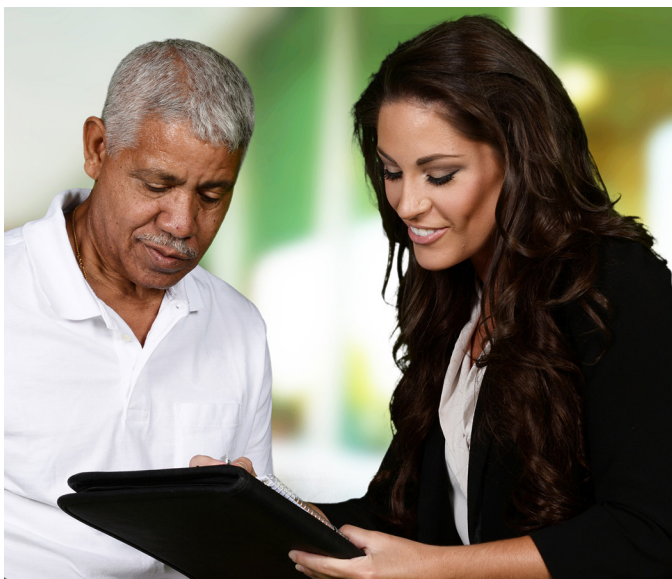


10 Reasons Every Therapist Should Talk About Sex in Therapy... and How to Get Started



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Every therapist should talk about sex in therapy.

Every therapist?

Really?

Why?



1. The best reason of all: your clients want you to.

The clients you already have would like to talk with you about sex. Probably not all of them want to right away, but I'd be willing to bet that at least 40 percent would have some issue about sex to bring up if you opened the door to that conversation, and most of the rest would bring something up later if they knew you were open to it. Here are some sentiments frequently expressed by my clients and the clients of my students:

- *"We've been to a number of couple's therapists over the past 25 years, but you're the first one who has ever brought up sex."*
- *"We're tired of working on 'communication' when we say we need to work on sex!"*



- *"My previous therapist never brought up sex, so I assumed she'd think I was a freak if I brought it up. Maybe she was just really uncomfortable with the topic."*
- *"Thank you so much for being willing to talk with me about sex as if it were a normal part of life. I was able to do a huge amount of healing in a really short time because you were so comfortable with the issue."*
- *"I've always held back in therapy because I think sex freaks people out. Thank you for being someone I can talk to about anything."*

It's true: your clients want you to talk about sex! Even more, they want *you* to bring it up first! And if you do, you will normalize the fact that people have sex and sometimes have issues around sex. That's just part of life. If you bring up sex in therapy, your clients will truly believe they can talk to you about anything.

2. Cultural messages about sex are confusing, and they lead to misconceptions that are damaging.

Open any magazine or watch any television show or movie, and chances are good you will be exposed to multiple—usually completely false—messages about sex.

Some common messages:

- *Only thin people are beautiful, and only thin people have sex.*
- *Women shouldn't initiate dates, romance, or sex.*
- *Men can't be trusted sexually or intimately.*
- *Men think about sex all the time.*
- *Women only want romance, not sex.*
- *Everyone thinks about sex all the time.*
- *Pornography causes sex problems.*
- *Good people don't watch pornography.*
- *Everyone watches pornography.*



- *Only men watch pornography.*
- *If a man in a couple relationship watches pornography, the couple will fight about it.*
- *Everyone is sexual.*
- *No one is sexual.*
- *Orgasm is easy and effortless for everyone.*
- *Sex should not be discussed openly.*
- *Sex always goes well, with no discussion needed.*
- *Partner sex is the only sex worth mentioning (except for the occasional joke).*

I could go on and on. My point is that sex is a huge part of our culture, and we are all barraged by culturally accepted misconceptions, myths, and downright lies. We take those messages in and apply them to our fragile selves, and they take hold and make mischief.



My private practice—and, I suspect, yours as well—is full of people trying to untangle their self-image, body image, ideas of what a relationship “should” be like, and a multitude of other issues arising from confusing norms and downright falsehoods. Many of these

things are closely entwined with sex and sexuality—for instance, what makes a person sexy, what sex “should” be, and what it means when sex doesn’t go as expected.

