

CHAPTER 7

Pleasure Yourself

A dinosaur was having an orgasm in front of me. To be specific, my friend, dressed up in a blow-up T. rex costume, was riding a saddle-like sex toy contraption with a vibrating and rotating dildo while enthusiastically orgasming.

I was at a play party at a local dungeon, and I could think of nothing more erotic in that moment than a dinosaur pleasuring themselves while I watched with joy, doubled over in laughter.

When you throw out all the preconceived notions of what you “should” find erotic and what “sexy” is and let yourself play, sometimes what you find pleasurable might surprise you.

So, let’s talk about what pleasure is.

Pleasure isn’t productive, but it is generative. Pleasure is an invitation to create, and in that way, it’s in direct defiance to messages that say our worth is dependent on our productivity.

Eroticism is indulging in pleasure, letting it sink into your bones and fill your chest with the feeling of being turned on and alive. Esther Perel defines eroticism as “pleasure for its own sake” and the “qualities of vitality, curiosity, and spontaneity that make us feel alive.”¹ Eroticism includes sexuality, yes, but it’s also so much bigger than that. It’s about a turned-on life. Saving some of the most delicious feelings for just sex? How boring. Imagine that energy existing in more of your everyday life, guiding choices and inviting you to slow down and remember to enjoy being alive.

Eroticism and pleasure bring connection and intimacy within ourselves, and particularly within our bodies. When you’re exploring gender,

finding ways to feel pleasure in your body helps quiet dysphoria and self-critical thoughts. Or, at the very least, it helps you realize you can hold both pleasant and difficult feelings and move between them. Pleasure and eroticism help you recharge. They remind you of why you're exploring or transitioning your gender in the first place—to feel good in your skin.

Pleasure and eroticism also connect us to others, whether that is through shared sexuality or shared platonic experiences. Some of the most intimate and pleasurable moments I've had with others have been watching a beautiful performance-art piece or staying up too late laughing and talking about ideas that make our hearts sing.

Pursuing pleasure is a statement about your self-worth, saying you deserve to feel alive—to create, receive, explore, delight, connect—and to experience pleasure for its own sake.

That's what this chapter is about.

You don't have to have it all figured out to start experimenting with pleasure, nor do there have to be dinosaurs and dungeons involved. Finding what brings you pleasure is both an experiment and a form of play. You can't fail at this, because the measure of success isn't about an outcome. It's about the act of being playful. As Emily Nagoski puts it, "Pleasure is the measure."²

When I say, "Pleasure yourself," your imagination might go to many different places. The first place is likely to be solo sex, or masturbation, since that's the context we often use this term in. And yes, I will talk about pleasuring yourself sexually. But I'm also talking about pleasure in a more global sense—as a feeling of satisfaction, delight, joy, and indulging in things that make our senses light up.

Maybe your imagination goes to ropes and whips, or perhaps long baths with candles and coconut oil, dancing alone in your room to your favorite song, staring at the ocean, watching an inspiring performance, feeling the wind on your face while riding your bike around town. What brings each of us pleasure is as unique as we are.

Or maybe you can't think of anything. That's okay too. I've been there.

Historically, I've felt disconnected from pleasure and eroticism, especially in my body. Unnamed gender dysphoria played a role, but it's not the whole story. My family and culture were big factors in keeping me disconnected from noticing or pursuing pleasure in my body. In addition to oppressive norms around sexuality (or lack thereof), my family would have agreed with the preacher in *Footloose* about dancing. Growing up, I wasn't allowed to wear a two-piece bathing suit, spaghetti straps, or shorts that didn't graze my knees. Engaging with anything erotic or pleasurable related to the body was actively discouraged.

I also lived in a body with chronic pain and untreated anxiety. My body has been a source of hurt and distress throughout my life. Dissociating from it and dreaming of the day my brain could be transferred to a new, AI-powered body during the robot revolution was a coping skill I learned early. All of these intersections in my life made it difficult for me to discover what it meant to be connected to my body and to experience pleasure in it. Since then, I've done a lot of work (and still do) to connect to my body with more self-compassion and notice what brings me pleasure.

The turning point for me was simple: I decided it was worth fighting for a life where I get to be myself, to feel joy and pleasure, and to be connected to people who love me. I deserve that. And so do you.

