



A Short Guide to Sex Therapy


Wildflower
Center for Emotional Health.

Chicago | Oak Park | Boulder
312.809.0298
www.wildflowerllc.com



A Short Guide to Sex Therapy

by Wildflower Center for Emotional Health

Sexuality plays a crucial role in shaping our identity, relationships, and overall wellbeing. It can also be a source of significant distress and difficulty. Sex therapy is a highly effective means of addressing sexual challenges and exploring your sexual self. Whether you are struggling or simply seeking personal growth, sex therapy is an excellent place to start. Read on to learn how this specialized form of psychotherapy can support your sexual health!

Introduction

Sexuality is interwoven with many facets of our lives, reflecting a spectrum of experiences that are central to what it means to be human. It shapes our personal identities and self-expression, allows us to deepen intimacy and connection, and can contribute pleasure, and vitality to our lives.

Our sexuality can be a source of joy and tremendous pain; of confidence and shame; of belonging and aching loneliness.

It is a powerful, dynamic, and often bewildering force that exerts an influence on many dimensions of our well-being. In this guide, we will share how we conceptualize sexuality and sexual problems in our roles as sex therapists and educators at Wildflower. We will discuss how sexual themes are addressed in therapy and what sex therapy is, who it is for, what challenges it can address, and what its aims are. You will learn about concepts that include sex positivity and sexual values. Let's get started!

First things first: What is sexuality?

The World Health Organization (WHO) offers the following working definition of sexuality which seeks to capture the diverse and multifaceted ways in which we experience and express this dimension of our being:

"...a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors (WHO, 2006a)."

In its mission to promote health in many forms, WHO goes on to define the concept of sexual health:

"...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled (WHO, 2006a)."

At Wildflower, these definitions underlie and animate all therapeutic efforts with clients seeking help to address concerns related to their sexuality.

Sexual health is foundational to our wellbeing, so much so that it is considered to be one of the four pillars of health alongside physical, mental, and spiritual health.

WHO's vision of sexual health goes beyond definition: it also puts forth a set of sexual health values, which include positivity, respect, safety, and pleasure. In joining with clients to help them build healthy and fulfilling sexual lives, mental health professionals are guided by these central principles. Let's explore them further. As we do so, we invite you to consider how they show up in your own life, which of them are areas of strength, which represent areas of distress or difficulty, and what goals, if any, you might have in relation to them.

Six principles of sexual health

WHO's definitions of sexuality and sexual health provide a vital framework for attending to sexual wellbeing. At the same time, they can feel abstract and difficult to apply in one's own life. To address this, Douglas Braun-Harvey at the Harvey Institute developed what is now known as the "six principles of sexual health," a set of ground rules that each person can use to construct their vision of personal sexual health. At Wildflower, we like to introduce clients to these ideas early in their therapy experience as we find them to be a rich source of reflection and discussion.

Principle 1: Consent

Consent is one of the most important cornerstones of sexual health; it is essential to developing healthy sexual relationships. Consent means actively agreeing to engage in a sexual act or relationship with someone. It is letting them know and understanding that the sexual act is wanted and desired each and every step of the way. Actively establishing consent throughout a sexual interaction creates a safe space for each sexual partner's pleasure and exploration.

Principle 2: Non-exploitation

Non-exploitation is the second principle of sexual health. Exploitation takes place when one person uses their power or control over another to receive sexual gratification. It is taking advantage of someone's vulnerability from a position of power, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from sexual engagement. Sexual exploitation occurs when a position of power is used for sexual purposes against someone who is more vulnerable.

Principle 3: Honesty

Honesty involves open and direct communication with yourself and your sexual partner about your sexual health, desires, thoughts, and needs. Without the practice of honesty, sexual relationships may not have effective communication or be able to uphold the other principles of sexual health. Tip: If you find yourself suddenly taken aback by a particular sexual topic discussed on the news or by a friend, child or teen, take a deep breath and check in with yourself from a place of honesty: what does this topic or question bring up for you, and what would it mean to respond with honesty and vulnerability? This can be quite tricky and may require a significant amount of self-exploration in order to understand what you genuinely think, feel, want, and need when it comes to your sexual health.

Principle 4: Shared values

Sexual values are a way to identify one's sexual standards and ethics. Understanding your values is key to honest, transparent communication with sexual partner(s). Here are questions you can use to explore this theme:

How do I feel about my sexual health?

Am I able to openly communicate about my sexual health with my partner(s)?

