

Sex

MJ Barker

Introduction

Welcome to my free book on sex. These free books are collections of the pieces and essays that I've written on various subjects over the years for those who would rather print them off as a hard copy book, or read them - collected together - on an e-reader. I aim to update these books with any new writing on each topic every new year, so feel free to come back then for the updated versions.

Note that some of these pieces were written over a decade ago now, and before many of the most profound shifts that the world - and I - have recently been through. I hope that it is of interest to see how my ideas have evolved over this period. But please do be mindful of the context in which they were written as they may not always represent either my own, or culturally current, thinking/practice on these topics.

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Sex Ed

Sex education

February 2021

My new book with Jules Scheele – *Sexuality: A Graphic Guide* – comes out today. One of the ways we're launching it is that I spoke about the book on *The Real Sex Education* podcast – also coming out today.

The podcast asks contributors to reflect on the sex education they received themselves, and to talk about what would've been more useful for them and more relevant to the real world. It occurred to me that the main sex education that I received were three books left in my room when I was around the age of eleven. I'm now nearly done writing a trilogy of books which would be the ones I wish I'd received instead:

- *Enjoy Sex (How, when and IF you want to)* with Justin Hancock: This book contains all the advice I wish I'd received about how to go about having sex with yourself and others, as well as knowing that you never have to unless you want to. Justin's follow up book *Can we Talk About Consent* is also a great companion to this.
- *Sexuality: A Graphic Guide* with Jules Scheele (out today!): This book explains 'with compassion, humour, erudition and a touch of the erotic' everything that I now know about how sex and sexuality work, drawing on the activists, scholars, therapists and others who've taught me the most useful things I know about this topic. It's part of our *graphic guide* trilogy.
- *How to Understand Your Sexuality* with Alex Iantaffi (out next year, we just finished writing it!): This book takes the reader through how they can understand their own relationship to sex and sexuality, within the wider understandings they grew up with, and those which surround them today. It also covers how they can communicate their sexual or asexual identities, attractions, desires, and practices to themselves and others, if they want to. It's part of our 'how to understand your...' trilogy.

To celebrate the launch of the second of these books, I thought I'd reflect here on the sex education that I received myself, as well as the messages that I'm passionate about getting across in the 'real' sex education that I now put out there.

Content note: There's brief mention of the traumatic impact of bullying and non-consensual sex and relationships in this post, no detailed descriptions.

My sex education

I didn't receive much explicit sex education at all myself. In middle school (9-13) it came in the form of a couple of anatomy lessons from an obviously highly embarrassed science teacher. It now seems striking to me that this lesson came from the same teacher who – when vexed – would make her class raise our arms above our heads and 'clench and unclench your hands' until we were in pain. It was said that she did this because she was no longer allowed to hit the kids to punish them, something that had only just been made illegal in state schools in the UK. I wonder now how it impacts you when you receive education about sex in the same context as you receive both emotional awkwardness and non-consensual/abusive behaviour. My high school was Catholic which – back then – meant that the only sex education came in the form of a disturbing anti-abortion video.

At home sex, education took the form of the three aforementioned three books which several of my friends received around the same age. These were the Usborne books *Growing Up* and *Babies*, and a book about periods *Have You Started Yet?* It looks like there are more recent versions of the Usborne books, which were also combined into a book called *Understanding The Facts of Life*.

In some ways this book was impressive for its time. The pages before and after this one include boxes explaining that it's perfectly fine to fantasise and to masturbate 'during puberty' (although by implication less okay afterwards?), and that around 1 in 10 people is 'homosexual' and even more are 'bi-sexual'.

The ways this book covers sex is not dissimilar to any number of **popular sex advice books today**. It assumes that sex equals penis-in-vagina intercourse, and that we do it to achieve orgasm. It includes some mention that 'foreplay', masturbation, and same-gender sex as legitimate activities – although these are given nowhere near the amount of room as hetero 'sexual intercourse'.

The messages in explicit/implicit sex education

The messages that I internalised from these books – and from the more implicit forms of sex education that circulated in pop songs, teen mags, peer conversations, and romance fiction – were the following:

1. There are two kinds of people – boys and girls (there were also boy and girl specific Usborne books called *What's Happening to Me?*)
2. Boys have penises, girls have vaginas.
3. Boys want sex with girls and vice versa ('Homosexuality' is this other strange thing that requires an explanation).
4. Sex is penis in vagina intercourse.

5. People generally orgasm from penis in vagina intercourse, which is the goal of sex.
6. If you want to fall in love and have 'a relationship', you need to have sex.

These messages were unfortunate for me given that:

1. I had a pretty strong sense that I wasn't the gender everyone seemed to think I was.
2. My genitals didn't seem to work in the ways these books described.
3. It didn't make a lot of sense to me to be interested in girls and boys in different ways.
4. The things I thought about when I was excited were not penis in vagina intercourse.
5. When I eventually tried it, it was impossible for me to orgasm from penis in vagina intercourse.
6. I desperately wanted to be loved and became convinced I wouldn't be because I wasn't physically able to either have penis in vagina sex, or to be attractive to the 'opposite sex' in the ways described.

Nowadays I'm thankfully aware that the things on the second list all apply to large numbers of people. In fact, if you put together all the people that at least one of those things apply to you would have the vast majority – rather than the minority – of people.

The impact of sex education

When I think about the legacy of any one of these disconnects – between the messages in implicit/explicit sex education and my own experiences – they are very painful. So many teenagers share the experiences of being convinced that they're unattractive and/or abnormal because of their physical appearance, the ways their genitals work, their experience of gender, or their erotic desires and attractions – or lack of them.

It's worth repeating that those who have at least one of these disconnects are actually in the majority rather than the minority. Also there are far too many – like me – for whom that sense of unattractiveness and abnormality was reinforced on a daily basis for several years in the form of bullying. From what I now understand of **trauma**, it's hard to compute the damage done from being repeatedly told that you – and your body – are abnormal, unattractive, unacceptable and even disgusting, with nobody to counter these messages or to help you to bear the excruciating pain, fear, and shame that comes with them.

In my case I eventually learnt that I must conform – or pretend to conform – to that former list of messages, if I ever wanted the bullying to end, or to find love and belonging. This is the second layer of damage done by explicit and implicit sex education: all of the people forcing themselves to have unwanted sex, trying to conform to gender norms that don't fit, allowing things to happen to their bodies which are not pleasurable or may even be painful or non-consensual,

and entering relationships which aren't good for them because that's the kind of relationship they've been told is normal or romantic.

And, of course, it's very painful indeed to realise – later in life – that none of this was necessary, that there were other ways you could have lived your life. It's little wonder that many people double down and try to ensure that they – and others – conform to the sex, gender and relationship norms they grew up with. As **Alex suggests**, we could see that as a form of **intergenerational trauma**.

Real sex education

This all perhaps explains why I'm so committed and passionate about getting different messages about sex and sexuality out there: why I've co-created my own trilogy of books to provide a very different kind of sex education than the trilogy I received as a kid.

For me, the following list of alternative messages would be the absolute baseline required for decent sex education or advice.

1. Gender is diverse and we all have a unique and complex relationship to gender.
2. People have a diverse range of bodies – including sexual anatomy – which work in diverse ways. So it's always about finding out how your body, and anyone else's body, works at this particular time, without making assumptions.
3. We can be attracted to all kinds of people, in many different ways, on the basis of all kinds of physical, psychological, and other features.
4. Anything can 'count' as sex so long as it feels erotic to you, and it's all fine to think about or act upon so long as that's **consensual** for you and everyone else involved.
5. There are all sorts of reasons to have sexual, sensual or erotic contact with yourself and/or others, and it tends to work best if you're **being present** rather than trying to reach any kind of destination or goal, such as orgasm.
6. All different kinds of relationships are equally valid – again so long as they're **consensual**. None of them should *require* that those involved have any kind of sex – or do anything else – because that's inherently non-consensual.

We really can't get these messages across if we centre any one kind of body as the default kind of body, any one kind of gender or sexuality as the default kind of gender or sexuality, or any one kind of sex as the default kind of sex – even if we acknowledge that other kinds of bodies, genders, sexualities and kinds of sex exist.

Returning to the 1970s and 80s

Thinking about the book that Jules and I have just published, in the light of this trip down memory lane, I realised that we managed to return to the media of the 1970s and 1980s in another way in what we created. That is in addition to trying to come up with something that was better than the sex ed books that I received at that time.

Our background theme for this book is a mashup between two 1970s creations which remain popular and are constantly reimagined: *The Rocky Horror Show Picture Show* and *Scooby Doo*.

As a kid I was obsessed with *Scooby Doo* and with anything relating to ghosts. In fact Usborne – who published the *Facts of Life* books – also published some of the best true ghost story books which I devoured.

I also vividly remember the first time I saw *The Rocky Horror Show Picture Show* at a friend's house and all the confusing feelings it left me with: this depiction of another world in which all the rules of sex, gender, and relationships which I thought were set in stone were completely different. I remember the massive sense of loss that came – for me – at the end of the movie, when the human characters are left on earth with just the sense of how everything they thought they knew has been upturned. At the time I hard-related to the character of Janet, although nowadays that has certainly shifted!

Jules and I mashed *Scooby Doo* and *The Rocky Horror Show Picture Show* together because we wanted a sense – like in *The Rocky Horror Show Picture Show* of unknowing characters entering the potentially confusing, frightening, exciting, wonderful world of sex and sexuality and returning changed by the experience. But, of course, in *Rocky Horror*, the main characters who do this are the young, white, heteronormative couple Brad and Janet. *Scooby Doo* gave us the potential to imagine a more diverse group of characters to navigate this fun house / house of horrors. In the process we took the opportunity to (re)imagine a Scooby gang who included more intersecting experiences and identities, and a more consensual version of Frank-n-Furter and his friends for them to engage with, which made us both very happy.

Of course no book is perfect, and there's so much more that I wish we could have covered in *Sexuality: A Graphic Guide*, some of which Alex and I have been working to incorporate into *How to Understand Your Sexuality*. For example, Alex and I include much more on how trauma of all kinds – as well as pleasure – shapes our sexualities. We also touch on more *indigenous scholarship*, which is a vital perspective when considering the problems with western understandings of sex and sexuality, and how these have been imposed on people around the world in forms of historical trauma which link to claiming/owning of land. Despite having studied sex and sexuality for well over two decades now, I'm still learning about it – personally and politically – and still have much to learn.

I hope that *Sexuality: A Graphic Guide* is a helpful starting point to get folks questioning the messages that they've received in their own explicit and implicit sex education. I also hope that some people may receive it – and other resources like it – young enough that a more open understandings of sex and sexuality may become a foundation for their burgeoning erotic experiences, instead of them having to begin by undoing the damage of previous messages.

Sex ed via Blurred Lines

August 2013

I was late in the day to the *Blurred Lines* phenomenon. At a conference where I was talking about gender and sexual consent a colleague mentioned that I should really check it out. Since then I have followed some of the commentary online, not to mention the numerous parodies that have been produced (as with last year's *Gangnam Style*). I was moved to write this post about how this might prompt some very interesting and useful conversations about sex (perhaps in the context of youth work or teaching on sex and gender in higher education).

For those who aren't aware, *Blurred Lines* is a song, and music video, by Robin Thicke which has topped the charts this summer across 14 countries. It caused controversy both because of the inclusion of a group of skinny, near-naked female models in the video, and because of the lyrics which seem to suggest non-consensual sex. The repeated line 'you know you want it' next to 'but you're a good girl' seems to support the common problematic assumptions that 'good' women shouldn't be sexual, and that women can want sex even when they are refusing it. The 'blurred lines' idea seems to suggest that it isn't always clear whether it is okay to have sex with somebody or not, which is a problematic message given the high rates of sexual violence.

It can be difficult to raise these kinds of issues – around gender and power, and around consent and sex – with people who enjoy the catchiness of the song and don't particularly see a problem with the lyrics or video. Given how widespread these kinds of images of women – and messages about sex – are, there are many who struggle to see the difficulties.

For this reason it has been particularly useful that two of the (many) parodies of the song and video explicitly address gender and consent. The parodies, themselves, are not unproblematic, as we will see, But I think that – used together – a viewing and discussion of all three clips can open up some helpful conversations.

Gender

The gender dynamics in the song and video were usefully highlighted by this response by Mod Carousel. The video switches the genders of both the people singing, and being sung to, and the lyrics ('you're a good boy', etc.)

This video is part of a wider internet meme of gender switching images, words, and videos in order to demonstrate problematic gender dynamics. I had a go myself on [this blog](#) when I was analysing *Fifty Shades of Grey* last year, and there are many examples on blogs like [Sociological Images](#).

Caitlin Welsh wrote [an article](#) recently, highlighting the Mod Carousel video and claiming that gender flipping could be the most important meme ever, for the powerful way in which it reveals how women are treated differently to men. As she says, when we are visually confronted with how ludicrous men look in similar poses to women, for example, we are able to recognise the problems with things that often go unnoticed and unremarked in our culture. This school project on advertising is a great example of this.

Dustin Hoffman's [reflections on filming the movie Tootsie](#) were another recent example suggesting that experiencing the world as another gender can enable us to realise things that explanations in words can never quite convey. This [art project](#) where couples switch clothes is another interesting example.

However, the gender switching in the Mod Carousel version of *Blurred Lines* raises some important issues itself. It is interesting that they chose to masculinise the women (some are wearing suits) and feminise the men (by having them wearing the same outfits and make-up as the women in the original version). On the one hand this is useful in raising issues about women being required to wear such shoes, make-up etc. as a potentially problematic aspect of femininity (another whole conversation about choice and social pressure). On the other hand, perhaps the video suggests an intrinsic link between femininity and submission given that – in order to present the women as powerful and the men as passive recipients of power – they have to masculinise the women and feminise the men.

Also there is an issue that any gender switching implicitly accepts (and reinforces?) the idea that there are two, opposite, genders, rather than alternative views such as gender being on a continuum, or there being multiple possible experiences of gender. However, of course, the video does present the idea that women can be masculine and men can be feminine which is a step forward from the original.

There is a very interesting article by Nico Lang on the limitations of the gender switched *Blurred Lines* [here](#). Nico says:

If we really want to critique rape culture, we must not just critique men but the culture of toxic masculinity that allows Thicke's song to exist in the first place. By having these women continue to perform predatory male behavior, it only upholds male patriarchy. Mod Carousel seems to suggest that the song's content is okay and that you can sing "I know you want it," just as long as you're female, but what it does is uphold a world where femininity continues to be predated.

When I saw it I felt the Mod Carousel version was trying to demonstrate the problems with the original by showing how troubling it would be if these kinds of things were said to men, rather than to women. But I also think that Nico has a point here and it would be possible to read the switched video as accepting the underlying assumptions of the original; as long as everyone can say these things to everyone else they are not problematic. This is the issue of whether

women and people of other genders should be fighting for the same rights as men (e.g. fighting for one's country or being the 'breadwinner'), or whether some of those 'rights' themselves should be questioned.

Consent

A parody which perhaps goes further towards confronting the problems around power and consent in the original is the *Ask First* video. This alters the lyrics such that those involved are asking for each other's consent (rather than telling them what they want). It also depicts characters of multiple genders in conversation. While it doesn't have the production values of *Mod Carousel*, perhaps it does a better job of revealing the problematic assumptions of the original.

There's a great accompanying article to this video on [the Scarleteen website](#) about the problems of consent in the original. Cecilia refers to Thicke's lines about how he's going to 'take' the woman he's singing to:

Consensual sex isn't something we "take" from someone else or they take from us: it's something where everyone involved is an active agent, doing something together, or, if you prefer, where everyone is giving and accepting, but no one is taking.

Again though, the parody video may not completely capture the complexities of the situation. It promotes the idea of 'yes means yes' or 'enthusiastic' consent whereby sex is engaged with because everybody wants it (you ask and they enthusiastically say 'yes' or vice versa). This is certainly preferable to the *Blurred Lines* message that you can't really know if somebody wants sex and just have to guess (either they will enjoy it or you will be a rapist). It is also preferable to the 'no means no' version of consent where you go ahead unless somebody actively refuses. In 'yes means yes' everyone is actually keen on what they're going to do.

