

# Sexual Health Conversations: A Missing Piece in Treatment

By Jerry Moreau, LMFT

Counseling clients requires specific skills. Clients can present many challenges for the counselor. There are some topics that appear to be difficult and even taboo to bring up in therapy sessions, such as finances, religion/spirituality, politics, and sex. The taboo is that these topics are too potent. There may be the conception that the client would be uncomfortable with these topics. Even more problematic, the counselor may be uncomfortable, often counselors hesitate to bring up these topics unless the client initiates the discussion. The client may want to discuss these challenging subjects but may first need to assess if this is a safe environment in which to do so.

Sex is often a very difficult topic to talk about with clients. Maybe it is the intimacy of the counselor-client relationship, the age difference, or gender difference. We do know that when conversations around sexual issues are left unsaid or remain in the margins of the work we do with our clients, there are negative health outcomes. It is very important to be open to freely discuss sex, sexuality, sex history, sexual trauma, and other topics related to sex.

Sex is uncomfortable for many of us to talk about, whether it is with our intimate partner, children, friends, or health professionals. Our wants, desires, and needs can feel embarrassing, even shameful. Sex often is something we talk about in disparaging ways. Society has determined that sex should be something to be ashamed of and therefore kept quiet. Gloria Brame, Ph.D. said

“...our culture and laws treat sex as something that is so dirty that we need not only to be protected from it, but prevented from having it. We still abide by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century beliefs that sex is a dangerous force which has the power to pollute minds and drive adults mad.”

Not wanting to be driven mad, it is no wonder we do not talk about sexual issues, yet we can find sex everywhere. Sex is used in marketing, television, music, movies, and video games. However more often than not sex is not talked about where it most needs to be – in the home, between sexual partners, and in a health care professional’s office. Counselors often do not ask about sexual health because of various factors, such as time constraints, their own discomfort discussing sex and sexual health, and their assumptions about the client’s comfort level regarding sexual health.

Refraining from bringing up these topics that are important to clients is a disservice to them and can result in negative health outcomes. Counselor-client communication impacts the client’s quality of care, health outcomes, and satisfaction. Discussing sexual history and intimate relationships with clients is an important part of any health care assessment. Open communication between client and counselor is vital for the relationship to be effective, productive, and successful. The counselor’s comfort level discussing sexual health often determines the topics that are addressed and how they will be discussed. Discomfort in

discussing sexual health and other sensitive topics negatively affects communication, the counselor-client healing relationship, and it can shame or re-shame the client. Barriers to communication may be heightened when discussing sexual health and intimate relationships with sexual minority clients and clients of the opposite sex. Sexual health conversations require thoughtful skill – a clear purpose combined with a resolve to understand the multiple and interrelated negative health outcomes that arise when sexual health remains in the margins of silence. Optimal sexual health conversations are an integral part of any healing treatment.

Sexual health is more likely to be discussed by the client if it is clear that the counselor is non-judgmental and not making assumptions. It is highly important for the counselor to create an environment in which the client feels safe. This starts with the counselor being comfortable and willing to discuss sexual health. To that end, it is important that the counselor does their own work to be ready and willing for sexual health conversations. There are some easy practices that counselors can do to be more empathic and not shaming with clients. Becoming aware of beliefs and bias toward sex is a start. This will help the counselor be more mindful of their own areas of discomfort and where judgements may enter the counseling session. By working on these issues surrounding discomfort ensures that the client's best interests are honored. Being able to have positive sexual health conversations enables counselors to be more sensitive having discussions about sexual issues. Finally, sexual health conversations help clients to have improved recovery, relationships with self and others, life situations, personal growth, and mental and physical health.

#### References:

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#### About Jerry Moreau, LMFT



I am a psychotherapist, a licensed marriage & family therapist and a holistic health practitioner. My goal is to see people be more playful in the world, enjoying who they are and what they do, living a passionate life, filled with love, compassion, and curiosity for the possibilities. I have been working with people and their health in all aspects of body/mind/spirit for over 25 years. I am a faculty member at the [Pacific College of Oriental Medicine](#) and the [Portland Community College](#). I have trained hundreds of clinicians in the art of listening and to be comfortable and willing to have Sexual Health Conversations. I have a private practice in San Diego, CA. [www.JerryMoreauMFT.com](http://www.JerryMoreauMFT.com)