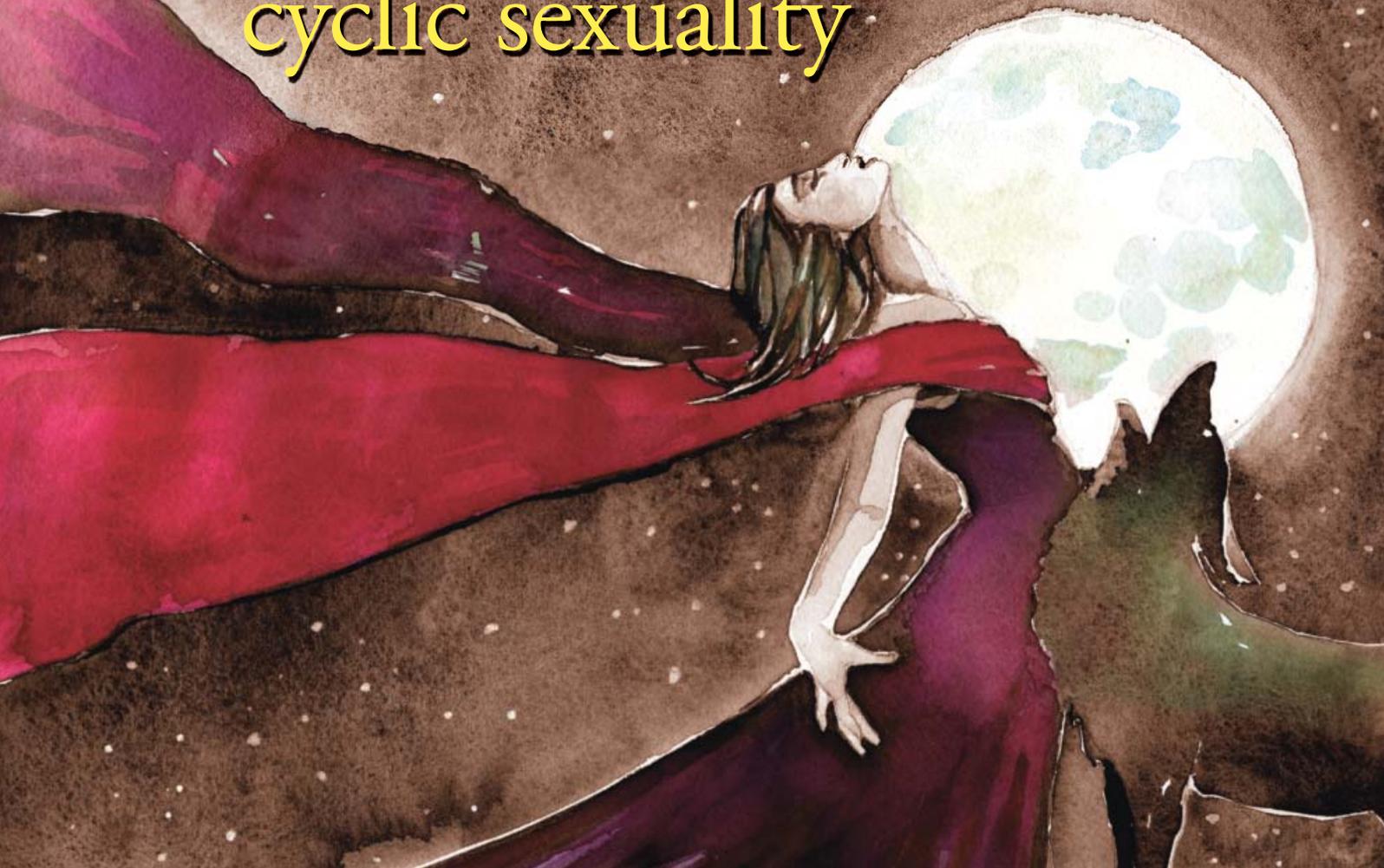


Understanding female cyclic sexuality



Miranda Gray explores the rhythmic but predictable changes in a woman's sexual feelings and behaviour linked to her menstrual cycle and the benefits to her and her partner of accepting this rhythm and 'going with the flow'

In the modern world we are bombarded with images and expectations of what women 'should' do to be sexually desirable or to feel 'sexy'. We are shown the socially 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' faces of women's sexual energies, pleasure and desire.

But the template that we receive from this societal view of women's sexuality is fundamentally flawed and, consequently, many women are disconnected from their vibrant, female sexual energies. Women can feel a lack of self-worth and may carry guilt because they do not measure up to the culturally accepted image of what women's sexuality should be.