However, the focus on asking and receiving a yes assumes that people have a pretty good insight into themselves and that no other power dynamics are in play. The problems with this are nicely illustrated if we return to the original *Blurred Lines*. In wider culture women are often regarded and portrayed as sexual playthings for men, and men are encouraged to be independent and responsible whilst femininity is often still about being vulnerable, delicate, and needing validation from relationships with others. Given this backdrop, are men and women on an equal footing when it comes to conversations about sex? Might men feel pressured to be constantly 'up for it' and to say 'yes' to things because that is part of masculinity – even when sex is the last thing they want? Might women feel pressured to say 'yes' because being 'nice' and 'enthusiastic' about other people is part of femininity, and because they feel losing a relationship otherwise? Under such social conditions the idea of 'yes means yes' becomes more tricky. And the same is true when power dynamics are in play around other things like age, experience, sexuality, race, class, disability, etc.

Conclusions

There aren't necessarily easy solutions to any of these issues, but I think that our relationships, and our sexual connections, are likely to be improved by thinking them through, rather than accepting the kind of mainstream understandings reflected in *Blurred Lines*. We need to ask ourselves what media would look like if the genders (or other power dynamics) were switched. We need to consider whether the people represented are equally free to choose. And, if not, we need to ask would have to happen to make them more so, and whose responsibility that would be.

Sex Advice

Five problematic sex messages perpetuated by advice manuals

First published in [The Conversation, May 2018](#)

I can't recommend reading over 60 sex advice manuals. I spent several months doing this and it results in a particular combination of sadness, anger and frustration that I'd rather never repeat.

The reason for my painful few months was my new book, [Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture](#) with [Rosalind Gill](#) and [Laura Harvey](#). The book explores the changing forms of "sexpertise" and how they influence ideas and practises around sex. In addition to sex manuals, we studied blogs, magazines, reality TV shows such as [Sex Box](#) (which actually gets people to have sex in a box), newspaper problem pages, websites, apps, and more.

We emphasise throughout our book that it's rarely a matter of any sex advice being all good or all bad. Rather, sexpertise often opens up some things – in terms of ways of understanding or experiencing sex – at the same time that it closes down others. And the same text has the potential to be read in different ways by different readers. For example, somebody might read sex advice to get ideas, to enjoy sexual images, to find humour in it – or a combination of these.

But it's also important to acknowledge just how deeply problematic the vast majority of mainstream sex advice is. Especially in this moment of #MeToo, and greater awareness of intersecting systems of privilege and oppression, it's most concerning how few texts even mention consent, and how many assume that sex equates to penis-in-vagina intercourse, often depicted by endless images of young, white, slim, non-disabled, normative male/female couples.

When the panic around the messages young people receive about sex so often focuses on sexually explicit material, it's about time we turned our attention to the insidious and disturbing messages that people are receiving from materials which are supposedly designed to educate, inform, and advise about sex.

So – in true sex advice "top tips" form – here are the top five problematic messages that we've found are perpetuated by the majority of sex advice.

1. There's a set script for 'proper' sex

As sex therapist [Clare Staunton](#) puts it, the "kiss, kiss, boob, boob, penis in vagina" approach to sex is found everywhere. Even advice which tries to expand sex beyond this formula often defaults to an assumption that penetration is somehow better or more ideal than other forms of sex. In addition to the number of sexual identities and practices this excludes or marginalises, it also makes ongoing consent more difficult as it is easy to simply default to the script without checking whether you find this pleasurable or whether it is what the other person wants.

2. Certain bodies are sexy and sexual, others aren't

People are encouraged to engage in surveillance and disciplining of their bodies in order to have a sexy appearance, and to perform sexually. From the images found throughout mainstream sex advice it's clear that older bodies, disabled bodies, and fat bodies are not deemed sexual given that they are absent or – if they ever do appear – clothed. Again, this marginalises many bodies, and encourages people to treat their bodies in unkind ways that takes them away from the potential for embodied erotic experiences.

3. Individuals are responsible for having great sex

The ideal self in sex advice is one who has banished repression, overcome taboos, dealt with any “issues”, and become a properly adventurous neoliberal lover. Sexual problems are almost always located within the individual – often a woman – who is also told they are responsible for improving themselves through various “technologies of sexiness” (toys, techniques, and so on). There's very little consideration of how wider cultural messages and social structures frequently restrict our capacities for sexual desire and pleasure.

4. Pleasure is imperative (but restricted)

Sex advice emphasises that people must experience sexual pleasure – even suggesting that it's an imperative of being a healthy person or having a healthy relationship. But there's little unpacking of what pleasure is. Rather, it's assumed that the range of acts presented in sex advice will be pleasurable – often equated with resulting in orgasm. There's little consideration of the complex interweaving of pleasure and other experiences in sex (such as duty, shame, validation, disappointment, relief), or the ways in which goal-focused approaches to sex often result in less pleasure and more pressure.

5. No need to mention consent

Shockingly, hardly any mainstream sex advice we looked at mentioned consent in any detail. When it was touched upon it was almost always in relation to having safewords for kinky sex, with no sense that other forms of sex may also require consent, and that it may be about far more than just “saying no”. Advice about communication hardly ever gave consent as a reason for communicating, or as something that people might need to communicate about.

This is even more concerning considering that much sex advice actually gives messages that run counter to treating yourself – and others – consensually. For example, women are encouraged to provide unwanted quickies or forms of sex they did not enjoy so as not to risk losing the relationship, to allow partners to do anything they liked at the point of orgasm, or to begin having sex when they didn't feel like it – because supposedly women don't get into it until they've been doing it for a while.

The most recent [NATSAL survey](#) found that nearly half of people report a sexual difficulty of some kind. This seems unsurprising given the the pressures and restrictions sex advice places on sex, and the lack of advice about how to expand our erotic imaginations, to tune into and

communicate our desires, and to have sex in ways that don't risk further non-consensual experiences.

Sex therapy: Stop trying to be 'normal'

September 2014

Yesterday *The Observer* published its special issue on sex. Based on their [survey of British sexual attitudes and practices](#), the issue contains several interesting articles about current understandings and expectations around sex. They interviewed me and a couple of other sex therapists about what we thought was going on in this area, from our work with clients. You can read those interviews [here](#), and I've included the full version of mine below. I addressed a few points in greater depth than they could cover in the article.

Overall I was pleased with the interview they published, especially with the fact that they used my quote 'stop trying to be "normal"' as the headline. However, in retrospect I think I might have added a caveat: 'stop trying to be "normal". But that is really really difficult to do in a culture that puts so much pressure on people to conform to a certain idea of "normality", so go gently on yourself.'

What are the most common issues raised in sex therapy by men?

Definitely problems with erections: either struggling to get and keep erections, or 'premature ejaculations' which mean that they feel they orgasm too quickly. There's a lot of pressure on men around performance, so men's sexual problems tend to relate to not feeling able to 'perform' as expected, and anxiety that this makes them less of a man.

Could you just tell me about how this has that changed since Viagra?

Viagra and other similar drugs have certainly changed things. Of course they have been very helpful to many many men in helping them to have the kind of sex they want. However it's important to remember that they only work to keep erections in guys who can already get erections. So they can be disappointing for people who aren't getting aroused in the first place.

At the same time, I think a lot of people have understood Viagra to mean that all sexual problems can be physiologically fixed and that this must mean that they are physiologically caused. That isn't the case. A lot of sexual difficulties stem from the huge cultural pressure to 'perform' sexually in certain, limited, ways, and the anxiety that causes. Sexual difficulties can also be a really useful message from our bodies that they are not happy with what we're trying to make them do (e.g. having sex that we don't really want). The risk with drug therapies is that they encourage us to ignore those messages, and they may discourage us from trying to change the wider culture around sex which is such a big part of the problem.

What are the most common issues raised in sex therapy by women?

Mostly, for all genders, it is worries about anything that gets in the way of having the kind of sex that people feel is expected of them. With women, for example, if they don't feel aroused enough or if their vagina is too tight or painful for penetration they often feel anxious. For a lot of women there's a big fear that if they don't have the 'right' kind of sex they might lose the relationship.

What are we most scared of when it comes to sex?

This one is easy! People are very scared of not being normal. By far the most common question I've heard as a sex and relationship therapist is 'am I normal?' And people come to sex therapy with the hope that it will make them normal. Generally what they mean by 'normal' is the ability to have sex that lasts a certain amount of time, that happens an average number of times a week (whatever that is!), and that involves penetration and orgasm.

Do Britons have a healthy attitude to sex?

No! The **NATSAL survey** of sexual attitudes and lifestyle found that 42% of men and 51% of women reported experiencing sexual difficulties.

Why is that the case? I'm sure it's because we have this strong cultural ideal of normal sex and how important it is. Everyone is trying to match up to whatever they've seen on TV or read about in magazines instead of realising that sex is hugely diverse. There's massive variety in the amount of sex people want, how long they want it to last, the kinds of things they enjoy most sexually, the people that they find attractive – all of these things. It is perfectly healthy to experience no sexual attraction or to have a high level of sexual desire or anything in between. We need to stop caring so much about normal and start embracing diversity.

Online porn: good or bad influence?

Both! As with most things porn opens up some possibilities and closes down others. In a world where we still have shockingly little decent education about sex, porn does provide a lot of people with a place to find out about how bodies work and different sexual practices. Also it can help people to realise that there are lots of things that they can do sexually and that is okay.

However, if people only view the most available kinds of porn they could easily come away with another set of ideas about 'normal' sexually, which could make them feel worse rather than better. For example, it wouldn't be helpful to measure your body against a porn star's body (in terms of how it looks and what it can do – they are like the Olympic athletes of sex!). Plus it is

important for people to find their own sexual scripts of what they enjoy rather than feeling that they have to copy any standard script (whether it is porn or Hollywood movies).

Finally there is very little discussion of sexual consent in either porn or mainstream media sex scenes. Given the high rates of sexual abuse and violence that is probably the most vital thing – to get people negotiating sexual consent. It's shocking that this is absent from most media representations of sex, and from most sex advice too.

Could you tell me what you mean by negotiation?

Negotiation really means having some kind of conversation about sex before having sex. This would cover things like what each person likes and doesn't like, as well as how they will communicate to each other during sex if they aren't enjoying it any more. This is very important as research suggests that – currently – couples who have been together for a decade still only know about 60% of what their partner likes sexually, and only about 20% of what they don't like!

Kink communities have a lot of good ideas about how people might negotiate – given that it can be so difficult to communicate about sex. For example, with a **'yes, no, maybe' list** you list all of the sexual activities you can think of (either together or on your own) and then go through the list writing 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe' beside each one, to get a sense of what your shared areas of interest are, and also what each person's hard limits are. This can be a pretty exciting and fun way of opening up a conversation. It's also good to revisit it every year or so as, of course, these things often change over time. Kinksters also have 'safe words' that people can say if the sex they're having starts to feel uncomfortable in any way (e.g. the traffic lights of green = go, red = stop, and amber = slow down a bit or check in, I'm not sure about this).

One of the positive sides of online technology for sex is that people can also negotiate online prior to having sex in person. Email and online messaging can be great places to talk about sex, to share fantasies, or to try things out in role play (although, of course, it's important to remember that none of that communication is completely private because online messages go through so many places in their way from A to B).

Have the anxieties you hear in therapy changed in the last five years? (And how?)

I did an analysis recently of the kinds of anxieties that people were writing about to the main newspaper sex problem pages in the UK. That gives a pretty good sense of what people are most worried about at the moment. The top two problems were worries about sexual orientation, and worries about infidelity. So people are most concerned about whether they, or their partner, might be bisexual or gay, and about whether they, or their partner, is having an affair. The next most common fear was around not being sexually normal (the kinds of thing I've already mentioned).

So I think we definitely need to open up more conversations, in sex ed in school, in the media, and in sex advice, about the diversity of sexual orientations, and about how people manage the rules of their relationships around monogamy. From the research it seems that over a third of people have attractions to more than one gender, and over half people have sex outside of a monogamous relationship. Clearly people are very anxious about these things, but many don't have the information and awareness to navigate their ways through it.

What sexual practices are you seeing more of?

After *50 Shade of Grey* there is definitely more awareness around kink and BDSM, again without much good information for people about how they might engage in those kinds of sex. The novels definitely don't give a great sense of how people might do this! There are some very useful books out there by people like [Tristan Taormino](#), [Mollena Williams](#), and [Dossie Easton](#) if people are looking to explore those areas.

What's missing from the novel? In what ways is it not helpful as a sexual education?

In the novel, the kink relationship takes place in a very unequal power dynamic. Ana has no experience at all, and Christian has loads, and he is also a hugely rich and powerful man. It's really important, in real life, to think about power dynamics when it comes to sex because they can easily make one person feel that they can't really say 'no' to something they dislike, or open up about what they'd like to do sexually. Ana is given very little opportunity to say what she might like to try – just a list of what Christian is into.

Also, Christian does not respect Ana's boundaries in their wider relationship. He follows her when she's asked for some space, and interferes with her work life. He also tells her that she can't talk about the relationship to any of her friends, which is a big danger sign for abusive relationships. Both characters are trying to change each other into something they're not. It is hard to have consensual sex under such unequal conditions.

Do you think we're having better sex than previous generations?

Nope, sadly not. I'm always dismayed when I go and talk to students about these topics because their sex ed is generally no better than what I had thirty years ago. Also the current popular sex advice books (which I've just been analysing for a research project) just perpetuate the idea that there is one kind of 'normal' sex that everyone should be having. They emphasise penis-in-vagina sex and orgasm, and really don't give any sense of diverse bodies and sexual practices, or much guidance around the issues of sexual orientation and monogamy that people are actually most worried about. Many are mostly a list of different positions in which to have penis-in-vagina sex, which really isn't much help!

You could definitely say that many of the places that people are going to get help with sex are actually part of the problem, given that they still buy in to the idea of normal sex that everyone should be having, instead of emphasising diversity and helping people to tune in to what they want and to communicate that consensually to others.

What counts as cheating these days? Are we less monogamous – are there more shades of grey?

The evidence suggests that people do not have open conversations, early on in relationships, about monogamy. They generally just assume that the other person will have the same rules as they do. Many relationships then break down because they realise that they have different rules when something goes wrong. One person thought it was fine to stay friends with their ex and the other didn't. One person thought it was okay to look at online porn and the other didn't. The lines around monogamy and non-monogamy are blurred, and there are lots of different ways of doing relationships (think about friends-with-benefits, hook-ups, monogamish relationships, and polyamory, for example).

Again I think people just need more awareness about these things and guidance about how they might navigate differences in how much emotional and/or sexual openness they might like. We go into relationships assuming that we will share our monogamy rules and our sexual desires, but actually there are bound to be some differences. Assuming difference from the start, and talking about it, could be a lot less painful than finding this out down the line.

Is that like the conversation about whether or not you want to have children – important to have early?

I think that's another conversation that is worth having. In *Rewriting the Rules*, I suggest that it's worth thinking about all the things that we often take for granted when committing to relationships (e.g. living together, sharing finances, having kids, going on holiday together, etc.) as well as monogamy, and having conversations about it. There are different ways of doing all these things, and it's important to respect that each person can be coming from a different place and that is okay.

Is there a difference between how older and younger couples are negotiating or interpreting the new rules?

I'm not sure that there is much of an age difference here. Some older couples have found, through experience, that they want to do something differently to the perceived norm (e.g. living apart together, or having separate holidays, or swinging), whereas some younger couples follow what they think is expected of them. And, of course, there are older couples who feel that they can't shift after a lifetime of following the perceived rules, and younger ones who do things differently from the start because of their politics, for example.

Do you think we've become more open minded and experimental, or more anxious and insecure?

Again I'd say the answer is both! There is both more openness and more anxiety.

What is still taboo?

We still have a lot of cultural bogeymen in relation to sex. The sex advice books that I read talk about a 'sexless relationship' like it is the worst thing in the world and would definitely lead to break up. They encourage people to have sex even when they don't want it in order to avoid this. I think that is really problematic as it encourages non-consensual sex, and also lots of relationships are not sexual and are totally fine.

There are also taboos about people being 'too sexual' or having the 'wrong' kinds of sexual desires. People get so scared of being labelled a sex addict, or a freak, that they often try to hide from their sexual desires, rather than exploring them in a safe space, and figuring out which can be acted on consensually, and which they want to keep to fantasy only.

Are fantasies quite taboo in general?

Yep, people are often worried by their fantasies, again because we aren't open about the reality that it is – in fact – normal to have a range of sexual fantasies, including about things we'd never act out. Like dreams, sexual fantasies can be a place where we work out all kinds of things. [Emily Dubberley's recent collection](#) of British women's sexual fantasies is a great place to look to realise just what a range of things people fantasies about.

