond the moment. What we feel today predicts what we'll feel tomorrow, even in the absence of sex. One partner's desire can also influence the other's, especially during physical intimacy.⁷ Daily feelings of love and desire both predict sexual engagement and satisfaction, but desire is the stronger predictor.⁸ Love provides emotional grounding, while desire brings energy and movement into the relationship. When couples feel both desire and love together, sexual encounters are not only more likely to happen but tend to be more satisfying when they do.

The Emotional Climate of Desire

We often think of desire as something we either feel or don't, blaming it on hormones or circumstance. What's easy to miss is that desire also responds to the emotional climate between partners. When two people first meet, they tend to spend a lot of time together. By default, the brain starts to associate that person with pleasure, excitement, and safety. Being close feels good, so we want more of it.

Over time, even small moments reinforce that bond, signaling emotional investment and care.⁹ Feeling valued by a partner matters more than we realize. Research shows it's a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than simply knowing each other well. When we feel emotionally seen and understood, the body relaxes. That sense of safety is what allows desire to emerge and return.¹⁰

But when conflict becomes frequent or the emotional climate stays tense for too long, the brain begins to make a different association. Instead of linking our partner with comfort or pleasure, it starts to link them with stress. Repeated arguments, unresolved tension, or ongoing dissatisfaction train the brain to anticipate discomfort whenever that person is nearby. Even neutral or loving moments can begin to feel heavy because the body is bracing for what usually comes next. None of this happens all at once. These patterns build slowly, usually without anyone noticing.

When the emotional climate shifts, the body registers it before the mind does. Our emotions surface in predictable ways: sadness as pressure in the chest, frustration as heat in the face, and anxiety as tightness in the stomach. The same process applies to positive experiences, where the body remembers moments of ease, laughter, and affection. These sensations become part of our emotional memory, and because our partner is intertwined with these experiences, they can end up inextricably linked to the way our body learns to respond to these emotions.¹¹

When discomfort takes precedence, avoidance can begin to feel comforting, and the brain often rewards it. For some people, pulling away from stress brings a sense of relief.¹² In relationships, this means that if withdrawing or shutting down eases tension, even briefly, the brain remembers it as a “good” strategy. The catch is, this relief is only temporary. And eventually, the brain gets stuck in a loop of withdrawal, feeling a little better, and withdrawing again. If this cycle continues, couples may begin living side by side rather than together. Partners who once felt like erotic allies can transition into the roles of roommates or co-parents, staying functional but emotionally disconnected. The reality of this is more nuanced, and we’ll continue to explore it throughout the book.

Life Just Happened

I travel frequently for work, and every flight starts with the same hope that this will be the one where I actually relax. Of course, that hope is often short-lived. On one particular trip, I’d overbooked myself and needed the time to review slides for an upcoming presentation. And as anyone who’s ever flown knows, “personal space” on a plane is a generous concept. Before long, the woman seated next to me started sneaking glances at my laptop until curiosity finally got the better of her.

“So...what do you do for work?” she asked.

I hesitated for just a second, already knowing where this was headed. “I’m a sex and relationship therapist.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Well, I guess we’re doing okay. Right, John?” She nudged her husband in the aisle seat. He looked up from his phone, offered a polite smile, and returned to it just as quickly.

“And your presentation,” she pressed on, “is really called *Sex, Bills, and Chores?*”

I nodded. “The three most common reasons couples argue. Finances usually take the top spot, intimacy comes next, and then it’s a tie between parenting, chores, and in-laws.”

“That makes so much sense. When you hear it laid out like that, it’s obvious. But when you’re living it, it just feels like...life.”

This time, her husband grinned wryly and leaned in. “Yep. We’re three for three.”

What started as casual small talk turned into something much more honest. She admitted quietly, “We’re not in trouble or anything. But lately it feels like we’re stuck in a routine. Work, kids, errands. Even the fun stuff feels like a chore.”

By the time we landed, it was clear they weren’t just curious passengers but a couple at a crossroads. Their foundation was solid, but “life happened” and the weight of responsibilities created a wall they never meant to build. As we gathered our bags, she turned back and said, almost to herself, “We’ll look into therapy. You know...before it’s too late.”