Building Your Pleasure Practice

We often think of pleasure and eroticism as something that happens to us—something latent inside us that reveals itself with time. But I find it more helpful to think of eroticism and pleasure as a practice. The key to building your pleasure practice is to slow down and take time to notice and pursue things that bring you pleasure. Our brains pay attention to what we ask them to focus on, which means we can quite literally train our brains to notice pleasure. It's like looking for red cars on a road trip—as soon as you start looking for them, you notice them everywhere.

Getting in touch with our senses and imagination is one of the easiest ways to connect to pleasure in our bodies. There is a reason we call it “sensuality.” When we fill our senses with things that are pleasurable to us (good music, a vivid sunset, a hot bath, a cup of tea, a clean house that smells like lemons) and understand what pleasure feels like in our body, we remind our brain to slow down and notice other pleasurable sensations.

For transgender and non-binary folks, there can sometimes be conflicting feelings about experiencing pleasure in bodies that don’t feel like they fully reflect who we are. I’ve had clients express resistance to or guilt about feeling pleasure with certain body parts, sexual activities, or roles because it brings up feelings of being not “trans enough” if those things are outside of the gendered box they are now “supposed” to fit into.

It can be difficult to let ourselves enjoy the body we’re in and feel pleasure while simultaneously knowing we may change that body in the future. Complicating this even more are feelings of discomfort at the parts of our physical selves that we can’t change.

Remember how we talked about body positivity versus body respect all the way back in chapter 2? Given the world we live in, it’s unrealistic to expect that you, as a transgender/non-binary person, are going to feel love for your body all day, every day. However, there is always an opportunity to show kindness to our bodies. And one of the greatest ways to show kindness to ourselves is to pursue pleasure.

Pursuing pleasure is about reminding yourself you want to feel good in your own skin, even on the days when you don’t. We can hold it all. You’re magic like that.

We’ve discussed how the way you think impacts gender exploration and the ability to transition with more ease. Likewise, there are important mindset shifts that will help you tap into pleasure while taking the pressure off of any particular “goal” besides “pleasure for its own sake.”

Mindset Shifts for Exploring Pleasure

If you’re having trouble tapping into pleasure or eroticism, it’s not because your vibes aren’t high enough or some other silly claim about connecting

to your “divine vortex of epic sex.” We’ve talked a lot about how context, histories, and systems have shaped us and created more barriers for folks with multiple, intersecting identities, especially when we’re trying to connect to our own and other people’s bodies.

Pleasure, eroticism, and sexuality can feel scary. Each requires vulnerability and getting to know sensations that might feel unfamiliar. When we’ve experienced lots of things that have hurt us, our brain can interpret new sensations as “AHH! SCARY!” instead of the more curious “Oh, what’s that?”³ That’s normal.

I say this not to sound depressing but to ground you in self-compassion for wherever you are in your pleasure journey. Let’s not judge it. Let’s just start there. As we go through the next few chapters and you begin to explore what brings you pleasure, remember your brain can help. The way you’re thinking and talking to yourself makes a big difference in the pursuit of pleasure, and by grounding yourself in curiosity and a willingness to take risks, you can turn down the volume on your brain trash.

As always, the most important thing is that you feel emotionally and physically safe. But assuming those two things are present, these two mindset shifts have helped my clients and me explore pleasure and eroticism.

Mindset Shift #1: Curiosity

One of the best guiding principles to get out of your head in the exploration of pleasure is to follow your curiosity. If you’ve ever gotten stuck in the joy of an internet wormhole and gone running to your partner to randomly exclaim, “Did you know that sperm whales can vibrate you to death with their sounds?” then you know what I mean.

(Only me? Okay.)

Once you notice one thing that piques your curiosity, you can expand on it, just like my journey into the vocalizations of sperm whales had me googling “biggest squids ever seen” late into the night.

Shifting into a curious mindset is especially helpful when we find ourselves judging. A lot of folks get hung up on judgment at some point when exploring pleasure and eroticism—judgment of ourselves, our bodies, our

"performance," and of sensations and experiences. Curiosity is an "I wonder..." energy. It's playful, generative, and assumes the best intent of both ourselves and others.

In the show *Ted Lasso*, there's a great scene where Ted has to hit a perfect bullseye to win the round of darts that will determine the lineup of the last two games of the football season (or soccer, to us Americans) that he coaches. His opponent chuckles, smugly assuming that Ted is going to lose. It is, after all, a tough shot. As he goes to throw the dart, Ted talks about how people have always underestimated him, going on to say that had his opponent asked him a couple of questions before he made the bet—instead of judging him right away—he would have found out that Ted had played darts every Sunday for six years with his father.