If you can talk about sex comfortably in therapy, you have another tool for helping. If you can debunk some myths about sex, you are on your way to changing the ways the culture’s messages about sex are hurting your clients.

3. Sex is part of everyone’s life...

...and a *huge* part of many peoples’ lives. It’s part of how we connect with partners, how we know we are “OK,” how we gauge whether our relationship is going well. Sex is one of the few ways adults play. Sex can be casual, connecting, deeply intimate, and even, for some people, spiritually transcendent. Sex is non-verbal



communication, and as such is sometimes an important language for couples who struggle with verbal communication. Sex is a way we feel validated, and some people rely on sex to validate their self-image or body-image. Sex brings joy or sorrow, lifts life force or squashes it, provides peak positive and negative experiences. Sex is one way our bodies tell us they are working correctly, or not. For some, sex is an

energy exchange; for some, an exchange of goods or services (think “If I take out the trash for you...”). Sex has the power to enliven both relationships and lives.

Even people who have no interest in sex, or who identify as asexual, can find it helpful to discuss that aspect of their life and identity with their therapist, at least occasionally. You don’t have to have a sex partner to have a sex life. You don’t even have to be interested in sex for sex to be an important part of your life, as well as something you want to discuss in your most private and safe places—for instance, in your therapist’s office.

4. Building a healthy sexuality is a life skill *nobody* can afford to be without.

Everyone deserves to have a healthy sexuality:

Everyone deserves to have a clear understanding of consent, leading to the ability to co-create relationships and a world with no sexual coercion or violence. No one should think a kiss means a commitment to “go all the way”—yet even adults who are partners in long-term relationships often think just that (consciously or unconsciously), and they don’t want to move in for the kiss because of it.

Everyone deserves access to accurate information about sex and sexuality, including a clear understanding of what and where their body parts are, how they work, how sexual pleasure happens in the body and brain, and how to keep all systems working optimally. Yet when I teach sexual anatomy and physiology, student-therapists often feel like banging their heads on their desks, asking, “Why didn’t anyone teach me this before?! I shouldn’t have to go to graduate school to learn how my body works!”



Everyone deserves to know that part of sex is sexual pleasure, and to understand how to normalize and maximize pleasure for ourselves and those with whom we choose to be consensually intimate. As a therapist, you know that flexibility is the skill that is most helpful for family systems in stressful times. A certain amount of knowledge about sexual function is a foundation for flexibility, allowing us to get the most out of our sexual relationships and intimate connections with changing abilities, bodies, and life circumstances.

This is what we want for ourselves, our children, and those we love. Can you imagine building the skills to help clients who want to create healthy sexuality for themselves? Now that would be life-changing!

5. Sex, identity, and religion are inextricably connected and lead to deep veins of rich material for therapy.

You probably already talk to your clients about values and belief systems, because you know how hard it is to help someone succeed if their goals are not aligned with their values. But if you don't already talk comfortably about sex, some people's therapy can only go so far. This is because sex, identity, and religion are aspects of self that are very closely connected. I find it helpful, when trying to facilitate change in one area, to be able to shift between several aspects of the issue in order to seek leverage without fatiguing the client.



You can imagine, then, that as an advocate and trainer for talking about sex in therapy, I also strongly advocate for talking openly about religion and identity. Let me give you some hypothetical examples derived in composite fashion from my practice:

- *A female client who, for religious reasons, did not engage in sex before marriage discovered to her dismay after the wedding that sex was not enjoyable, and then she worried that maybe she wasn't a "real woman" or a "good wife," or that maybe her experience was punishment for something. She was terrified to discuss it with her husband, not knowing what he would think of her. Here we have sex, religion, sex again, and identity.*
- *A male client who had been raised Catholic was quite devout. As he got older, he began to realize he was attracted to other men. Now he had a real dilemma: give up God, his belief system, his family, the afterlife—or himself? Here again, religion, sex, and identity.*

You've probably worked with many clients who are struggling to resolve a conflict in which some deeply held value or belief system is not aligned with their emerging self, creating an identity issue. In my opinion, these cases are some of the most interesting ways sex issues arise in therapy. It is so satisfying to be able to comfortably discuss this type of deep, intrapsychic impasse fully and from every angle.



