

# **Human Sexuality**

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“Sexuality is the lyricism of the masses”

Charles Baudelaire

## **Introduction**

Probably no topic creates as much awkwardness and uncomfortable perceptions than that of human sexuality. Regardless of your age, experience, education or national origins, when the topic of sex and sexuality comes up most people run for cover. The most typical reaction is for people to either shut down or start giggling when a discussion of sex comes up.

Why is this? Why do we become so uncomfortable with a topic that is natural and relevant to us all? These are not easy questions to answer, but suffice it to say that for most of us, we behave or react immaturely and find ways to dodge or evade the topic.

In reality, human sexuality is a natural and critical issue for all of us. Further, sexuality is an issue that affects every one of us, regardless of age, maturity, cognition or physical functionality. All people are sexual and have a right to sexual expression in ways that are socially acceptable.

## **Relationships**

All human sexuality gets expressed via relationships in our lives. In fact, although there are examples of sexuality self-expression, the mainstay of our perceptions is framed in relationship to others. From the time we are born, and nurtured by our parents, to our early experiences with both those of our own and opposite sex; we are constantly assessing and reassessing who we are. From how we see our own body parts to how we are seen by others and then the messages they send back to us, our perceptions are framed and reframed.

To this end, any discussion of human sexuality must first start with the notion of human relations. These are the people we meet and how they begin to influence our lives, both internally and externally. Sociologists call these human relationships our “social capital” and in essence they are our family and friends. More formally social capital is defined as “those relationships in our life and how they come to serve and support us.” Often social capital is measured in how it affects our health, happiness, achievement, improvement, tolerance and general sense of pro-social behaviors.

For our purposes in thinking about human sexuality, however, social capital becomes a critical variable because how we learn, see, and then express our sexuality is dependent upon these people. It would seem that any successful or unsuccessful aspects of sexuality are tied to the input and feedback of those people in our social networks. This fact becomes more powerful as we look at the steps and stages of sexuality.

“Sexuality itself means mortality – equally  
for both man and woman”

Leon Kass

### **Psychological Aspects**

Within the context of our social capital we begin to come to know ourselves sexually through other people. How our parents and adult figures around us treat us, and the subject of sexuality, begin to form the kind of sexual creatures we become. This is why sexual perversions with youngsters, especially by people they know and trust, are such hideous crimes and assaults. These experiences lead lasting scars that never fully heal.

To this end, we need to understand sexuality through 2 key dimensions – psychological and physiological. Simply understood, psychological aspects relate to our own perceptions and understandings of our sexuality in relation to others. These tie in with our own personality, values, understanding and assumptions. Feeling attractive or desirable are psychological factors that undergird our sexuality.

Again, we begin to create our psychological paradigm based on what we are taught, what we observe and how we feel about these bits of information. From the most basic aspects of how we are touched and handled as an infant, to what we observe between our parents and family, to how we are taught in our homes and social institutions, all of this sets a mental model for sexuality. In thinking about our exposure to basic sensitive information, this is also influenced by our personal maturity. Our ability to take information, formal and informal, and then come to understand it is a cognitive process that must be understood within the context of maturity. What our parents, teachers, and then friends tell us about sex can be stilted, exaggerated, or untrue. Our maturity in filtering this information can be different for all of us.

Psychologists tell us that most humans follow a predictable psychological path as we develop our personalities and perspectives. Freud had his 5 basic stages that blended physiological with psychological growth. Erikson suggested 8 major stages for the same process. Regardless, conventional wisdom has it that human beings go through defined stages of development that begin to craft our sexual identity.

Although this seems logical, in today’s society we must also factor in omnipresent external images of advertising that deeply affects our perceptions and attitudes. Once we become aware of images and appearances, which is happening earlier in the scale,

children begin to frame what they are observing and being told off these images. So if a commercial suggests something different from what you are being told, some type of discourse will unfold. This is especially true if the message is coming from someone (or something) that the person finds attractive, desirable, or pleasing.

