

**Let's Talk About Sex! Oh, No!**  
**Welcoming Therapist Parts in Reaction to Sexual Conversations**

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**Introduction**

1. As with all IFS therapy, the goal for talking about sex (or having sex) is for our Self to be in the “driver’s seat” or the leader of our internal system. As many parts may automatically blend and take us over with their beliefs, values, and actions around sexuality and the erotic, we aim to be good parts detectors, help parts unblend, relate to and heal underlying hurts, so we can be present in Self.
2. You don’t need to be a sex therapist to have good conversations about sexuality with clients. Most important is to be aware that sexual conversations can stimulate many parts with desires and reactions, stirring approach-avoidance polarities, in clients and in therapists.
3. Confidentiality and Safety for this workshop. Speaking for parts.

**Meditation**

Bring curiosity and compassion to the parts that you’re bringing to this workshop, what you’re feeling in your body, listen to any parts with concerns or questions, notice any parts that would like you to speak for them.

**Considerations for Bringing Sexual Conversations into Therapy**

1. What parts (values, attitudes, beliefs, likes and dislikes) are we bringing to a particular client or couple?
2. How does each of us decide to pursue or not pursue sexual or erotic material with clients? If we hesitate because this is a very personal, private

domain, how is it that we don't hesitate to ask about other private domains, such as depressed and suicidal parts. Which parts encourage us or inhibit us from talking about sexual matters with clients? We have parts that may be uneducated or are judging and shaming (parts that might judge clients' parts and/or our parts). Sexual topics stir a huge range of reactive parts in us, including excited titillation, pleasure, shame, moral prohibition, disgust, fear, and rage

3. A “multicultural” approach to sexuality – educated about diverse sexual and erotic cultures, practices, and attitudes. How does a person’s sexuality intersect with other dimensions of identity, including gender, class, ethnicity, race, and religion?

4. The erotic is based on polarities:

- (a) Yin (feminine, cool, receptive, passive, whole body focus) and Yang (masculine, hot, penetrative, active, genital focus)
- (b) Eros (drive for love, life, sexuality, reproduction) and Thanatos (drive for aggression, death, destruction)
- (c) Other polarities: familiarity-novelty, closeness-distance, dominance-submission, safety-danger, being good-being bad, differentiation for healthy attachment

5. Themes that can pose challenges for therapists:

- (a) Helping partners communicate sexual likes and dislikes, negotiating Self-led speaking for and listening to Yes and No, balancing safety with passion, inviting all parts, including desires, shame, anxieties
- (b) When sex is used (by an individual or a couple) to satisfy or ignore other emotional needs. When sex is absent because of other emotional frustrations.
- (c) Love and Lust: Integrated and balanced for some people; Segregated and compartmentalized for others. Clients who romanticize others, who objectify others, etc.
- (d) Many people enjoy their erotic fantasies for their private pleasure whereas other people aim to transform their fantasies into actual sexual behaviors. For couples, what remains private and what is shared?
- (e) Low or high sexual desire; discrepant sexual desires between partners; waning passion in couples over time
- (f) Assessment and treatment of sexual dysfunctions (physiological and

psychological bases; dysfunctions as consequences of medical diseases, surgery, or medications)

(g) Sexual and emotional affairs outside of one's primary relationship: betrayals of trust

(h) Negotiating boundaries for monogamous and open sexual relationships, polyamory

(i) Internet Pornography – normal or addictive? Cybersex, sexting

(j) Other compulsive or addictive sexual behaviors, mixing sex with other addictions (alcohol, drugs). Distinguishing high sex drive from out-of-control impulses without concern about consequences.

(k) Phase-based treatment for clients with history of sexual trauma, individually and in couples

(l) lesbian, gay, bisexual sexual practices, cultures, identities, mores

(m) the gender spectrum, transgender umbrella, gender transitioning

(n) erotic play with power and pain: domination/submission (d/s) and sadomasochistic sex; distinguishing consensual, respectful, intentional play from coercive power and abuse

(o) anonymous sex, group sex, kinky sex, using objects with sex, etc.