Then Ted throws the bullseye.

Moving from judgment to curiosity within ourselves is a simple concept but takes practice to apply. Just like noticing how pleasure feels in our bodies, noticing what judgment feels like in our bodies and what our internal dialogue sounds like when we're being judgmental is the first step to changing it. Even if you don't feel curious yet, you can practice acting "as if" until it feels more natural.

In the context of a sexual experience with someone else, this might look like moving from "I'm a failure because I got anxious during sex" to "What happened here? What context and skills do I need to feel more pleasure next time? What do I need from my partner?" Even if you are acting "as if" you're curious before you *feel* curious, practicing this cognitive shift will help retrain your brain to not go to judgment automatically and allow you to pull yourself out of it quicker.

For one client I worked with, those questions helped him decide not to take off his binder during sex because sex felt more affirming that way. Don't overlook the tiny changes that might make a huge difference.

Whether you *feel* curious or not, keep going! Keep exploring. Keep learning. Keep following your budding curiosity and what brings you pleasure. You might be surprised where it leads. There will be days that will feel joyous and euphoric, and there will be days where things will feel harder and frustrating. Just keep swimming.

Both curiosity and pleasure are like snowballs rolling down a hill—as you put focus and intention on them, your pleasure snowball (I know it's cheesy; let me have it) keeps expanding and picking up the pace.

Mindset Shift #2: Flexibility and Willingness to Take Risks

What each of us finds erotic is unique. We each have our own desire templates that are shaped by our identities, our experiences, our values, and our socialization. It's common and completely normal for those desires and interests to shift and change over time as we grow and change ourselves, including during gender exploration and transition.

Discovering what you find erotic, what feels good in your body, and what feels good to consensually do to others' bodies requires flexibility and openness to change. Some of these new discoveries might require you to confront biases and be a little uncomfortable as you unlearn old messages and ways of being.

Exploring pleasure and eroticism often requires a change of scenery and context. Embracing fluidity and growth means being open to new experiences, spaces, and people and getting out of your comfort zone and embracing the awkward. (Your first dungeon party? Awkward. Your first time slowly eating a strawberry in the exercise you're about to do on page 120? Awkward.) But as always, we want to take risks that are challenging but not so challenging that they feel overwhelming.

The mindsets of curiosity, flexibility, and a willingness to take risks are the foundation for exploring the principles of pleasure. Once we get our mind right, everything else becomes easier.

Principles of Pleasure

In her book *Trans Sex*, Dr. Lucie Fielding asks one of my all-time favorite questions: "What would it be to imagine sexuality as a terrain of play and wonder rather than a dysphoria-packed minefield?"⁴

My answer—as you might expect by this point—is that it would feel like exactly that: full of play and wonder. But how do we know where to start exploring? How can we start to identify these feelings? There are

four principles that can act as the cardinal directions on our pleasure compass and help us navigate the new terrain.

Principle #1—Pleasure Lives in the Body

We've talked about the challenges of getting stuck in your head in previous chapters, and...here it is again. The simple, but not always easy, remedy is to focus on your five senses. Your brain is going to do its own monkey-mind thing and might be all over the place. That's normal. Any time you notice your brain chatter taking you out of the moment, compassionately bring the focus back to what is pleasurable using your senses.

That sounds simple, but if you've felt disconnected from your body for a long time (like I was), your first tiny step is to learn how to reengage those senses and experience what pleasure feels like in your body. The following exercise will help you do just that.

SEXY STRAWBERRY

For this exercise, I want you to find a strawberry (or chocolate or another food item you find delicious) and sit down somewhere comfortable. Your goal is to stay aware of how your body feels when you engage each of your senses. Don't try to force feeling pleasure; stay curious, and pay attention to what sensations come up for you and where you feel them in your body.

Sight: Look at the strawberry closely. Notice the colors and gradients of color. Notice the shape and any irregularities. Notice the different textures of the fruit and the leaves.

Sound: If you rustle the leaves close to your ear or rub your finger across them does your strawberry make any sounds?

Smell: What does your strawberry smell like? Can you identify any fragrance notes like with a fine wine? Do the leaves smell different than the fruit?

Touch: Run your fingers over the strawberry. Notice the different textures. Is it cool or warm? Does the temperature change in your hand? What does it feel like to use a light versus a firmer touch?

