

BASIC SENSATIONS, COMPLEX RELATIONS

Intimacy Issues And Sexual Distress Take Many Shapes

Think back to your own childhood. How were intimacy and affection expressed at home? Did you hear your parents argue but never see them kiss? Who were your first intimacy teachers?

Maybe you were among the lucky ones whose parents answered your questions simply and honestly. You were prepared for your first period or your first ejaculation — proud that your body was maturing and confident it was healthy. You learned to handle your sexual feelings responsibly and discuss your concerns with someone you trusted.

Or maybe you found out about sex from the boy down the street or by an unwelcome advance from your next-door neighbor. How did you decide when to be sexual and with whom? Is sex something you did to be liked, or did it have a more important meaning for you? And while we're on the subject, what is sex anyway (if there's no penetration, does it still count as sex)?

As a sex therapist and psychologist, I'm interested in all of this and more. Virtually everything that affects us biologically, psychologically, spiritually, historically and interpersonally shapes our capacity to feel sexually successful as men, women and couples.

People ask me how I became a sex therapist. I think this early story may have set the stage for me.

I was 15 years old when Al Rofelson broke up with me because I wouldn't French kiss him. I still wonder what happened to him — how he turned out. Someone told me he's a musician in a town outside of Boston. I remember scribbling "Mrs. Al Rofelson" all over my notebooks. Al had braces that pinched my lip when we kissed. I really liked him, so I didn't complain. At that time in my life, I couldn't understand why French kissing was so important or why someone would break up over it.

After our relationship was over, I wrote Al a short note (I kept a copy of it in my diary because I was a little obsessive — even then). "Dear Al," I wrote. "I'm just writing to tell you that I'll always love you (as a friend) and that one day you'll learn that sex isn't everything even though you may think it is right now!"

Out of the mouths of babes! What would he think if he knew that my entire career has

centered on sexuality!

That was many years ago. I've treated thousands of individuals and couples in some kind of sexual or intimacy distress since then. People call me with problems of desire, arousal, response, pain and intimacy. Some struggle with issues of sexual adequacy and desirability. Others are trying to find a way to blend parenthood with passion, chronic illness and pain-free sex, pregnancy and sensuality, menopause and femininity, or retirement and vitality. For all of these years, sexuality has continued to challenge me with its simplicity and its complexity.

Many teens and adults give in to sexual pressures or expectations. Others run from discomfort or shut down their own pain by dissociating. As adults, some of these individuals have gotten their desire and arousal permanently stuck in the off position. "Kelly," a 28-year-old math teacher, came to therapy six months after marrying "Chuck," 29, her high school sweetheart. At age 6, her parents had divorced after a stormy relationship where she witnessed many battles. Her first sexual experience was forced by an uncle 12 years her senior when she was only 14. Kelly has frequent nightmares, a poor body image and "numbs out" physically whenever she is touched. She loves Chuck and can't understand why she can't feel pleasure with him. They're both worried things will never improve. In therapy, Kelly and Chuck learned to openly discuss her sexual abuse and her need for safety and control. She is learning to listen to her body's messages about her pain — instead of shutting them down.

When I think about how I kept silent with something as silly as the pinch of Al's braces, I recognize the enormous pressure women face at all stages of development to "just grin and bear it" and be accommodating. Even when breast touching or penetration is uncomfortable, some stay silent. Women tell me how they tolerate uncomfortable vaginal dryness rather than stop the action and risk upsetting their partner. Countless women I see think that painful pelvic exams are normal and are afraid to tell their physicians to slow down or proceed more gently — after all, it will be over in a minute.

Women also have difficulty identifying their sexual pleasure and stating their sexual needs clearly.

And let's not forget the men, trying to be sensitive lovers, distracting themselves to delay ejaculations, or anxious to maintain their erections because they're afraid of the consequences. These couples withhold their truths and sacrifice their own physical or emotional well-being for the supposed "good" of the relationship. But dishonesty is never healthy. By denying each other their truths, they decrease their intimacy.

Living in accordance with our own sexual and emotional truths is a tall order for young and old alike. We're bombarded on a daily basis by images and dialogues of what constitutes normal healthy sexuality (supported by statistics that are usually self-selected). Let's sort through the science and mythology to fashion more sexually satisfying, more meaningful, more intimate lives.

This content is considered informational and is not intended to be a substitute for professional, medical, or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

To Ask A Question ...

Our intimate relationships and sexual health are intensely personal concerns that many people find difficult to discuss.

Please think of this as a safe place to have those concerns addressed.

Feel free to ask me whatever is on your mind about sexual wellness, health, intimacy, and relationship — mind, body, or spirit. Whether it is a question about talking to your kids or your parents about sex, coping with an aging parent's needs for intimacy, newly dating — let's push the boundaries.

I wonder how many teens today would anguish over questions about kissing as I did years ago. May be kissing is too simple-minded a subject for a generation that has grown up with the terrors of 9/11 and a live-for-the-moment mentality. In the days of purportedly plentiful oral sex and "hooking up" with buddies, what do teens think about sex?

Let's find out together what's really relevant today. Whether you're a college student, recently divorced or widowed, balancing a career, managing cancer or some other illness, struggling with fertility, or just trying to make the most out of your marriage — let's talk.

Write to me in confidence at AskDrScantling@aol.com.

She Has Multiple Degrees, Certification As Sex Therapist

Dr. Sandra R. Scantling is an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine, nationally recognized intimacy expert and a certified sex therapist and psychotherapist in private practice in Farmington.

She is a licensed clinical psychologist, advanced-practice registered nurse, and is a diplomate of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, & Therapists. She holds

degrees from Boston University, Indiana University and Antioch University and completed a doctoral fellowship and advanced sex-therapy training at Yale University. She is the director of the Farmington Psychotherapy Center and Scantling Institute in Farmington.

Scantling is a recipient of the Connecticut Psychological Association's award for "Distinguished Contribution to the Science of Psychology" and was honored as "Sex

Educator of the Year." She is the author of "Extraordinary Sex Now: A Couple's Guide to Intimacy," co-author of "Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Sex" and creator of the video series "Ordinary Couples Extraordinary Sex" that has sold more than a million copies worldwide. She also has contributed to the "The Most Important Thing I Know About..." series of books on topics of love, family, friendship, faith and kindness.

Scantling maintains a web site at www.dr.sandy.com and writes the "Sex Health" column for the Connecticut Psychologist and is a frequent guest on WTIC-AM radio's Jim Vicevic Show. She has also appeared on numerous television shows including the Today Show, Good Morning America, The View, The BBC and The Early Show.

Email your questions to AskDrScantling@aol.com.

Dr. Sandra Scantling, a psychotherapist and certified sex therapist in Farmington, will discuss intimacy issues in a twice-monthly column in NE.

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