

## Optimizing Older Adult Sexual Expression

### Sex is Alive and Well

Most people are uncomfortable when confronted with issues relating to older adult sexuality. In my experience as a trainer and sexuality educator for close to 25 years, I have talked about sex with people of all ages: young girls and their parents (mostly their moms) about what to expect in puberty, high school and college students navigating their way through mating and dating, adults who were incarcerated and/or in recovery, and older adults and their service providers. Human sexuality is a compelling topic, and the curiosity and enthusiasm it arouses is perfectly normal regardless of the age group.

However, for many, fascination with the subject of human sexuality is also charged with negative emotions and concerns. Sometimes curiosity is tinged with feelings of guilt, shame, fear, and foreboding; and often for good reason. Sexuality issues include topics that are very difficult to discuss and this can be especially true when we talk about older adults.

Sex and sexuality are human needs that evolve and change over the lifecycle and the need for intimacy is ageless. It is simply not true that people lose interest in sex as they age, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity or the health challenges they may face.

The following anecdotes exemplify some of the ways sexuality evolves and changes as we age, but is still very much a part of who we are.

Consider the following question asked by a member during a recent workshop on "SEXcessful Aging" that I conducted at a local senior center: "Will I have a chance to

talk about Eddy today?" My response: "Sure, tell me more about Eddy." Older adult: "Eddy is my vibrator."

A man in his 80s talked about how making love to his wife (now deceased) was "the best sex he ever had, and I still think about those years." Another person asked whether or not oral sex was still "sex" and if it was "safe". A woman shared, "It's been so good to talk about sex and relationships. I haven't talked about it to anyone in years, these conversations bring back such pleasant memories." A 70+ year old transwoman talked about her gender transition process that started in her mid 50's and how much happier she is. Grandparents asked questions about their grandchildren's "gay identity" and if the word "queer" was okay to use. Older LGBT adults voiced concerns and fear about "coming out" when seeking aging services.

So many people, even those who work in the field of public health, may not think of seniors experiencing intimacy and sexuality concerns. The above anecdotes reflect some of the needs seniors have in relation to their sexuality and sexual activities; concerns about relationships, feelings, memories, morality, and the lack of knowledge.

### Sex and Sexuality: Is there a difference?

There are many facets of senior sex and sexuality, but too often, the words sex and sexuality are used interchangeably, and that may lead to diminishing the value of sexuality as we age.

One can think of sex in terms of intimate behaviors people engage in, or what box to check when identifying one's gender.

Sexuality is a central aspect of being human and encompasses sex, gender identity and roles, sexual orientation, pleasure, intimacy and sexual health; and it is influenced by social, economic, political, cultural and religious factors. We express our sexuality in our thoughts, fantasies, desires, attitudes, values, and behaviors, and these change throughout our lives.

### Implications for Practice

Sexual expression and intimacy among older adults is a reality that providers who work with them must be prepared to face. How can we help them to meet this challenge and support healthy older adults' sexual expression across the decades of aging? Here are some tips:

- Remember that sexuality is physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual and spans an individual's entire life. The need to enjoy and express one's sexuality does not diminish with age. Older adulthood can be a time of new discoveries and powerful sexual experiences. Being "sexually active" involves more than just intercourse.
- Understand your beliefs and attitudes toward sexuality in later life, and examine any barriers there might be to working supportively with older adults. The Aging Sexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale (ASKAS) is a tool designed to measure two realms of sexuality as they relate to older adults: knowledge about changes in sexual response and general attitudes about sexual activity.<sup>1</sup>
- Get to know the important sexuality and intimacy issues that are specific to those served—older adults living with HIV, residents in long-term care setting, lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or

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transgender older adults, clients with dementia. Increasing understanding will help providers become more aware of and identify intimacy needs and opportunities for discussion, as well as offer tools to begin addressing intimacy needs.

- Advocate that sexuality and intimacy be integrated into the services provided. For example, education for staff, addressing sexual consent policies, activities that allow seniors to build intimacy/relationships (dances, date nights, social functions), incorporate physical intimacy goals into physical therapy, or provide a confidential space for older adults to discuss sexual health issues.
- Learn about the PLISSIT model. PLISSIT is an acronym for Permission, Limited Information, Specific Suggestions, and

Intensive Therapy, a model developed by psychologist Jack Annon to address sexuality issues with patients.<sup>1</sup> The PLISSIT model provides a framework for conversations about sexuality, including sexual health. The model includes several suggestions for initiating and maintaining the discussion of sexuality.

To summarize, sexuality is an important contributing factor to quality of life and wellbeing. Sexuality, intimacy, and sex are central pleasures to the human experience and all adults have the right to express their sexuality, regardless of their age, sexual orientation, gender identity or HIV status. We all need to join in conversations with older adults to empower them with comprehensive information about sex and sexuality, thereby increasing knowledge and developing positive attitudes and behaviors

towards sexuality, intimacy and relationships, which are key to successful aging and quality of life.

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### **Terri Clark, MPH**

*Prevention Services Coordinator  
Action Wellness  
[TClark@ActionWellness.org](mailto:TClark@ActionWellness.org)*

Terri is a certified trainer with the SAGE (Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders) serves on the American Society on Aging's Leadership Council of their LGBT Aging Issues Network (LAIN) constituent group and is currently the Coordinator of Prevention Services at Action Wellness in Philadelphia, PA. To learn more about Terri and Action Wellness visit: <https://www.actionwellness.org/>

## **REFERENCES**

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