Taste: Finally, put the strawberry in your mouth and bite slowly. Notice the juice running over your tongue and the first moment of tasting it. What does it taste like—sweet, bitter, acidic, rich? Finish eating it slowly and notice if there are different flavor profiles as you go.

Once you finish enjoying the strawberry, ask yourself the following:

What did it feel like to be really present and to go slow while eating?

What feelings, body sensations, and thoughts came up?

Did this experience feel like a "Yes!"? What parts?

Did any parts of this experience feel like a "No!"?

Whether or not you identified certain sensations as pleasure, going slow and using all your senses help build your capacity for using these skills in more areas of your life. When you do this and your brain and body go, "Yes!" you know you've hit the mark.

Principle #2—Decenter Genitals and Orgasm

Our biggest sex organ isn't our genitals. Or our brain. It's our skin, full of nerve endings all over our body ready to receive pleasure. By decentering genitals, you're opening up a world of possibilities for pleasure instead of having it concentrated in one spot.

It's common to think of orgasm as the point and pinnacle of sex. It isn't. The point of sex is multifaceted, and we all bring different needs at different times, but at the core is an experience that is connective (including to yourself) and erotic. When you center on pleasure and eroticism instead of running toward the goal of orgasm, you're able to slow down and experience more full-body pleasure. You're less likely to get stuck in your head because there's no goal except pleasure. And you take the pressure off any sexual concerns or issues: There's always something else pleasurable to do if your body can't or doesn't want to "perform" like society says it should.

There are many traditions of sexual and erotic teachings like tantra, BDSM, and kink that decenter the genitals and orgasm and can give you ideas for things to explore. And—shocker—the simple way to decenter these things is to focus on pleasure (or painful pleasure) in your five senses.

Slow it down and luxuriate in it. Or speed it up and get a rush. There's no right or wrong way as long as it works for you.

Principle #3—Give Yourself Permission

Skin isn't gendered. It's simply sensation. You don't need to experience pleasure or have sex in any particular way to "prove" your gender to anyone—even yourself. You're already valid. Let yourself enjoy the pleasurable sensations without judgment about what it means.

To be clear, you don't need my permission. (You can give that to yourself!) But in case it helps to hear someone else say it, you have my official permission to enjoy what you enjoy and to explore what you want to explore. You're trans enough, and nothing you do that brings you pleasure or feels erotic invalidates that. Period.

Principle #4—Accept Your Body As Is

When I say accept your body, what I mean is acknowledge the reality of what your body is like right now and show it kindness. I don't mean ignore gender dysphoria, limitations, or other concerns. Those feelings are real, they impact you, and ignoring difficult feelings is rarely helpful. Still. The body you have is the one you've got in this particular moment, even if you change something about it in the future. You don't have to hate your body or be unkind to it to want to change it.

SOME TRUTHS ABOUT BODIES

- All bodies are good bodies.
 - Your body doesn't invalidate your gender identity regardless of what medical interventions you may or may not have.
 - People will respect your gender identity if you tell them about it regardless of what your body looks like. Not all people. But the ones that aren't assholes, who are also the only ones we want to be hanging around anyway.
 - All bodies can experience pleasure and eroticism.
 - All bodies deserve pleasure and eroticism.
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Accepting your body as is (for now) and working on believing these truths can help you turn down the volume on self-judgment and allow you to pursue pleasure more freely. Again, this is not about ignoring your feelings but about giving yourself a little bit of space to relate to yourself with more kindness. Practicing self-love, self-compassion, and self-efficacy (as described in chapter 2) can help ease feelings of judgment, anxiety, and fear as you work toward accepting your body. We experience the world and pleasure through our bodies, and we deserve to enjoy ourselves along the way.

PLEASURE BATH

One of my favorite homework assignments for clients and a personal practice of mine is a pleasure bath. I love baths (or showers) as a context for exploring pleasure because they take away one of the barriers that folks can get stuck on: being naked. Getting naked in your bedroom can pose a barrier if you aren't feeling comfortable in your body, if you have a partner or kids or roommates who might interrupt you, or if you're simply cold. The wet world is a natural place to explore pleasure since you're already naked and used to touching your body as you bathe.

In a pleasure bath, the goal isn't arousal or orgasm or any particular activity; it's just curiosity. Of course, if you want to get down and dirty with yourself in the bath, go for it! But that's not the point. This is an opportunity to practice curiosity and lean on the pillars of getting out of your head, as well as decentering orgasm and genitals, while exploring pleasure.

