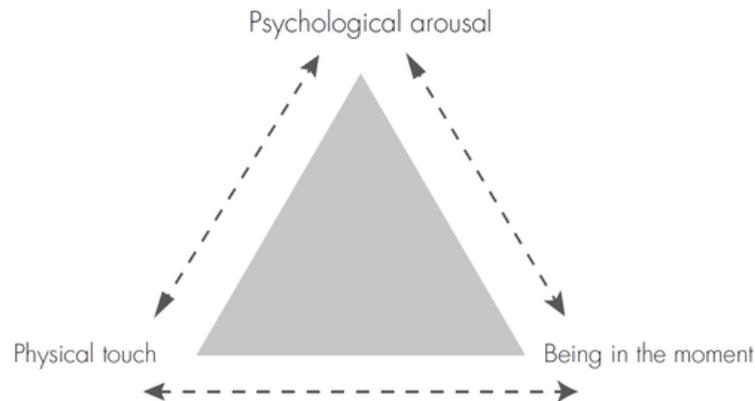


CONDITIONS FOR GOOD SEX

An exercise in understanding what makes sex good for you

Part of knowing yourself sexually and getting the most out of your sexual experiences is understanding your '**conditions for good sex**'. (Gurney, 2020)

You can think of these conditions as an interrelated triangle, of which all three points are crucial to your sexual experience..



Psychological arousal – this refers to how much of what is happening involves experiences or contexts that you find erotic, and how much the connection you have with that person meets these needs also. It involves things like the environment, trust, safety, love, power play, how exciting you find different sexual acts, visual stimuli, the dynamic or connection between you and your partner, talking, attraction, passion, props, sensuality, closeness, eye contact, the role you take and much more. This part of the triangle can be thought of as how close this sexual situation matches up to the kind of sexual situation you would create in a fantasy, for example, or which would create maximum arousal.

Physical touch – this refers to how close the physical stimulation is to the type of physical stimulation that makes your body feel good. This can be anything from the type of kiss that you like to whether you like penetration or not (and if so, where), the pressure of touch you like to your skin, and the speed and location of touch to your genitals. It could be around restraint, fabrics, the feel of body hair, the feel of someone's body. There is some overlap here with the psychological, as a sexual position you enjoy could be both about physical touch (you feel the most pleasure in that position due to the contact between your bodies) but also psychologically arousing (as you find that position hot).

How present you are – this refers to how 'in the moment' you are, versus being away with your own thoughts or distractions. This can be anything from feeling worried, self-conscious and anxious, to being distracted by something innocuous in the background. There is a continuum here, with being totally in the moment or totally present at one end and being totally distracted by what's going on in your mind at the other. The reality is that we might be somewhere between those two points, but the closer we are to being present, the better.

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'Conditions for good sex'

We want each of these three factors to be as close to our ideal conditions as they can be, so *maximum eroticism through high levels of psychological arousal*, the most pleasurable *physical touch based on what we like*, and *being as present as we can be*. The content of each of these three aspects will be different for all of us, and it's this reason that it's impossible to be 'good at' sex, as you can never really know what someone else's conditions will be without asking or being told.

In this case, you might be good at talking about sex, or responding to feedback – both of which are great skills for sex – but the phrase 'good at sex' is a societal term which implies that there is a 'right' way to do sex that works for most people, and this is simply not the case.

If we feel really turned on (high psychological arousal), are receiving pleasurable physical touch and have a low level of distraction or worry (in the moment not in our heads), we are meeting our conditions for good sex and it's more likely that this sex will be pleasurable for us resulting in increased sensation, arousal, orgasm and desire.

Our conditions for good sex do not exist in isolation, of course, and there are additional external contexts which impact upon it, such as understanding what needs sex is meeting for us at any given time, negotiating and communicating what we want with someone else, and how much our conditions feel accepted or frowned upon by society, but we'll cover these another time.

However, without knowing what these primary conditions for each of us are in the first place, we are starting from a huge disadvantage when it comes to negotiating good sex with others. Hence this task to help you work this out for yourself.

An important aspect of understanding your own sexuality is recognizing that 'sex' is not just one thing, and the types of sex, the way you have sex, the pleasure you get from it and how it makes you feel about yourself and your relationship are all crucial factors in sexual satisfaction and desire.

'Sex' can mean any number of experiences day to day, year to year, or relationship to relationship, and it's important to understand what types of 'sex' are good for you and in what contexts. You can see this reflection as looking inwards at your own sexuality before we can consider how your sexuality fits with anyone else's, as it's essential to have a clear understanding of how your own sexuality operates before you can expect it to dovetail optimally with a partner's.

Let's get started!



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Understanding your own conditions for good sex

We use this conditions for good sex triangle as a starting point in therapy, to help people get a basic understanding of which elements of their sex life are going well and which need further attention. We spend some time on each of the three aspects, writing the conditions that the person feels are important for them for psychological arousal and physical touch, and rating them according to how *close* they are to where they would like them to be in their most recent sexual encounters. We then spend some time considering indicators that they are in the moment, such as a feeling of transcendence or being completely absorbed in sensation or a partner's body to the exclusion of all else, or the types of thoughts or distractions that they find themselves plagued by.

