

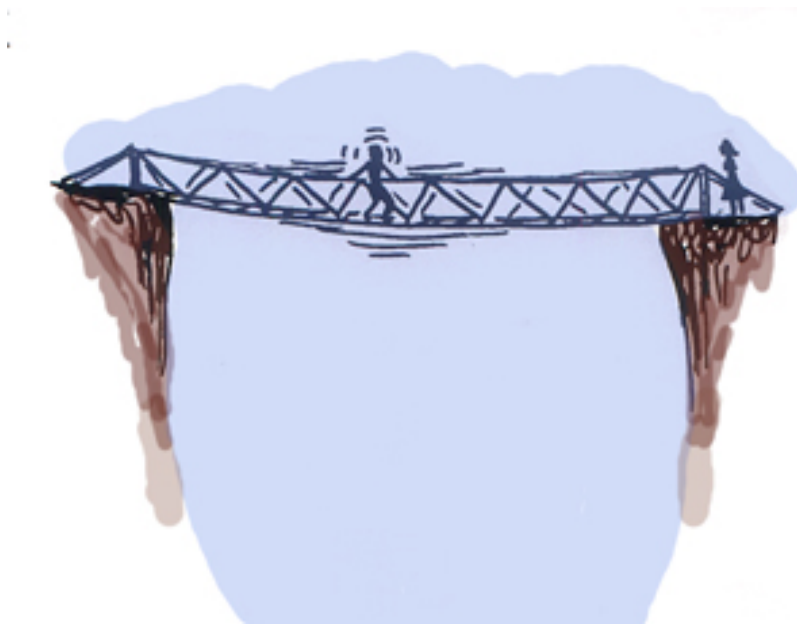
LINE ON LIFE

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Fear Causes Romance? *

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Some men purposely take their dates to fear-arousing events. Why? These fellows think that this heightened level of emotional arousal – inspired by a horror movie, a boxing match or a roller-coaster ride – can stir up their woman's romantic feelings toward them. Are they right?



In a 1974 study, this effect was investigated by two psychologists, Dutton and Aron. They studied the emotional reactions of young men in crossing two different bridges in a scenic area of North Vancouver. The men were randomly assigned to walk over one of these two bridges. The first was a narrow, 450-foot long, suspension bridge that swayed back and forth in a scary manner over 200 feet above a rocky gorge. In contrast, the second bridge was not very high off the ground, and it was solid, safe and immobile. As they finished their walk across either bridge, they were met by an attractive

young woman, who introduced herself as an assistant of the psychologists doing the study. As part of another project, she asked the men to answer a few questions and write a brief story in response to a picture. After this was finished, she explained more about her project. She also wrote her home phone number for each man, in case any of them wanted more information about the project.

In the stories given to the picture, sexual imagery was at a higher level with the men who crossed the anxiety-provoking suspension bridge. Most of the men did not actually call the woman. Out of the 33 men in each group, there were 9 callers from those who crossed the suspension bridge and 2 from the other group. Even though there was a significant difference between groups, the effect of the anxiety was not a strong one.

Of course, these results could be interpreted in several ways. The men who called might have actually been interested in getting more information about her project. However, it seems more likely that the emotional arousal generated by the fear enhancing their sexual attraction. It is impossible to tell how many men thought of calling but failed to do so.

Dutton and Aron followed this study with another that linked fear to sexual arousal. Recruited for a learning experiment, college-age men found themselves paired with an extremely attractive young woman. They are informed that the experiment is designed to test the effect of electric shocks on learning. Randomly, some men were deliberately told that they were going to receive strong, painful electric shocks, while others were told to expect weak shocks that would barely cause a tingling sensation. (In reality, nobody received any shocks. This information was given merely to raise the anxiety level in one group.)

After the instructions were given and before the fake experiment began, the investigator spoke privately with each man. Among the questions, each was asked about their feelings toward their attractive partner. The men in the anxious condition found the women to be sexier and were more interested in dating her than those who expected mild shocks.

Other studies have indicated that – beside anxiety and fear – other types of arousal can increase passionate feelings – at least to a limited degree. A 1981 psychological study explored the effect of exercise on fanning the flames of passion. Some men were asked to run rapidly in place for two minutes. Their reactions to videotapes were compared to other men who had exercised only mildly for 15 seconds. The videotapes featured either a very attractive or a very unattractive woman.

The men who exercised more found the pretty woman to be more appealing than the men who exercised less. On the other hand, the high exercise group also reacted more *negatively* to the unattractive woman. Higher physical arousal seems to accentuate whatever emotion you think you are feeling.

Still other studies support the hypothesis that emotionally neutral physiological arousal can stir up the passions. However, one thing strikes me as being very peculiar. Since men are trying to use this method to stir up passion in their dates – why weren't any of these studies done on *women*?

* Adapted from Masters, Johnson and Kolodny's *Human Sexuality*, HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, pages 302-303.