To create a pleasure bath ritual, block out at least forty-five minutes and lock the bathroom door. (You hear me out there, parents? Lock. Your. Door.)

Create a pleasurable context. Pick up any clutter. Light some candles or put on music if that's your thing. Or grab a joint and relax. Think about engaging as many of your senses as possible.

Then begin to touch your body with curiosity. Run your hands over your skin. Notice if some parts feel warmer or cooler, rougher or smoother, softer or harder. Experiment with a light touch and a deeper massage. Really look at your body and notice the little details you tend to overlook—curves, the texture, the way the light catches on your skin.

Take your time bathing your body. Massage your head and face. Soap up slowly, touching every inch of yourself.

What sensations feel pleasurable to you?

What feelings or thoughts come up as you explore?

A pro tip: I love using coconut oil in a pleasure bath because many people have it in their kitchen and it's a body-safe oil for our sensitive bits. Throwing a little in your bath or warming it up in your hand during a shower and rubbing it on your skin creates a different (and very pleasant, in my opinion) sensation to explore. Just don't slip and fall!

Hormone Therapy and Pleasure

A common fear I hear from folks who are medically transitioning is that hormone therapy (or surgeries) will change their sexual experience in a negative way.

Here's the truth: It's erotic to be authentic. And folks with all different kinds of bodies, abilities, and hormones are out there having hot and connecting sexual and erotic experiences, both solo and partnered. Changes in desire and exploring new ways to experience pleasure in your body can be an exciting time of growth.

Medical intervention does often change how your body functions and impacts your desire, but the science as well as my own experience as a therapist suggest that this is an overwhelmingly positive change for folks.⁵

Hormone therapy puts your body and mind in an environment where they can thrive.* Even before noticeable external changes start appearing, most of my clients have expressed that simply having different hormones in their bodies dramatically improved their gender dysphoria and helped them feel more comfortable and confident in their gender identity and expression. And confidence is sexy as hell.

Folks often get stuck in their heads about pleasure and hormone therapy, and there are a few misconceptions and anxieties I hear constantly. Much like with our boogeymen from chapter 4, shining a light on these anxieties makes them a lot less scary, so let's take them head-on.

* For people who feel like hormone therapy is a "Yes!"

A QUICK NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

For clarity, I will often use traditional medical terms for anatomy in this section, but please replace any terms that don't feel affirming to you with whatever terms you like best. You can literally cross them out of the book and write your own. Using names for genitals that feel good to you, either all the time or during sex with a partner, can help you drop into your body more fully and create even more pleasure.

Transgender Women / People Taking Estrogen

Many transgender women / people taking estrogen I've worked with feel ambivalent at first about the changes in sexual functioning and desire from hormone therapy. While having more estrogen coursing through their body is deeply affirming, there is a fear they will experience less sexual and erotic satisfaction if it's more difficult to orgasm, there are changes in genital functioning, or their libido, or desire for sex, is lowered.

There are a few fallacies here to address.

First, hormone therapy with estrogen does not kill your libido. It simply changes it. Spontaneous desire is what we usually think of when we think about libido. Think of the feeling of horniness or getting hard or wet with few to no external triggers. This "lightning bolt to the genitals"⁶ is what we see pictured in most media when we see desire portrayed.

However, there is another type of desire we don't talk about as much and that is often more common: responsive desire. When we are in a context that is safe and sexy and we give our bodies time to catch up, our bodies will often respond to that context. It's more intentional and just as sexy.

For example, it might mean taking a bath to relax and putting on some audio erotica before engaging in solo sex and giving your body thirty to forty-five minutes of time to feel pleasure instead of jumping on the bed right after work and expecting to have an orgasm within five minutes of furious rubbing.

Slowing down and being intentional about building your pleasure and eroticism practice can open up doors to new and greater pleasure, whether you're taking hormones or not. The transfemme folks on estrogen I've

worked with have often described more full-body orgasms and pleasure as well as more awareness and pleasurable sensations in body parts besides the genitals, and they've experienced wonder at how fulfilling their solo and partnered sex lives are. A change in your desire template from more spontaneous to more responsive does not have to be a loss; it can be an expansion.