How have my values and beliefs on sexual health changed over time?

Am I willing to explore my sexual health and challenge my beliefs if needed?

What satisfies me sexually?

What do I need sexually from my partner?

What do I not enjoy?

Where do I draw the line?

What are my goals in regards to my sexual health?

Principle 5: Protection from STIs, HIV, and Unwanted Pregnancy

This principle involves the need for anyone engaging in sexual activity to implement a contraception plan and a plan for the prevention of sexually transmitted infection and/or HIV. This includes access to tests to identify STIs, proper medical attention to address any infection, and access to comprehensive, medically accurate sexual healthcare and education. Lack of medically accurate sexual health education and information is a significant problem in the United States. Only 39 states mandate sex education and/or HIV education, and of those states, only 18 require that the program content is medically accurate. There is a lot of work to be done in this area! Many adolescents – even those fortunate enough to have school-based sex education – may not be exposed to medically accurate information about HIV, STIs, and contraception.

Principle 6: Pleasure

This last pillar of sexual health concerns pleasure. Pleasure can be a primary motivation for solo sexual activity and the giving and receiving between sexual partners. According to the Harvey Institute website, "Throughout all stages of life, sexual health is the art of balancing one's sexual safety and responsibility with the lifelong curiosity of pleasure, exploring sexual interests and remaining curious about the ever-changing sources of sexual pleasure." What feels good for you might not feel good for someone else. Everyone is different when it comes to sexual pleasure. Exploring ways to build and grow pleasure by yourself and with partners is a crucial part of sexual health.

A word about sex positivity and mainstream culture

Sex positivity is an inclusive framework that embraces and celebrates human sexuality as a natural and healthy aspect of life. It encompasses efforts to promote open and honest discussions about sexual health, consent, and diverse identities, and to foster environments where individuals feel empowered to explore their desires and boundaries without shame or stigma.

By prioritizing mutual respect, understanding, and education, sex positivity affirms the great diversity of our sexual preferences and experiences.

Sex positivity is a critically important movement that seeks to change cultural attitudes and norms around sexuality. Our mainstream culture is, at best, conflicted about human sexuality, and, at worst, sex-negative. In a sex-negative mindset, sexuality is acceptable only within a narrow, usually monogamous and heterosexual frame, and is viewed as risky, potentially pathological, deviant, and dirty.

Few people manage to escape the far-reaching grasp of these deeply entrenched sexual attitudes. Sexual shame and distress are extremely common in our culture. We become preoccupied with whether we are “normal,” fret about whether we are having enough sex, wanting it enough, wanting it too little or not at all, having it the “right” way, thinking about it “correctly,” whether our bodies are doing what they are “supposed to,” are our fantasies or sexual interests are “okay.” It can be exhausting. Sex seems to be everywhere, and everyone seems to be having amazing sex. In the meantime, we may be confused, riddled with questions, and feel very alone in our struggle for answers.

This is where sex therapy comes in.

What is sex therapy?

At its most basic level, sex therapy is a conversation. You might exclaim, “Wait, what? That’s all it is? I don’t need a therapist for that!” Indeed, for some, this sentiment may ring true. For many, it does not. We invite you to ask yourself: Are there safe spaces in your life where you engage in a deep, honest exploration of your sexuality? Do you talk with others about the sexual dimensions of your identity in ways that help you grow and understand yourself better? Do you feel like you have sources of clear, accurate answers to your sexual questions?

If your reply is an enthusiastic “yes!,” this is something to celebrate! You can pay it forward and create further sex-positive ripples in your relationships and community that affirm the fundamental fact that sex is not just what we do but rather part of who we are. Since humans are wired for belonging and connection, we want to feel understood and known, including when it comes to sex.

When asked the above questions, many of us would shake our heads and reply that we don’t get to have these deeper conversations. We don’t know how to start, and we are worried about the reactions we will get from others. If you feel this way, it is not your fault! We are socialized to avoid frank, reflective discussions about sex. It is often easier to get naked with someone than to talk about getting naked.

For many people, sex therapy is the first space they have ever experienced where they can talk openly about their sexuality.

Thus, sex therapy is a conversation with a mission. Its aim is to help individuals and couples address medical, psychological, personal, and interpersonal factors impacting their sexual lives.

The broad goal of sex therapy is to create a path for people to live their most meaningful and fulfilling sexual life.

No two people are alike, so this will mean something different to every person, and what it means to you will also change as you move through life and its different stages.

