

It's Friday night and I'm nervous. I have a date, of sorts. I'm meeting a friend I've not seen in a while. As I arrive at the address in east London, I look down at the long skirt I've been instructed to wear, and wonder if it's too late to chicken out and get an Uber home. But then the door opens, so I take a deep breath and go inside. I'm here for an event called 'The Art of Pussy Gazing'. Whether you call yours your yoni, your c\*\*t or your lady garden, I'm going to be communing with mine this evening. For two hours.

In the candlelit room are a circle of women of various ages sitting on yoga mats. Sheepskin rugs and blankets are scattered around, and in the centre of the circle there's a pile of hand mirrors of various shapes and sizes. Lacey Haynes, a tall blonde Canadian in a sparkly 'Feminist' T-shirt and bright orange yoga pants, has been running classes in 'the power of the pussy' since her own freebirthing experience inspired her to find out more about her own 'wellspring of power, pleasure and play'.

We begin by going around the circle, giving our names and explaining why we're here. One woman has just had a hysterectomy and feels disconnected from her body; another works in the male-dominated tech industry and wants to get more in touch with her femininity; one has

experienced sexual trauma; another was brought up Catholic and wants to unlock some of the shame she feels around masturbation; the woman beside her is in a long-term relationship and has gone off sex completely. And me? I'm here to discover how to have better orgasms.

Tonight's workshop is the latest offering from Secret Yoga Club. Set up by Gabrielle Hales in 2013, its events now focus on female pleasure and sexuality, and how to reconnect with our bodies and 'wildness' as women. 'I know lots of open-minded feminists who enjoy their bodies, but this wasn't always translating into enjoying sex, and that was really affecting their confidence,' she explains. Hales is writing a book on the much misunderstood topic of female arousal, out in May, and says, 'Absolutely everyone deserves raw pleasure. Good sex and transcendental orgasms are our birthright.'

Although I'm not one of the 5% women who say they've never climaxed, when I experience pleasure during sex, I am sometimes left thinking. 'That felt great, but maybe it could be better?' And sometimes even, 'Was that an orgasm?' Hales says that's not such a stupid question. 'The mystery of the female sexual response is still not fully understood, and varies from woman to woman.' This is why Hales believes that getting to know your sexual anatomy is the first step to taking control of your own pleasure. 'Using the word vagina only refers to the elastic, muscular canal lined with nerves,' she says. 'The vulva is the right word for our whole outer pleasure matrix: the mons pubis, labia, clitoris, urethra and vaginal opening. Saying vagina is like calling a penis a shaft.'

After some deep 'pussy breathing' exercises – like regular breathing, but thinking about your vagina (sorry, vulva), we are encouraged to hold it in one hand. We're then instructed to start moving however we choose – some women are rocking back and forth, others are circling their hips. I have to close my eyes to let go of my inhibitions, but then it feels good. Eventually it's time for us to remove our underwear, pick up a hand mirror, lie on our backs and look at our... faces. Only then is it time to slowly move the mirror down and, er, get better acquainted with someone else.

At first I feel self-conscious and wrap the blankets we've been given around my knees to give myself some privacy, but once I start looking at myself like this, I'm captivated. I end up throwing the blanket off completely so I can get more light and take a closer look. Although I have to stifle a giggle when Lacey encourages us to say to it 'I love you. I'm sorry. Please forgive me', on the whole, it's a surprisingly profound experience. I start thinking how strange it is that I could probably recognise most of my other body parts in a line-up, but not this one.

We do a lot of breathing exercises – one I'll take home involves inhaling and imagining a thread of golden light moving down from your navel, past your yoni, back up your spine to the top of your skull, and then exhaling from the roof of your mouth back to your navel. 'Training yourself to be present in your body and feeling relaxed is key to better orgasms,' says Hales. 'A lot of women don't know that it's okay to spend time and effort on themselves in this way. So spending time on yourself exploring your body and what feels pleasurable is revelatory.'

Carolyn Cowan is a psychosexual therapist who teaches Secret Yoga Club's female arousal workshops. 'We explain what the genitals look like when they're aroused and not aroused, we cover consent, games around intimacy and "interjects". These are statements that get in the way of having an orgasm: "I can't come", "I'm not wet enough."' Cowan adds, 'I see women from their early twenties to their sixties who are having bad sex or not having orgasms. And of course a lot of women are faking it.' Indeed, one US study in 2017 found that 50% of women fake their orgasms, for 'altruistic purposes'. *When Harry Met Sally* has a lot to answer for. During the workshop, Cowan explains that there are many different types of orgasm. 'You can have a clitoral orgasm, vaginal, cervical, anal, even a breath orgasm – where you create super-high levels of oxygen in the body.' She points out that if we can't communicate what we enjoy to our lover, they're not going to be able to bring us to climax. 'For some reason we start kissing and we go silent,' she says. 'We should be communicating what we like, especially as what turns us on changes over time and particularly if we've had children. What you did at 20, by the time you're 45 might be like "Can



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you just not?" And it's often really hard to say that to your partner. I had a client who'd been married for 20 years and had three kids and hated how her husband kissed her. It's sad that we're reluctant to talk about it because sexual pleasure can create so much happiness and lack of it can cause so much unhappiness."

Hales says that one of the reasons women aren't having better sex is we haven't been taught how to orgasm. 'Porn and mainstream films or TV tell us that it takes women 10 seconds to reach ecstasy,' says Hales. 'In fact, only around 18% of women can orgasm from just vaginal penetration alone, the rest require clitoral stimulation.' For most of history the science about women's health was written by men – from Freud who thought clitoral stimulation was associated with neurosis and hysteria (thanks, Sigmund), to Alfred Kinsey in the 1950s who finally championed the clitoris. It wasn't until 1998 that Helen O'Connell discovered that this pleasure-seeking gland (our little 'tender button') extends back several inches into the vagina.

In some ways, claiming our right to better orgasms might be the next frontier of feminism. If only 65% of heterosexual women are regularly orgasming but 95% of men are, clearly there's an 'orgasm gap'. Interestingly, 85% of lesbian women say they regularly climax and Hales posits numerous theories about why lesbians are having better sex, including more dialogue, better turn taking and fewer scripts about how sex is 'supposed' to be. Cowan also points out that the male arousal cycle is typically about three minutes whereas a woman's – outside of the erotic charge of having just met someone – is between 30 minutes and an hour and a half.

By the end of the pussy gazing session I feel really connected to my body and a bit high, like I've had a few glasses of wine. As I make my way home, I'm texting all my friends and encouraging them to grab a mirror and get exploring. Given the health benefits of regular orgasms – they boost your immune system, improve your skin, help you sleep and activate dopamine (the motivating hormone), I've decided to build some, ahem, 'me-time' into my regular self-care routine. It feels empowering to take control of my sexuality, for myself, on my own terms. I'm aware of how much better and longer my orgasms seem, both during sex and alone, and feel able to trust myself to let go into the sensation, rather than pulling back or faking it 'til I make it. I can't believe it's taken me this long to get in touch with my own pleasure. I wouldn't say I am having daily moments of ecstasy, but practice makes perfect.

For more Secret Yoga Club events, visit [secretyogaclub.co.uk](http://secretyogaclub.co.uk)

**'NOW I'M  
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# THE SECRET TO BETTER ORGASMS

From pleasure workshops to wild women retreats, Gabrielle Hales is on a mission to improve your orgasms. Kate Wills finds out how