

Incest and Sexuality

**Sexuality:
Why Bother?**

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Sexuality: Why Bother?

Incest survivors want to resolve the issue of sexuality, yet they don't want to go near it.

—Nancy Evergreen, M.A., Incest Treatment Specialist

To women who have been sexually abused, talking about sex or even thinking about sex can be emotionally upsetting. For many survivors, sexuality has become confused with sexual abuse, even though intellectually they understand there is a difference. They may find it difficult to imagine positive, healthy, enjoyable sexual activity. Sexual activity has generally become associated with emotional and physical pain. Justifiably, a survivor may wonder why she should bother exploring her sexuality.

She may not want to bother. Some survivors are not ready to look at sexuality issues. If and when to address sexuality is an individual decision and should not be forced; survivors have experienced too much force in sexual areas already. One woman who had been repeatedly sexually molested in her teens by both her stepfather and grandfather explained, "Sex is the last priority for me. Enjoying an orgasm is a ridiculous goal when I'm trying to stop drinking and being self-destructive." It's not a good time to look into sexuality concerns if a survivor

doesn't have a basic feeling of worth about herself, if she is concerned for her safety or survival, or if she lacks the interest and motivation to explore this area.

Though dissatisfaction may exist in their current relationships, some survivors prefer to avoid addressing their sexual concerns. The idea of making sexual changes is perceived as threatening. Opening themselves to the possibility of sexual pleasure can be extremely difficult for survivors. They do not want to feel sexually vulnerable again. They may not want to believe sexual pleasure is possible. There is a great fear of failure. One woman said, "If positive sexuality is my right ...I don't think I want that right!" She saw having sex with her husband as something she did as a duty in order to keep things calm. She confided that she hated the sexual experiences but had taught herself to "grin and bear it" for his sake. The situation had grown "acceptable." She feared her husband's reaction if she were to be honest with him.

Yet there are many survivors who feel ready to develop their sexuality in a positive way. For them, it is worth the time and energy necessary to explore their sexuality because of their strong desire to experience sexual pleasure and contentment. Usually this desire surfaces in the later stages of incest therapy, when self-esteem is higher and women are able to feel their strength and power. There may be a desire to reclaim what was taken from them by the offenders—their sexual innocence. As one woman shared, "I want to feel good about sex. It's my way of totally breaking my father's hold over me. I don't want what he did to

get in the way of my sexual enjoyment with a future partner.” Having a partner whom she loves and feels fully loved by can be a tremendous motivator for a survivor to overcome sexual problems that resulted from early abuse.

Teens are another population of incest survivors who are often motivated to address sexuality concerns. Usually they are very curious about sexuality and are eager to develop healthier sexual attitudes, since they have not experienced repetitive abusive patterns as adults. This can be an excellent time for them to resolve confusions and fears about sex. To prevent future sexual problems, time can be spent in teen incest treatment programs focusing on common sexual concerns and the sexual repercussions of incest.

Sexuality refers to how people feel about their bodies and genitals, how they choose to express sexual energy, and how and with whom they prefer to share sexual feelings. In sexual expression, a woman projects her intimate self outward. She takes hidden aspects of herself—her genitals and their sensations—and reveals them to herself and perhaps to a partner. When this is done in the context of healthy, positive sexual expression, the experience can be extremely satisfying. On a physical level, individuals can experience pleasurable sensations and tension release, which then reinforce good feelings about the body. On a social level, healthy sexual expression involves intimacy and an exchange of feelings of positive regard and acceptance. Thus, healthy sexuality can greatly enhance one’s sense of self-esteem.

All women have a right to positive, healthy sexuality. Incest survivors, having this right, can redefine sexuality for themselves and develop ways of relating sexually with others that feel good to them. To ensure against further abuse and to create healthy, positive sexual experiences, survivors must make sure certain basic conditions are met. Though these conditions may vary somewhat from person to person, the five that follow (called CERTS) seem essential.

CERTS for Positive, Healthy Sexuality

1. *Consent*: I can freely and comfortably choose whether or not to engage in sexual activity. I am able to stop the activity at any time during the sexual contact.
2. *Equality*: My feeling of personal power is on an equal level with my partner. Neither of us dominates the other.
3. *Respect*: I have a positive regard for myself and for my partner. I feel respected by my partner. I feel supportive of my partner and supported by my partner.
4. *Trust*: I trust my partner on both a physical and emotional level. We have a mutual acceptance of vulnerability and an ability to respond to it with sensitivity.
5. *Safety*: I feel secure and safe within the sexual setting. I am comfortable with and assertive about where, when and how the sexual activity takes place. I feel safe from the possibility of unwanted

pregnancy and/or sexually transmitted diseases.

