

I'm stuck with lots of messages about sexuality, and it's hard to sort them all out. How can I know what is really "healthy" sexuality, and learn to develop my own sexuality in a positive way?



Ah, sex. We joke about it and use it to sell everything from cars to beer. But most of us never really learn about sex—what to expect, how it works (and doesn't work), and what to do when it isn't what we expect. If only sex were like driving a car, and you had lessons and lots of practice with an experienced person to guide you through the pitfalls before you tried it on your own.

Consider this brochure one of the pieces of your sex education manual. This information can help you understand what to expect and how to think about sexuality in your life.

What is healthy sexuality?

Sexual expression and activity that is:

- Consensual—without coercion, and without “strings attached.”
- Pleasurable—sexual play that feels good for any person involved.
- Engaged in with awareness—the ability of each person to be fully present. If you have to “check out” during sex, it's a sign that there is something you need to fix in order to have a healthy sex life.
- Connecting—Sex can help you feel closer to a partner or to yourself, and provides a different way for people to communicate.
- Fun! Sex is playful, intense, silly, and can be full of laughter.

Most of what we learn about sex we learn from friends, internet sites, magazines, movies, and word-of-mouth. Unfortunately, this leads to a lot of mis-information that can be damaging to

our sexuality if we choose to believe wrong or inaccurate sources of information.

Myths vs. Truths

Some of the myths that many of us learn about sex, and the truths that reflect sexual reality:

Myth: *Sex is something you “just know” how to do. It comes naturally and doesn't require practice. You should know exactly what to do and how to do it.*

Truth: Good sex takes learning and practice—it doesn't happen easily at first, nor is it “rockets and fireworks” all the time.

Myth: *Sex is always fabulous. Every time you engage in a sexual act you experience absolute pleasure, and fireworks go off and your body is filled with joy and happiness (or something like that!).*

Truth: Sometimes sex can be awkward, silly, uncomfortable, and messy; after all, we are human. Other times it can be wonderful, magical, and amazing. But every time something will likely be different, so expecting peak experiences every time is both wrong and misleading.

Myth: *Sex = intercourse. If you're not having sexual penetration, you're not having sex.*

Truth: Sex is a lot more than penetration. Healthy sex involves a variety of touching and intimate contact, and may or may not involve penetration at all. Penetration is necessary for making babies (for those who have the right parts), but sex is about intimacy and closeness, too, and that can be achieved in a lot of different ways, including oral sex, hand massage, kissing deeply, rubbing skin-to-skin, and much more.

Myth: *Only beautiful people with thin bodies have sex.*

Truth: Nope. Almost everyone is sexual in some way—it's up to you to find out what sex is for

you, how you enjoy it, and with whom. And if you are someone who just isn't interested in sex or intimacy, that's okay as long as you are happy with how you are. People of all sizes, shapes and abilities enjoy delightful, healthy sex lives with themselves and their partners.

Myth: *Sex happens seamlessly; it moves from kissing to disrobing to caressing to “sex” without awkwardness or discomfort.*

Truth: Sex requires good communication to work well. If we can get over our shy awkwardness and ask for what we want and like, we will be more likely to get it! No one can read anyone else's mind, and moving your hips and moaning does not communicate enough to be a clear message. (“Was that an ‘oh, I like that!’ moan, or a ‘don't do that anymore!’ moan?”)

Good, healthy sex requires that you know your body—how it works, what you like, how you like to be touched. We are all very different: some folks like to be lightly stroked, others find that light touches tickle too much. Don't expect your partner to know how to arouse or touch you if you don't tell them what you like and don't like.

Myth: *Masculine people always want sex and Feminine people always want romance.*

Truth: There are feminine people who love sex and want a lot of it, as well as feminine people who prefer a lot of romance in their lives. There are masculine people who are more interested in romance or companionship than in sex, and masculine people who love sex play and enjoy it often. Many folks enjoy both romance and sex, while others prefer neither.

Myth: *You should always feel lust toward your partner, and if you don't, there's something wrong with you or your partner.*

Truth: There is an early period in every relationship where sex drive is often high—it's

the brain's way of encouraging people to bond. Over time, that settles down. You won't always feel that kind of “lust” that you felt at first. In fact, if you stayed in “lust,” you'd get nothing else done in life (eating, working, sleeping, etc)!

There is nothing wrong with your relationship if your sexual frequency changes from daily to weekly, or weekly to monthly. Sexual interest is very dependent on your level of stress, energy and distraction, as well as a natural waning of intensity after the first 6-12 months of a relationship. For most people, sexual desire comes and goes—sometimes it's high and sometimes it's low. And that's normal.

Myth: *“Everyone else” is having great sex all the time (or at least, more than you).*

Truth: Uh-uh. Stress, busy-ness and external pressures can cause anyone's sex drive to go up and down. If yours has gone down because of kids, jobs, or other life stresses, it often returns when there is more time and energy for it. Sometimes you have to *make* the time and *find* the energy. If you're too busy to have sex, you might want to find ways to be less busy and make more time for sex and other pleasures.