What's the most common advice you give out in therapy?

The most common thing I do is to try to help people to gently explore their ideas about what is normal and what everyone else is doing sexually. Those NATSAL statistics – that half of people see themselves as having sexual difficulties – definitely help with that.

Once we can stop trying so hard to fit a certain box of 'normal', then we can start to explore what our own desires actually are, which is a much better starting point.

What issues seem to be most upsetting and pertinent in therapy?

I think those I've already mentioned. People feeling that there are certain kinds of sex and relationships that they should have, and that they are an unacceptable human being if that isn't what feels right to them.

This feeds into many mental health problems, particularly anxiety and depression, and also many relationship problems and conflicts. We really could help people a great deal if we could put out a different message of sexual and relationship diversity.

Do you think have any examples of the most common situations that you see in sex therapy?

One kind of situation I've seen a lot of is young people – often, but not always, women – who find penetration sex painful, but keep having it because they feel like this is what their partner will want, and they fear they might lose the relationship if they don't. Often this is wrapped up in wider discomfort about their body. They've learnt to worry greatly that they are unattractive, so they can't relax during sex. They've also never really learnt to enjoy their fantasies and their bodies so that sex might be a pleasurable thing.

Of course what we really need to do about this is to change the messages that young people are getting about their bodies, and about sex and relationships. But until that happens, therapy with clients like this is often about improving confidence, helping them tune into their desires, and challenging assumptions about sex. For example, it might be that they are assuming what kinds of sex their partner wants, and actually both of them would be very happy to take the pressure off penetration sex, by doing other stuff as well, or instead (e.g. mutual masturbation, oral sex, watching erotica together, role-play games, massage).

Another common situation at the moment is people – often, but not always, men – who are disturbed by the kinds of online porn they're looking at or how much they're looking at it. Again, the ideas around 'normal' sex often mean that they are terrified to think too much about it in case they discover that they are abnormal or 'deviant' in some way. Often they then get into a pattern of just trying not to do it at all, and then going back to it and feeling deeply ashamed afterwards.

Again, the best answer here would be to change our cultural ideas about sex, so that we were much more open about the diverse range of sexual practice that are absolutely fine, as well as being much clearer about the lines between consensual sex and non-consensual sex. If sex education throughout school explored those kinds of things then young people would have a much better idea about how to navigate their sexual fantasies and online sexual spaces.

However, in the absence of that cultural shift, therapy can provide a safe space for people to be open about what turns them on, and to start to gently understand what it means to them (rather than just trying to avoid it completely, or get sucked into it totally). Exploring ideas of consent and ethical treatment of ourselves, and other people, can help clients consider their own ethics around watching porn, and engaging in sex, and the lines that they want to draw between fantasy and reality.

When was the last time you were shocked in the therapy room?

In a way every time that I hear another person in so much pain because they are trying to match up to this impossible ideal of normal sex, instead of exploring what they might actually enjoy. That is pretty shocking when you think about it.

If you could give one piece of advice to the nation when it comes to sex, what would it be?

Stop trying to be 'normal'!

What can we all learn about sex from *The Sessions*?

January 2013

I urge you to go and see the movie, *The Sessions*, which is currently out in cinemas. Not only is this a quietly beautiful and uplifting film about life and love, alienation and connection, in the same vein as another favourite of mine, *The Station Agent*, it also has a lot to offer on the topic of sex.

The Sessions

The film, based on an autobiographical essay *On Seeing a Sex Surrogate*, follows Mark O'Brien (played by John Hawkes) as he attempts to find a sexual relationship. At 38, Mark has had to spend most of his life in an iron lung since having polio as a child and is only able to be outside of the machine for two or three hours at a stretch, still lying on a gurney and reliant on his mouth for typing or making phonecalls, and on paid carers to move him around.

After being opened up to the possibilities of love, but subsequently rejected, by a potential partner, Mark decides that he wants to experience sex. A therapist refers him to a *sexual surrogate*: an expert practitioner who engages in sexual therapy and education through both conversation and sexual intimacy with their clients (unlike *sex therapists* whose professional boundaries forbid physical contact). Cheryl Cohen-Green (played by a rightly *Oscar-nominated Helen Hunt*) sees the highly anxious Mark for a number of sessions and helps him to explore his fears and hopes around sex, as well as experiencing various sexual practices, with the aim that he will then have sexual knowledge and skills to take into future relationships. The film takes us through both the physical and emotional aspects of the sessions and reveals the impact of these on both main characters as well as on a number of beautifully drawn additional people in Mark's life including friends, carers and his priest (William H. Macy on cracking form).

What can we all learn from *The Sessions*?

The film was moving without ever straying into sentimentality, and funny whilst retaining a deep commitment to the humanity of all of the characters. It contained, for me, many important messages, particularly about the value of being open to connections with others (wherever those happen) and of being able to express one's vulnerability and uncertainty. I loved that, whilst the main character did want to have a romantic and sexual relationship, we also saw that romantic relationships are not necessarily sexual, sexual relationships are not necessarily romantic, and the other relationships in life (such as those with the priest, friend and carer) are equally valuable in their own ways.

Just as *Hope Springs* does for ageing and sex, *The Sessions* directly challenges the common, and deeply problematic, misperception that disabled people cannot and/or should not be sexual. Clearly Mark is just as needing, and capable, of both sex and love as anybody else, and those who are able to relate with him in any kind of mutual way (rather than being unable to see past his body) are the richer for it.

The movie relays this message in a far more subtle and sophisticated manner than I could possibly do justice to so I will leave that point there. Instead, in the rest of this post, I want to ask what all of us might learn about sex from the sessions depicted in the movie. If we haven't experienced disability it would be too easy to come out of this film assuming that what happens is only relevant to 'other people', or possibly to ourselves at some future time of injury, older age, or illness, but not now. Actually I think that we could gain a lot from considering the ideas around sex in this film as relevant to all kinds of people and bodies.

Sex in The Sessions

It is striking to me that the thing which makes sex with Cheryl most difficult for Mark has little to do with what his body is and is not capable of. Rather, as for so many of us, it has much more to do with his own anxieties about sex. These come from the messages which he has received about what kinds of sex are and are not okay, about what sex means, and about what it should involve.

It is extremely common for people to report sexual difficulties (more than half of people according to most surveys, as I mention in the sex chapter of *my book*). And even those who don't report such problems have all kinds of ideas which get in the way of them having a pleasurable or fulfilling experience. This is a truly psychosocial issue because our psychological experience of anxiety, discomfort and self-doubt is intrinsically related to the social understandings of sex that surround us. That social stuff operates through us in the form of self-monitoring. It is like there is somebody inside observing and commenting that we might look ugly in this position; or that our partner is probably expecting us to do this now; that we've taken too long over something, or not long enough; or that it isn't okay to do that because it is too dirty or weird or not 'proper sex'. All of those kinds of internal commentaries relate to social messages about who should be having sex and in what ways.

So not only does Mark need help to believe that it is okay for somebody with his body to pursue sex at all, he also struggles with messages that sex is only acceptable in a certain kind of relationship (definitely not one with a sexual surrogate), and with ideas about what counts as sex. He has many 'shoulds and oughts' about sex which we will recognise from the social world that we share with him.

Cheryl challenges these perceptions well in her work with Mark. Instead of reinforcing his idea that penis-in-vagina sex is 'proper' sex, she introduces him to a wide range of sexual practices

including those that do and do not involve the genitals, as well as the idea that certain roles or places (like motels) might be experienced sexually by people as well as certain acts. She jokes about taken-for-granted rules about sex like the idea that after fondling one breast it is 'kindof a rule' that you have to fondle the other one.

Whilst Mark does feel good when he meets his aim of orgasming inside a woman and her orgasming too, he later comments that it wasn't any better than many of the other practices they engaged in, and not even as good as some. Mark also orgasms quickly on any kind of genital contact or even visual stimulation. At first he regards this as a failure but Cheryl helpfully challenges the common assumption that a (male) orgasm means the end of sex. They enjoy both sex without orgasm and sex after orgasm, and the concept that simultaneous orgasm is the epitome of good sex is challenged when it is clear that Mark can enjoy Cheryl's orgasm more from having already had his and being able to focus on her.

What the film helpfully points out – if we are able to see it – is that we all have different kinds of bodies that work in different ways. Instead of this being a cause for shame and distress as we all try (or pretend) to meet up to some narrow, limiting standard of sex (or avoid sex entirely if we don't), we could embrace this diversity and make it the starting point for each new sexual conversation. Rather than going in with assumptions about how our body, and our partner's, ought to work, we could go in assuming that this will be a new and different body and being open to the inevitably new and different experience it will bring.

Our concerns could be not 'will I get an erection?', 'will it last long enough?', 'will I be able to be penetrated?', 'will I come at the right time?' but rather 'how does this person's body work?', 'what do they like having touched?', 'what other kinds of stimulation do they enjoy?', 'how do I respond to what they do?', 'what can I tell them about how I work with my words and with my body?', 'what new ways will I discover with them that I haven't with other people?'. With such questions it ceases to matter whether or not we orgasm from penetration, or at all, or whether we get erections or can be penetrated. We can put down those anxieties and just open up to the conversation as it unfolds.

I will leave the details of how this might work in practice to future posts on sex communication and consent (and several suggestions are also already made in [my book](#)). However some ideas – many of which are touched upon in the movie – which can be helpful include:

- Exploring the whole of a partner's body rather than focusing on assumed 'erogenous zones' and asking a partner to feed back to us on how each touch is for them (avoiding what they dislike in future), and doing the same thing the other way around.
- Practising [mindfulness](#), or being in the moment. at other times in life (washing the dishes, sitting still, walking) to cultivate that capacity and bringing it to sex.
- Reflecting on our assumptions about sex, whether they are helpful, and how they can get in the way of our pleasure and ability to be in the moment.

- Communicating about what we enjoy sexually with partners outside of explicitly sexual situations (e.g. in conversation, on the phone, or online), perhaps sharing fantasies or considering all the possible sexual practices that we are aware of together.

Sex in Relationships

Rethinking sex in relationships

November 2019

Recently I was interviewed Rachael Healy for a couple of articles on My Viv about [sex beyond penis-in-vagina intercourse](#) and about [navigating no-sex spells in relationships](#). Here's my full interview about these topics...

Why do many couples feel pressure to have a certain type of sex?

Unfortunately we have a cultural script that only certain things count as 'proper' sex. Generally this is penis-in-vagina sex leading to orgasm, although there are different scripts among women who have sex with women, or men who have sex with men. Even there there is still often an idea that there's a default way that people should have sex.

Other things that many people like just as much – and often more than – penetration are either seen as 'foreplay' before the 'real thing' (like oral sex or mutual masturbation) or as 'alternative' forms of sex, with a lot of stigma around them (like kinky play or threesomes).

We see this idea of proper, normal, default script everywhere from Hollywood movies, to the medical categories for 'sexual dysfunction', to sex advice books, so it's hard to escape from even when we know that it's problematic.

How can people start to move beyond these expectations?

I think it's useful to realise that – far from being good for us – the idea of a certain kind of normal sex is responsible a lot of problems people have with sex.

Trying to 'achieve' penetration and orgasm takes us away from being in the moment and from being open about our desires, which are the two things that are most vital for enjoyable sex.

The default sexual script also leads to a lot of people having unwanted sex – because they feel they 'should' do this 'proper sex' – which makes them end up wanting to do it even less. In long term relationships, people often stop enjoying sex because of having such a limited sexual script, rather than being able to enjoy how their desires shift over time and pick from a wider menu of activities which can all be great.

If people are experiencing a period of no sex within a relationship, how can they approach and resolve the situation with their partner?

The first thing to say is that it's absolutely normal to stop having sex. Actually far more relationships stop being sexual over time than those that stay sexual, and even in those that do remain sexual, the sex fluctuates over time.

As therapist and writer Esther Perel points out, it's actually very difficult to have relationships that are both warm and companionable, and hot and passionate, at the same time. As most long term relationships become more warm, they stop being hot. It's a cruelty of the sex advice industry that it sells us the myth of ongoing hot relationships.

Also people in asexual communities teach us that it's perfectly possible to be a healthy human being – in a healthy relationship – without being sexual, so accepting not being sexual is absolutely an option. One thing people should never do is to try to make themselves have sex that they – or their partner – don't want. So much non-consensual sex happens this way and it takes a massive toll on people's mental health.

If one or both partners do still feel desire for sex then there are a huge array of openly non-monogamous and monogamish relationship styles to consider. It's also worth thinking how each person is building solo sex into their lives, including fantasy, erotica, and/or porn – this is really important in itself, and for understanding yourself as a sexual person. If partners do want to have sex with each other, then exploring their individual **fantasies and desires**, communicating about these, and finding the potential areas of overlap is a good start.

What are the best ways to begin a conversation with a partner about rethinking expressions of sex and intimacy within the relationship?

I've created some zines to help with this, with Justin Hancock, called **Make Your Own Relationship User Guide** and **Make Your Own Sex Manual**. These can help you to figure out both what relationship style works for you and your partner/s, and what you're into sexually, as well as communicating that. It's a great idea to make these things an ongoing conversation in your relationship as people often have different assumptions about what their relationship rules are, or what they're looking for from sex.

Beyond heteronormative penetrative sex, what forms of sex could couples explore?

Justin and I recommend **expanding out your notion of sex** as far as possible. Get together and write down all the things that could possibly be thought of as erotic, sensual, or hot by somebody somewhere. Then you have a menu to work off and can go through ticking which ones you'd be keen to try, or not, and other thoughts about each activity. That way you can build up a sense of your overlapping desires and interests.

It's also a great idea to explore **sexual fantasy** – whether that's fantasies you have in your head, erotica, or porn, that you enjoy. Sharing this can be an excellent way to see where your areas of overlap might be.

Justin and I did this podcast of all the things you can do sexually with somebody which don't involve genitals – it's a really **long list**. The Wheel of Consent **3 minute game** is also a great way to explore different kinds of physical touch and dynamics between you. It's a good way to learn how to be consensual too.

What other forms of intimacy could couples explore?

Often when people want sex it's for some particular reason, for example to feel close with their partner, to relieve stress, to get into a high energy state, to relax, or to be playful. It's worth checking in with the state you'd like to be in – rather than just saying that you want sex. There might be lots of things you could do – alone or together – to **get into that state**.

Taking the pressure off sex is one of the most common pieces of advice from sex therapists. So think about carving out time to spend together as a couple where you tune into what you'd like to feel at the end of the time together, and come up with non-sexual things you could do to get there. For example it might be that a massage, cooking together or going for a walk together relaxes you and meets your need for intimacy, or that playing a game together, teasing and tickling each other, or watching comedy meets your need for playfulness.

It's great to do solo time like this too because it's good for couples to get both time together and time apart.

Sex in long term relationships

December 2014

Here's an interview that I did on sex in long term relationships. This topic is covered in more detail in my [book](#) and [website](#) with Justin Hancock, and in my book [The Secrets of Enduring Love](#).

What are the signs that lust is dead?

I'd prefer not to use the word 'dead'! Evidence suggests that our sexualities are much more fluid and flexible than many people think, so it is completely normal to go through periods of not feeling sexual. These might last or they might be temporary. Sexuality might bubble up again or take new forms.

What are the usual causes?

It can just be completely normal fluctuation with no specific cause. However it is also quite common to feel less sexual when we are tired or stressed (although some people respond in the opposite way and feel more sexual at such times). For many people relationships become less sexual over time and this can be absolutely fine. However if one person then has higher desires than the other it can be difficult for both if they don't have other ways of meeting those desires.

What is the emotional fallout for individuals and couples of the death of lust?

The only times it is a negative thing is (a) if the people involved feel that there is something wrong with them or under pressure to stay sexual and (b) if one person wants to be more sexual than the other one. Otherwise it can be fine if we challenge the messages we get from society that it is so vital to be sexual. There is so much more to relationships than that.

A really important thing is not to make either or both people feel that they should have sex that they don't really want. The more you do have unwanted sex, the harder it becomes to tune into your sexual desires and the more sex becomes something that you want to avoid.

Some partners decide to get some of their sexual needs met in other relationships of various kinds ([open non-monogamy](#)). Even in a monogamous relationship it is important that both people are able to engage in solo sex without guilt – so partners are not the only place they can get sexual desires met.

What can be done to prevent it?