There is a basic misconception about female sexuality that is not just perpetuated by the media and the film industry

but is also supported by the medical and therapy establishments, and that is that *women are like men*. This view overlooks and largely ignores a major aspect of female sexuality in the psychology and therapy of sexuality: that *women with a menstrual cycle are cyclic in their nature and experience*.

This cyclic nature is experienced not just in the measurable fluctuations of hormones and chemicals during the month but also in the more subtle, inner dynamics of how a woman thinks and how she perceives herself, her relationships and the world. Her sexuality, sensuality, creativity and spirituality are all blended together in a cyclic journey that she travels each month. What 'turns her on' or satisfies her physically, emotionally and mentally changes from one

phase to the next as her body and the dominant aspects of her awareness and perception change.

Over many years of working in this area and talking with women in workshops and answering questions about my books, it is apparent that, although a woman may look the same throughout the month, in reality she may be thought of as at least four, possibly more, different women, each with different sexual, sensual and emotional desires, needs and dreams. It is little wonder that some women feel guilty that they cannot live up to the media image of female sexuality because it is simply not possible for them to embody one single type of sexuality *all the time*.

Menstruation, the Moon and female wisdom

The menstrual cycle was a major development in the evolution of womankind to a stage beyond the animal kingdom.

Image: Wolf Moon by artist/designer Eyan Myers based in Vancouver (www.eyanmyerscreative.com), an illustration from *Moon Mysteries* (www.moonmysteries.com)

Having a menstrual cycle, women became capable of arousal and sexual activity throughout the year, rather than being limited to seasonal periods of being 'on heat', as is the case with most animals. Throughout each month women experience highs in sexuality and creativity in both the fertile and non-fertile phases of their cycle, allowing them access to the creative energies that in animals are experienced only for purposes of procreation.

For ancient people this cyclic rhythm, together with the approximate synchronicity of women's cycles and that of the Moon's phases (its synodic cycle), reflected a link between women and the divine. This concept of a link between women, menstruation, the Moon, measurement and wisdom is found reflected in many cultures and in many languages; for example, the word 'menstrual' itself derives from the Latin word *mensis*, 'month' (and the earlier Greek *menus*, which incidentally can also mean 'power') and the word 'moon' is from the same root.

In early beliefs, a woman carried the mystery of life within her body and through her cycle she reflected the four-fold energies of the phases of the Moon, the tides and the seasons. A woman's menstrual cycle was not something that happened to her but an expression of who she was: a cyclic being. (See Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove's *The Wise Wound*, Penguin, 1980.)

Sadly, this perception of the four-fold, cyclic, female energies has largely been lost within today's uniform culture, but every modern woman can re-discover it for herself by becoming aware of the experiences within her own body. Although each woman's individual experience of her menstrual cycle is unique to her, there are a number of aspects that many women share and, when I talk to groups of women about their own experiences and outlooks, they are often surprised to find just how many of their own feelings, actions and energies are similar to those of other women in the same phase of their monthly cycle.

The English language is deficient in specific words that relate directly to female experience, so there are few modern cultural titles or referencing frameworks that we can readily use to describe female cyclic sexuality. Thus, we need to go back to ancient stories and mythologies that hold a richer and wider female archetypal language to create a new vocabulary of words and imagery for modern women to use to identify, acknowledge and communicate their experiences.

Four archetypal expressions

If we look at old stories, myths and folk tales – and in some cases, even their 'Disneyfied' modern equivalents – we can frequently identify four archetypes that we can use as easily identifiable icons for the four phases to describe the changing monthly nature of female sexual energies (see Table 1). Some of these archetypes, such as the 'Crone', can be difficult for modern women to accept or relate to in the way that our ancestors would; but in tradition and mythology the wizened old woman was a powerfully magical aspect of the Universal Goddess and the Goddess of rebirth.

Although we could adopt the modern scientific and medical route to chart the sexual journey of the cycle via hormonal changes in women's bodies, in doing this we run the risk of ignoring or discounting the cyclic changes in sensuality, creativity, sexuality and spirituality that women may experience.

In *Red Moon* I describe a method for maintaining a monthly 'Moon Dial' that enables each woman to chart the fluctuating rhythms of her physical and emotional energies, attitudes, aptitudes and sexuality.

