Chapter 3

Let’s Talk about Sex: The Importance of Open Communication about Sexuality Before and During Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Developing comfort in having an open and honest conversation about sex is essential to better our community’s sexual health and to assist individuals in developing happy and healthy relationships. Discourse about sex commonly begins in schools’ sex education programs, but these programs need radical reform. The current mandated sex education programs only cover the basic anatomy of sex with the emphasis of abstinence. However, reformation to a sex positive approach within sex education would educate individuals on the physiological, psychological and emotional aspects of sex, and could promote safe sex practices for both mental and sexual health. Communication is extremely important for all types of sex relationships; communication in general about sex is correlated with higher rates of overall relationship satisfaction. Communication about one’s sexual needs and desires leads to higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Higher levels of satisfaction lead to higher levels of overall relational satisfaction, emphasizing importance of communication about sex.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, by the time they reach their late teen years, more than three-quarters of all men and women have engaged in sexual intercourse, and over two-thirds of sexually active individuals have had at least two or more sexual partners. The Kinsey Institute reports that condoms are used in only 25% percent of vaginal intercourse sex acts, and roughly six million US women become pregnant each year. The Center for Disease Control Prevention (CDC) estimates that almost 20 million new cases of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) occur in the United States each year. In 2014, there were approximately 1.4 million cases of Chlamydia, approximately 350,000 reports of gonorrhea, 50,000 new diagnoses of
human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and 20,000 cases of Syphilis. In 2013, according to the CDC, approximately 47% of high school students nationwide had engaged in sexual intercourse. Of the percentage of students who had engaged in sexual intercourse, about 34% reported that they were sexually active. Of the percent of students who admitted to being sexually active, 40.9% reported that neither they nor their partners had used a condom the last time they engaged in sexual intercourse.

Culturally it is felt that conversations about sex are best kept conservative. However, developing comfortability in discourse about sex is essential for the conservation of our community’s sexual health and for individuals to develop happy and healthy relationships. Conversations about sex commonly begin in schools’ sex education programs, but these programs need radical reform. Despite our country’s high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancies, and the large number of sexually active people in our nation, less than half of the states in the U.S. mandate sex education. The current mandated sex education programs only cover the basic anatomy of sex with an emphasis on abstinence. However, reformation of a positive approach to sex within sex education would educate individuals on the physiological, psychological and emotional aspects of sex, and could promote safe sex practices for both mental and sexual health. Today, many young adults engage in casual sex relationships, specifically “friends with benefits relationships,” and research has also been conducted investigating the effects of casual sex relationships in terms of young adults’ mental health. Communication is extremely important for all types of sex relationships; communication in general about sex is correlated with higher rates of overall relationship satisfaction. It is important for individuals to communicate about their sexual needs and desires in order to better accomplish sexual satisfaction. Higher levels of satisfaction lend themselves to higher levels of overall relational satisfaction, thus communication about sex is increasingly important.

**Sex Education**

Despite the fact that the United States has such a large population of sexually active people, with devastatingly high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and infections, and a large community of HIV positive individuals, Sex and HIV education is not nationally mandated. According to the Guttmacher Institute, as of December 1st 2015, only 22 states including the District of Columbia mandated sex education. The District of Columbia and 20 states mandate both sex and HIV education, and two states mandated sex education alone. Only 13 states in the U.S. require medical accuracy when sex and HIV education are taught. When HIV education is taught, 39 states require that abstinence be included, 25 require that it be “stressed” and the remaining 12, that it be covered. Only 18 states and the District of Columbia require that information on contraception be provided. Inclusion of life skills for avoiding sexual coercion is required when sex education is provided in 20 states and DC, healthy decision making is required in 20 states, and 11 states are required to include information on family communication.

One of the greatest criticisms of sex education in America is that it fails to properly educate today’s youth on the nature of sexual activity. Sex education in many school settings is often presented in a purely biological manner. Educators talk about basic anatomy and the biological principles of menstruation, ejaculation, puberty, reproduction and conception. Information on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), sexually transmitted infections (STIs), human papilloma virus (HPV), HIV, and pregnancy may be provided, however sex education in schools tends to employ scare tactics and to emphasize the negative outcomes of sexual intimacies rather than offer a positive focus on healthy relationships. Most sex education programs focus on the risks and dangers of sex as a means to deter adolescents from en-