

Questionnaire: Making sense of Your Personal Story (Sex History)

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Many women feel an immediate need to deal with the problems they have with their spouses when they come for sex therapy. However, it is a basic truth that change must begin with the self. Beginning with personal work anchors us in our authentic loving selves and develops an appreciation for the complexities of change. We **can** make new choices for ourselves although we may not be able to change our partners. The following questions enable you to review your life story with regard to your sexuality.

There are seven basic areas: 1) Issues of mistrust and sex-negative messages, 2) wounds from primary attachments, 3) self-esteem and control, 4) distortions of compassion 5) fear of self-disclosure, 6) visualization, and 7) inspiration and guidance. These areas correspond to each of the seven domains of the seven chakras or energy centers of the body. If you are not familiar with the concept of chakras, using the seven areas is still an excellent way to organize your understanding of the influences on your sexuality.

Focus Questions for Early Sex Messages

- How old were you when you first experienced sexual feelings? How did you feel about acting on them?
 - Who told you the most truth about sex?
 - What were your experiences surrounding your first menstruation?
 - What was your experience with first intercourse?
1. Did anyone abuse or abandon you? How did you react to the experience?
 2. What losses of loved ones did you suffer in your life? How have you coped and what resources have you discovered?
 3. Right now, if your partner asked you to do something you didn't want to do, could you say no?
 4. What do you need in your sexual relationship with a partner? Can you imagine being able to have this in your life?
 5. Can you truthfully communicate what you want to your partner? What feelings remain undisclosed?
 6. As a young girl of about 9 to 12, what was your dream for your future? (Something you wanted to be, do or have) How much of that dream have you fulfilled? What do you still need to do?
 7. Who was a Woman of Power in your life? How did she influence you?

8. What does your body wisdom tell you about your sexuality?
What rituals, meditations etc. help you receive guidance?

Early Sexual Exploration and Sex-Negative Messages

How old were you when you first experienced sexual feelings? How did you feel about acting on them? Who told you the most truth about sex?

We all have some degree of guilt or shame associated with our developing sexuality. Shame and guilt are socially motivated emotions, intentionally evoked by caregivers to prevent acting inappropriately. For example, Gina was told *ad nauseam* by her mother, “boys only want one thing” and “don’t let any boy touch you.” This instilled fear of exploring sex as a teen. Her parents used fear as a way to prevent her from devaluing her worth as a virgin. She had not been able to eliminate fear-based sexual prohibitions and enjoy her husband’s touch after marriage. Another patient, Sherry, constantly heard her father say, “why buy the cow if you can get the milk for free?” She often felt degraded after intercourse, even though she loved her husband. You may have had parents who talked in platitudes about sex: “Save it for the one you marry,” or you may say, “they didn’t tell me anything.” In any of these situations, you have automatic thoughts and uncomfortable feelings to overcome.

Messages about self-stimulation tend to be quite negative in households where the parents were uncomfortable with sexuality. You may have been discovered masturbating and associate shame with wanting to pleasure yourself. These feelings continue to operate in your subconscious as powerful blocks to sexual desire. Shame and guilt may have dissuaded you from sexual activity, but they may also indicate sources of taboo sexual fantasies. These forbidden images may still arouse your most intense, sexual feelings. In chapter nine, we will explore fantasies and self-stimulation.

Identifying people who told you the most truth about sex helps you understand the source of positive attitudes. One woman’s source was an older cousin who was about to be married. Her cousin told her, “it’s real fun with the right guy.” That encouragement allowed her to explore sexual pleasure with her steady boyfriend in high school. Her adjustment to marital sex was enhanced by this exploration. Much traditional sex therapy provides the counterbalancing voice of the therapist as a source of permission to explore sexual pleasure. Whatever the sources of information, they have made a significant difference in your developing sexuality and your attitudes about relationships between men and women.

First Blood Experiences-- Self-Esteem and Body Image

What were your experiences surrounding your first menstruation?

