

Super Week

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It's taken some time to discover it. The fact that the same wild state of euphoria shows up every single month. Just like migratory birds flying in V formation, the ebb and flow of the tides, or bell-bottoms once again becoming 'a thing' – a woman's cycle is something that invariably comes and goes. Women bleed once a month – we know this. But the recurring discomfort, low mood, anxiety, and all the *fuss* also has an upside: all the extraordinary things that happen during and around ovulation. Remarkable bodily changes that flow in just as regularly as the blood itself.

Only a week later. And much, *much* more fun.

Sometimes you wake to find you have the cognitive abilities of an octopus. You master stress and multitasking like a machine. Find yourself existing in an inexplicable bubble of self-confidence, capable of being more empathetic and working amazingly well as part of a team. You express yourself so precisely, so wisely. Walk around feeling as if you're the star of your very own music video – even though the pouring rain is coming in sideways. Everything runs like clockwork. Until you start to grow a little frazzled again, when it's *that* time of the month – that's just par for the course, after all.

But have you ever noticed how the exhilarating days *also* happen again – and again – and again? You don't just have a 'Nightmare Week' – you have a 'Super Week', too.

Women assigned female at birth are regularly influenced by the two leading characters in our lives: oestrogen and progesterone. In a healthy body, these two hormones fluctuate, first rising, then falling – changing us physically, mentally and emotionally. Almost from day to day – and guaranteed from week to week. But extremely *predictably* from month to month.

This hormonal tango transforms us into four ever so slightly different versions of ourselves. That the menstrual cycle affects women is nothing new. But the fact that it involves much more than a woman's period – and impacts a whole swathe of qualities that are especially good for us – is nowhere near as well known.

But it is now scientifically proven that the brain becomes more active as ovulation approaches. You communicate better, become more creative and physically stronger. Your hips move differently. Your face appears more open, and you smell more attractive. Your voice changes, as do the words that come out of your mouth.

A couple of days before the egg pops, a gang of cool hormones vibrates around your body, as if you've drunk a Red Bull topped with Irish coffee and mixed it with a few lines of natural cocaine. You've never noticed this, you say? But just think back: it happened on the day of that important job interview, when you presented yourself with the self-confidence of George Clooney. Or when you juggled three dates with three different people, all in the same

week, no stress. It was those days at the gym when you dead-lifted an extra ten kilos, or when you actually sat down and began to write, because you just *knew* that your novel would make it out into the world one day.

In short, the seven days leading up to ovulation are unmined gold. Every single month.

The problem is that generation after generation of women has been told something along the lines of: ‘Congratulations on becoming fertile, you’re now going to bleed into your underwear for years and years, stain the entire contents of your knicker drawer, experience bloating, stuff absorbent cotton wool up into your vagina, struggle to sleep through painful cramps, and become a little depressed now and then. It’s all just part and parcel of being a woman.’

Maybe the power of ovulation has remained one of the female body’s biggest secrets because it happens so quietly. Menstruation is so visible, so bright red and warm. The effects of ovulation, on the other hand – the mini-explosion that happens deep within us in the middle of our cycle – can be neither seen nor smelled. And we therefore rarely notice it. Perhaps not until one or two pink lines on a plastic stick provide us with a positive or negative result.

But I hope all this is about to change. Because ovulation can give rise to life in many more ways than pregnancy alone.

‘Super Week’ is just a term I’ve come up with, but I think it will quickly come to resonate with many of you. Lots of women intuitively understand what I’m talking about, almost as if I’m pointing out the obvious – your nose, for example, and saying, hey, did you realise you can use that thing to smell cinnamon rolls and daffodils? Like, no shit! Now it all makes sense!

But there’s nothing wrong with you if you’ve never felt or even thought about the highs that accompany the lows of menstruation. If this is the case, then there’s all the more to be gained from becoming aware of your Super Week. The specific qualities of the days prior to ovulation will vary from woman to woman, but new research shows clear commonalities across countries and cultures.

But when exactly does this Super Week occur? How does it affect you, and which specific traits in you are fortified by it? You’ll learn more about this throughout this book – and not least, you’ll have the chance to explore one of the very best things about getting to know yourself in this way: the ability to use your cycle to plan for an easier life.

With the help of world-renowned hormone experts, psychologists, brain researchers and exercise physiologists – the people behind some of the most cutting-edge scientific

studies out there – I’ll tell you why and how you can skim the cream off this unique thing that happens to you every single month.

Just a little insight into how the best week of your cycle works makes it possible to implement this knowledge in pretty much every area of your life. If you know *what* happens, and not least *when* it happens, you can ride the hormone waves instead of drowning in them. And you can optimise how you work, sleep, exercise, eat, and meet and talk with people – all the things that are important in a woman’s life.

Some days or weeks will fail to live up to your expectations, but by understanding roughly where you are in your cycle, you will better understand why some of your plans never seem to come to fruition, and how you can ensure that they will in future.

Because: you have a Super Week.

An untapped, potent source you can grab with both hands, if you want to. The goal is for you to find your version of this special week. Not by overlooking or downplaying the strenuous parts of your cycle, but by understanding them better, too. While at the same, we can revel in the fun times and – for once – look on the bright side of things.

So we ask instead: ‘Wait, are you on your *Super Week* right now?’

Woman, know thy cycle

It seemed almost a given that I should feel a certain way every time the blood appeared. From when I was twelve years old until late in my thirties, I – like many others, I imagine – thought it was time to hibernate on the day my period arrived. Or, at the very least, to ‘get comfy on the sofa’ – to cancel plans, to sleep away a summer’s day, to suffer in silence. Now, as a forty-year-old, I feel the complete opposite. Today, I practically ‘celebrate’ the first day of my period. Because this is when the brain fog lifts, and it’s as if I become ‘myself’ again. When my period announces its arrival, the first thing I do is take an extra-hot shower with lots of peppermint oil. Then I throw on some white underwear (because, fuck it), and brew myself my first cup of coffee in ten days.

My oestrogen level is on the way up. And over the coming days, I’ll be pulled in the same direction. I can tell that my Super Week is close, and raise my mug of coffee in a toast to myself.

It was only a few years ago, when one of the world’s greatest biathletes, Tiril Eckhoff, told me that she felt ‘pretty pep’ on the first day of her period, that I really started to pay

attention to my own. She often won skiing competitions when she was menstruating, she said. I remember the sensation of a tiny crack opening up somewhere inside me – and I soon came to realise how I actually felt when on my period, rather than how I thought I should feel.

Over the past three years, I've closely monitored what happens in both my body and my mind at different times of the month. Is it true that I 'always' feel an intense and bubbling energy, and that I'm hungrier for social contact and have less of an actual appetite, around a week after the first day of my period? And do I really feel more neurotic, clumsy, nervous and self-conscious in the days before it arrives?

The answer is yes.

Month after month, the same feelings bubble up in me. Not always identically, not as if I'm a robot, but as variations of the same mood. I know this, because I've systematically studied my cycle. This is what is known as 'tracking'.

And tracking – at least at first – is about numbers.

A woman's cycle is around 28 days long, and I therefore use this average figure when discussing cycle length in this book. But in reality, it varies greatly. A normal cycle lasts between 21 and 35 days, and anything shorter or longer than this may be seen as abnormal. My cycle often lasts for twenty-nine days – but I've also noticed that it can be an entire week shorter if I've been especially stressed. No matter the length of your cycle, the first day you bleed is always the point from which you can start to count ahead to the arrival of your Super Week.

Common to all women is our 'day 1' – this is the day you bleed fresh menstrual blood (not the pale pink discharge known as spotting that can happen a couple of days before). Another thing we all have in common is that ovulation itself takes place over the course of a single day. Most often smack bang in the middle of your cycle – that is, around day 14. But for some women, ovulation may occur shortly after menstruation, or it may happen later in the cycle, since far from everyone ovulates exactly two weeks after the first day of bleeding, despite the fact that this has long been regarded as the 'general rule'.

Regardless, at some point during the roughly seven days *before* your egg is released, you'll have your Super Week.

Is this already starting to seem like a bit too much to keep track of? Here's the trick: pay attention to what happens in your body, and when. Yes, I know this can seem challenging. But specific, manageable cycle tricks can help you to 'tune in' to your body's frequency. I'll come back to some of these tricks, tracking and counting later in this book, but what I want to tell you right now is that for me, gaining an overview of my cycle has been a

revelation. Simply *knowing* – having something to blame when the going gets tough, or being able to push myself that little bit more when I know I can handle it – has been enough to provide me with a more relaxed day-to-day throughout the entire month.

Becoming aware of the upsurge in energy that can occur during my Super Week has also had a kind of self-reinforcing effect – it's as if my emotions are intensified by my being aware of them. The placebo effect is of course a well-known and welcome phenomenon within traditional academic medicine. In fact, the impact of over half of all Western medicine use is achieved simply by the patient *believing* the medicine will work. Still, a great deal of what I and several of my friends have begun to notice during our Super Week is now scientifically proven.

The first tentative studies of women's sex hormones began as early as the 1920s. This was when oestrogen was discovered by the American biochemist and Nobel Prize winner Edward A. Doisy. Oestrogen is an umbrella term for the hormones oestradiol, oestriol, and oestrone. The first of these provides you with your Super Week; the second is produced during pregnancy, and the third helps us out during the menopause. But to keep things simple, I'll use the umbrella term oestrogen throughout this book.

Although many thousands of studies of women and their sex hormones have been conducted since the 1920s, most of them have been small, and concluding anything revelatory from their results has therefore been challenging. But now that larger-scale, high-quality studies on the menstrual cycle's effects are being undertaken all over the world, we are learning more and more. It's been tempting to pepper this book with footnotes, but personally I find those tiny numbers scattered throughout a text to be a snoozefest. But do check the list of sources at the back of the book, where I include details of all the studies I reference (along with many others I don't reference directly, but which I've used in my research).