Second, a soft penis is still able to orgasm and experience pleasure. We are all socialized to believe that the only good penis is a hard penis, but this isn't true. A soft penis has the same number of nerve endings as an erect one and can experience just as much pleasure. Our culture teaches us how to interact with a hard penis (albeit in a very heteronormative way) but not a soft one.⁷ Having how your body functions change means it's time to explore new ways of touching and using your body that are affirming for you.

Lastly, if a transfemme person wants to be a penetrating partner but is struggling to maintain an erection, there are lots of options for penetration beyond genitals. Fingers or fists are popular ones. There are also dildos in every shape, color, and size, and strap-ons that have room for larger genitalia.

Transgender Men / People Taking Testosterone

For transgender men / people taking testosterone, there can be uncertainty about "bottom growth," or clitoral growth, and concerns about what an increase in spontaneous desire will mean. Many folks on testosterone experience an increase in the feeling of horniness as a result of the hormones and, just as importantly, new behaviors and increased feelings of authenticity and confidence. As we discussed in chapter 1, testosterone levels are impacted by behavior and socialization more than previously thought, and it's amazing how sexy feeling yourself is. But as folks start to experience greater interest in sex than they might have had before, there can be a fear of becoming a sex-fueled monster.

The answer to the fear of becoming the equivalent of an obnoxious, horny teenage boy is simple. Don't be a misogynistic prick, and you'll be fine. There are lots of people in the world with a lot of testosterone in

their body who like sex and are mindful, respectful, and loving, whether with a long-term partner or during a one-night stand. Be that person. Also, for what it's worth, if you're concerned about becoming a sex-fueled monster, chances are you won't become one, because you're already mindful of it (also, that's not how testosterone works).

Increased desire can and should be fun! You're the same person who holds the same values you did before starting testosterone. Remember that eroticism is about more than sex. It's about energy, and energy can be used in many different ways in and out of the bedroom and in solo and partnered play.

Bottom growth is a beautiful thing if it aligns with your gender identity. It can be scary because it's new and unfamiliar and permanent and usually one of the first physical changes that folks notice. And there is space between starting hormone therapy and irreversible bottom growth. If you are uncertain whether you will like it, you have an opportunity to stop or decrease the dosage of hormones at any time if the growth becomes dysphoric for you. In my experience, bottom growth and increased genital sensitivity have been some of the most fun and affirming aspects of more testosterone both in my body and as a partner.

TESTOSTERONE SIDE EFFECTS: DRYNESS AND ATROPHY

A couple of common side effects of testosterone hormone therapy are vaginal dryness and atrophy. Clitoral pain with growth can also be a concern. Often, this is discomfort due to skin growth and will go away with time. If it continues or is especially bothersome, bring in a professional. If you're experiencing any of these concerns, there are a few things you can do.⁸

- Get good-quality lube (check out a local or online feminist sex toy store) and use it consistently for both solo and partnered play.
- Give your body more time to respond to your safe and sexy context.
- Seek out a pelvic-floor physical therapist who can help identify

- what muscles might be tight and work with you to gently loosen them up. Pelvic-floor muscles can often be released through internal or external pressure or through things like deep breathing.
- Take deep, slow breaths that expand your belly. You can practice this by sitting or lying comfortably and placing one hand on your belly. Breathe in slowly through your nose while allowing your stomach to rise. As you exhale gently through your nose or mouth, notice how your belly contracts toward your spine.
 - If the dryness and irritation is causing your pelvic floor muscles to tense, you can stretch out the pelvic floor muscles with your fingers. Imagine your vulva is a clock. Taking one or two fingers (use lube), inserting them to the first or second knuckle and pressing firmly (but not so much that it's painful) on the "hours" between three and nine is particularly helpful in releasing tense pelvic muscles.
 - Talk to your pelvic floor physical therapist and prescribing doctor (or your primary care doctor) about topical estrogen cream to rejuvenate the dryness. Topical creams only impact the area where they are directly applied.
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Ideas for Erotic Exploration

All of the mindsets and principles of pleasure we've explored in this chapter lead to something deep and meaningful—hope. Hope isn't about wearing rose-colored glasses or constantly having a smile on your face. Hope is created by having goals (like bringing more pleasure and eroticism into your life), seeing a path to get there, and taking tiny steps toward your goal.⁹

Think of the following ideas as alternately a tasting menu and the proverbial spaghetti to throw at the wall. Some are explicitly erotic (or can be) and some simply focus on pleasure through your senses, play, and inspiration. Everyone's desire template is different, so use these suggestions as a jumping-off point—or ignore them completely and come up with your own ideas. The important thing is that you come curious and

let your imagination lead you. Learning that you don't like something can be as powerful as knowing that you do. It's all just information.

