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## Why You Want Who You Want

Who we desire is driven by powerful evolutionary forces, but while most of us are drawn to looks first (whether or not we admit it), human attraction is far more complex than it appears at first sight.

By Wendy Paris, published on July 4, 2017 - last reviewed on September 6, 2017



MARK: "There was a lot of chemistry. We just talked and talked. One of the first things I said was that people who look like you usually aren't as cool as you are." ALEXIS: "He left that night and I Facetimed him an hour later, then I woke up and Facetimed him again."

Throughout her 20s, [management](#) consultant and author Nita Tucker dated doctors—usually tall ones. She was drawn by their status and her mother's insistence that a physician would be a

great catch. "If someone said he was a doctor, I was turned on," she says. "I went out with enough to staff a major hospital."

Then Tucker moved to Seattle, where the SuperSonics had just won the NBA championship and were the town's biggest celebrities. To Tucker, a basketball player seemed an even better catch than a doctor. Plus, he'd be taller.

One night at a bar, Tucker noticed some guys from the [team](#), including one who had just been dubbed "Most Eligible Bachelor" by a local paper. Tucker smiled and tried to catch his eye. "But I didn't smile quite high enough, because the guy next to him came

over instead." That man, Tony, invited Tucker to join the group. She spent the rest of the evening [flirting](#) with the players and ignoring him.

Tony, it turned out, was the team's vice president, and he invited Tucker to a game the next day. "I said, 'Of course!' because I wanted to be with the players," she says. "They were funny and cute. Tony was a boring executive. He had a dated haircut and long sideburns."

And yet Tucker went out with Tony nearly every night that week, mostly to basketball-related events. "I was using him," she says. She started to feel [guilty](#) about it. "I told my roommate that I was going to stop going out with him, and she said, 'I'll take him!' She was so enthusiastic that I thought, 'Wait a minute. I'm not going to give him up right away.' He was always so nice to be with. After about 10 dates, I looked at him across the table and realized I was falling in love." They have now been together for 37 years.

**[Attraction](#) can spark at first sight or sneak up on us, stealthily and unexpectedly. At other times, it's a disappointing no-show:** We've probably all wished we could fall for a loyal friend or a date who sounded great online. It can sometimes seem as if we have no dominion over our romantic tastes, but **"humans have a lot of control and a lot of volition" in this realm**, says Glenn Geher, a psychology professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz and a co-author of *Mating [Intelligence](#) Unleashed*. **We can overcome an initial, unwise attraction, no matter how powerful, and be drawn to a great partner, even if it isn't lust at first sight. We also can take steps to attract the right person to us.**

### Survival of the Prettiest

**"There are universal standards of attraction, and they're not skin deep but rather fundamentally anchored in adaptive problems that men and women have to solve in mate selection,"** says David Buss, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of *The Evolution of Desire*.

**The main adaptive problem for men, evolutionarily speaking? The fact that human female ovulation is largely concealed.** Other female primates signal fertility in clearly detectable ways, such as a chimp's pink genital swelling. A male human is given no such guidance. "This dramatically changed the ground rules of mating for humans," Buss says. "Human males have to detect fertility from physical cues that happen to correlate with it." **Since female fertility peaks in the mid-20s and declines to zero around age 50, the theory goes, cues correlated with youth and [health](#) have evolved into a universal standard of female attractiveness.**



MARGO: (right) "I was really attracted to Zoe's enthusiasm. She asked me a lot of questions about myself, which turns out to just be how she interacts with everyone." ZOE: "I was flirting up a storm but it took Margo a few hours to catch on."

**A slew of studies show that men do tend to be drawn to women displaying markers of youth and health**—bright eyes, clear skin, full lips, symmetrical features, a sprightly gait, and a narrow waist in comparison to the hips. "You can see the evolutionary history of female faces and bodies at the drugstore," Geher says. **"Every product is designed to make women look as if they're in that fertile stage of life.** You see hair coloring, products to make the eyes stand out, and lipstick

for more vivid and luscious lips."

