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THE MODERN LOVE PODCAST

Want to Have Better Sex This Year? Here's How.

After 15 years teaching a class about sex, the most popular course at the University of Washington, this professor shares her most important takeaways.

By Anna Martin

I don't remember having an official "birds and the bees" talk with my parents. It wasn't that they avoided it; it just never seemed to come up. And that suited me just fine: I was grateful to avoid the awkwardness.

Instead, almost everything I learned about sex was from older girls at school. They would regale a wide-eyed group of us with stories that were equal parts intimidating and enthralling, describing what boys liked and what they didn't, listing out dos and don'ts with a kind of worldly weariness (or as weary as you can get for an eighth grader). I won't get into details, but the metaphor of an ice cream cone loomed large.

These conversations were like sacred texts to me. I committed all of the older girls' instructions to memory. Until eventually, it came time for me to apply them in practice, and what they told me to do just didn't feel right. It took a while for me to realize that the knowledge I had about sex was extremely incomplete and, functionally, mostly hearsay. Like a game of telephone where information gets more and more distorted as it's passed on, the assumptions and expectations I'd inherited were clouded in shame and judgment, and they often prioritized my

partner's pleasure above my own. It was up to me to figure out what I really liked and what felt good. That process was exciting, but also daunting, and looking back, I wish I would have had Dr. Nicole McNichols to help me along in my journey.

Dr. McNichols is a professor at the University of Washington, where she teaches a class on human sexuality to over 4,000 students a year. She's immersed in years of research and studies on what makes a good, fulfilling sex life — and she has the data to back it up. Her new book, "You Could Be Having Better Sex," is full of practical tips, backed by science, on how to have truly fulfilling sex.

I recently spoke to Dr. McNichols about the common mistakes and misunderstandings about sex that lead to disappointment or underwhelm. She also let me in on some of the most applicable tips you can implement as an individual or as a couple to level up your sex life this year. Below are six lessons Dr. McNichols shared during our conversation, edited for length and clarity.

Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Understand the Importance of Pleasure

Often, the biggest surprise is just how important pleasure is in our lives. We've all grown up in this very puritanical culture that treats sex like dessert, but there are reams of research showing how critical positive emotions and pleasure are to our well-being, and not just to our well-being, but to our ability to think creatively, to problem solve, to broaden our perspectives and to seek out sources of social support, all of which are going to help us cope with the inevitable challenges and stressors in our lives. Start from the standpoint of A) pleasure is important, sex is important, and B) most of what you've been taught about sex is probably wrong. Let's start over.

Say What You Like Before and During Sex

Be comfortable communicating and having a certain handful of phrases that you feel comfortable using throughout. Have respect for and an understanding of your own sexual communication style as well as the sexual communication style of your partner. It's about asking, "What are the best ways that I can exchange information about what I want, what turns me on?" It can be beforehand, about what you're excited to do, but it can also be as simple as having phrases that you're comfortable using, like, "Guide me," or "Show me." You can also use sighs and moans — a lot of people don't realize that we only project those groans and sighs when we're in pain or when we are experiencing pleasure. It operates at a neurological level to communicate pleasure, but also to help you experience pleasure.

For Couples, Aim for Once a Week. Even Schedule It.

One of the questions I get from couples is, "OK, but what's that magic frequency?" In other words, we know sex is important, but how often do you really need to be having it to see the benefits? The answer is once a week. It's fantastic if couples want to have sex more than once a week, but when we look at the benefit of sex to relationship well-being, it doesn't increase after about once a week. So for those of us who love to have a target, that target is once a week.

It doesn't need to be spontaneous, either. Going back to the data, we asked couples at the beginning of a study, Which do you think is hotter, planned sex or spontaneous sex? Everyone says, obviously, spontaneous sex. If it has to be planned, that's robbing it of excitement and pleasure. But when you ask them to keep daily diary studies and explain how hot and enjoyable the sexual experience was, guess what? It's just as pleasurable when it's planned versus spontaneous.

Introduce 'Micro-Novelty' on a Regular Basis

I love to discuss this idea because novelty does not need to mean that you're going to a sex shop and buying a bunch of leather and toys. That's fantastic if you want to try that, but it can be as subtle as having sex in a different room, having sex while you're on vacation, having sex at a different time of day than you normally do, having sex with all the lights on, having sex with the lights off. If you want a number, for those of you who love to hit your targets, data show that couples who try to do something new once a month or more tend to meet that relationship satisfaction threshold.

For Casual Sex, Understand Why You Want It

The data show that it really comes down to motivation. In other words, what are you looking for in the experience? Are you looking for adventure, play, fun, experimentation, the chance to let off stress? Even sexual validation, meaning while you're coming into yourself and you kind of want to gain some confidence, it actually can be effective for that as well. So when your motivation is what we call autonomously driven, it can be really exciting and hot and fun. On the contrary, if you're having it because you actually want something deeper, but you're not quite sure how to ask for that, it can lead to really poor results.

