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SEXUAL MYTHS THAT CAN MAKE YOUR SEX LIFE MISERABLE!

Free yourself from harmful beliefs
and get the sex and love life you want



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MYTH buster

As a sex therapist, much of my work with my clients consists of identifying and questioning their assumptions about sex and relationships, and then helping them adopt new ways of thinking that will allow them to achieve better sex and intimacy.

False or unhelpful beliefs are behind most sexual problems. Here are some of the most common sexual myths that I encounter in my practice, beliefs that cause unnecessary grief and frustration, and render people powerless to helping themselves out of their sexual and relationship problems.

MYTH #1

Sexual desire is all about hormones

“We were always in the mood for sex during the first years of our relationship. It just happened naturally. We didn’t have to make any special efforts to make sex happen. Why should we now?”

Without denying that hormones play an important role in fueling sexual desire in both men and women, our thoughts and feelings are greater determinants of whether or not we feel like “getting it on”. And to me, that’s a good thing. It means that we have the power to turn ourselves on when our hormonal sex drive turns off (like when those sexy endorphins secreted in the initial passionate phase of a relationship inevitably die down, or when menopause or andropause brings hormonal changes).

Knowing your sexual self and what turns you on is key to a happy sex life.

So what gets you in the mood? Getting in touch with your body and senses? Reading erotica or fantasizing? Being physically active? Doing things that make you feel desirable and sexy?

Making efforts to stay connected to your sexual self as you try to juggle life's various obligations and roles (parent for your children, worker at the office, caregiver for your elderly parents, etc.) is important in sustaining your interest in sex. As a couple, knowing when you need more time together or apart can be crucial to keep wanting each other sexually.

And since desire is about longing and craving, anticipation plays a key role. Just like we can get ourselves psyched up for an upcoming vacation or a night out with the girls, we can also get psyched for sex by thinking about how good it felt that time at the beach or how that sexual technique we read about in that magazine seemed pretty erotic.

If you want a great sex life, you have to give up passively waiting for your sex drive to kick in. Instead, discover what fuels it and then take action to purposely fire it up.

MYTH #2

Sex should be spontaneous

“Good sex is something you shouldn't need to plan ahead of time. It's best when it just happens. To plan sex is a sure way to make it boring. And what if I'm not in the mood when I get in the moment?”

After having been in a relationship for a while, many of us long for how sex was at the beginning of the relationship, making love anytime, anywhere. While feeling nostalgic about that period in one's relationship is totally understandable, holding on to that period and waiting for it to come back is sure to make one miserable. With the 9 to 5 job and the 2.5 kids, recognizing that your day-to-day life has changed and, in turn, so has your sex life, is the starting point to making sex good again.

One of the things couples must do to keep sex going in the long term is prioritize and schedule time together. This time can be spent making love or just reconnecting and seeing what happens. If not, other things in their busy lives will take over and sex will be on the bottom of their “to do” list.

But the couples I work with are often initially resistant to this idea. For some, putting time aside for sex seems like “mom-and-pop-have-sex-every-Saturday” which turns them off. For others, taking responsibility for sex by planning it instead of just sneaking their way into it makes them uncomfortable.

Despite the fact we are supposedly all liberated folks when it comes to sex, many of us are hesitant to being forward about wanting and needing sex and would rather have sex “just happen”.

But when you really think about it, even during that hot initial phase of your sex life, sex with your partner was more often than not “premeditated”. What were you thinking was going to happen as you picked out your sexiest lingerie or made sure you had condoms on hand? You were already planning for sex in advance.

When you plan for sex with your partner, it allows you to anticipate it positively and gives you something to look forward to as you try to get through your day or week.

And now that you know you can fuel desire and how (see Myth #1), no problem right?

MYTH #3

When two people are sexually compatible, they don't have to talk about sex

“Sex is natural and instinctive. My partner should be able to read me. I shouldn't have to spell things out.”

Ah it's so romantic! Two beings so connected that during sex they fuse and their minds becomes one, knowing instinctively how to pleasure the other without a word being said. If only it were true. Then we wouldn't have to have those sometimes embarrassing and tricky conversations with our spouse or sexual partners.

While talk about sex is all around us, talking about our sexual needs and preferences with a partner can be scary. Many couples in my practice do not talk about their sex life together and are often surprised (pleasantly most of the time!) at what their partners have to say during our sessions. Sharing one's sexual preferences is a step towards letting ourselves be known in a way we often don't. It takes courage. And, quite frankly, it can be just plain awkward at first.