A challenge with the existing knowledge is that it's rarely been made widely available. Menstruation and women's cycles have been surrounded in shame and de-prioritised within academia, as well as within society at large. Monitoring the effects of one's cycle from day to day over several years has long been many women's only way of obtaining any kind of trustworthy data. There is therefore a significant amount of anecdotal literature penned by researchers, authors and curious women who have performed studies on themselves – and you'll meet some of them in this book.

When it comes to the basic information about the menstrual cycle you were given at school, let me guess: a maximum of two lessons in grade nine. Which were probably delivered by a school nurse?

Most women I know understand little about how their cycle actually works. I was shocked myself to realise how little knowledge I had until just a few years ago. Only recently did I become aware that the cycle is divided into two main phases and four sub-phases. And not least – the incredible events that happen during ovulation. Something we were never taught at school.

A ‘mayfly’s’ fascinating journey

The egg will surprise you – what a curious little character it is! But first we need to back up a little, and look at the whole process from the beginning. Ready? The cycle has two main parts, known as the follicular phase and the luteal phase. During the first phase, the first two weeks of the cycle, somewhere between three and thirty eggs each grow and mature inside their very own fluid-filled ‘sleeping bag’ – or follicle, as they are more technically known. This crop will eventually release huge amounts of one of our two main sex hormones – oestrogen. For now, let’s call her the Party Queen.

The second phase, the next two weeks, involves a natural increase in leading hormone number two – progesterone. Let’s call this hormone the Nester. It’s produced by the egg’s old ‘follicle sleeping bag’, which in its post-ovulation state is known as the corpus luteum, or ‘yellow body’ in Latin. Luteum, luteal phase – it makes sense, right?

The first two weeks, in which the body’s oestrogen levels rise, are often two weeks filled with energy, desire and the feeling that we’re going somewhere. The next two weeks, with their decreased oestrogen and sharply increasing levels of progesterone, are for their part often experienced as a time when we feel more introverted, and operate at a slower tempo.

To complicate all this even further, we can also divide the cycle into four sub-phases. These are known as the early follicular phase, the late follicular phase, ovulation and the luteal phase. Put more simply: menstruation, pre-ovulation, ovulation and pre-menstruation. To make things even more simple, the month and our cycle can be divided into seasons: winter, spring, summer, and autumn.

The seasons can be used to paint a picture of the characteristics and emotions that colour each of these four phases. Several hormone therapists, women’s health experts and writers, among them Maisie Hill, author of the book *Period Power*, divide the cycle into these four seasons. Precisely which days are ascribed to which season varies a little, but in this book

I'm going by the following: days 1 to 6 can be viewed as Winter, days 7 to 12 as Spring, days 13 to 20 as Summer, and days 21 to 28 as Autumn.

So where, exactly, does our Super Week fall? Roughly between day 7 and day 14. It depends on when you ovulate, and this can shift throughout the year. But what you can always count on is that ovulation is what divides your cycle in two. Before and after; Spring and Autumn. In Spring, your body attempts to get pregnant, while in Autumn, it thinks it already is.

In Spring, a clucking broodiness starts up in me. I want to get laid. I want to dance. I become hormonal, as they say. Late in Autumn, it can feel as if my blood runs cold if I so much as receive a text message. I want to cry. I want to be alone. I become hormonal.

Let me tell you why.

Our hormones are 'chemical messengers' that are produced in various glands around the body – and which in various ways control many of our bodily functions. Hormones act like millions of tiny 'keys' that circulate in our blood on an eternal hunt for receptors, or 'locks', that fit them. Locks are found in all the body's cells, including those in our brain, our skin, our muscles, our heart – everywhere. Some keys simply float past the locks, because they don't fit.

But suddenly – click!

Certain keys and locks fit each other perfectly. Of the several dozen different hormone keys that swim around our bodies, oestrogen has special VIP access to produce 'confetti' in almost *all* the body's cells. Which is why oestrogen is so important and exciting for women.

When the right hormone lock and key find each other, they can switch our genes on and off, and cause our cells to grow, shrink or divide. And they initiate bodily processes that can result in us sweating heavily, or that we laugh or yawn, feel our stomach grumble, or feel horny or afraid. Without hormones, human beings would be like a book without sentences. We'd exist, but we'd be far less interesting.

Oestrogen is one of these hormones that makes life richer (and sometimes a little complicated). It collaborates directly with the brain and affects the entire nervous system – which again controls our movements, reactions, thoughts, senses, concentration, interpretations and emotions. And one of our hormones brings to life a small group of eggs in our ovaries every month.

But for this to happen, the brain has to be involved. The ovaries and the brain are like old friends, and they speak to each other constantly by sending out various hormones via the bloodstream. At the start of the follicular phase – that is, when you bleed – the brain sends out

a hormone known as follicle-stimulating hormone, or FSH. The ovaries receive this signal, and immediately begin to ‘stimulate’, or wake up, the eggs, so that several of them begin to grow.

Each of your two ovaries is the size of a green olive, and they are located on either side of your body, just below your navel. In the lower abdomen, our entire reproductive system floats in a kind of inner sea, with the uterus hovering in the middle. From the top of it run two ‘tunnels’, one to the left and one to the right – these are the fallopian tubes. Between the fallopian tubes and the uterus is where these two olives hang: your ovaries, stuffed with the approximately one million eggs you were born with.

As ovulation approaches, the follicle sleeping bags containing the eggs can grow from just a few millimetres in size to as large as two centimetres – no wonder you can feel bloated in ‘midsummer’. And then, luckily, an incredible thing happens.

From among the three to thirty eggs that have competed to grow largest over the past few days, one will emerge victorious. It’s often the healthiest egg, the one that has grown the most, that’s permitted to launch. All the other eggs that took part in the race, including those that placed silver and bronze, and around a thousand of the eggs that never even really woke up, wither and die – every month. But even mature women have tons of eggs, and you will in fact die with many eggs remaining. That they eventually ‘stop working’ doesn’t mean they all vanish. They simply no longer grow large enough to be released.

This peculiar process of releasing the egg is known as ovulation, but the winning egg isn’t simply *released*. It *explodes* out of its ovary – so much so that a small scar is created on the ovary’s surface as the egg, inside its follicle sleeping bag, bursts out through it. This is why forty per cent of women might experience an odd, shooting pain reminiscent of period cramps, bloating or gas on the left or right side of the abdomen for a few hours in the middle of their cycle. This very specific feeling is scientifically known as *Mittelschmerz*, which in German means ‘pain in the middle’.

So almost half of us can actually *feel* this explosion. The moment the curtains open and the victorious diva egg – the size of the tip of a human hair, and which well-trained doctors can actually see with the naked eye – begins its journey.

As the golden egg waves goodbye to the ovary, she wriggles out of her sleeping bag. Then, in slow motion, she floats out into the watery no man’s land of the abdominal cavity: the area between the ovary and the fallopian tube’s searching tentacles. She weightlessly sashays around here for a little while, before the tiny arms making their seaweed-like movements find her, and she’s sucked into the fallopian tube’s underwater current.

If the egg were to look over her shoulder just before being sucked into the fallopian tube, she would see the yellow sleeping bag she wriggled out of discarded on the surface of the ovary. Here, it will dry up and its cells begin to produce progesterone – the hormone which, among other things, prepares the uterus: the golden egg’s desired final destination, and possible new home for the next nine months.

After ovulation, Autumn, as we’re calling the luteal phase, begins almost immediately. The large remaining egg stores then snooze for a couple of weeks, before your period says ‘hi’ and fires the starting shot for a new group of eggs to battle it out for the winning spot.

The goal of the human body’s largest cell is always to meet up with the human body’s smallest – the sperm cell. The egg has just twenty-four hours in which to do this, like a mayfly. But over the course of the around 450 cycles the average woman experiences in her lifetime, this rendezvous doesn’t happen very often. If the golden egg doesn’t meet the golden sperm, she dies; the egg is ‘absorbed’ by the body and simply disappears. Like a magic trick, it is reabsorbed into our system in the same way as any other cell we no longer need. And around two weeks later, we see the physical, red result of this unsuccessful date.

The cycle has ended. Or, it’s just begun.

The Beyoncé and Jennifer Garner of hormones

I couldn’t actually remember ever having had a Super Week. Not until I started tracking, which enabled me to look back on episodes in my life that inexplicably had seemed like something out of a movie – or just *extra* somehow.

Then, gradually, it dawned on me. I was probably in the middle of my Super Week when I accepted an invitation to a sex party in Los Angeles in 2015. The same must have been true when I managed to keep my cool during an encounter with a psychopath. When I shamelessly haggled over the price of a toaster in my local electronics megastore – and when I was thrown out of a strip club in Barcelona.

A couple of days before the arrival of your period, although often not on the day *itself*, your cycle’s lowest secretions of both oestrogen and progesterone might make you hyper-sensitive, emotional or irritable. But by as early as day 3, oestrogen – the Beyoncé of hormones – has slowly begun to brew ‘happy juice’ in your ovaries, where she spins and dances, becoming fiercer with every day that passes in the lead up to ovulation. You might find yourself able to jog a little faster on the treadmill each morning, or fancy swiping a few

extra potential lovers to the right. Beyoncé struts around our bloodstream early in our cycle, and soon practically pushes us out the front door. *And* she makes us feel especially attractive.

Like when my friend Victoria and I somehow ended up in the middle of a French stag party in Barcelona, and the group of guys wanted to go on to a strip club. ‘What? Can’t we come too?’ I’d never been to a strip club before, and was hopping from foot to foot with excitement when the maxi taxi arrived. The guys exchanged quick glances, and then the taxi door was held open for us.

At the club, the atmosphere was... not great. Women in polyester underwear and heavy make-up shuffled wearily back and forth across a raised, oval stage at the centre of the room. Maybe some of them were in their inner ‘Autumn’. A renowned research study has actually shown that strippers receive much more in tips when ovulating – apparently it has something to do with body odours or pheromones, and the fact that we unconsciously pick up on the biological events happening in the bodies of others at any given time.