If it is important to you that sex remains part of the relationship then you can do several things. Remaining tuned into your own changing desires is important. Give yourself time to fantasise or look at images or stories. Be open with yourself about what turns you on. And keep communicating with your partner about what those things are, finding any common ground (and accepting there'll be differences too). Remember that it is fine to change and to enjoy different things. Take the pressure off sex being a certain thing (eg penetration or orgasm) and play with exploring each other's bodies and fantasies. Finally a baseline of kindness in the relationship is important. Being open about sex can feel vulnerable so it is hard to do if you don't trust each other. Relationship therapy can help if you've got into a bad place.

Crucially, if you fail to prevent it, can you really revive it?

If you both want to then certainly it is possible, but do make sure that you really do want to, rather than just feeling under pressure to do so.

Can you make yourself fancy someone you have never really lusted after?

Sexual desire works in all kinds of ways. Certainly we know that love and desire can grow over time in some relationships as well as diminishing. Try not to be so fixed on an equation that sex = good and no sex = bad. That pressure tends to make us even less likely to feel sexual. Instead open up time to be emotionally and physically close with no pressure, and try to be present to that with no expectations.

Are there any cases beyond saving and how can you know?

If you've got to a very conflictual or unhappy place in the relationship I would suggest addressing that before worrying about sex.

What are the 7 highly effective habits of couples with successful sex lives?

Successful sex means that both people are able to tune in to any sexual desires they have, communicate about them, and enjoy the sex they want in a guilt free way. This might involve the couple having lots of sex, occasional sex or no sex!

7 habits that spring to mind are:

1. Cultivating the ability to tune into your own sexual desires
2. Accepting when you or your partner doesn't feel sexual
3. Not putting pressure on sex, or assuming that sex has to involve certain things

4. Open communication
5. Prioritising each other's wellbeing over any ideas about what you 'should' be doing
6. Being open to each other having some sexual desires met separately (e.g. solo sex)
7. Recognising that the amount and type of desires that we have change over time

Is there such a thing as too much pressure?

Definitely! That is the biggest problem that we have at the moment – all the cultural pressure that relationships have to be sexual and that sex only means certain things.

Should you ever 'just do it'?

Often one person will feel more sexual than the other and that is fine, but I do think it can be very damaging to have sex when you really don't feel like it, or to feel pressured into it. It is disrespectful to our partner if they are assuming that we do want sex when we don't, and it is an unkind way of treating ourselves.

Should you work at it?

I don't really like the 'work at it' idea because making it into work suggests that it isn't ok not to be sexual. Also it will likely mean we never want to do it! Instead maybe it is about valuing each other enough to protect time for *play*, and not worrying about what form that takes (whether it is sexual or not).

Sex and relationships: Fiction and fact in Hope Springs

September 2012

This weekend I saw the new romantic comedy *Hope Springs*. The movie is about a couple in their sixties (Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones) who go to intensive couple therapy (with Steve Carrell) because Streep's character is concerned about the lack of intimacy and sex in their relationship.

On one level I loved the movie. The performances were all astonishingly good, the comedy was pitched perfectly and had me laughing out loud, and I shed a tear or two in the darkest hour before the dawn because it was such a good depiction of how lonely it is possible to be in a relationship.

However, as soon as I left the theatre, I started to reflect on the messages about sex and relationships in the film and found some of them pretty problematic. In this post I'll go through a few of the ideas from the film, saying why I question whether these are good sex and relationship therapy.

Spoiler alert: I have written in detail about the film so don't read on if you want to suspend disbelief and enjoy the movie like I did before engaging your critical faculties!

Fiction: Relationships are tough – Fact: Relationships are tough

One of the best things about the movie is that it doesn't present a totally Hollywoodised version of relationships as some perfect happily-ever-after. The couple, Kay and Arnold, have not found that the love and sex that were present at the start of their relationship have stayed constant all the way through. They have changed over time, as all people do, and they have found they can't communicate very well and don't feel close any more. Kay captures a common experience well: 'It shouldn't be hard to touch a person that you love. But it is.'

Fiction: Older people can still want sex – Fact: Older people can still want sex

Another big plus was the depiction of people in their sixties as just as sexual beings as the people in their twenties and thirties who we are more used to seeing in films. This includes a number of realistic sex scenes which are a rarity in mainstream cinema. It is often assumed that people cease being sexual as they age, with a great deal of prejudice and ridicule around sex between older people, so it was nice to see this challenged. Also the therapist in the movie did not make the assumption that the couple should stop caring about sex, which many professionals do make when confronted with older people, or people with disabilities or health problems.

Fiction: It's good to communicate in relationships – Fact: It's good to communicate in relationships

The relationship between the main characters does improve and this seems to be due to the fact that they've started communicating with each other during therapy. However I did have some sympathy with Tommy Lee Jones' character when he questioned whether blurting out all of the resentments that had developed over the relationship was really a good idea. In the early weeks of relationship therapy I often see clients individually (alternating weeks) so they can have a free space to talk about how the relationship is for them and think about the ways in which they might kindly communicate this to their partners.

Secrets and lies are not a great idea in relationships, but it is also valuable to learn what each other's vulnerabilities are and to tread gently around these. Having some empathy for how what we say might be received makes it easier for the other person to hear it.

Fiction: Space can help a lot – Fact: Space can help a lot

One key moment in the movie was when both characters went off and had a day on their own. This seemed to enable them to become closer and take more of a risk with each other. I thought that this was a nice portrayal of how valuable space is for a relationship. Time apart helps to remind us of who we are with other people as well as with our partner, so we are less focused just upon the relationship and how difficult it is. We can also get some fulfillment from ourselves and from other people so that we stop expecting the relationship to be everything for us. For example, Kay got the reassurance she wanted from people she met in a bar and that took the pressure off Arnold. Arnold was able to calm down. Time apart also often means that we are able to see our partners more fully rather than fixing them as just one side of who they are (boring or difficult, for example).

Fiction: Relationships must be sexual – Fact: Relationships can be sexual or not

Perhaps the main problem with the movie is that it reinforces the common myth that the romantic relationships must be sexual all the way through and that not being sexual is a sign that there is a problem. This is a big ask given how long relationships last, and [Esther Perel](#) has written very well on the difficulties of sustaining relationships that are both warm and hot. Many relationships go through long periods of not being sexual, some are never sexual, some cease being sexual at a certain point, and some involve partners who get their sexual desires met in other ways (e.g. with other people or with pornography, erotica, fantasy and/or solo sex). Interestingly open relationships are twice presented as a big joke in the movie. Of course they might not be the thing for Kay and Arnold, but they do work for many people so it is a shame to ridicule them.

Asexual communities are currently raising awareness of the fact that it is perfectly possible to not experience sexual attraction. The therapist in *Hope Springs* seemed to assume that Kay and Arnold had to recapture their sexual relationship, rather than really exploring whether this was something that they wanted and, if so, why it was important, and the different possible ways of doing this.

Fiction: People should sleep together – Fact: It is fine to sleep apart

Another common myth reproduced in the film is that sleeping in separate beds/bedrooms is a sign of relationship problems. This is not necessarily the case at all. Some people love sleeping together and some hate it, and it may well change over a relationship (for example if people develop different sleeping routines or if one person snores or moves a lot in their sleep). Indeed having separate rooms to retreat to could be a very helpful way of getting the kind of space that can be so valuable to relationships.

Fiction: There is one thing called intimacy – Fact: There are many different kinds of intimacy

Carrell's therapist also seems to equate sexual, physical and emotional intimacy and focuses on getting Kay and Arnold to be physically and sexually close. Personally I would have focused more upon their relationship in general rather than forcing physical/sexual closeness before they were communicating well. And, as mentioned above, it is perfectly possible to have each of these kinds of intimacy without the others.

Fiction: Sex is penis-in-vagina intercourse – Fact: There are many different kinds of sex

There is a moment in the movie where the couple are about to have sex and Arnold loses his erection. Kay is very unhappy after this and nearly leaves because she assumes that it means that he doesn't find her attractive. Everything is better when they manage to have 'successful' penis-in-vagina intercourse. There are a whole load of sex myths in here. Clearly penis-in-vagina intercourse is represented as 'real', 'proper' sex, and sex is seen as requiring an erect penis and ending in ejaculation. There isn't, for example, the possibility of sex which is focused on Kay's pleasure, or the possibility of Kay and Arnold enjoying less genitally-focused forms of pleasure. Also erections are equated with attraction when these things may, or may not, be related (there are many other reasons why somebody might lose an erection).

Fiction: It is okay to go ahead with sex without much communication – Fact: Communication first is vital

When the therapist asks Kay and Arnold what they fantasise about sexually Kay struggles to come up with anything, and Arnold manages a couple of possibilities (oral sex and threesomes). The conversation is left there rather than pursuing Kay's desires or really checking out whether

she shares any of Arnold's desires (teasing apart the cultural views of these activities from her own feelings). The real danger of this is that people will then feel forced into having sex that they don't want. At the end of the film Kay seems to be so relieved that she and Arnold are finally having sex that what she might enjoy sexually seems to have disappeared (she has been vague about whether missionary position sex is pleasurable or orgasmic for her).

If people don't communicate about their sexual desires there is a significant risk that the sex they have will not really be something that they have consented to. It can be very painful to be a person who ends up having sex that they really don't enjoy (like Kay when she attempts oral sex in the movie theatre because she thinks this is what Arnold wants). It can also be very difficult to be a person who realises that the person they are having sex with isn't enjoying it (as Arnold speaks about as a key reason why he stopped having sex with Kay).

With somebody like Kay who struggles to know what she desires I would want to work with her on this before doing anything (e.g. reading erotic fiction, exploring her own body). Also it would be useful to explore the menu of what is possible physically and sexually to see whether there was any common ground (rather than pushing them towards one, restrictive, version of sex). It would be useful for Kay and Arnold to make a 'yes, no, maybe' list of all the sexual and physical practices that they are aware of, and whether they are interested in them (one of the possibilities I discuss in the sex chapter of *Rewriting the Rules*).

Overall it is great to see a movie depicting the challenges of romantic relationships and including sex and relationship therapy as a possibility. However it is about time that film-makers started to think a bit more critically about sex and about the diversity of possibilities for a good relationship.

Mismatched sexual desires

March 2022

Thanks so much to [Charlotte Dingle](#) for including me in this [great piece](#) about navigating differences in libido late last year. You can read my full interview below.

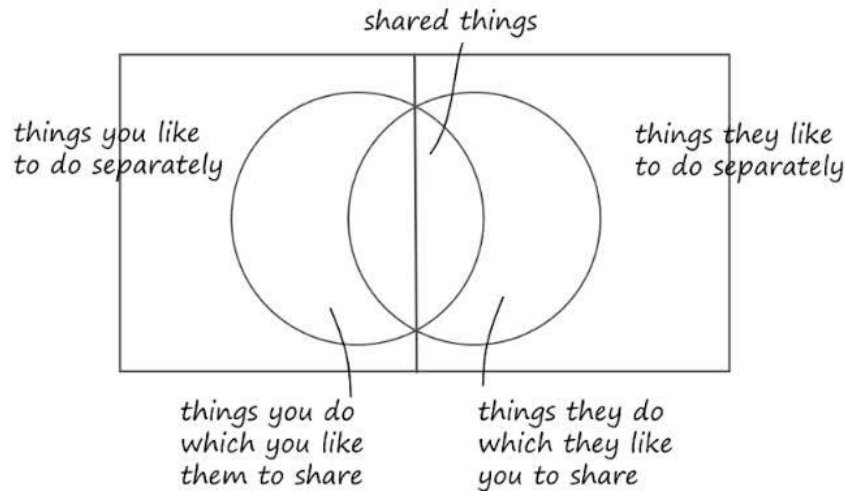
Do mismatched sex drives have to be a dealbreaker?

Not at all, in fact it would be highly unusual if any two people did not have differences – often significant differences – in terms of the amount and kind of sex they want. It would be great if we could assume, going into relationships, that this would be the case and talk openly about how we'd like to navigate these discrepancies. Unfortunately there's a huge cultural mythology that if a relationship is 'right' we'll be matched in terms of our sex drives and desires. This means that people find it very hard to acknowledge, and get support around it, when that's not the case.

How can a compromise be reached without the partner(s) with the higher sex drive feeling unwanted and/or the partner(s) with the lower sex drive feeling coerced?

It's very useful to untangle sex from other things where possible. Instead of thinking, or saying, 'I want sex' we can tune in and identify what we really want, and then assess whether sex is the only way to get there. In your example it sounds like somebody wants to feel wanted by their partner. Can they explore where that 'wanting to be wanted' comes from, and what range of experiences give them that feeling? It's very helpful to tune into what we really want and need, so we can take the pressure off sex being the only thing that can fulfill those wants and needs.

It can also help to make a [sexual venn diagram](#), of overlapping circles for the people in the relationship, where we include all of our sexual desires in the circles, with the ones we share in the overlapping part. Then we can have conversations about how we might connect in ways where we can enjoy those overlapping desires. We can also talk about the ways in which each person might be able to explore and enjoy the desires they have that are not in the overlap. In consensually non-monogamous relationships that might be with other people, in monogamous relationships it might be in giving everyone time and space for solo sex of various kinds, for example.



What about situations where there is a kink vs vanilla compromise to be made?

This is no different to the previous example really. Again if we assume that there will always be differences in desires, then kink/vanilla is just one of the ways those differences might show up, and it's up to each relationship to keep returning to the ways in which each person might explore and enjoy those desires which aren't compatible.

In this case, however, it is probably worth unpacking more what's meant by 'kink' and 'vanilla'. Rather than assuming, it may be more helpful to **list all of the erotic desires and fantasies each person has** and mapping them on the venn diagram. It may be there are some compatibilities that show up when we don't assume what counts as 'kink' or 'vanilla'.

How common would you say this issue is, especially in LGBTQ+ and poly relationships?

It is extremely common among everybody. Given that all our sex drives and desires shift and change over time, even if we were 100% compatible at one point in time (unlikely!) then that won't be true for the whole length of our relationship. It's way more helpful to assume that we'll fluctuate over time. There can be some more acceptance of sexual fluidity in LGBTQ+ communities, but there can also be a carry-over from mainstream heterosexual culture that sexual discrepancies are a problem.

One big question is how we can untether sex from other aspects of a relationship. A key reason that people often feel that they have to have sex when they don't want to is that they assume that other aspects of a relationship are contingent on them continuing to have sex. If we want to be **truly consensual** we have to accept that our partners may stop wanting sex with us for a while, or even forever, and that this should not mean they would lose, for example, our love, respect, financial security, family, or anything else. Asexual and aromantic communities are perhaps at the

forefront of navigating relationships in this way.

Struggling with sexual discrepancies can be less common in poly groups given that there is a built in possibility that people can meet different desires and needs in different relationships. However, there can still be an assumption in poly communities that for a relationship to 'count' as a relationship there needs to be sex involved, or that being sexually 'compatible' is better or ideal. Again, the more we can question such assumptions, the better.

What kind of resources would you recommend for those facing this sort of issue?

[BishUK](#) and [Scarleteen](#) are two excellent websites for young people (but really useful to everyone), and [School of Consent](#) is brilliant. In terms of my own books, hopefully [How to Understand Your Sexuality](#), [Sexuality: A Graphic Guide](#), and [A Practical Guide to Sex](#) do a pretty good job at covering these issues. There's also a [free book about consent](#) on my website, and the zine [Justin Hancock](#) and I created to [Make Your Own Sex Manual](#) helps you to communicate overlaps and mismatches in desire.

Sexual incompatibility

September 2019

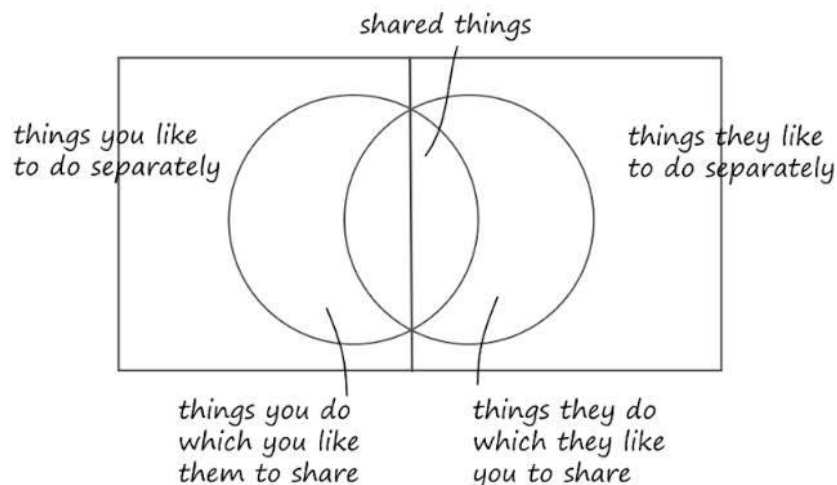
I was recently included in this article about [sexual incompatibility](#) by Alix Fox. It's something that [Justin Hancock](#) and I talk about regularly on [our podcast](#) as we think that the myth of easy and ongoing sexual compatibility is one of the reasons people are often so unhappy and anxious about their sex lives. Here's my answers to the questions Alix asked me.