A 2016 paper published in *Evolution and Human Behavior* takes the fertility hypothesis one step further, investigating what the authors called the "fitness relevant trait" of a woman's lumbar curve. Researchers hypothesized that since [pregnancy](#) shifts a woman's center of gravity forward, men would be attracted to women with a lower back curvature that would minimize the pressure on the spine created by carrying a fetus, thereby reducing net fitness threats. They used Photoshop to manipulate the angle of curvature on photos of women, and in two studies, men's interest grew as the lower back curve moved closer to the presumed optimum, perhaps discovering the evolutionary correlate to Meghan Trainor's song "All About That Bass."

**Evolutionary standards of attraction work both ways: Women are drawn to physical characteristics indicating good health and a likely ability to provide and protect**—broad shoulders with narrower hips, athleticism, a strong jawline, and a deep voice.

In my case, that translates into attraction to men who are swarthy, soulful, and, in some cases, hairy. I first spotted the man I'll call "Joshua" standing across a courtyard at a synagogue, his biceps evident beneath his dress shirt. As he glanced toward me with eyes that were big and brown, intelligent and sensitive, searing yet slightly hurt, a

message shot through my heart: "I must have [sex](#) with this man!" Or, to quote Rainer Maria Rilke, "Look, that is how, if you do not come, I shall crawl to my ending."

Joshua was successful in a highly competitive creative field, which heightened his appeal, just as [evolutionary psychology](#) would predict. "Every marker of [creativity](#) seems to play into mating," Geher says, "Being attracted to someone creative means that person's creativity could help you and your offspring and that those [genes](#) could pass on to your offspring. We're also attracted to resources—today, money—and to kindness."

The notion that our partner preferences are driven by ancient biological demands can be infuriating. But "even if we consciously say, 'I'm not going to do these things you say I'm evolved to do,' it's hard to get away from them. They've been sculpted over so many thousands of generations," Geher says. **"In spite of how much the [environment](#) has changed, our evolved mindset is based on ancestral conditions."**

### Hot Enough for You?

**Attraction to good looks may be a fundamental part of human evolution, but modern society has bolstered the [bias](#).** "The media portray the ideal as someone who is exceptionally physically attractive," says Eastern Connecticut State University psychology professor Madeleine Fugère, a co-author of *The Social Psychology of Attraction and [Romantic Relationships](#)*. **"In reality, you have to be only moderately attractive to be attractive to most of the population,"** Fugère says.

The concept of assortative mating holds that people who couple up "tend to have correlated attractiveness levels," says University of California, Davis psychology professor Paul Eastwick. So it's more important to be well matched with your partner than to catch the most beautiful person in your circle. **Couples, whether same-sex or heterosexual, tend to fall within similar ranges of size, [education](#), [religious](#) beliefs, values, and socioeconomic status. The exceptions—say, couples with widely divergent levels of physical attractiveness—often knew each other well as friends or acquaintances before becoming romantic,** Eastwick says.

JEFF: "When I first saw her I thought she was a knockout." STACEY: "We were working together and some people were talking about things to do. I said, 'I hate museums!' He started making fun of me for that and got me so angry that I cursed him out. That sealed the deal for me."



**Researchers are only now discovering the broad influence assortative mating has on us. New studies suggest that, consciously or not, we seek partners who resemble us, in terms of appearance, height, or IQ.** Studies by geneticists at the University of Queensland in Australia found a strong correlation in the genetic markers for height between partners in more than 24,000 married couples. They also found striking similarities within couples for genetic markers that have been linked to the pursuit of education.

Assortative mating can also have a significant impact on genetic inheritance. A study published last year by a team at Sweden's Karolinska Institute found that

individuals with a mental disorder such as [schizophrenia](#) or [bipolar disorder](#) were more likely to partner with others who have mental disorders than would be expected by chance. This makes those couples much more likely to pass these disorders on to their children and grandchildren.