It’s never too late to work on a relationship, but prevention is far easier than repair. Couples who notice and address the small cracks early, before resentment and disconnection take hold, have a much better chance of staying close and satisfied over time. Part of that work involves actively tending to desire, even when life feels overwhelming.

What they were experiencing wasn’t unusual. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls it *emotional work*: the invisible labor we do to keep a relationship functioning.¹³ It is the ongoing effort of adjusting how we feel to meet someone else’s expectations, whether those expectations come from a partner, society, or our own internal story about what a relationship should look like. Most of us don’t notice this labor at first. We just keep going, assuming it’s part of love.

And it’s something most of us don’t notice at first until one person begins to feel like they’re doing more of the lifting. That imbalance, if

left unspoken, can turn into distance and resentment. This is where many couples begin to burn out. We tend to think of burnout as something that happens at work, but it happens at home too. Between parenting, caregiving, schedules, and unexamined roles, intimacy can start to feel like another responsibility. Affection becomes routine, and desire fades into the background. Desire tends to pull back when emotional labor outweighs emotional connection, and it often returns when partners make room for safety, curiosity, and shared effort again.

As you move forward, keep this in mind. Desire doesn't disappear randomly. It responds to how busy life gets and how much space partners still have for each other. Understanding that is the first step toward bringing it back. In the chapters ahead, we'll explore how desire shifts, where it gets redirected, and what helps couples rebuild it in ways that fit the lives they're actually living.

CHAPTER 2

Desire by Design

From one generation to the next, we've been chasing the answer to what makes someone desirable. The ancient Greeks saw beauty as more than appearance. They believed it reflected divine order and moral goodness. Beauty signified not only symmetry and grace but also virtue and character. To be beautiful, in their eyes, was to be good.

In the eighteenth century, desire took on a very different form. In France, desirability was on extravagant display. Women powdered their hair until it stood in towers. Beauty marks were applied like punctuation, each with its own flirtatious meaning. Seduction was visual, decadent, and performative. By the Victorian era, the pendulum swung toward modesty. Restraint became its own form of power with a tightly corseted waist, a downward glance, and the soft flush of embarrassment. A woman's allure lived in what she concealed, not what she revealed.

The twentieth century marked another turn, as pin-up culture and Hollywood pulled seduction back into the spotlight. Today, fashion, wellness, fitness, and cosmetics each compete to tell us what it means to be desirable. But one thing rarely changes. We often *think* we know what others want, and we shape ourselves accordingly. We once plucked our eyebrows into thin arches because someone decided that

was seductive, only to reverse course years later when a new idea of beauty took over. We paint, pinch, filter, and posture. But what if we've been wrong this entire time?

When We Misread Attraction

Attraction feels instinctive, but it is shaped by context, chemistry, memory, and expectation—often in ways we don't recognize until later. At the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, researchers asked a deceptively simple question: *What do we find desirable?* Participants completed a three-step digital modeling experiment to reveal how we perceive attractiveness in ourselves and others.

First, each person created a 3D avatar resembling their own face. It was a straightforward task of sculpting familiar features. In the second part, participants had to adjust their avatars to reflect what they *believed* a potential partner would find most attractive. This is where things got interesting. The women in the study exaggerated traditionally “feminine” features by widening their eyes, slimming their noses, and refining their chins to near doll-like proportions. The men did the opposite, emphasizing a broad jaw, pronounced brow, and almost cartoonish symmetry, leaning into stereotypically “masculine” traits.

Finally, participants were asked to adjust the avatars to reflect their *own* preferences in a potential partner. Interestingly, the results diverged significantly from the previous stage. The exaggerated features softened, and the avatars became more balanced and realistic. The pattern was consistent. Both women and men significantly misjudged what the other sex preferred. Women tended to overestimate how feminine men wanted faces to be, while men overestimated the level of masculinity women desired. These misperceptions were also linked to discrepancies between people's current and ideal appearances, suggesting that mistaken beliefs about others' desires may contribute to dissatisfaction

with one's own looks.¹⁴

We often have no idea what the other truly desires. And that misunderstanding reaches further than we think, shaping not only how we see ourselves but how we interpret our partner's attraction, attention, and interest. This matters because when we misunderstand what others find attractive, we misread ourselves and our partner's interest, attention, and commitment as well.