Some lack knowledge about their sexual selves and do not know what they like, let alone how their partner could please them. Others don't talk about their sexual preferences for fear of being judged or hurting their partner's feelings. I've had clients tell me they would rather tolerate certain types of sexual stimulation they don't like (or that are even painful!) rather than risk making their partner feel inadequate.

But like most other areas of a relationship, communicating your needs and desires is crucial to building and sustaining a satisfying sexual relationship with someone. Here are some ways to communicate with your partner effectively:

- Avoid criticism. Instead, express what you want in terms of needs or preferences (e.g.: “For me to reach orgasm, I need you to focus more on stimulating my clitoris”)
- Let your partner know you like something they're doing as it's happening by giving non-verbal (e.g. moaning.) or verbal feedback (“Oh what you're doing feels good”).
- You can also express what you want by guiding your partner's hand to the body part you want stimulated or through demonstration by stimulating yourself.

Letting your partner know what you like and need for sex to be pleasurable is your responsibility. Being able to express sexual preferences helps you and your partner adjust to changes over the course of your lives together. Communication fosters intimacy, prevents misunderstandings and leads to better sex.

MYTH #4

Sex is for young and attractive people

“After a certain age, it's normal to lose interest in sex. It's not natural to continue wanting sex. And with my wrinkled and sagging body, who would want me anyways?”

When was the last time you saw two average looking people over 50 making love on television or in a movie? I bet the times have been few and far between. If you did see one, it's likely the scene was in a comedy sketch, meant to make fun of the characters.

What we mostly see in the media are attractive people with young firm bodies having sex or being seductive. This can easily make people who are no longer quite so young feel sex is no longer for them and believe that they have become undesirable.

People are often surprised to know that I have clients coming in to see me who are in their 60s, 70s and 80s who want sex and want to keep exploring their sexual potential. In fact, most people I've encountered will say that, like in most aspects of their lives, their sex life has improved over time. Having gained self-knowledge and confidence over the years, they no longer see sex as a performance-oriented activity and their lovemaking has consequently become more erotic, sensual and playful.

What society tends to consider as “sexual prime” is more about “genital prime”: the speed and intensity to which our body parts respond to sexual stimuli. But if you're doing it right, good sex is much more than about nipples and genitals reacting to stimulation, no?

So don't let social messaging dictate who should and shouldn't be having sex! Sex is about feeling good, not looking good. All bodies have the same nerve receptors and therefore the same potential for sensual pleasure. So don't buy into you have to be young and with a firm body to enjoy sex. Rebel by having great sex!

MYTH #5

Masturbation is for single people.

“Sure masturbation is fine when you're not getting any elsewhere. But you shouldn't have to masturbate when you're in a relationship. If you do, you must be sexually dissatisfied with your partner.”

I've often seen this myth cause quite a bit of unnecessary strife in relationships: worry, conflict, guilt, feelings of rejection....

Relationship experts will say that for a relationship to last and be healthy, it's important for both partners to find a balance between individuality and togetherness. Two makes three - me, you and us - and each entity – you, your partner and your relationship - must be recognized, respected and have room to grow. So maintaining a separate self with your individual interests and passions while investing in an “us” is one of the keys to a successful relationship.

So why is there a belief that masturbation and enjoying one's fantasy life is totally acceptable before we get hooked up, but not once we're in a relationship?

While making love can be the ultimate way to feel close to your partner, communicate feelings and share physical pleasure, pleasuring oneself can remain a legitimate activity on its own with its own purpose: relieving tension, providing some pure “about-me” time when you feel over extenuated, getting out of your mind and reconnecting to your body (and then maybe later to your partner...).

Masturbation is also useful in a relationship when your partner is unavailable for sex due to being too tired, not in the mood or while away from you.

But let me be clear. When discussing masturbation, I'm not talking about situations where there's a lot of solo action going on while your sex life together is on the fritz. Nor am I referring to situations where masturbation has become an excessive and destructive behavior.

So if your sex life with your partner is generally satisfying and without any major problems, there shouldn't be any reason to worry about his or her indulging in a little “sex for one”. And why not take it up yourself! Or, if you're up to trying something new, masturbating together can be pretty hot!

