



Sexual Self-Care:

Owning your Power for a more Pleasurable Life

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Q1: Why do people need self-care? (Psychoeducation)

A1:

- So by this time, most of us know why self-care is important: to combat stress and its effects.
- About eight in 10 Americans say they frequently (44%) or sometimes (35%) encounter stress in their daily lives, with biggest stressors being children and work (Saad, 2017).
- On top of that, burnout, or the state of emotional, depersonalization, and decreased sense of accomplishment caused by excessive and prolonged stress (Freudenberger, 1975) is at an all time high with 21% of workers in older generations claiming they feel frequent or constant burnout at work and nearly 7/10 millennial workers say they sometimes feel burned out at work (Pendell, 2018)
- Stress has been linked to various health concerns including: Heart disease, Asthma, Obesity, Diabetes, Headaches, Depression, anxiety, Gastrointestinal problems, Alzheimer's disease, Accelerated aging, and even premature death (Griffin, 2015).
- Completing the stress cycle and implementing some self-care are ways to develop healthy coping skills for stress. Self-care is important to maintain a healthy relationship with yourself, produce positive feelings, and boost your confidence and self-esteem to know that you can handle future stressful situations. Also, self-care is necessary to remind yourself and others that you and your needs are important.

Q2: What is sexual self-care? (A definition)

A2:

- Simply put, self care is taking care of your whole self. There's all sorts of self-care, and I know Beth touched on some of those before, like mental, physical, emotional, personal, social, spiritual, etc. but sexual self-care is unique in that it can combine a number of those aspects. Sex can be personal or social, it can be physical, emotional, and spiritual all at once. By focusing on the sexual aspect of self-care, we are reminding ourselves that sex is a basic human function (for most) and having a healthy relationship to our bodies and our sexual selves is part of what makes us whole.

Q3: How does one utilize sexual self-care when they consider themselves A-sexual?

A3:

- I say “for most” because there are people who identify as asexual. In fact current studies suggest 1% but the number could be much higher (Poston & Baumle, 2010). But sexual self-care can be for asexuals too. People who identify as asexual can still be romantically attracted to other people, masturbate, and enjoy sexually intimacy with others, while not being sexually attracted to anyone (Prause & Graham, 2007). It's important here to conceptualize sex as more than just PIVing (or penis-in-vagina), it's about the connection to your erotic self, communication, relating to another person, and so much more.

Q4: But why sexual self care? What are the benefits? (Psychoeducation)

A4:

- Sexual self-care allows you to understand your body and your potential for pleasure, moving beyond body (and genital) shame
- Allows you to reconnect to your body and a sense of pleasure beyond trauma and changes such as unwanted sex, the sexual body in pregnancy, in birth, and postpartum, and the sexual body during and after illness. Its a way to heal and embrace one's body & sexuality again after traumatic experiences
- It allows to discover our own way to sexual empowerment, beyond lack of sex education, social constraints, or instances where you may have felt that you did not have control or power over your own sexual expression.
- Focusing on sexual self care can also be a form of transformative justice, or “pleasure activism,” ie. using the work of using satisfaction and enjoyment to reclaim ourselves from the impacts of oppression and promote socio political reform to move toward large-scale societal healing (Brown, 2019).
- Reconnecting with your sexual self (through sex, masturbation, and orgasms) releases feel-good hormones like oxytocin, and endorphins, our natural pain-killing hormones (Toates, 2009).

Q5: How does one utilize sexual self-care when they are experiencing anhedonia?

A5:

- So anhedonia refers to a lack of pleasure, usually seen as a side effect of depression and other mental health disorders; however, it can also be the result of other causes, such as overwork, recent tragedies, and you guessed it, stress! For those experiencing anhedonia, I would advise first seeking out a professional to rule out any medical causes, followed by following up with a mental health provider to address possible depression or undiagnosed mental health concerns. For those experiencing anhedonia to to life stressors, sexual self care can be a way to take care of yourself and develop healthy coping skills for future stress. But for those who are too stressed to even think about sex, please stay tuned for my next podcast where will be tackling just that.

5 Sexual Self-Care Tips

Q6: What are some ways people can engage in sexual self-care?

1. **A6:** Check yourself out. Take a good long look in the mirror if you're comfortable, and just notice what you see. Point out the things you like and admire what's in front of you: you! Remember that all bodies are good bodies and that all bodies are generally the same, just composed of similar parts that are configured differently (including your genitals!)

Q7: Why is it important for women to look at their vulvas in relation to sexual self-care?

A7: I think it's important for women especially to check out their genitals. We are so much socially ingrained to hide and be shameful of our vulvas, that most of us don't even know what they look like! So I think one of the first steps in getting comfortable with your sexuality is really knowing your body. Remember that self-care of about taking care of your WHOLE self, so if you are working on maintaining a healthy relationship with yourself and boosting your confidence and self-esteem with the rest of your body, but not your vulva, are you really focusing on your whole self? Taking a look is also a precursor to knowing where and how you like to be touched. Once you can identify where and how, you can more effectively communicate this information to a partner(s), if you like of course.