Casual sex can be awesome. It can be exciting, it can be pleasurable, it can be a form of sexual adventure. When you poll people about their last sexual experience, it's very mixed. About a third of people say it was really unsatisfying. Then we get

another third who say it was awesome. It was pleasurable. It was an adventure. And then you get about another third that are like, It was a little bit of both.

People might think, Clearly it's probably the men who are saying it's awesome and the women who say it sucks. This is where I love to throw out the statistics from a very famous study, which shows that when you look at the gender difference that exists between men and women enjoying casual sex, it goes away when you control for the variable of orgasm, meaning that when women have an orgasm, they enjoy casual sex, on average, just as much as men do.

Know What You Want and Go Get It

Own your pleasure. It really is about owning what makes you feel empowered to show up, assert your own needs, communicate and have a mutually pleasurable experience, taking that responsibility into your own hands and knowing that you have the power to do it.

'Modern Love' Wants to Hear From You

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THE EROTIC ENCOUNTER

PEGGY J. KLEINPLATZ, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Ottowa, Canada. She is a certified sex therapist and sex educator. She deals with sexual issues in individual, couple, and group therapy, using an experiential approach. Since 1983, she has been teaching human sexuality in the School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa. She also teaches sex therapy at Saint Paul University's Institute of Pastoral Studies. She has offered workshops on eroticism and transformation, sexual communication, and sexuality and spirituality.

Summary

What is the nature of eroticism? What is the role of eroticism in sexual interaction? The answers to these questions are explored as are their implications for the understanding and treatment of sexual desire problems. To the extent that sexuality has typically been defined in the sex therapy literature in terms of a pattern of physiological and observable, behavioral events, the phenomenology of erotic experience has been overlooked. Eroticism involves the intent to contact and arouse another. The erotic experience is to be found with a partner who values enhancing sexual pleasure for each other for its own sake rather than as a means to a goal, for example, tension release, orgasm, intercourse. The erotic encounter involves the shared exploration of sexual wishes, dreams, and fantasies. It is argued that eroticism is a central component in the maintenance of sexual desire. The absence of eroticism is linked to the prevalence of chronic sexual dissatisfaction and inhibited sexual desire among those who are otherwise fully functional. The taboos surrounding sexual arousal and the seeking of sexual pleasure are examined. The value of eroticism for the individual and the couple is discussed in terms of deepening of self-knowledge, self-affirmation, mutual trust, and intimacy. Implications for clinicians are addressed. A shift in paradigms is recommended from the prevailing one, focusing on sexual function versus dysfunction, to another that emphasizes the potential for sharing erotic experience.

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What is the nature of eroticism? What is the role of eroticism in sexual interaction? Eroticism involves the intent to contact and arouse another. Eroticism goes beyond sexual activity or sexual pleasure even when it culminates in orgasm. The erotic experience is to be found with a partner who values enhancing sexual pleasure for its own sake rather than as a means to a goal, for example, en route to coitus, tension release, orgasm.

The role of eroticism in sexual interaction tends to be ignored, minimized, and obscured in North American society. In a culture that is erotophobic, the need for sex is acknowledged grudgingly, but the cultivating of sexual desire and arousal is frowned on.

Similarly, the value of eroticism has been overlooked in modern sexology. Over the last 15 years there has been a trend toward the "medicalization" of sex therapy and reliance on pharmacological intervention (Leiblum & Rosen, 1989, p. 5). The focus has been on sexual functioning and dysfunction rather than on the subjective aspects of sexuality. Humanistic psychology may be able to contribute an alternative perspective to mainstream sexology. It may provide an appropriate context within which to consider the phenomenology of erotic experience. With its emphasis on awareness and being rather than on doing and performing, this approach allows for the appreciation of eroticism and its significance in sexual/intimate relationships.

The contrast between sexual proficiency versus eroticism in sustaining sexual desire is apparent in cases of inhibited sexual desire (ISD). ISD is typically viewed in terms of pathology (Kaplan, 1979; Leiblum & Rosen, 1988; LoPiccolo & Friedman, 1988) whether in the individual or in the couple's relationship. Yet some men and women present with lack of sexual desire in the absence of psychological or sexual dysfunction. Despite the presence of sexually skillful partners in otherwise satisfying relationships and the capacity for orgasm, they state that sex has lost its allure (Kleinplatz, 1992). Not only has sexual interest diminished markedly, but some have commented that the best sexual experiences of their lives occurred during high school, while they were still virgins; that is, the "best sex" of their lives occurred before they had even had their first dyadic orgasms, and consisted of kissing, necking, and caressing (and may or may not have included genital stimulation).

These comments have led some sexologists to reconsider what good sex is all about. Sexologists often say that good sex is not about what is between the legs but rather what is between the ears. To take this line of reasoning one step further, what then is sexuality about? What makes sex sexy, even in the absence of genital involvement?