**There are some exceptions to assortative mating, such as the tendency of many men to [shy](#) away from women who are equally (or more) intelligent or successful than they are.** Recent findings confirm this bias. For a 2016 study, researchers at the Warsaw School of Economics analyzed data from a Columbia University speed-dating experiment. Participants had rated dates on a 10-point scale for both physical attractiveness and intelligence, and they also stated whether they'd want to meet the person again. Unsurprisingly, both men and women preferred people whom they rated high on both qualities. But men's interest in a woman's intelligence peaked at a rating of about 7. A woman smarter than that? No uptick in the men's desire to date her. In fact, scoring a perfect 10 in the brains department lowered some men's interest. Women rating men, however, said that for them, the smarter the better.

In another study published last year in [Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin](#), most male participants reported that they'd like to be with a woman who was smart, even one who scored higher than they did on a math or verbal test. But when they actually took a math test while seated next to a woman, and then learned that she had scored higher, their ardor quickly faded.



**Evolutionary theorists believe that a woman who has the demonstrable ability to occupy the role of provider can decrease a man's sense of power and purpose and compromise his self-evaluation or feelings of manliness.** This does not mean smart women should play dumb, but it shows that how we feel about ourselves when we're with a partner affects how attractive that person seems to us.

### **Romantic (and Brain) Chemistry**

Biological anthropologist Helen Fisher, the author of *Anatomy of Love and Why Him? Why Her?* points to another system underpinning our attractions—brain chemistry. **"What does it mean when people say, 'We have chemistry'?" she asks. Part of her answer lies in four [neural](#) systems that underlie our major constellations of personality traits—the [dopamine](#), serotonin, [testosterone](#), and estrogen/[oxytocin](#) systems.**

Fisher created a 56-question survey to measure how many traits in each of these four systems a person expresses—in other words, which neural systems dominate your personality. More than 14 million people have taken the survey through Chemistry.com and Match.com. Fisher, who may be best known for imaging the brains of people in love, also used fMRI scanners to confirm that participants' reported traits matched expected neural activity patterns.

**She found that people with dopamine-dominant personalities (curious, creative, adventurous types) tend to be drawn to fellow dopamine-influenced adventurers. Serotonin-dominant people (traditional, [conscientious](#), and rule-following) are also drawn to people like themselves. On the other hand, testosterone-dominant people (analytical, skeptical, and tough-minded) and estrogen-dominant individuals (nurturing, contextual, imaginative) are drawn to each other, essentially to their behavioral opposites.**

"We all have all four systems, and everyone has a different ratio," Fisher says. Knowing your own primary traits, and how they play out with others, could help you choose better and improve your romantic connections. Fisher, a self-described high-dopamine type, describes negotiating with a serotonin-dominant date who refused to sneak a bottle of water into a movie theater. "Instead of saying, 'He's just being a stuffed shirt,' I try to say, 'Oh, it's the serotonin gap. We'll just go buy some water.'"

### **Changing Your Type**

My family talks about looks, a lot. They refer to my great aunt Nettie as "The Most Beautiful Girl in Cleveland." And my grandmother was such a comely child, according to family lore, that the Cossacks would drive her around Poland and return her home

safely, too charmed by her looks to do her any harm. Are we more superficial than most? Not necessarily. We just have a deeper acceptance of our shallow nature.

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Eastwick and psychology professor Eli Finkel of Northwestern asked participants to list the characteristics they cared about most in a mate. They then invited subjects to attend a speed-dating event and, afterward, to rate each of their 12 mini-dates on attractiveness, [humor](#), and earning potential—and to state whom they'd like to see again. In the end, everyone wanted to go out with the best-looking people, despite their stated preferences. And while, in their surveys, men had been more open than women about prioritizing looks, males and females were equally interested in second dates with the best-looking potential partners. (Warmth and a sense of humor were also favorable factors in the study, after looks.)

**"Men and women both want hot, ambitious people,"** Finkel says. "You say you like tall, funny guys. Your best friend says, 'I want someone who's wealthy and kindhearted.' People claim that they have a strong preference for a particular attribute, but they don't end up being especially attracted to potential partners who possess it."