### **Physiological Aspects**

Our psychological perceptions must be understood off our physiological development. As our bodies start to develop and mature our actions begin to work hard to keep up. The development of pubic hair, breasts, and deepening voices, more curves and structure to the body the lure of attractiveness or desirability kick in. People begin to see themselves differently and those around us, especially authority figures such as parents and teachers begin to feel that it is time to have the “talk.”

Often, however, the “talk” is more about physiology and how our bodies work, than other critical elements of our sexual being. None-the-less, this physiological information is a critical part of the formula. Certainly it is important for people to know how their bodies work and the ramifications of the reproductive system. This is especially true if someone has a physical disability that might have direct impact on physical function.

In thinking about our physiology, it is amazing how little most people know about their bodies and how they work. More, most people are clueless how the opposite sex’s bodies actually work. Most sexuality talks are often private, and man to boy, or woman to girl oriented. These early discussions are not just awkward for the parent, but often full of erroneous information due to limited information possessed by the parent. So from the beginning, many people get started with flawed information.

Of course, as the child moves into the local school’s purview, the Health teacher is often straddled with this task and although the information may be viable and valid, the process is often stilted and unbalanced. Teachers rush through the information and little time is available for questions or explorations. Certainly this is not true everywhere, but in many cases does unfold. Think now about your own experience here, or the current experience your children have been part of. You might even want to ask your children how this information was handled and how comfortable the teacher was.

### **The PLISSIT Model**

For many years a simple model has been available in thinking about sexuality information developed by the psychologist, Jack Annon (1976). This model is very basic and has put sexuality issues into clear perspective. Annon suggested that all struggles or dysfunction in sexuality could be addressed in a cascading framework he called PLISSIT, that is an acronym for each of the stages. Quite simply the model is:

P = Permission – The preponderance of sexual dysfunction comes from either erroneous information that has caused tension, guilt or fear in people, or the strong cultural taboo about discussing or talking about sexual functioning. In this stage intervention is as basic

as just giving people permission to talk about their concern. In our work at UCP it is amazing how often just the opportunity to talk about things can take the weight of the world off people.

LI = Limited Information – If the issue or dysfunction is not resolved at the level of permission, then the counselor might need to explore more information. In the case of sexuality it might be clarifying or offering basic physiological or even psychological information that might alleviate the situation.

SS = Specific Suggestions – This level, which continues to funnel downward, indicating much less numbers, is one where the support person begins to offer specific suggestions to the individual about how they might alleviate their issue. Often with disability issues, this might mean physical positioning or perhaps devices or adjustments that might facilitate an answer to the imposing issue.

IT = Intensive Therapy – Last in the model, and an indication of less need, is the action of intensive therapy for the individual or couple in resolving their issue. This intensive therapy could be ongoing counseling or treatment that is very focused on the identified issue in the way.

The beauty of the PLISSIT model is that it demonstrates that most sexual dysfunction is easily remedied and that people who struggle do not necessarily need a certified or trained counselor. It also suggests that the lion's share of the problems come from faulty information or the lack of an opportunity in learning appropriate things from the beginning.

In my practice in Pittsburgh, I have seen the validity of the PLISSIT model, and used it extensively with people we serve. A large portion of what we offer as an agency attempts to make up for what people should have gotten earlier in life or more fluidly as they were growing up. For most people it is just the simple permission to talk about their issue without being judged or condemned.

### **Toward Better Sexuality**

If we are to develop a better sexuality agenda, we must think not just about the PLISSIT model, but stay focused on key elements that are part and parcel of a sexuality dialogue. To this end, I have developed a sexuality framework to consider. For simplicity, I have designed the key elements with words starting in the letter T. These are:

**Told** – Each of us can track back to how we were told about sexuality, both how our bodies work and how sex gets expressed. Usually the key people in this dialogue are not only different but have different agendas. Often all of these people are wrong about what they told us. Our parents rushed through the “talk” and hoped that the school would deal with physiology. Usually our friends told us about sex. Often these were exotic and erotic discussions of things that were exaggerated.