The Neurochemistry of Attraction

If desire can be distorted by what we *think* others want, it is also intensified by what our bodies *make us feel*. It's not unusual to leave a date thinking, "*We vibed*" or "*We had chemistry*." Those phrases are more literal than most people realize. What we call "chemistry" is actually the brain and body responding together, releasing chemicals that influence how connected, excited, or drawn in we feel.

Think about the last time you were drawn to someone. Perhaps your heart raced, your face got warm, or you got butterflies in your stomach. That's adrenaline signaling, *Pay attention—this is important*. Then comes dopamine, driving the brain's reward system and explaining the happy, slightly obsessive pull of wanting to be near them all the time. As things move beyond first attraction, oxytocin, the "love hormone," starts to kick in, creating feelings of safety, trust, and closeness. Similarly, a neurochemical, called phenylethylamine (PEA), nicknamed the "love molecule," adds to the early rush by boosting mood, energy, and even that euphoric high people describe in new relationships.¹⁵

Another key player is noradrenaline, a close cousin of adrenaline, which also plays a role by locking these emotional moments into memory. That's why those first moments can feel unforgettable.¹⁶ Interestingly, brain scans show that being in love activates the same

reward centers as addictive drugs. The more in love people are, or the more attractive they find their partner, the stronger the reaction in those brain areas.¹⁷ No wonder a new crush can feel like a drug—because, biochemically, it almost is.

This link between desire and the brain's reward system has been known for decades. Back in the 1950s, long before scientists fully understood how reward works in the brain, James Olds and Peter Milner made a surprising discovery. Rats would press a lever thousands of times to stimulate certain reward-related areas of the brain, often choosing this stimulation over food. We're not so different. That same circuitry is still hardwired into us, pushing us toward connection, craving, and the feeling of being wanted. It's why a single text can light us up, and why silence can leave us spiraling.

Although desire is processed in the brain, it is experienced throughout the body. At Aalto University in Finland, researchers explored how people feel love using a method called *emBODY*, which asked people to map their physical sensations in response to different emotional states, including romantic love and sexual desire (lust).¹⁸ Romantic love concentrated in the chest and the head, in the quickened heart and the circling thoughts. Lust, by contrast, was far less contained. It activated the body from head to toe, with flushed cheeks, a pounding heart, a fluttering stomach, and even tingling in the fingers and toes.

In this way, desire works like a feedback loop between your mind and body. It depends on mood, memory, context, and the signals we're sending and receiving. When we're tense, distracted, or emotionally depleted, the body may not react, even with someone we love. But when we're open and regulated, even a glance or a word can send a signal through our entire system. Desire is never random. It operates through the ongoing dialogue between biology, emotions, and perceptions. And sometimes, that dialogue is persuasive enough to convince us we're feeling something deeper than we actually are.

Was It You, or Just the Moment?

Leah was in her late thirties. She sat on the couch, barely able to hold back her excitement.

“Remember I told you I was thinking about going out?” she said, half-smiling. “Well. I did.”

“And?” I asked.

“I think I met him,” she said. “Like...really met him.”

“Tell me more.”

“It was at a salsa night,” she began. “The music was so loud you could feel it in your chest. Everyone was moving, and I was just standing off to the side at first, trying to work up the nerve. Then I saw him.”

She paused, smiling at the memory. “I swear it was like one of those ridiculous movie scenes. But before I could talk myself out of it, he was standing right in front of me, holding out his hand.”

“And you took it,” I said gently.

She nodded. “I didn’t even think. I just followed. And once we started dancing, it was like my body already knew what to do. He pulled me in close, spun me out, and we just kept moving. I was laughing. I couldn’t stop smiling.”