Sometimes we are certain that we have a preference and have to date ourselves out of it. Entrepreneur Verick Cornett, 33, dated women who fit a certain mold—tall and athletic—through his early 20s. Then he met someone who matched his type, and whom he found intensely alluring—but they disagreed on nearly everything. He spent two years in an on-again-off-again relationship with her before calling it quits, finally accepting that physical attraction, and even chemistry, were not enough to make a long-term relationship work.



Next, he dated someone who was his physical type, and who shared his background and interests. But he wasn't especially attracted to her. "I realized that for me, attractiveness has an element of how you carry yourself and how confident you are—and she lacked [confidence](#)." The pair broke up, and he broadened his range.

MIKE: "I began to be taken more seriously when she realized my other attributes outweighed the detriment of height." LYDIA: "They definitely did. Because of that brilliant brain of his there's

never a dull moment." Photo by Peter Hapak

Cornett had discovered the importance of what researchers call dynamic attraction, otherwise known as charisma or [magnetism](#). Studies show that physical attraction isn't just about a face or body in a static state, but also how the person behind it uses what he or she has. Our movements and gestures, our emotional expressiveness, how much we light up when speaking to someone we just met at the beach—all are components of dynamic attraction and help explain why certain people are so highly sought after. A recent study by Eastwick, Finkel, and three other researchers looked at people's choices on online dating apps like Tinder and found that individuals were twice as likely to choose prospective dates whose pictures displayed "postural expansiveness—expanding the body in physical space," making that quality the most reliably predictive trait for attraction.

One type that research confirms many women struggle to quit is the "bad boy." In my case, the swarthy man I met at synagogue turned out to be not only creative and accomplished but also self-absorbed, work-obsessed, and generally unreliable. But I was so attracted to him that I excused nearly a year of obfuscations, canceled plans, and outright rudeness. It took discovering that he was married to convince me to give him up.

**We all know men and women who perpetually fall for partners who are "no good" for them. We may be drawn to such individuals by a perception of power, Geher says: "Power in an absolute sense is attractive.** There are multiple routes to success. The 'bad boy' can be someone high on the 'dark triad' personality traits—[narcissism](#), Machiavellianism, and [psychopathy](#). When people are high in all three, they can become powerful, but through a dark route." That's the allure of the bad boy: Someone who seems as if he doesn't care about the rules, or about conventional relationships, can be strangely appealing. "It seems like not being afraid of life," Geher says.

### **The Smoldering Acquaintance**

for many, romantic attraction is far more complex than a simple response to visual stimuli. "When you initially meet someone, often the only information you have is their looks," says Arthur Aron, a psychology professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "But a person can be wealthy, or powerful, or interesting, or a brilliant artist, and you might find those qualities very attractive." You might also be drawn to someone's availability. While unrequited love has its romantic appeal, most of us actually prefer a present partner, Aron says: "The likelihood of forming a relationship is increased if that person likes you."



**A person also can grow more appealing through intimate conversation.** In a now-classic 1997 study led by Aron, researchers instructed pairs of participants to ask each other 36 questions that solicited gradually escalating levels of self-disclosure; in other words, the conversations were designed to quickly get more intimate. Aron wanted to see if he could manipulate closeness to help people understand each other better, not to generate romantic attraction. And yet, after a 45-minute chat, many pairs of participants did feel closer, and some were more attracted to each other; one pair went on to marry.

Most romances, it turns out, are like an extended version of Aron's exercise: They ripen over time. "People overestimate how easy and common it is to strike up any sort of sexual relationship with someone they've just met," Eastwick says, "and they underestimate how common it is for relationships to emerge from their existing [social network](#). **If you ask people how long they knew someone before their first kiss or hook-up, the average is about a year.**"

Or, as Helen Fisher puts it, **"Romantic love is like a [sleeping](#) cat. It can be awakened at any moment."**

**Sometimes, though, that cat just lies in the middle of the living room**, refusing to budge even if you run the vacuum around it. The truth is that while many factors can spark sincere attraction, we still cannot force ourselves to desire someone. "It's quite common to fall in love with someone you've known, but not for it to be someone you've known and wanted to fall in love with," Aron says. "Even when a person has known someone for a while, often they'll say, 'I kind of knew it but didn't want to tell myself that.'"

