

Frequently Asked Questions about Sex

Susan Scott Hennings and Jerry L. Talley were interviewed by New York journalist and author Elina Furman for an article Elina was writing on sex. Here are the questions she asked and their responses.

How can couples improve how they communicate about sex?

Learning to communicate well is an important skill in any relationship. It becomes even more important, helpful and necessary when sex is the topic! Start by making the "talking about sex" as intimate as the sex. Sit close. Make eye contact. Hold hands. Be playful as well as earnest. Be direct and clear. Be inviting, not demanding. Use humor as needed. Avoid shame, blame or criticism. Convey acceptance and encouragement. Be mindful of your tone and timing.

What are some good conversation openers when discussing sex?

It's not unusual to feel awkward and uncomfortable when sex is the topic. You don't have to pretend to be an expert or let your anxiety hold you hostage. Talking about sex can start with acknowledging any discomfort, ignorance, or embarrassment that you feel. You might try, "I really don't know HOW best to do this. I've never talked about these things before...and I don't feel comfortable. But I'm willing to try because I want so much to be close to you and to build on what we already have."

What can a man do to make his partner more open about her sexual fulfillment? (Jerry)

Start by focusing on *your* behavior rather than on *her problem*. Let her know you'd like to learn more about her body, and that you'd love to be taught. Then listen, take notes, be aware. If you don't know what pleases your partner, don't make it into her problem. Ask. Be curious. Admit that you haven't been listening and show her you can change.

What should women be aware of when talking about sex with their partner? Are men more open or closed when it comes to communicating about sex? (Susan)

I think that depends on the man. Some are more open and comfortable; others are more closed and awkward. Just like women. I don't think women have the market on openness when it comes to sex. Both men and women can fall prey to the prevalent societal myths that can lead either gender to become focused more on performance than on pleasure. I'd want women to understand that men seem especially vulnerable to these (damaging) myths, and can become overly-concerned with "performing well." Here's a popular one: "A 'real' man is always interested in and ready for sex; a 'real' man is so good at sex that he'll make the Earth move for his partner--or at the very least knock her socks off!" The impact of these myths is not harmless. They elicit unrealistic expectations of what people actually do sexually, and can badly affect self-esteem, sex lives and relationships.

I think some women have a tendency to use too many words or, in an effort to be sensitive or gentle, can beat around the bush. (No puns intended!) Don't make your man play "fill in the blanks." Be clear and specific, instead of vague or global. Use as few words as possible, keeping in mind your main message. Don't forget to voice what you appreciate or what's working. Positive strokes are a good thing!

How can people keep lust alive in long-term relationships?

Stay in touch---literally. Maintaining your non-sexual connection will fuel and more easily spark your sexual one. At the beginning, novelty and sometimes risk are enough to make sex exciting. After you've made love a few hundred times, it's your sense of candor, humor, adventure, acceptance, authenticity, and caring that will spark continued lust.

Does it always take work to keep the spark going?

Where did we ever get the illusion that keeping the spark alive would be simple and automatic? Of course it takes work (pleasurable work, but still a special effort)! Sex may be simple, but "making love" is an art, a cultural acquisition, a higher order talent. Read. Study. Talk with your partner. Dare to really "show up!" Make learning about yourself and each other a lifelong pursuit. Most of us work harder at hobbies than we do at love making.

What's the best way to find out a new partner's sexual past, STD's, partners, etc.? Are there any good ways of starting a conversation about sexual history? Many women try to cover up how many people they've slept with. Should women be honest about revealing their "number" (how many partners they've had)?

Try: "As curious as I am about your sexual history, I'm really more interested in our sexual future. Aside from lots of practice, I'm hoping we can talk openly about what's important to us, what works well, what we each like, and what new things we might each like to try. Are you up for some candid and passionate sexual talk as well as passionate sex?"

Neither Jerry nor I are fans of reporting "the number." Ask yourself: "How/why is the answer to this question REALLY important?" Seems to us to be the wrong focus. Your partner's sexual past (how many partners) is less of your business than the state of their current sexual health! That's important to discover and disclose. If you have an STD, it's (hopefully) a given that you'll be upfront and candid with any new partner BEFORE having sex! Getting tested together is a better solution than playing "You tell me yours, and I'll tell you mine."

What should you never say to a new partner when discussing sexual past? Or, should nothing be taboo?

Comparing your current partner to previous partners is not only bad taste, it's misleading. Don't go there. This isn't the Olympics. Competitive scoring works for the gymnastics mat, but not for the bedroom. You don't get higher marks for technical difficulty. It doesn't matter what the East German judge gave you. The real issue is how well your sexuality reflects and enhances your sense of intimacy.

When is it appropriate to mention potential STD risk? What if one person has an STD? When should s/he disclose this information?

As soon as there's potential sexual contact, or just before, if you can pull it off. But certainly the first time there's any flash and pizzazz (hot kiss, a grope, a grab, a glimmer). Definitely sooner rather than later! BEFORE sex rather than after the fact....or act?! Having a STD is an unfortunate but simple fact of life--not a crime or moral flaw. Hiding an STD or avoiding a discussion about it IS. So, please talk about it! Disclosing an STD can feel uncomfortable or embarrassing--yes!--but better to stumble awkwardly through such a conversation than not to

have it at all. Being candid and direct with your partner about having an STD is evidence of your respect and affection for them. Please offer the information in that spirit. Good luck.

Have other questions?

Some of this material from the paragraphs above made its way into an article appearing on RevolutionHealth.com. You can [link here](#) to the article on exploring your partner's sexual past, and then make your way to other articles you might find interesting.