

SEX EDUCATION

OLDER, WISER, SEXUALLY Smarter Sex Education Comes to 40+Women

The following article is in response to the many requests we have received to address the topic of sexuality as we age. We hope you will find that the information helps you consider sexuality important to your overall well being.

- Silk Purse Women
editor in chief

Sex education has come of age. Boomers – and their parents! – are assuming their right to enjoy their sexuality as they grow older, and sexuality educators nationwide are helping them do it. If your idea of “sex ed” is a nervous high school health teacher showing grim slides of sexually transmitted diseases and warning about the dangers of teen pregnancy, think again. There’s a new sex ed blooming and it’s for adults only! It challenges all those old myths about sex and aging, addresses the many real-life barriers to good sex at mid and later life, and provides a bounty of feisty ideas and resources for keeping sex alive as we grow older.

For example, in California, Kat Forsythe initiates her Get a Second Wind business and invites women to two-hour conversations titled *Sex on the Porch*. Her lively Web site (www.getasecondwind.com) is full of good advice, “Men, go ahead, be vulnerable, you don’t have to have an orgasm every time. Women, go ahead and be ‘on top’. It’s our time!”

In Pennsylvania, Karen Hicks and her daughter Kayla create Say Yes to Pleasure, a business providing “edutainment, tasteful and tasty” which educates in the midst of laughter. A group can choose the session *It’s Never Too Late*, or the team will custom design one on a specific topic. That word “pleasure” (deliberately absent in most sex ed for adolescents) is basic to the new sex education. It’s part of overcoming the focus on intercourse and broadening the idea of sex to embrace the many ways of pleasuring, including “outercourse,” non-penetrative sex.

In North Carolina, Bonnie Parker, who retired as founder and director of Hi-Tops, an innovative clinic and education center for teens in Princeton, New Jersey, begins work with older adults at the Ashland Lifelong Learning Institute of Duke University. A session, *Sex in Mid and Later Life*, attracts 45 students who laugh at her jokes, request copies of a handout, *Twenty Key Facts*, to share with their friends and declare time was too short, they want more!

My own seminal experience is teaching a 12-session course at the Academy of Lifelong Learning at the University of Delaware. Students from age 55 to 88 ask questions

anonymously: **“Is it possible to be faithful to a non-sexual partner and have a relationship outside of your primary relationship?” “I get pleasure from seeing a porn film, is this normal?” “Can we address the concept of authenticity and truthfulness in the context of scheduling vs. spontaneity?” “Talk about sexual dysfunction due to diabetes – problems with erections.” “Do you feel there is a push for people over 40 to be involved in sex more than is biologically true?” “Does the length of women’s orgasms increase or decrease as we age?” “How to do gentle foreplay without a frontal attack on the clitoris?” “How to get a penis to fit when there are two good-sized bellies?” “Why are women afraid to give blow jobs?”**

Over the years, I’ve collected hundreds of such questions; each is evidence of why learning about sexuality is a lifelong process. Changing bodies, changing relationships, changing lives keep raising new questions.

Three issues are by far the most common. Number one is communication. **“The most difficult thing for me is to tell a partner what I like.” “Knowing whether to initiate sex in a new relationship.” “Men who are taking this course have kept it a secret from their wives.”** Second is lack of desire. **“Why do older people lose interest in sex?” “Is it true that the older we get the less libido we have? If a woman has decreased desire for sex, does masturbation help?”** Third is erectile dysfunction: **“Do you recommend Viagra?” “I understand the importance of safe sex, but with the difficulty of maintaining an erection, how can one manage a condom?” “How do prostate problems affect male sexual response?”**

While some questions ask for information that can be accessed in books and on the Web, many of the most important ones are about opinions and values. That’s why people are so enthusiastic when they have an opportunity to explore ideas with others. In hundreds of small groups, I’ve asked students to discuss variations of the following questions: **three messages about sex you**

received from your mother, your father; three important people or events that have influenced your sexual attitudes and values; three ways your thinking has changed as an adult; three goals you have for your sexual future. Discussion is always intense, participants protest when I must end the session, and they are universally amazed that “we’ve been talking so openly about sex.” The most frequent response is the wonderful discovery that they aren’t alone: No one’s parents talked to them about sex!

Most of us learned by bumbling along: locker-room talk, sleep-over gossip, romance novels, movies and television, possibly some porn, and, of course, our own experiences both good and bad. Whether or not these worked in the past, by midlife most of us need to re-envision sexuality to fit our current realities.

Encouraged by the enthusiasm for these courses, my colleagues and I created a book we hope will encourage other educators to join this revolution. *Older, Wiser, Sexually Smarter: 30 Sex Ed Lessons for Adults Only* (<http://tinyurl.com/lxmxmw>) provides a comprehensive approach to sexuality and aging. Thirty lessons? Yes, that’s how many it takes to tackle the sexual concerns so common at midlife: negative body images; disability and chronic illness; cyber sex; new relationships; safer sex; talking with a physician; communication skills; gay, lesbian and bisexual issues; sex toys; spirituality; sexual rights. An annotated bibliography of books, films and Web sites shows how many resources are available for anyone determined to create a happy, healthy sexual life – throughout life.

Let me suggest just a few. Since the older we get, the fewer of us will have a partner, I recommend *Sex for One: The Joy of Self-Loving* by Betty Dodson, often called “the mother of masturbation.” Dodson writes that masturbation, still taboo for too many, is the best way for women to understand their own sexual responses, enhance partner sex and enable continuation of sexuality when alone. (See also

bettydodson.com) And, since lack of desire is the most common complaint among women after menopause, I suggest you try

Kathryn Hall’s *Reclaiming Your Sexual Self: How You Can Bring Desire Back into Your Life.*



A seasoned sex therapist, Hall helps women examine their whole life in order to overcome sexual inertia. For those women back in the single scene after many years, there’s savvy advice in *Another Chance for Love: Finding a Partner in Later Life* by Sol Gordon and Elaine Shimberg. And, finally, for an outrageously joyous, explicit book that tells you everything you didn’t know you wanted to know, try Paul Joannides’ *A Guide to Getting It On*. Whatever you do, don’t give up. Sex can be beautiful in mid and later life, but you need to be wiser and smarter!

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