

# **SEXUALITY IN MID & LATER LIFE**

## **An Introductory Lesson**

### **OBJECTIVES**

Participants will:

1. Identify the wide range of attitudes and feelings regarding sexuality among older adults.
2. Discuss their own attitudes and feelings about sex in mid and later life.
3. Examine the concept of sexual scripts and the importance of re-evaluating one's script as one ages.
4. Identify some basic facts concerning sexuality and aging.

### **RATIONALE**

This lesson introduces two important concepts about sexuality and aging that are basic to this manual. First, older adults need to examine and possibly change the “sexual scripts” they have learned from childhood about how to think and behave as sexual people. Many of these scripts are not relevant for older adults. Second, sex is more than intercourse. Especially in the later years, people need to explore the possibilities of non-penetrative sex, or “outercourse.”

### **MATERIALS**

- Easel paper/board, markers, tape, and pencils
- *Educator Resource: WIT & WISDOM – SENIOR COMMENTS ON SEX & AGING*
- *Handout: WARMING UP FOR SEX IN MID & LATER LIFE*
- *Educator Resource: SEXUALITY IN TWO SOCIETIES*
- *Handout: SEXUALITY IN MID & LATER LIFE – SOME KEY FACTS*
- *Educator Resource: FALSE STATEMENTS & TRUE SOURCES*

### **PROCEDURE**

1. After reviewing the ground rules, introduce the session by acknowledging how difficult it is for most people to talk about sexuality and aging. As young children, many of us may have learned not to talk about sex. In addition, current media images of sex are mostly of the young, but today we are going to talk about sex in mid and later life.

2. Note that in 1985, a sexuality educator named Eric Johnson was one of the first people to investigate older people's attitudes about sexuality. He asked them to write freely about physical closeness, fondling, sexual intercourse, masturbation, sexual fantasies, remarriage, living together without marriage, and other matters. Read a few of their comments from ***Educator Resource: WIT & WISDOM – SENIOR COMMENTS ON SEX & AGING.***

***Discussion Questions:***

- a. How do the attitudes expressed by these older adults differ?
  - b. Do you expect there is the same variety of attitudes among seniors today as in 1985? Explain.
3. Distribute ***Handout: WARMING UP FOR SEX IN MID & LATER LIFE*** and pencils. Read the directions and ask the participants to read the list *quickly*, circling the statements with which they agree. When everyone is finished, direct participants to move around the room to seek signatures. After 10 minutes, ask participants to return to their seats.

***Discussion Questions:***

- a. Which statements were easy to sign?
  - b. Which statements were people less willing to sign? Why do you think that was?
  - c. What is the importance of the statement, "When it comes to sex, everyone has baggage?"
4. Write on easel paper or board **SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IS LEARNED.** Explain that we will examine two simple societies which vary in the sexual scripts people learned in each society. Note that a person's sexual script includes attitudes towards being male or female, the ideal body, relationships between the sexes, appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviors, etc.
  5. Describe the sexual behavior of the Irish of Inis Baeg and the Manganian people of Polynesia using ***Educator Resource: SEXUALITY IN TWO SOCIETIES*** as a guide. When you have finished, ask participants in pairs to decide which society is more like American society: the one where parents don't talk about sex or the one where parents teach young people how to have sexual pleasure? Take a quick poll, and ask participants to give their reasons.
  6. Note that these societies and modern American society all lack adequate sexual scripts for older people. Suggest that older adults essentially need to create sexual scripts for themselves that are appropriate for living in a society where people live into their 70's, 80's, and 90's.
  7. Explain that the remainder of the lesson will provide participants an opportunity to think about the scripts they have learned, and to decide whether they need to change their old scripts to fit this time of their lives or create new ones.

8. Write the following three lists on easel paper or board:

**PAST**  
Your sexual script  
(Everything you learned about  
sexuality: attitudes, beliefs,  
behaviors)

**SEXUALITY EDUCATION**  
Learning facts  
Thinking about old scripts

**FUTURE**  
Making choices

9. Note that for most of us, our sexual scripts are “baggage.” Many of the sexual scripts we learned as children and throughout our lives keep us from being sexually healthy and happy as we grow older, and changes occur in our bodies, relationships, and perspectives on life. Sexuality education gives us an opportunity to examine all our old sexual scripts and make any changes we choose that will enhance the quality of our future lives.

10. Ask participants to brainstorm some of the messages people receive that may discourage healthy sexual expression as people age. Record their responses on easel paper or board. Supplement participants’ lists with the following as needed:

- “Good girls don’t...!”
- “We don’t talk about *that*...”
- “Don’t touch yourself!”
- The romantic love script — automatic fireworks
- The male must initiate sex
- Sex is only for the young
- Old bodies are ugly
- It only counts as “sex” if it’s vaginal intercourse

11. Note that a new script validates a person’s right to be sexual — perhaps in new and different ways — as we age. However, we first need to examine some of the basic facts about sexuality in mid and later life. Distribute ***Handout: SEXUALITY IN MID & LATER LIFE — SOME KEY FACTS*** and instruct participants to complete the handout with a partner.