(p) unsafe sexual behavior – putting oneself (and/or one's partners) at risk for sexually transmitted diseases, danger, violence

(q) sex workers and people who pay for sex

(r) integrating sexuality and spirituality

(s) cross-generational sexual relationships

(t) unfamiliar sexual practices: e.g., fist fucking (one person inserts his or her arm into the other person's well-lubricated anus); pegging (a woman wearing a strap-on dildo penetrates the other person's anus)

(u) perpetrative sexual behavior: e.g., sex offenders, sex trafficking

### **Exercise: Speaking and Listening in Sexual Conversation**

Choose a partner whom you don't know very well. One begins as the speaker and the other begins as the listener. The speaker speaks for 3 minutes about anything sexual or erotic, could be pertaining to his or her personal experience, a client, or something sexual the speaker has heard about in the news, etc. The speaker may speak for parts that are uncomfortable, embarrassed, or shy about speaking about something sexual or erotic to a stranger. (This exercise aims to simulate what our clients' experience might be when we ask them to talk about this personal, private area of their lives.) The listener pays attention to any parts, feelings, reactions that come forward while listening to the speaker. What parts get in the way of listening from Self curiosity, calm, compassion?

The speaker and the listener take a couple of minutes to write down whatever each noticed inside while speaking or listening. Please do not share with each other.

Then they reverse roles and repeat the exercise.

After the listener and the speaker have written down what each has noticed after the second round. Please share with one another.

### **How does talking about sexual topics affect therapy and the therapy relationship?**

1. May eroticize the therapy relationship, e.g., talking about sexual matters may intensify client's sexual attraction to therapist
2. Clarifying boundaries and ethical and legal prohibitions against sex with clients
3. May bring therapist's attraction to a client into clearer awareness
4. Therapist's attractions to clients (summarized from Ken Pope et al. (1993))
  - a. *Parts that are Triggered by Sexual Feelings toward Clients*
    - Surprise, Startle, Shock
    - Guilt
    - Anxiety about unresolved personal issues
    - Fear of losing control
    - Fear of being criticized

- Frustration at not being able to speak openly
- Frustration at not being able to make sexual contact
- Confusion about tasks of therapy
- Confusion about Actions
- Anger at client's sexuality
- Fear or Discomfort About Frustrating the Client's Demands

b. *Parts That May Take Over The Therapist If Sexual Feelings Are Not Acknowledged*

- Dehumanizing client
- Distant, Analytical Therapist
- Obsessing about the client
- Parts that show up through slips and mistakes
- Fantasizing about the client
- Giving client special treatment
- Isolating from colleagues
- Creating secrets with the client

c. *Work With Your Parts*

- Go Inside—Notice what is happening
- Seek supervision
- Consult with colleague
- Begin or resume personal therapy
- Study available research/literature
- Acknowledge what is happening
- Communicate consistently with client
- Clarify fuzzy issues (hugs)
- Make sure you are competent
- Always act in the client's best interest

**Exercise: Developmental Messages We Received about Sex and Sexuality**

*Please answer these questions to as much detail as you and your parts feel comfortable. This exercise will be shared in small groups, therefore be cautious in regards to sharing sexual trauma.*

- What messages did you get from parents around sexuality?
- What messages from peers?
- What messages from religious institution?
- What messages from society?
- How did early experiences impact your sexuality?

### **Break**

### **Exercises to Help Clients Work with Their Erotic Parts**

1. *Basic Principles for Using Exercises Individuals and Couples*
  - a. Sex is communication, within oneself and with your partner
  - b. Stay present (i.e., with as much Self as possible) during sexual communication.
  - c. Notice being distracted, uncomfortable, or not feeling--parts are blended with you
  - d. Give you and your partner permission to go slowly, take time to go inside, listen to parts' concerns, help them to relax
  - e. Help couples develop reflective listening skills
  - f. Speak for polarized parts – those that have wishes and desires and those that are nervous, shy, ashamed, want limits
  - g. View sex is a great opportunity for each partner to learn about his or her projections.

### **Exercise – Relating to One's Own Sexual Parts**

Brief meditation to guide you to get in touch with any of your body parts that are involved in their sexual/erotic feelings, desires, and concerns, i.e., the brain, which is the most erotic organ of the body; the heart, which may hold romantic and

attaching feelings; the eyes, nose, lips; the breasts; the penis, clitoris, labia, vagina, buttocks, anus; and other any parts (maybe for some the toes or the kneecaps). You can do this exercise as cautiously or as openly as you decide is best and safest.

Notice the first part that seeks your attention and ask this part how it would like to be represented on the paper and draw or write this.

Notice any feelings or reactions or judgments to this part, including parts that might be polarized with this part. Represent these parts.

Then notice the next part that seeks your attention and ask this part how it would like to be represented on the paper and draw or write this.

Notice any feelings or reactions or judgments to this part, including parts that might be polarized with this part. Represent these parts.

Continue until a few sexual parts are on the paper.