MYTH #6

Good sex ends in orgasm.

“What's the point of sex if you don't reach orgasm? Sex just doesn't feel complete without it. And how am I supposed to know if I've satisfied my partner if they don't have an orgasm?”

An orgasm is an involuntary reflex of the nervous system that happens when sexual arousal levels reach the orgasmic threshold. It is the peak feeling of sexual pleasure that can feel anywhere from a tingle to waves of intense pleasure throughout the body. That's it. It lasts a few seconds and there's nothing mystical about it.

Yet I see so many people in my sex therapy practice that are stressed out about reaching orgasm and are making themselves (and their partners!) miserable when they don't.

Don't get me wrong. I'm totally into orgasms and there's nothing I enjoy more than helping clients who are having problems reaching orgasms finally get to experience them.

But the objective of sex should be first and foremost pleasure, not orgasms.

Since orgasm is not under our direct control, focusing on orgasm is the surest way to making it not happen. And making orgasm the barometer of one's sense of sexual adequacy, worth or satisfaction is sure to bring bad feelings and a good dose of performance anxiety in anyone.

So don't get side tracked. Sex is meant to be about pleasure and connection. An orgasm should be seen as the cherry on top of a sundae. Wouldn't it be a waste to eat just the cherry and not enjoy the whole sundae?

MYTH #7

With the right technique, a good lover can please anyone.

“Hot New Sex Tricks Guaranteed to Make Her Beg For More!” “5 Surefire Ways to Giving Him the Best Blow Job Ever!” “Mind Blowing Sex Moves Sure to Drive Her Wild!”

We've all seen some of these headlines promising that they have the secret formula to being the best in bed and guaranteeing sexual satisfaction.

Sure, some sexual education and specific techniques such as sensual touch and kissing, knowing the different body parts and erogenous zones are definitely pluses when it comes to lovemaking. But a satisfying sexual experience has much more to do with perception than pushing the right buttons a certain way.

Our thoughts and feelings during and after sex are stronger determinants of how we respond to sexual stimulation and of our sense of sexual satisfaction. You could be doing all the right moves, but if your partner is focusing on their cellulite, feeling guilty about having sex in the first place, experiencing anxiety about possibly being inadequate or thinking of the dirty dishes in the sink...You can see my point.

This idea that there is a “correct” way to make love is also problematic in that it makes us responsible for our partner's sexual pleasure and satisfaction. We can then create a lot of pressure about performance and over-focus on pleasing our partner. This myth has made many feel sexually inadequate and wonder what they're doing wrong. They worry about their performance and focus on the mechanics when sex doesn't seem so “mind blowing”.

Again, having a good time in the bedroom depends on where your mind is at and communicating what you want and need sexually. If your partner is not responding to the type of sexual stimulation you're providing, instead of focusing on the mechanics of sex and possibly second guessing your sexual skills, ask them how they're feeling or what they want. You'll have a better chance at getting the right pointers from your partner than from any magazine or internet article.

MYTH #8

Men are always in the mood and ready for sex.

“Men always have sex on their mind. They think about sex a zillion times a day and walk around with a hard-on in their pants.”

Although this myth has been challenged in the last several years, the fact that this belief is still at the core of many of the problems I encounter in my practice tells me that as a society, we still have work to do. Add to this the quick labeling of losing one's erection as “erectile dysfunction” (as if not being erect because you're tired, not aroused, not attracted to your partner, still angry about yesterday's fight, etc. is not “normal” and must therefore be fixed) and we are not out of the woods just yet in terms of these ridiculous beliefs..

Yes surveys do show that men often want sex more than their female counterparts and often require less sexual stimulation to become aroused. However, men are human and not sex machines and, just like women, their sex drive has its highs and lows. Erection can at times require longer and more direct stimulation. Like women, men are also susceptible to fatigue, illness, work-related stress, body-image issues, relationship conflicts, etc.

But there's a double standard when it comes to sexual desire and pleasure in our society: women can and are expected to not be in the mood at times and to have special requirements for wanting and enjoying sex. Meanwhile, men are expected to want sex all the time and to respond to advances from their partner, despite how they're feeling or what's going on with them.

Understandably, this impossible standard has made many a man anxious about performance and question his manhood when he finds himself not interested in a sexual advance or his body does not respond “as it should”.

