

Circles of Sexuality

Adapted from *Life Planning Education, A Comprehensive Sex Education Curriculum*. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 2007 as well as a talk given by Dennis Daley in June of 2012.

Sexuality is much more than sexual feelings or sexual intercourse. It is an important part of who a person is and what she/he will become. It includes all the feelings, thoughts and behaviors associated with being female or male, being attractive and being in love, as well as being in relationships that include sexual intimacy and sensual and sexual activity. It also includes enjoyment of the world as we know it through the five senses: taste, touch, smell, hearing, and sight.

Circle #1—Sensuality

Sensuality includes many aspects of sexuality; body image, experiencing pleasure, satisfying skin hunger, feeling physical attraction for someone else, and sexual fantasy. Sensuality enables us to enjoy sexuality in many different ways.

- Body image—Feeling attractive and proud of one's own body and the way it functions influences many aspects of life. Individuals often choose media personalities as the standard for how they should look, so they are often disappointed by what they see in the mirror. They may be especially dissatisfied when the mainstream media does not portray or does not positively portray physical characteristics they see in the mirror, such as color of skin, type or hair, shape of eyes, height, or body shape.
- Satisfying skin hunger—the need to be touched and held by others in loving, caring ways is often referred to as *skin hunger*. It is important to remember that MSOP clients receive considerably less touch than most people. Sexual acting out at MSOP may sometimes result from a need to be held and touched rather than from sexual desire.
- Feeling physical attraction for another person—the center of sensuality and attraction to others is not in the genitals (despite all the jokes). The center of sensuality and attraction to others is in the brain, humans' most important "sex organ." The unexplained mechanism responsible for sexual attraction rests in the brain, not in the genitalia.
- Fantasy—the brain also gives people the capacity to have fantasies about sexual behaviors and experiences. Individuals often need help understanding that sexual fantasy is normal and that one does not have to act upon sexual fantasies.

- Experiencing pleasure—Sensuality allows a person to experience pleasure when certain parts of the body are touched. People also experience sensual pleasure from taste, touch, sight, hearing and smell as part of being alive.

Circle #2—Sexual Intimacy

Sexual intimacy is the ability to be emotionally close to another human being and to accept closeness in return. Several aspects of intimacy include:

- Sharing—sharing intimacy is what makes personal relationships rich. While sensuality is about physical closeness, intimacy focuses on emotional closeness.
- Caring—caring about others means feeling their joy and their pain. It means being open to emotions that may not be comfortable or convenient. Nevertheless, an intimate relationship is possible only when we care.
- Liking or loving another person—having emotional attachment or connection to others is a manifestation of intimacy.
- Emotional risk-taking—to have true intimacy with others, a person must open up and share feelings and personal information. Sharing personal thoughts and feelings with someone else is risky, because the other person may not feel the same way. It is not possible to be really close with another person without being honest and open with her/him.
- Vulnerability—to have intimacy means that we share and care, like or love and take emotional risks. That makes us vulnerable—the person with whom we share, about whom we care and whom we like or love, has the power to hurt us emotionally. Intimacy requires vulnerability on the part of each person in the relationship.

Circle #3—Sexual Identity

Sexual identity is a person's understanding of who she/he is sexually, including the sense of being male or of being female. Sexual identity consists of three "interlocking pieces" that together, affect how each person sees him/herself. Each "piece" is important.

- Gender identity—knowing whether one is male or female. Most young children determine their own gender identity by age two. Sometimes, a person's biological gender is not the same as his/her gender identity—this is called being *transgender*.
- Gender role—identifying actions and/or behaviors for each gender. Some things are determined by the way male and female bodies are built or function. For example, only women menstruate and only men produce sperm. Other gender roles are culturally determined. In the United States, it is considered appropriate for only women to wear dresses to work in the business world. In other cultures, men may wear skirt-like outfits everywhere.

There are many "rules" about what men and women can/should do that have nothing to do with the way their bodies are built or function. Individuals need help sorting out how perceptions about gender roles affect whether they feel encouraged or discouraged in their choices about relationships, leisure activities, education and career.

Gender bias means holding *stereotyped opinions* about people according to their gender. Gender bias might include believing that women are less intelligent or less capable than men, that men suffer from "testosterone poisoning," that men cannot raise children without the help of women, that women cannot be analytical, that men cannot be sensitive. Many times, people hold fast to these stereotyped opinions without giving rational thought to the subject of gender.

