

The Accidental Sex Therapist

Sex Therapy Tools Anyone Can Use

STEPHEN SNYDER

When a client unexpectedly reveals a sexual problem, many clinicians find themselves thrust into the role of “accidental sex therapist.” In this uncomfortable position, too many shy away from addressing the sexual issue, thinking they lack expertise. But all it really takes are some simple conceptual tools and a willingness to learn what’s truly going on in the bedroom. In this workshop, we’ll examine how to handle common sexual problems with confidence and skill. Discover how to:

- Ask the right questions that get to the heart of what’s really going on in bed—and in each person’s head—during sex
- Teach clients a new vocabulary to describe their level of arousal, and help them stop expecting themselves to function sexually when they’re not really aroused
- Recommend techniques to improve the erotic climate of a relationship, such as enjoying moments of mutual arousal even when sex isn’t on the menu and doing simple mindfulness practices in bed
- Empower clients to feel more confident communicating their sexual needs and feelings

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Learning Objectives:

1. Develop specific questions that get to the heart of what's really going on in bed---and in each person's head---during sex.
2. Build a new vocabulary to teach clients to describe their level of arousal, and help them stop expecting themselves to function sexually when they're not really aroused.
3. Propose techniques to clients to improve the erotic climate in a relationship, such as doing simple mindfulness practices in bed together.
4. Assess how to help clients feel more confident communicating their sexual needs and feelings.

Outline:

1. **Develop specific questions that get to the heart of what's really going on in bed---and in each person's head---during sex.**
 - a. Psychological arousal, as opposed to physiological arousal, is a more reliable indicator of sexual readiness and a better predictor of sexual satisfaction.
 - b. Most people report that psychological arousal has core features such as the following:
 - (1) Absorption in the moment
 - (2) Self-acceptance, lack of judgment
 - (3) Temporary impairment of intellect
 - (4) Distortion of time sense
 - (5) Regression to more infantile modes of being
 - (6) A feeling of "selfish connection" that's different from ordinary adult interaction.
 - (7) A deep sense of validation
 - c. Questioning clients about their typical sexual experiences should include careful inquiry re the usual sequence of events ("Who typically does what to whom first? Then what happens next, and why?"), as well as re participants' subjective experience at each stage ("How psychologically aroused do you usually feel when that happens?")
 - d. Case examples will be given, showing how simple questioning along these lines can yield

valuable information that clients and their therapists can use to frame interventions to enhance psychological arousal.

e. Theoretical: The idea of a “sexual self:” primitive, regressive, and rooted in the healthy narcissistic gratifications of early childhood.

2. Help clients learn a new vocabulary to describe their level of arousal, and help them stop expecting themselves to function sexually when they’re not really aroused.

a. Once clients learn to self-observe their state of authentic psychological arousal, it often becomes clear that the major block to sexual function was that “their sexual self felt unhappy.”

b. The therapeutic question then becomes, “How can we give the sexual self what it needs?”

c. Clinical examples will be provided.

3. Recommend simple techniques to improve the erotic climate in a relationship---such as enjoying mutual arousal even when sex isn’t on the menu, and doing simple mindfulness practices in bed together.

a. Most long-term, committed couples learn to make mutual orgasm the goal of lovemaking. Along the way, they forget to ask whether they’re authentically aroused.

Re-focusing on arousal rather than orgasm becomes a central therapeutic agenda.

b. Most long-term, committed couples refrain from experiencing arousal together unless they plan to have sex. Treatment should include practice experiencing frequent arousal “for its own sake.”

Technique 1: “Simmering”: One or two minutes of mutual arousal, without expectation of sex per se.

c. Most long-term, committed couples lose the intense sexual motivation they started with when their relationship was new. Most sex advice these days recommends trying to introduce novelty, adventure, or uncertainty. This is usually unproductive, for reasons we’ll discuss. “Sex dates” tend not work either, since desire is absent and the sex can feel artificial. Instead, the following will be recommended:

Technique 2: The “Two-Step”: Instead of making a date to have sex, make a date to “do nothing in bed together.” Start with mindfulness practices – to be described (“Step 1”), before

letting yourself get aroused (“Step 2”). Mindfulness facilitates arousal, since “paying attention to the present moment without judgment” is at the heart of psychological arousal.

d. Most couples find that “Simmering” and “Two-Step” are far more user-friendly, feel more natural, and are more compatible with 21st Century schedules than traditional Masters and Johnson “Sensate Focus.”

4. Help clients feel more confident communicating their sexual needs and feelings.

a. Too few couples talk much during sex. Or they try to “talk dirty” in order to “keep it hot.”

b. Simple communication about your feelings of sexual arousal can often feel far more intimate and erotic.

c. Clinical examples will be provided.

d. A model will be provided for assessing whether a given communication is intimate or not.

5. Assess your own level of comfort with being an “accidental sex therapist” when individuals and couples unexpectedly bring up sexual problems during the course of therapy.

a. Feedback will be solicited from attendees re possible difficulties they might anticipate in implementing the approach and techniques outlined above.

b. Solutions and work-arounds for common difficulties will be presented.

References:

a. Baumeister, Roy. *Is There Anything Good About Men? How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

b. Bader, Michael. *Male Sexuality: Why Women Don't Understand It -- and Men Don't Either* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

c. Corbett, Ken. *Bohhoods: Rethinking Masculinities*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).