

CHAPTER ONE

The Journey Begins

“Sex is more than Intercourse. It’s more than physical. It’s part of my personality. It expresses my culture. It involves all of me –

My body, senses, emotions, thoughts, memories, meanings, relationships.”

From “New Expectations: Sexuality for Mid and Later Life” by Peggy Brick and Lindquist, 2003

Wander into your neighborhood bookstore and peruse the travel section. No matter where you choose to go, you’ll find many books to guide you in your travels. Why? Because it makes sense to know where you’re going before you get there. At minimum, you want to have some idea of the culture, the climate, the currency used, and the basics on how to get around so you can be comfortable. Otherwise, you may end up in a place like Reykjavik, Iceland in the middle of winter, wearing shorts, a T-shirt and flip-flops, squinting through your Ray-Bans, a wallet full of Shekels, looking for the subway. (If you’ve never been to Iceland, I assure you that Reykjavik, although beautiful, is cold and very, very dark in the winter, you can’t buy anything with shekels, and there is definitely no subway system.)

You may, at times, be traveling solo, but you will most likely have a traveling companion, or two, or three. If you’ve ever traveled with someone else, you know that his or her quirks can make or break your trip. There’s nothing more disconcerting than finding out that you’re with a “plan every second of the day-get up early-visit every museum-stick to the itinerary” person when you are a “spontaneous-fly by the seat of your pants-let’s see where this road takes us” voyager. Bottom line – you want to be

prepared for your journey. Or, as my mother used to say, “You want to make sure you have clean underwear!”

It’s the same with sexuality. You may be primed to jump right in (“get out the handcuffs and slather me with lubricant. Yahoo!”), or you may want to take a more tentative approach (“don’t expect me to stray too far from that old faithful missionary position.”). Trying new things and new ways of doing old things can evoke both excitement and apprehension. In *Sexploration*, there are opportunities for both ends of the adventure spectrum and the entire range in between.

That’s necessary because, much like the weather, our bodies and our sexual desires and needs are constantly evolving and changing, ebbing and flowing and responding. Any change in your life such as ending or starting a relationship, an illness or disability (whether temporary or chronic), stress (and who doesn’t have this in their life), gaining or losing weight, having children, even having a bad day affects your sexual needs and desires.

If you have a long time companion or spouse, it is likely that s/he too will go through changes over the course of your time together. If you start a new relationship, you will have to adjust and adapt to another person’s needs and wants, which are most likely to be different from your previous partner’s needs and wants, not to mention your own needs and wants.

As with any other excursion, the same pre-departure planning applies to a “Sexploration”. You need to figure out the “lay of the land” (so to speak) to guarantee that your sexual journey with yourself and with your partners is a safe and exciting one. But, the truth is that we seldom prepare sufficiently for our sexual journeys and then we wonder how the

heck we are so unequipped for the place and the person (or persons) with whom we have ended up.

This book is not going to help you achieve the perfect sex life, because let's be serious, nobody has the perfect anything. But, it will help you challenge yourself within your own limitations, give you tools to address particular situations, communicate your needs, negotiate with partners who have different turn-ons from your own, confront your personal inhibitions, expand your definition of sex and teach you new ways of sexual pleasuring. It can help you identify which of your sexual behaviors are healthy and which are sexually hindering—so that you can be truly great in bed, whatever that means or entails to you.

If you've had negative or disappointing experiences around sex, you might feel like you need to do some type of work on that. If you are ashamed or not comfortable with your body you may want to work on improving your body image as your goal. Part of a Sexploration is setting the parameters within which you can safely explore. Below are some of guidelines that I have found to be helpful for anyone embarking on a journey in the realm of sexuality.

CHALLENGE YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT SEX

I can't tell you the number of people who preface stories about their sexual experiences with “well, I'm kinda freaky” or “my sex life is pretty boring” or “I'm not sure if this is normal...” Trust me, no matter what you have or have not done sexually, there is someone else who has or has not done it, too. You can probably find a chat group on line for those who like to wear diapers and chew gummy bears while someone sucks their earlobes. People's sexual experiences run the gamut from “I've never done anything,

even with myself” to “Everyday, I do something with a feather duster.” Human behavior around sexuality is unpredictable, diverse, and limitless. That’s what makes it so wonderful. It’s all normal...as long as it’s consensual. But, whether or not you’re content with it is another story and that’s what this book is all about.