I ran over to the guy in the DJ booth and shouted ‘Dirrty! By Christina Aguilera!’ into his ear. He looked at me gravely for a few seconds, before he turned back to his mixing desk. Then he glanced at the stage. And nodded wearily. As I sneaked around to the back of the podium, I made a questioning thumbs up at the stripper on the stage. She shrugged one shoulder indifferently, descended the three steps, rested an elbow on the bar and left the stage to me.

In my stained white trainers and old sweater, while Christina sang ‘give me some room, I’m coming through’, I took a run up and flew jubilantly across the stage, hanging from two ‘gym rings’ suspended on long ropes from the ceiling. I span around and around like a kebab on a spit, then twerked and jiggled my way across the sticky stage floor – convinced that I was moving like the curly haired woman from *Flashdance* (a notion subsequently quashed by a video recording that surfaced later that evening).

The sparse audience laughed and clapped, and then the manager was suddenly standing right in front of me, red-faced with rage. My antics weren’t going to benefit her, after all. So Victoria, the French boys and I were all thrown out on our arses.

Had I been aware that I was on my Super Week at the time, I would have known that I didn’t need as much sleep as usual – I could have agreed to go on to the after party. And then maybe I might have had the chance to keep chatting to that cute, funny guy. It was Summer in my body, and Beyoncé wanted to blow off some steam. I simply hadn’t noticed the invitation *in its entirety* – so I just walked home.

The only thing nature *really* wants us to do, other than survive, is have sex. The first two weeks of a woman's cycle, Winter and Spring, are basically therefore about getting out into the world and finding someone to have it with. The two subsequent weeks, Summer and Autumn, are reserved for housing a potential child.

Regardless of whether we don't want to, can't, or don't manage to get pregnant, most healthy young women who are not using hormonal contraception will ovulate – and therefore have the *opportunity* to become pregnant. This is why Jennifer Garner comes to visit. Or rather, the more introverted nesting hormone progesterone – not the real Jennifer Garner, although that would of course be lovely.

Your body doesn't know what your standpoint is regarding having children, or, for example, that you always use condoms, or that you're not having sex. Your body readies itself every month, no matter what. Progesterone is released in order to prepare the body, and make it as primed as possible to undertake the monumental and science-fiction-like task that is carrying a human being to term. But what's so cool is that we can use these two hormones, oestrogen and progesterone, in areas of our lives that have *nothing at all* to do with reproduction. We can grow *ourselves*. We can innovate, create art, find solutions, write great works of literature, identify alternatives, make friends, foster understanding, make plans – and set goals. As I was terribly preoccupied with doing in 1995.

An anthropological ghost study

My five diaries had lain untouched under my grandmother's crocheted tablecloths at the bottom of a drawer in my family's cabin for years. The first book's spine creaked as I opened it, and as I turned the pages, it dawned on me that I had in fact been tracking my cycle since the tender age of twelve.

29.08.1995: 'Hectic at school. I must have changed my pad ten times. The stupid sticker with blue seagulls on it had got stuck to my leg! How embarrassing!' This is a direct quote from the very first page of diary number one. On this summer's day in August, I got my period for the first time, and that very same day I began to keep a diary. Every day, for seven years, I made notes. My exam grades, crushes, future hopes, and – I realised – exactly when I got my period, were all thoroughly documented until I reached the age of nineteen. Then adult life took over, and I no longer prioritised writing in the half-dark beneath my duvet.

I didn't track my cycle consciously, but the diaries gave me access to historic data that I could use in a kind of anthropological 'ghost study' of my younger self. Seeing large parts

of my cycle history with fresh eyes was quite astonishing, to tell the truth. Because after reliving the first day of my first ever period, from the comfort of the corner sofa I could skip ahead ten pages to study and analyse what had been happening in my life during my first ever Super Week.

My smile grew wider as I read: first, I founded the ‘Money Club’, whose aim was to earn as much pocket money as possible for my summer holiday abroad by arranging tombolas and mowing people’s lawns (at the back of the diary is a kind of analogue Excel spreadsheet, which provides an overview of the club’s accounts). Then I had the idea that I wanted to collect autographs rather than serviettes. I sneaked backstage after a theatre performance at a concert hall to hunt for actors, and... it was inevitable: ‘I’m in love! (With Robert or Tor-Morten...)’.

Just a week later, on day 23, a little grey cloud seems to enter my life. *21.09.1995*: ‘Love? It was probably just a passing thought.’ Precisely one week later, and I’m deep into Autumn: *28.09.1995*: ‘I’m sitting on my bed, looking up at the starry sky. To be or not to be, I choose... not to be.’

A few pages later: ‘The “P”-pains have started. I suppose this is just how life is going to be from now on?’

And so it continues, month after month, year after year.

In the weeks prior to getting my period, I write noticeably shorter texts (with messier handwriting), and describe how everything feels ‘hopeless’, even though ‘it’s strange, because things are going well at school and here at home.’ I had a sore throat or a cold more often, wrote about how I felt stupid, childish and tired – and listened to an embarrassing selection of power ballads on CD.

Around two weeks later, the diary’s margins are filled with perky blue hearts. I write longer, more vivid and giggly entries, in neater handwriting. I use capital letters more often, along with a ridiculous number of exclamation points, as I make plans for the future and embellish elaborate stories about everything and nothing.

As a teenager, I didn’t have a clue what hormones were, or how they affected me. But almost a decade of documented data clearly shows that I’ve lived through predictable weekly fluctuations all my post-pubescent life.

Tracking tricks

‘Right, okay, but... where are you in your cycle right now?’ I ask my friends. In practically every conversation, regardless of the topic, my question pops up. Whether we’re talking about relationships, career challenges, our stress levels or self-esteem – I almost always ask the same thing.

What many of us have not yet fully realised is that feelings of both discomfort and well-being can often be viewed in the context of where we happen to be on the axis of our hormones – and that tracking your own cycle is one of the best things you can do for your physical and mental health.

Of course, you could also take out a small loan to pay for help from a psychologist, go on a yoga retreat in the mountains or move to another continent to get some perspective – or, you can try something that’s both cheaper and simpler: figure out how long your cycle is, and then which emotions and bodily changes you experience as you move through it.

Take out a notebook, or use your phone, the blank pages at the back of the book you’re currently reading, your iPad or an app. I tend to prefer analogue methods – I like pencils, LPs and physical calendars, so I still use my little leather Filofax. Or at least, this is where I keep my private overview. Every month, on the date my period arrives, I write a ‘P’ with a ring around it. Then I count seven days ahead, and enter an ‘S’, on this day and the six following days. I then know when my Super Week for this cycle will be. I expect my next period to arrive 29 days after the first day of my current period, so I count out the days and write another small ‘P’ followed by a question mark on the relevant date, to mark the day I can expect my next cycle to start.

After three or four months of tracking, you’ll have an idea of the approximate length of your cycle. And at the same time, you’ll be able to keep a closer eye on how you feel mentally and emotionally from day to day, and compare, for example, day 17 of one month to day 17 of the next. This can be difficult for people with very irregular cycles, but try to stay curious about any changes, whether big or small. Because you’ll most likely notice them. Changes in how your neck muscles feel, the way your gut behaves or the way you breathe, or in how you react to certain situations or conversations.

My cycle is fairly regular, so I know that day 18 is a day on which I’m more likely to feel self-conscious. On day 10, I’m almost guaranteed to feel full of energy.

Try writing down this information manually for three or four months before transitioning to using a cycle tracking app. The app will be able to provide you with

suggestions as to how you'll feel, or possible symptoms you might experience, but it isn't a given that any of the suggested alternatives will apply to you. Regardless, the most important thing is to keep a log somewhere – we often don't remember things as well as we think we will. Of course it's possible to record everything from the colour and consistency of your discharge to the intensity of any headaches and the number of glasses of water you drink each day, but obtaining an overview of your cycle doesn't require the constant monitoring of every little twinge.

By writing down just *one* descriptive word for the day – such as outgoing, contemplative or nervous – for a few months in order to see whether these words reappear in upcoming cycles, you'll discover your personal pattern. This self-study doesn't need to take more than thirty seconds of your day – you can do it after brushing your teeth, for example, to make it a habit. If you want to keep track in a bit more detail, you can try keeping a little diary with brief notes on each day's strongest emotions, along with your sex drive, sleep, moods and energy levels. And once you've found your rhythm, you don't necessarily need to be quite so detailed in your bookkeeping. You'll know yourself better, and then it becomes enough to know which week you're in. Or at least whether you're pre- or post-ovulation. Something that certainly isn't easy to figure out – but nor is it impossible.

There are four specific physiological signs that reveal where you are in your cycle. The first is the arrival of menstrual blood. We're all familiar with this one – fresh blood marks day 1 of your cycle, and naturally means you're in the menstruation phase. The other three signs are less visible, but all of them belong to ovulation and your Super Week.

The first of the three is that your so-called basal body temperature goes up just after ovulation. Those of you who have the patience for it can track your body temperature every morning, after at least five consecutive hours of sleep. You'll see that directly after ovulation, progesterone increases your body temperature by 0.3 degrees. If your body temperature fails to drop again, you may be pregnant. Although this can be a little challenging to interpret, since other factors such as drinking wine, stress and illness can all affect your body temperature, too.

The second thing you can do is monitor the position and texture of your cervix. If you feel comfortable doing so, you can insert a finger into your vagina all the way to the end, where the cervix is located – that is, insert your finger as far as you can until you meet a kind of 'wall'. This is the entrance to the cervix, a particularly exciting part of your body, which you'll soon become better acquainted with. For large parts of your cycle, your cervix will feel like the tip of your nose. But during your Super Week, this damp entryway will gradually

open slightly, and instead feel more like soft trout lips. At the same time, your cervix will have moved further in and up!

The third and clearest sign, which is also the easiest to keep track of, is vaginal discharge. Each of the cycle's four weeks and phases actually has its own liquid substance. Let me try to visualise it for you: you leak blood in Winter, milk in Spring, jelly in Summer, and possibly a few cornflakes in Autumn – that is, a slightly crunchier, dried-up discharge with a yellowish undertone. Just like old leaves on the trees, cornflake discharge may be coloured by the yellow corpus luteum, signalling that you too have reached Autumn.

