

chemistry

How Much Does Chemistry Count?

By Kimberly Dawn Neumann

[Back to A](#)



Chemistry. What is it? It's that...well, thing. That "I need to see this person again" im Or that "We click" feeling. But what causes it? Does it need to happen naturally, or ca create it? Does it die over time, or are there tricks to keep the sparks flying? To explo these questions and more, we gathered together a group of real people and experts t delve into this titillating topic. Here's what they had to say—see if you agree, and gle few tricks on generating more chemistry in your own dating life.

The Subjects:

Joyce Catlett, MA, mental health specialist and author of *Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships*

David Givens, Ph.D, anthropologist and author of *Love Signals*

Sean and Alison, 36-year old newlyweds who met on Match.com and are now living in Rancho Cucamonga, CA with their blended family

Michael, 35-year-old single man from Denver, Colorado

Pamela, 29-year-old single woman from Seattle, Washington

Q: So how do you define chemistry?

Alison: Chemistry is like cookie dough and vanilla ice cream: When it works, it works.

Sean: Chemistry is the igniter, the catalyst for the relationship.

Pamela: I think chemistry is an animal attraction between two people that is purely physical. The connection appeals to the senses: the way someone looks, their smell, the way they taste, the feel of their body, the sound of their voice. The reaction one's chemical match is often excused or explained as overwhelming and uncontrollable. It's the "throw-down factor."

Michael: To me, chemistry is a connection, a bond or common feeling between two people. In my opinion, it starts very ear friendship/relationship. Positive or negative chemistry is often one of the first feelings two people have about each other . It be verbal or nonverbal, conscious or unconscious—yes, just like you were hit over the head with it!

Joyce Catlett: If you're talking about chemistry as something that stimulates love or sexual attraction (or both), brain chem are definitely involved. In *Why We Love*, Dr. Helen Fisher found that levels of the chemical dopamine rise in a person who is infatuated, particularly as the relationship starts to take on more meaning.

David Givens: Chemistry is basically when the pleasure centers of the brain are engaged. The pleasure you get from chocol martini or a rollercoaster is basically the same. The brain doesn't differentiate. While chemistry isn't everything, many of courtship's most powerful signals are unheard, untouched, and unseen. Operating chiefly through unconscious channels, the invisible aromas, tastes, steroids, sterols, and hormones strongly shape our feelings about each other.

Q: How do you know you have chemistry with someone? Are there "symptoms"?

Alison: You know you have chemistry when it is easy. And the only goal you have for the day is to get back to that person.

Sean: I knew I had chemistry with Ali when I would spontaneously smile when I was with her or even just thinking about her.

Joyce Catlett: Symptoms? Rapid heartbeat. Shortness of breath. And sensations of excitement that are often similar to sensations associated with danger. As one researcher said, "Adrenaline makes the heart grow fonder."

David Givens: You can tell when there is chemistry between people because the sympathetic nervous system gets aroused. Blood pressure goes up a little, the skin may flush, the face and ears will turn red and there might be a feeling of weakness in the limbs. It's that combination of basic psychological arousal combined with a feeling of pleasure.

Q: Can you create chemistry with someone you're not initially feeling it with and, if so, how?

Michael: I think you can build chemistry, but personally, I like chemistry to just hit me. It's much more fun that way. I enjoy suddenly realizing "Hey, I may be interested in her" and then WHAM! Makes me smile just thinking about it.

Pamela: Nope. It cannot be created. Unfortunately, it's one of the few things in life you can't learn and can't teach. You, as a couple, either have it or you don't.

Alison: Actually, I think chemistry can grow. Some people may be reserved at first, not showing their true selves. Over time personalities show and chemistry develops.

David Givens: Yes, I think you can create chemistry. Ordinary courtship goes over a period of weeks and months, and it builds up and adds up and eventually you get this kind of chemical bonding. Eye contact and discussing personal subjects can accelerate this chemical bond.

Joyce Catlett: Sometimes alcohol, which takes away inhibitions, could make it easier to be attracted to someone. But it's an artificial "high," only a temporary tension reliever. The chemistry you felt might very well disappear.

Q: Can you tell if you have chemistry with someone online or on the phone, or do you have to meet in person to know?

Ali: I think you can tell whether you have *compatibility* online. You can't tell that you have chemistry until you meet the person. I know I was not really into Sean until I first saw him, until then I wasn't quite sure if I should even be going out on the date.

Sean: Actually, with Ali, I could tell there was a *potential* for chemistry online. I could tell based on her physical appearance, grammar, and tone in her bio, in e-mails, and then especially on the phone. However, I could definitely tell there *was* chemistry and not just potential, on the first date.

Pamela: Online? Nope. Doesn't stimulate any of the five senses. Phone? Sure. The sound of someone's voice can be an instant turn-on. Ever notice what suckers we are for people with Australian accents?