12. As participants seem finished, reveal that only the last four statements are false and that the rest are true. Supplement information as needed by using ***Educator Resource: FALSE STATEMENTS & TRUE SOURCES***.

***Discussion Questions:***

- a. Which statements surprised you? Explain.
- b. Which statements do you think are the most important for adults to know?

13.If time allows, distribute small index cards and ask everyone to write questions they have about sexuality in mid and later life. Emphasize that the cards are anonymous. Collect and answer as many as possible in this session, or begin the next session by answering these questions.

14.To close, ask for people’s brief thoughts or feelings about the session.

***WIT & WISDOM – SENIOR COMMENTS ON SEX & AGING***

1. “I don’t feel old inside, but I’m simply appalled at how old my children are!” *Woman, age 70*
2. “I’m waiting with bated breath. When will I feel old?” *Man, age 86*
3. “My wife and I have been married 34 years, and I have the feeling that we achieved more happy physical adjustment during the past three or four years than ever before, a sort of new awakening to quiet, deep joy.” *Man, age 74*
4. “Sex, like war and the Olympics, is for the young.” *Man, age 72*
5. “Remarriage is like a second chance at being young.... To be bodily close again, to enjoy whatever the aging process allows, is one of the greatest blessings I know and far surpasses those earlier years of deep passion without fulfillment.” *Woman, age 73*
6. “I am neither interested in nor concerned about ‘sex over 65’.” *Woman, age 69*
7. “I’m a widower. I miss sex. So I masturbate, and I agree with whoever it was that gave the arguments for it: ‘It’s free, it’s always available, you can’t get anybody pregnant, you can’t get any disease – and you meet a better class of people.’” *Man, age 72*
8. “Masturbation – you can have it. I want the real thing or nothing, and given what I find around me, I have chosen nothing.” *Woman, age 74*
9. “I think it’s disgusting that these old people go around looking for sex. When you get flabby and dry, you ought to stop trying to be young and accept your age and quit looking for sex.” *Woman, age 69*
10. “I’m not going to marry some old geezer, even a nice one, just to ‘service’ him sexually....” *Woman, age 74*
11. “In most retirement homes, the women outnumber the men...so if a man and a woman find they have enough in common on other levels to go to bed together, the rest of us should not condemn or criticize, but rejoice that at least two people have found a way to express and share an exchange of energy that will bring a new zest for life and evoke joy for others just by their new radiance.” *Woman, age 77*
12. “A young woman asked a 70-year-old woman how long the sex drive lasted. The older one replied, ‘I don’t know; ask me in twenty years.’” *Woman, age 75*

**WARMING UP FOR SEX IN MID & LATER LIFE**

**Directions:** Circle the number of each statement that you agree with. When directed, move around the room asking people if they are willing to sign a particular statement. Get as many signatures as possible. The winner is the person with the most signatures at the end of the allotted time.

**Are you someone who:**

**Signatures**

1. Feels sure your parents rarely (if ever!) had sex.	
2. Truly believes there's sex after 70.	
3. Knows sex after 40 is <i>not</i> like sex at 20 – thank goodness!	
4. Believes sex improves when the nest is empty.	
5. Agrees a couple can have great sex without intercourse.	
6. Believes menopause is a blessing.	
7. Thinks older lovers are better lovers.	
8. Knows it's tough to start dating again at 45.	
9. Can talk about sex with just about anyone.	
10. Thinks a pill (Cialis, Levitra, Viagra) can solve most sexual problems.	
11. Believes it's often the woman, not the man, who wants more sex.	
12. Thinks non-monogamous marriages can work.	
13. Knows a person should take off eyeglasses when having oral sex.	
14. Thinks physically fit people are more interested in sex.	
15. Believes if women knew as much about sex as they do about diets, they'd be happier.	
16. Thinks the Internet is a good way to meet a new partner.	
17. Has had a physician ask if you have any questions about sex.	

## ***SEXUALITY IN TWO SOCIETIES***

**T**he people of *Inis Baeg* live on an isolated island off the coast of Ireland. For the most part, this small population of about 350 is poor and either fish or farm for a living. This culture is referred to as one of the “most sexually naïve cultures in the world.” Sex is never discussed at any time. Girls are not taught about menstruation, intercourse, orgasm, or childbirth. The onset of both menstruation and menopause are greatly feared, and menopause is believed to cause madness. Oral sex, fondling of the penis or breast, homosexuality, anal intercourse and even French kissing are either unknown or considered depraved. The men believe that intercourse will destroy their health. The only position for intercourse is the male-above “missionary position” with no foreplay. Female orgasm is considered a sign of possession by the devil.

Nudity is forbidden. Mothers bathe children in a smock so that they never see them nude. Husbands and wives never see each other naked. Children and adults only wash hands, feet, lower arms and legs, and faces. Men would rather drown than wear swim trunks exposing their legs.