“And when the night ended?”

“He walked me to my car,” she said softly. “My heart was pounding. I was sure he could hear it. It felt like fate. Like, *this* is how you know. I even texted my best friend when I got home and said, ‘I think I met someone.’”

For the next few days, Leah was floating. She told me how she couldn’t stop thinking about him, and how she’d replayed their dance a hundred times in her head. She imagined what their weekends would be. He seemed charming and confident. She couldn’t wait to see him again.

But when she returned a week later, she had a different energy. “So... we got coffee,” she said.

“And?”

“I don’t know,” she hesitated. “He’s nice. Really nice. But it was just...flat. We sat across from each other and talked, but I kept checking the time. It was like the spark was gone. I even wondered if I made it all up.” She looked at me. “How can someone feel so *perfect* one minute and so ordinary the next?”

“What you felt was real,” I told her. “But it might not have been *about him*.”

That night created a powerful emotional cocktail of movement, touch, novelty, and heightened arousal. Her brain did what all our brains do with incomplete information. It filled in the blanks with *This must be love*. In reality, the sensation was arousal mistaken as emotional connection. To understand why moments like this feel so convincing, psychologists started looking at how intense physical arousal can reshape what we think we’re feeling.

How Our Bodies Trick Our Hearts

British Columbia, 1970s. A narrow suspension bridge stretches over a steep canyon, swaying with every step. Halfway across, a young woman approaches passing men with a clipboard and a smile. She asks them to complete a brief survey. Most agreed. A few even flirted. Some wrote down their phone numbers, and later, more than a few actually called.

What the men didn’t know was that this was part of a field experiment conducted by psychologists Donald Dutton and Arthur Aron. The setting made all the difference. When the same survey was administered on firm ground, interest dropped sharply. Researchers suspected that the men’s heightened responsiveness on the bridge was driven by fear-based physiological arousal rather than attraction itself. The elevated heart rate, adrenaline, and bodily activation triggered by the height and instability of the bridge were misattributed as romantic

interest—a phenomenon known as the *misattribution of arousal*. Our brains are surprisingly quick to confuse danger with desire. When the body is revved up by fear, excitement, or even physical exertion, the brain looks for an explanation. Sometimes, this surge lands on the nearest person and says, *You're the reason I feel this way*, even when the real cause is a swaying bridge high above a canyon.¹⁹

Before that, in 1962, Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer demonstrated a similar principle in a laboratory setting. As with many early experiments, their methods would seem questionable. They injected participants with adrenaline without telling them, causing racing hearts and jittery nerves, and had them interact with an actor who was either goofily euphoric or irritable.²⁰ Those who weren't given an explanation for their physical arousal took emotional cues from the environment. If the actor expressed joy, participants reported feeling upbeat and energized. If he expressed anger, they experienced tension and unease.

When we don't have an obvious explanation for our racing pulse, we let the context fill in the blanks. The mind asks, *Why do I feel this way?* and reaches for the most available or socially acceptable answer. Even subtle sources of arousal, like listening to stimulating music, can spill over into attraction, leading people to rate strangers as more appealing and feel greater romantic interest than they otherwise would.²¹ In real life, the setting of an encounter can act like an amplifier, dialing up our feelings. A crowded club, the thrill of travel, even the adrenaline from a rollercoaster can all trick our brains into feeling more attracted than we might in a quiet and neutral setting. Sometimes, it's not the person who makes our heart race but the moment that makes the person unforgettable. This helps explain why certain encounters feel so powerful in the moment, yet fail to translate into lasting connection once the context changes.

The Invisible Pull of Biology

Some aspects of attraction operate behind the scenes, or even, quite literally, right under our noses. Think of scent, for example. We rarely consider scent when meeting a potential partner, at least not consciously. Maybe we notice a pleasant perfume or a trace of bad breath, but our noses may be doing far more matchmaking than we realize.