What are the most common kinds of sexual incompatibility?

Probably the most common ones are people having different levels of desire or wanting different amounts of sex, and people enjoying sex for quite different reasons (e.g. for one it is to feel connected with a partner, for another it is more about the release of orgasm, or being in certain roles). People just being into quite different things is also common: like one being more kinky or open than another.

Do you think absolute incompatibility is a myth and that most people can learn to satisfy one another? Or are there problems where it's more sensible to break up, or accept it the way things are?

I would challenge the [stay together / break up binary](#) here! In any relationship there are bound to be areas of compatibility and incompatibility (around all kinds of things, not just sex). It's useful to view it as a Venn diagram. What is in your separate circles and what's in your overlap? The main problem is that people are taught that they shouldn't have any incompatibilities and that The One true partner should meet all their sexual needs and desires.



If we see incompatibility as inevitable we can remove some of the shame and start to think creatively about which desires we might explore together, which we might explore separately and how (given the agreements that we have around non/monogamy). Justin and I have produced zines on making your own [sex and relationship user guides](#) to help you to have these conversations.

What are the ways people can approach incompatibility issues in terms of practical actions and strategies?

First it's worth thinking about your non/monogamy agreement. In your areas of incompatibility where is it possible for each of you to get those desires met? If the relationship is sexually monogamous then ensuring time for separate solo sex, reading/writing erotica, watching porn, fantasy, etc. is important. If non-monogamous then might these desires be met with another partner, in hook-ups, with a sex worker, at parties, or in other ways?

If one person wants sex a lot more/less than another, or this changes over time, try to expand your understanding of what 'counts' as sex. Make a long list – separately and then together – of all the erotic and sensual things you might enjoy together and then find out which ones you both enjoy. Create times together to enjoy those things so that there isn't pressure in those times to have the kind of sex that the one person doesn't want. Consent-wise you should only be doing what you are both a wholehearted 'yes' for. Ensuring that the times you do connect together are consensual and enjoyable for everyone involved will help a lot.

When one person has a fetish the other does not share, dig into what sex – of various kinds – means to each of you. What is it you're looking for from sex? What kind of feeling do you want from it? What is enjoyable about it for you? This kind of conversation can be very illuminating and help you find the common ground as well as the areas where you differ.

If a partner doesn't seem to know how to touch you, or how they want to be touched, it could well be worth going to some events together where you can learn more about sex, and/or doing some reading. Barbara Carrellas's [Urban Tantra](#) and Betty Martin's [Wheel of Consent](#) both offer brilliant advice about how to learn to be with your body and another person's body, learning what you enjoy giving and receiving, and how to be present to each other during sex.

If you are both dominant/submissive – if you're non-monogamous and you want to be erotically connected, what about finding a third person or people who you can co-top – if dominant – or submit to together? Or you could each get those desires met elsewhere and connect over comparing notes. Sometimes we can find hidden submissive sides (if dominant) and vice versa, so it might be worth playing with that very gently and cautiously to see whether you can switch, but if that doesn't work for you that's just okay.

If one person wants sex to be tender and emotional, whereas the other has a more casual or raunchy attitude to sex, again digging into the meanings of sex and the reasons for having sex for each of you would be useful. Perhaps there is some common ground. If not then it's fine that you have different desires. Can you reconfigure the relationship so that it is grounded on other things than sex and go elsewhere for the sex?

If your partner doesn't instinctively seem to be able to 'read' you, this is another good one for reading or going to events and learning each other. It's also just okay if you find that sex isn't one of your areas of compatibility and you need to go elsewhere for that and base your relationship on other things.

Are there any additional approaches or ideas you can detail that can help people bridge sexual gaps and find greater satisfaction with one another? e.g. sex menus, being 'GGG', scheduling sex, getting therapy, etc.)

Sex menus are great. Check out [Enjoy Sex](#) and megjohnandjustin.com for more about how to talk about sex, be present to sex, and figure out what you want.

GGG and scheduling sex risk being a fast-track to non-consensual treatment of yourself and the other person. Never have sex you don't want! It is fine to get your sexual desires met somewhere else. It is fine to have a close relationship which is based on other things than sex. Most partners have incompatibilities. Many long term relationships become non-sexual and that is fine. If you have unwanted sex you are hurting yourself and you are likely to want even less sex as a consequence. Please don't do this to yourself!

How important is it to solve sexual incompatibility? Is it possible to have a happy, healthy relationship without mutually satisfying sex?

It's totally possible and very normal. The [Enduring Love](#) study found that many – if not most – long term couples had happy relationships without much sex together. The myth of one relationship meeting your sexual desires for a lifetime is really dangerous.

Sex discrepancies

*Originally published on the megjohnandjustin.com podcast/website, 2017-2020
megjohnandjustin.com/relationships/sex-discrepancies/*

What are sex discrepancies?

Sex discrepancies or sexual incompatibility refers to having different levels of desire in a relationship: one person wanting sex more or less than the other/s. It can be about wanting different types of sex too - which is connected, but we're focusing more on levels of desire for sex here.

Why do we think they're a problem?

The usual suspects: wider culture, capitalism, all of that noise. Specifically the sex advice and sex therapy industries seem to be invested in telling us that sex discrepancies are a problem that we need to solve because - in order to be a healthy human being in a healthy relationship - you need to have regular sex of a particularly kind (this is not true on any level).

The myth that sexual compatibility inevitably comes with good relationships is a dangerous one because it can keep people in relationships where the sex is good, but other aspects of the relationship are damaging, and it can mean being losing relationships which are not sexually compatible but where other things are really good (especially if we accept the stay together / break up binary).

Asexual and aromantic communities helpfully tease apart sexual and romantic attraction. We can have both, neither, or one without the other - as individuals, and in relationships - and all of that is okay. Recent scientific theories of sex have caught up with this idea and tend to separate erotic and nurturing attractions. Therapist and writer Esther Perel says that it's generally very hard to get both those things - hot passion and warm companionship - in the same relationship.

What's wrong with mainstream sex advice on this?

Normative advice reinforces the idea that discrepancies are a problem, which then reinforces the need for normative advice, which reinforces the idea that discrepancies are a problem. It's a vicious circle.

Mainstream sex advice generally makes the following kinds of suggestions

- Vary positions – always end in a different position to the one you started in
- Have a regular once-a-week time when you always have sex even if you don't want to – this will make you want it more
- Spice up your sex life by adding new sexual things to your menu
- Surprise each other with new sexual scenarios
- Never say 'no', but rather offer something else (if you really can't bring yourself to do the thing)

There is a huge issue of consent here given these suggestions are about having sex you don't want, or the other person doesn't want, or both. There's a danger of reinforcing treating yourself, and others, non-consensually. Also such suggestions don't even work to make us desire sex more - the more we do anything we don't want to do it (from checking our emails to sex) the less we want to do it.

Are sex discrepancies common?

Absolutely. It is far more likely that you would have them than you wouldn't. The NATSAL survey found that:

- 1 in 5 people who are in a relationship said that their partner had experienced sexual difficulties in the past year. (NATSAL)
- 1 in 4 people who are in a relationship do not currently share the same level of interest in sex as their partner. (NATSAL) (over time – likely everyone)
- 50% of people report having a difficulty with sex (NATSAL) (and doesn't impact happiness with relationships)

The Enduring Love study found that in long term relationships couples had everything from no sex to lots, and it ebbed and flowed over time. Sexologists have found that sexual desire, identities and practices all appear to be fluid (change over time).

Why are there sex discrepancies in relationships?

Many many reasons including: chronic pain, acute pain, illness, changing ability, wanting different things, getting bored of things were doing, bereavement, trauma, mental health issues, having kids, kids leaving home, trying to get pregnant, relationship conflict, discovering new things about your body/sexuality, gender changes, ageing, changes in sexuality, fancying partner less/more/differently, fancying someone else as well/instead, interest in porn/erotica/etc., experiencing something with someone else (e.g. other partner, sex worker, fuckbuddy, etc.), change in living situation, work or other everyday stress, change in sleep patterns, how you feel about your body, having sex and something going wrong – so worried about doing that again, experience of something non-consensual.

Again, given all of this, you would expect sex discrepancies - total compatibility would be really unlikely.

What can we do?

- Get curious about the times you want sex and the times you don't - both are just as valid and interesting - neither is more of a 'success' or 'failure' than the other
- Practice believing that it is absolutely fine for you and others not to have sex, or never to have sex. It's a vital foundation for consensual and enjoyable sex
- Expand your understanding of what counts as sex
- Consider your reasons for having sex - and what other ways you might get those desires or needs met to take the pressure off sex
- Explore your relationship agreement to ensure that everyone can get their sexual desires met without making anybody have unwanted sex

- Go gently with yourself because these cultural messages are deeply ingrained and leave us with a lot of fear and shame around not being sexual

Sexual Desire

Feeling horny all the time?

*Originally published on the megjohnandjustin.com podcast/website, 2017-2020
megjohnandjustin.com/sex/horny-all-the-time/*

First - is it a problem? We may get the message that there's an acceptable level of horniness to have and that it isn't okay to be more or less horny than that, but the reality is that there's huge diversity between people in how horny they feel (from not at all to lots) and it also fluctuates a lot within any individual person over time. Also we may well feel bad about it because of wider cultural shame and stigma, or because people in our lives are shaming us for it, rather than because it is a problem for us. If we are comfortable with it, and if we're acting on it only in consensual ways, then it's okay.

Whether we have a problem or not we might find it useful to understand it better. As with all things in life horniness is biopsychosocial. That means that it is at the level it is because of a complex mixture of the way our body works (bio), the things that have happened - and are happening to us (psycho), and the cultural messages around us (social). For example, if somebody feels less horny in their 50s, this could be due to a mixture of the cultural messages about libido declining over time or older people being less attractive, to the hormonal shifts in their body, and due to specific situations they're going through (such as a relationship difficulty, or their work becoming very busy, or a worsening chronic pain condition). Many people who take HRT in the form of testosterone feel more horny than before, but this can be due to the expectation of becoming hornier, to feeling more comfortable in their body, to genital enlargement meaning that area is stimulated more, or to changes in their lives that they make which give them more outlet for horniness, as well as to the direct impact of the hormone itself. People also respond differently to different situations, such as some people becoming more horny when grieving and others becoming less so.

Why might some people struggle to feel highly horny? Here are a few common reasons:

- Shame because of cultural messages and/or the kinds of things they're thinking about
- Judgement from others
- Being horny that much is distracting them from being present to other things
- Doing something about the horniness is taking time away from others things
- It creates difficulties because of an imbalance in a relationship (e.g. one person much more horny than another, or relationship agreements forbidding acting on the horniness)

As with sex more widely, it's worth thinking about what needs might be being expressed by the horniness. It can be as simple as 'I feel turned on', but horniness can sometimes also be a manifestation of other needs/desires, for example:

- Needing to move the body or have some physical exertion
- Wanting to soothe yourself or be kind to yourself in an embodied way - perhaps because things are tough
- Desiring a creative outlet
- Needing another kind of release but not being able to allow that (e.g. crying, laughing, anger, etc.)
- Wanting some kind of intimacy or human contact

So what can we do if we're struggling with how horny we are? It may be worth playing with this list of needs and desires. Try doing something that would meet the other needs/desires on the list and see whether that is helpful. It can also be worth getting more intentional about the horniness. With such a strong desire it can be easy to just keep fulfilling it, for example by wanking / masturbating many times a day. However, as with other appetites there are other approaches. We could designate times for solo sex or sex with another person and wait for that time to focus on quality rather than quantity. That can be a bit like saving hunger up for specific mealtimes or snacks rather than simply eating any time you feel a desire for food. The practice of 'urge surfing' can give us useful information too. Allow yourself to feel the horniness without acting on it to satisfy the urge, or trying to repress it. What is it like to stay with the feeling? That may help you to understand the feeling better and what it means to you, as well as learning how to have the experience without leaping to do something about it. Instead of giving into it, or pushing it away, we can learn to hold it gently.

Wanting to be more horny

*Originally published on the megjohnandjustin.com podcast/website, 2017-2020
megjohnandjustin.com/you/wanting-to-be-more-horny/*

The first big question if you feel this way is 'why?' There's so much pressure in wider culture to be horny and sexual that it's really hard to step outside that cultural script and decide whether it's something you really want for yourself, or more something you feel you should be. Also it's easy for people in our lives to put pressure on us to be as horny as they are - especially if we have a sexual relationship.

The most important thing here is that it is really okay not to be horny ever. It's also okay to only be horny some of the time, or only a bit horny. There is so much to be learnt from asexual communities here about the fact it is fine not to experience sexual attraction or sexual desire, or to only experience them very occasionally, or only in certain situations.

Consent is vital. It's really important not to do anything sexual that we don't want to do because we feel like we should. Not only is it damaging to be treated - or to treat ourselves - non-consensually, it will most likely leave us feeling even less horny or interested in sex than we were before.

If you are aware of all of that and would still like to feel horny more of the time, then you might want to reflect on horniness as a biopsychosocial thing. What aspects of your body and brain (bio), your experiences through life (psycho), and the culture around you (social) contribute to your horniness - and your experiences of erotic stuff more generally? What might you do on all of those levels to invite more horniness? For example, for bio you might think about times of day you feel more relaxed or available for horniness and focus on those times, or situations your body feels most comfortable in - or in less pain. You might get your hormone levels checked out or find toys that stimulate you most. For psycho you might reflect on good and bad past sexual experiences and find ways to incorporate the better ones into your current sexual times. You might do the [Make Your Own Sex Manual zine](#) to tune into your sexual desires. For social you might cultivate friendships and community where you can talk about this stuff with likeminded people, or go to events or workshops where you can learn in a culture that invites consent and horniness.

Being present to flickers of horniness is important: cultivating micro-moments of horniness when you have them and fanning the flame by allowing yourself to explore them. You might invite more erotica, porn, fantasy, or playing with bodily sensations into your solo sex, or sex with other people. It's also important not to be aiming at a certain kind of sex/bodily experience like erection or orgasm. Again this makes those things - and horniness itself - less likely to happen.

If you're sexual with another person it's important to remember that it's fine and normal to have discrepancies and fluctuations in your levels of horniness.

Asexuality and Trauma

*Originally published on the megjohnandjustin.com podcast/website, 2017-2020
megjohnandjustin.com/you/asexuality-and-trauma/*

This piece addresses a question we received at megjohnandjustin about how we might go about knowing whether we are on the asexuality spectrum or whether our lack of sexual attraction is due to trauma in our life which perhaps we should address. It unpacks a lot of what is meant by both asexuality and trauma, as well as considering the overlaps, and how all of us might address elements of trauma as they surface in our sexual lives.

Let's start with a few caveats. First there are lots of different ways of being asexual, all of which are absolutely legitimate and valid. Some ace people are neutral about sex, some are averse to it. Some sometimes have forms of solo or partnered sex, many don't. Some experience romantic attraction, some don't (aromantic people). Some experience a little attraction (gray-A) or in certain relationships (demisexual). Just as it shouldn't matter why an allosexual person is allosexual, it shouldn't really matter whether these diverse asexualities are the result of being 'born that way', or choosing asexuality as a response to problematic cultures of sexuality, or life experiences meaning you are asexual. For most of us it's probably a complex combination of bio, psycho, and social aspects.

Historically asexual people have been treated as if their low - or no - sexual attraction must be a problem, often with the assumption that it's the result of trauma. The first thing to say is that - as with most marginalised sexual communities - there is no evidence that asexual people are any more likely to have been abused, or to suffer from mental health problems, than anybody else. That's why asexuality is now clearly stated not to be any kind of 'psychiatric disorder' in the psychiatric manuals.