So the start of your cycle is characterised by red blood, while towards the Spring you might see a kind of milky white, creamy lotion. And the closer you get to ovulation, you'll discover a clearer, more jelly-like substance that can clump together. Maybe you've noticed it clinging to the toilet paper every now and then?

This substance, which is known as *cervical mucus*, is the physical manifestation of your Super Week. It's also known as fertile mucus, and is one of the best and most natural signs that ovulation is just around the corner. Among other things, this clear, stretchy mucus is intended to act as a kind of lubricant that helps any sperm cells along their journey. Because even though a woman's vagina is actually quite a cosy place, it's low pH-value makes it rather acidic. Since sperm have a higher pH-value, many of them would die fairly rapidly in the vagina's moist darkness. But then along comes the Super Week, and something strange takes place: the fertile mucus arrives, and 'just so happens' to have the same high pH-value as the sperm. Which means that more sperm cells are able to survive in the vagina for longer!

All the other types of discharge you might observe – the white and milky, pale pink, green or yellow – play only supporting roles. The cervical mucus is the superstar.

But does cervical mucus on the toilet paper mean you'll ovulate that very day? Has it already happened, or can it be expected over the coming days? An American study from 2021, which looked at the cervical mucus of 500 women, discusses what is called Peak Mucus Day.

On average, the women in the study had six 'mucus days' in their cycle. But the consistency and appearance of this mucus changes constantly. The difference is about how stretchy, transparent and slippery it is – and the more you can use these three adjectives to describe the mucus, the closer to Peak Mucus Day you are. If you're healthy, and have an optimal cycle, you can try something a little... unorthodox. If you stretch the mucus between your index finger and thumb, and the jelly-like substance can be extended by at least 2.5 cm –

congratulations! This means you've reached Peak Mucus Day – and you can expect to ovulate at some point in the next 24 hours.

'Knicker milk' or 'G-string jelly' – call it what you will, but by reading your underwear you can quite simply discover where you are in your cycle – and how close you are to your Super Week.

The seven-day party in detail

Noticing that your Super Week is just around the corner is like hearing Lizzo's 'Juice' start to play in your headphones at low volume, a little less than a week after the first day of your period. Then the volume increases. The run-up to ovulation really *is* like a hit of 'natural cocaine' – this isn't just something I'm saying in an attempt to be amusing.

As our Super Week begins, our oestrogen levels prepare to ramp up, and everything within us begins to germinate and grow. In all probability, you'll start to feel frisky – indeed, full of the joys of spring – because oestrogen affects your endorphins. These are the body's feel-good hormones, which are responsible for unlocking the doors to where both your serotonin and dopamine live. When the former is released into the bloodstream, it gives rise to feelings of well-being and positivity, just like certain recreational drugs; the latter gives us an increased sense of pride, and greater drive and staying power. The fact that there's an increase in these two hormones during your Super Week might therefore result in you becoming a little self-centred, or wanting to kickstart big projects. We might find ourselves casting more glances at others, and a great many of us experience an increased desire for sex – something that's being proven by an ever greater number of studies. Many women feel *super* over an even longer period – for a week and a half, or two weeks, perhaps. Others experience the effects of their Super Week for a shorter time, maybe just a few days. Regardless, the body's gradual increase in oestrogen can take most of the credit for many of the positive changes that happen to us prior to ovulation.

And this upturn can start as early as day 1 – even though at this point, it's January in the body. As indicated by the seasonal calendar, these first few days can feel a little colder, a little more subdued. Several cycle-authors think it can be a good idea to turn our thoughts inward on the days we bleed. To maybe do the laundry, or a bit of admin, perhaps – preferably automatic tasks, rather than the more active and outgoing things we might find ourselves actually *wanting* to do very soon.

Because for a couple of days prior to ovulation, Beyoncé is given a little help to sprinkle her stardust over you. She receives this assistance from a couple of wild backing vocalists: first from an upswing in testosterone – the Grace Jones of hormones, who gives us the stare of a lioness, tickles our libido and wants to give us one last chance for a quickie (or an intense workout), and then from a rapid but intensely powerful increase in the hormone LH – the hormones’ Lady Gaga, who whips into action the release of the egg. Unlike oestrogen, this hormone isn’t released from the ovaries, but from the brain (just like FSH, which causes the eggs to grow).

And Lady Gaga comes with a proviso: she’s only sent out if the body has let the brain know that we’re healthy, and not too stressed to be able to take care of a child.

On day 14 it’s time for ovulation itself – it’s midsummer, and the body is all aquiver. A couple of guys I know who are in heterosexual relationships, and who I’ve done a bit of light research on, have told me life usually seems to become a little more rosy around this time. ‘I usually get more compliments from my girlfriend in that week,’ a friend of mine said, and his girlfriend told me she often finds herself wanting to be extra social in the week before she ovulates. Recent studies show that those of us on our Super Week also have a heightened ability to recognise emotional facial expressions in others, and that we listen more attentively. ‘We don’t just plan *date* nights, but *talk* nights, too,’ my friend’s girlfriend told me.

I believe that the Super Week’s seven days can be divided into two phases, with the first phase belonging to the spring and the second to the summer. On the first few days (from around day 7 to day 10), we might seem a bit like ego-driven machines desperate for our ideas to come to fruition, while in the second phase (from around day 11 to day 14), even closer to ovulation, we become a warmer version of this same machine. Rather than pushing our own projects, we might prefer to involve other people, or to nurture close relationships or cultivate new ones.

British author Miranda Gray divides the cycle not into seasons, but into four phases based on the type of behaviour that is most dominant in each one. Her book *The Optimised Woman* was published by a small British press in 2009, and although Gray doesn’t discuss specific scientific research in the book, it’s easy to recognise oneself in her experiences. In one of the first self-help books to explore the positive sides of the menstrual cycle, Gray calls winter the ‘reflective’ phase, spring the ‘dynamic’ phase, summer the ‘expressive’ phase and autumn the ‘creative’ phase.

For Gray, the start of the winter, or day 1, is the lead-in to the ‘reflective’ phase. This, she believes, is the time to get yourself some perspective. To think back over the month that’s

just passed and the people you've met. And perhaps to let go of any thoughts that have been weighing you down.

Around one week later, on day 7, we're well on our way into the 'dynamic' phase – or the spring, the start of our Super Week. This is a good time for concentrating on work and learning new things; an especially favourable time for doing all kinds of research and kickstarting projects you've been mulling over. You might become a little self-centred during this phase – a go-getter who can't sit still. We also become good at logical thinking, Grey claims. And we feel an especially strong desire for change, to take control and to see results.

Once the 'expressive' phase – the summer – is well underway around day 11, we find ourselves in the second half of our Super Week, where people are more important than facts, figures and the bottom line. Our inner gas pedal isn't to the metal in quite the same way as it is in the spring, and the needs of others are given more of our attention. We find ourselves wanting to connect with people. You become more social in a gentler way, communicate like a true team player, and become a source of empathy and support for others, Gray explains. Autumn is the 'creative' phase, with a strong need to make things, and for innovation and big-picture thinking. This is when we can also identify challenges – and solve them.

Nevertheless, new research shows that it's often the spring and our Super Week that can be our most creative period, something we'll soon be taking a look at in more detail.

Personally, I think it's easier to use the seasons to distinguish between the four weeks of the cycle, even though I like how Gray links specific characteristics to each phase. During both spring and autumn, that is, *before* the release of the egg and menstrual blood, Gray believes we can feel the need for things to happen *now*, right away. While *during* ovulation (summer) and menstruation (winter), we're a little more patient and calm, with greater acceptance for the way things are.

We simply aren't necessarily aware of this ourselves.

Decades of structural blind spots are to blame for the fact that we still don't have more clarity or tangible evidence on how women's bodies *actually* work. Research has simply never been undertaken on us to the same extent it has on men.

Today, many take equality between the sexes as a given. But in 2019, in her book *Invisible Women*, Caroline Criado Perez revealed that the world still orbits around a right-handed white male who weighs around 70 kilos and is roughly 177 cm tall. Everything from the design of car seats to the descriptions of symptoms in medical textbooks have been based on this 'average person' – which absolutely no women, and extremely few men for that matter, are able to see themselves in.

One sex, one race, and one very specific body type has been viewed as the human mould for far too long. There are several explanations as to why this tunnel vision exists, and it's been documented that both gender discrimination and sexism have played a part here. And let's not forget that just a few generations ago, women in an astonishingly high number of well-developed countries weren't permitted to own property – or to rent their own apartments, attend university, or vote on election day. Another important factor is financial resources: studying women can be expensive, tedious and challenging. Scientific studies often wish to serve up 'simple', clear results relatively quickly, explains researcher Cat Bohannon in her book *Eve*. But female hormones aren't always easy to deal with, and they have therefore long been regarded as 'clutter' in the system – and provided a convenient excuse for conducting research on men instead.

The main reason we've been excluded from so many studies is actually the main reason we never should have been disqualified in the first place: our hormone levels, which change daily.

The summer depression

In much the same way as an inexplicable summer depression can hit us at the end of August, before work and school once again drag us back to our everyday routines, our cycle's final days of summer can be experienced as a kind of hangover after all the 'wonder juice' that has fizzed through our veins in the preceding days.

Our Super Week is suddenly over.

What happens now is that our oestrogen levels plummet at around the same time that the egg is released. At this point, our progesterone – the calm, collected, Jennifer Garner – is still mostly in hiding, even though she's on the way up. A few days after ovulation, these two hormones therefore cross each other – our oestrogen plummeting at top speed, while our progesterone still has some way to go before it peaks.

I feel this drop in hormone levels intensely each month – so much so that I draw a small teardrop in my calendar on day 18 of my upcoming cycle. The same thing happens to my friend Esther. For her, the classic, somewhat angrier premenstrual period that arrives three or four days before menstruation isn't the worst part of her cycle. There's 'something else' that happens around ten days before the blood turns up: most likely the lowest crossing point between her two main hormones. This is what I call the summer dip – a phenomenon that's

apparently also true for many other women, according to several studies. But it rarely lasts for very long, and both Esther and I find that we become more stable once we're fully into the autumn, which in my body begins around day 21.

