Sexual Intelligence: A New View of Sexual “Function” & Satisfaction

Marty Klein, Ph.D

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What do most people say they want from sex?

1) Pleasure
2) Closeness

But that’s not what most people focus on before or during sex!
What do people focus on during sex?

- How they look, sound, or smell
- Preventing unwanted activity
- Ignoring (or preventing) pain
- Discerning partner’s feelings or judgments
- Trying not to climax too quickly
- Hurrying to climax
- Suppressing emotions
- Trying to function “the right way”
- Persuading partner to do certain activity
- (Ignoring) distracting thoughts/feelings
What can make sex complicated?

- Shame, guilt, embarrassment
- Performance anxiety
- Feeling separated from partner
- Hiding from partner
- Being sexual when you don’t want to
- Doing things you don’t want to
- Fear of pregnancy or disease
- Difficulty resisting distraction
- Physical pain
So what’s the best way to address these issues and make sex more enjoyable?

Hint—It’s not by getting better erections, better lubrication, or better orgasms.
Many people think that sex has inherent meanings, and that we’re stuck with them.

For example:
* Lack of desire means lack of love
* Lack of erection means lack of manliness.
But like so much else in life, the meaning of sexuality is constructed.

People and couples construct its meaning all the time.
Constructing sexuality

- What is sex?
- What is sexy?
- Where do I fit in?
- What is my history?

How do these things apply to me? my partner? our couple?
Examples of narratives

- Men/women always disappoint you
- I’m no good at sex
- I’m not desirable
- I’ve been permanently traumatized
- Sex should be spontaneous & natural
- I’m a sex addict
- I’m over the hill
- Some kinds of sex are undignified, unfeminist, not manly, or not for people like me
Examples of couples’ narratives

- Our chance for good sex is over
- We’re not sexually compatible
- We’re not eligible for sex
- Our kind of people don’t really enjoy sex
- Sex is for young people
- I’m ready to have good sex, but s/he isn’t
- S/he is too involved with work or the kids
- There’s just no time for good sex
Changing our narratives is central to enhancing sexual satisfaction.

But that’s not what people generally do.
How people typically try to resolve sexual dissatisfaction

- Urge partner to be sexier
- Erection drugs
- Acquire new positions or techniques
- Fantasize during sex
- Use drugs, alcohol
- Masturbate beforehand or afterwards
- Romantic getaway
- Affair or different partner
- Get into BDSM or toys
- Get into swinging
Most people focus too much on the sexual content, and not enough on the sexual experience.

The 1st question shouldn’t be “what should we do?” but rather “how do I want to feel?”
Sexual “function” is a **means**, not an end.

It doesn’t necessarily create sexual satisfaction.

Too much focus on “function” can **undermine** satisfaction.
Creating “good sex” is not the goal of sex.

Orgasm is not the goal of sex.
Enjoying sex is the goal of sex (i.e., some combination of pleasure & closeness).
Everyone has conditions for enjoying sex—about self, other, environment. What are the client’s?
Everyone has conditions for enjoying sex; for example,

- Privacy
- Being in love
- Afraid of getting caught
- Lots of touching
- Lots of verbal communication
- Feeling respected
- Feeling naughty
- Feeling dominated
- Secure about contraception
- Feeling clean
Sexual dissatisfaction when conditions aren’t met isn’t a dysfunction

• I don’t feel close to you
• I don’t feel you’re interested in me
• I have other things on my mind
• We still haven’t resolved a recent quarrel
• I’m concerned the kids will hear us
• We haven’t agreed on our sexual routine
• I don’t entirely trust you
• I’m too stoned to actually feel my body
“You shouldn’t have that condition.”

“Ignore how you feel.”

“I don’t have that condition.”

“I don’t have conditions you find inconvenient.”
Anatomy of Sexual Arousal

1. BRAIN
   sexual message
   (picture, caress, etc.)

2. SPINAL COLUMN

3. PELVIC NERVES

4. VASCULAR SYSTEM
   (leading to erection or lubrication)
“Sexual dysfunction” is when the brain—spinal column—pelvic nerves—vascular system information transfer doesn’t work smoothly.

There can be many reasons why the transfer is disrupted.
Remember, someone’s requirements for “functioning” may not be present.

We have to ask about various contextual details to find out.
“How did you feel when ______?”

“How did you decide to _______?”

“What were you thinking when _______?”
The concept of “normal sex” disrupts many sexual relationships. There’s no inherent hierarchy of sexual activities.
Most people want to be sexually normal, and think it’s a problem if they aren’t. Or if their partner isn’t.
Rather than reassure people that they’re normal, let’s help them escape this dilemma altogether.

That empowers them instead of fixing them.
“Normal” sexuality

- Sex when tired
- Unrealistic expectations
- Awkwardness & self-consciousness
- Confuse arousal and desire
- Confuse arousal and enjoyment
- Masturbation hidden
- Sober?
- Know what partner likes?
- If using erection drug, does partner know?
If someone doesn’t expect to enjoy sex, not wanting it makes sense—no matter how sexy their partner, or how much they love each other.
Good reasons people don’t enjoy sex

• Performance pressure
• Normality anxiety
• Unrealistic expectations
• Emotions about non-sexual things
• Conditions: unmet or conflicting
• Shame, guilt
• Chronic conflict about sexual routines
• Partner’s criticism; Narratives of failure
• Unsatisfactory initiation or transition
Making sex more enjoyable

- Focus on lived experience rather than “function”
- Ask yourself what you want from sex
- Talk about your actual experience during sex
- Ask a partner what they like about what they like, & what they don’t like about what they don’t like
- Negotiate rather than compromise
- Treat sex like other relationship activities
- Don’t retreat into categories (sex addict, kinky)
- Create your conditions before or during sex
A new vision of sexual “function”

• Sense of humor
• Ability to relax
• Ability to focus and resist distractions
• Comfort with discussing birth control & STDs
• Comfort touching oneself during sex
• Sexual self-esteem independent of performance
• Self-acceptance: body, preferences
• Ability to enjoy sex sober
• Can express desire
• Knowledgeable about sex and one’s body
• Realistic expectations
This is also called

Sexual Intelligence
Sexual Intelligence:

The information, emotional skills, & body awareness that we need to create enjoyable sex.
Sexual self-acceptance

- Independent of performance or function
- Independent of body shape, size, etc.
- Resolve normality anxiety
- Don’t imagine your sexual challenges are unique
- Don’t take responsibility for partner’s experience
- Don’t imagine partner’s reality—ask, & believe
- Identify & challenge early shaming messages
- Notice when you’re enjoying yourself
Interventions

• Identify, evaluate, change sexual narratives
• Identify & reduce shame
• Ask about times they’ve enjoyed sex
• Ask how they want to feel during sex
• Ask what they like in sex, including partner’s body
• Locate & challenge what’s “normal”
• Challenge them to maintain their sexual self-esteem independent of performance
The two most practical suggestions for improving sex:

* Communication
* Self-acceptance
After all, sex is more than an activity:

it’s an idea.