

Remembering Love

The Dual Control Model of Sexual Arousal

Understanding Your Accelerator and Brake Systems

Developed by John Bancroft & Erick Janssen at the Kinsey Institute and supported by over two decades of research across genders and cultures (Bancroft & Janssen, 2000; Graham et al., 2006; Bancroft et al., 2009)

What the Model Explains

The **Dual Control Model (DCM)** describes how human sexual arousal is governed by two interacting systems in the brain:

- **Sexual Excitation System (SES)** – the accelerator that turns arousal **on** when it detects erotic cues or emotional safety.
- **Sexual Inhibition System (SIS)** – the brake that turns arousal **off** when it detects threat, risk, shame, or danger.

Healthy sexuality depends on a balanced relationship between the accelerator and the brake. Too much braking leads to inhibition or avoidance, while too little braking may lead to impulsivity or risk-taking.

Types of Brakes (Sexual Inhibition Subtypes)

Subtype	Description	Common Manifestations
SIS-1: Performance-Based Inhibition	Fear of failure, rejection, or negative evaluation from a partner.	Worrying about “performing,” body image, or being desirable; anxiety about losing arousal or disappointing a partner.
SIS-2: Consequence-Based Inhibition	Fear of potential negative outcomes (moral, relational, or health-related).	Guilt, shame, fear of being “caught,” moral conflict, religious guilt, fear of pregnancy, disease, or emotional vulnerability.

Common Brakes (Inhibitors of Arousal)

Category	Examples
Psychological & Emotional	Anxiety, depression, body shame, low self-esteem, moral guilt, trauma history, fear of rejection, internalized messages about “good” sexuality.
Relational & Interpersonal	Unresolved conflict, lack of trust, feeling unseen or criticized, emotional disconnection, resentment, or pressure to perform.
Cultural & Moral Conditioning	Religious purity teachings, gender roles, sexual double standards, messages that pleasure is wrong or dangerous.
Contextual & Environmental	Stress, fatigue, distractions, lack of privacy, parenting demands, work stress, physical discomfort.
Physiological & Health Factors	Hormonal changes, chronic illness, medication side effects (SSRIs, birth control), substance use, pain.

Common Accelerators (Stimulators of Arousal)

Category	Examples
Emotional & Relational Safety	Feeling loved, accepted, and emotionally attuned; being desired, trusted, and relaxed.
Novelty & Playfulness	Shared adventure, erotic curiosity, humor, mystery, anticipation, playful teasing.
Sensory & Physical Stimulation	Touch, eye contact, scent, movement, temperature, music, lighting, sensual environment.
Psychological & Cognitive	Fantasy, imagination, vulnerability, mutual attraction, feeling pursued or appreciated, power exchange, mindful presence.
Contextual & Lifestyle	Rest, reduced stress, privacy, time for connection, positive body awareness, intentional self-care.

Clinical Takeaways

- **Everyone has a unique calibration.** Some people have sensitive accelerators, others heavy brakes. There's no "normal," only balance.
- **Shame lives on the brake.** Moral conflict, judgment, and fear of rejection are the strongest inhibitors of desire.
- **Safety activates the accelerator.** Emotional trust, self-acceptance, and curiosity are the most powerful arousal enhancers.
- **Partners can work together.** Understanding each other's accelerators and brakes transforms sexual frustration into teamwork.

Suggested Reflection Questions

1. What tends to "hit your brakes" — the situations or beliefs that shut desire down?
2. What presses your accelerator — what helps you feel alive, open, or desired?
3. How can you and your partner create conditions that release the brake and nurture safety and curiosity?

References (Key Research)

- Bancroft, J., & Janssen, E. (2000). The dual control model of male sexual response; A theoretical approach to centrally mediated erectile dysfunction; *Neuroscience™. Biobehavioral Reviews* 25(5), 571–579.
- Bancroft, J., Graham, C. A., Janssen, E., & Sanders, S. A. (2009). The Dual Control Model; Current status and future directions; *Journal of Sex Research* 20(2–3), 121–142.
- Graham, C. A., Sanders, S. A., Milhausen, R. R., & McBride, K. R. (2006). The Dual Control Model of sexual response; Relevance to sexual desire and arousal disorders in women; *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 35(6), 697–712.

SIS/SES Self-Assessment

Below is a friendly self-assessment into your accelerator and break sensitivity that has been research tested.

Please rate each statement **1–4**, where:

1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly Agree

Sexual Excitation System (SES – “Accelerator”)

1. I get aroused easily when I feel emotionally connected to my partner.
2. When I see or hear something erotic, I become aroused quickly.
3. I find that small physical touches or gestures can easily turn me on.
4. I get excited when I anticipate a sexual encounter.
5. Feeling desired or admired increases my arousal.
6. I often think about sex even when I don’t plan to act on it.
7. When I feel safe and relaxed, sexual thoughts come naturally.

Sexual Inhibition System (SIS – “Brake”)

1. I lose interest in sex if I’m worried about how I’m performing.
2. If I feel emotionally distant from my partner, I can’t get aroused.
3. Fear of being rejected or judged turns off my desire.
4. Stress or fatigue can easily shut down my sexual feelings.
5. Guilt or moral conflict about sex reduces my arousal.
6. Worrying about consequences (like rejection, pregnancy, or being “caught”) inhibits my desire.
7. If I think my partner doesn’t really want sex, I lose interest.

Scoring the results:

SES (Accelerator Total): Add the 7 SES items.

- Higher.±.more.easily.aroused.by.erotic.or.emotional.cues;

SIS (Brake Total): Add the 7 SIS items.

- Higher.±.more.likely.to.inhibit.arousal.due.to.anxiety?guilt?or.fear;

High SES + High SIS: Passionate but cautious; can thrive when safety is strong.

High SES + Low SIS: Excitable, spontaneous, more risk-tolerant.

Low SES + High SIS: Tends to avoid or suppress desire; common in shame-based inhibition.

Low SES + Low SIS: May experience low desire overall or feel disconnected from erotic stimuli.