### **Making It Last**

For Nita Tucker, falling for Tony involved a makeover. She took him shopping and recruited a hairstylist friend to give him a more flattering cut. Suddenly, "he was so good-looking that all these other women started coming on to him." (Research confirms the old adage that a prospective partner becomes more attractive when you discover how much others want be with him or her.) "Tony's confidence really blossomed, which also made him more attractive," Tucker says. "It didn't take much."

Being too beautiful, however, can have downsides. Consider this, if you can suppress your schadenfreude: From an assortative mating perspective, if you're extraordinarily attractive, it may take years to find your equal. And at least one study shows that people who are more attractive can be more exacting than the rest of us about potential partners' appearance, drastically limiting their pool of eligible mates.



ZAK: "When we met in person, I thought, OK, she's funny and really beautiful. That's pretty good."

ALLIE: "He was late, but when he walked in, I was like, he's cute enough that it's OK."

Being seen as "cool" presents similar complications. Johnny Gaudi, 48, an Austin-based singer/songwriter, has been a front man for bands since his teens. He says performing is like having Super Attraction dust sprinkled on you, but the sheen brings mixed results. "When you're on stage, you're the focal point. The lights are dimmed, and there's a room full of 500 people, all looking at you." This invites [fantasies](#) that are hard to fulfill when the lights come up. "In October, a woman asked me out at a show. We went to dinner and walked around

after. I think she had an idea of who I was that she'd made up," he says, "but when I was there, I wasn't that poet or brooding artiste. I asked her if she wanted to go out again, and she said, 'I'd rather go out as friends.' This has happened before."

Gaudi, who is divorced, met his first wife through his social circle, and he'd prefer to do that again. "I would hope to meet someone in a normal scenario, who likes me for who I am," he says. "'Cool' is a currency when you're young, but not so much as you get older. People are looking for someone who is stable, not a dreamer who's gone every weekend."

**Long-term couples confirm that attraction is never a completely stable state, any more than looks or wit.** "We go through phases where we don't see each other as people," Nita Tucker says, "and then all of sudden, you're far away and you think, He's so cute! I have to wake myself up to appreciate it."

After decades of [marriage](#), she says, "It's important to me to notice that and to say, 'You look great.' I think the more you appreciate something, the more it grows. So I think part of his being attractive is my making him feel attractive. I think it's my job to make him feel attractive, and I'm doing it well."

### **Can You Make Yourself More Attractive?**

**Research shows that there may be a few things you can do to improve your chances of attracting the person you want most, although your results may vary.**

**Be Comfortable and Confident.**

Developing more comfort in your own body can greatly increase your dynamic attractiveness. Take a dance class, or just spend more time dancing around your living room. Join a running club or take up acting. And improve your dynamic attractiveness by using open, expansive body gestures. Similarly, when you focus on your strengths and seek out the environments where you're most confident, you'll feel more secure, which can translate into appearing more attractive to others.

### **Network**

Finding love at a bar happens less often than you think, University of California, Davis psychologist Paul Eastwick says. A better plan is to join an activity group where you'll meet new people who share your interests. "If you keep moving through those networks, you'll eventually get to know people you click with," he says. "People are good at this when it comes to finding a job. Maybe it seems instrumental or creepy for dating, but I do think there is a way to leverage your network."

### **Answer the 36 Questions.**

Go online and download the classic intimacy-boosting questionnaire, "The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings." Then invite the person you're interested in to sit down and run through some of them with you.

### **Don't Play (Too) Hard to Get.**

Yes, you may not want to seem easy, but you also don't want to make it so hard to win you that a potential partner gives up. "There is old research showing that playing hard-to-get, even after initial attraction, is not a good idea," State University of New York at Stony Brook psychologist Arthur Aron says. "The ideal is to make it feel as if it's hard for everyone else to get you. We like challenges, but we like challenges we can win."