6. You don't have to be a specialist to talk about sex in therapy.

Many of my clients talk about sex in therapy, yet most of what they discuss with me doesn't require much—or even any—specialized knowledge about sex. I am an AASECT-certified sex therapist (ACST), and most of my clients presumably choose me for that reason, or at least take it into account when choosing a therapist. Yet only a small percentage of them, perhaps 10-20%, actually need a specialist.



By far the most common issue sex therapists help with is desire discrepancy. I find it very interesting that many clients feel they need to see a specialist to deal with this extremely common issue. And this is not the only issue about sex that a generalist therapist can quite easily become qualified to discuss—or may already be qualified to discuss.

As of February 2016, the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists listed 677 AASECT-certified sex therapists. Some states have only one or two! Clearly there are not enough specialists to do all the talking about sex that needs to be done.

Are you worried you aren't qualified? For some clients and some problems, you probably aren't. But for many, even most, clients you could easily become very well qualified, even if you aren't already. The main tools you need are the willingness to have a conversation about sex and some vocabulary and a framework for doing so. With time and practice, you will build comfort.

I have trained many therapists to open the topic of sex and follow up any topic around sexuality that comes up in therapy, and to feel confident making appropriate referrals. So far every single one of these therapists has increased their levels of both competence and confidence, so I know it can be done.

7. Sex changes over the lifespan, so sex issues come up throughout the course of life.

Sexual function depends on multiple physiological systems functioning well all at the same time, and everything about our bodies is constantly in flux. There are large shifts in sexual function



around puberty, pregnancy, postpartum, and midlife, but those are not the only times our bodies change in ways that affect sexual function. Bodies are complicated biochemical ecosystems, and orgasm, erection, and penis-in-vagina penetration in particular require quite a lot of systems to be “go.” Skin integrity, hormone balance, cardiovascular function, nervous system health, and more are all necessary for reliable sexual function. And even stress and commonly used medications can interfere with sexual function.



And those are just the physical aspects of sexual health. Now consider the emotional aspects, which are even more numerous. Great sex depends on mood balance, anxiety management, and a reasonable degree of positive self-image. Also helpful is the ability to tolerate and even celebrate individual differences in preference, interest, body type, amount and quality of time spent together, communication style, kissing style, and a million other aspects of

individuality. An ability to gracefully navigate triggers connected with negative past experiences is also important, as is an elegant and nuanced understanding of consent. Good manners don't hurt, either.

8. Talking about sex is *not optional* if you want to clear up issues involving sex.

This may seem obvious, but my clients tell me they have seen many therapists who try to help them solve their sex issues by working solely on communication skills, and they tell me they find this frustrating.



I can say this: sometimes it works to focus on communication skills. I have done so myself, and when I approach a sex issue by starting with communication, I have one of two strategies in mind, for one of two types of couples and concerns:

Example 1. This couple's sex issue is *primarily* an interactive problem, so if they can learn to communicate more effectively, they will probably be able to resolve their sex issue on their own; *or*

Example 2. If this couple doesn't learn to communicate more effectively *before* tackling this hot-button issue about sex, they are unlikely to be able to get through all the complicated feelings and meanings attached to it.

In the case of Example 1, I have found that the meanings people make about issues around sex are so fraught with intense and complicated emotions that unless both parties in the couple are already extremely comfortable with their differences (in belief, body, meaning-making, preferences, etc.) and have very good emotional boundaries, they are likely to need help from a therapist when they get to talking about sex, even if they are able to clear up most *other* issues on their own.

In the case of Example 2, couples who are quite frustrated about sex issues tend to lose patience with me if I don't specifically address sex with them, no matter how hot-button the issue is. I can respect that. At the same time, developing skills in emotional regulation and communication will be crucial to their success. I believe the best results can be achieved by moving between supporting self-regulation and supporting congruent communication.



Furthermore, people have many myths and misunderstandings about sex. There is nothing more satisfying than offering up a few pieces of carefully timed psychoeducation about sex and watching entrenched gridlock between partners dissolve, leading to a dramatically faster and more effective therapy.

9. You can help people change their lives in dramatic and rewarding ways.

The most powerful interventions for helping with the most common sex issues are easy to learn and exciting to use because they change people's lives.

Imagine being able to quickly assess any sex issue and feel confident that you have covered the bases, know when to refer, and have enough information to create an effective and targeted treatment plan.