The answer may involve eroticism. When clients referred for treatment of ISD say that the best sex of their lives did not include genital contact, what they experienced once was the erotic component that is now missing from their lives. The focus of eroticism is on pleasure and the heightening of arousal for its own sake. This element is often an unspoken taboo in sexual socialization in North America.

THE DENIAL OF PLEASURE AND SUPPRESSION OF AROUSAL

Whereas the need for sexual interaction, particularly intercourse, has been acknowledged and tolerated, albeit reluctantly, within this society, the seeking of arousal for its own sake or for the enhancing of sexual pleasure has been denigrated, denied, and suppressed; it has been condemned as sinful by the Christian church; declared illegal when sexually explicit materials serve to inflame sexual desire without any other "redeeming" social value; it has been obscured in sex education.

Although progressive parents and schools tell children about the mechanics of sex and reproduction, they are conspicuous in their failure to say aloud what every young child, immersed in genital exploration, already knows: It feels good. We deny children's sexual pleasure in an attempt to rob pleasure of its intrinsic value—unless it is coupled with some extrinsic purpose, for example, coitus. We refuse to label their sexual organs or we mislabel them (Ash, 1982), particularly when these organs have no reproductive role and function primarily for sexual pleasure. The more salient an organ is for sexual pleasure (as opposed to procreation), the less likely we are to name it aloud, especially with our children. For example, current children's sex education books (e.g., *The Bare Naked Book*, Stinson, 1986) include the names of the genitals among their pages. Yet they incorrectly label the female external genitalia as the vagina, an organ that corresponds to the penis for purposes of intercourse and reproduction but not necessarily for pleasure. No mention is made of the vulva or clitoris. Although even pre-

schoolers are capable of learning correct genital terminology (Wurtele, Melzer, & Kast, 1992), information that pertains to sexual pleasure is withheld, even in child sexual abuse-prevention programs (Tharinger et al., 1988).

It is no wonder that the safer sex campaigns directed toward adolescents are often unsuccessful in modifying behavior. Adolescents have already learned to distrust the messages they receive from adults regarding sex. "Just say no" approaches will not work with adolescents who are seeking pleasure and will ignore authorities who refuse to admit that sex involves pleasure. Educators who warn that intercourse could have dire consequences without recommending alternative, sexually satisfying options are perceived as arcane and oblivious to reality. By teaching that which is irrelevant to adolescent experience and refusing to speak about sexual pleasure, educators inadvertently communicate that they do not know about what matters (Fisher, 1990). In so doing, they lose their credibility and reinforce the notion that it is taboo to speak of desire and arousal. Thus the message transmitted in silence is that although sex and reproduction are necessary parts of human life, the seeking of arousal and pleasure is a hedonistic luxury. According to such programs, to cultivate desire is suspect at best, if not decadent and greedy.

In much of North American adult culture, it seems that everywhere there is a focus on sex: sex acts, sex techniques, sex in the media. But this focus is occurring in a void. It concerns the peripherals and ignores the essentials of human sexuality. We pride ourselves on being open about sex, about being able to communicate freely, about being able to tell our partners how to please us (a little higher here, a little harder there), and fail to acknowledge that this discussion leaves us feeling that something is missing. (Conservatives might say that what is missing is love, marriage, commitment, and so on. They are correct only insofar as they note that what is missing is the context [Weeks, 1985].) The intrapsychic, interpersonal, and symbolic meanings that we confer to the physical, behavioral events are what create an erotic experience or lack thereof. As Tisdale has written (1992, p. 210), we are "a generation that has explored sex more thoroughly and perhaps less well than any before." Yet we reassure ourselves that we need not delve into those anxiety-provoking, guilt-inducing sexual fantasies, desires, and images. We are modern people, able to converse about sex freely and thereby perpetuate our fear of the dark unknown.

Our current models of sexuality rely on the physiologically (rather than experientially) based Human Sexual Response Cycle (Masters & Johnson, 1966). This model focuses on physiological indexes rather than subjective ones and therefore cannot account for lack of desire or satisfaction in fully functional individuals and couples (Tiefer, 1991; Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). Furthermore, we define normal sexuality as that which aims toward coitus and orgasm and specifically identify alternate sexual goals and patterns as abnormal or deviant (Ogden, 1988). As long as we circumscribe sexuality in this fashion, we will be unable to appreciate the role of eroticism in sexual relations. For as long as we define sexuality in terms of a pattern of physiological and observable, behavioral events, we deny eroticism's contribution toward sexual satisfaction.

The deficits in the aforementioned model emerge most clearly in its failure to produce memorable, passionate sexual experiences among those who are fully functional by the previous criteria. Too many of these couples are bored in bed (Rosen & Leiblum, 1989). It is not surprising that so many are diagnosed as ISD; too often they are simply not willing to work themselves up for sexual relations that they do not experience as worth the effort.

