

# Problems With Intimacy? Retrain Your Brain

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**Oxytocin, the hormone for bonding, trust, breastfeeding and orgasm also helps us learn to love.**

Oxytocin is quite a busy hormone. When released in the brain, it facilitates sex, orgasm, birth and breastfeeding, as well as feelings of bonding, connection and trust.

No wonder, then, that scientists want to recreate the chemical's effects. Drugs that simulate the hormone, like Pitocin, are given to pregnant women to help induce labor. A synthetic oxytocin nasal spray has been produced to help mothers create milk for newborns, and researchers are experimenting with how doses of it might combat memory loss and autism, and improve sexual functioning.

In her forthcoming book *The Chemistry of Connecton: How the Oxytocin Response Can Help You Find Trust, Intimacy and Love*, author and journalist Susan Kuchinskas describes the important role oxytocin plays in our love lives and how we can train our brain to better respond to love. In other words, we weren't born knowing how to love—we learn it.

She spoke to Tobi Elkin.

**YourTango:** What is the "oxytocin response"?

**SK:** The brain pumps out a spurt of oxytocin directly into your brain during times of physical and emotional intimacy, safety or trust. It's a learned response—people begin to secrete oxytocin when their mothers are loving them. The oxytocin response can happen during

orgasm, or when you're shaking hands with someone. It doesn't even have to be when you're touching someone. You can get an oxytocin release when you're interacting with someone via IM, on the computer or phone.

Unfortunately, what can happen is that we also can learn to secrete oxytocin when our mother is harsh and yells at us. We associate our mom with yelling and anger, but also love. When we grow up, we have the oxytocin response not only during loving times, but also angry ones, which can make it hard to maintain a good relationship.

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**YourTango:** If someone doesn't have a healthy oxytocin response, can anything help? Therapy? Nutrition?

**SK:** Therapy has been shown to actually change the structure of the brain. It can retrain the oxytocin response.

**YourTango:** What about oxytocin in everyday life? If we don't have a partner right now, or we have to be away from family, are there things we can do to boost or cultivate our oxytocin response?

**SK:** You can join a group, nurture a pet, participate actively in your friendships. If we see love as the oxytocin response, we realize that it starts from inside us. Women, tend to think "If I could just find the right person, I would fall in love." But if a woman doesn't have a strong or healthy oxytocin response, all the nice people in the world won't be able to make her fall in love with them.

**YourTango:** How does oxytocin make it difficult to tell the difference between romance and committed love?

**SK:** Part of the problem is that we have muddled definitions of love. That feeling after sex of "Oh I love him, he's the one," that's oxytocin, not love. But people mistake the excitement of romance for committed love. When romance dies, we think "Oh I don't love you any more." Our culture doesn't privilege the steady, non-fizzy kind of love. Media is all about romance. I agree with Helen Fisher on that point.

**YourTango:** Is oxytocin also secreted by men?

**SK:** Yes, it's just as important to men as it is to women, but testosterone seems to mute the effects of oxytocin. Vasopressin, which is related to oxytocin, is also important because it stimulates certain protective behaviors in men. Vasopressin is enhanced by testosterone, and estrogen enhances the bonding effects of oxytocin. In relationships, a potential problem can be

that women expect men to bond the way they bond.

**YourTango:** If this is all the result of brain chemicals, do we have any control over it?

**SK:** I think the biggest thing for women is to understand that the feeling of being bonded to a man is a very strong one. It's absolutely a real feeling, but it's not necessarily based on any reality within your relationship.

In the early stages of a relationship you need to be aware. Use the thinking part of your brain and understand that the feelings come from your body as much as your mind. Keep your eye out for signs that he really is trustworthy and loveable. Oxytocin plays with us. "He lied to me, but I love him!" or "Gee, he wasn't very nice, but I love him anyway." That's the oxytocin talking.

The other thing women should be vigilant about even if everything is going well: don't push a man for a deep commitment too early. It takes men longer to bond. The flip side is that women should allow their man the opportunity to be protective and helpful. For example, your guy might be very good at fixing the computer, so if you can validate that mastery in some way, on a biological level it's good for him and it's good for the relationship.

**YourTango:** What's your oxytocin story?

**SK:** I've been in a committed relationship for 13 years. It's been my oxytocin lab! Thinking about oxytocin is another way of realizing the importance of the sexual relationship for the oxytocin bond. If I'm feeling distant from my partner, we can renew the bond by making love and getting that jolt of oxytocin.

Susan Kuchinskas is a freelance journalist based in Oakland, Calif. Find out more about her at [www.kuchinskas.com](http://www.kuchinskas.com).