

Sexual Health Conversations: Therapist Skills for Confidently Talking with Clients about Sex

Douglas Braun-Harvey, MFT, CGP, CST
The Harvey Institute
www.TheHarveyInstitute.com

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Avila Carmelite Centre
(Disalced Carmelites)



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Learning Objectives

- Discuss current international conceptualizations of sexual health
- Define and summarize six fundamental principles of sexual health
- Measure current level of therapist comfort and willingness to engage in sexual health conversations
- Identify common therapist barriers to sexual health conversations

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Learning Objectives

- Explain essential elements of effective psychotherapeutic sexual health conversations.
- Identify skills that increase confidence and willingness to engage in sexual health discussions in individual, couples, family and group psychotherapy.
- Choose sexual health conversation skills relevant to therapy for individual, couples and groups as well as intern training and ongoing clinical supervision.
- Formulate client development of a personal vision of their sexual health.

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World Health Organization



Spiritual Mental Physical **Sexual**

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Inextricable element of human health

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Sexual and Reproductive Health Problems Account for **18%** of the total global burden of disease



32% of the Total Global Burden of Disease Among Reproductive Aged Women is from Sexual and Reproductive Health Problems



Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity.

Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.

For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.”

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World Health Organization(2006)

pleasurable and safe
sexual rights protected

World Association for Sexual Health



Readiness

Exists along a continuum from not at all ready or perhaps even opposed to various degrees of uncertainty to the other end of the spectrum: ready, willing, and open to change.

Suspending Judgment

Knowing One's Own Relationship with Sexual Health

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What are professional barriers to sexual health conversation in psychotherapy?

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Family Therapist Comfort With and Willingness To Discuss Client Sexuality

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Harris, S. M., & Hays, K. W. (2008). Family therapist comfort with and willingness to discuss client sexuality. *Journal of marital and family therapy*, 34(2), 239-250.

"Most health professionals, regardless of discipline, lack sufficient preparation to be considered competent in addressing sexual concerns" (Harris & Hays, 2008, p. 240)

"Mental health professionals need to maintain an accurate knowledge base about human sexuality" (Harris & Hays, 2008, p. 240)

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Therapist anxiety and reactivity when combined with client anxiety and reactivity to discussing sexuality contribute to an anxious-avoidant pattern in response to sexual health issues in therapy.

Clients need a non-anxious/non-avoidant informed therapist to initiate sexual health assessment and clinical treatment interventions.

Providers protect the therapeutic space for client curiosity and honest self-reflection when they avoid prematurely endorsing client or their own diagnostic conclusions.

Maintaining a nonjudgmental stance is difficult when faced with sociocultural forces or client distress.



Sexual Health Definition

Pan American Health Organization, WHO and WAS (2000)

Responsible sexual behavior is expressed at individual, interpersonal and community levels. It is characterized by autonomy, mutuality, honesty, respectfulness, consent, protection, pursuit of pleasure, and wellness. The person exhibiting responsible sexual behavior does not intend to cause harm, and refrains from exploitation, harassment, manipulation and discrimination.

Sexual Health Definition

Pan American Health Organization, WHO and WAS (2000)

honesty,
consent,
protection,
pleasure,
refrains from exploitation

mutuality,

Sexual Health Principles

1. Consent
2. Non-exploitation
3. Protection from HIV/STI's & unintended pregnancy
4. Honesty
5. Shared values
6. Mutual pleasure

Thank you for your honesty

**Honestly disclosing our
erotic desires and turn-ons
is a moment
to learn more
about the people we love.**

Definition of Sexual Health

CDC/HRSA ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON HIV AND STD PREVENTION AND TREATMENT (2011)

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Sexual Health

A state of wellbeing in relation to sexuality across lifespan that involves physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions.

An inextricable element of human health and is based on a positive, equitable, and respectful approach to sexuality, relationships, and reproduction, that is free of coercion, fear, discrimination, stigma, shame, and violence.