Marriages are arranged by the parents and occur at age 36 for men and 25 for women. Premarital intercourse does not exist. Families are large, with an average of seven children. Sons are favored by their mothers, and this often results in open resentment between fathers and sons. Hostility frequently exists between husband and wife because there is usually no love in the relationship, and the wife often resents the husband’s freedom.

**T**he people of *Mangaia* live on Cook Island in the South Pacific. In private, boys and girls are free to engage in all forms of sexual activity, with adults pretending not to be aware of these activities. In public, however, Mangaian boys and girls are segregated from the age of three or four. Even hand-holding is considered very immodest. Yet prior to the age of segregation, boys and girls run around naked and masturbate in public.

The Mangaians believe sexual pleasure should come first, before either affection or the formation of an intimate relationship. They find the American belief that you do not have sex with someone you do not love (or for whom you do not have a strong affection) very strange. Adolescent sex is very open and encouraged by adults. Boys undergo a type of circumcision at 13 or 14. Once the wound is healed, the boy has intercourse with an experienced older woman. Both sexes are taught the art of sexual pleasuring, and masturbation is encouraged. Orgasm is universal for both boys and girls, and heterosexual intercourse, including oral and anal sex, is enjoyed in a variety of positions.

Parents encourage premarital sexual activity with many partners. In their teens and twenties, young men and women engage in intercourse several times a night. Extramarital sex occurs when a woman goes back to the man with whom she first had intercourse. It also occurs when men and women are separated from their spouses. The Mangaians believe that regular intercourse keeps a person from become ill and losing his or her mind.

**Source:** Marshall, D. & Suggs, R. Ed., (1971). *Human Sexual Behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall. Summary adapted with permission from Francoeur, R.T. (1984). *Becoming a Sexual Person*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

***SEXUALITY IN MID & LATER LIFE – SOME KEY FACTS***

**Directions:** Only four of the following statements are false. Try to find them!

1. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, marriage lasted an average of 12 years before one of the partners died.
2. There are approximately three single women for every single man over age 65.
3. The expectation that older men and women will not be sexual is probably more responsible for sexual problems than actual physical changes.
4. Masturbation is a natural supplementary activity within a relationship.
5. The effects of relationship factors and mental health are increasingly proving to be more important predictors of sexual well-being than physiological factors of sexual arousal and response.
6. After age 35 or 40, most men need direct penile stimulation to get an erection.
7. Normal physical changes in sexuality as men age include increased ability to delay ejaculation, less forceful orgasm, more rapid loss of erection and a longer period of time needed before erection is possible again.
8. The most important predictor of sexual motivation and activity in a person's later years is the importance and frequency of sexual activity in earlier life.
9. Some illnesses and disabilities require that the couple experiment with new positions for intercourse.
10. About half of men who take Viagra continue using it by the end of a year.
11. As humans age and become less focused on their genitals, they are more likely to discover the sensuousness of their entire bodies.
12. Most adults would like to discuss sexual functioning with their physicians.
13. The amount of testosterone in a man's body is highest in the morning.
14. Changes in sexual desire and behavior over the life cycle are normal.
15. If an older heterosexual couple ceases sexual activity, the choice usually rests with the female partner.
16. Marital longevity and happiness is closely related to the frequency of sexual intercourse.
17. Women's sexual problems are usually caused by reduced estrogen after menopause.
18. Having an orgasm is one of the top three items women associate with satisfying sex.

***FALSE STATEMENTS & TRUE SOURCES***

Following is an explanation of the four false statements in *Handout: SEXUALITY IN MID & LATER LIFE – SOME KEY FACTS*, plus sources for all the statements.

**15.If an older heterosexual couple ceases sexual activity, the choice usually rests with the female partner.**

**FALSE.** Women in heterosexual relationships actually report that intercourse ceases because of a loss in partner or at the *husband's* request. Additionally, men report sexual inactivity because of lack of desire, ill health, or erectile dysfunction. Many sexual problems could be alleviated if people broadened their idea of "sex" to include "outercourse" or non-penetrative sex.

**16.Marital longevity and happiness is closely related to the frequency of sexual intercourse.**

**FALSE.** Over the years, "attachment" to a partner becomes more important than "attraction." Happiness and satisfaction is measured more in terms of affection, security, and commitment rather than the frequency of sexual intercourse.

**17.Women's sexual problems are usually caused by reduced estrogen after menopause.**

**FALSE.** There are many causes for women's sexual problems including shame, guilt, sexual abuse, interpersonal conflicts, depression, and sexual prohibitions they may have learned while growing up.

**18.Having an orgasm is one of the top three items women associate with satisfying sex.**

**FALSE.** Research indicates that the top three items women associated with satisfying sex were feeling close to a partner before sex, emotional closeness after sexual activity, and feeling loved.

**Sources:**

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