Men aren't the only victims of this double standard. If a man refuses an advance or does not respond to sex, women who buy into this standard will end up thinking “how can this be, there must be something wrong” then end up worrying that their partner isn't attracted to them anymore or that they're having an affair.

So let's get this straight : there's a man attached to that penis and like women, their interest for sex waxes and wanes. Men too have certain requirements for wanting and enjoying sex. So men, allow yourselves to be human. It takes a real man to refuse a sexual invitation and express his specific sexual needs.

MYTH #9

You shouldn't start what you can't finish.

“A person shouldn't start having sex and then change their mind. If they stop, they're leading the other person on and that's not cool. Plus it can be unhealthy to get erections and then not ejaculate.”

Unfortunately, lots of sex is not happening because of this belief.

As seen above, in most heterosexual couples, men want sex more often than women and will initiate more often. This means that most women will at times accept a sexual invitation from a “neutral” standpoint, thinking that maybe they'll get in the mood once the action starts. And, for various reasons, sometimes they do and sometimes they don't.

But unless women are willing to endure sex despite not wanting it anymore, they won't accept a sexual invitation and try to get into it if they feel that to begin sexual contact means having to go “all the way”. They won't start sex for fear of disappointing or frustrating their partner, or being accused of being a “tease”. So they'll wait to be sure they're in the mood beforehand and these times might be few and far apart.

And then there's the famous “blue balls”. Without denying some men can experience anything from discomfort to pain after having been aroused for a while and not ejaculating, this is a relatively rare occurrence and does not pose any real threat to one's health. Most men have experienced high levels of arousal many times in their lives without it leading to ejaculation and without experiencing any discomfort (just think of all the times during your youth when you made out for hours because going all the way was not yet an option).

So we can easily see how adopting the myth of finishing what you start can create a lose-lose situation for both men and women.

Couples can benefit from establishing a rule about initiating and ending sexual contact: for example, each has the right to initiate sex, refuse sex and stop sexual interaction at all times. And this, without leading to conflict, pouting or guilt-tripping.

MYTH #10

For sex to be good it must be an earth shaking experience.

“He grabbed her and kissed her ferociously as she melted to his touch.... As he came, it felt as though his penis would explode...”

Wow that sounds like it could actually hurt!

Media's portrayal of sex can create unrealistic expectations about how we should experience sex. It can easily make “normal” sex disappointing, so we end up feeling like we're missing out on something others seem to be in on. Sex in Hollywood (let alone in pornography) is almost always intensely passionate up-against-the-wall type of sex. And it doesn't help that in our competitive climate, those around us (and yes, most of us are guilty of this too!) can exaggerate how great the sex they're having is, reinforcing this idea again.

We are in a sensation seeking culture – drugs, extreme sports, fast cars – and expecting sex to be like a high sensation experience is sure to disappoint. And while you're focusing on what's not happening sexually, you might be missing out on what is, the more subtle pleasures that lovemaking can provide.

Sometimes sex is “wow”, but sometimes it can be nice, comforting, playful, relaxing, etc. To expect sex to be super hot all the time is setting ourselves up to feel bad afterwards.

Accepting and letting sex vary in intensity and pleasure, and focusing on and appreciating “what is” instead of “what isn't” is sure to make your sex life more enjoyable, varied and overall satisfying. And as they say, “Life is made up of small pleasures”.

FREE yourself

For a society who is supposedly sexually free and open, we sure still seem to be caught up in rigid rules on why we should be having sex and how sex is supposed to take place.

True sexual freedom comes from:

1. Questioning assumptions about sex forwarded by society and keeping our focus on what we feel matters.
2. Taking responsibility for our sexuality and our pleasure by adapting to what life throws at us and asserting who we are sexually.

By not buying into these sexual myths, we become empowered to take control of our sex lives, become who we want to be sexually and make sex about what we truly value. Now that's real freedom!

ABOUT the author



Mylène D'Astous is a Clinical Sexologist and Psychotherapist who works with both individuals and couples who are struggling with sexual and relationship issues. For more than 18 years now, she has been providing her clients with the knowledge and guidance they need to build healthier and more satisfying sex and love lives. She offers sex therapy sessions in person in her Moncton office and via telephone or Skype to others in the Maritime provinces and Canada.

If you are struggling with any of the above sexual myths, contact me and we'll explore how we can work together to help you have the best sex and relationships possible.