In one classic study, women were asked to smell a series of T-shirts that had been worn (and sweated in) by different men, with no cologne or deodorant to mask the natural body odor. The women consistently preferred the scent of men whose immune system genes were most different from their own.²² From an evolutionary standpoint, this kind of attraction may help steer us toward partners who offer genetic balance, supporting stronger, more resilient offspring.

What's interesting is this wasn't a one-off experiment. A decade later, researchers found a similar pattern.²³ And a broader meta-analysis across humans and other primates also found support for preferences for genetic diversity, especially in the earliest stages of mate selection.²⁴ All of this happens far below conscious awareness, where we're simply drawn in by a feeling, something that smells like comfort, or someone we want to get closer to. From there, it becomes more complicated. Attraction is chemistry, context, signal, and biology interacting at once, and once the body is engaged, the mind begins assigning meaning.

When Signals Override Reality

Even when we know the moment can inflate attraction, the brain still has to decide what it's looking at. It doesn't respond to reality so much as it responds to cues. And when cues are amplified, they can override accuracy. This insight becomes clearer when we step outside human

attraction altogether. In the mid-twentieth century, animal behavior researcher Nikolaas Tinbergen introduced the concept of a *supernormal stimulus*.²⁵ He showed that exaggerated signals can outperform the real thing. In his experiments, birds preferred larger, brighter artificial eggs over their own real ones. Stickleback fish attacked overly red objects more aggressively than actual rivals. The exaggerated cues proved more compelling than the original signals.

That discovery opened the door to a bigger question: how do exaggerated signals interact with sexual responsiveness? Researchers Martin Schein and Edgar Hale wanted to identify which specific cues activate a turkey's mating instinct. They presented male turkeys with a taxidermied female, designed to look convincingly real.²⁶ As expected, the males responded enthusiastically, strutting and trying to mate as if she were alive. So far, the experiment seemed straightforward.

Then the researchers started removing parts of the decoy to figure out what was really driving the attraction. They took away the tail, then the wings, and eventually the entire body. The male turkeys remained interested. Finally, the researchers presented only the female's head mounted on a stick and nothing else. And the males went wild for it. In fact, the disembodied head triggered more interest than the full-bodied female had. A lifeless head on a stick outcompeted a living, breathing turkey hen.

Schein and Hale called it a *sign stimulus*, a specific cue that triggers a full behavioral response. For the turkey, the look of the female's head was enough to flip that switch. Once activated, the rest didn't seem to matter. The essence of attraction had been reduced to a single exaggerated feature.

Before we laugh at the turkeys, we should probably blush a little. Human brains can be susceptible to heightened signals too. We're wired to respond to eye contact that feels intentional, to a voice that sounds grounded and assured, to someone who seems fully present with us. And today, many of these cues are amplified or, perhaps,

strategically presented in ways evolution never prepared us for. Dating profiles, carefully curated photos, perfectly scripted messages—they can present supernormal stimuli, signals that exceed natural levels and capture attention more intensely than real-world interaction.

We might find ourselves falling for an online persona or a few gorgeous pictures, mentally filling in the gaps with fantasies of the perfect partner. Just as that turkey fixated on a head and (we assume) imagined the full mate, we might get hooked on someone's highlight reel and supply all the missing pieces. *This must be my ideal match!* But behind that dopamine surge, that flutter in our chest, there's a question worth asking: *Is this real connection...or just a really convincing signal?*

Seeing What We Want to See

Long before love was studied with brain scans and surveys, writers and philosophers tried to make sense of its mysteries. In 1822, after visiting a salt mine in Salzburg, the French writer Stendhal observed how barren twigs left in the briny depths became coated in shimmering crystals. What was once plain and ordinary appeared transformed into something precious.

Love, he said, works in the same way. "What I call 'crystallization' is the operation of the mind that draws from all that presents itself the discovery that the loved object has some new perfections."²⁷ Just as saltwater can make a dry branch appear encrusted in gems, our minds can turn an ordinary person into someone extraordinary, at least in our eyes.

In the early stages of attraction, we don't see objectively. We see selectively. We focus on qualities that fit the image we're forming and overlook what doesn't. A forgetful partner becomes "charmingly distracted." A sharp comment feels playful rather than cutting. We begin

to build an idealized version of the person, shaped partly by who they are and partly by what we hope for.