Includes ability to understand benefits, risks, and responsibilities of sexual behavior; prevention of disease and other adverse outcomes; and possibility of fulfilling sexual relationships.

Impacted by socioeconomic and cultural contexts—including policies, practices, and services—that support healthy outcomes for individuals and their communities.

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CDC/HRSA ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON HIV AND STD PREVENTION AND TREATMENT (2011)

"Sexual health promotion programs for all groups, including youth and people with disabilities, should embody the reality that **sexual pleasure and intimacy are strong motivating factors for sexual behavior** and that sexual pleasure contributes to happiness and well-being."

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Knowledge of the body related to sexual response and sexual pleasure

Valuing sexual pleasure throughout the lifespan

Sexual pleasure balanced with respect for rights of others

Engage in sex in a safe and responsible manner

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Dermer, S., & Bachenberg, M. (2015). The importance of training marital, couple, and family therapists in sexual health. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 36(4), 492-503.

Affirming Sexual Pleasure



Credibility
established
through
affirming
dangers of
sex

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Affirming Sexual Pleasure

Rewarding
experience
of sex is
pleasure

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Affirming Sexual Pleasure

Sexual
pleasure is
a positive
force in the
world

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Affirming Sexual Pleasure

Pleasure is
an important
motivation for
sex

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Sexual Health is Central to Overall Health

Sexuality affects
every aspect of every
therapy modality

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Sexual Health is Central to Overall Health

Not a rare
topic for
therapy

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Attempt to Address Sexual Worry

Honorable
attempt to solve a
sexual concern

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Focus on Client Motivation

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Focus on Client Motivation

Sexual values, ethics, and boundaries are important motivators.

Focus on Client Motivation

Focus on incongruence between current behavior and sexual health goals

Focus on Client Motivation

Place confidence in transformative potential of a clients sexual values

Sexual Health Conversation Skills

Establish Psychological Safety

Clients calculate safety at micro decision points

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Establish Psychological Safety

Assess risk of specific sexual disclosure within the immediate climate

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Establish Psychological Safety

How has the therapist mitigated previous hurt, shame, pain, criticism or sexual talk?

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Establish Psychological Safety

Clients calculate safety at micro decision points

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Establish Psychological Safety

How is sex discussed in the first session?

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Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices

How do clients learn to consciously observe and manage their sexual judgments?

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Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices

Focus on conflicting motivations within sexual health principles

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Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices

Sequence of revealing opinion or conclusion before behavior description

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Here and Now Sexual Health Moments

Use of accurate,
specific sexual terms

Here and Now Sexual Health Moments

What do you mean by "it"?

Here and Now Sexual Health Moments

Do you feel closer or more
distant from _____?

Here and Now Sexual Health Moments

What did you enjoy or
find pleasurable?

Block Interference of
Sexual Health
Conversations

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Block Interference of
Sexual Health
Conversations

Therapist redirects behaviors
and comments that move
away from emotionally
activating topics

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Block Interference of
Sexual Health
Conversations

Interrupt social custom of
most uncomfortable person
regulating the sex talk

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Block Interference of
Sexual Health
Conversations

Become curious about the
defenses that were the catalyst
for the blocking intervention

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Sexual Health **Language**

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The ability to achieve sexual desire, arousal and orgasm

Sexual Functioning

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The way in which one participates in or engages in a sex act with oneself or another

Sexual Behavior

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Individual acts engaged in, including, but not limited to, fantasy, embracing, caressing, masturbation, kissing, oral-genital stimulation, oral-anal stimulation, anal intercourse, and vaginal intercourse

Sexual Activities

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A sequence of physical and emotional changes that occur as a person becomes sexually aroused and participates in sexually stimulating activities

Sexual Response

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Positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli

Sexual Pleasure

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A peak of sexual pleasure characterized by a general euphoric sensation and physical or emotional release.

Orgasm

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Positive regard for and confidence in the capacity to experience one's sexuality in a satisfying and enjoyable way.

Sexual Self-Esteem

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