

For Men Only

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Personal love maps determine who we find attractive

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Last in a series on "Sex and the Senses"

The end of my six-part series is here. I will tease you no longer and reveal my theory that the sixth sense of sex is attraction. Attraction provides the "x" factor for the sex, love and intimacy we all crave. But it is a mystery to many -- what explains our preferences and why we each have different tastes and desires.

Did you ever wonder what attracted you to one sort of person over another? What causes that feeling of attractive familiarity with someone you have just met... someone to whom you are inexorably drawn? Why someone can have everything you think you want, yet leave you feeling flat? Dr. John Money, a world-famous sexologist from Johns Hopkins, invented a concept known as love maps.

Love maps explain why we feel that certain pull toward someone, without knowing why. A crush activates preferences formed long ago in our subconscious. Serious loves likely fit almost perfectly into the love map stamp that's on our brain. It's like two halves of a puzzle come together.

But just what is a love map made of? It's a product of early childhood experiences delivered to us via the five senses, then activated later on by those very same senses. For instance, you walk into a crowded room and someone catches your eye. Or you feel the pangs of attraction when someone is wearing familiar cologne. The legend to your love map looks like this:

****Sight:** Studies show we tend to be attracted to people who look like our parents and even ourselves.

****Smell:** Pheromones, the smells that fly below the conscious radar, alert us to compatible mates and make us feel lustful, without quite knowing why.

****Sound:** The words of parents, teachers and peers we admired (and certainly those we had crushes on) in early school days shape our emotional needs and self-image.

****Taste:** Food is a powerful metaphor for sex. Our real appetite and our sexual appetite are related in more ways than one. Freudian oral fixations abound.

****Touch:** We develop a craving for intimacy based, in part, on how we were touched and cuddled as children by our parents.

Attraction is a chemical symphony resulting from the senses' unique information. A love map might be what triggers the right hormones and neurotransmitters for romance. In fact, different circuits in the brain are lit up during lust and love. The picture of a brain in love is far more complex -- and enduring -- than that of a brain in lust. You don't want just sex; you want the person because they speak to you in a way that is hauntingly familiar.

Love maps might alert us to who's the best fit, romantically speaking, but it doesn't mean that finding your soul mate will make love easy. Relationships take work! The chemicals at play in the early days of lust and attraction fade over time -- for every couple, no matter how much their maps coincide. However, you can recapture that feeling of euphoria by injecting some novelty back into your relationship.

You can reactivate your love map with a road map. Whether it's a trip to an exotic location, bungee jumping or ballroom dancing, the idea is to engage in new experiences together. Force yourself to leave behind that sense of predictability about what comes next. Thrill-seeking restores the thrill!

It works inside the bedroom, too. Pretending you don't know each other leaves room for surprise. Pushing yourself to change a tired sexual routine restores the electricity of each other's touch.

If the senses are paint to the canvas, a love map is the complete landscape. It's why love is often described as an experience that sets the body and the mind ablaze. The neurons are firing "we're interested!" and the hormones are saying "we want to mate!" The strongest electricity occurs when all five of the senses are activated, ushering in the sixth sense of sex: attraction.