Based on experiences from women's Moon Dial observations and from workshops, we can generalise some aspects of female cyclic sexuality:

Maiden sexuality

The Maiden phase is a time when women re-emerge from the withdrawn state of menstruation with their creative, mental, emotional and sexual energies restored after the rest. Women can often feel physically lighter and more active, with a need to get out and to take action. The Maiden phase brings a strong, thinking-based mentality, which is full of self-confidence and rational in approach. The libido can be renewed and active, but emotionally many women feel independent and focused on their needs and desires; they may be more sexually self-confident and are not looking for a 'mate', but for some physi-

cal fun to bring them pleasure. Women can also be actively flirtatious and may be the one to suggest a date or initiate contact. Sex can be casual, without deep emotional commitment and, with renewed physical stamina, sex can also be more frequent.

Mother sexuality

As women move from the Maiden to the Mother phase they may notice a gentling of their whole outlook on life. They can experience greater levels of empathy and their feeling-mind becomes dominant. Relationships and connecting emotionally with people become more important and so sex often needs an emotional response from a partner to feel fulfilling. Libido in this phase can be high, but women can be more choosy about the type of partner they desire. Mother Nature is not just looking for a physical father for a child but someone who will stay with the mother and help to raise it. Women's sexual response may be drawn toward a more romantic and intimate relationship, a sharing of souls so that she feels she truly knows the partner. Women may also be more focused on meeting their partners' needs and being loving and nurturing toward them, rather than on their own sexual pleasure and desires.

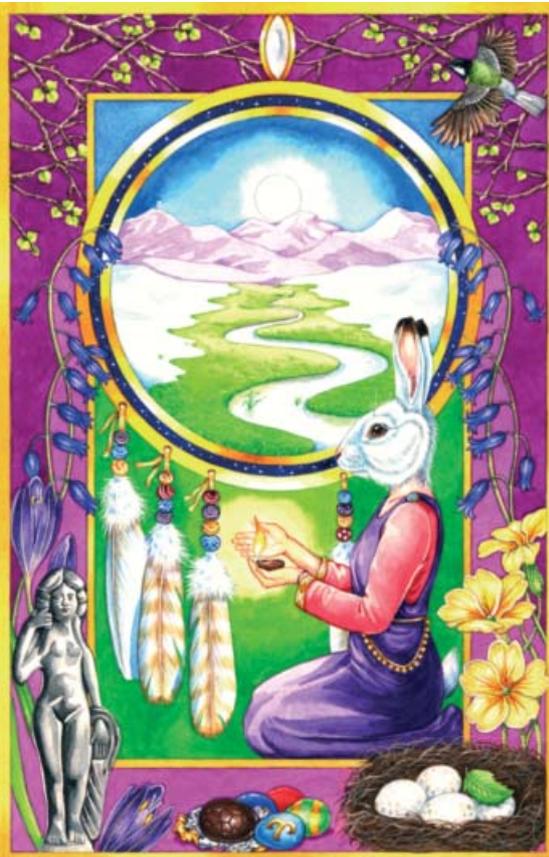
Enchantress sexuality

The pre-menstrual phase can be the most challenging for many women and a number of factors at this time can affect women's sensuality, sexuality and relationship needs. The Enchantress phase is one in which many women experience a decline in physical, emotional and mental energies, which should suggest that our sexual desire would also decline. However, for many women this can be the phase with the highest and most demanding libido. In the Enchantress phase subconscious thinking is dominant, meaning that many women lose a lot of their sexual and social inhibitions and are willing to take part in sexual acts in this phase that they would

Table 1. The four female goddess types related to the menstrual phases

Female archetype	Moon phase	Cycle phase	Sexual energy experienced
The Maiden (eg. goddesses of Spring and hunting)	Waxing Moon	Pre-ovulation * approx. day 7-13	Dynamic, outgoing, confident and independent
The Mother (eg. goddesses of Summer and hearth)	Full Moon	Ovulation approx. day 14-20	Fertile, emotional and relational
The Enchantress (eg. goddesses of Autumn, war and magic)	Waning Moon	Pre-menstrual approx. day 21-menstruation	Uninhibited, magical and dynamic. Also emotional and needy
The Crone (eg. goddesses of Winter and death)	Dark Moon	Menstrual phase approx. day 1-6	Infertile, passive, spiritual and transcendental

* Every woman's cycle is individual and her phases may be longer or shorter than suggested here.