We like to believe we know what we're looking for—certain traits, values, or a particular “type.” But research on attraction suggests that early desire is driven by how someone makes us feel in the moment: noticed and valued. As social psychologist Paul Eastwick puts it, “We think we know what we want. We don’t.”²⁸

Psychologist Dorothy Tennov later introduced a more familiar term, *limerence*, to describe the intense state of infatuation where idealization takes over. It's the almost obsessive preoccupation with another person, the constant thoughts, the belief that they're perfect, and the overwhelming need for their attention and approval. In this state, even small gestures like a smile or a message can feel hugely significant. At the same time, uncertainty or indifference can feel devastating. Limerence distorts perception, and we tend to exaggerate the positives and overlook important red flags, rationalizing behaviors we'd normally question. As Tennov described it, the other person becomes an “idealized object of desire.”²⁹

During the early stages of attraction, especially in *admiration* and *delight*, we're seeing what we *wish* to see and actively shaping our perception, turning an ordinary person into someone who seems extraordinary in our minds. There's nothing wrong with this. It's a natural and beautiful part of falling in love. But it can lead to disillusionment later, when the crystals start to flake off and we see the twig beneath. The first time they disappoint us or fail to live up to our imagined perfection, it stings. We might feel like they changed, but really, it's our perception recalibrating closer to reality.

Many couples arrive in therapy confused by this shift. They wonder where the magic went, or whether they chose the wrong person. But, what they're grieving is the loss of the idealized version they once envisioned.

The Power of Being Liked

Attraction has a way of gathering momentum, especially in moments that feel mutual. Psychologists call it the *reciprocity principle*, the idea that we tend to like people more when we sense they like us first.³⁰ But not all liking is created equal. In a series of speed-dating experiments, researchers found that selective romantic interest, when someone uniquely likes you, makes you more likely to feel reciprocal desire in return. But when that same interest seems generalized, as if the person is attracted to everyone, it actually has the opposite effect.³¹ Being liked makes us feel good, but being liked specifically, uniquely, is what affirms our self-worth and brings our guard down.

According to *interdependence theory*, when we know someone likes us, we unconsciously start expecting that interactions with them will be rewarding and low in cost. Often, this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.³² We lean in, they lean in, and this is how a positive feedback loop begins. Similarly, *balance theory* says our minds crave consistency. If we think someone has a positive view of us, it's easier and more psychologically comfortable for us to have a positive view of them too. Liking them back keeps our internal equilibrium intact. "They like me. I like them. All is harmonious."³³

Familiarity and Similarity

Once attraction has a foothold, repetition and overlap start to matter as much as intensity. We like to believe attraction is rare and mysterious, but it often follows a simple pattern. The more we see someone, the more comfortable and connected we tend to feel with them. It's called the *proximity effect*, where opportunity breeds liking.

It sounds simple, and it is. And research shows that proximity plays a role in shaping who we notice, who we trust, and who we might

become interested in. This was brought to light in a 1950s study of student housing at MIT. Researchers noticed that students were far more likely to become friends with the person in the dorm room next door than with someone only two doors down.³⁴ Proximity outweighed all other factors. People whose front doors faced each other or who bumped into each other at the mailboxes and stairwells developed the closest bonds. This pattern has held up in all kinds of environments.

The same effect appears in more recent settings. A study of nearly three thousand students found that random classroom seating assignments significantly influenced who became friends. Sit two strangers next to each other for a semester, and odds are high they'll form a bond, regardless of how different they seemed at first.³⁵ It's almost ironic that in a world where apps promise to connect us across continents, some of the most enduring relationships still begin with something as simple as who's sitting beside you. Even today, this old rule still applies. Perhaps that's why dating platforms try to mimic proximity digitally, showing us the same profiles over and over, hoping that what's familiar will start to feel meaningful.