Notice how these parts relate to one another within your sexual system. Which parts tend to work together? Which parts tend to pull in opposite directions? Which parts receive appreciation and gratitude? Which parts receive judgments and blame and carry shame? Bring Self energy to the various body parts.

Notice any parts that would like you to get to know them better or may trailheads for further exploration. If comfortable, set an intention to spend more time with these parts, including time with your body to explore these parts with touch, by yourself and/or with a safe partner.

## 2. *Attunement to One's Body - Exercises for Individuals*

(from Judith Leavitt, (2012). *The Sexual Alarm System: Women's Unwanted Sexual Response and How to Overcome It.*)

- Sit upright in a comfortable chair or lie on a mat or carpet on the floor in relaxing environment.
- Begin with conscious inhaling and exhaling, not trying to control it. When you are comfortable lie down on a yoga mat on the bed, draw the air through your nose expanding your belly as you do.
- Feel the air filling your diaphragm, your chest, and your pelvis.
- Then exhale and feel the air flowing out of your pelvis, diaphragm and chest. As your body released let it go. You can place your hand on your chest and belly to sense the movement in these areas.

- Then add your genitals to the above breathing. Imagine your vagina and vulva to be like a mouth. As you inhale, imagine drawing air into your vagina and letting it expand and relax. As you exhale imagine that you are pushing the air out through our vagina.

## 2. *Attunement to One Another's Bodies – Exercises for Couples*

*(from Judith Leavitt, (2012). The Sexual Alarm System: Women's Unwanted Sexual Response and How to Overcome It.)*

- Sit together on chairs next to each other in a relaxed and quiet atmosphere
- Begin by focusing on your breath-inhalation and exhalation normally through your nose
- Then begin to let out sounds together such as “MMM” or sighing “AHH”. Feel the resonating of your sounds together
- Explore the sounds of births or animals, cawing, chirping, meowing, barking--make sounds identical and complimentary
- Then do big, releasing sounds such as roaring like lions, church bells ringing, sirens wailing, train whistles, drumming on table, stomping feet on floor, etc.

## 3. *Touching Pinkies Exercise*

- Ask one partner to touch his or her pinkie finger to the other partner's pinkie.
- Guide them to notice protector parts that come up just before touching, while touching, and after touching.
- Work with parts that interfere with person staying present/being in Self during the touching

## 4. *Talking to Our Erogenous Parts*

- Consider the genitals and erogenous areas of the body as parts and form relationships with them.
- It is very common for genital/erogenous parts to carry burdens and it can be enlightening for you (or your client) to understand and witness this.
- Facilitate dialogue between genital/erogenous parts and other parts, with which they may be polarized.

## 5. *Communicating Erotic Fantasies and Sexual Wishes Exercise*

*This exercise is for people who are comfortable with their bodies or who don't have sexual trauma or who have healed from sexual trauma*

- Ask each partner to think of one of two desires or fantasies that are pleasurable for him or her.

- Notice any parts that come up for each person while thinking of the desires. (The desires or fantasies do not need to be spoken aloud.)
- Work with any parts that are interfering with the person staying present/be in Self while thinking about the desire or fantasy.
- Consider telling a desire or fantasy to one's partner. (They can whisper in each other's ears or they can write down their desires and exchange papers.)
- Notice any parts coming up in anticipation of communicating the desire to one's partner. Work with parts so each person can be as present/in Self as much as possible for the other person.

#### 6. *Saying "No" (Setting Limits) Exercise*

- Work with person's parts to help clarify what is uncomfortable or undesirable about x.
- Help guide person to identify what he or she could be comfortable with.
- Work with other partner's parts to be as present/ in Self as much as possible to hear first person's discomfort or limits.

#### 7. How to bring desire (erotic passion) into an enduring love relationship

Esther Perel: What increases partners' erotic excitement to one another:

- When partners are apart from each other
- When we view our partner in his or her confident and strong role, e.g., performing his or her job or a talented avocation. "Looking at a familiar partner from a distance helps make the partner seem elusive and mysterious."
- Surprise and novelty, not only via new sexual positions but when new aspects of our partner come forward: "Wow, I never knew this side of you!"
- Wanting our partner is fine but neediness (a compulsive part) is a turn off and can stir a caretaking part (or a resenting, rejecting part) in the partner, which is not erotic.

Jack Morin: Erotic Equation: Attraction + Obstacle (polarity) = Excitement

- Geographical, temporal, or emotional distance
- Violating prohibitions (playing with guilt and shame)
- Playing with power – submission-domination

Consider partners' changing roles – the yin yang reversal

### ***Bibliography and Resources***

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