Joyce Catlett: I think chemistry would probably be less strong online or on the phone because research has shown that eye contact is important in transmitting emotions. The exception would be for a shy person, who has trouble relaxing in social situations. Online contact would be less stressful for this person, and the more relaxed state would allow the chemistry to emerge.

Q: How long does it take to know if you have chemistry with someone? Five minutes? When you kiss? After getting intimate?

Joyce Catlett: It may take only five minutes. Simply spotting an interesting person at a cocktail party from a distance could be the chemistry perk. Many people have also reported that the first kiss was how they knew they were falling in love.

Pamela: If the first kiss isn't fireworks and hot flashes in certain regions of the body, then move on. Intimacy is the ultimate chemistry test. And that feeble excuse of "The first time is always awkward"? Not true!

Michael: Chemistry is the start or end of it all: Good chemistry equals move forward, bad chemistry equals keep looking. I think the first kiss is the magic threshold, nor is the being intimate. In my opinion, you should already have chemistry at the point.

Q: Can you be "just friends" with someone and then get hit with a wave of chemistry that makes the relationship change direction?

Pamela: From experience, yes. It was a friendship for eight years, and now my desire for him is like a virus, forever coming to haunt me when I least expect it. Keep in mind, as you grow and discover yourself, your "tastes" change. What appealed to you at twenty might not/probably won't appeal to you at thirty.

Joyce Catlett: This often happens to coworkers who have been "just friends" but suddenly find themselves involved in an affair while working on an important project together. This type of interaction has been found to increase feelings of attraction.

David Givens: Yeah, that's pretty common—where you're around someone for years and never realized that you have a feeble attachment for the person, and then something happens. It's usually an event, or it can simply be that you two have been doing the same thing together for a while, which puts you on the same wavelength.

Q: Are there times it might be prudent to ignore a "chemical" reaction? Like it might be just a "sex thing"?

Michael: For me and most guys I know, the "chemical reaction" should be ignored pretty often. Do you really want to be that guy—the Neanderthal who's always checking people out and on the prowl? That reaction is there—hey, we're guys! But you keep your Neanderthal in check.

Joyce Catlett: There are times it might be prudent to ignore it. One has to do with the well-known cliché that opposites attract. People tend to have strong sexual attractions to people who have traits complementary to their own. In addition, both people feel deficient in the specific trait that they admire in the other person. Later on, however, the very qualities that are so attractive in the initial phases of a romance may come to repel us. The quiet man may increasingly resent the fact that his gregarious partner never lets him get a word in edgewise, while she may start hating him for being so non-communicative.

Pamela: Unfortunately, I'm experiencing this situation right now. I believe his quote was, "We should stay away from each other. We are poison to each other." Ouch! And yes, the sex was the best ever, for us both. He would back that—I'm not being delusional here. Unfortunately, when we aren't making out, we're usually fighting. Some people might call that passion. Others would call it ulcers waiting to happen.

Q: What's more important to a successful relationship, chemistry or compatibility?

Alison: Chemistry is most important, by far. You can be compatible with a lot of people. Chemistry is the rarer of the two.

Michael: Chemistry is vital, but not as important as compatibility. Chemistry is the connection that you have with someone. Compatibility is a partnership of similar goals. I feel that if two people have chemistry and are not compatible, the relationship won't last very long. If two people are compatible, they can find their chemistry. **Sean:** If you don't have chemistry, you're just wasting your time. Compatibility cannot overcome a lack of chemistry.

Joyce Catlett: The combination of chemistry and compatibility—a mix of friendship, affection, love and sexual passion—is the ideal that most people are seeking. Obviously, it is also the most challenging to achieve over the long term.

Q: Does chemistry fade with time? Is there any way to bring it back?

David Givens: Usually after one to two years it starts to wane—the actual chemical levels in your body die down. There are ways to keep the thrill alive, though, like going on vacation with your partner to some exotic place or doing some kind of physically thrilling thing together. An increase in adrenaline levels can help people feel closer.

Michael: Chemistry can fade if you don't pay attention to it. If communication is minimal due to responsibilities such as time-intensive careers, kids, money etc...life's demands can contribute to couples misplacing their chemistry. But I think you can find it again.

Joyce Catlett: Chemistry doesn't necessarily have to fade with time. What makes it fade is not familiarity, but the fact that couples get into routine ways of being together and habitual ways of making love. Also many partners give up their independence and their old friends, and start to act out of obligation. They forget that they are two separate individuals and this detracts from the sexual attraction they initially felt. To remedy this, I think it's important for couples to reminisce, during times of conflict the time when the sparks of passion first began to fly between them. It helps them reconnect to the feelings they enjoyed during the early phases of their relationship.

New York City-based freelancer Kimberly Dawn Neumann can tell if she has chemistry with a date in—oh, about 1.3 seconds

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