Now it's progesterone's turn to shine (while we also get another, albeit not super-week-sized, boost in oestrogen). Unless we're feeling particularly stressed, progesterone has a somewhat calming effect on any anxiety we might be experiencing. Our premenstrual days are therefore actually meant to be rather pleasant. If we take both them and ourselves seriously, and give our body enough of the rest it needs, we might find these days to be both pleasant and alluring. Progesterone makes us feel calmer, and is actually a bit of a sleeping pill – something we can make good use of if we're aware of where we are in our cycle.

During this part of my cycle, I usually find myself wanting to organise my kitchen cupboards or to rearrange the books on my shelves; it can feel satisfying to do a bit of dusting, and doing my accounts doesn't feel as tedious as it otherwise does. But then, in November, around day 25, both Beyoncé and Jennifer Garner experience yet another shared dip, and this is when our hormone batteries can really start flashing red. PMS, or premenstrual syndrome, arrives – something 'everyone' who menstruates is said to experience. But what we don't often think about is that the last letter in the condition's abbreviated name – 's' for 'syndrome' – actually makes PMS a clinical diagnosis. Not all women suffer from PMS, but they can absolutely be premenstrual. Most women I know would say they become premenstrual each month, but this doesn't necessarily mean they suffer from PMS.

Some women experience such terrible symptoms around this time of the month that they can actually become suicidal – the condition is then known as PMDD, which stands for premenstrual dysphoric disorder.

Perhaps we could use the term 'the premenstrual phase' instead? Or PMD – premenstrual days? Because that *is* something most women experience. Esther often finds that she becomes more anxious and muddled during this time; she constantly misplaces her phone and becomes annoyed at herself. She also has ADHD, and for adult women with this diagnosis, the premenstrual days of their cycle can be especially difficult.

As for me, I cry easily on these days. I'm also quick to irritate, have a terrible self-image, and think I'm good for nothing at all. I also find myself struggling to get my point across, to articulate myself in the way I want to. But I don't need to feel *quite* so down on myself if I can glance at my calendar and say... 'ah.'

FemTech, and apps that assume

One thing that can help you to keep an overview is a cycle tracking app – and there are tons of these digital data collectors out there. But while they've gradually increased in popularity, they also come with a number of challenges. First, an app won't necessarily understand you and *your* cycle, even if you input data about your discharge, symptoms and mood swings every single day. In 2018, a survey carried out among almost 1,000 women showed that apps only suggested the correct day of ovulation in 21 per cent of cases.

Cycle tracking apps run on algorithms, so their functionality stems from generic data about where you 'should' be, in a cycle based on an average. Some of the apps will therefore force your cycle into a kind of 'standard' template, and make suggestions that won't necessarily be true for you. Some of them don't seem to understand that pregnancy is *not* a never-ending cycle of several hundred days. Or they fail to take into account irregularities, and neglect to permit users to enter shorter-than-average cycles.

Other apps erroneously present ovulation as if it takes place constantly over five or six 'green' days. But as we now know, ovulation lasts for just a single day; you do however have a fertile *window* of several days before and one day after the egg has been released (you can read more about how you can use your Super Week to become, or not become, pregnant in the last chapter of this book).

When the app makes it appear as if ovulation happens on *all* the green days, it can be confusing. Perhaps you ovulated a couple of days ago, and you're now on your way into the summer dip, but the app leads you to believe it's ovulation itself that's making you feel so down?

Many of the early cycle tracking apps, with their cute ballet-pink designs and functions that assumed everyone using them had the ultimate goal of becoming pregnant, were developed by men in Silicon Valley. There's a lot of money in FemTech. Products and services within women's health make up a gigantic industry – one estimated to be worth \$1 trillion by 2027.

The apps are getting better all the time, but the biggest issue with them is that some still send your extremely private personal data to other commercial enterprises such as Facebook, Google, and other marketers and healthcare providers – or even legal institutions. This was why in 2022, millions of American women deleted their cycle tracking apps in the wake of the US Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, which had protected American women's right to choose to have an abortion. Now it's up to each individual state to decide

whether or not abortion is legal, and in the US, the long arm of the law can both see and use digital data about whether or not your period has been absent for a few months as evidence in court. Women therefore feared they might risk criminal prosecution after having had an abortion – a truly awful state of affairs.

There's no shortage of companies keen to snoop around your digital life to discover every last detail about your sexual habits, the medications you use and your emotional state from day to day. A pregnant woman's user data, for example, is worth around *fifteen times* that of someone who isn't currently growing a baby, since being in the 'pregnant woman' segment means you're about to go through a huge life change that will necessitate the purchasing of many new goods and products.

A few alternative apps (Euki and Drip, among others) have been developed without the aim of gathering information about you or storing it in the cloud. Which also means that these apps are unable to share, sell or be legally forced to hand over users' personal information to third parties. But at the same time, it is new – and in many ways extremely useful – that large volumes of data about women's cycles are being collected and used in research.

When we gather information about how individual women's bodies actually work in the name of science, we gain better insights into an area that for far too long has remained a silent wasteland. But when it comes to you personally, neither apps nor thermometers nor books can be trusted to be 100 per cent accurate. The only thing that counts is how *your* body feels at any given time.

Not everyone loves their Super Week

I have some friends, both with and without children, who don't report feeling a surge of energy in the middle of their cycle. One has told me she notices a 'fun, little boost', but not a week that makes a huge difference. Some of my friends experience a lighter version of the Super Week, perhaps just a single Super Day. And not everyone loves their Super Week. It can, for example, feel very intense for introverts, or those who quite simply prefer spending time alone. Nor is it improbable that you might have spent several decades unconsciously

madly in love with the spring phase of your cycle, only to later (perhaps after you became a mum?) develop a deep affection for the autumn or another of the cycle's phases.

Charlotte, my more introverted 32-year-old friend, realised as early as her teens that she almost seemed to alternate between two different personalities. One was fearless and could 'work a room' – she could make strangers laugh, attracting the kind of attention she didn't usually like. The other was embarrassed and shy; she overthought everything and constantly doubted herself. These two personalities were so strikingly different that Charlotte called the first 'Char' and the second 'Lotte'. 'At the time, I didn't understand that it was my cycle regulating all this, but I see it clearly now,' she told me.

Today, Charlotte knows that she'll get the most out of travel plans, social gatherings and work presentations when she's on her Super Week, so she plans these specific activities around her cycle. As a so-called introvert, she can feel particularly vulnerable during her extroverted Super Week, but because she tracks her cycle, she's learned to put greater trust in the 'Char' part of herself. Nevertheless, she still finds herself 'a bit blindsided' by both her period and her Super Week each month.

I, too – as an extrovert – have been on my Super Week as the sultry sounds of a saxophone resounded through the streets outside my window and friends invited me out to a summer barbecue, and *still* I just wanted to stay home and potter about doing my own thing. On the other hand, I've dragged myself out on the town while feeling gross and wobbly with PMS, and had a shit ton of fun.

Your cycle won't necessarily feel the same from month to month, and it won't always provide you with set answers. It isn't that we're *guaranteed* to feel more chirpy and playful around ovulation. As always, and as with most things in life: nothing is certain. And the factors that add up to what we might call your 'daily life' play a huge role in how you experience your cycle from week to week. If, for example, I've had a relaxed premenstrual period in one month, I've noticed there's a greater chance the next will be just as good, or perhaps even better. On the other hand, a particularly brief and hefty premenstrual phase might indicate I can expect the same phase of my next cycle to be a little worse. Whatever we've been up to over the past week affects how the various ups and downs of our swirling hormones will play out, which means that, in a way, your body's physical and mental health determines how short or long your cycle will be, how many days your period will last, and whether your cramps will be godawful or manageable.

As early as 1986, a researcher at Oxford University proved that your eggs have to move through at least eight levels before one of them is released. In your ovaries, a large

group of eggs always lies ready and waiting, as if in several layers beneath each other. Right now, today, your body has decided exactly which eggs will be allowed to compete in the race to be released – more than one cycle in advance. Even as early as 85 days prior to these eggs possibly being popped, they're given their very own mini arteries connected to the rest of your body. Which means that for an entire three months, your eggs are able to gather data about the life you're currently living.

So your eggs and brain are constantly gossiping about their favourite subject: you – perhaps whispering about how in love or 'beige' you're currently feeling, if you've put on or lost weight, whether you've been eating healthily or if you've overdone it on the coffee or the cava – along with anything and everything else that might affect you, whether positively or negatively.

With all this information on the table, your brain will either say 'good to go' or 'hang on a minute. Your body can therefore prevent this month's golden egg from being released – because maybe it isn't such a good time for you to become a mother right now, seeing as you're finding your exams or PhD so challenging, or if you're worried about a family member who's just been diagnosed with a serious illness. The egg is smart. The egg *knows*. It pops when you're ready – not when you want it to. But you'll always have another chance next month.

So let me put it this way: you shouldn't view your cycle as a constant cookie-cutter, but rather as a flexible framework.

Personally, I don't try to schedule my entire life around whether I'm on day 24 or 15 of my cycle, but instead find it important to know approximately which week and season of my cycle I'm in. Others will enjoy planning their schedule around where they are in their cycle on any given day.

Regardless, the framework you draw up is information you might like to share, perhaps weekly, with your partner, housemates, children or colleagues – the people you trust, and who you'd like to know more about how you're feeling. This can enable them – and not least you yourself – to more easily realise that you might not always think or act in the same way.

You can of course keep your shifts in mood entirely to yourself. But I believe a certain amount of knowledge about how the menstrual cycle works can be hugely beneficial for anyone who lives with a woman – or anyone who has a daughter, mother, sister, friend or aunt they'd like to understand better. At the very least, perhaps you can let your partner know where you are in your cycle. If it feels like too much effort to have to flag it every week,

whether for your partner or for anyone else, use an indicator that only the two of you know the meaning behind, such as that you'll put a cherry magnet on the fridge on the days you're not feeling especially 'chatty', for example.