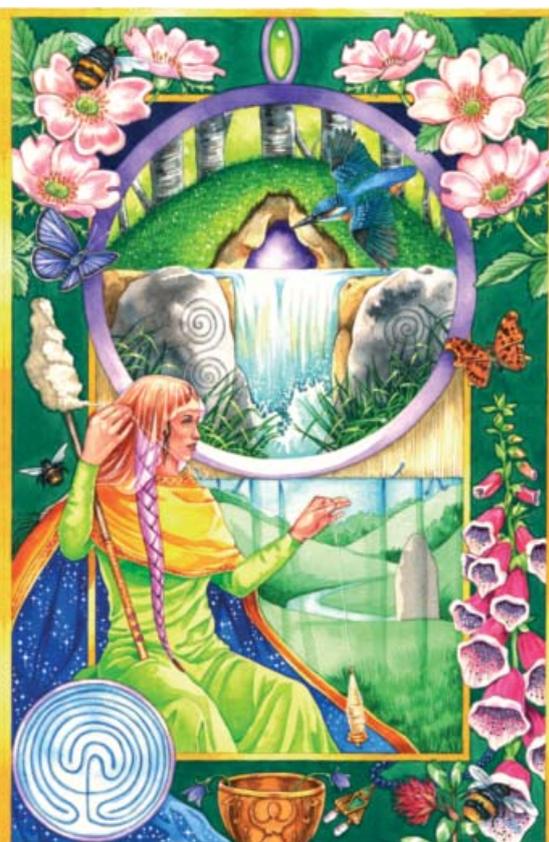


Above: Maiden – Goddess of the Spring, of beginnings and growth, of the waxing Moon and the pre-ovulation phase.

never consider in any other phase.

As a woman progresses through this phase she may find that her physical stamina declines and if she does not rest more and reduce the demands on her, she can experience feelings of aggression and anger. In addition, if a woman does not release her heightened sexual energies in this phase then she can become sexually demanding or sexually aggressive and frustrated. To complicate

Below: Mother – Goddess of summer; of fertility and love, of the Full Moon and of the ovulation phase



things further, some women oscillate between short but sharp peaks of desire followed by deep dips in physical and emotional energy, often accompanied by feelings of lack of self-worth and needing reassuring sex to show them that they are loved.

Crone/Wise Woman sexuality

Many women feel that having sex while menstruating is not acceptable and feel that their libido is so low that sleeping is more appealing than sex. However, the Crone – Wise Woman – phase does encompass a sexual energy that can bring deep spiritual connection with the partner. Crone sexuality invites women to redefine their expectations of what sex is and to see it as a sensual and spiritual activity. In the Crone phase the dominant level of thinking is soul-thinking; this is the deepest level of our awareness and can be similar to the states reached by experienced meditators. There can be a wonderful sense of letting go of all needs, wants and ego; in this way, although active desire for sex can seem to disappear, sexual activity can be accepted completely without reservation and without concerns about doing things ‘right’. The feeling of being ‘allowing’ and mindful of the experiences is enough.

When we view female sexuality in this way, we can see why it may be so difficult for long-term relationships if both partners are expecting one single type of female sexuality, rather than an exciting journey through a cycle of changing energies, needs, desires and emotions. Understanding that women are cyclic is key to creating a fulfilling and long-lasting sexual relationship. But even this key has a potentially huge pitfall; how does a woman communicate her phase-specific desires, preferences and emotional needs to her partner without it being seen as a demand for always having her own sexual needs fulfilled as a priority? The answer is for women to explore personally with their partners.

Cyclic sexuality and men

It’s not surprising that men are confused by women. One week their partner can be sexually their equal in desire and physical stamina, the next week she wants to talk and have romantic, emotional sex; the next she is sexually demanding and willing to go along with their fantasies or dissolves into tears, and in the final week she just wants to sleep or have very languid and non-interactive sex.

Without understanding the cyclic nature of women’s sexuality, the ebb and

flow of a cyclic woman can make it very difficult for men to maintain confidence in their sexual approach to their partners. Finding that what worked last week to keep her happy and satisfied does not work this week challenges men’s belief in their ability to sexually satisfy their partner. But if a woman becomes aware of her cyclic sexuality and shares her awareness with her partner, then he has the tools to understand how he can approach her and not be rejected.

Approaching your cyclic partner

If men realise that their approach to their partner needs to be flexible and adaptive to her cycle then there can be wonderful benefits. By adapting their approach, the words they use and their expectations, men discover that their partner’s cyclic nature gives them a vibrant, exciting, varied, active and enticing sex life. Each man with a cyclic partner has at least four sexual partners – ‘young and fun’, ‘loving and caring’, ‘erotic and uninhibited’ and ‘deep and

Women’s experience of cyclic sexuality

‘Being in tune with my cycle has helped me embrace the different characters within my own sexuality without fear of being stuck in that role. I know that each phase will soon pass as quickly as they appear, so I make the most of them. I have more fun with my flirt, my seductress or my gentle lover. Cyclical awareness has also given me a sacred quality to aspects of my sexual experiences and I’m more able to feel the subtle energies that flow within me.’