Basically from the time we are born until the day of our death we are flooded with ideas about what is sexy and how sex should happen. In some ways the boundaries for sexuality are widening, but in some ways they are just as constrictive as ever. Every strong viewpoint that you have about sex is profoundly influenced by your past experiences and the messages you received. Often you’re not even aware of how your experiences affect your interpretation of the world.

Where you are at this point in your life is the result of a lifetime of learning about sexual attitudes, values and beliefs, and your personal sexual encounters. Every sexual person experiences and expresses him or herself differently. What you have learned and what you have done – combined with how our culture portrays sexuality – forms the basis for your “sexual script.” This script generally specifies when, where and with whom you have sex, as well as what you do sexually, and why you tend to do it the way in which you do.

We are often limited by our own rules – we spend so much time worrying about doing things right, having the correct type of orgasms, being with a certain number of people, how frequently to have sex, that it’s amazing we enjoy our experiences.

In her compelling and insightful book, *Intimacy and Solitude*, Stephanie Dowrick says, “Many of us have sexual secrets about which we feel uneasy or even ashamed. These make us unusually vulnerable to real or imagined misunderstandings, attack, or potential

ridicule.” Once you realize that these ‘secrets’ are normal, natural and oftentimes common, you can start to accept them as a part of your sexual self and move forward.

One of the most compelling changes you can make is to challenge the assumptions that underlie your rules about sexuality. We all make them. And we are not immune to judging ourselves – often we are our own worst critics. We compare ourselves to others constantly (am I prettier, stronger, fitter, smarter, hotter?) and may have stringent rules about with whom, where, when and how to have sex.

EXAMINE YOUR GENDER EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Gender expectations are a pretty tough thing to shake. Basically, we’ve been saddled with them since someone checked between our legs at birth and pronounced us to be a boy or a girl. Gender is a social construct, which means that you learn from family, community and media about how girls or boys should behave. The extent to which you ascribe to these roles (or not) can either limit or enhance your sexuality. For example, you may believe that if a woman asks for sex, she is a slut because you learned that a woman’s role is to play hard to get and not “let” a man have his way with you too easily. Or, maybe you are a man who doesn’t have an enormous sex drive, but you learned that men are supposed to be perpetually horny and ready to penetrate anything, so you wonder what is wrong with you. Some of our most damaging and limiting assumptions are those we make about gender roles and sexual orientation.

APPRECIATE YOUR BODY AND CELEBRATE ITS SEXUAL CAPACITY!

People of all shapes and sizes have hot sex and I guarantee that no matter how ‘attractive’ the person may be, it is no indication of how hot the sex they are having is. Sometimes the best looking people have the worst sex. People who are comfortable with their bodies

and their appearance often have better sexual experiences than those who are insecure. Getting to know your own body, whether through self-exploration, learning the facts about how bodies work and respond, or having open conversations with others is an important part of healthy sexuality.

PROCEED AT YOUR OWN PACE

Trying to change everything, to entirely recreate the sexual you all at once, is difficult, if not impossible. It's like the person who makes a New Year's Resolution to go on a diet, exercise, cut down on drinking and quit smoking all at once. By the third day, they're sore, hungry and rummaging through the garbage can for old cigarette butts.

I remember reading one book that told me that in order to "spice up" my sex life I should greet my partner at the door naked in nothing but Saran wrap, like a tasty dish waiting to be uncovered. All I could think about was this would be the time that Ed McMahon would ring my doorbell to tell me that I had won the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes and I would be on National Television looking like a human fruit roll-up. While this may work for some, if you've never done anything remotely like this it can be jarring for you and your partner. He or she may decide that you have truly lost it. And, just because someone writes in some book that something is "hot", doesn't mean you're not if you don't want to do it. Trust your instincts.