When we think about “permission” in the PLISSIT model, we must help people feel comfortable in talking about that which they are confused or concerned about. In this regard the person doing the “telling,” must be comfortable and knowledgeable themselves. They do not have to be certified sex specialists – remember that is only needed in the IT part of the PLISSIT model, and in reality only the smallest amount of people need this intensity.

Rather, people who have the opportunity to share information should be good communicators who are comfortable with their own sexuality and the topic in general. Given that most people struggle in this area, finding these people is not always that easy. Still, agencies and families can look to find or prepare people for these tasks by taking the time to learn or relearn key areas of sexuality themselves.

**Time** – In most aspects of life, timing is critical. Such is the case in discussions dealing with sexuality. In both meanings of this word, timing refers to not only making the opportunities to discuss issues and not rush, as well as when it is best to discuss emerging issues.

Certainly parents or agency staff who are dealing with sexuality issues must make the time for comfortable discussion. This not only includes the minutes or hours available, but the setting as well. Since many of these discussions are sensitive or awkward for the other person, you want to find or use a setting that is not only private, but comfortable. Think about noise, lighting, distractions, and other external messages that might make the person you are talking with uncomfortable and look to change these issues.

Timing also causes us to think about when we should have conversations. As mentioned earlier, no time is too soon in making people feel comfortable about who they are and how they are developing. In some aspects, a certain level of maturity is important for people to understand, yet there are ways to simplify or concretize information so that it can be digested. This is especially true if you are supporting someone who has an intellectual disability.

**Trust** – The notion of trust goes without saying when talking about sexuality. Since many of the questions or issues about sex are sensitive, a strong sense of trust must exist between both people. To this end, trust is not something that automatically is there with people. It is an element that must be developed and won over time. Think about trust in your life. You would not cavalierly walk into a new situation and begin to talk about something that is intimate and highly personal.

In developing trust the proof is in the behaviors that unfold. In your own relationships as you begin to share more sensitive issues with your friends, you tend to trust those that you know will treat the information with the confidentiality that it deserves. If you feel the person will divulge your trust or make fun of your situation you will surely back away.

**Theology** – No discussion of sexuality would be complete without looking at the impact and influence of religious theology. For most people, religion is something that creates a values framework. Within the context of most religions, the powerful sexual by-products of lust, passion, infidelity, and the like are acknowledged and often framed in powerful and controlling ways. Consequently, human sexuality, and some of the incumbent sexual acts often get caught in the web of religion and are perceived to be sins. This powerful convergence of sexual drives and what is defined as “appropriate behaviors” creates a confusing collision. So much so that often natural sexual acts are defined in some situations as sins and the notion of guilt begin to carry the day.

Theology and religion cast such a deep shadow over some parts of human sexuality that even discussions about sexual issues are taboo. People are taught that sex, or aspects of sex are a sin and that the urges we might have should be suppressed. These are powerful energies and many people have become confused and distracted to a point that they can become dysfunctional.

This is not to be taken lightly. Theology and religion play an incredibly important role in our lives and most of us are greatly influenced, and for the better, by our theological beliefs. Further the notions of sex, when framed from a theological aspect can be useful and complimentary to viable sexual self-perspective. Regardless, you can not have a discussion about sexuality without factoring in theology.

**Techniques** – As a person matures and begins to understand the notions of sexuality, then physical and emotional realities begin to unfold. The initial question is “how do I manifest my sexual desires?” When we reach this point, and we balance the initial aspects that we have covered in this essay, our sexual energies begin to externalize. This means we look to express our sexual energies with and through other persons. Superimposed over all of this is the attraction we feel toward others, often the opposite sex.