The operative word here is "work." "It used to be fun but now it feels like work. What happened?" Indeed, the existing model suggests that armed with sufficient knowledge, sex should be easy. After one is familiar with the genital area and has gained some technical proficiency in stimulating it, the sexual response cycle should proceed smoothly, barring psychosocial or interpersonal obstacles. And the first few times, that does appear to be the case. But those who think that fitting part A into slot B (Steinberg, 1990) comprises the necessary and sufficient conditions for hot sex are deluded.

One of the best ways to ruin a potentially satisfying relationship is to do what works—relentlessly. Initially couples often explore one another's bodies enthusiastically, searching for the magic buttons or magic formula with which to please their partners. When the sought-after answers are obtained, couples repeat their "successes." They often rely on sexual routines that have led to orgasm in the past rather than attempt more innovative ap-

proaches with uncertain outcomes. Couples assume that no further exploration is required and that their mandates as lovers are completed. But this approach reduces the potentially erotic experience to masturbation. Technical proficiency (for its own sake), no matter how skillful and adroit, reduces the experience to one of a mechanical nature. One becomes an object to be manipulated.

The ensuing wistful complaint, "the mystery is gone," is commonplace. This outcome is all but inevitable among those who limit their explorations to the body. When the "mystery" evaporates, the couple's exploration has been limited to bodily parts rather than what the persons within desire. That desire involves having a partner who is intrigued by what turns one on, a partner who intends to arouse the whole being, to touch one's secret places or fantasies. There is quite a contrast between the lover who seeks the formula for how to bring his or her partner to orgasm versus a lover whose goal is arousal and providing a pleasureful, erotic experience for a partner. Thus it was never "the mystery" that provided the excitement in the initial stages of sexual relations. "Mystery" serves as the pretense, the masquerade, for the underlying turn on, which is the notion that someone might go out of his or her way to turn his or her lover on; that someone might intend or deliberate as to how to reveal his or her desire in such a fashion as to arouse the intended audience, partner. Imagine the articles of seduction: The candles, perfume and cologne, strawberries fed lovingly from one's hand to the other's mouth, the lover semi-nude, the allure of "mystery" and invitation. Visualize the half-dressed centerfold and notice the comments that she looks much more exciting this way than she would have entirely naked. After all, naked, all we know of her is her body. But the lingerie signals her unspoken intent to arouse. Lingerie manufacturers and pornographers are aware of this. The woman bedecked in the silk teddy or even the "demure" lacy baby-doll or the man in the red satin jockey shorts can use those items of clothing as a way of suggesting "I intend to arouse. I want to turn you on." without having to use words. To the degree that direct sex talk is anxiety and guilt-laden and the explicit expression of desire for sex inhibited, we have to disguise our true wishes and camouflage them in the "allure of mystery." When couples say "the mystery is gone," we may interpret this to signal the absence of any convenient, consensually agreed-upon means to communicate the desire to heighten arousal. (Unless the couple chooses to say it with words) they are unable to

convey the message that they seek to arouse and intend to be aroused, for the sheer pleasure of it, for the chance to experience the thrill and fulfillment of deep, sensual connection.

This analysis can also account for clients who claim that the quality of their sex lives has been diminishing since high school when they were still virgins and had yet to have an orgasm with a partner. While in adolescence, no one was acknowledging, let alone taking, responsibility for having the intent to arouse as the primary motive for erotic encounters, although it may have been implicit in their interactions; after all, the goal was hardly tension release for those who had barely "progressed" to genital contact as yet. But the continued, indeed *prolonged*, sexual/erotic encounters clearly served some delightful purpose, no matter how physically frustrating they may have been. Part of the appeal of adolescent sexual "experimentation" is precisely that, to experiment with (heightened) sexual desire and arousal for its own sake. No wonder much of the allure of early sexual exploration is often lost once sexual intercourse begins, both for teens and adult couples. We allow ourselves to confound the socially acceptable and sexually expedient goals of orgasm, tension release, or coitus with the unspeakable desires to enhance sexual desire and erotic pleasure. We thereby limit ourselves to the mundane (that which is already known) and limit sexuality to the genitals.

Similarly, this perspective can also shed light on the diminishing of arousal during sex, even in the presence of desire. "She seemed so excited just a moment ago. Then we began to have intercourse and all of a sudden she seemed to lose interest. Where did I go wrong?" The body has relaxed; myotonia has decreased. The problem is inherent in the conception of sex. The problem lies in making intercourse *the* sex act, the ultimate end of sexual relations. By making intercourse the goal, one has denied the possibility of allowing pleasure and eroticism to be the focal points of sexual interaction and limited oneself and one's partner accordingly. Your partner suddenly lost interest upon realizing that you were willing to forgo the delights of sexual arousal for the quicker payoff of orgasm. She says that she is afraid of boring you by taking too much time and effort to reach orgasm. She would probably never think in those terms if it were only clear that you value arousing her; in which case, one would not think of sexual stimulation as "work" and one would not be rushing toward orgasm. She senses that you do not care enough about her and yourself and the potential delights

of a more authentic sexual or erotic interlude to take some real risks, to be more vulnerable, and to really go all the way.

