

Let's Talk about Sex

(Even When It's Hard to Do)

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This Clinician's Toolbox is the first of several upcoming articles on the topic of working with sex and sexuality in EFT couples therapy.

Sexual intimacy and attachment go together and are precious parts of a couple's relationship and of being human. Sex is a bonding activity that is intimate, playful, erotic, life-giving, has numerous health benefits, and enhances emotional closeness and feelings of wellbeing. Sex is inherently packed with attachment messages of being loveable, wanted, and desired. It is woven into the fabric of humanity and relationship, but so often goes unmentioned and unexplored even in the most skillful couples therapy sessions.

The EFT therapist is a relationship crusader who willingly goes into the darkest corners of emotion with clients in the service of love. Yet, a whopping 75% of therapists on average (across models) don't talk about sex with their clients. Estimates posit that between 50%-67% of couples and individuals struggle with their sexuality. Most couples are waiting for their therapist to raise the issue. And the news is disappointing – most therapists don't.

Why is that? In speaking with many therapists about this question, reviewing the literature, and tapping into our own historical blocks to addressing sex and sexuality in our psychotherapy practices, some themes emerge: Most therapists feel quite unprepared clinically – especially since there has been a professional divide between the fields of couple therapy and sex therapy with little cross-pollination of the two. Therapists feel anxious about the content itself, fearing they may offend or embarrass clients, or that this topic is inappropriate to pursue, or that they may be experienced as intrusive to a private part of clients' lives. Therapists themselves struggle to talk about their own sexuality, making it more difficult to explore the issue with their clients. Here the old adage really applies: "We can't take clients into terrain we are unwilling or unable to go into ourselves".

So How Can We Ask About Sex?

Even when you know that asking about a couples' sexual relationship is a crucial part of the assessment process, it can be so hard to find the right words or the right moment. As in most of EFT, transparency and directness work well. We ask couples, in the first or second meeting:

How important is it to each of you that we discuss your sexual connection in our work together?

Would you like to talk about how things are feeling for each of you in your sexual relationship?

How would you describe your sexual relationship? How and when is it a source of connection and pleasure for each of you?

In our experience, couples most often respond in one of two ways: With an exhale of relief, because they *need* to talk about sex, and the therapist has just broken the ice for them; or, alternatively, they shoo it away as not very important “*right now.*” That can be a signal that they are not yet comfortable enough – with the therapist, with the process of therapy, with their partner – to talk about this sensitive topic. (Of course, it could also be that they feel good about their sexual relationship, but even then, that is still a worthy area of discussion). If they don’t want to talk about it now, we can offer to check back in with them at a future time taking a respectful and collaborative stance: “*OK. I understand. You have other, more pressing issues as we are just getting started in our work together. Would it be okay, though, if I check back in with you down the road in our work, to see if it’s something that would be helpful to talk about later on?*” The value of this question is that you have opened the door, and the couple will know that YOU are okay talking about it. You have also created permission for them or you to bring it up again at any future time.

“It’s not you, it’s ME:” When the Therapist Feels Uncomfortable

Almost every therapist has the best intentions and wants to serve their clients well, including in the area of sexuality. What is a therapist to do, then, when talking about sex is *really* uncomfortable for them?

FIRST, HAVE EMPATHY WITH YOURSELF. Most likely there are very real reasons and experiences you have had which make this such a difficult topic for you. Can you talk about why this might be so with a friend, a colleague, your own therapist, or an understanding supervisor? Understand *what* is so triggering for you (e.g., is it the topic at large, is it using explicit language with clients, is it fear of your own discomfort or reactions, of the clients’ discomfort, of getting turned on/off, of looking ignorant... what, specifically, is scary about this?). Understand *why* it is uncomfortable: how did you learn (or not learn) about sex growing up? What messages did you receive about sex, about *talking about* sex? What implicit attitudes do you hold about sex (i.e., sex is dirty, sex is a sin, sex is only for a man and woman, polite and professional people don’t discuss sex in mixed company, etc.)?

SECOND, EXAMINE YOUR OWN ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT SEX. One very good way to open up your own experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and reactions about sexual topics is to participate in a “SAR” – a Sexual Attitude Reassessment seminar. A SAR is a process-oriented, non-judgmental, structured group experience that allows participants to explore and understand their beliefs, attitudes, values and biases within the realm of sex and sexuality. This self-exploration and self-understanding facilitates comfort that ultimately fosters improved communication skills, both on a professional and a personal level. AASECT.org is a good place to

find SAR workshops all over the U.S., and many other sexual health education organizations offer these workshops.

THIRD, SEEK MORE EDUCATION. Gaining more information on sex through workshops, courses and reading is a wonderful way to increase confidence and comfort surrounding these topics.

FOURTH, PRACTICE. Practice having conversations about sex; if you have a partner, talk more explicitly about your own sexual feelings, values, practices; discuss sexuality with friends, colleagues and your therapist. Practice putting the words to sex, using a wide variety of language (both technical and slang). In a later article we will share the kinds of questions that are helpful to ask when taking a sexual history with clients. Some of these questions might be uncomfortable to ask. Sit down with a friend or in front of the mirror, take a deep breath, and practice asking the questions most difficult for you: *What are your early experiences with masturbation? Can you tell me about your first sexual encounter? What role do sexual fantasies play in your sex life?*

The good news is that talking about sex gets easier with practice. Most of us are breaking implicit rules or taboos in explicitly talking about sex with ourselves, our partners, and our clients. Be the therapy crusader. You, and your clients, will be stronger for it.

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