

## Mindful Teenage Sexuality: An Integrated Approach to Teaching Teenagers About Human Sexuality

When it comes to sexuality, what's a teenager to think, feel say and do? Teenage years are arguably a most vulnerable period in human development. Adolescent brains are undergoing an extensive remodeling process whereby they will lose half the neurons they had when they entered puberty. (Begley, Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain.) In flux, their brains are open to new experiences, but short on inhibitory circuits. One author, described it this way: "The limbic system reigns supreme in teens when they are processing emotions. In adults, the more developed prefrontal cortex exerts a moderating influence. It's as if the higher brain is telling the lower brain: "Now, now, settle down. There you go, overreacting again. The take home message from all this is that the teen years are a time when we are still reigning in our ability to distinguish emotions and accurately assess people's motives". (Discover Magazine, Spring, 2007). While in this maelstrom of developmental activity, teens are thrust into the chaos of sexual images, over stimulation and peer pressure . Indeed, when it comes to sexuality, what's a teenager to think, feel, say and do?

Since the decade of the brain in the 1990's, the field of sexual science has exploded with new information about the brain and sexuality. The pioneering work of Helen Fisher Ph.D. (*Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*, 2004) and Beverly Whipple, Ph.D. (*The Science of Orgasm*, 2006), among others, has deepened our knowledge of the relationship between the brain and the body. In addition, an entire new field of affective neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology has added yet another layer of understanding of how our minds, brains, bodies and souls interact. Researches and clinicians such as Daniel Siegel, M.D., (*The Mindful Brain :Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well Being*, 2007) Steven Porges, Ph.D., (*Love: An Emergent Property of the Mammalian autonomic Nervous System*, *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, vol. 23, November, 1998) and Jock Panksepp, Ph.D., (*Affective Neuroscience*, 2004), present solid scientific data on the mind-body connection. Along with these developments, research on Attachment Theory has demonstrated the centrality of dyadic relationship in the development of the human infant. Scientists such as Jude Cassidy, Ph.D. (*Handbook of Attachment : Theory, Research and Clinical Applications*), Erick Hesse, Ph.D. (*The Adult Attachment Interview in Handbook of Attachment*, eds. Jude Cassidy and Phillip Shaver, 1999) and Mary Main, Ph.D. (*The Organized Categories of Infant, Child and Adult Attachment*, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. 48, 2000) created and implemented the Adult Attachment Interview, to explore how early attachments affect our adult relationships. Along with these developments in brain science, there has been an increased interest in spirituality and how it can impact our sexual relationships. Tantra from the East and Kabbalah from the West are but two examples of ancient spiritual traditions which have intertwined sexuality and spirituality. Ken Wilber's, Sex, Ecology and Spirituality, and Barnaby Barratt's, Sexual Health and Erotic Freedom, are excellent presentations of the nexus of sexuality and spirituality.

In an effort to teach teenagers about the relationship between their mind-brain-body-soul system and their sexuality, I have combined all of the elements mentioned above into a curriculum. My intent is to integrate the best of what affective neuroscience, attachment theory and current research on sexuality and spirituality have to offer into a coherent framework that adolescents can use as they think, feel and behave sexually. It combines didactic material, experiential lessons, such as meditation and awareness exercises, and active learning principles to engage them in mindful reflection about their sexuality.

The curriculum entitled, “Mindful Teenage Sexuality: An Integrated Approach to Human Sexuality”, consists of five units each containing four to five discrete learning sessions. The five units include: Brain, Mind, Body and Soul; Sex, Love and Desire; Sex in Relationship; The Processes of Sexual Decision Making; and Sexual Satisfaction and Happiness.

Each lesson combines a key issue in human sexuality, with correlating research from sexual science. For example, the unit on Sexual Satisfaction and Happiness combines the work of Martin Seligman, Ph.D. (Authentic Happiness, 2004) on authentic happiness, Beverly Whipple, Ph.D. on the nature of sexual experience and Marty Klein, Ph.D. (Beyond Orgasm, 2002) on the nature of intercourse and orgasm. This, in turn, is combined with the work of Gina Ogden in her groundbreaking book, The Heart and Soul of Sex: Making the ISIS Connection to allow teenagers to have an experience of sexual science and spirituality in the same frame. The Unit on the Brain and Sexuality combines the work of Helen Fisher, Ph.D. (The Anatomy of Love), 1994), David Schnarch, Ph.D. (Passionate Marriage, 1998 and Daniel Siegel, M.D., (The Developing Mind, 2001) on how an integrated brain functions when we are sexually engaged. In this unit of the class, Helen Fisher’s concept of the “Sexual Triune Brain” is discussed. Helen Fisher adapted the findings of Paul Maclean, M.D., (The Triune Brain in Evolution, 2003) to explain how lust, attraction and desire originate in the brain. In this unit we also discuss Daniel Siegel’s essential features of human communication. Students are given the opportunity to participate in dialogue and teaching exercises, and they are free to opt out of any exercise that is presented.

The standard approach to sex education in our schools has been either: “Here are your genitals: use them safely” ( i.e. wear condoms), which I call the Drivers Education approach to sex; or “Here are your genitals: please don’t use them,”, which is called Abstinence Education. I think we can do better for our teenagers. The Mindful Teenage Sexuality approach gives students an opportunity to create a reflective mindset and to apply the principles of mindfulness to their sexual interactions. Students learn the latest data on sexual science and the relationship between mind, brain, body and soul in a user friendly format. Special emphasis is placed on teaching the principles of a sex positive approach to human sexuality as it emerges from ancient spiritual traditions.

I recently taught parts of this curriculum to the Junior and Senior Seminars of the Los Angeles Hebrew High School In Van Nuys, California. A particular lesson that the students resonated with involved an exercise in which they described what their best characteristic was and articulated their greatest passion. We determined that hits combination could represent their essence, or what some call, their soul. The question was: When we are sexually interactive, is our essence present, or is it hidden? What additionally grabbed their interest was reflected in a common question that came up over and over again: What is an orgasm? How do you get it? “ Overall, students gave positive feedback. Twenty juniors stated they were “very satisfied” with the “content and presentation” and one was “satisfied”. Feedback from the seniors was similar. “This was an awesome class and I learned a lot”. “Great--now I can make smarter sexual decisions”. “Very useful and interesting--thanks”. “Other comments included, “This class was way too long---interesting content, but very repetitive,”, and “I felt these sessions would be better suited for people who are already sexually active. I am not”.

This is a work in progress. I welcome your comments and suggestions.

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