That is why sex is boring and not worth the interest. The interest is not clinically inhibited; it is just so limited that it speaks volumes to both partners about not being worth wanting.

THE NATURE OF EROTICISM

What then is eroticism? It is about the intent to arouse, not just the body but also the psyche of the partner. It is about the intent to enhance that arousal and pleasure, for its own sake, rather than as a means to a genital end. Eroticism is about the exploration and exposure of the other's wounds, dreams, passions, desires, hopes, and so on, in a sexual context. It is about allowing the vulnerability that one (or both) experiences in this endeavor to be exposed in the hope that whatever is discovered will be accepted, valued, cherished, and regarded as precious. Thus eroticism involves not only heightened arousal but the awareness of the potential for intense arousal and the choice of entering into it.

Describing eroticism is a challenge. Sexologists rarely write about it, with notable exceptions, for example, Barbach and Levine (1980), Ogden (1988), Schnarch (1991). Outside sexology, those who do discuss eroticism typically present it in the context of artistic or commercial rather than scientific endeavors; that is, their goal is typically to arouse, inspire, or provoke their readers rather than to explore the complexities of eroticism for academic or clinical purposes.

In contrast to the dearth of "serious" discussion on this subject within Western literature, there is a notable emphasis on eroticism in the history of Eastern approaches toward sexuality, particularly within the Hindu tradition of Tantric Yoga (Garrison, 1964). From this perspective, "it is believed that sexuality can at times be a powerful path to increased self-awareness and heightened consciousness. . . . it not only allows sexual feelings and sexual contact, but, in fact, utilizes the sexual experience as a means to enlightenment" (Dychtwald, 1979, p. 56). The teachings of this ancient approach, and its accompanying rituals and practices, have been adapted for Western readers in several recent books on the subject (e.g., Anand, 1989; Muir & Muir, 1989; Ramsdale & Ramsdale, 1991).

Defining the particulars of eroticism may be impossible for two reasons: First, we are detached from our own erotic potentials and, as such, find it difficult to access that which we have been forced to repress, deny, displace, and otherwise defend against.

We are socialized to keep our pleasures secret, to deny our bodies, and to hide the joy of arousal. Beware of desire—it is wanting too much. As we grow up in this society, according to Steinberg (1992):

> We understand that we must choose between much of what we feel in our bodies and what everyone around us is telling us we *should* feel. Gradually or suddenly, we split into two contradictory beings. . . . To gain the approval of those around us, we reject our primal erotic nature and, as we push our erotic sensibilities deeper and deeper into the shadows we find it increasingly difficult to honor or even be aware of the erotic within us. (p. 160)

Of course, if one does wish to renew or explore one's capacity for eroticism, a good starting place is precisely in the contours defined by those shadows. That which creates embarrassment, trepidation, a sense of foreboding, danger, or provokes uneasy nervous laughter, curiosity, a titillating sense of risk, or a compelling hint of arousal (Mahrer, 1983) may suggest the potential for eroticism lies there.

A second reason for the difficulty in describing the content of eroticism is that the erotic experience is unique to each individual. This is not simply a matter of personal preference, nor is there an intent here to be evasive, as in, "I don't know how to define it but I know it when I see it." To the extent that as a society we prohibit, restrict, and suppress certain categories of feelings and experience, for example, those labeled helplessness, dependence, hedonism, loss of control, and self-indulgence, there may be some broad commonalities in the phenomena, images, or fantasies that acquire the potential to arouse. However, the specific material that fuels a given individual's capacity for erotic response will be particular to that man or woman and cannot be known a priori (Mahrer, 1983).

THE EROTIC ENCOUNTER

It may prove easier to describe the process, dynamics, and outcome of an erotic encounter than it is to describe eroticism in isolation, out of context. It is, after all, not the technical, objective

aspects, but rather the phenomenological and symbolic aspects of the events that provide their erotic quality and significance.

At the simplest level, in the erotic encounter lovers intend to contact and arouse one another and provide one another with heightened pleasure and arousal. The lovers explore, touching and listening, seeking to discover what is arousing. The lover who stumbles across another's secret places, whether they be literal erogenous zones or hidden fantasies, recognizes and appreciates this finding. Such a lover treasures these nuggets as rare gems, to be polished and refined, and, having sought them out, will use them for purposes of arousal and the heightening of pleasure and not necessarily for tension release. He or she will savor such knowledge, reveling in it and perhaps even announcing its discovery. The lover would employ this knowledge in a manner neither haphazard nor routine, but caringly and deliberately in a manner that states, "I intend to take advantage of this most intimate knowledge of you and to play with it to create an erotic encounter." He or she may experiment with it to determine maximal cause and effect.