The way your first blood experience was handled strongly influences your sexual self-image, yet many women do not realize it. Recently, I attended a women’s full-moon ceremony in my community. We gathered in a circle and recounted our first blood stories. Most of us related some tale of embarrassment or humiliation from which we had learned shame or loathing for our natural body processes. However, some of the stories were truly

enlightening because they were so different. The women told of special celebrations honoring their new Maiden status, conducted by a beloved female relative. The women's stories about positive support and festive events gave us great inspiration and a goal for the future. The stories inspired many of the women to seek ways to initiate their own daughters in the spirit of the ancient, feminine way.

First Intercourse-- Personal Power and Self-Esteem

What was your experience with first intercourse?

First intercourse is a major rite of initiation. In our culture it is usually not very satisfying for women. When women recall their first intercourse, their answers fall into three categories. One group says that it was painful or disappointing. They report thoughts such as, "is that all there is?" or they tell me, "it got better after a while" or, "it didn't hurt as much over time," but their first intercourse was a negative experience. Some of these women may even say, "I hated it, and still find it uncomfortable."

Another group of women respond with, "I don't really remember what I felt" or "I guess it was okay." This group has blocked out memories of the first defining moment of male-female genital sex and they are unaware of any issues stemming from it. The third group says many things about their first intercourse. They say they desired the experience, or looked forward to it. Even if it was awkward, they had many opportunities to repeat pleasurable exploration with their lovers, enhancing their sexual responsiveness. They talk about the conditions that made their first experiences positive. Rarely do I hear, "I loved penetration the first time," but women of this group fondly recall their first love relationship which included intercourse, and are likely to feel the most empowered about their sexuality.

Loss of Basic Trust and Security: first chakra

Did anyone abuse or abandon you? How did you react to the experience?

If you have been neglected, physically harmed or sexually abused by a parent, relative, or trusted adult, you have been deeply wounded. You may find intimate relationships threatening. Your early care taught you that caregivers failed to meet your needs, or they actually hurt you. They may have failed to attend to your cries, neglected your needs for nourishment and cleanliness, and damaged your sense of security. Your experiences with negative touch determine your ability to tolerate and express physical affection, the foundation for healthy sex. You may *function* sexually, but block feelings of intimacy. Such barriers to intimacy erode your sexual desire in a long-term relationship.

Many people assume that these early experiences have no bearing on their current sexual relationships. For example, you may think that you were no more disadvantaged than others, that physical abuse was just strict discipline, or that you adapted to the neglect. In my experience, most people downplay their neglect and abuse until they are confronted with circumstances that tap into their buried feelings. Many learn not to trust, which creates the desire to control loved ones, due to such early rifts in primary attachments. A supportive, therapeutic environment is necessary to deal with all the issues associated with physical and sexual abuse.

Attachment-- Early Wounds in the Affectional Bond: second chakra

What losses or rejection from loved ones did you suffer in your life? How have you coped and what resources have you discovered?

You may have sustained a loss, disappointment, or heartache as a child that raises anxiety when you have attachment feelings. *Attachment* refers to the sense of connection and closeness that we all need from the primary caregivers in our lives. This relationship is called “the affectional bond,” because we learn to express and receive affection, which impacts us throughout our lives. The early mother-infant bond is the basis for the ability to form attachments throughout life. Our mothers, or other family members who provided nurturing, are the initial “significant others” to whom we attach. If we are separated, it causes serious issues in our psychological development.

Primary relationships teach us whether our needs for attention will be met or not. Holding, visual attentiveness, and nurturing touch are all part of our attachment needs. If your mother was distant or unavailable, you may have experienced significant anxiety as a child, producing a need to control loved ones as an adult. On the positive side, you may have had a good foundation of loving, nurturing parents. This has probably resulted in a reasonably secure childhood that gave you tremendous insurance for the slings and arrows of later life. Any losses in adult relationships may have been painful, yet the foundation of good experiences with early nurturing may have mitigated the devastation.

