OLDER ADULTS AND SEXUALITY

BY TYLER BUCHIERO, LMSW

As with so much, the individual experience of sexuality changes over the course of the lifespan. Research has shown that older people continue to engage in a wide variety of sexual activities into the eighth and ninth decades of life. Most individuals choose to maintain sexual and intimate relationships throughout their lives, though this is not what is broadly represented in the media. The fundamental presence of sexuality in some form can be a perpetual source of self-awareness, intimacy, and pleasure although this sexual expression differs across the wide range of individual human experience, gender identity, and sexual preference, Dr. Peggy Kleinplatz of the University of Ottawa conducted a groundbreaking study of people who identify as having had "optimal sexual experiences." One of the most notable findings in this research was the concept that "great lovers are made, not born" and that as people age they often have access to better and better sexual experiences with age. In her study, the "great lovers" were by and large in their 50s, 60s, and beyond. This finding is definitely underrepresented in media portrayals of older people. Dr. Kleinplatz' excellent book Magnificent Sex discusses the components of optimal sexual experiences in older adults and in people of all ages. The Rochester Center for Sexual Wellness is a participating site with her Optimal Sexual Experiences research team. As a part of this project sexual medicine specialist Dr. Kranz and certified sex therapist, Daniel Rosen, lead eight session Optimal Sexual Experiences groups for couples with low or discrepant desire.

Physiological changes - the aging process itself - do alter the landscape of sexual intimacy and sometimes may lead to a need for more specialized medical attention, and mental health professionals educated in the treatment of sexual issues in later life. Yet these barriers to continued sexual health are not nearly as rigid as they once were; with greater resources and expertise available than ever before, sexual wellness is readily within the grasp of those who seek it.

It is important to recognize that sex and sexuality does not have to be lost as a part of the aging process. If anything, it is the best opportunity for self-exploration and deeper connection than ever before. Psychotherapy can help to facilitate this process and clarify what your goals are for sexual health moving forward in this stage of life, as well as give insight and tools to achieve that. Sexual medicine consultation can be helpful in resolving sexual pain, arousal difficulties, as well as changes in orgasm or desire.

IN LONG-TERM CARE SETTINGS

Within the confines of a long-term care facility, sexual expression is often reduced or even prohibited. While an institution may have an overarching policy regarding sexuality, staff attitudes and responsiveness are often what shape the culture and freedom of expression. Judgments about this sexual expression and restriction of personal freedoms can often contribute to larger issues, and are habitually fueled by a lack of knowledge or comfort. In situations like this, staff and residents alike can benefit from an in-service by a trained professional or through support of the resident by connecting them to individual psychotherapy. Members of the Rochester Center for Sexual Wellness team have led trainings and provided staff support for agencies who would like to better address their clients' sexual needs.

STIGMA/AGEISM

While active sexuality remains an important feature of one's life, older adults are often stereotyped as non-sexual beings who should not or cannot engage in sexual activity; in part due to the limited scope of what is presented as prototypical physical beauty in our society. We have yet to properly deconstruct the myths and stereotypes that deny older adults their own unique sense of sexual being and the right to express it. At the very least, our society does not discuss sexuality enough when considering the lives of older adults, even as we avoid important and candid discussions of sexuality at all ages.

The Rochester Center for Sexual Wellness is committed to refuting these stigmas about sexuality in later life, and focusing on helping individuals of all ages cultivate their ideal of sexual health and experience through work with our specially trained psychotherapists and medical professionals. A satisfying sex life is not something that must disappear with age, and is paramount to maintaining quality of life and holistic sense of self.

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Resources:
https://www.apa.org/pi/aging/resources/guides/sexuality
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https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/life/info-2014/srr_09.html?migration=rdrct
https://womanlab.org/sex-aging-the-best-sex-is-yet-to-come/
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