The existing sexology literature describes techniques for bringing a partner to orgasm, but rarely discusses the advantages of heightening rather than reducing sexual tension. Eichenlaub (1961, cited in Harmatz & Novak, 1983, p. 289) is an exception who suggested the "advance and retreat" technique in which stimulation of the breasts and genitals is intermittently withdrawn to increase sexual tension during foreplay, prior to the main event. But Eichenlaub focused on tactile stimulation and merely as a prelude to intercourse. Eroticism can potentially go beyond the sensory and may involve the entire range of intrapsychic and interpersonal elements. In an erotic encounter, the lover feels valued knowing that his or her partner is interested enough in him or her as an erotic being to enjoy the process of attempting to provide erotic fulfillment.

Another author who differentiates between sexual and erotic encounters is Rollo May (1969) who stated:

> The pleasure in sex is described by Freud and others as the reduction of tension; in eros, on the contrary, we wish not to be released from the excitement but rather to hang on to it, to bask in it, and even to increase it. The end toward which sex points is gratification and relaxation, whereas eros is a desiring, longing, a forever reaching out, seeking to expand. (pp. 71-72)

May then (p. 74) declared that the peak of such an encounter occurs not necessarily in orgasm but in intromission. Although May limited the height of eroticism to a physical, heterosexual act, the passion of eroticism may perhaps be most profound when both partners sense the metaphoric penetration of one another's deeper, inner, hidden selves.

This is sex as therapy, sex as an avenue for exploring, expressing, and healing of our deepest secrets, especially shame. Too often, in our culture, sexual socialization entails the development of shame and guilt. In the erotic encounter, whatever is revealed is accepted and cherished, and hence shame dissolves. According to Gallagher (1989, p. 214), "If you take away all shame and barriers to the clarity of bodily knowing it's like entering the purr of a cat . . . we like to be stroked and to give over to the body its whole power as the spirit hums."

If the motives of the lover in the erotic encounter described previously are to explore, arouse, heighten tension, provide pleasure, and so on, what is the attitude of his or her partner? In conventional sex the goal is to perform well, to keep up, to put in one's fair share of the effort. Here, the partner is to allow himself or herself to be naked, literally and figuratively. The orientation has shifted from doing to being. In ordinary sexual relations, enjoyment is often hampered by fears of loss of control and the unknown. In the erotic encounter, control is released; discovery of the unknown is embraced. One's secrets are not simply revealed, but are divulged by choice. It is not that fear is absent, but rather that one trusts that his or her lover will value whatever may be exposed in peak moments; therefore, at least there is no fear of rejection. Perhaps this is the ultimate human desire, that is, to be known and understood and fully accepted. This is the gift that is offered in the erotic encounter. As described by Sturtevant (1989):

> To lie down, naked and vulnerable with another person, to open myself slowly, to partake as the other unfolds to me . . . this is a basic expression of the spirit and power of the erotic. Without it, I am diminished, stopped from expressing essential parts of myself. Words and gesture lie unused, accumulate like debris around my heart. (pp. 221-222)

Too many are afraid that the acceptance they crave will not be forthcoming if they disclose their secrets. Entrusting another with one's hidden fears and hopes is an act of courage. Webster (1992, pp. 388-389) described the moment at which she grasped another's

meaning in reaching out to her with his sexual desires: "Would it be cruel to let him go on? Was that nice? There was a subtle change in my understanding of our power dynamic. Suddenly I realized that I could understand what he meant, or I could make him suffer by my incomprehension." The power we grant to our lovers when we share our deepest sexual fantasies is so great that few dare to do so.

Having been taught that actively seeking sexual pleasure is unseemly and greedy, we refrain from asking our lovers to augment arousal and pleasure. We do not wish to be judged as self-indulgent. "I can't ask him for that! What would he think?" One is not allowed to make requests if one's sole reason for asking is one's own pleasure. And what if the partner is agreeable? "But then it doesn't count because he's *only* doing it because I asked him to." Having a partner who is willing to oblige as "a favor" is unthinkable. It is not good enough if he accommodates out of caring and a wish to satisfy his lover. He must want it for his own sake; he must be aroused by the thought of arousing his lover and not simply the desire to please.

Furthermore, if his fantasies correspond to his lover's, mutual validation is provided. Their erotic longings are acceptable. Califia (1983) demonstrated this point when she explained why she ties up her submissive lovers in their erotic encounters (p. 133): "The bondage is reassurance. She can measure the intensity of my passion by the tightness of my knots. It puts an end to . . . speculation about whether I am doing this just because she likes it so much. . . . Restraint becomes security. She knows I want her." Of course, all of the speculation about the partner's motives would become irrelevant if one could only express the desire for heightened arousal freely. To disclose this desire and the accompanying fantasies is to be truly naked, vulnerable, and exposed. That could be a daunting prospect, unless it is with a partner who would be aroused at seeing one in such a state, unless one is in an erotic encounter.

The implicit or explicit contract in the erotic encounter is that the lover's motives and intentions are safe and caring, and will respect our vulnerabilities. Even if one does not know precisely what the lover's imagination and creativity might hold, the lover's intentions are to arouse within whatever limits one might set. The lover's intentions are to inflame and unleash one's desire(s) to

arouse both partners and not to hurt or abuse the partner. His or her motives are honorable, noble.

