

Skin So Gorgeous You Can Skip Makeup!

SELF

YOU
AT YOUR
BEST

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desire

You want it, you need it, but it doesn't always come naturally. Ignite your passion with easy yet unexpected ideas to recharge your romance. Next stop? Satisfaction! By Marjorie Ingall Photographs by Riccardo Tinelli

Drop the whipped cream and step away from the candles. Instead of relying on the same old props to enliven your libido, you might have more success (and fun!) simply by doing things that enhance your overall happiness. "Becoming more fulfilled in nonsexual ways can have a spillover effect, helping you gain confidence and naturally pursue and achieve more satisfaction in the bedroom," says Julie Holland, M.D., assistant professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine in New York City. Discover eight totally easy, enjoyable ways to give your days a lift—and steam up your nights in the bargain.

Try something a little scary

The problem with a long-term relationship is that whatever else it is, it ain't new. My husband, Jonathan, and I have been married for a decade. I adore the guy, but I can't say he surprises me very often; I'm sure he'd say the same about me. Cozy familiarity is great, but it can get a little...snoozy. That's why new, interesting rendezvous are vital, says Arthur Aron, Ph.D., professor of social psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "When people first fall in love, it's exhilarating," he says. "But eventually, you get to know the other person, and the butterflies, which come from the unfamiliar, fade. My research, however, shows you can re-create feelings similar to those you had when you were first in love by doing novel and challenging things with your partner. Then you associate that rush of excitement with him."

In one of Aron's studies, couples ranked a list of 90 activities (like kayaking) by how pleasant or exciting they were. Half the pairs tried endeavors they deemed highly exciting but only moderately pleasant, whereas the others did things they perceived as highly pleasant but only moderately exciting. After 10 weeks, the latter group didn't show any change in their feelings toward each other, but the pairs who did the out-of-the-ordinary stuff (like skiing a black-diamond trail) had friskier feelings about their partner.

Inspired by Aron's research, Jonathan and I attended a Gotham Girls Roller Derby bout. Watching hot, tattooed girls with names such as Miss American Thighs, Beyonsláy and Surly Temple skating like Furies and bashing into each other...well, that was pretty heart-pounding. We've also tried ziplining—whizzing down a cable across the top of a forest in Costa Rica—and attending occasional gallery openings. We both felt more invigorated in bed by doing unusual (to us) activities than when we follow our same dinner-and-DVD routine. The upshot: Banish boredom and not only will your life be richer, but it will become more sexually charged, too.

Become a gaming geek

Combining the aforementioned novelty with a little sweat in a one-two punch of date-night fun, Jonathan and I have begun boxing after the kids go to bed. We aren't actually putting on gloves and beating the crap out of each other (although the night after he stayed out 'til 4 A.M. with his brother, I wanted to): We've been playing with our Nintendo Wii, a home video game system that simulates the movements of actual sports. Using a handheld motion-detecting controller, you move around the living room as if you're actually bowling, playing baseball or what have you.

It's a fun, healthy activity that has a bedroom bonus. Jonathan often falls asleep on the couch when we watch *Lost*, and that's not likely to happen when he's ducking my roundhouse right. Getting the heart rate and competitive juices flowing has led to other benefits. (Fade to black. See how discreet I am?)

"Research shows that women who work out regularly feel more confident, and that confidence spills over into the bedroom," says Pete McCall, an exercise physiologist in San Diego for the American Council on Exercise. Because Wii can be played at night, in any kind of weather, while the kids are in bed, without having to hire a sitter, the game may inspire sexy sweat sessions among people who wouldn't ordinarily get to the gym. McCall even has a suggestion for upping the ante: "Make a bet: Whoever wins gets to choose what you do in bed. Great way to raise the level of competition."

Envision **ecstasy**

Guided imagery is a technique that utilizes your imagination to encourage relaxation, health and healing. "It isn't simply visualizing," says Belleruth Naparstek, a psychotherapist in Cleveland and author of *Staying Well With Guided Imagery* (Warner Books). "Guided imagery uses all of your senses, your emotions and your entire body to take you to a different physical and emotional state." Research shows it can lower blood pressure, increase immunity, ameliorate pain and reduce anxiety, so it's not surprising that it can help your sex life, too.

"You have to imagine and *feel* yourself into an orgasm," Naparstek says. "Guided imagery helps you get a meditative focus on sensation, eliminating chatter from your head. You can use guided imagery recordings to relax or for active sexual fantasy."