2. Take some time to focus on the health aspect of your sexual wellbeing: Maybe do a little research into reproductive care, STI info or testing, pregnancy, expected stage of life changes, whatever! Remember that knowledge is power, and it can help you feel more calm or confident in your sex life. Getting tested for STIs totally counts as self-care and allows you to take control and power over your own sexual health and wellbeing.

5 Sexual Self-Care Tips cont.:

3. Take some time to reflect on your sexual boundaries and check in with your partner(s) about them. What you do like, what you don't like, things you'd like to try?

Q8: What can people do if they are uncomfortable talking to their partners about sexual needs? How can they communicate unmet sexual needs/desires to their partner(s)? And where does consent play in this?

A8: This can be scary, it can be really difficult to be vulnerable about these things, but having an open and honest conversation with your partner is the best way to communicate your needs and take control of your pleasure... This leads me to the topic of consent. Having firm boundaries in place allows for you to clearly identify consent. By knowing where you and your partner's boundaries are, you can more clearly articulate them to each other, and identify your "no's," or what is off limits. In other words, what you are not consenting to. It's important to check in on these boundaries because just like consent, they can change. And it should be noted that learning how to respond to "no" is important act of sexual self-care for all parties involved.

5 Sexual Self-Care Tips cont.:

4. Masturbate! (If you want!) Think about experimenting with a sex toy or a fun lube. Masturbating is a great way to just focus on you, and has a ton of benefits (including releasing all those feel good hormones I mentioned earlier). It's also a great way to determine what you like sexually and how you like to experience sexual pleasure (including where you like to be touched, how much pressure to apply, etc), making it much easier to know what you want before sharing this information with a partner(s).

Q9: Could you elaborate on orgasm equality?

A9: Sure, so I'm sure a lot of people have heard about the orgasm gap. Basically, this refers to the idea that men orgasm far more frequently than women, with studies noting that 95% of heterosexual men say they usually or always experience orgasm during sexual intimacy, compared to just 65% of heterosexual women (Frederick, et al. 2018). This is largely in part due to societal conditioning, like the stigma against women expressing their sexual desire, coupled with the pressure on men to take an active role during sex, which can prevent meaningful communication and limit engagement of behaviors that are most likely to elicit female orgasm (Frederick, et al. 2018). That's the bad news. The good news is that behaviors associated with sexual self-care such as: Asking for what you want in bed, praising your partner for something they did in bed, incorporating more variety into your sex life, and engaging in conversation during sex are all associated with closing the gap (Frederick, et al. 2018).

5 Sexual Self-Care Tips cont.:

5. Lastly, if you are feeling uneasy about some part of your sexual health, consider seeking out support from a sex therapist. Whether you are experiencing desire discrepancies with a partner(s), discomfort with your gender identity, having anxiety about sex or your body, have uncontrollable sexual behaviors, or trouble getting past a trauma, there are professionals out there trained in matters of both sex and mental health that are there to help.

Additional Questions:

Q10: Is porn helpful or hurtful in relation to sexual self-care?

A10: So I am not anti-porn. I think though, that everything to be enjoyed should be enjoyed in moderation. So if someone is wondering about their porn use, I suggest that they ask themselves if and how it is impacting their life. Porn can be helpful for a lot of reasons, it can help you explore interests, it can be a shared activity between partners, and it can teach you new techniques, but if its getting in the way of your work day or your relationship, it might be time to close the laptop. With regards to self-care, it's important to remember that porn isn't real. I like to think of porn being to sex what fast and the furious is to driving, its faster, more extreme, the explosions are bigger (everything is bigger), and those people are actors. If you're going to watch porn, remember to have compassion for yourself, mainstream porn tends to limit the types of people and body types we see, but there are other not-so-mainstream porn companies that strive for more realism.

Q11: When is the earliest someone should learn about sexual self-care?

A11: The sex start stuff starts from the beginning, as long as its developmentally appropriate. For example, getting to know your body parts and boundaries is especially important at a young age. Children who are shamed about their genitals often become adults who are ashamed of their genitals. There's a group called Sex Positive Families that has loads of resources for giving your kid "the talk" at various age levels. I'll link them for folx to check out if interested.

Q12: Is mindfulness apart of sexual self-care?

A12: Mindfulness is most certainly a part of sexual self-care. It means paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present, without judgment. I can't think of a better way to come to know your authentic self as a sexual and erotic being.

Recommended Readings/Resources:

Nagoski, E., & Nagoski, A. (2019). *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*. Ballantine Books.

Nagoski, E. (2015). *Come as you are: The surprising new science that will transform your sex life*. Simon and Schuster.

<https://sexpositivefamilies.com/>

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