There are at least three significant attachment losses, in childhood through teen years, which impact sexuality: loss of a parent through death, or divorce, and loss of adequate parenting. Some of you may have had alcoholic, drug addicted, mentally unstable, severely depressed, cold, distant, seductive, or emotionally abusive parents. All these problem parents have one element in common. They could not or would not provide adequate, emotional nurturing for you as a child.¹ Your parents may have been emotionally cruel, withholding affection, but quick to deliver critical messages. This deprived you of the chance to build healthy self-esteem.

Two additional losses in teen years affect adult sexuality: the betrayal or loss of a cherished friend and your first “broken heart” in adolescence. These are critical to developing sexuality because they teach either valuable skills for negotiating and ending relationships, or ways to detach from attachment needs in order to numb the pain.

Codependence and Control: third chakra

Right now, if your partner asked you to do something you didn't want to do, could you say no?

When there are attachment problems from your early life, you may feel the need to control others, whether directly or through subtle manipulation. *Codependence* means centering your attention on *the other*. It is the illusion that you can somehow fix your partner's problems, control unwanted behavior, or get to him or her to change. Many women, as well as men, hold tenaciously to such illusions that are permanently doomed to failure. Such behavior inhibits sexual self-expression and blunts sexual desire. Codependent women accommodate their partners' desires and bypass lack of sexual

feelings to engage in sex, simply to please. Bypassing uncomfortable feelings to accommodate your partner's desire erodes your sexual responsiveness.

This question directly targets your ability to stay individuated in your relationship. Acting in your own best interests is the opposite of codependence. You can refuse your partner's request when it is not in your best interests, and work on soothing your anxiety about his reaction. If you are totally honest in your answer to this question and you find it hard to say, "no," you need to strengthen your boundaries. You must begin to set limits on unwanted behavior and act in your own best interests more often.

Distortions of Compassion: fourth chakra

What do you need in your relationship with a partner? Can you imagine being able to have this in your life?

The classic statement, "I don't really need to have orgasms, I just want to know that he's enjoying it," or some other variation of the theme, "I don't need anything for me," is distortion of compassion and a loss for both partners. If you have isolated the sexual part of yourself from your "good girl," loving self-image, you may be unable to access genuine desire. You may feel helpless because you cannot respond to your chosen mate. If you are unable to integrate sexy behavior with your wife-and-mother image, you may have internalized a distorted view of compassion and disowned your sexuality.

If you get involved, perhaps repeatedly, with men who are abusive, rage at you with explosive anger, or are cold and distant, you may think your love will save them from their withdrawn or violent behavior. However, you are distorting your compassionate, heartfelt love, by enabling such relationships to continue. Compassion sustains satisfying sex, with a long-term partner, only when it is experienced as reciprocal. Without reciprocal compassion in a committed relationship you will have a wellspring of resentment.

If you deny your resentment in order to appear to be a loving and giving partner, you will be like an empty vessel, having poured out all your caring with nothing left to give. Such distortion of your natural nurturing and compassion damages female sexual desire because it results in sexual accommodation, without any genuine sexual energy.

Developing Compassion: Fourth Chakra

Sexually, the heart chakra is the source of physical healing for the self and the partner. The shift from personal attachment desire into selfless love for another is facilitated through communion with the partner. Where the second chakra generates sexual attachment, the feeling of "this one is mine," the fourth chakra yields loving communion that extends beyond personal attachment. The partner is no longer perceived as "mine" but as a beloved gift of the Divine. Practicing conscious loving connects us to our partners and can serve as a pathway to the next level of sexual expression, spiritual union.