I decided to try an MP3 called "Sexual Intimacy: Relaxation and Imagery to Enrich the Experience of Making Love" (which sounds clinical enough to be not at all arousing, but whatever) by Emmett Miller, M.D., and his wife, Sandra Miller. When I fired it up on the computer in our bedroom, plinky New Age music filled the air. "Is this the right sound level?" I asked Jonathan. He replied quickly, "There is no right sound level for this."

We lay side by side, eyes closed, listening together, which was fun and felt sweetly intimate. The MP3 offered affirmations such as "I accept myself as a unique, special person" and "I feel centered and confident in my sexuality." We aren't really affirmation people, so we got the giggles. The program then talked us through creating a beautiful, safe setting in our mind. (One funny moment: When Dr. Miller said, "And now drink the scene in," both Jonathan and I thought he was saying "And now drink the semen." Both of us opened our eyes and barked, "What?") After you see, smell and feel the safe setting, the Millers have you invite a lover into the scene and imagine feeling sexually open to that person. It was gentle and nice, and I could believe that it could help people with anxieties about sex or a couple making up after a fight. But I wanted something a little dirtier. To each her own.

Pick up **a pen**

After a productive day of writing, I feel more sexually charged. I've used my creativity and gotten a lot of work done, which makes me feel happy, open, free and receptive to all sorts of external stimuli. I suspect that when most of us have a great day at work, we feel celebratory—and often sexy.

But I also think there's something about writing that offers a sexual bonus. "Writing involves sensory thinking," says Molly Peacock, professor of poetry at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. "Sex is connected to the imagination and the ability to visualize your actions, so writing links your mind to your body."

You don't have to be a professional writer to reap those rewards. Simply making the time to sit down and put thoughts to paper or pixels—whether keeping a diary or writing a novel—means you're taking your own desires seriously. And journaling, writing about your own life, can give you insights into yourself that can fuel self-awareness and confidence in bed. To write authentically, keep your hand moving, surrender control and don't overthink, suggests Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones* (Shambhala Publications). The same advice could certainly pertain to sex.

You might also try writing specifically about getting busy. "During a dry spell in my 17-year marriage, I wrote specific instructions for turning me on," Peacock says. "In writing it all down, I realized that I needed to take responsibility for my own arousal, not just blame my husband. Writing to myself helped me clarify my thoughts about how to salvage our sex life."

Take a little **tippie**

We've heard about the health benefits of moderate drinking. But perhaps more enticing is the way a glass of wine or Champagne makes us *feel*. Flirty. A little naughty. And, yes, sexy. "There has always been a close link between drinking and feeling less inhibited," says Sharon Wilsnack, Ph.D., professor of neuroscience at the School of Medicine & Health Sciences at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. Alcohol makes the muscle tissue in the blood vessels relax, which makes their diameter increase; this

leads to increased blood flow. "When veins are more dilated, you have increased physical feelings of warmth, which can translate into emotional warmth," Wilsnack says.

Intriguingly, though, even as we feel sexually excited when we drink, our body tells a different story. "There are laboratory studies of alcohol consumption and sexual arousal in which a device measured vaginal blood flow. Women said they were more aroused after drinking [even one cocktail], but measurement showed a significant decline in blood flow to the vaginal area," Wilsnack says. "Still, most women report that moderate drinking makes them less sexually inhibited and makes sex more pleasurable," perhaps because they are freer to express their fantasies. Cheers to that!

Feng shui **your space**

Feng shui is the art of arranging a space to facilitate the balance of complementary dualities (yin and yang) and aid the flow of chi, a kind of life-force energy. After reading *Move Your Stuff, Change Your Life* by Karen Rauch Carter (Fireside), I decided to make purportedly sex-beneficial changes to our bedroom and to what Carter refers to as our love and relationships *bagua* (it's the right-hand back corner of the house).

"Red is an energy activator," says Carter, who suggests putting something crimson

DESIRE, INC.: WHAT HELPS, WHAT'S HYPE

OVER-THE-COUNTER SEX AIDS

When I spied (on the convenience store shelf, I admit) Feminine GSpark herbal blend, I had to try it. "Strengthens orgasm! Speeds arousal!" screams the label, which lists ingredients like False Unicorn Root. Within an hour of taking the pills, I felt as if I'd chugged a pot of coffee. We did have sex—I was too wired to do anything else! But as far as sex goes, I've had way better.