When you zoom back out, the pattern feels familiar. Most friendships, flirtations, and romances begin with someone who's just *there*. A classmate, a coworker, a neighbor, or the person you always see at your favorite coffee shop. The more we cross paths, the more chances there are for eye contact, casual hellos, and conversations that gradually grow more personal. Over time, this repeated exposure, referred to as the *mere exposure effect*, can transform a person from an "other" into someone who feels a bit more ours. It's not a particularly romantic idea that we might fall for someone simply because they're around, but life often works that way.³⁶

Closeness goes hand in hand with similarity. We're drawn to people who reflect shared values, a sense of humor, or a mutual love of the same weird documentaries. These overlaps create a sense of "you get

me,” and we tend to feel more interest when someone aligns with us in personality, lifestyle, or worldview. It’s the comfort of not having to explain yourself all the time.³⁷ However, similarity doesn’t always lead to connection. Sometimes we notice a sense of alignment but don’t pursue it any further. Turns out, we’re a lot more likely to bond with someone who shares our views, but only when those views really matter to us.³⁸

At the same time, we have to be careful not to read too much into surface similarities. People often take small shared preferences as evidence of greater compatibility. It’s like seeing one matching puzzle piece and assuming the entire picture lines up. But liking the same playlist doesn’t mean you share core values or long-term goals. This overgeneralization can skew our judgment in both directions.³⁹ We may dismiss people who don’t immediately match our quirks, or overlook real red flags simply because we both love sci-fi and vegetarian tacos. So, yes, similarity matters. But the deeper the overlap in values, direction, and emotional needs, the more meaningful the connection.

And what about that old saying, “opposites attract”? There’s some truth to it, but mostly when differences are complementary rather than conflicting. An introvert may be drawn to an extrovert who helps them open up, or a planner may value the spontaneity of a more laid-back partner. These pairings can offer balance and bring out something new in each person. However, over the long term, shared values tend to matter more. You can enjoy the thrill of dating someone very different, but if you’re not on the same page about emotional needs, relationship expectations, and lifestyle goals, those differences can turn from charming to challenging.

More Than Chemistry

This is where attraction alone stops being enough.

“I just don’t get it,” Naomi said. “The first few weeks, I was so into him. I couldn’t stop thinking about him. My heart would literally skip when he texted. I’d replay our conversations before bed like a teenager.”

“What changed?” I asked gently.

She sighed. “I don’t know. It’s always the same. Things start off strong, then something changes. I overthink. Or they do something small, and it feels bigger than it should. And suddenly, I’m either clinging or pulling away.” She paused. “I chase that feeling at the beginning...the excitement. But it never seems to last.”

This wasn’t the first time Naomi had said something like that. She’d told me stories of whirlwind starts, full of dates that felt like movies. There were sleepless nights filled with texting and partners who said all the right things early on, but somehow it always ended the same way: a crash, disappointment, and heartbreak.

Then came Eli. She mentioned him almost offhandedly in a session a few weeks later. “He’s nice,” she said. “Stable, predictable, and honestly, I don’t even know why I’m bringing him up.”

“Tell me more,” I said.

She shrugged. “We met through a mutual friend. He remembered my dog’s name and made me tea when I had a cold. Not in a ‘trying to impress me’ way. Just...he notices things. He’s kind.”

I waited.

“But...” She glanced away, uncertain. “I don’t feel the butterflies, and I don’t get that rush. And that scares me. It’s almost like...if I’m not *anxious*, I don’t know if it’s real.” She looked back at me. “Is that weird?”

Not weird at all. Naomi, like many of us, grew up confusing *intensity* with *intimacy*. Early relational experiences taught her nervous

system to associate unpredictability with connection, training her body to equate anxiety with passion. Chaos became her chemistry. But Eli felt different—because he was.

We explored this difference together. Over time, she began to realize that what she had mistaken for boredom was actually a sense of peace. What she called a lack of excitement was the unfamiliar comfort of emotional safety. Eli didn't send her heart racing, at least not for the reasons tied to chaos and uncertainty, but he was there, steady and caring. And slowly, she realized that desire doesn't always come in like a storm. Sometimes, it arrives like a sunrise that's easy to miss if you're always looking for lightning.

