

I hear my hormones whisper

Sophie Heawood

At the instigation of a friend I've been on a voyage of self-discovery - and yes, I've got an app for it



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I'm sitting in a coffee shop in LA when my friend Lou says: "Give me your phone and I'll download an app that tracks your menstrual cycle." "Why on earth would I want that," I mutter. My period comes fairly regularly, then it goes away, and I'm not trying for a baby, and all right, the whole thing does actually take me by complete surprise every single month, because my head and the clouds have always been in quite close contact - but still. I don't really feel the need to inform my phone when I've got the painters in.

"What's your password?" she says, signing me up to the app regardless, and charging a couple of quid to my account. That was two months ago, when I was on holiday - and I've stopped being sarcastic about it now. Honestly, back in my real life in the UK, I can happily declare that hormones are an utter revelation.

Firstly, this app - and there are others like it - is nothing to do with astrology. It is everything to do with making you realise that if you're someone who menstruates, then you are always, at every minute of every day, experiencing some part of that cycle. It's not superstition, it's biology.

This hormonal journey doesn't just affect fertility - it affects your courage, your self-worth, your attractiveness to others; and the idea is that you can use the knowledge to plan your life.

Well guess what: it turns out my ever-changing personality makes total sense. I'm not actually a mood-swinging weirdo who wants to run up to strangers singing naked hosannas to the moon and the stars one week, and then stay in my room focused solely on death the next - I mean I am, but it all clicks into place now. I've just been going through the various stages of my cycle, and feeling the lovely rush of oestrogen (which drops twice every cycle), or the onslaught of progesterone, without realising I could work with them rather than against them.

Ovulation! I've learned so much about how ovulation affects my social life! Honestly, please invite me over to your house at this time, and not just because my body is programmed to try to have unprotected sex with you. As someone writing a book, I also see now that the boundless ideas and juicy flow of words all come in the first half of my cycle. The quieter time for reflection, perhaps casting more of a critical, doubting eye over the material, comes in the second.

It's not just women. I spoke to the American publisher David Shook, who admits he spent years confounded by a low sex drive, bouts of depression and weight gain, before finally discovering that a teenage head injury, long forgotten about, had damaged his pituitary gland. When he finally got tested, it turned out he had the testosterone levels of a 90-year-old man. Now he injects a variety of hormone treatments into his body every morning - and life has changed immeasurably.

I emailed someone about my hormone revelation and it got lost in their spam filter - it seems the mention of hormones puts you straight into the murky underworld of black-market drugs. And perhaps that's what hormones are - the drug dealers in our midst: the naggers, the tricksters, pushing you forwards, holding you back. At some points of the month they are like Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, shoving all her daughters in the face of suitors. At other times, they are the parent who says children should be seen and not heard, and who won't let you speak in public lest you bring shame upon the family.

For me, the most exciting thing has been learning to listen to what my hormones have been whispering at me all this time. And to apologise to my friend Lou: you were right, mate - it was money well spent.