Secondly, we could argue that all of our sexualities - or asexualities - have something to do with trauma because (1) sadly high numbers of us experience sexual forms of abuse, assault, and bullying as children and/or adults and (2) the restrictive messages we receive about sexuality are a form of intergenerational trauma. Over the generations sex ed, sex advice, parents, porn, Hollywood movies, magazines, etc. all pass on limited ideas about what counts as sex, and how we should have sex, which leave many people having sex which is painful, unwanted, mediocre, even non-consensual. Many people who are sexual in pretty normative ways are quite dissociated when they have sex and many could be seen as traumatised and retraumatising themselves.

So it's not a matter of here's the 'normal' thing - being sexual - which is unrelated to trauma, and here's the 'abnormal' thing - being asexual - which is probably related to trauma. It's certainly a shame if ace folks feel they have to wonder about trauma in a way that allosexual people don't, because of all the stigma about being asexual or struggling sexually in any way - even in sex positive spaces.

Also ace communities have some of the most vital things to teach everyone about sex because they make it clear that nobody (ever) has to have sex. We can't really be in consent unless we know that it's really okay to never do the thing (in this case sex).

All those caveats aside, of course it can still be important for those of us who are asexual (whether for a period or for the longer term) and have also been through traumatic experience to reflect on whether these things are related. It is possible that they are somewhat related, completely related, or not related at all (you might just happen to be ace, and happen to be traumatised). Again, all of those options are equally valid.

A lot of people's sexualities are shaped by traumatic things that happen to them. It seems that one major survival strategy in response to trauma is to process things sexually. For some that might mean developing kinks in response to trauma, or using sex as a way to self-soothe, for others it might mean retreating from sexual experience either in some contexts or completely. So a person who is sexually bullied at school might become averse to sex, or identify as asexual, they might develop very gently erotic relationships which feel very different to the bullying, they might eroticise being sexually dominated in a more safe BDSM context, or they might eroticise becoming the dominant - or even bullying - person. All of these responses - and no response - are valid and legit, so long as only acted upon consensually.

Here are some signs that trauma might be involved in your a/sexuality. Do you see/hear/experience something sexual and find that you get dissociated (not present, out of your body, unable to remember things)? Do you get reactive - feeling heightened emotions like fear or anger and going into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses? Do you have trauma body responses like twitches or shakes? Do you have flashbacks or intrusive memories? Do you end up feeling very overwhelmed? Do you find yourself shutting down or melting down?

If these things happen then it might be useful to get professional help from a trauma-informed therapist using somatic experiencing, EMDR, or other techniques, as well as learning more about trauma and how it works. Trauma-informed sexological body workers may also be particularly helpful in this area.

However being traumatised in a certain area of live does not mean that you have to 'fix' the trauma and go towards that thing (e.g. trying to have a certain kind of sex or relationships if you become triggered by them). It's also perfectly legitimate just to decide that that thing isn't for you. It's also fine to be in a place of not being ready to address that trauma yet. A vital part of trauma therapy is building a sense of safety and learning when it is good to go towards the trauma - or the feelings accompanying it - and when better to move away from it.

So TLDR: it's fine to be ace, it's fine to be traumatised, it's fine for those things to be linked or not, and it's useful for *all of us* to explore our sexuality, and trauma, and how those things may or may not be linked.

What isn't okay is shame around asexuality and shame around sexual trauma. What also isn't okay is any form of conversion therapy which tries to make people sexual. If you do seek out a therapist please make sure that no part of their agenda is the assumption that it'd be better if you were sexual: that's acephobia right there and no major therapeutic body supports it. Remember, it can't be consensual if it's not okay not to have sex.

Sex Addiction

*Originally published on the megjohnandjustin.com podcast/website, 2017-2020
megjohnandjustin.com/sex/sex-addiction/*

Based on an interview with Dominic Davies - the head of Pink Therapy - who has a critical perspective, and lots of expertise, about sex addiction. We also did a YouTube video on this topic back in 2016 which you can see [here](#) if you want more about this topic.

Diagnosing sex addiction

Of the two main manuals that psychiatrists and other practitioners use, the American one - the DSM-5 - ruled out including sex addiction last time it was revised due to the lack of evidence supporting its existing. The World Health Organisation ICD-11 includes 'Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder' but makes it clear that this should not be used if people's distress about their sexual behaviours are due to moral conflict or being disapproved of or social rejection.

You can't be diagnosed a sex addict because other people are uncomfortable with your sexual desires or behaviours, because you self-identify that way (perhaps to justify non-consensual behaviour), or because there's cultural disapproval about your amount - or type - of sexual desires or behaviours.

There's more about all of this in David Ley's article in Psychology Today [here](#).

Why be cautious?

Along with the lack of evidence for sex addiction, a lot of past attempts to diagnose it have been based on a 'Goldilocks' amount of sexual desire/behaviour 'normal' people should have, when we know that people can be perfectly happy and healthy with anything from no sexual desire, attraction or contact, to high levels of sexual desire, attraction and/or contact.

Also many of the behaviours said to indicate sex addiction have been those that are particularly common amongst gay and bisexual men - meaning that it has been a way to pathologise homosexuality now that is no longer considered a 'disorder' (it was in the ICD until 1992). Solo sex, sex work, non-monogamy, and BDSM are often included in lists of behaviours that might indicate sex addiction - again suggesting that these activities are somehow more questionable than hetero PIV sex.

Acts vs. principles

Braun-Harvey and Vigorito argue that we should move away from acts-based diagnoses of sex addiction, to a principle-based approach to working with 'dysregulated sexual behaviour'. Basically we could see it as a problem (compulsion or dysregulation) if a person's sexual behaviour wasn't meeting any of the following core principles of sexual health, according to the WHO:

- Consent
- Non-exploitation
- Protected from STI's and unintended pregnancy
- Honesty
- Shared Values
- Pleasure

This could apply to any kind of sex equally - solo, partnered, group, vanilla, kinky, etc.

What to do if you're concerned

Having solo/partnered sex, viewing porn, or fantasising can all become problematic for people if we're not doing them ethically and/or if they're only giving us short-term relief or pleasure but causing problems for us longer term because we don't feel good about them or they're getting in the way of the rest of our life. This is similar to the issues there can be if we're relating to alcohol, TV viewing, dating, gaming, work, exercise, or anything else in this kind of way.

Using sex to soothe distressed feelings isn't wrong, most of us use sex and/or self-pleasure to help us feel better. But if you're spending all day doing that when you have other more urgent things to do, then it might be worth seeking help to work on what's causing the distressed feelings and treat the underlying cause.

Sex - like many things - can be a way of distracting/soothing ourselves from an underlying issue like anxiety or depression. In those cases addressing the underlying problem should be the focus of therapy rather than the sex as such.

What else might be underneath? Sometimes its trauma - especially traumatic events in childhood. We recommend Alex Iantaffi's excellent podcast on developmental trauma to explore whether this possibility might apply to you [here](#).

Often people who feel out of control around sex have a lot of sexual shame and have erotic conflicts where their values and what turns them on are in conflict. They may be aroused by dressing in latex or leather and their partner is more conventional in their tastes, or they enjoy pain or feeling submissive or powerful but this conflicts with ideas about sex needs to be loving and tender. They may be predisposed to non-monogamy, but their values tell them monogamy is the only valid option and they constantly find themselves being unfaithful. In these cases a chance to explore their erotic templates and their values can be really helpful.

With any of these examples - other problems, trauma, and shame - a good practitioner can help you to explore these things. Dominic suggested avoiding sex addict therapists and groups - due too all the problems with this idea - but searching for a [Pink Therapist](#) with expertise, or otherwise shopping around for a good therapist with expertise around sex.

Sexual Practices

Time to ditch the idea of foreplay?

July 2019

I recently did an interview with Franki Cookney about how problematic the concept of 'foreplay' is. You can read Frank's excellent articles [here](#), and my interview below.

Where does the concept of "foreplay" come from in the first place?

I believe it dates back to the studies that Masters and Johnson did on sex in the 1970s – or certainly it became a more common idea around that time. They observed many male/female couples having sex and came up with the sexual response cycle which mapped on to the common model we now have of sex following these stages: foreplay to get aroused, penetration as 'proper sex', orgasm as the goal of sex.

Why do so many people struggle to get their heads around the idea of sex being more than just PiV (or PiA)?

That model of what sex is has been reproduced and reinforced in numerous sex advice books and other media which tend to assume that this is what we mean by sex. In fact many of those books are even structured around the model, with early chapters on foreplay and oral sex, most of the middle of the book devoted to multiple positions for PiV, and perhaps a chapter towards the end on 'alternative' kinds of sex like anal and kink.

Why does it matter that we get away from viewing sex as "foreplay" vs "intercourse"? And who is affected by this?

It is really important and everybody is affected by it! We know from recent sex surveys that over half of people think of themselves as having at least one sexual disorder. This is ridiculous! And a big part of the reason is that psychiatry, sex therapy, and sex advice define 'sexual dysfunction' in relation to this model of sex. People have to be able to get erections or be penetrated, and they are expected to be able to orgasm from this.

Actually we know that over two thirds of women can't orgasm from PiV alone, and many men can't either. Beyond that many, many people find other kinds of sex as exciting – or way more exciting – than PiV. If we could wrestle all the things that are labelled as 'foreplay' (i.e. not 'proper sex') or 'alternative' (i.e. 'weird' sex) back onto our sexual menus then people would have a much better time sexually. So that includes all varieties of oral and anal sex of course,

but also touching each other, mutual masturbation, dry-humping, passionate snogging, touching other parts of the body than the genitals, all kinky activities, tantra breath practices, sharing fantasies, playing with sex toys, watching porn, [etc. etc. etc.](#)

It might seem like a paradox, but letting go of the centrality of penetration and orgasm generally leads to a way more satisfying sex life. It means that people can tune into what actually turns them on, and they can enjoy what they're actually doing instead of chasing the goal of an orgasm, or worrying they're going to 'fail' by not getting there.

Taking the 'fore' off the beginning of the word and focusing on play is a great approach. What feels playful, joyful, fun, exciting, naughty, enjoyable, arousing, delicious, pleasurable? What happens when we share our answers to that question with somebody that we have sex with and focus on doing those things?

Are there any places where we are seeing a broader view of sex being embraced, for example in subcultures, in toy design, in sex tech, in educational resources?

Kink and LGBTQ+ communities generally have a wider understanding of what counts as sex, and the kinds of [yes, no, maybe checklists](#) that kink people use to figure out what they're into can be a useful starting place for everyone. However, being outside the mainstream doesn't completely protect you from believing that it's only 'proper sex' if there's some kind of penetration. Also LGBTQ+ people can end up with their own cultural norms which can be just as restrictive (e.g. if it's assumed that gay men should like anal sex, or that lesbians should – or shouldn't – use strap-ons, for example).

The asexual community is a good place to turn. Because ace people don't experience sexual attraction, many think a lot about other ways they could enjoy intimacy, sensations, or play with other people without any genital involvement, again assuming that it's worthwhile in its own right rather than a prelude for something else.

Justin Hancock and I try to promote this wider view of sex in our resources and podcast ([megjohnandjustin.com](#), [rewriting-the-rules.com](#), and [bishuk.com](#)). Scarleteen is a good resource for younger people, and Lori-Beth Bisbey does a great A-Z of sex podcast ([the-intimacy-coach.com](#)). Browsing sex toys at a store like Sh! can be a good bet also, and many people put on excellent workshops on more conscious sexuality (like those related to Urban Tantra and the Wheel of Consent). Check out [sexpluszine.com](#) and [pleasureinstitute.org](#).

What might the personal benefits be of broadening our understanding of sex?

Just huge – we will have a much more fulfilling and enjoyable sex life, and the things we learn from this can also teach us a lot that is valuable for the rest of our lives. For example moving away from a set script means we have to do consent better (which is useful in all areas of life),

and taking the focus off any goal for sex cultivates the capacity to be present to what we're doing (which is also useful in all areas of life). Remembering how to be playful is great for mental and physical health.

Sexual ethics

October 2014

Are sexual ethics changing? Are forms of behaviour that were frowned on in the past considered acceptable today?

Definitely. Some people have called it the 'sexualization' of culture: the fact that there are changes in what forms of sexual behaviour are seen as acceptable, with a general trend towards more forms of behaviour being acceptable – or even desirable – and a lot more visible sexuality in the media, advertising, the music industry, and the like.

So sexual ethics are changing in the sense that there is more openness to people being sexual and to a variety of sexual practices. However, there is also a shift towards a pressure, or demand, on people to be sexual in certain ways. Now there is quite an expectation that people should want to be sexually desirable, and a sense that being 'up for it' is fun, pleasurable and empowering. The negative side of this is that many people are excluded who don't fit the rather narrow definitions of what is sexually desirable, and others find it hard to tune in to what they want because they are under so much pressure or have picked up on fairly narrow ideas of what is pleasurable.

Changes in sexual attitudes may be considered a value-neutral development, but if they take on forms that are hurtful it's different matter. Is that happening today?

I think so. I think that cultural attitudes towards sex are changing, but that there is actually very little focus on what we might call 'sexual ethics'. There are changes in what behaviours are accepted or expected, but the ideal is still pretty narrow, and there is little appreciation of the diversity of sexual expressions and desires that exists.

A lot of this is very hurtful to people. For example, pressure on young women to be sexually desirable in certain ways – in order to keep a relationship – can mean that many are not in tune with their own sexual feelings and may feel that they have to have certain forms of sex. Similarly, pressures on men to perform sexually, to initiate sex, and to always be 'up for it' can make it very difficult to tune in to sexual desires or to be open about not wanting sex, or not wanting certain kinds of sex. People can become alienated from their bodies which don't seem to match up to high social expectations of looking a certain way, achieving erections, orgasming on demand, etc.

If that's the case, is one of the genders clearly the loser?

It is always so hard to say that one gender is 'the loser' or 'the winner'. I think that this situation is bad for everyone, and who it is 'most bad' for depends on all kinds of other things as well as gender (including sexuality, age, race, class, disability, body type, and so on).

That said, the pressure to be sexual in a variety of exciting ways in order to be a successful person, to have a good relationship, or to demonstrate your femininity or masculinity, is definitely risky. It is very hard to have ethical, consensual, sex under these conditions because it is very difficult to tune in to what you like sexually, and to communicate this confidently to another person. Particularly it can be difficult to say 'no', so there is the risk that sex becomes coercive rather than consensual.

What is the answer?

One answer, I think, is to put lots more emphasis on sexual ethics. We need to provide good sex education which gets people thinking about how to ensure that they – and their partners – can be engaging in sex consensually. We need to be aware of power imbalances (like those around gender, age, experience and all those other aspects I mentioned) which might make it difficult for a person to consent.

Additionally it'd be good to consider the representations of sex that we're putting on there – in the media and so on – do they provide a restrictive view of what sex is? Do they model sexual consent and open communication? That is one reason why me and my colleagues created the [Bad Sex Media Bingo](#) card which calls out bad examples of sex in the media, and suggests alternative ways in which we might represent ethical, consensual, diverse forms of sexuality and sexual practice.

Penis-in-vagina sex

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megjohnandjustin.com/sex/enjoy-penis-vagina-sex-want/*

Most sex education and sex advice focuses on PIV sex Way Too Much: to the point of suggesting it *is* sex, or the only ‘proper’ or ‘real’ form of sex. For this reason we generally try to knock PIV off its perch by emphasising the huge array of possible sexual, sensual, and erotic practices that people might enjoy which don’t necessarily involve genitals or penetration/enveloping at all.

However PIV is one kind of sex that people might want to do. People often don’t enjoy PIV as much as they might because of the conflict between two big messages we receive about sex:

1. Sex = PIV
2. The goal of sex is orgasm

Most people don’t orgasm from PIV at all, or only rarely. Some stats are about 30% of women and 50% of men who can actually orgasm from PIV (according to scientific and not-so-scientific research, and the stats are yet to come in for non-binary folks).

So if you’re doing PIV with the hope of an orgasm you might well not enjoy it very much, or even feel bad.