The erotic encounter is best understood by its outcome (Ogden, 1988). To the extent that the erotic encounter allows hidden or veiled potentials or parts of oneself to be touched, explored, brought forth, and experienced, something shifts within (Mahrer, 1983). Califia's description of her own erotic encounters is as follows (1983 p. 134): "It is a healing process. . . . I find the old wounds and unappeased hunger. . . . I nourish, I cleanse and close the wounds. . . . I see her as she is, and I forgive and turn her on and make her come. . . . A good scene doesn't end with orgasm—it ends with catharsis."

Previously hidden fantasies, laden with fear, guilt, and shame, are transformed and lose their anxiety-provoking capacity. Recurring images cease to be compelling. Instead of being drawn to or haunted, year after year, by fantasy themes that refuse to dissipate, one's sensitivity to particular sexual stimuli or fantasies changes; one will not respond the same way in the future. New wishes, desires, vulnerabilities, and hidden potentials emerge to be explored and encountered yet again in this dialectical process.

In addition, the self-knowledge that results from the erotic encounter promotes the development of self-affirmation and validation. There may be improvements in self-image, body-image, and increases in feelings of empowerment and of being worthy of attention and pleasure (Ogden, 1988). Exhilaration and the rush of freedom ensue. Furthermore, the sharing of risks in the context of mutual trust deepens the level of intimacy in the couple's relationship. Thus both individuals are moved toward greater personal and erotic fulfillment.

This analysis can also shed light on the difference in excitement between masturbation, even with elaborate erotic fantasy, versus dyadic sex. For many people, the most physically intense orgasms occur via self-stimulation, yet few choose masturbation as their favorite mode of sexual gratification. The difference goes beyond simply having another present to touch one's genitals rather than having to do it oneself, even taking feelings of being wanted by a partner into consideration. Certainly, self-stimulation may provide pleasure and satisfaction and is hard to surpass for accuracy of stimulation. Its advantages and disadvantages are one and the same: It is comfortable, predictable, reliable, and risk-free. There is minimal erotic tension in that there are no unknowns. However,

those who wish to learn something new about themselves erotically benefit from having another as a stimulus. A partner can facilitate the process of uncovering and discovery. Partners can heighten the intensity, turn up the volume, making here-and-now immediacy more real, and making hidden, deeper potentials more likely to emerge (Mahrer, 1978). The unknowns are welcomed in that they heighten the possibilities that one cannot create alone. The partner is a potential catalyst that one cannot be for oneself.

The erotic encounter is empathy in motion. It is the best sex known only to a "blessed few" (Schnarch, 1991), although that need not be so. It often requires years of communicating one's deepest sexual feelings, longings, and desires, and only secondarily a relatively comprehensive familiarity with how to stimulate the partner's body for maximal effect. When two individuals come together who have such intimate, intensive knowledge of one another as sexual beings, they can move together in improvised, if rehearsed, dancing. For such couples, the possibilities for erotic discovery and fulfillment are endless, provided they continually intend to arouse one another.

Most people do not feel they have access to this caliber of sex. Many are drawn instead to doing dangerous, risky things to provide a pseudo-erotic excitement to sex (Allgeier, 1989). The safest risks to take may be those that occur when revealing one's vulnerabilities with a trustworthy partner in an erotic encounter. This option is only viable for those who are willing to acknowledge consciously and openly that they are seeking sexual arousal. Some of those unwilling to admit their desires for eroticism may gravitate toward more hazardous sexual behaviors. They (allegedly) blunder into unsafe, "unplanned," "spontaneous" sexual activities (e.g., teens who refrain from using contraception because "nice girls don't"). The ambivalence about acknowledging their sexual choices feeds the hidden thrill that comes from engaging in this risky behavior. Others deliberately conduct themselves in ways that are externally risky (e.g., where there is a possibility of being caught). They, too, would prefer not to grapple with the intrapsychic and interpersonal risks that follow from admitting to ourselves and others that we wish for an erotic encounter. Still others will bare their bodies and souls, but only with strangers or casual acquaintances. The risks are certainly real enough, but at least the potential rejection by a stranger will not wound as deeply as by an intimate partner.