Is sex therapy for me?

If you’re still wondering if sex therapy could be helpful to you, you are not alone. People seek out sex therapists for a variety of reasons including wanting to address sexual functioning or dysfunction, to explore their sexuality, or to increase the overall fulfillment, pleasure, and enjoyment of their sex life, and much more.

When it comes to sexual functioning, it has been estimated that some 43% of women and 31% of men report some degree of sexual dysfunction (Rosen, 2000). These numbers tend to increase as people age due to the changes in physical health associated with aging (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). It is also important to note that regardless of sexual function, most people can benefit from some form of sex therapy to improve both the quality of their sex lives and their overall sexual health.

Common themes addressed in sex therapy

The following are some of the most common sexual themes we address with clients at Wildflower. Please note that what follows is not an exhaustive list.

Desire

Desire encompasses concerns related to libido and interest in sex. If you're finding that you're not enjoying sex as much as you used to or that you're not feeling as interested in sex, it could be a sign that you could benefit from sex therapy. Low sexual desire can be caused by a range of factors, including stress, hormonal changes, relationship issues, and medical conditions. A sex therapist can help you identify the underlying causes of your low desire and work with you to find ways to improve it.

Arousal

Arousal includes concerns regarding physical or emotional arousal during or leading up to sexual activity. If you're finding it difficult to become emotionally or physically excited before or during sexual activity, sex therapy can help address these challenges.

Orgasm

Sexual functioning in relationship to orgasms may include delay, absence, or premature orgasm. Difficulty with orgasms and other sexual functions, such as premature ejaculation, delayed ejaculation, or anorgasmia (inability to orgasm), can be distressing for both partners. These problems often have physical, psychological, or relationship causes.

Pain

Unwanted pain or discomfort during sexual activity is never something to ignore and should be treated. Pain or discomfort during sex can be distressing and overwhelming, and can indicate an underlying medical or psychological issue. Conditions such as vulvodynia, vaginismus, genitopelvic pain/penetration disorder, or dyspareunia can make sex uncomfortable or even unbearable.

In addition to sexual functioning, sex therapy is utilized to address and improve other sexual health areas, including:

Intimacy and connection to your partner(s)

If you're finding yourself wanting to build greater connection and intimacy with your partner or partners, working with a trained sex therapist can be helpful.

Sexual education

There is no shortage of resources on sexual health, and it can be hard to determine what is most accurate and reliable. A sex therapist can assist you in sifting through all this information.

Healing from past trauma

Sex therapists are trained in providing trauma therapy to help you heal from distressing past experiences, including sexual traumas, in order to create a more fulfilling sex life with your partner(s).

Letting go of sexual shame

Sexual shame is an experience of unworthiness, discomfort, and even disgust related to one's sexuality, thoughts, desires, and needs. A sex therapist can help you overcome shameful thoughts and feelings, and support you in finding ways to lean into self-compassion and self-acceptance.

Identifying unhelpful intergenerational patterns around bodies, sex, and sexuality

When parenting, it can be difficult to know how to create a sex-positive environment for your child so they can grow up without shame and guilt surrounding sexual health. A sex therapist can support you in navigating this complex topic with children and adolescents.

Navigating sexual health and desire during various reproductive life stages

Sexual desire, arousal, and satisfaction can change dramatically when attempting to get pregnant, facing infertility, pregnancy, postpartum, perimenopause, and menopause, and a sex therapist can help you address concerns that arise during each unique stage.

Medical concerns

Cancer, heart conditions, physical disabilities, gynecological, or urological issues impact sexual health. A sex therapist can support you in navigating these challenges.



What takes place in the first sex therapy session?

Most people feel uncertain and even anxious when coming to see a sex therapist for the first time. It might feel awkward because we are not used to talking about sex, especially with a stranger. Rest assured that as you develop a connection with your therapist, your discomfort will decrease. Getting started is easier if you know what will happen in your first meeting.

The therapist's top priority in the initial appointment is to create a welcoming, safe, and confidential environment to facilitate open discussion. They will invite you to share your reasons for seeking support, ask questions about your sexual history, including past experiences and dynamics that may be affecting your current situation. Together, you'll set goals for therapy, outlining what you hope to achieve. Throughout the session, the therapist will emphasize confidentiality and respect, ensuring you feel safe to express your thoughts and feelings. Providing accurate information about different areas of sexuality is always an important part of this form of therapy so it is possible the therapist will share various educational resources with you throughout your time together.