The only thing we know for sure about “everyone” is that we all have times when we have a lot of great sex, and times when we have little or no sex in our lives. Every part of that is normal and to be expected.

Myth: *People over the age of (older than you) don't have sex or are no longer sexual.*

Truth: We all have the capacity to enjoy sex for all of our lives. As long as you maintain good health so that your sexual parts function well, you can enjoy sex with yourself and with other folks. Even as your body ages and changes, with time and some extra thought (and maybe a few helpers like lubricant and a toy or two), you can enjoy pleasurable sex for as long as you

wish. It may be strange to think of parents or grandparents having sex, but chances are, they do.

Myth: Everyone should always be “ready” for sexual penetration immediately: penises should be hard right away and vaginas should lubricate a lot, and quickly.

Truth: In reality, sex play is very different from the view we see of it in movies, internet sites, television, or erotic novels. Sometimes it takes a while to become aroused, and sometimes when people are aroused they may not have firm erections or lubricate a lot. Many vagina’s don’t lubricate as much at certain times in a monthly hormonal cycle, when taking certain medications, or when they go through menopause. Penile erections vary depending on their physical health, and all of us may have trouble with arousal or orgasm when we are distracted, stressed, or experiencing relationship challenges. Keeping yourself physically and mentally health has a substantial side benefit in keeping sexual arousal capacity intact and available.

Myth: Self-pleasuring (masturbation) is pretty bad for you physically and mentally, and leads to severe negative outcomes.

Truth: Orgasms are healthy for your mind and body. Self-pleasuring is a safe way for you to learn more about how your own body works, does not transmit infections, and is a proven way to make sure that your sexual arousal system can function properly in the future. When you are privately pleasuring yourself, it has no impact on any one else.

So how do you learn to create and enjoy a healthy sex life?

Everyone is different, and that is no where more true than when thinking about a sexual self. Some things to consider are:

- **Know Yourself**—learn about how you like to be touched, what arouses you, what turns you off, and how you need to be touched to reach orgasm. This takes learning your body parts and how they work sexually, and exploring through self-pleasuring and other forms of self-touch.
- **Learn about safer sex** and how to keep yourself safe from sexually transmitted infections. Learn more about barriers like condoms and oral sex dams, and get comfortable using them (see our *Condoms and Barriers* brochure for more information).
- **Get more comfortable communicating** your needs and wants to a partner, if you have one. Try to be non-judgmental when a partner does the same. Presenting an open-minded attitude will encourage others to do the same for you.
- **Say no when you don’t want sex.** Sometimes it’s okay to negotiate about sex—“Okay, I’ll have sex with you now if you’ll help me with X later”—but if you really don’t feel like it, that’s okay, too, and it’s important to say so.
- **Take the time to be “in” your body.** Find ways to love your body, regardless of whether or not it conforms to your culture’s norms. Stay active, strong and healthy.
- **Learn more about sex** and all the different ways that people enjoy it together. Explore new things and make sure that you have fun during sex, whether it’s with a partner or yourself.
- **Try not to be goal-oriented**—orgasm is not the only thing you get out of sex. Aim for whole-body pleasure, connection, deepening intimacy and communication, or an exploration of sensations in addition to, or instead of, orgasm.

- **Understand that sexuality changes over time**—what you want and like now may not be what you want and like in 5, 10, or 20 years. Accepting changes and enjoying where you are now without preconceived expectations is the healthiest way to enjoy your sexuality. Trying to get “back” to how you were X years ago is not necessarily going to be rewarding, nor possible. Sex often gets *better* as you age, but it also becomes *different* from how it was when you were younger. Learn and enjoy the evolving you.
- **Don’t be afraid to integrate toys and other tools** (vibrators, visuals, lubricants) into your sex play. These can increase your pleasure and help make sex fun. If you’re not interested in toys and tools, that’s okay too.
- **Ask for help when you need it**—from a friend, family member, partner, professional, book or DVD. It’s okay to recognize that you need some help boosting your arousal, and there are lots of resources you can turn to when you need more information, more support, or another opinion.
- **Most of all, have fun!** Laugh, be silly, be outrageous, and be yourself!

Suggested Resources

Good books to help you learn about healthy sexuality in all its forms:

- *Better Than I Ever Expected*, by Joan Price
- *Come As You Are* by Emily Nagoski
- *Drawn to Sex* by Matthew Nolan & Erika Moen
- *Good Sex* by Jessica Graham
- *Madness to Mindfulness* by Jennifer Gundsauillus PhD

The Path to Healthy Sexuality

~ learn about healthy sexuality

~ learn the truth behind common myths about sexuality

~ tips to increase enjoyment in your healthy sex life



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