

Women's Sexuality: A New Perspective on Core Issues

by Melanie Davis

As Garden State Woman's Sexuality Editor, I will be writing about a major force in women's lives that affects not only our identity but also how we relate to others in public and private. My columns will not resemble sex stories in other women's magazines, e.g., "10 Tricks to Try Tonight!" or "Sexy Looks for Every Body." Rather, it will clear away misinformation, promote sexual health, and prompt you to think about the role that sexuality plays in your life. I hope that you will gain insights that increase your overall sexual satisfaction, not just your satisfaction in bed.

Let's start by defining the word sexuality, which is a concept best understood through a model created by social work professor Dennis Dailey. The model is widely used by sex educators because it is easy to understand yet comprehensive. The model consists of five interlocking circles representing Intimacy, Sensuality, Sexual Identity, Sexual Health and Reproduction, and Sexualization. Within each circle are several elements, as follows:

- **Sensuality** involves your level of awareness, acceptance, and enjoyment of your own body and others' bodies. Its components are skin hunger, response to aural/visual stimuli, sexual response cycle, body image, and fantasy.
- **Intimacy** is the degree to which you express and have a need for closeness with another person. Its components are caring, sharing, liking/loving, trust, vulnerability, self-disclosure, and emotional risk taking.
- **Sexual identity** is how you perceive yourself as a sexual being. Its components are biological gender, gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation.
- **Sexual health and reproduction** relates to your attitudes and behaviors toward your health, childbearing, and the consequences of sexual activity. Its components are sexual behavior, anatomy and physiology, sexually transmitted infections, contraception, and abortion (spontaneous or induced).
- **Sexualization** is the use of sexuality to manipulate or control others. Its components are media images/messages, flirting, seduction, withholding sex, sexual harassment, incest, and rape.

None of these elements exists in a vacuum, e.g., a woman with a lot of skin hunger – also expressed as a need for physical contact – may be frustrated if she has a relationship with someone who does not like to touch or be touched.

Personal experiences, values, and spiritual beliefs, along with cultural values, shape everything about an individual's sexuality; therein lie some big challenges as we try to mesh the truth about our sexuality with what we have been taught is acceptable, expected, pleasurable, or healthy.

Women must understand their sexuality and attitudes so that their actions will be congruent with their values and best interests. For example, a woman who has unprotected sex and values motherhood needs to know how sexually transmitted infections may affect fertility. A mother may want help to emotionally support a child who questions his or her sexual orientation. An older woman will benefit from knowing how to accommodate age-related changes in sexual function and physiology.

I look forward to helping you communicate about sexuality, whether you are talking to yourself (women can be their own worst critics) or to your partner, children, aging parents, or healthcare providers. Too often, clear communication is hindered by embarrassment, shame, fear of looking ignorant, or fear of seeming more knowledgeable about sex than any respectable woman should be. Perish the thought.

I will introduce you to experts in sexual health and research and will recommend helpful books and websites. And I invite you to ask questions and suggest topics that interest you. Your identity will remain confidential, and I will refer to you other experts if necessary.

I look forward to building a relationship with you. Sexuality is a fascinating, important topic, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to be your guide. 🌿

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Melanie J. Davis is the author of "Sexuality Talking Points: A Guide for Thoughtful Conversations Between Parents and Children."

She offers workshops on communication, self esteem, and sexuality, and she writes an online advice column for parents, *The Buzz on the Birds and Bees*, on mommasaid.net. She can be reached at 908-722-1632 or www.honestexchange.com.