When these conditions are met, sexual activity can become fun, nurturing, and a true expression of caring. It's a natural human response to want to be physically close to people who one cares for, to share love and appreciation with a hug, handshake or kiss. With an intimate partner, under circumstances of mutual respect and consent, this caring can be expressed further with touch involving sensitive, private parts of the body. Each person sharing sexually can feel in control. The couple focuses on feeling emotionally at ease and close, not on one person getting something from the other. Defining sexual expression in the context of *nurturing, healing closeness* can help survivors to consider claiming sexuality as something beneficial for themselves. Experiencing sex when one's body, mind, and emotions are united in pleasurable desire is something totally different from being sexually abused—and definitely worth the effort it takes to overcome the sexual traumas from the abuse.

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Suggested Resources

Outgrowing the Pain, by Eliana Gil, 1983 (San Francisco: Launch Press).

A short, readable book for adult survivors of child abuse which clearly explains how early abuse affects self-esteem and relationships. Especially good for people who wonder whether they were actually abused.

Betrayal of Innocence, by Susan Forward and Craig Buck, 1978 (New York: Penguin Books).

Basic information on the history and dynamics of incest, including many

case examples. Sections on variations of incest, including mother-daughter, mother-son, father-son, and sibling.

Father-Daughter Incest, by Judith Herman, 1981 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

A comprehensive book on how incest affects daughters, including a historical overview, research findings, and treatment concerns.

For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality, by Lonnie Barbach, 1976 (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books).

A good overview of sexual socialization and sexual pleasuring. Especially helpful for women resolving orgasmic difficulties.

For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy, by Lonnie Barbach, 1982 (New York, New York: New American Library).

Female perspective on healthy couples sexuality. Lots of exercises and suggestions for improving physical relationships. Contains basic sex therapy techniques.

Male Sexuality: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment, by Bernie Zilbergeld, 1978 (Boston: Little Brown and Company).

Excellent section on male sexual socialization, harmful myths, and reasons for male sexual problems. Includes sex therapy techniques for treating common male dysfunctions.

Out of the Shadows: Understanding Sexual Addiction, by Patrick Carnes, 1983 (Minneapolis, Minn.: Comp-Care Publications).

Overview of common types of sexual addictions, including incest. Can help survivors understand why some perpetrators sexually molest.

Learning About Sex: The Contemporary Guide for Young Adults, by Gary F. Kelly, 1977 (Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 113 Crossways Park Drive, Woodbury, New York 11797).

A good book for teens over fifteen years old and their parents, in paperback. Straightforward sex education for older adolescents. Includes section on love, responsible sex, and decision making in relationships.

“Identifying and Treating the Sexual Repercussions of Incest: A Couples Therapy Approach,” by Wendy Maltz, *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 142-170.

Primarily written for clinicians. Presents a model for assessing and treating the sexual effects of incest in couple relationships. Includes intervention strategies, techniques, and therapeutic considerations.

Partners in Healing: Couples Overcoming the Sexual Repercussions of Incest (VIDEO) produced by Wendy Maltz, Steve Christiansen and Gerald Joffe, 1988. (For information and to order, contact: Independent Video Services, 401 E. 10th St. Dept. L, Eugene, Oregon 97401, telephone 503-345-3455).

Hosted by Wendy Maltz, this video program helps couples identify sexual problems caused by incest histories, and journey toward sexual healing and emotional intimacy. Symptoms of sexual concerns and specific steps in the healing process are discussed. Features three heterosexual couples (one with a male survivor). Helpful to incest survivors as well as a resource for therapy, education and training.

Two major self-help organizations for adult incest survivors are *VOICES* (Victims of Incest Can Emerge Survivors) in Action, Inc., P.O. Box 148309, Chicago, Illinois 60614, and *ISA* (Incest Survivors Anonymous), P.O. Box 5613, Long Beach, California 90805-0613.

About the Authors

[Wendy Maltz LCSW, DST](#), is an internationally recognized sex therapist, author, and speaker, with more than thirty-five years of experience treating sex and intimacy concerns. She authored a number of highly acclaimed sexuality resources, including the recovery classic, [*The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*](#), as well as [*Private Thoughts: Exploring the Power of Women's Sexual Fantasies*](#), and [*The Porn Trap: The Essential Guide to Overcoming Problems Caused by Pornography*](#). Wendy compiled and edited two best-selling poetry collections that celebrate healthy sexual intimacy, [*Passionate Hearts: The Poetry of Sexual Love*](#) and [*Intimate Kisses: The Poetry of Sexual Pleasure*](#). Her popular educational website, www.HealthySex.com, provides free articles, podcast interviews, posters, [couples sexual healing videos](#), and more to help people recover from sexual abuse, overcome sexual problems, and develop skills for love-based sexual intimacy.

Beverly Holman holds an M.S. in counseling psychology from the University of Oregon, where her master's thesis was entitled "The Sexual Impact of Incest on Adult Women." She also holds an M.A. in human development from the University of Kansas. Beverly is currently in private practice in counseling and mediation,

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