But don't despair. Your Super Week will soon be here. Seven days that are extra special when it comes to communication – and creativity.

Mental life: gain a sane brain

I'm neither a hormone expert, a researcher nor a doctor – I'm a journalist, a curious and often creative type. And sometimes, those of us who ovulate can clearly get *extra* creative. Many years ago, when I worked as a reporter for a Norwegian youth magazine, I was sent to Germany to cover the MTV Music Awards, where the magazine's photographer and I tagged along with Norwegian rappers Karpe.

We – along with several thousand other people – wanted to get into Snoop Dogg's after party, which was reportedly taking place in a circus tent beside some woods just outside Munich: two VIP buses, an entire army of security guards, and a whole load of unnecessary secretiveness away.

Out in the huge car park where people were milling around after the awards show, I eventually found a kind of queue that led to the first limo bus, which would lead us to yet another bus, which would lead us to what rumours said would be the Party to End All Parties. The photographer and I squeezed our way between the steel barriers until we finally found ourselves looking up at three human brick walls all dressed in black, who were idly asking to see people's 'gold bands'. Which neither the magazine's photographer nor I had. That was when I got creative.

With a loud sigh I quickly flipped through my wallet, before with a half-irritated, half-apathetic gesture I thrust a loyalty card at one of the security guards. On the smurf-blue plastic was printed just one thing: *Rema 1000*. The name of one of Norway's biggest discount supermarket chains.

I mean, I suppose it looked sort of special? It had a big number on it after all. The security guard looked at me. I looked at him. Neither of us spoke, but something in my eyes must have resonated with him. The security guard obviously dared do nothing other than acknowledge that this was *The Card*, and we were permitted to cruise on through.

The more fertile, the more creative

'So do you think I was close to ovulation on the evening of the MTV party?' I ask Katarzyna Galasinska. The Polish psychologist and researcher laughs out loud. 'Absolutely!' she answers forthrightly. 'That's a brilliant example of an a-ha moment relating to creativity.'

Of course, no definitive answer exists as to where I was in my cycle or what was actually going on in my brain that night, but what Galasinska has discovered is that when a woman has particularly unusual ideas, well – it’s not improbable that she’s about to release an egg in a few days’ time.

When animals are fertile, it’s common knowledge. Female dogs in heat will spot; cats meow and become more affectionate. The faces of monkeys darken. Goats wag their tails more, and the female firefly uses her light-up bottom to send out a special signal. This state, such as when female dogs are ready to party, and which is clear for all to see, is called ‘oestrus’. This isn’t something we humans have – in general, a woman’s horniness, whether conscious or unconscious, remains hidden away. But the things that happen to cats, monkeys and goats in heat *are* similar to the things that happen to women when we’re feeling especially ‘frisky’.

At these times, we’ll also be more physical and intimate; our cheeks will be redder, and we might swing our hips a little more as we walk. This has been shown by several new studies into how fertile women unknowingly disclose their ovulation phase to others. And one of the ways in which we might unconsciously ‘flash’ our fertility can be through having more cool ideas than usual – that is, by being creative.

The closer we are to ovulation, the more original ideas we have. In 2021, at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Katarzyna Galasinska collected responses from over 750 women who had been tasked with coming up with as many questions as possible about a Picasso-like drawing of people and animals. The results showed that the women’s responses contained a greater number of different perspectives in the days around ovulation.

In the following year, Galasinska carried out another study that looked at the originality of the ideas women have around the time of ovulation. At three different points in their cycle, 72 women aged between 19 and 35 were given five minutes to come up with as many alternative uses as possible for everyday items such as a shoe, a towel or a bottle. Many of the responses – such as that the shoe could be used as an aquarium – revealed yet again, and perhaps even more clearly than in the first study, that the responses’ originality was most striking in the days closest to ovulation.

In 1989, one of the founders of modern evolutionary psychology, David M. Buss, conducted a survey of partner preferences in 37 different cultures. He was curious about what human beings consider attractive about each other, and discovered that creativity was among the ten qualities deemed most interesting in a potential partner.

‘Creativity can become a kind of signal of fertility, and women can use their creativity to attract a partner,’ says Galasinska, who explains that there are many different forms of creativity. For example, a woman’s fertility might indirectly be revealed if she mixes liquorice into her soup on a third date, or excitedly goes on about existentialism, or carves you a useful gift out of wood.

‘Being creative can show others that your brain and genes are of high quality. That they are healthy, and not mutated in any way,’ Galasinska says. Classic artistic skills such as being able to paint, sing, dance, take photographs, write poetry or play a musical instrument are therefore well worth mastering, she believes, if we want to secure ourselves a long-term partner. So all those ballet lessons or tedious hours spent practising the piano or violin in childhood might, as it turns out, actually pay off once you’re an adult.

In terms of our reactions and emotions, the human brain has continued to behave in more or less the same way ever since we crept out of the last ice age. Despite the fact that new pathways are created in your brain with every experience and conversation you have and every memory you make, collectively our brains haven’t actually changed all that much in 12,000 years – and we *still* struggle to stand out from the crowd and get noticed by others. But as Katarzyna Galasinska points out: ‘We become far more visible when we’re particularly original and inventive.’

All roads lead to Rome?

Or is it actually to the bedroom?

No, don’t worry – our inherent creativity doesn’t just exist so we can snag ourselves a baby daddy. Original ideas that pop up during your Super Week can just as easily be about your living situation or schedule, your fitness programme, new decorating ideas, or how to use meditation, upcycling, transport, or anything else in new ways.

Katarzyna Galasinska’s studies show that women don’t come up with more ideas during their Super Week, but the ideas we have are especially unusual. All of a sudden, while in a supermarket queue or sitting on a bus, something new might pop into your head. Brief thoughts about how to formulate an email in order to receive a positive response. A new way of watering your plants. An ingenious new purpose for a coat hanger or a toothpick. Being creative is about thinking differently. It’s about coming up with several alternative solutions to a problem.

Big eureka moments are often regarded as the very definition of creativity. These are the kinds of moments we might experience only a couple of times over the course of our lives, but Galasinska’s research shows that we can be creative much more often than this. Creative

thinking can be about the swarm of loose ideas and thoughts that glimmer and grow in the back of our minds; the solutions that bubble up to the surface, and the brief moments in which we manage to identify and catch them – while we’re changing the bedsheets, or taking a shower, for example. This is part of the mental work that takes place in the brain’s ‘back room’, and which, according to Galasinska, comes more easily during our Super Week. This is when everyday a-ha moments are particularly accessible to us.

Charlotte, who is a visual artist, says that she uses her Super Week to think more consciously about things she hasn’t previously been able to ‘properly get to grips with’ – things she hasn’t been able to ‘nail’ in her love life or at work. During her Super Week, she can more easily notice and understand things she might not have realised before, and ‘exciting thoughts often fall into place’ in her mind.

Katarzyna Galasinska pays close attention to her cycle herself. She too often notices that ‘something interesting begins to happen from day 5 onwards.’ Although there are many factors that impact upon and determine how fabulous or creative her week will turn out to be, Galasinska believes that just *knowing* that we might be especially creative on particular days of the month can help us. Especially at times when we’re attempting to do something that doesn’t quite turn out as we had imagined.

Just like the placebo effect, being aware of the existence of our Super Week can put us in a frame of mind that will strengthen our creativity. But once you realise that you can use your creativity strategically, you may find that an inner critic also starts to sneak its way in.

On my Super Week, I might feel invincible – until a nagging voice pops up. These are the whisperings of the autumn, an attempt to make me set aside my original idea and never pick it up again. Here’s a tip: don’t listen to that voice until the luteal phase, when autumn actually arrives, and you can even let it play devil’s advocate for you.

But during your Super Week – that’s when you can feel self-assured. At the start of the week, it might be easier for you to ponder and daydream on your own; to play around with your thoughts, and to discover and invent. But then, once summer is in full swing and you become even more social around day 11, you can gather up all your good ideas – and put your plans, no matter how great or small, into action.

Now, dammit!

‘When I’m ovulating, I make decisions at lightning speed. Yes! That’s what I want. No! I don’t want to do that. I don’t dwell on things, I get myself super-organised, and, now that I think about it, when I make jokes on stage, they’re actually funnier’ musician Frida Ånnevik once told to me in an interview.

This is precisely how it can feel to be on your Super Week. When you’re aware of its impact, you make better and tougher decisions. You trust that you’ll master whatever lies ahead of you.

When I lived in New York in the early 2010s, I dated a Harvard professor who ended all his emails with the phrase ‘rock on’. One rainy autumn day after we had known each other for a week and a half, he was on his way to chair a conference in Hawaii. Two hours after we had kissed goodbye, my phone rang. I’d said ‘see you in a week’ and gone home to the one-room apartment I was renting in the East Village. When I saw ‘D’ on the display, I was sure he must have forgotten his passport.

‘How about you come with me to Hawaii?’ he said. I laughed, a little confused. The mechanical hum of the plane taxiing onto the runway was audible in the background. ‘Take the next flight! The hotel is already paid for. It’s pink! And it’s on Waikiki Beach, yo!’

My intuition seemed to come from somewhere deep in my gut. Or maybe it was my ovaries. Most likely, I was on my Super Week. I knew immediately that I would go, but said I’d have to think about it. Over the next eleven hours, as David flew west, I did 103 things at once. I cancelled all my appointments for the coming week while I simultaneously threw some random summer clothes into a suitcase, placed an ad on Airbnb to say my apartment would be available from the next day – and bagged myself a renter. I managed to get myself both a manicure and a pedicure, and to get my bikini line waxed and buy a new bikini.

When David called from baggage reclaim at the airport in Honolulu, he cautiously asked me how I’d spent my day. I calmly ran through the list of all the trivial errands I’d managed to get done, one after the other, before I finally shouted: ‘... and I bought myself a plane ticket to *Hawaii!*’

‘Really?!’ he shouted back.