Exercise: In order to experience the generating and receiving of loving energy from this center with a partner, sit facing each other before you begin to touch. You

should each place one hand over your partner's heart and look into each other's eyes. Feel the heat of your partner's hand on your heart and imagine the warmth of a small sun emanating from your heart towards your partner. Visualize this as divine love and imagine it as a beautiful color. If you need to do so, close your eyes at this point in order to focus on the inner sensation of warmth in the area of your heart and to visualize its color. Now imagine this warmth radiating from the center of your heart like the rays of the sun, enveloping your partner as well as yourself in a warm, liquid, colorful light. Stay with this visualization as it changes or moves and breathe deeply. Continue to be aware of this energy from your heart center for a few moments. Then, when you are ready to open your eyes, tell your partner some of the loving feelings you have experienced.

Self-Disclosure/Telling the Truth: Fifth Chakra

The fifth chakra is the source of intimate communication: the ability to tell our partner the truth about our selves. For most of us, it is difficult to tell our partners the truth about our very vulnerable feelings. One of my patients expressed her fears about being honest with her partner. She wrote, "why am I afraid to tell you who I am? I'm afraid that if I tell you, you may not like me and that's all I have." Thus, the desire to tell the truth competes with the very real fear that if you show your true colors, you will be rejected. As you work with suggested communication skills notice how often fear emerges when you practice self-disclosure.

Exercise: The most important communication skill in intimate relationships is the ability to listen without judgement. The best way to learn listening skills is to summarize what your partner is saying. Here is a way to practice listening to each other telling the truth about your selves. Sit comfortably, facing each other and let one of you begin talking. The other will be the active listener. Summarize what your partner is saying at least once every two minutes. You might say something like, "just let me make sure I understand you, before you go on." After you have summarized for a while, using his or her words, you can begin to ask clarifying or open-ended questions. For example if your partner says, "I need to feel respected," you could ask, "when you say, 'respected' can you tell me what you mean by that?" "Can you tell me more about that?" or, "could you give me an example of what you mean by that?" Open-ended questions help you gather information more efficiently about how your partner feels. When it is your turn to talk for about twenty minutes and you are aware that your partner is not listening to you, try saying, "would you be willing to tell me what you just heard me say?" Remember, you must not invalidate each other's feelings by saying, "you shouldn't feel this way," or "that's ridiculous, how could you feel like that?"

Your goal should be to communicate deeper truths about yourself, outside your comfort zone. You can be truly *known*, once you have faced the fear that is responsible for your discomfort. Your ability to tell the truth about yourself deepens your capacity for intimacy and intensifies sexual desire.

Visualization: Sixth Chakra

Sexual energy generated from the sixth chakra can be used to visualize your

partner as the divine God/Goddess. In ecstatic, sexual states we can perceive data beyond the physical senses. It is the source of spiritual visions during cosmic orgasms when the particularly powerful release of energy can stimulate the psychic senses that perceive information leading to extraordinary clarity. In addition, focused will can be combined with energy generated from the sixth chakra to project visualizations consciously. You can visualize a desired goal at the moment of orgasm. It is an ancient source of shaping reality with extraordinary results. In this way, creative ideas can be made reality.

Exercise: You can try this alone with self-stimulation, or with your partner. If you are working with your partner, you should practice the heart chakra exercise, above, for several sessions, and establish intimate communication with active listening and self-disclosure. Set aside one hour or more and set up a *sacred space* with candles, incense, beautiful colors, and your sacred objects. Begin to breath together, generating and receiving loving energy from the heart. As you move slowly into lovemaking, gaze into your partner's eyes and acknowledge the God/Goddess within. Bring your awareness into the visual image of your desired goal. Hold that image as you release energy with your orgasm. You may want to experiment with using sound as well.

Inspiration and Guidance: Seventh Chakra

The seventh energy center is the source of transcendental, sexual experiences. The sense of merging with cosmic energy without physical boundaries at the moment of orgasm is often described as "being in the moment of boundless bliss." Ancient and modern visionary experiences describe feelings of being "bathed in pure light." It is cosmic orgasm, the direct experience of the self as pure energy, in union with the divine source. Experiences of sexual energy that go far beyond ordinary reality can be terrifying without any preparation. It may evoke disbelief or fear in some because it involves loss of the sense of the physical body. You should develop conscious rituals and meditation techniques that allow you to be open to seventh chakra experiences.