Heidi, Hampshire

‘I can sense a different type of sexual desire in every phase of my cycle. I enjoy it from being the young lusty maiden to having a more spiritual connection during my bleeding phase.’

Belinda, Mexico

‘Over the years of listening closely to my menstrual cycle, it has been incredible to notice how my sexuality changes in tune with the different phases: from inwards and deep to outwards and open, from faster to slower, from playful and curious to sensual and spiritual... The most important step is to recognise and respect these changes in ourselves.’

Sophia, Spain

Phase	Keywords	Approach
Maiden phase Approx. cycle day 7-13	Energetic sex, emotionally casual sex, 'quickies', exploration, fun, humour	Mirror your partner's renewed energies after menstrual 'hibernation' with a fun and physical approach.
Mother phase Approx. cycle day 14-20	Togetherness, romance, emotional connection, talking, loving acts, time together, 'commitment sex', 'soul mate sex', long and loving sexual moments	Make time to emotionally connect with your partner and share your feelings and aspirations, express your love in words as well as actions. Let her feel she knows your inner self.
Enchantress phase Approx. cycle day 21- menstruation	a) Uninhibited sex, 'fantasy sex', passion and adventure b) Reassuring sex, commitment sex, loving and gentle	This is perhaps the most challenging phase for both men and women. Your partner may have times of high libido and erotic tendencies combined with a decline in physical stamina. She may also oscillate between high physical desire and emotional need. Mirror her needs as they arise. In times of emotional sensitivity, create feelings of security and safety. 'Supportive' sex can transform into passionate sex.
Crone phase Approx. cycle day 1-6	Sacred sex, undemanding sex, togetherness, spiritual sex, instinctual sex	Connect with your partner spiritually. Show her that you honour her femininity. Accept her passivity if she is inactive as a gift of being and allowing. Feel the sacredness of this time and express it in your approach.

Table 2. Suggestions for men on approaching a woman's cyclic sexual nature

mysterious' – whatever his partner's age or sexual experience. With these four sexual partners to experience each month, a sexual relationship does not need to become dull and repetitive. By taking an adaptive approach, men can also gain confidence in their ability to arouse their partner and enjoy a variety of ways to satisfy both their needs.

So, how does a man know what is the right approach? Every woman is individual and her cycle can vary in length, but here are a few suggestions (summarised in Table 2).

Sex with a woman who is aware of her cyclic sexual energies can broaden a man's experience of both the 'feminine' and of sex. By understanding her changing energies and aligning with them, a man can deepen his relationship with his partner, explore a wider experience of the feminine and also deepen his awareness of his masculinity and its response to her authentic femininity. His partner's cycle becomes for him a physical journey of inner exploration, empowering him to connect with his own different levels of awareness as she experiences and expresses hers in her cyclic nature.

More than just sex

The cyclic changes in a woman's energies and perception do not just impact on the bedroom and on intimate relationships. Wherever there are women the menstrual cycle is evident and so we see its impact in the workplace, business and society. Sadly, many women are unaware of the benefits of their cyclic nature and the 'optimised' skills it can bring.

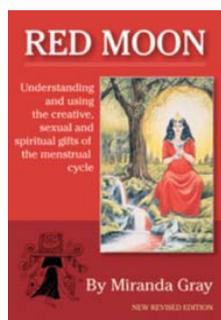
After years of observing women in the world of work I wrote *The Optimized Woman* to help women to live in this very masculine environment in harmony with their female cyclic nature. When we

women realise our cyclic nature and start working with it, whether in the bedroom or the boardroom, something amazing will happen; we will start to change society. It will not be the revolution of the feminist movement of the '60s and '70s, but it will be a revolution – in the hearts and minds of both women and men.

Conclusion

When women listen to their bodies rather than ignore them, their cyclic nature becomes obvious. It can sometimes take a little re-thinking to perceive seemingly negative traits that do not fit in with modern life and modern expectations as 'gifts', but when women become aware of their cyclic sexuality, sex has the potential for both partners to be more fulfilling and never dull and boring.

It is certainly time for women to reclaim their cyclic nature, to remove the cultural blinkers and look at all aspects of their life and society to recognise where the opportunities presented by women's natural rhythms have been ignored, restricted or repressed. When women embrace their authentic cyclic nature, then men can also re-discover their own authentic nature, emotions and desires. ♀



All images: Miranda Gray from *Red Moon*; www.redmoonthebook.com



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Top: Enchantress – Goddess of Autumn, of magic and change, of the waning Moon and the pre-menstrual phase

Right: Crone – Goddess of winter, of the Underworld and rebirth, of the Dark Moon and the menstrual phase