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

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Avila Carmelite Centre (Discalced 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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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."



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.

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Suspending Judgment

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What are professional barriers to sexual health conversation in psychotherapy?

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) 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.

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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.

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.

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Braun-Harvey, D. (2015). Treating out of control sexual behavior: rethinking sex addiction. Springer Publishing Company.



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

mutuality,

honesty, consent, protection, pleasure, refrains from exploitation

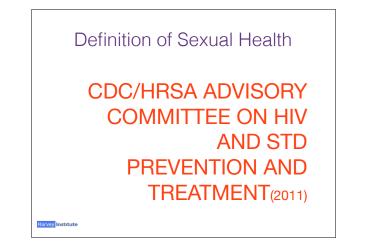
Sexual Health Principles

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.



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.

CDC/URSA A

"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."



AND STD RREVENTION AND TREAT

Knowledge of the body related to sexual response and sexual pleasure

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Valuing sexual pleasure throughout the lifespan

Sexual pleasure balanced with respect for rights of others

Engage in sex in a safe and responsible manner

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	
Affirming Sexual Pleasure Rewarding experience of sex is pleasure	
Affirming Sexual Pleasure Sexual pleasure is a positive force in the world	
Affirming Sexual Pleasure Pleasure is an important motivation for sex	

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.

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Focus on Client Motivation

Focus on incongruence between current behavior and sexual health goals

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Focus on Client Motivation

Place confidence in transformative potential of a clients sexual values

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Sexual Health Conversation Skills

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Establish Psychological Safety Clients calculate safety at micro decision points Harvey Institute **Establish** Psychological Safety Assess risk of specific sexual disclosure within the immediate climate Harvey Instatute **Establish** Psychological Safety How has the therapist mitigated previous hurt, shame, pain, criticism or sexual talk? Harvey Instatute **Establish** Psychological Safety Clients calculate safety at micro decision points

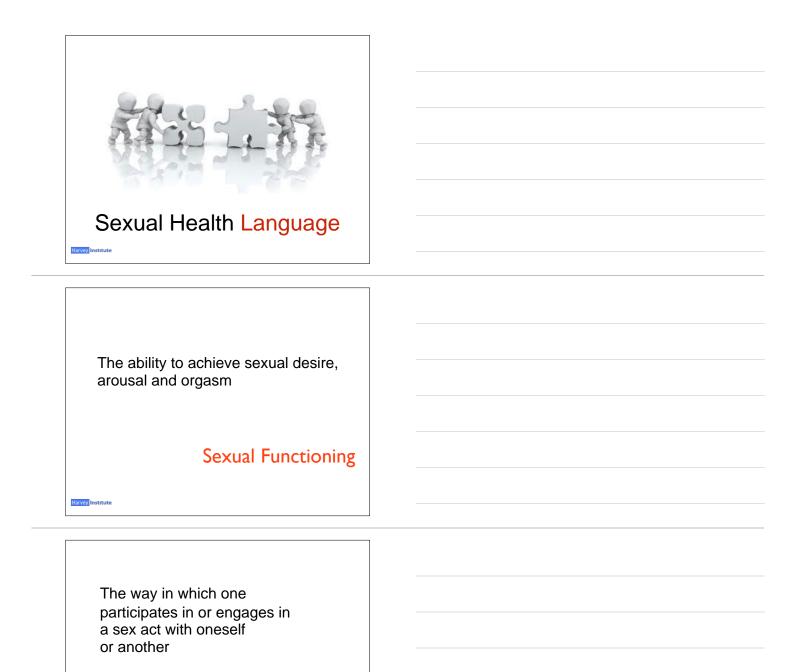
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Establish Psychological Safety How is sex discussed in the first session? Harvey Institute Suspend Judgement about **Sexual Practices** How do clients learn to consciously observe and manage their sexual judgments? Harvey Institute Suspend Judgement about **Sexual Practices** Focus on conflicting motivations within sexual health principles Harvey Institute 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	
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]
Here and Now	
Sexual Health Moments	
What do you mean by "it"?	
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Here and Now Sexual Health Moments	
Do you feel closer or more distant from?	
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Here and Now	
Sexual Health Moments	
What did you enjoy or find pleasurable?	
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Block Interference of	
Sexual Health	
Conversations	
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	7
Block Interference of	
Sexual Health Conversations	
The second state with the base is an	
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 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

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

Sexual Response

Positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli

Sexual Pleasure

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