- Sexual orientation—whether a person's primary attraction is to people of the other gender (heterosexuality) or to the same gender (homosexuality) or to both genders (bisexuality) defines his/her sexual orientation. Sexual orientation begins to emerge by adolescence although many gay and lesbian youth say they knew they felt same sex attraction by age 10 or 11. Between three and ten percent of the general population is probably exclusively homosexual in orientation. Perhaps another 10 percent of the general population feel attracted to both genders.

Heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth can all experience same-gender sexual attraction and/or activity around puberty. Such behavior, including sexual play with same-gender peers, crushes on same-gender adults, or sexual fantasies about same-gender people are normal for pre-teens and young teens and are not necessarily related to sexual orientation.

Negative social messages and homophobia in the wider U.S. culture can mean that individuals who are experiencing sexual attraction to and romantic feelings for someone of their own gender need support so they can clarify their feelings and accept their sexuality.

Circle #4—Reproduction and Sexual Health

These are a person's capacity to reproduce and the behaviors and attitudes that make sexual relationships healthy and enjoyable.

- Factual information about reproduction—is necessary in order to understand how male and female reproductive systems function and how conception and/or STD infection occur. Having inadequate information about your own and/or your partner's body can hinder individuals in making informed decisions about sexual expression and protecting your health.
- Individuals need to understand anatomy and physiology because everyone needs the knowledge and understanding to help him/her appreciate the ways in which his/her body functions.
- Feelings and attitudes—are wide-ranging when it comes to sexual expression and reproduction and to sexual health-related topics such as STD infection, HIV and AIDS, contraceptive use, abortion, pregnancy and childbirth.
- Sexual intercourse—is one of the most common behaviors among humans. Sexual intercourse is a behavior that may produce sexual pleasure that often culminates in orgasm in females and in males. Sexual intercourse may also result in pregnancy and/or STDs. In sex education programs, discussion of sexual intercourse is often limited to the bare mention of male-female (penile-vaginal) intercourse. However, individuals need accurate health information about sexual intercourse—vaginal, oral and anal.
- Reproductive and sexual anatomy—the male and female body and the ways in which they actually function is a part of sexual health. Individuals can learn to protect their reproductive and sexual health. This means that individuals need information about all the effective methods of contraception currently available, how they work, where to obtain them, their effectiveness and their side effects. This means that individuals also need to know how to use latex condoms to prevent STD infection. Even if an individual is not currently engaging in sexual intercourse, he/she probably will do so at some point in the future. They must know how to prevent pregnancy and/or disease.

Circle #5—Sexualization

Sexualization is that aspect of sexuality in which people behave sexually to influence, manipulate, or control other people. Often called the "shadowy" side of human sexuality, sexualization spans behaviors that range from the relatively harmless to the sadistically violent, cruel and criminal.

- **Flirting**—is a relatively harmless sexualization behavior. Nevertheless, upon occasion it is an attempt to manipulate someone else and it can cause the person manipulated to feel hurt, humiliation and shame.
- **Seduction**—is the act of enticing someone to engage in sexual activity. The act of seduction implies manipulation that at times may prove harmful for the one who is seduced.
- **Sexual harassment**—is an illegal behavior. Sexual harassment means harassing someone else because of her/his gender. It could mean making personal, embarrassing remarks about someone's appearance, especially characteristics associated with sexual maturity, such as the size of a woman's breasts or of a man's testicles and penis. It could mean unwanted touching, such as hugging a subordinate or patting someone's bottom. It could mean demands by a teacher, supervisor, or other person in authority for sexual intercourse in exchange for grades, promotion, hiring, raises, etc. All these behaviors are manipulative. The laws of the United States provide protection against sexual harassment. Individuals should know that they have the right to file a complaint with appropriate authorities if they are sexually harassed and that others may complain of their behavior if they sexually harass someone else.
- **Rape**—means coercing or forcing someone else to have genital contact with another. Sexual assault can include forced petting as well as forced sexual intercourse. Force, in the case of rape, can include use of overpowering strength, threats, and/or implied threats that arouse fear in the person raped. Individuals need to know that rape is always illegal and always cruel. Individuals should know that they are legally entitled to the protection of the criminal justice system if they are the victims of rape and that they may be prosecuted if they force anyone else to have genital contact with them for any reason. Refusing to accept *no* and forcing the other person to have sexual intercourse always means rape.
- **Child Sexual Abuse**—means forcing sexual contact on any minor. This behavior is always illegal and is extremely cruel because it betrays the trust that children and youth give to adults. Moreover, because the older person knows that child molestation is illegal and tries to hide the crime, he/she often blames the child/youth. The triple burden of forced sexual contact, betrayed trust and self-blame makes child sexual abuse particularly damaging to survivors of sexual abuse.