Embodied Practices

Moving your body in ways that feel pleasurable or satisfying gives you a feeling of agency over your life and can be a powerfully erotic practice. Dance is a particular embodied practice that has meant a lot to me over the past ten years. Because of my upbringing, I don't think I truly danced until I moved to Chicago (Baptists don't like dancing). Learning to let go of being so controlled in my body and moving it (flailing it?) with the music's rhythm, preferably in a crowd of sweaty queers, is the freest I've ever felt.

As an overambitious Capricorn, I decided to conquer my body issues and continue exploring pleasure by taking my clothes off onstage for strangers while dancing. Graduating from my improv burlesque days, I joined a burlesque class with a performance track and worked my two left feet to the bone learning the moves. "Eyes up!" our teacher would yell roughly a thousand times a class, reminding us to stop staring at our feet and watch ourselves in the mirror. Confidence was the message of the class. Whatever your body looked like, no matter how many dance steps you forgot, no matter what happened onstage with your costume, you had to own it. Because at the end of the day, the audience wanted to see you having fun onstage. Everything else was details.

I've heard clients describe the pleasure and freedom they feel while riding their bike through the city as an erotic experience. Fitness and feeling strong and flexible is a source of pleasure and agency for many, like my friends who run Han Training, a queer, trans BIPOC-led gym in Chicago.

And while it might not sound super sexy, even body-based therapies like somatic experiencing, eye movement desensitization reprocessing (EMDR), and sensorimotor psychotherapy are powerful tools to help folks feel more connected to their bodies when their bodies haven't always felt safe to them.

Solo Sex

Mindful solo sex, or masturbation, is one of the best ways to connect with our bodies. We often think of solo sex as secondary to partnered sex or as a quick release when we don't have a better option. Let me paint a new picture for you.

It's much more helpful to think of solo sex and partnered sex as completely different erotic constructs.¹⁰ Solo sex isn't a consolation prize if we can't or don't want to have partnered sex. It's a different type of sexual experience that is valuable in and of itself. Mindfully engaging in solo sex means taking your time, paying attention to context, and taking the focus off of orgasm and putting it back on sensual pleasure. Solo sex gives you the opportunity to get into a "Oh, what's that?" headspace¹¹ and explore your body without worrying about paying attention to a partner.

Sexy Snapshots

A sexy snapshot is the result of mining for sexy and safe contexts in an experience or fantasy that was particularly pleasurable and erotic for you. Something that really got your motor running. It can involve sex or being naked, but it doesn't have to. Late author and sex educator Jack Morin calls these "peak erotic experiences."¹²

Getting curious about the factors that contributed to the sexy snapshot can give you important clues as to what feels pleasurable to you. Once you've identified some of the factors, the question becomes "How can I include more of X in my day-to-day life?"

For example, I used to read like a maniac.

Then I went to graduate school, and after all those papers and textbooks, it was hard to get back into reading consistently for fun. As I explored what feels pleasurable and erotic in my life, I experimented with reading novels again for fun, some of them erotic by content but many of them erotic because of the beauty of the words. I lit some candles, poured myself a glass of whiskey, and curled up on the couch with a book and a playlist called "Fuck Me, Daddy."

Thinking of this sexy snapshot reminded me of things I knew I loved

on some level but wasn't in the habit of putting together—words, great music, a vibe. I now incorporate more of those things into my week.

Speaking of erotic words...

Erotica and Porn

Finding erotica or porn that resonates with you is a fun and effective way to broaden your erotic imagination. Sometimes finding the right author, performer, or producer can be a challenge, but in the age of the internet, there is something out there for everyone with a little digging.

One of my favorite porn projects is Goodyn Green's Shutter series. Some folks are more visual or auditory, so experimenting with what type of written or video content speaks to you is part of the process. There are also many fantastic and affirming sex how-to books out there that can give you ideas and some great tips. Seeing ourselves reflected in erotic material is powerful and affirming in a world that often seeks to tokenize or desexualize marginalized identities.

However, finding pleasure in words or film is not just about explicitly sexual material. Some of the most erotic words I've heard come from a finely crafted description of the mycelium networks under the earth and Jeanette Winterson's unique ability to blend fantasy with realism or the way Lidia Yuknavitch's words seem to explode from her body and settle into yours.