Exercise: If you choose to practice this with a partner, you will need to communicate clearly with each other about your expectations. It is important to recognize that your experiences of transcendence will be unique from your partner's. Attaining ecstatic states through sexual interaction is very personal, however, it is helpful to feel a conscious bond with your partner. Your rituals need to be infused with your own creativity. You can borrow from ancient rituals, such as honoring the four directions of the Native American Medicine Wheel. The Wicce tradition uses rhythmic poetry and movement. You may want to work with the Yoga practices of meditation and chanting. Kundalini Yoga, Tantra and Native American Quodoushka all teach specific techniques to move the energy up from the base of the spine, through the genitals and the heart center to the crown at the top of the head. The effect of these techniques is to energize all the chakras.

The ancient cultures that worshipped the Divine Feminine perceived universal energy as a pulsing spiral. The spiral of energy moves up and down the body through all the chakras in a continuous, pulsing current. In essence, we are plugged into a cosmic "electric outlet" through our crown chakras near the tops of our heads. Continuing the analogy to electricity, our bodies cannot function well if our energy is not grounded firmly

in our root chakras near the base of our spines.

Any time our sexual energy is distorted and out of balance with the pulsing Life Force there can be harmful consequences. With the sex-negative conditioning of our culture, the energy is blocked, producing leaks that dissipate available energy. Since all humans generate sexual energy from the chakra located near the genitals, whether it is blocked or free flowing is crucial to maintaining the connection with Divine Inspiration.

Healing Unfinished Business

Healing of any kind is a function of finding the right pieces of the puzzle so you can understand your own patterns and what to do about those aspects you'd like to change. For example, you may have told your story many times but you may not have put it in some meaningful context that illuminates your sexuality. The questions are intended to allow you to look at your sexuality in a new way.

The concept of *unfinished business* is popular in psychology and generally refers to emotional traumas and hurts, great and small, that are holding you back from being truly present in your life. Once you complete your personal unfinished business, you become free to respond in the moment with relatively few expectations. *Completion* means understanding and overcoming your negative reactions that are stimulated by the past. The concept of "responding in the moment" is especially important to sexuality.

To be truly present, you must respond sexually without anxiously anticipating the same negative outcomes as past experiences. We are all susceptible to hidden bedroom "partners" which stifle our responses just as if they were real life spectators that sabotage sexual desire. These hidden spectators are the voices of our parents, previous partners, abusers, and any other sex negative influences we have experienced in our lives. In order to be fully present we must avoid reacting in predictable, rigid patterns left over from such painful experiences.

When sexual energy is perceived as purely genital sensations, it can be misunderstood as a simple physical release in order to produce feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. However, sexual energy can move up from the base of the spine, radiating to all the other chakras. It can be experienced as divine healing from the heart center and divine inspiration from the crown center. It is possible to practice conscious loving and spiritual sex if the first three chakras and the heart center are relatively free flowing.

It may seem outrageous to view sexuality in such lofty terms. Yet, it no longer makes sense to deny the spiritual dimension of our sexuality, as if we had "lower," physical urges and "higher," spiritual functions, disconnected from the body. Since sexual energy is the source of our connection to the Life Force, the benefits to physical, emotional, and mental health are obvious. There is truly an endless supply of loving sexual energy. Consequently, there are more unlimited playful moments, times of communion with our partners and spiritual ecstasy than most of us can ever imagine.

Bio: Linda E. Savage, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist and sex therapist who has been exploring the mysteries of sexual healing for over 25 years. Dr. Savage is the author of *Reclaiming Goddess Sexuality: The Power of the Feminine Way* (Hay House) which presents a view of women's sexuality that blends the ancient wisdom of the Goddess cultures with current clinical knowledge.

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