If you still would like to do PIV therefore, you might consider the following:

1. Don’t do it if it is remotely painful for you - either physically or emotionally - if that’s the case please explore other sexual, sensual and erotic options instead (if you want to)
2. Don’t do it with any goal in mind. Instead, tune into what’s enjoyable about the act itself. It might be the sense of intimacy that comes with having a body part inside another body part, or the experience of doing something which you’ve seen done a lot in media, etc., or it might feel transgressive if you don’t often do it, or you might like the sensations on your body, etc. etc. etc. Focus in on what kinds of things make it enjoyable for you - and for the other person involved - and try to be present to those beginning and during PIV, rather than aiming for anything in particular.
3. Consider various different ways of ending PIV - other than anybody’s orgasm - and find ones that work for both of you. You might simply stop once you’ve enjoyed it for a while, or when you start to feel a bit tired. You could come up with a ritual to end on: some shared eye-contact, or saying something to each other, for example. You could create a different climax than genital orgasm, such as breathing in ways that create a climax, or increasing the intensity or speed of bodily movements to a crescendo and then stopping or letting them slow and calm again. You might move from PIV into another form of sexual, sensual, or erotic contact.

Painful sex

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megjohnandjustin.com/sex/avoiding-painful-sex/*

What do we mean by pain. We're focusing here on physical pain, but we can never really disentangle physical and emotional pain because bodies and minds can't be separated. Emotional pain can often be expressed as physical pain, and can make existing physical pain a lot worse. If you're interested in reading more about this check out [Teach Us To Sit Still by Tim Parks](#), and this free [OU course about embodiment](#).

[Peggy Kleinplatz](#) is a sex therapist who writes a lot about how physical pain - and other difficulties - during sex are our body's ways of telling us something important. That means that it's really important to tune in and listen to those messages, not to push through and try to force our bodies to do things that they don't want to do for important reasons. Unfortunately capitalism has given us a strong message that our bodies are machines and that we should force them to be 'normal' and 'productive'.

Historically it has generally been assumed that women should feel pain - in general and in relation to sex - often due to beliefs about original sin and/or the pain of child-bearing. This lingers today in the way doctors take much longer to give women pain-killers than they do men.

Similarly there are many assumptions that it is right or normal for the 'receiver' in insertive sex of any kind to experience pain.

We need to challenge both these assumptions, and the assumption that sex should hurt the first time. They set up situations where people put themselves through unnecessary pain, often meaning that that kind of sex remains painful because they tense up remembering the previous time. There are lots of other kinds of sex than insertion if that is painful. And we shouldn't be inserting anything into anyone unless their body is clearly inviting that to happen.

People often put themselves through pain because they are embarrassed to admit it, or feel that they 'should' do a certain thing. People often suffer through pain to their penis or clitoris, carpet burns, painful positions, or feeling crushed by another person, for example.

As always it helps to be [as present as possible](#) to yourself and the other person. If anybody starts to feel physical and/or emotional pain, or starts to check out or withdraw emotionally because it's bringing up painful things, that is the time to pause and check in with yourself and each other. It's brilliant if you can then stop or go back to things which you *can* be present for and find comfortable. Sex would be so much better in every way if we could stay with whatever we can be present for instead of pushing to do what we think we 'should' be doing. That's also a way better recipe for consensual sex.

Solo sex and self-pleasure can help a lot in learning how to do this: How to know when you are present or not, in some kind of pain or not. Professionals like sexological bodyworkers and other sex workers who work therapeutically, and workshops like tantra classes, can also be good places to learn how to do these things - but do make sure you check out anybody you work with in this way thoroughly and only do what you're comfortable with.

BDSM/Kink

BDSM 101 (or what to do and what not to do from *Fifty Shades of Grey*)

February 2015

As somebody who has researched with BDSM communities for over a decade, and written about the *Fifty Shades* books, I thought it'd be useful to give my suggestions for people who are thinking about getting into kink for the first time having watched the *Fifty Shades* movie.

I'm going to cover the following topics, including where I think *Fifty Shades* gets it right, and where it has a lot of room for improvement:

- Mythbusting about BDSM
- Getting informed about kink
- Figuring out, and communicating, what you're into
- Consent, consent, consent

Before we go on it's important to say that pretty much everything covered here is also true for *any* kind of sex – not just kink. It's sad that people often don't think about tuning into what they enjoy, or ensuring consent, until they're considering BDSM. So you might well find it useful to read on even if kink isn't something you're particularly interested in.

Mythbusting about BDSM

There are a lot of myths out there about BDSM, which stands for Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadomasochism. *Fifty Shades* manages to challenge some of these, but also leads some of them in tact. So what do we actually know?

Well, first of all the whole *Fifty Shades* phenomenon demonstrates that having some kinky desires or fantasies is not abnormal. There's no way the books would have been such bestsellers if it were. And research bears this out. Around two thirds of people have fantasies about bondage, and other common interests like spanking and roleplay are not far behind.

Research has also now clearly demonstrated that being into kink also doesn't make you psychologically unhealthy or more likely to be injured during sex. BDSMers actually come out as higher than others on emotional well-being in some studies, and they don't turn up in ER any more than anybody else.

However, *Fifty Shades* does – unfortunately – perpetuate one common myth about BDSM: that people who are into kink are more likely to have been abused themselves (as Christian Grey was as a child) or to be abusive (as the women who introduced the young Christian Grey to BDSM was, as was one of his other ex-partners).

Again the evidence shows that BDSMers have childhoods that are indistinguishable from other people's and are no more likely to be abusive themselves. Of course, that means that there will be folk in the BDSM world who have experienced abuse (just as there are in the general population). Also, sadly we know that there are abusive people in all communities and BDSM is not exempt from this. But it's important to remember it is no *more* likely here, despite how it might seem in *Fifty Shades*.

So it's absolutely fine to want to be kinky. However, as with all forms of sex, it is worth thinking up front about how you're going to do it in as consensual and enjoyable way as possible – both for yourself and for any other people involved. That's what the rest of these posts will cover.

BDSM 101: Finding out more about kink

In *Fifty Shades* Christian swears Ana to secrecy about their kink relationship so that she can't talk to anybody else in her life about it. This is a terrible idea! It's a huge warning sign in a relationship if there are areas you're forced to keep secret. Given how common kink is there may well be people already in your life who you can chat openly about your ideas with. However there is still stigma around kink, so you might prefer to talk with people who're already involved in BDSM.

If you're new to kink, there is a huge wealth of information available to help you get started. It's definitely worth checking this out and learning from people who have been there and got the Tshirt.

I wouldn't suggest going to general sex advice books to find out about kink. Generally they are pretty poor with only brief sections that don't cover any detail about consent or practicalities. Some of the spin-offs from *Fifty Shades* are equally dubious (note: [cable ties are not a good idea for bondage!](#)) Go to the community experts instead. The books by [Lee \(Bridget\) Harrington & Mollena Williams](#), [Tristan Taormino](#), and [Dossie Easton](#) and [Janet Hardy](#) are particularly helpful places to start. Many of those folk have blogs, podcasts, and video clips that you can check out as well.

Online [FetLife](#) is also a good social networking space to meet others and chat about kink-related topics or get advice from more experienced folk. There are also groups on general social networking spaces like facebook. Offline munches and fetish fairs are a great place to start meeting other people to play with and/or learn from. At these kinds of events the emphasis is just on chatting and exchanging information, rather than doing anything kinky yourself, so they can be great for the newbie. Online and offline there are loads of different groups, clubs, events, etc. for different interests, sexualities, genders, and so on, so do find ones that feel comfortable to you.

However, a word of caution about getting involved with BDSM communities: It can be easy, as someone new to kink, to assume that everybody already there knows what they are doing and has your best interests at heart. The manta of 'safe, sane, consensual' can leave you assuming anybody you meet would be safe to play with. As I said earlier, sadly kink groups aren't exempt from abusive behaviour, and you should be just as cautious as you would be anywhere else. Unfortunately some people do prey on folk who are new to the scene, relying on their ignorance, and the stigma around kink, to keep their silence. Particularly it's worth running a mile from anybody who tells you that they're some great expert, that they know what you want, that you should do certain things to be a 'proper' submissive or dominant, or that you should go faster than feels comfortable to you (basically the Christian Grey vibe is one to be well cautious of!)

SexGeek has much more information on this, plus a great [list of resources](#) for people new to kink, and Erica Hanna has written an [excellent, and well-researched, post](#) about things to be cautious of when getting involved with kink communities and events.

Also, as Elizabeth Sheff and Corie Hammers found in [their research](#), sadly most kink communities – like many other sexual communities – are not very diverse in terms of race and class. As in *Fifty Shades* there can be a link between BDSM, wealth and whiteness which is excluding, for example the idea that it is necessary to buy a ‘red room’ full of expensive kit in order to be ‘proper’ kinky. Another tip from *Fifty Shades* can help a little here: Cable ties aside, a lot of equipment can be purchased cheaply from a hardware store, or taken from a kitchen cupboard (e.g. ropes, clothes pegs, spatulas, candles). Again the books and websites mentioned can help with adapting everyday kit, and there is also some good community writing about creating more [inclusive communities](#).

Finally, if you have any worries or anxieties about the kind of kink that you’re interested in – such as whether it is consensual or not – then it could be worth chatting with a kink-affirmative professional. Sadly we’re still not in a situation where [all therapists and counsellors are knowledgeable about kink](#), and some are downright pathologising, so check out a site like [Pink Therapy](#) (UK) or [Kink-Aware Professionals](#) (US) to find somebody decent.

Of course you might not want to get that involved in kink community if it is more that you just want to bring some BDSM into an existing relationship. But it is well worth cracking a book or two, and checking out some informative websites, to learn the basics in terms of physical and emotional risks and establishing consent. The rest of these posts give a few suggestions to start with, but there’s plenty more information and advice out there.

BDSM 101: Figuring out, and communicating, what you're into

Figuring it out

There's a sense in *Fifty Shades* that the kind of 'kinky fuckery' that Ana finds herself enjoying is fine, but that the kind of 'real' BDSM that Christian is after is not okay. Please put these kinds of distinctions from your mind! People are always trying to draw lines between what kinds of play are okay and what kinds aren't. For ages it was that missionary penis-in-vagina man/woman sex was fine and nothing else was. Then it expanded a bit to any kind of sex involving genitals was okay, but other stuff wasn't. Now, after *Fifty Shades*, we're told that a bit of light spanking and fluffy handcuffs is okay but anything 'more than that' isn't. All this focus on what counts as normal, right, proper sex (and what doesn't) takes us away from far more important questions such as what the people involved actually enjoy, and how to do it ethically.

So the first step is to try (as much as is actually possible) to step away from all the things you've learnt about 'normal sex' and all the pressure there is right now to have 'amazing sex' with all kinds of toys and techniques, and just tune in to what you'd actually like to do. Importantly that might involve bringing kink into your sex life, or kink might be something you explore without linking it to sex. Many people enjoy things like role-play, sensation-play, bondage, and impact-play without necessarily involving genitals or orgasms.

Another key thing is to remember what a big umbrella kink, or BDSM, is. People are into all different kinds of things and for all different kinds of reasons. For example you might enjoy playing with power (bossing people around, or serving someone) and never go near pain or strong sensations. Or vice versa. Or you might enjoy mixing those things together. People sometimes use D/s to refer to the more power-based forms of play, and SM for the more sensation based. Even for any one activity, people get different things out of it. So, for example, if you like the idea of hitting someone with a riding crop to humiliate them you might not fit so well with someone who wants to be hit as a form of physical endurance. Again, nobody should ever tell you that your motivations or preferences are any less valid than anyone else's.

Research suggests that around equal proportions of people prefer being the top or dominant person, the bottom or submissive person, and switching between different positions at different times. You could think which applies best to you, as well as recognising that it often changes over time.

Communicating what you're into

Fifty Shades isn't a great example of how to communicate about what you want. Ana is just presented with a list of Christian's interests and told to say which she'll consent to and which

she won't. This means that their play is entirely based on what one of them wants rather than both of them. Also it often seems like Christian telepathically knows what will give Ana multiple orgasms with no communication whatsoever. Real people don't work like this!

If you're not sure what you're into it is worth you – and the person or people you're thinking of playing with – doing a bit of self-exploration. Check out some kinky videos, erotic fiction, or [books of popular fantasies](#) and see what piques your interest. Many people in BDSM communities suggest 'yes, no, maybe' checklists. These are lists of all imaginable activities which you can go through saying which you're up for and which you aren't. There are many versions online – [here's](#) just one of them.

Of course these are worth revisiting from time to time because our preferences and desires often change over time, and with experience. Some people write, and update, a kind of 'user manual' for themselves to give partners a longer explanation of how they – and their body – works. One particularly important thing to get across is any 'hard limits' and 'triggers' you're aware of so that partners know what they really mustn't do or say.

Sometimes people have the idea that talking about these things is unsexy or unromantic. A good rejoinder is that non-consensual play is a lot *less* sexy and romantic. Also, my friend Hannah gives a great analogy:

When you choose a restaurant based on the type of cuisine you like, read the menu, discuss dish choices with your companions, ask the waiter some questions about the specials, and tell him how you like your steak, does it ruin your appetite or spoil your enjoyment of the meal?

It is worth being very cautious about playing with somebody who isn't up for some form of communication, and it can be extremely sexy and romantic to share fantasies or plan out a scene in advance. You could even put aside an evening specifically for that purpose, with all of the delayed gratification that involves. If face-to-face is hard then writing things down (online or offline) can be easier and equally exciting (although with the proviso that online communication is not completely private).

Of course Ana has a hard job telling Christian what she wants because she has zero experience of sex or kink. It can be very hard to communicate what you're into if you haven't actually tried things. In such cases communication might be more a matter of letting each other know how to tell if you're enjoying something or not. For example, are you somebody who is very noisy when enjoying things or do you go quiet?

[Safewords](#) like in *Fifty Shades* are obviously a good idea but ideally there should be a lot more going on than that. If you're just starting to try out some stuff it's worth going gently and slowly, and checking in regularly with each other how it's going (where's this for them on a scale of one

to ten, for example). Don't assume that the way something feels for you will be the way it feels for somebody else. People are all different and what is gentle for you may be near the limit for them. You can always try out something you're curious about in a much more light and playful experimental context before bringing it in more seriously.

Checking in is important for everybody involved. Tops and dominants can struggle just as much as bottoms and submissives, with the added pressure that they are often the one who is expected to orchestrate or control everything.

The absolutely *essential* thing with all of this is to create conditions under which whatever you do is most likely to be consensual for all concerned. Whether you're playing with an existing partner, or somebody you've met through kink community who has good word of mouth as a trustworthy person, the next post will cover the kinds of things you really need to consider in order for play to be consensual.

BDSM 101: Consent, consent, consent

Despite what you might think from *Fifty Shades*, consent is not just a matter of having a safeword! In fact we can see from *Fifty Shades* itself that safewords are not enough. The first time that Christian spans Ana she's really not sure if she likes it. Her feelings about it change from when it happens to later when she reflects on it. She has similar ambivalence on other occasions but clearly doesn't feel that she can use her safeword to express that uncertainty.

There are huge cultural pressures around sex. We often feel – as Ana seems to – that we must have certain kinds of sex a certain amount in order not to lose a relationship. We feel that we should 'perform' certain kinds of sex in order to be a 'real' man/woman, or a 'proper' straight or queer person. We feel like if we've had a kind of sex before we're obligated to have it again. We feel too embarrassed or awkward to say we're not enjoying something. We feel that because we've done one thing we should automatically do others. All of these are deeply problematic ways of thinking about sex which hurt us badly, but they are also really hard to completely step away from because they're so engrained in our culture.

So, when it comes to consent, we can't just rely on partners to say 'no' or safeword if they've stopped enjoying it. Instead, consent should be about trying to minimise the pressures that they – and we – are under, so that we can be as confident as possible that what we're doing is consensual. How can we do this? Well it is definitely worth talking about the messages we've received about sex and reassuring the other person that we really wouldn't want them doing something they don't enjoy. We can also deliberately avoid making any suggestion that kink or sex should involve certain things (e.g. genitals, pain, orgasms, or fancy outfits) or that certain things are more or less normal.

It's also worth thinking about wider power dynamics that are in play between you. Is one person older than the other, or from a gender, race, or class with more social power? Does one person earn a lot more than the other (hello Christian Grey!)? Is one person much more sexually experienced or confident in their capacity to find other sexual/romantic partners? Are there differences between you in terms of mental or physical health? All of these are worth considering in relation to how the person with greater power (in these various areas) can maximise freedom of the other person to be able to say no (or yes). Of course it's likely that you'll each have more, or less, power in different areas.

Finally it is troubling how much we tend to assume that we'll be able to have consensual sex – or play – when our wider relationships are not very consensual at all. [The Pervocracy](#) puts it really well:

I think part of the reason we have trouble drawing the line “it's not okay to force someone into sexual activity” is that in many ways, forcing people to do things is part of our culture in general. Cut that shit out of your life. If someone doesn't want to go to a party, try a new food, get up and

dance, make small talk at the lunchtable—that’s their right. Stop the “aww c’mon” and “just this once” and the games where you playfully force someone to play along. Accept that no means no—all the time.

