

Bring on those hormonal urges

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS watching a documentary the other night on testosterone and the fact that men worldwide are clamouring to get their hands on this so-called youth drug. Doctors and scientists are now hailing supplementary testosterone as a wonderful panacea to loss of libido, and a powerful combatant against the effects of ageing in males. And, surprisingly, also in females. There is a plethora of women in North America and Europe who are now using gels and patches not only to address some of the issues of menopause but also to give them an edge in the male-dominated business world.

The downsides are that life expectancy is shortened and, predictably, that users can become irrational and aggressive. One man reported that he was getting increasing bouts of road rage and found himself dragging off other cars. In an article I read in HQ magazine a few years ago, a woman taking testosterone reported libidinous feelings so intense as to make her understand why some men forced women into sex.

Despite my own aversion to altering nature's chemical balance without good reason, I did find it fascinating that society is finally facing up to the profound and powerful effects hormones have on governing our moods, behaviour and what we so proudly call our unique "personality".

I have written before about my own natural cycles and how my personality seems to change dramatically just before menstruation when oestrogen is at its lowest ebb. I become far less tolerant, my libido rises sharply, I get lost easily between home and the local milk bar, have diminished mathematical and spatial abilities, but am hugely creative and have a heightened sensitivity to the world.

Which all goes to confirm the degree to which we are more a biological soup than anything else. Given the degree to which chemicals and hormonal urges govern our behaviour, it amazes me that these facts don't come to light when handling common social challenges. Like the female midlife crisis.

A common phenomenon that shows up in divorce statistics is the high proportion of women in their early 40s running off. On the surface the high incidence of infidelity among women in this age group looks like betrayal, bad behaviour, mid-life madness, but at a biological level it is just nature doing her "thang". According to a doctor friend, it's normal for women to reach a hormonal peak in the late 30s-early 40s, as the body goes through its last hurrah before menopause. Thus the unconscious mind is pushing women to seek young, virile males in order to get those last eggs fertilised.

As reported by prominent anthropologist at Rutgers University in New York, Helen Fisher, in her book *Anatomy of Love*, the body releases amphetamines like speed when we see an appropriate mate, which then pushes us to procreate. Love hormones include adrenalin, dopamine, norepinephrine and phenylethylamine (PEA).

Later, nature's opiates -- literal "pain killers" -- kick in to help people pair-bond while children grow up. The love cycle tends to last until a child is off the breast and walking. In two-child families, this is about seven years -- hence the proverbial Seven-Year Itch. By which time the body is off again producing amphetamine hits in the hope of mating in a fresh genetic pool.

If we had more awareness about these natural processes in both males and females, then perhaps more relationships subject to animal behaviour could be saved rather than ruined by the maelstrom of biology. At least such internal dramas could be more truthfully navigated and negotiated.

Recent reports have humans deeply affected by hormones at a spiritual level as well. For if falling in love is chemical, then so too is talking to God.

The potent psychedelic drug DMT -- used by shaman cultures to commune with the Divine, and found in certain plants -- has recently been found in the pineal gland during intense states such as birth, near-death, deep meditation, extreme sports and passionate sex. When these chemicals are present in the brain we are transported into the spirit realms either through hallucination or -- as at least one scientist has professed -- the DMT acts as a sort of TV antenna which allows us to tap into other energies we can't normally access.

And of course hormones govern our emotions. Tears contain opiates, and we often cry to give ourselves a Valium fix when grieving or in pain. Deep breathing can promote nitric oxide which triggers endorphins and feel-good hormones, as does laughter. Our legs alone can trigger cortisol and norepinephrine rushes if we tense them during stress due to a primal fight-or-flight response. Which is why my yoga teacher repeatedly tells the class to relax the legs first during times of worry.

There are so many things we could better deal with, if we accepted our sacred animal natures rather than forever trying to impose civilised laws, and rational rules, on the brilliant, sleek, chemical cocktail Homo sapiens are. In many instances, it clearly pays to go back to the biologists for guidance, rather than therapists and relationships counsellors.

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