In our immature moments a lot of this sexual energy is expressed in fantasies toward others. Sometimes this is dreams, or urges we have about celebrities or other people that we might have romantic feelings. Usually this occurs in wet dreams, or masturbation or some other self manipulation. We long for the touch of others, but are still insecure about the techniques that we could use to express our sexual energies.

**Talking** - Once we make the next step the first sexual technique is “**talking.**” We must begin our sexual journey and this means talking to those we are attracted to. Now we could spend the rest of our days talking about ways of communication and how this relates to life and relationships. Still, as we are sexually attracted, we want to talk with the person of the attraction. In this regard the most powerful thing we can do is not just talk, but to listen just as much. One thing that makes a person attractive is if they listen effectively. This means not just being interested, but to ask questions about the other person to promote a better understanding and to find those points of similarities.

**Touching** - As people develop more connectedness, especially in a sexually focused way, the next energy is to “**touch**” that person. This touching first starts with hand to hand, hugging, or embracing in some way. This often then leads to kissing and more intimate touching. Again more can be said about this, but the key to touching is first influenced by invitation or approval first. Unwanted touching can be a huge turn-off.

**Trying** - The next technique that unfolds as touching increases is “**trying**” something new to express your sexuality. This can be as expressive as you and your partner want to be in this stage. Again, the critical element in this phase of techniques is that both persons approve the exploration and are ok with the process. If one partner is unwilling then the trying should stop.

**Turn-on, Turn-off** - In fact, this leads to the next variable under techniques, that of “**turn-on, turn-off.**” There is no question that each of us have these turn buttons. Some things that happen might excite us; others might cause us to be negative, or even disgusted. These differences develop in unique ways, but must be honored. The fun part of this however, is to fine the turn-on button. When this happens people become excited.

**Traps** – Once a relationship starts to develop and both partners are accepting we must become aware of the traps that can either stop growth, or create a negative affect that lessens the relationship. These traps can manifest in a number of ways and can happen at anytime in a relationship. We can be proactive by thinking about the triggers that can lead to relationship decay. Here are a few of them:

**Tired** – When one partner starts to tire of a technique or aspect of the relationship, this can signal the first step of a decline. We all know the famous line – “Not tonight honey, I’m tired.” This did not become a cliché line for nothing.

**Taken for granted** – As a relationship continues to develop, it can happen that one partner takes the other for granted, that they will always be there, and always ready for them. This phenomenon signals a lack of spontaneity and can create another decline.

**Traumas** – Life is unpredictable and often traumas enter into life. These are seismic events that push people into another zone. Sometimes when these occur people get pushed out of their comfort zone, or fell compelled to behave different than before the trauma. Their negative effects to a relationship can be obvious.

**Temptation** – Tied to all of the above traps is the biggest threat to a relationship – the temptation to engage with another person. We call these affairs, or trysts and they are usually the clear end to most relationships.

**Tenderness** – One can not have a viable discussion of human sexuality without acknowledging the critical importance of tenderness. The growth and development of a sexual relationship is dependent on both partners being tender with each other. This means that we take time and thought to be loving and warm and that we know the more tender we are to each other the stronger the human bond. Take time now to think about

tenderness – what it means to you, and how you might be able to express it more with the people you love.

**Today and Tomorrow** – So there we have it – a whirlwind primer on human sexuality, compacted into the key phases. Certainly such an essay and its brevity is a bold endeavor. Yet these are the key themes and they do convey an opportunity to become more conscious to their impact on us. All of us are sexual animals, and we have urges and longings that are real. For those who can direct and develop these desires in appropriate ways the result offer incredible depth and are powerfully fulfilling.

In spite of our bravado, humans are very insecure animals and as we think about our sexuality, these ideas might give us pause for not only development but action as well. What we frame for our own sexuality is a complex process but if we begin to think about it in the context of these issues we will begin to become more mature in our thinking and in our support of others.