

Sex Ed

Category: Getting Motivated

written by Pamela Adelstein | October 16, 2024

Behind the closed door of the exam room, patients always hesitate in a predictable manner before asking uncomfortable questions. As the visit winds down, they finally summon their courage and inquire. We providers recognize this scenario, having witnessed it countless times before. Perhaps the patients sense us relaxing into the familiar and feel briefly encouraged to proceed.

The wording varies, but the themes are similar:

“Why don’t I want to have sex anymore?”

“Is something wrong with my body? Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Is there a pill I can take to fix this?”

“Can you do a test?”

For health-care providers, our schooling often provides a mere glimpse into the sex education required to answer questions like these. We must educate ourselves. For patients, other than the internet, or maybe a trusted friend, it can be difficult to find accurate information. So when I get questions like these, I normalize my patients’ feelings and discuss the lack of openness about sex in our society, particularly around gender diversity and aging.

“We are all so busy, tired and stressed—one may not want to have sex if one is emotionally depleted.”

“Your body is neither deficient nor wrong. Social media has created warped expectations about bodies and sex.”

“Let’s talk more about your experience and figure out how to help you feel how you would like to feel.”

“It is wonderful for your body to experience pleasure. And you get to define what pleasure means to you. Many of us carry deep internalized shame. You deserve better.”

I savor these discussions with patients. I work to build mutual trust and create a safe space in the physician-patient relationship to help people feel more at ease. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss sex with people of all genders and sexualities—with a gentle smile, a calm voice, and an open heart. I know that my patients are still hesitant to disclose information about their sexual practices. The obligation to create greater opportunity for dialogue is mine.

What is my motivation? So many children, teens, and adults have felt alone

and confused about their bodies and carry unnecessary shame and blame. I want to help them find answers to their questions so they can feel more whole. Honest and open sex education would greatly benefit so many. Until our society is ready for this, such discussions will continue to be had behind closed doors, one patient at a time.

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