CELIBACY Some say abstinence gives you clarity about your sexual choices, so when you have sex again, it's more special. Hmm...not for me. I'm more of the "Use it or lose it" school.

OYSTERS Eating these little numbers may be arousing to some, but to me, the notion of chugging slime is a no-go.

COOKING TOGETHER Movies are full of cute cooking scenes that lead to sex. But when Jonathan and I make a meal together, we grit our teeth and try to resist using the knives on each other.

WHIPPED CREAM A guy pal of mine explored licking it off his girlfriend. Everything went great until he realized he'd eaten way too much and projectile vomited all over the bathroom. The upshot: no whipped cream!



Got a high seas fantasy? Share it and watch the sparks fly.

under the bed. Feeling a little silly, I slipped a slender red Chinese bangle bracelet between the mattress and box spring. "Make sure there is equality on both sides of the bed," Carter adds. "Two matching night stands are best." We already had those! Yay! Carter also advises placing "symbols of physical pleasure" such as massage oils, sex toys and lingerie in the relationships area, which also happens to be in Jonathan's home office. Putting nipple clamps and lubricant by his desk does not seem advisable, unless he wants to start working in porn. But I did tape a small paper heart to the fax machine. And I put a bride and groom figure by the printer. We'll see if it helps. You never know.

Make a new move

While pregnant, I took classes in belly dancing. The moves require sinuous, sensuous movement, so I was in touch with my body at a time when it often seemed ungainly. Unlike some expectant moms, I never felt unattractive or awkward. Using these exercises, I was comfortable with my curves, which led to sexual confidence.

"Belly dancing breaks down self-consciousness and inhibitions," says Suzanne Caesar, founder of Maternal Dance in NYC and creator of the *Rhythm for Life* DVD. "A lot of the moves work the belly, the abdomen and the hips, the parts of the body many women are most anxious about." She says that women are often so out of touch with their own hips that when she says, "Put your feet hip-distance apart," some women spread their legs so wide it's as if they're doing jumping jacks. "That tells you right there that their body image is distorted," she says. "But the moves of belly dance, the figure eights and hip circles, take you right to the source of your sexual energy. As you engage the ab muscles, your chest lifts and you open your heart. And self-love comes from there."

It may sound woo-woo, but I find that the repetitive, hipcentric, swinging moves of belly dance make me feel good in my own body. The requisite twisting actually seems sensual—especially compared with slogging away on the elliptical trainer while plugged in to the TV—so I feel sexier. "If you're rocking your pelvis and doing hip circles, you're not only getting more physically fit, but you're also learning new techniques to adapt in the bedroom," Caesar adds. If you feel seductive, you act seductively. You're more likely to initiate sex, and you're less critical of your body.

Open your mind to Reiki

Reiki therapy is a method of spiritual healing in which the practitioner uses a light touch in a sequence of hand placements on the head and torso. But it's unregulated—you don't need certification or proof of competence to do it—so all kinds of crunchy charlatans can claim deep Reiki wisdom. Trying Reiki years ago for the first time for an article, I was skeptical. But as the therapist's hands moved over my body, I could feel intense heat radiating from them. And I had a vision. I had been anxious about my father's health, but suddenly I saw blue waves caressing jagged pink mountains. And I knew, somehow, that everything would be all right. (It was.)

The second time I had Reiki, I was pregnant and terrified I'd have another miscarriage. As I lay on the table and the therapist did her thing, a white dog padded into the room. I thought, How nice that this spa has a dog! Then I realized my eyes were closed. I opened them: no dog. It had been a vision. Again, I couldn't explain why, but I knew that whatever happened, it would be OK.

Reiki has stress-relieving, energizing benefits, so it makes sense that it would enhance sexual feelings as well. "What gets in the way of sexual pleasure more than lack of self-esteem?" asks Pamela Miles, author of *Reiki: A Comprehensive Guide* (Tarcher/Penguin). "The core shift with Reiki is that people feel differently about themselves, making deeper intimacy possible." My own experience tells me that Reiki can bring comfort. I did not have a revelation that my dad would survive or that I wouldn't miscarry. I simply had a feeling of serenity and comfort and the belief that I could handle anything. That confidence in your ability, I realized, is the solution to so many questions in life—including how to revitalize your sex life. I'm not saying you should boycott candles or chocolate body paint. Rather, you should acknowledge that any activity that allows you to feel happier, more secure and self-assured will likely make you feel sexier and more psyched about what goes on in the bedroom—and beyond. ■

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