Finding film and words that bring you pleasure is about chasing curiosity, being open to change, and broadening your erotic template naturally and with ease.

Fill Your Feed

Social media has a profound impact on us in both good and bad ways. Filling your feed with people who reflect your values, promote body respect and pleasure for all bodies, and are explicitly erotic or sexual in nature makes scrolling through Instagram a delight. It can take a little bit of work to find these folks, but I promise they are out there. Once you find a few of them, it becomes a snowball of inclusive pleasure as you start following similar pages and the algorithm catches on.

Erotic Spaces and Art

Shaking up your routines and intentionally putting yourself in spaces focused on eroticism can jump-start your erotic imagination. This might look like explicitly sexual spaces such as classes at your local feminist sex toy store, sensual movement classes, kink conferences and events, play parties, or online groups and discussion forums. It might also include choosing to take in erotic performances like burlesque, circus, or pole dancing or engaging with erotic art. It can also look like going to spaces that bring you pleasure but aren't explicitly erotic, like the ballet, opera, an art gallery, or taking a pottery class (*Ghost*, anyone?) or learning to work with leather.

Brains, Craft, and Talent

Some of the most erotic experiences I've had have not been explicitly connected to anything sexual. I get a lot of pleasure from watching, listening to, and having conversations with people that I find smart, skilled, and talented. I love and am consistently inspired by people sharing their gifts, art, and ideas. I could happily listen to a master maker explain in detail about their craft for hours. Watching talented performers of all types lights me up inside. People's brains and their passions leave me in awe.

The Natural World

Connecting with nature is a source of eroticism and pleasure for many. There's an entire movement called ecosexuality, melding eroticism with environmental activism.¹³ The natural world has an endless supply of awe and pleasure to share, whether you literally want to have sex with a tree or simply feel pleasure when you see a beautiful sunset or a mountain peak held by clouds or when you stand in the outer space that is an ocean.

Cheese

There's a reason my only skill in the kitchen is making a cheese board fit for Dionysus. It's a delight for the senses.

Play "This or That"

Imagining new ways of interacting with your body beyond what society tells us we "should" do can be a lot of fun. It's also fun to experiment with new kinds of sensations—like hot and cold, pokey and soft, firm and light. And often, we're surprised by what we enjoy.

The "this or that" game is a great way to explore new experiences. You can play with a partner or on your own. Try two different sensations and ask yourself, "Did I like this or that better?" Repeat.

Reimagining and relearning how to touch yourself or asking a partner to touch you in new ways can feel incredibly affirming. In exploring new terrains in your body, you might ask a partner to try different ways of touching, licking, and sucking that might feel good. You can also experiment with things like ice cubes, body-safe candle wax, something fuzzy, or a Wartenberg wheel (a small wheel of spikes you can roll across your skin).

This game can also be useful for reimagining what you want your bits to be called and finding affirming language for your body. Pro tip: Have a partner whisper them in your ear.

Here's what I want you to know: You deserve pleasure equity. Your body might not feel 100 percent affirming to you, but it's yours and it deserves kindness. Pleasure is accessible no matter what your limitations are, and it's a muscle that you have to intentionally build.

I WANT / I WONDER DANCE PARTY

Saying our desires out loud is powerful. As you discover more about what brings you pleasure, this brainstorming exercise can help get your curiosity and play juices flowing.

For this exercise, find a time when you have some privacy, take a few deep breaths, and turn on your favorite music to dance to. Get warmed up by moving your body to the music for at least one song. As you continue dancing, start brainstorming out loud about things you want and things you wonder about. Don't censor yourself. Don't think too hard. Don't be afraid to be silly. Just let your stream of consciousness flow.

That's it. You don't have to do anything with the answers if you don't want to. But my guess is that you will.

Examples:

I want...

to be desired for who I am

to experience being a top/bottom/dom/sub

to have my partner dress up in a gorilla costume and fuck me with a strap-on

I wonder...

what it would be like to wear a strap-on and have my partner give me a blow job while I watch in the mirror

what words would feel the most affirming when talking about my body parts

what it would be like to feel confident in my sexuality; how would I behave differently?

Pro tip: Try recording yourself saying these things on your phone and have it transcribed (or transcribe it yourself).

We can think faster than we can write, so it's often easier and more authentic to talk it out, and seeing your stream of consciousness in writing can help you see patterns and keep a record of the things you want and are curious about.