

Confident Conversations with Clients About Sex

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The Harvey Institute
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*Improving Health Care Through
Integration of Sexual Health*

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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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MentalHealth

SpiritualHealthPhysicalHealth

Human Health and Well-Being

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MentalHealth

SexualHealth

SpiritualHealthPhysicalHealth

Human Health and Well-Being

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



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



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Sexual Health:

- Conceptualized on the principle of human health and well-being.
- Based on sexual science.
- Biopsychosocial health model

Sexual Well Being:

- Prevention and treatment of sexual disorders.
- Addressing negative consequences of sexual activity.
- Reduction of situations that might lead to negative sexual health consequences.

Promotion of Sexual Health: Recommendations for Action was finalized during a seminar held in Antigua (Guatemala) from May 19-22, 2000, under the auspices of the PAHO and the WHO, in cooperation with the WAS.

*MentalHealthPhysicalHealthSpiri
tualHealthSexualHealthPhysical
HealthMentalHealthSexualHealth
SpiritualHealthPhysicalHealthSe
xualHealthMentalHealthSpiritual
HealthSexualHealthMentalHealth*

Inextricable Element of
Human Health and Well-Being

**Defining
SexualHealth**



“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 Health Organization(2006)

KEYWORDS: world health organization working definition of sexual health

https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/

Initiating client sexual health conversations requires therapist comfort, **knowledge** and ability




Initiating client sexual health conversations requires therapist comfort, **knowledge** and ability



Sexually knowledgeable therapists were not better at initiating sexual discussions

(Harris & Hays, 2008)

Initiating client sexual health conversations requires therapist comfort, knowledge & **ability**



SEXUAL HEALTH CONVERSATION SKILLS

Suggestions for Participating in Today's Workshop

**SEXUAL HEALTH
CONVERSATION SKILLS** | Have
Conversations

**SEXUAL HEALTH
CONVERSATION SKILLS** | Listen for
Pleasure

**SEXUAL HEALTH
CONVERSATION SKILLS** | Welcome
Reflections and
Memories

**SEXUAL HEALTH
CONVERSATION SKILLS** | Observe
Judgements

SEXUAL HEALTH
CONVERSATION SKILLS

Suspend
Judgements

SEXUAL HEALTH
CONVERSATION SKILLS

Specific and
Accurate
Language

Suspending Judgment



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What are professional barriers to **sexual health conversation** in psychotherapy?

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"What makes you assume that I'm a snowman?"

Comfort

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Ability

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"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.

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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.

Therapist Verbal and Non-Verbal Sexual Health Conversation Avoidant Patterns

The Six S's



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Sexual Health Counseling Practice Skills

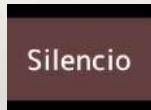
Willing to Disrupt Counselor and Client Avoidant Patterns in Discussing Sexuality



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Silence

Counselor's resolve, lack of confidence, worry, and uncertainty about addressing a client's sexual health worries, problems or dysfunctions is managed by remaining silent.



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Silliness

Counselor's and client's humor, jokes, innuendo, smirks, smiles, and laughter can be both a wonderful coping mechanism or a release valve for the unspoken discomfort, low confidence or judgements, opinions or biases.



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Shame

Difficult for counselors to admit they may engage in shaming behavior. A counselor's facial expression, action, or inaction can communicate shame.



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Shyness

Counselor insecurity, self-consciousness, or nervousness may present as shy to the client. Their body may blush, shake, begin to have more shallow breathing, and/or feel speechless. The counselor with a shy response may hesitate to say or do anything in response to the client's sexual conversation.



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Suppression

Client sexual talk, sexual thinking, sexual memories, or sexual desires are excluded from treatment. Counselors and/or client may benefit from skills for managing intolerable levels of anxiety/shame/embarrassment activated by a sexual health conversation.



(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Superstition

Sexual superstitions reign when data, facts, or sexual health informed psychotherapy methods are not available.

Counselors and clients benefit from curiosity about how much we *do not* know about sex-/drug-linked or Chemsex behavior.



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(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

Why Training in Sexual Health Conversations?

Each counselor sex avoidant pattern contributes to their clients experiencing shame when interested in talking about their sexual health



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(Braun-Harvey, 2011)

The Six S's:

1. Silence
2. Silliness
3. Shame
4. Shyness
5. Suppression
6. Superstition



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Braun-Harvey, D. (2011). *Sexual Health in Recovery: A Professional Counselor's Manual*. Springer Publishing Company.



SEXUAL health

Principles

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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.

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Sexual Health Principles

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| 1. Consent | 4. Honesty |
| 2. Non-exploitation | 5. Shared values |
| 3. Protection from HIV/
STI's & unintended
pregnancy | 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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Definition of Sexual Health

**Raise your hand when
you find the word
pleasure in the
definition**

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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.



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Fundamentals



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Affirming
Sexual
Pleasure



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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





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Establish Psychological Safety



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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



Establish Psychological Safety



How is sex discussed in the first session?



Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices



Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices



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



Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices



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Focus on conflicting motivations
within sexual health principles



Suspend Judgement about Sexual Practices



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Sequence of revealing opinion or
conclusion before behavior description



Here and Now Sexual Health Moments



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Here and Now Sexual Health Moments



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Use of accurate,
specific sexual terms



Here and Now Sexual Health Moments



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What do you mean by "it"?



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Here and Now Sexual Health Moments



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Do you feel closer or more
distant from _____?



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Here and Now Sexual Health Moments



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What did you enjoy or
find pleasurable?



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Block Interference of Sexual Health Conversations



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Block Interference of Sexual Health Conversations



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



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Block Interference of Sexual Health Conversations



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Interrupt social custom of most uncomfortable person regulating the sex talk



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Block Interference of Sexual Health Conversations



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



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