Fifty Shades is a perfect example of how to get this wrong. Christian is constantly doing things after Ana has clearly said ‘no’, such as buying her expensive gifts, following her on holiday, and getting involved in her work. How on earth is she to trust that he’d respect her ‘no’ when they’re playing? And just as Christian tries to convince Ana that she’s a submissive, Ana tries to force Christian to be the ‘hearts and flowers’ boyfriend that she’d really like. How are they to trust each other not to try to pressure, control, and manipulate when it comes to their sex life?

If you’re bringing kink into an existing relationship it’s definitely worth having a good hard look at whether you treat each other consensually around other things, such as socialising, food or finances, and how you might be more consensual in those areas. It’s also worth thinking about whether you treat yourself consensually! This is something I’ve written more about [here](#) and there is lots of useful stuff about cultivating consensual communities over on the [Consent Cultures](#) blog.

Conclusions

I hope these posts have given you a flavour of some of the things that are worth thinking – and communicating – about when exploring kink. As I said earlier, there are heaps more helpful resources out there to draw on. There’s another excellent list available from Clarisse Thorn’s website [here](#).

It can be amazing, when you haven’t done so before, to finally give yourself permission to have the kind of sex and/or play that really excite you. Tuning into yourself, communicating with others, and cultivating consensual dynamics, are all excellent ways to start opening that door.

Dominant and submissive relationships

June 2014

For some unknown reason this is the most popular post I ever put on my website! An interview about D/s relationships...

Why do people sometimes prefer Dom/sub relationships?

D/s is one aspect of the wider category of **BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadomasochism)**, sometimes also known as kink. Some people are into all of the things listed under BDSM, and some only some of them. D/s is generally distinguished from SM because it is more about power than about physical sensation (although some use these terms more interchangeably).

In D/s activities one person generally dominates the other, or has **power** over them, therefore people tend to prefer D/s if they find a power dynamic to be exciting in some way. Of course it is pretty common for sex and power to be mixed together in our culture. For example, a lot of romance fiction involves people being rescued from peril or being swept away by somebody more powerful, and a lot of people fantasise about having the power of being utterly desirable to their partner.

What is involved in a Dom/sub relationship?

If somebody identifies as being into D/s, or having a D/s relationship, then they probably include **power play in their sex life**, and perhaps in other aspects of their relationship. People can identify as dominant, submissive, or switch (which means that they are sometimes dominant and sometimes submissive). It might be that people stick to the same roles each time they play together, or that they take different roles on different occasions.

For most people, being D/s will be something that they only do some of the time (for example, just in pre-arranged scenes – often, but not always, involving sex). Such scenes could involve any kind of **exchange of power**. For example, the submissive person might serve the dominant one food, or give them a massage; the dominant person might order the submissive one around or restrain them or punish them in some way; people might act out particular power-based role-plays such as teacher and student, cop and robber, or pirate and captive.

Some people who are into D/s might have longer periods, such as a holiday, where they maintain their **power dynamic**. And a few have lifestyle or 24/7 arrangements, where one person

always takes the dominant, and the other the submissive, role. However, even in such cases much of their everyday life will probably not seem that different to anybody else's.

How does it differ to the traditional 'vanilla' relationship?

This depends very much on how important it is in the lives of those involved. Some D/s relationships would look very much like a vanilla relationship but just with a bit more power-play involved when people have sex. Others would have something of the D/s dynamic in other parts of the relationship. However, it should be remembered that most vanilla relationships have specific roles (e.g. one person takes more responsibility for the finances, one person is more outgoing socially, one person does more of the looking after, one person takes the lead in sex). In D/s relationships those things tend to be more explicit, but perhaps not hugely different.

So perhaps the main difference is in the amount of **communication**. Most people involved in BDSM stress the importance of everything being **'consensual'** so there will probably be much negotiation at the start about the things people do and do not enjoy, and the ways in which the relationship will be D/s. **Checklists and contracts** can be useful ways of clarifying this. So, for example, there may be limits about the kinds of activities and sensations people like, whether they enjoy role-play or not, and which aspects of the relationship will have a D/s element.

Why do so many people have misconceptions of this type of relationship?

The media portrayal of BDSM has tended to be very negative, often associating it with violence, danger, abuse, madness and criminality. Research has shown that actually people who are into BDSM are no different from others in terms of emotional well-being or upbringing, and that they are no more likely to get serious injuries from their sex lives, or to be criminal, than anybody else.

Often the media also focuses on the most extreme examples, such as very heavy and/or 24/7 D/s arrangements, rather than the more common relationships where there are elements of D/s. For these reasons people may well have misconceptions about D/s relationships. This is why it is useful to get a range of experiences out there in the media – so people can have more awareness of the diversity of things involved and the continuum (e.g. from light bondage and love bites to more scripted scenes and specifically designed toys).

How do couples go about beginning a relationship like this?

A good idea for all people in relationships, whether or not they are interested in D/s, is to **communicate about what they like sexually early on**, and more broadly about **what roles they like to take** in the relationship. Often people just assume what the other person will enjoy or how they would like the relationship to be.

For example, one good activity from sex therapy and from the BDSM community is to create a list as a couple of all of the sexual practices that either of you is aware of, and then to go down it writing 'yes', 'no', or 'maybe' about whether it is something that interests you, and sharing your thoughts. It can also be good to share sexual fantasies or favourite images/stories and to talk about whether (and, if so, how) they might be incorporated into your sex life (the Nancy Friday and Emily Dubberley collections of sexual fantasies can be helpful with this). It is very important that people only do things that they really want to try (rather than feeling coerced into certain activities) and that it is accepted that there will likely be areas which aren't compatible as well as those that are.

BDSM communities and websites are a great place to look for more information from those who have been involved in these kinds of practices and relationships. Also local fetish fairs and kink events often include demonstrations and workshops. There is more in my books *Enjoy Sex* and *Rewriting the Rules* about communicating about sex and relationships.

Some people have a BDSM relationship outside of an existing 'vanilla' relationship. What effect can this have on a marriage or couple relationship?

Again this varies. Although it isn't always out in the open, many couples have arrangements where they are open to some extent (e.g. monogamish couples, the 'new monogamy', open relationships, swinging, polyamory, and 'don't ask don't tell' agreements).

Having different sexual desires is one reason why some couples open up their relationship to one or both of them being sexual with another person. If this is communicated about clearly, kindly and thoughtfully, it can work perfectly well. The important thing again is kindness and communication.

In regards to the hit book *50 Shades of Grey*, many husbands have bought this for their wives and girlfriends. What does this say to them, and how would you help a couple who want to get more involved in this sort of lifestyle but don't know how, or they are too shy to approach it?

The kinds of conversations and activities mentioned above are a great idea. One of the good things about *50 Shades of Grey* is that it has opened up this kind of conversation for many people. However, it is important not to assume that the only form of BDSM is the one described in the book. In a heterosexual couple it may well be that the woman is more dominant, for example, or that both people switch roles, and the things that they enjoy may well be different to the ones which Ana and Christian engage in in the book.

If you want to read more about different practices and how to do them, then there are lots of good books available about BDSM. Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's books *The New Topping*

Book and *The New Bottoming Book* are great places to start, as is Tristan Taormino's *The Ultimate Guide to Kink*.

For couples who are really struggling to communicate about sex, or who have very different desires and are finding it hard to reconcile this, it might well be useful to see a sex and relationship therapist for a few sessions. The [Pink Therapy](#) website includes many kink-friendly therapists.

Vanilla Sex

February 2019

Recently I was interviewed for [an article in VICE](#) about what vanilla sex means and whether people are having it. You can read the full article [here](#), and here's what I had to say...

Have activities that fall under “vanilla sex” changed over time? Is something that was once considered kinky now considered vanilla?

Absolutely there has been some changes with a couple of cultural shifts that have happened in the last few decades, often called ‘sexualisation’ and ‘subjectification’. Sexualisation means that sex has become a big story in wider culture and there's a lot more sexual media out there, easily accessible, and including more diversity of sexual practices. Subjectification means that people are now expected to be sexual subjects or entrepreneurs: learning tools and techniques to make them good at sex, and maintaining ‘great sex’ in relationships.

The combination of these two means that the kind of sex people are expected to aspire to has a broader range, and includes some things that would previously have been thought of as kinky. For example most sex advice books include light bondage, role-play, and sensation play these days. However there is still a strong sense that these things are an add-on to sex rather than sex itself (which is still generally seen as penis-in-vagina intercourse). Also there's a strong sense of a boundary between ‘kinky-fuckery’ (as Ana calls it in *Fifty Shades of Grey*) and proper BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadoomasochism). Proper BDSM is still seen as deviant and people are warned against it as if it was somehow inherently abnormal, dangerous or only for broken people (it's not!)

But from these shifts you could argue that ‘vanilla sex’ now certainly includes oral sex, anal sex (man penetrating woman), and some light kink, in addition to penis-in-vagina sex.

More on this in my book with Ros Gill and Laura Harvey, [Mediated Intimacy](#).

Do queer and nonbinary communities use the phrase “vanilla”? Or is that kind of construct less prevalent, and if so why?

I've heard it mostly used in kink communities to describe non-kinky sex, and even then there is often an awareness that none of us should really be judging people negatively for their sexual desires – whether those desires are kinky or non-kinky – and there can be concern that ‘vanilla’ sounds like a derogatory term (bland or boring). Queer people can use terms like vanilla, normal, mundane or muggle to describe non-queer people. It can be a way of reframing things so that the people who are often stigmatised, marginalised and pathologised are presented as

in some way better than those who often do the stigmatising, marginalising, or pathologising. But again it is usually tongue-in-cheek with an awareness that reversing a hierarchy where one sexuality is seen as superior to another is still problematic.

It's also worth remembering how few people actually tick all the boxes of being a completely vanilla, heteronormative, person. If you count up the numbers of people who are openly or secretly non-monogamous, with the number who have kinky desires, and the number who have attraction to more than one gender, or very low or high sexual attraction, actually that leaves very few people in what we've been taught to believe is 'normal'.

More on this in my book [The Psychology of Sex](#).

How do you think tech/apps have changed the way we view what falls under “vanilla sex” and how we view sex in general?

They've been part of this sexualisation and subjectification that I mentioned earlier – they make us more aware of the diversity of things that people can find hot, and the sense that it's good to be open about such desires and to be able to offer to meet them. There is a risk that we go the other way in that people feel pressure to be up for anything and to offer things on hook-up apps and the like that they're not really into. There's nowhere near enough cultural consideration of how we do this consensually.

Sex positivity

August 2018

A while back I did an interview with Franki Cookney about sex positivity, which became [this excellent article](#). It was great to read that, and this [other great piece](#) by Fancy Feast exploring sex positivity critically in recent weeks. Franki was kind enough to let me include the whole interview that I did here:

Let's talk a little bit about definitions of sex positivity. How does the mainstream definition of sex positivity differ from the definition used in kinky or queer (or otherwise subcultural) spaces?

I think that part of the issue here is that 'sex positive' is used in two different ways. Sex positive lite (if you will!) is when sex positive is just used for any space or event where sexy stuff is going on, such as events selling sex toys or mainstream sex parties or kink events. They're generally using 'sex positive' to mean the opposite of 'sex negative'. We live in a culture which generally sees and stigmatises sex and these spaces are different to this in that they are positive towards sex. However, just because sex is happening there doesn't mean it's being done any better than anywhere else. Often sex positive lite spaces haven't thought enough about issues like consent and power, or about norms around what counts as sex and who counts as sexy. That's why – in such spaces – you'll often experience people pressuring you into certain activities, and many people will feel excluded by assumptions about who is attractive. In fact these kinds of spaces can be particularly bad because the sex positivity can give people implicit permission to be creepy and non-consensual, suggesting that everybody in those spaces should be 'up for it'.

The other way 'sex positive' is used is more thoughtful. In these – often queer, BDSM, and/or feminist – spaces there is more attempt to do the whole thing differently to the way sex is done in mainstream culture. This means things like having groundrules and boundaries, teaching the basics of consent to everyone attending, ensuring that all bodies are welcome in the space, providing places within an event that aren't sex focused, etc. Of course this doesn't mean that everything is perfect in these spaces, and post #MeToo there has been increased awareness about how the assumption that everyone will be consensual in such spaces can be a veneer under which some people abuse their power.

Have these definitions changed over time, do you think?

Yes definitely. I think there's increasing tendency to use sex positive in the second way – like with the new [Sex+ zine](#) that [Kim Loliya](#) and others are putting together which is explicitly

BDSM-friendly, queer-friendly, disability-friendly, sex-worker-friendly, etc. However some are still using it in the first way, which can make it confusing when trying to find safe-enough events and spaces to go to.

In what ways can sex positivity end up having negative effect on people in the mainstream and subcultures?

The mainstream version of sex positivity – which is put forward in mainstream sex advice – insists that ‘great sex’ is a necessary part of being in a healthy relationship – or even being a healthy human being. The risk of this is that people feel pressured to have sex when they don’t want to have sex, and to do sex acts which they aren’t really into. Indeed many sex advice books implicitly or explicitly encourage them to do so. That’s a problem for consent, and it’s a problem for pleasure because forcing yourself to do something you don’t really want to do is an excellent way of turning you off sex completely.

In subcultures the risks of sex positivity are that it creates a pressure on people to be sexual in other kinds of ways. Instead of the limited version of sex present in mainstream culture (mostly penis-in-vagina in different positions) there can be pressure to do diverse kinds of sex with multiple people. Again this is great if it’s what you’re into and you only do it when you really want to, but power imbalances and subcultural scripts mean that people often feel pressure to do things when they’re not really interested – perhaps because it’s intoxicating to feel desirable, because they want approval, because they think that’s what everyone else is doing, or because they think it’s the only way to maintain a relationship, for example.

Is anyone excluded from sex positivity and in what ways? Also would you say sex positivity is more or less inclusive than it once was?

The excellent zines ‘fucked’ and ‘too fucked too furious’ point out that it’s easy for anyone who struggles with sex – which is probably most of us at one point or other – to feel very excluded from sex positive spaces, especially if those spaces have implicit norms that everyone should be up for sex – or at least up for something. Also, even very good sex-positive authors can easily give the sense that it is better – or more healthy – to be sexual than it is to be asexual. It’s really important for the consent and comfort of everybody that we develop a culture where it is just acceptable not to feel sexual as it is to feel sexual – some or all of the time.

In the Meg-John & Justin podcast [episode on sex positivity](#), you and Justin Hancock talk about how non-consensual things can easily happen even in sex positive spaces. Can you elaborate a bit on this?

Yes. The problem has been that sex positive spaces have the veneer of consent: people are encouraged to behave consensually. Paradoxically that can make it harder – not easier – to call out non-consensual behaviour. If everyone assumes people will be consensual, it is a really big

deal to say somebody has been non-consensual, and you might even struggle to see the non-consent because you're not expecting it.

Also people are painfully aware of how rare such spaces are, and how precarious given the risks around holding a sex positive event. People in positions of power – such as charismatic organisers – have got away with extremely non-consensual behaviours because people have been so reluctant to see non-consent, or to report it. That's why we need to have #MeToo conversations within sex positive communities as much as outside of them.

How might we do a better job of defining and “practising” sex-positivity?

One of the best examples I've personally seen is the [Koinonia event](#) – and there are several other events and spaces following similar approaches now. What I like about this event is that there are four spaces, only one of which is explicitly sexual, so the culture there is that it's just as appropriate to go with the aim of chilling out, dancing, chatting with people, or having less erotic touch. Also, as well as a talk about consent and a set of written guidelines (which other events also have), the event begins by taking people through three group activities where they practise consent, tuning into what they would like, and communicating it verbally and non-verbally. That's a great way to show people what consent actually feels like, to normalise consent practices, and to ensure that people have already met a lot of other people in a kind and open way before the event proper begins.

Justin and I feel that the way to go with being sex-positive (or [sex-critical](#) which is the phrase we prefer) is to ensure that no form of sex is being presented as better than any other, that all bodies are welcome, that it is really okay to not be sexual in the space, and that consent is practised explicitly – including considerations of how power and social scripts can make consent more difficult. We've done a [video about consent](#) that might be helpful on this. We've also got several podcasts about consent and sex positivity on [our website](#).

Thank-you for reading

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