



IT'S TIME ... TO TALK ABOUT IT! CONNECT. RESPECT. PREVENT SEXUAL VIOLENCE.

## An overview on healthy sexuality and sexual violence prevention

**A**lthough many cultural messages contribute to our understanding and experience of sexuality, many of us are at a loss for how to identify or define healthy sexuality. It is important to understand that sexuality is much more than sex. Healthy sexuality is emotional, social, cultural, and physical. It includes our values, attitudes, feelings, interactions, and behaviors.

### What is healthy sexuality?

Healthy sexuality means having the knowledge and power to express sexuality in ways that enrich one's life. It includes approaching sexual interactions and relationships from a perspective that is consensual, respectful and informed. Healthy sexuality is free from coercion and violence.

### Primary prevention and healthy sexuality: Making the connection

**Healthy sexuality supports sexual violence prevention.** Healthy sexuality is free from violence or coercion. Promotion of sexually healthy behaviors can be linked to the prevention of unhealthy expressions of sexuality, such as sexual violence.

**Setting the example.** In order to prevent sexual violence, it is important that programming give models of healthy behaviors and actions, while also addressing root causes of sexual violence (CDC, 2004). Providing positive examples encourages young people to grow into sexually healthy adults and helps adults to model these behaviors throughout their lives.

**Knowledge = Power.** The more information someone has about healthy sexuality, the more likely they are to identify sexual abuse or violence when it occurs. An effective way to increase an individual's comfort level in addressing issues of sexuality is to provide them with information and skills that they can use (Lewis & Bor, 1994). An individual who understands healthy sexuality and consent may feel more comfortable taking action and getting involved as a bystander when they witness language and behavior that presents risk for sexual violence.

**Society sends mixed messages.** We live in a culture where media is highly sexualized (Gruber & Grube, 2000), yet many messages around sexuality are shaming and negative (Berne & Huberman, 1999). Understanding healthy sexuality can better prepare individuals to be critical consumers of media and to make healthier decisions.

**More support for survivors.** Discussing sexuality can make those experiencing sexual violence feel more comfortable about speaking up and seeking help. In addition, families, teachers, friends, and community members may be more comfortable listening to those victimized and better equipped to offer support and resources.



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## Key characteristics of healthy sexuality

*The following behaviors, adapted from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States' Life Behaviors of a Sexually Healthy Adult demonstrate healthy sexuality (SIECUS, 2004, p. 16):*

- A sexually healthy adult will ...
- Be comfortable with their body.
  - Know that human development includes sexual development, which may or may not include reproduction or sexual experience.
  - Have access to information and resources to protect and enhance their own sexual health.
  - Engage in sexual relationships that are consensual, non-exploitative, honest, pleasurable, and safe.
  - Express their sexuality while respecting the rights of others.
  - Interact with all genders in respectful and appropriate ways.
  - Know the difference between life-enhancing sexual behaviors and those that are harmful to self and/or others.
  - Communicate well with family, peers and romantic partners.
  - Express their sexuality in ways that are in line with their values.
  - Enjoy sexual feelings without necessarily acting on them.
  - Be aware of the impact of family, cultural, media, and societal messages on thoughts, feelings, values, and behaviors related to sexuality.
  - Accept one's own sexual orientation and respect the sexual orientations of others.
  - Accept one's own gender identities and respect the gender identities of others.

**Gender norms impact sexuality.** Strict gender norms contribute to sexual violence because of expectations and beliefs associated with femininity and masculinity (Gallagher & Parrott, 2011). Individuals who are taught about healthy sexuality are given the tools to critically examine gender norms and establish that communication and consent are integral aspects of sexuality regardless of gender.

**Expanding perspectives.** Understanding healthy sexuality supports culturally-relevant services and resources for those in marginalized populations, such as the LGBTQ community, people of lower socioeconomic status, and those living with disabilities, who have been affected by sexual violence.

## Implications: What can we do?

**Provide healthy sexuality training for advocates, counselors and educators.** Not all adults have received comprehensive sexuality education. This can impact our knowledge, attitudes and comfort levels around sexuality. Training staff helps prepare advocates, educators and counselors to deliver messages about healthy sexuality. The Healthy Sexuality and Sexual Violence Prevention resource list provides sources and resources to learn more about healthy sexuality.

**Incorporate messages about healthy sexuality into sexual violence prevention.** When teaching about healthy eating, we don't just talk about what foods to avoid, but we also discuss how to eat in a healthy manner. This approach can also help strengthen messages in sexual violence prevention. Prevention needs to go beyond the "no means no" model and explain what safe, equitable and respectful relationships look like.



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Recognize that gender norms can negatively impact sexuality. In order to create healthier sexual interactions, it is necessary to create healthier, less restrictive gender norms. Societal representations of how women and men should act and relate to one another are often unhealthy and unrealistic. Everyone needs the knowledge and tools that will empower them to give and seek clear and enthusiastic consent.

**Utilize curricula that teach both healthy sexuality and sexual violence prevention.**

Seek out evidence based or evidence informed curricula and resources that connect healthy sexuality and violence prevention education for audiences across the lifespan. For more information, check out the healthy sexuality resource list.

**Partner with others who deliver messages of healthy sexuality.** Creating change takes time and many voices are needed to deliver the message. Many faith-based organizations, schools, and community organizations are already working to help promote healthy sexuality. Build partnerships to address healthy sexuality and ensure the greatest impact.

## Resources

- **Advocates for Youth**  
[www.advocatesforyouth.org](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org)
- **Answer** [answer.rutgers.edu](http://answer.rutgers.edu)
- **National Sexuality Resource Center (NSRC)**  
<http://nsrc.sfsu.edu>
- **National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC)** [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)
- **Planned Parenthood Federation of America**  
[www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)
- **Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)** [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)
- **Veto Violence** [www.vetoviolence.org](http://www.vetoviolence.org)
- **World Association for Sexual Health**  
[www.worldsexology.org](http://www.worldsexology.org)

## References

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