These sexual choices, occurring within the context of "normal" sex, make for an interesting contrast with consensual sadomasochistic encounters. In the above scenarios, sexual thrills are generated by creating hazardous situations rather than by risking intrapsychic or interpersonal vulnerability with an intimate partner. Contrary to lay stereotypes, in consensual sadomasochistic encounters, the primary risks are in psychological vulnerability, but actual harm is limited by one's choices. Previously agreed on parameters for sadomasochistic scenes permit the partners to explore the farther reaches of their erotic fantasies and longings without fear of violation. Such lovers honor one another's boundaries. In fact, they may use prearranged "safe words" to ensure that regardless of exclamations in moments of passion, coded messages regarding limits will be understood accurately. (This is also in stark contrast to sexual assault, in which "No" really does mean "No," but that protest is ignored, despite the victim's lack of consent.) In the consensual sadomasochistic encounter, the partners refrain from crossing the line, knowing that an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, and safety must be nurtured for them to experience freely their erotic potentials.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

What are the implications of this analysis of eroticism for clinicians? Clinicians can go beyond categorizing their patients as functional or dysfunctional. We can envision a broader continuum that includes optimal sexual and erotic potential rather than stopping at mediocre or merely adequate sexuality (Ogden, 1988; Schnarch, 1991). Our conceptions of the individual's or couple's problem, our approach to treatment, and our criteria for effective outcome change automatically. A shift in paradigms is recommended from one focusing on pathology to another that emphasizes the potential for sharing erotic experience.

This model can be illustrated in cases of low sexual desire. Eroticism is a central component in the maintenance of sexual desire. The absence of eroticism is linked to the prevalence of chronic sexual dissatisfaction and low sexual desire. Over the last decade or so, ISD has been among the most pervasive presenting problems in the offices of sex therapists (Rosen & Leiblum, 1989). It has been described as a more complex problem than those more

common in the 1960s or 1970s and more difficult to treat (LoPiccolo & Friedman, 1988). Perhaps some of the "easier" cases of sexual dysfunction (e.g., anorgasmia, erectile dysfunction) can be ameliorated more readily by increasing sexual knowledge and technical expertise. But in regard to ISD, "advancements" in sexual information and skills may only make the feeling that something is wrong, something is missing, feelings of sexual emptiness and apathy more salient. Without a corresponding change in sexual feelings and values throughout our society, its members have been having more sex with more partners in more ways. But despite the expectation of greater satisfaction, many are enjoying it less, even with their required quota of orgasms. As such, they do not desire much sex. In that sexual values and feelings remain fairly conservative and repressed, respectively, people still refuse to acknowledge that passionate, memorable sex involves the seeking of pleasure or desire to be aroused. They have been eager to believe that sexual prowess alone will bring them sexual fulfillment even though they may be ignoring the more meaningful component of eroticism. This curtails the range of possible sexual relations to the technically skillful or lack thereof. An alternative is required that recognizes the fears and hopes of embodied persons for relationships in which they can be vulnerable and freed for growth.

To serve those clients referred to us for ISD more effectively, clinicians may benefit from a complete reorientation of perspective. Perhaps, in fact, what therapists might be diagnosing as ISD today is no more a case of sexual disorder/pathology than the inability to achieve a "vaginal orgasm" was truly indicative of sexual dysfunction in the 1940s. "Frigidity," or the inability to have a "vaginal orgasm," ceased to be viewed as pathological after clinicians decided that expecting women to have orgasms via solely internal stimulation was unrealistic. When we changed our criteria for anorgasmia to reflect the knowledge that additional or alternative stimulation would be required, we ceased labeling women as pathological and instead pointed out that the sex was insufficient. Similarly, let us stop diagnosing some patients who are uninterested in sex as having a disorder and focus instead on the inadequacy of their sex lives. Maybe in the absence of erotic encounters, clients are so disappointed, disillusioned, and disgruntled with the quality of the sex that is readily available, that they would just as soon shut down and not bother. We, too, may wish to turn away from performance-oriented, depersonalizing models of sexuality.

Instead of asking "What's wrong with *you*?" perhaps clinicians should be asking "What changes in your sex life would be required to interest you in sex? What are you missing in your attempts to arouse and be aroused?" Instead of asking "When did this problem start? How long have you been uninterested in sex?" we might ask "What would turn you on that you have not tried lately? What was the best sexual experience of your life? What makes you feel vulnerable and passionate about sex? What kinds of fantasies arouse you? At what point in your life was your desire for sex at its peak? What prevents you from disclosing this kind of information to your partner? What risks might you be ready to take? What are the obstacles to expressing such desires and engaging in such behaviors, and what conditions would make it safer for you to feel free?"

When we, as clinicians, shift our expectations and goals from ameliorating disorder or correcting inadequacy to aiming for the full flowering of erotic potential, it becomes possible and safer for clients to imagine themselves filled with passion. Therapists may acknowledge and validate clients' experience of lackluster sex. We may appreciate their reluctance to tolerate sexual interaction that promotes disintegration from self and others. We may suggest that their problems involve disconnection from their own erotic energy and that the capacity for ecstasy lies within (Ogden, 1988). In the process, we depathologize our patients, cutting through "resistance" and replacing some of their distress and trepidation with anticipation. (Implications for future research would include comparing treatment outcomes for clients referred for treatment of ISD in traditional therapeutic approaches versus those seen within the context of this alternative paradigm.)

The challenge ahead is to reclaim the eroticism that is "An affirmation of the incredible potential sex has to bring us deep joy, wonder, intimacy, growth, and wisdom when it is approached with honesty, courage and humility" (Steinberg, 1988, p. ii).

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