The initial session usually concludes with a discussion about what to expect in future meetings, along with any assignments or areas to reflect on before the next session. To build momentum for your work, weekly sessions will likely be recommended.

Sex therapy: A collaborative approach

○ Our sexual health is influenced by our overall health. This means sex therapists often collaborate with other specialties, and depending on your treatment goals, they might recommend that you see another provider in addition to engaging in sex therapy. Here is a non-exhaustive list of specialists sex therapists often partner with:

- Sexual medicine specialists (urologists, gynecologists)
- Pelvic floor physical therapists
- Primary care physicians
- Endocrinologists
- Psychiatrists

More about sex therapy

If you are curious about what you might be actively doing as part of sex therapy, this is a sampling of focus areas:

Exploring your sexual preferences, needs, and desires

Making room for non-judgmental sexual self-inquiry, whether that's through reflective discussion, assignments to complete in the privacy of your home, or open conversations and activities to try with partner(s).

Learning about consent and communicating boundaries

Clearly expressing what you are comfortable with in sexual interactions and feeling empowered to say no when something doesn't feel right.

Educating yourself

Obtaining accurate sexual education to better understand yourself and others.

Seeking support

Joining groups or communities that promote sexual wellness and acceptance, allowing for shared experiences and learning.

Challenging shame

Confronting societal norms or personal biases that create shame around your sexuality, and unlearning negative beliefs that keep you stuck.

Addressing trauma

Processing traumatic experiences and their impact on your sexuality and relationships, and developing coping strategies to restore a sense of safety and wholeness.

Practicing self-acceptance

Embracing yourself through activities that foster sex and body positivity.

Centering pleasure

Exploring what brings you pleasure, learning to be in the moment, and addressing barriers to pleasure.

Being open-minded

Being receptive to exploring different aspects of sexuality without judgment, whether it's trying new experiences or understanding diverse needs, identities, and preferences.

Expressing yourself

Sharing your experiences and feelings about your sexuality in safe spaces, such as through writing, art, or discussions with trusted others.

How to find a sex therapist



If you are curious about what you might be actively doing as part of sex therapy, this is a sampling of focus areas:

If you are looking for a sex therapist, a great place to start is the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT). AASECT is responsible for overseeing clinical training, certification, verification, and credentialing of sexual health providers. A Certified Sex Therapist (CST) will have gone through extensive training and supervised clinical work with an experienced Certified Sex Therapist who has verified the therapist's skills and knowledge.

That said, there are many wonderful mental health professionals with specialized training in sexual health who have chosen not to pursue formal certification. You will be in great hands with a competent, sex-positive provider who is knowledgeable in the field of sexuality and committed to ongoing learning. To determine whether this is the case, first consult their website/biography. Check if the provider and/or their organization mentions sexuality as one of their areas of focus. Set up an initial consultation and ask direct questions about the therapist's training, professional values, and areas of expertise.

At Wildflower, all psychotherapists receive specialized training in sex therapy and are able to address a wide spectrum of sexual experiences and challenges.

Final thoughts

Sexuality is a core dimension of who we are and a vital aspect of how we connect with others; yet the question of how we can thrive as sexual beings at all stages of our lives continues to receive limited, narrow, or misguided attention.

Our mainstream cultural messaging about sexuality is conflicted and riddled with inaccuracies, creates pressure to conform to unrealistic expectations, and promotes damaging myths. We both deserve and need better. The World Health Organization's definition of sexual health that we shared earlier goes on to state that sexual health is contingent on several factors, including:

“access to comprehensive, good-quality information about sex and sexuality;

knowledge about the risks they may face and their vulnerability to adverse consequences of unprotected sexual activity; ability to access sexual health care;

living in an environment that affirms and promotes sexual health (WHO, 2006a).”

While sex therapy is certainly not the only means of exploring and improving contexts that shape our experience of sexual health and sexuality, it is a powerful one.

In addressing our sexuality, we get to impact core themes that imbue our lives with vitality and meaning: safety, pleasure, consent, connection, love, respect, enjoyment.

Your decision to seek support and growth in these areas is not only important to individual wellbeing, but also a vital step toward building a society that embraces open, informed discussions about sexuality, promotes consent and mutual respect, and recognizes the diversity of sexual experiences and identities.

At Wildflower, we are honored to walk this path with you.



If you are looking to start psychotherapy at Wildflower, please reach out to our intake team by calling 312.809.0298 or completing the inquiry form on our website.