You can use the 'conditions' triangle to reflect and make sense of your sex life currently. Sometimes you might discover that your physical needs aren't being met, as your partner(s) don't know what you like (or do know, but just don't do it). Sometimes people discover that they don't feel safe to let themselves go with the person they are with. Other times people realise that the environment they are mostly having sex in is deeply unerotic or distracting. Often, people find that their mind is elsewhere, and without your brain involved, sex can feel like you're going through the motions.

Mapping out this 'conditions' triangle once for partnered sex, and once for masturbation, can also be really eye-opening, as it becomes apparent how much having difficulty being in the moment, or getting the touch that works best for you, may be with partners only. This might be, for example, because sex with someone else is full of distracting thoughts about being judged. Or perhaps psychological arousal is at its highest with a partner as opposed to masturbation, as you struggle to generate fantasy or recall hot memories alone and feel you need the presence of someone else to be really turned on?

There are no rights and wrongs with the preferences that people have, and all (consensual) sexual preferences and expression are valid. Also, this conditions for good sex triangle must be seen as a snapshot in time, rather than a template for life, as our sexual preferences, wants, needs and confidence are in constant flux. For this reason, if you would like to have a go at mapping this out for yourself, I would suggest you repeat the exercise periodically, as your needs and wants will change. You can use it to reflect on how much of the time your conditions for good sex are met both when you're alone (solo sex) and when you are with a partner.

Getting started

Draw a triangle on a large piece of paper and write the three headers 'psychological arousal', 'physical touch' and 'being present' on each point. Think back to the three best and three worst sexual experiences you have had with another person, and try to recall everything about these experiences that made them great (or not) for you in order to help you fill in each section.



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After you have done this, add to each aspect of the triangle anything you have not experienced in real life but feel you would like, as well as anything which works for you during masturbation, but less so with a partner. Try to make sure you have a good number of points under each.



Below is a series of prompts which may help, though there is so much variety in conditions for good sex that you should not be constrained by this list when coming up with your own.

- Feeling in sync with the other person
- Being able to ask for what you want
- Tension/build-up/erotic charge/suspense
- Making/hearing noise
- Sexual talk
- Visual cues like watching hips thrusting, seeing biceps rhythmically moving, seeing wetness, seeing body parts that are attractive
- Eye contact
- Environmental factors: lighting, music, surroundings, textures
- Body confidence
- Intimacy
- Having sex with more than one person
- Playing with power
- Playing with restraint or pain
- Biting
- Pushing boundaries
- Types of touch: gentle, firm, grabbing, slapping, stroking,
- Types of kissing and places you like to be kissed
- Taking control /relinquishing control
- Positions (not just sexual positions – positions you like to be in for kissing, for example)
- Sex acts (giving or receiving oral sex, fingers inside vagina/anus, rimming, penetrative vaginal/anal sex, rubbing bodies up close together, etc)
- How you like to feel about yourself/see yourself during sex
- How you like to experience the other person and how they act during sex
- Attraction to the person
- Animalistic/passionate sex
- Feeling free/alive/spiritual

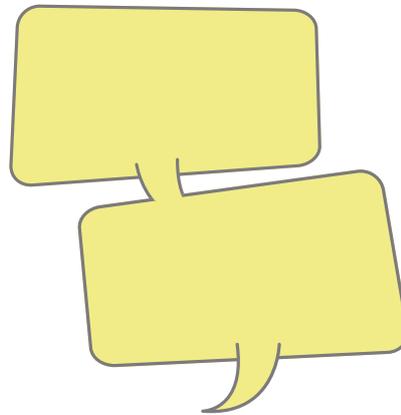
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Trying it out – sharing this with a partner

If you've been able to complete this for yourself and are in a relationship, a great next step is to be able to share it with a partner. In an ideal world, you would get them to read this handout and complete theirs too. Then, when you have the time and energy to sit down together and discuss them, do so, using the principles of:

- **Listening well and asking probing questions, i.e. 'What do you mean by this one?'**
- **Not ridiculing or judging each other's conditions**
- **Making an attempt not to get defensive or into an argument**
- **Being careful with the words you use to discuss them: go gently**



Once you have compared these (and remember that they are a snapshot in time, not a definite map for your lifelong sexuality), discuss the following:

1) Is there anything on your partner's 'conditions' triangle that you didn't know before? Ask them more about it. Is this something you might agree to try out/build on?

2) For the things that you did know, how often do these things feature in your sex life? If they're infrequent, what gets in the way?

There will be differences between your 'conditions' triangle and theirs. This is normal and not a sign of sexual incompatibility.

3) There will be some total 'no-no's, which neither of you feels you want to incorporate, and this is fine. But are there any that, with some modification, you'd be prepared to look at further? For example, you might not be into kissing with tongues but your partner might be. Try asking them what it is that they like about this. Perhaps it's that this type of physical contact represents passion to them? If so, is there another type of kiss, such as rough or deep kissing, that would work instead? Or you might decide that, although tongues is not your thing, you'd be happy to do it from time to time, especially if it's a big deal for them.

Revisit this task from time to time, your conditions for good sex are in constant flux, and knowing this about yourself and your sexual partners is a key foundation for good sex.