For some people, early relational experiences teach the nervous system to associate unpredictability with connection. Heightened emotional arousal becomes familiar, and familiarity gets mislabeled as chemistry. Calm, by contrast, can feel under-stimulating or ambiguous because the body hasn't learned to recognize safety as engaging.

When this happens, people may find themselves drawn to relationships that activate their nervous system, mistaking intensity for intimacy and regulation for disinterest. Over time, steadiness can feel confusing rather than comforting, even when it offers exactly what the relationship needs to grow.

This distinction can matter in your current relationship, too. When you place these sensations side by side, it becomes easier to see how emotional instability can be mistaken for attraction, while steadier, regulating qualities are overlooked. Some partners interpret calm as boring, assuming that if their nervous system is not activated, something must be wrong. That discomfort can even lead them to unconsciously reintroduce tension or conflict, not out of malice but because heightened emotional states feel familiar and regulating.

In reality, safety is one of the strongest foundations for lasting desire. It simply registers differently in the body. Rather than keeping you on edge, it allows you to relax, to stay present, and to want again.

Desire does not disappear when chaos fades. It just needs time and understanding to emerge in a new form. What we call *lost desire* is often misunderstood desire. And learning to recognize the difference is where change begins.

CHAPTER 3

What Comes After “Happily Ever After”

The setting sun cast a soft light, making everything seem perfect, at least for that moment. He turned to her and said softly, “I still can’t believe I found you.”

As she looked into his eyes, she whispered, “Forever.”

They shared a kiss. The screen faded to black. They lived happily ever after... The end.

Except it’s not. That’s just where the story *stops being told*. What comes next is the part most of us were never shown. Maybe the reason fairy tales rarely have sequels is because a new main character may need to be introduced—the couple’s therapist.

From childhood, we are conditioned to view love as the ultimate destination where all pieces of life neatly fall into place. However, many come to realize that finding the right person is merely the prelude to the more complex journey of learning how to remain with one another. In relationships that are as dynamic as they are challenging, the notion of *happily ever after* requires more than just mutual attraction and affection. After the storybook ending, the real work begins. More often, it plays out in how couples interact with each other when no one is watching. These are the moments I pay attention to the

most. Before I ever hear a couple’s story, I typically know more about their relationship than they realize.

The Pattern Behind the Feeling

Travel usually gives people a break from their routines. For me, it sharpens my attention. When I’m out of my usual environment, I notice the invisible structure of everyday interactions, the small moments most people pass without a second thought.

I was in New York City for a conference and had a few hours before the first event, so I decided to take a walk. A light rain began to fall, just enough to send people indoors. As I walked into a small café, I noticed two couples. One sat side by side, scrolling on their phones. Their bodies were turned slightly away from each other, and their conversation, if any, was barely audible. Across the room, the other couple wasn’t talking much either, but their silence felt different. He leaned in to whisper something that made her laugh softly. They sat close with her hand resting gently on his arm. The contrast was hard to ignore but just as easy to miss. One pair looked like two people simply sharing space, whereas the other couple looked like they still knew how to enjoy each other’s company.

I left the café unsettled. Not because one couple looked unhappy but because nothing about them would have raised concern. They were doing what so many couples do every day—sitting together, sharing space, calling it connection. And that’s the part that stuck with me. What if this is what disconnection looks like, and how many couples are already there without realizing it?

That moment changed the question for me. I stopped asking why desire disappears and started asking something harder: When do couples stop investing in it? When does attention drift just enough to feel normal? When does being together replace actually being engaged?

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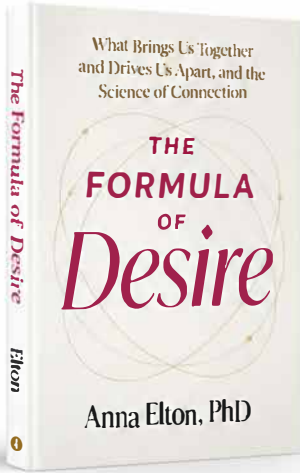
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