

were smack in the midst of such an emotional state. We could have made our participants feel angry or hungry, frustrated or annoyed. But we preferred to have them experience a pleasurable emotion.

We chose to study decision making under sexual arousal—not because we had kinky predilections ourselves, but because understanding the impact of arousal on behavior might help society grapple with some of its most difficult problems, such as teen pregnancy and the spread of HIV-AIDS. There are sexual motivations everywhere we look, and yet we understand very little about how these influence our decision making.

Moreover, since we wanted to understand whether participants would be able to predict how they would behave in a particular emotional state, the emotion needed to be one that was already quite familiar to them. That made our decision easy. If there's anything predictable and familiar about twentysomething male college students, it's the regularity with which they experience sexual arousal.

ROY, AN AFFABLE, studious biology major at Berkeley, is in a sweat—and not over finals. Propped up in the single bed of his darkened dorm room, he's masturbating rapidly with his right hand. With his left, he's using a one-handed keyboard to manipulate a Saran-wrapped laptop computer. As he idles through pictures of buxom naked women lolling around in various erotic poses, his heart pounds ever more loudly in his chest.

As he becomes increasingly excited, Roy adjusts the “arousal meter” on the computer screen upward. As he reaches the bright red “high” zone, a question pops up on the screen:

Could you enjoy sex with someone you hated?