Research has shown that just prior to ovulation, women are especially receptive to being seduced. New Australian research on the impact of the menstrual cycle on our personalities also shows that women are more ‘open to having new experiences’ while on

their Super Week. Among other things, this can mean that we become more interested in unusual people and ideas.

Nor is it so strange that you might find yourself acting more impulsively and making snap decisions just before you ovulate. Because during our Super Week, as it turns out, we're more inclined to choose a smaller, quicker reward there and then over a greater reward at a later point in time. This was demonstrated by a British study in 2023, in which over 200 menstruating women were asked to choose between three different hypothetical rewards. A smaller portion of food now, or a larger plateful in a little while. A smaller sum of money now, or more money later. Not so great sex now, versus amazing sex later.

My Super-Week-ladies want more of everything – *now!*

So think carefully before you ask a woman on her Super Week whether she's willing to fly half way around the world the next day – because she might just say yes.

A recent study of 3.3 million menstruating women from 109 countries has also scientifically proven that not only do we feel more motivated in the days leading up to ovulation, but we're also more focused, happy and energetic, too.

In what might be the biggest recent study of the menstrual cycle, which was undertaken at Stanford University in 2021, researchers attempted to find out what has the greatest impact on a woman's mood. Is it wintry days with miserable weather? The daily grind? Anniversaries, Christmas Eve? Or where you are in your cycle?

The most frequent response? *Where you are in your cycle.*

The intensity of your sex drive, your resting heart rate, your weight and body temperature – and your mood – all these things are more affected by your menstrual cycle than they are by any other repeating circumstances such as weekends, public holidays, annual festivities or the weather.

Most women in the study were happiest on Saturdays, calmest during the summer and most satisfied at around 11 o'clock in the morning. Everything from happiness, sensitivity, motivation and the tendency to be socially supportive or become more conflict-oriented depended on the menstrual cycle. That is, the majority of our emotions have greater odds of being influenced by our menstrual cycle than by the current time or date. And women from Japan, Australia, the US, Kenya, India, Kazakhstan, Norway, Brazil, Nigeria, Italy, China, Mexico, Chile, Sweden, Poland, Germany and Spain all felt the same. That is, the propensity to become especially oversensitive or argumentative at specific times of the month is not culturally dependent (as some might claim).

This happens to women all over the world.

Many people talk about PMS becoming worse with age. And this study showed that women aged between 30 and 35 felt sadder in the premenstrual period than the younger women in the study, those aged between 15 and 20. But for the oldest women, the sense of happiness experienced during their Super Week was also a notch or two *higher*.

The study was led by American data analyst Emma Pierson. She and her team also proved that during their Super Week, women have a lower body weight and body temperature and a lower heart rate than they do at other points in their cycle. The opposite is also true – in the autumn phase of their cycle, women experience a slight increase in body weight and temperature, and their heart beats faster than it otherwise does. Pierson, who was featured on Forbes Magazine’s ‘30 under 30 in science’ list of groundbreaking individuals, shows that the menstrual cycle plays such a huge role in women’s lives that it should be ‘better understood and incorporated into health research and practice,’ as she states in her report.

The study doesn’t represent every woman out there, of course, just those who used the Clue cycle tracking app. The fact that participants self-reported which phase of their cycle they were in might have an impact on the reliability of the results, as Pierson herself acknowledges. Nevertheless, this cross-cultural survey showed a striking correlation.

For the majority of women, their happiness skyrocketed from as early as day 1, and remained especially high from day 7 until day 14, until it gradually declined again towards the end of their cycle. In other words: the highest point on the graph was smack bang in the middle of the women’s Super Week. And the factor that was impacted by the menstrual cycle above all others? The women’s sex drive.

So it isn’t just Esther, Charlotte and myself who find ourselves wanting to have more sex when we’re on our Super Week.

Much of our sexual desire resides in the brain. So perhaps it isn’t so strange that we become more rabbit-like when our oestrogen levels rise, creating a kind of domino effect of horn-inducing chemicals and happy hormones in our heads.

That’s when the party *really* gets started! And sometimes, it might just be a sex party.

Our tiny penis and the little death

An egg was cooking – in the saucepan just in front of my navel, and probably also somewhere right behind it – as I danced back and forth in front of the stove with ‘Little Red Corvette’ by Prince in my headphones. It was November in Los Angeles. A small Airbnb in Silver Lake

with three palm trees in the garden would be my new abode for the coming month. A stopover, after many years in New York, before I would be moving on to Spain.

I knew nobody there. But I said yes to it all this week when a local friend of an old buddy of mine wondered whether I might be up for trying something a little... special. He forwarded me an email from something called Club X, reassuring me that it would be *his* first time, too.

Sex is healthy, for people of all genders. It's good for your head, heart and health. Having a bit of fun under the covers is also good for your menstrual cycle, as an American study from 2022 has shown. Researchers followed 530 menstruating, sexually active women who were not attempting to get pregnant for a year. Those who had sex at least once a month produced more fertile cervical mucus and experienced less spotting than was normal prior to their period.

Such physiological wonders are most likely not what's foremost in our minds when we're feeling horny. Or if we're on the hunt for an orgasm – because although one night stands result in fewer orgasms than when we sleep with a partner, many women still find they want to sleep around and have more no-strings sex when on their Super Week, as was demonstrated by a German study in 2019.

Four days after I received the email from Club X, I slapped half a tube of foundation on my face, loaded my eyelids with heavy eyeshadow and pulled on a purple wig in the hope of making myself as unrecognisable as possible. Jostling my black push-up bra into place, I shook my head and smiled at my reflection as I said to myself in a loud voice: 'Do it for the story.'

Let me just quickly interject with a little academic aside here. An Italian study of over 1,000 women aged between 18 and 40 has shown that single women, compared to those in established relationships, become even *hornier* during ovulation. So right there and then, back in November 2014, I just couldn't help myself.

Ethan was a charming musician with deep dimples who reassured me that he was nervous, too. Above the salt crystals on the edge of my martini glass, I studied his every movement. He smelled of bark. His voice was a deep bass. Some researchers believe women fall for more stereotypically 'masculine' men when on their Super Week, while after ovulation, in the autumn phase, we prefer less egotistical father figures. Others believe it isn't so much about masculinity, but more that we become more interested in male bodies in general prior to ovulation. And that we spend several seconds longer looking at the faces of the men we encounter than we otherwise would, as an American study showed in 2019.

When my phone dinged, letting me know that our Lyft to the luxury apartment on Venice Beach was waiting for us outside the tiki bar where we'd met up for a pre-party drink, we simultaneously hopped down from our bar stools. We cast a quick glance at each other. And quickly knocked back two shots of tequila each. I thought we might turn and do a 180 at the door the moment we got there. But as it turned out, we were the last to arrive, and the last to leave.

At six thirty the following morning the 'festivities' continued as the early orange sun illuminated the Hollywood sign on the mountainside. Ethan, it turned out, lived in a kind of cabin with a view of the sign's first few letters, along with three parrots, two acoustic guitars and a particularly chiselled jawline, one of the stereotypical characteristics of alpha males that certain women can find especially attractive when on their Super Week.

Just because someone can point out where Bournemouth is on a world map doesn't mean they know where the land of the clitoris lies. The female pleasure button has been given incredibly scant attention throughout history. But it should be especially easy to find during ovulation, because that's when it is said to grow slightly.

Historically, men from Hippocrates to Freud and Darwin have tied themselves in knots in their attempts to ignore the clitoris, this 'playful' organ whose obvious 'tasks' are reminiscent of many of those of the penis, writes American author and journalist Rachel E. Gross in her new book *Vagina Obscura*. The ancient Greek philosophers long regarded women as incomplete – imperfect. Well, we're *human* too, thank you very much. And we have exactly the same reproductive organs as men – just 'in the wrong place', as Gross writes. On the few occasions the founding fathers of biology and psychology did take an interest in female anatomy, they discussed what Gross terms the more 'grown-up' organ, the vagina – which means 'sheath' in Latin. In other words: 'that which houses a sword.' A home for his penis. A channel for his baby.

But the vagina isn't in competition with the clitoris – they belong together, writes Gross. Today, it seems obvious that the clitoris is inextricably linked to the vagina, but research into female sexuality demanded that curious researchers, instead of waltzing straight through those wide-open and moist vaginal gates, instead stopped just outside and rang the bell.

That little doorbell enfolded in soft skin.

Ding dong! It's 1998, and Australian urologist Helen O'Connell, for the very first time in history, is able to demonstrate to the scientific world that the clitoris doesn't just consist of

the little nub that's hidden under a 'hat' at the front of the genitals. It continues on inside the body, along either side of the vaginal wall.

As if the Matterhorn were completely buried in snow, with only its Toblerone top sticking out.

On average, the clitoris, in its entirety 'beneath the snow', is larger than – wait for it – the average flaccid penis! And it is the stimulation of this entire organ, and the many thousands of nerves that all end up concentrated in just a few millimetres of skin on – okay, *fine*, the female 'penis head' – that researchers believe to be the basis of all female orgasms. Only 18 per cent of women are able to reach orgasm through penetration alone, as an American study showed in 2017. And when this happens, it's probably because the clitoris is stimulated through the vaginal wall.

The male orgasm has a reasonably clear biological objective. But what's actually the purpose of the female orgasm, from nature's point of view?

Some view the female orgasm as being like men's nipples, an insignificant by-product of evolution. But more recent research shows that our orgasm causes a kind of suction effect within the vagina, which can give sperm an extra boost and thereby increase the chance of conception. At one time, the clitoris was actually located within the vagina, and orgasms initiated ovulation – or so believe a group of researchers at the elite Yale University in the US, among others. Their theory goes like this: women who had penetrative sex and reached orgasm (or chose to have an orgasm with the man she wished to father her children), experienced a release of pressure a short time afterwards. Sort of like in a toaster – but with the result that a conception-ready egg popped out of her ovaries to say hi to the sperm.