Behavior change is best done incrementally. If you have never exercised, it would be irresponsible of me to encourage you to run a marathon the first day you get on a treadmill. It's the same with sex. If you are used to doing things in one particular way, I encourage you to introduce new ideas, positions and products at a pace that you find

comfortable. Bottom line – go at your own pace, challenge yourself but stay within your comfort zone, trust your instincts, and don't feel obligated to try everything.

IMPROVE YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Sex can be difficult and confusing to talk about. This is mainly because we don't learn how to talk about it. And, many of us have the belief that we shouldn't talk about it – we should magically know what our partner wants and needs or that talking about sex ruins it. This astounds me. In what other aspects of our lives do we believe that NOT talking about something makes it better? Just imagine this scenario: “I had the best meeting ever at work. My boss didn't have to say a word. We sat down, he just looked at me in that special way, and I knew exactly he wanted me to do; it was clear that I was supposed to do that report as a PowerPoint presentation.” Usually, people complain when they *haven't* been told what their boss wants, when they have to second guess what s/he wants them to do, or when his/her instructions are unclear – it is frustrating. Why doesn't the same hold true for talking about sexuality?

BE PREPARED FOR ALL CONTINGENCIES

I once traveled through Europe with a friend who had Irritable Bowel Syndrome. She forgot to pack her laxatives and we wasted an entire afternoon going to apothecaries trying to decipher how the homeopathic remedies offered for sale compared with Ex-Lax. Maybe you don't travel with the plethora of medical supplies that my brother, the doctor does (antibiotic, anyone?), but you probably tend to pack enough clean underwear and products for headache, upset stomach, and constipation, just to name a few. In other words, you take precautions knowing that life involves risks. Sex involves risk, too, so being prepared with condoms and other safer sex supplies goes with the territory.

EXPAND AND ENHANCE YOUR DEFINITION OF SEXUAL PLEASURE

Ooh... Yes... Mmm... Ah... Ooo... Yummy. Sexual pleasures are unique, individual and subjective experiences. You may never truly like porn or morning sex or keeping the lights on and that is totally fine. What turns me on may turn you off. What leaves you trembling with desire may cause my vaginal juices to dry right up. Who cares?

Pleasure involves using your brain, harnessing your imagination, honing your five senses, trying new toys and techniques and relishing physicality. Pleasure is one aspect of sexuality in which an animal comparison to birds and bees *does* make sense. In fact, animals are way ahead of humans in the sybaritic category, particularly in self-pleasuring (much to the embarrassment of many parents standing in front of the Bonobo monkey cage at the zoo). Can you imagine Mama Monkey explaining to Baby Monkey that touching themselves is something to be ashamed of? The desire for pleasure is natural and normal.

I'd like to end this chapter with the following quote, from Paul Joannide's terrific book, *Guide to Getting It On*, in which he sums up what sex advice he would give if he were asked to limit his answer to one page.

“There isn't a feeling in the entire universe that you and your partner don't have stored, somewhere in your bodies, feelings that are waiting to be touched, shared and released. Yet the extent of your current lovemaking is to stick your tongues down each other's throats, tweak each other's nipples a perfunctory number of times, lick each other's genitals because that's what the sex books say you should do, and then thrust away until one of you goes ‘Ooo-ahh, Ooo-aah,’ and the other goes squirt, squirt, squirt. For a lot of people, sex is still an extension of grabbing for the cookie jar, which is fine as long as your expectations aren't very high.

Fortunately, there are a lot of wonderful dimensions to sex besides just huffing and puffing while the bedsprings squeak. Sharing sex with a partner allows you to discover where the different emotions are stored in each other's bodies, where your hopes and dreams are hidden, where the laughter and pain reside, and what it takes to free the fun, passion and hidden kink. To achieve that level of sharing you have to take the time to know someone, to feel what they are feeling, to see the world through their eyes, and to let a partner discover who you are in ways that might leave you feeling vulnerable (author's note: even if your partner is you). This can be scary.

Granted, there will be...times when all you want from sex is a quick jolt of sensation, but if that's all you ever expect from sex, then you might be coming up a bit short."

Let the Journey begin!