Imagine being able to explain how our cultural way of seeing a sexual interaction is creating multiple problems, possibly even creating sexual dysfunction. Imagine confidently leading your clients through a treatment plan targeted to building skills they need to more effectively approach the entire topic of sex—creating more connection, less disappointment, and more pleasure for everyone.

Imagine having a robust list of resources at your fingertips so you know where to look to find more information about your clients' most pressing issues.

Imagine having an ongoing consulting group focusing on your growth edge around sex and couple's therapy, where you can freely discuss clinical issues that come up in your own practice and get specific, targeted, and individual help you can use right away to help your clients and build your skills.

I have gathered, developed, and tested tools, approaches, theories, resources, and interventions from a career working with



multiple aspects of sexual health, followed by a master's degree program in marriage and family therapy, specialized training as a sex therapist, and certification as an AAMFT-approved supervisor. Throughout my career I have nurtured these twin passions: for understanding people, communication, and the brain/body/spirit connection and for developing creative, unique, and effective ways of teaching clinical skills to others.

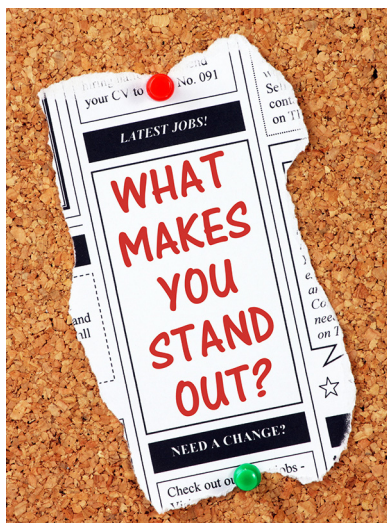
I offer an online training course that will help you gain that list of imagined skills and resources and give you the opportunity to move confidently through some of our culture's most values-laden and complicated material—in both the natural course of therapy and the normal course of life.

10. Talking about sex in therapy will set you apart from other therapists in your community...and you *can* do this!

The feedback I've gotten suggests that relatively few therapists offer comfortable, competent help with sex issues for their clients. Many therapy training programs don't offer even one course in sexuality, and many that do offer such a course do not focus on how to actually put theory into practice, leaving graduates unable to use the knowledge they've gained.

Unfortunate as that is, it also opens up an opportunity for you to set yourself apart from other therapists in your community.

In every graduate-level sexuality course I have taught, about a third of my students begin by telling me they don't think they can ever be comfortable talking about sex in therapy. They have a long list of blocks, and their confidence about moving past those blocks is low. Yet at the end of every course, even the ones who



were least confident at the start tell me they feel comfortable using language about sex, have a clear plan for how to assess and move forward with most sex issues, have a clear and individual plan for how and when to refer, and are currently incorporating sex topics into therapy, gaining confidence all the time.

Bonus: How to get started right away



Would you like to try broaching the topic of sex with your clients this week? If so, good for you, and good for your clients! The most tried-and-true technique I know for getting comfortable is *doing it*, and doing it many times.

Of course, talking about sex can feel a little taboo. That's why I've developed scripts you can use while you get your feet under you and find your own language, confidence, and style.

I strongly recommend conducting a brief assessment of sex issues right along with your other intake questions that assess mood and so on. Just like a mood assessment, a sex assessment takes only a few minutes. But first you have to open the topic.

Here's my favorite opening line:

"Is there anything about sex or sexuality you think you might want to discuss in therapy?"

If the response is "No," I follow up with, "OK. You should just know that if anything comes up in the future, you are welcome to bring it up here." And then I move on to the next (non-sex-related) item of assessment.

If the response is “Yes” (there is something about sex the client thinks they might want to discuss), I follow up with, “Can you give me a brief snapshot of what that looks like for you?”

And from there, I use a specific brief assessment tool to determine where the problem is, make sure I don’t miss something important, know if I need to make medical referrals, and get enough information to begin formulating an effective treatment plan.

If you’d like to learn my brief assessment tool, as well as many more specific interventions, techniques, and resources for helping effectively with sex issues, I invite you to consider enrolling in my online training course, **Assessing and Treating Sex Issues in Psychotherapy**.

Click Here

for More Information about “Assessing and Treating Sex Issues in Psychotherapy”



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