Today, women can come until they're blue in the face without having to worry about a conception-ready egg simultaneously jumping out of its sleeping bag. Our orgasm has become independent. Perhaps in order to contribute to our anatomical autonomy, the clitoris has therefore shifted its location over the millennia. From just inside the vaginal opening to just outside it, at the top of the vulva. A little more hidden away, and thereby a little less at risk of triggering constant orgasmic ovulation.

But make no mistake: our orgasm comes with a landslide of benefits.

There are only two specific circumstances in which our control organ up in the brain – the frontal lobe – becomes totally silent, writes Robert M. Sapolsky in his book *Behave*. One is when we dream – that is, when our nightly scriptwriter permits us to be completely manic and utterly relaxed (and this might be precisely the reason why parts of the brain have to be switched off during dreaming). It is only then, during REM sleep – *and* during orgasm – that

we go offline. And what happens when our brain relaxes this way? Among other benefits, headaches can lift, as a survey of 800 sexually active migraine sufferers has shown.

Orgasm – cheaper and more effective than both paracetamol and yoga?

I have noticeably fewer headaches in my Super Week – and can use *la petit mort*, or the little death, as the French call orgasm, to ease my period pains two weeks later. At the same time, orgasm offers a kind of quick fix for stress. When oxytocin is released and cortisol levels fall, the body calms and it becomes easier to sleep – and these little drops of happy juice also strengthen the bond between you and the person you're sleeping with. Or they can make you feel less anxious, if you're lying there alone. As I often do in the autumn of my cycle.

Relax, I remember where I put the keys

Just as surely as I can be found out and about during my Super Week, almost nobody will see me on the days before my period. Days 25 and 26 are often blanks in my social calendar. I start to feel more unsure of myself, so I withdraw. Or I find that I just need some time away from everyone and everything. At these times, I take myself off to a cabin as often as I can.

Esther leaves her husband and children behind and heads into the forest with a hammock and a thermos in her pack, with no music or podcasts in her ears, and stays away for 24 hours. It's a deal they have in their house. In turn, her colleague has set up her own little nook in a corner of her loft, with candles and half-eaten packets of biscuits: a cave where she can get away from having to be cheery or helpful.

Maybe you find yourself wanting some peace and quiet towards the end of your cycle, but just can't seem to wind down? If so, it can help to be aware of what's going on in your body. If you know roughly where you are in your cycle, it will be easier to tune in to what your body is trying to tell you.

At the cabin, I often sit in the lotus position by the sea, nodding slowly in time with the cotton grass, my woolly head also swaying back and forth in the breeze. The north-westerly wind can blow across the fjord as mercilessly as it likes – because then I can scream and shout into it. Other than this, I only want to stay indoors anyway.

My desire to withdraw into my shell can't be explained by tender breasts, acne on my chin or looking a bit peaky – it isn't all the physical stuff that makes me want to hide. It's the mental side of things. Close to the trees, I feel less FOMO. In the company of nature, there's

nothing I feel I have to or should say yes to. Having fewer distractions makes it more ‘permissible’ to relax, to park my thoughts for a while.

But I don’t cut all contact with the rest of the world, either – I always have a job or two on the go. Sometimes, during interviews or video calls with people who are trying to explain complicated concepts to me, all I want to do is cry. I simply can’t understand why I don’t understand. Of course I know the ‘premenstrual fog’ in my brain is the likely culprit, but when I’m in the thick of it, I somehow always forget. It can feel as if my brain can only handle 20 minutes of interaction at a time, as if the raw vulnerability will never end.

Several ‘holes’ do in fact appear in your brain on these days. Brand new research from Germany and the US has shown that oestrogen changes the very form of our grey matter, at lightning speed and from week to week. The brain becomes more dense – and therefore probably more potent – during your Super Week, while it becomes sort of ‘looser’ prior to menstruation.

So I’m starting to remember to ‘book myself a cabin’ or some downtime when I’m in the most super part of my cycle. Because this is when my control panel runs hot, and I can remember everything. Both the things I need to get done, and those I’ve already ticked off my list.

Women’s thought processes are of course affected by a huge range of factors. Our hormones – *clearly* – but also our genes, the chemical composition of our brain, and our upbringing, early childhood and culture. There’s an entire entourage of elements that determine whether you’re someone who usually remembers things, or someone who is often forgetful. Whether you’re the type of person who needs a ‘bird’s-eye view’ before the details fall into place, or vice versa. But when oestrogen gives us a boost during our Super Week, demonstrable changes in the brain take place.

The number of neurons that ‘speak to’ each other changes, and their synapses alter in shape. And what does all this mean? That oestrogen does indeed have an effect on communication, memory and learning. Over the past 35 years, research has shown that this hormone clearly affects several of the female brain’s cognitive functions. This is because the brain contains a particularly large collection of locks all waiting to come into contact with an oestrogen key.

This ‘happy juice’ is best enjoyed in the three deep areas of the brain known as the hypothalamus, the amygdala and the hippocampus: a three-leaf clover that regulates how we take in new information, how we orient ourselves in our surroundings – and how well we remember things.

Our memory is our mental photo album, kept on billions of memory cards. And in a way, we remember both backwards and forwards in time. I can sit for hours, mentally flicking through decades of ‘trips and Tuesdays’. And when it comes to creating memories, the planning of upcoming experiences is something my Super Week brain seems to just love to get busy with.

But Esther, on the other hand, tells me this isn’t true for her. Her problem is that appointments that have sprung out of spontaneous planning during her Super Week often fall in the upcoming couple of weeks, ‘when her superpowers have disappeared’, as she puts it. It can therefore be a good idea to do the opposite, and instead do your planning when you’re on your period, so that more social happenings end up landing on the days of your cycle that are a little more well-suited to them.

Esther is a so-called highly sensitive person. She knows very well that hosting self-imposed dinner parties for her extended family or giving presentations at work will drain her of energy. Which is why she tries as best she can to schedule these kinds of events for her Super Week. Although of course this isn’t easy with many competing considerations, clashing calendars, and guests, colleagues and family members who all have busy lives of their own. Sometimes we’re able to make use of our cycle hacks, other times not.

But Esther is now aware that her hormones almost always play a role, so when her guests have arrived and she finds herself breaking into a cold sweat because the logistical nightmare of getting everyone in the same place at the same time has meant she’s ended up having to hold her dinner party on the ‘wrong’ day of her cycle, she finds it easier to relax. She gives herself more time to prepare – and not least, she knows that her agitation isn’t down to *her*, but to her hormones. Or, more accurately, most likely a lack of them.

Changes occur in the female brain throughout the menstrual cycle, particularly with regard to how we learn new things or remember what’s been said and done. It’s all related to what we choose to pay attention to. And possibly to how exceptionally good we are at planning.

Our ability to make plans lies in the aforementioned frontal lobe – a complexly crumpled collection of wires in our brain, and ‘the most interesting’ of the brain’s four areas, according to Professor of Neurology and Biology Robert M. Sapolsky. He explains that this crown-jewel of ours, which lies right behind the forehead between the eyebrows, was the last part of the brain to develop in our journey from a kind of sea creature to a kind of ape and on to modern humans.

The frontal lobe is a kind of mental joystick. This is where your personality resides, along with all the responsibility for conscious actions and movement – *and* our ability to control our impulses. Did you hitchhike in stranger’s cars or go backpacking through areas swarming with poisonous snakes earlier in your life? Did you used to be less worried in general? Or maybe you’re a young woman who often says yes to everything. If so, there’s a scientific explanation, because the area of the brain that manages impulse control isn’t fully developed until our mid-twenties, a couple of years earlier in women than in men.

A Norwegian study has shown that this part of the brain is used to what researchers term a ‘significantly’ greater extent by those of us with ovaries. It’s also been proven that the frontal lobe is slightly larger in women than it is in men. But the fact that we use the brain’s headquarters for memory, understanding and learning more than men do doesn’t mean that women are more advanced in *all* the areas that are affected by it.

Still, I can’t help wondering: surely it’s no secret that women can be especially good at planning? And possibly slightly better at it than many of our male counterparts – if I may be so bold as to suggest this?

‘I don’t disagree, even though I don’t fit the stereotype. My husband is much better at planning than me,’ says Helene Hjelmervik, the Norwegian researcher behind the studies of cognitive control and the use of the frontal lobe in men and women. Hjelmervik is Associate Professor of Psychology at Kristiania University College in Oslo, and one of extremely few people in the world currently conducting research into women’s brains and the menstrual cycle.

Women’s working memory – the way in which we use our short-term memory to remember things that are said or done in front of us – improves in the days prior to ovulation, Hjelmervik’s research has shown. Humans usually forget things extremely quickly, but during a woman’s Super Week, words and actions can hang around in her consciousness for longer than they otherwise would.

When it comes to planning, having a good working memory is an advantage. But if women in general *are* in fact better at planning than men, nobody knows, since no specific studies have been undertaken on precisely this – yet. But any difference between the sexes is just as likely be down to societal conditioning and roles as biology, Hjelmervik says.

There is also something known as ‘spatial memory’, which manifests itself in whether or not we can remember where we’ve put our car keys, or where the light switch is in a dark room we’ve been in before. An Iranian study from 2023 showed that during our Super Week, this type of memory isn’t as affected by stress as much as it is at other times.

While working on her doctoral thesis in 2015, Helene Hjelmervik discovered that in the days prior to ovulation, women are better able to ignore distractions that might have otherwise overridden the natural choice to make in a given situation. In other words: we listen more attentively. Or at the very least, we become better at controlling *what* we listen to.

Have you ever been to a café with a lively group of friends whose voices are louder than those of the people at the neighbouring table, but then discovered you're able to tune out the sounds closest to you and pick up what the people at the next table are saying all the same? If so, you might have been on your Super Week, and suddenly become 'better at blocking out background noise,' according to Hjelmervik.

Your attention improved.

But why does this happen, from a biological perspective? It can be smart, Hjelmervik believes, for a fertile person to be able to connect several critical thought processes in order to make the best possible decisions prior to selecting a partner. And thereby not risk hopping into bed with just anyone.