

The Changes of Adolescence

Adolescents everywhere experience intense sexual curiosity and desire.

—Leonore Tiefer, *Human Sexuality: Feelings and Functions*

- ◆ What was adolescence like for you?
- ◆ How do you feel about the way you transitioned it?
- ◆ When you think about your adolescence, do you feel ashamed, pleased, angry?
- ◆ How did you express your sexuality as an adolescent?
- ◆ Was your sexuality harmed by unwanted or unfortunate experiences in adolescence? If so, how has your sexuality been affected?
- ◆ Did you have intercourse as an adolescent? If so, were your sexual relationships with peers, or were you seduced by a person who was older?
- ◆ Was your sexual experience in the context of a genuine, deep, ongoing relationship with mutual empathy?
- ◆ Did you use birth control/prophylactics?
- ◆ Did you feel in charge of your sexuality?
- ◆ If you are bisexual or homosexual, when and how did you first figure out your sexual orientation? How did you feel about this realization? If you told your parents during your adolescence, how they did react?

A Transformation

Adolescence is a time of great change. Even if your family did a fine job of creating a nurturing environment, helping you to feel good about yourself, handling power, providing you with appropriate knowledge of sexuality, and encouraging your social skills, you may have floundered anew during the special strains of adolescence. Adolescence is a pivotal stage in a child's development, when several tasks must be accomplished before entering adulthood.

As an adolescent, you needed to come to terms with your changing body and your changing sexual urges. You had to separate emotionally from your family of origin, establishing autonomy as well as fitting in with your peer group. Adolescence is a time of exploration, when sexual behavior, both self-stimulation and partnered, generally increases. Over the last four decades, there has been an increase in the number of adolescents who have experienced intercourse, although almost a third of adolescents have not had sexual intercourse by the age of nineteen.

If your adolescent sexuality was wildly destructive or distorted, then the factors underlying the psychological, social, and sexual wreckage began earlier. Problems with trust, empathy, control, guilt, and/or gender identity—to name just a few—began well before your teenage years. Emotionally neglectful families tend to totally abandon adolescents, as if they are old enough to be on their own entirely, and can cause the adolescent to withdraw, becoming even more socially isolated. Other neglected adolescents tend to act out sexually, in an attempt to get love and attention they are deprived of at home.

During adolescence, I was out in left field. My parents' criticism, and my general low self-esteem, and the way I felt about how I looked made it too frightening to try to get in with any of the crowds at school. I just retreated into fixing cars and riding my motorcycle. It took me until my second year of high school to come out of my shell. A girl named Gaby liked me, and she included me with her friends. I finally found out what I had been missing.

—Kyle, 27

Any less-than-ideal family sexual environments (as described in chapter 7) greatly impacts a child's adolescence, and can impair their sexual development into adulthood. Negative environments, where sexuality was seen as dirty, can create guilt and fear and difficulty coming to terms with surging sexual impulses and integrating them into one's sense of self. Se-

ductive and overtly abusive sexual environments overencourage and over-stimulate sexuality, which can lead to feelings of disgust about sexuality in adulthood.

When I look back at it, my mother was just off the wall in the way she reacted to my adolescence. It was like she was in some kind of sexual competition with me. She started talking about sex all the time. It gave me the creeps, actually. It went way past what would have been a healthy, open discussion about sexuality. I felt like she was prying into my sex life, to get off sexually herself. She just wouldn't leave me alone!!

—Annie, 29

Your Changing Body

Do you remember the feelings with which you greeted the emergence of your first pubic hair, first ejaculation, or first menstrual period? Had you been prepared in advance for these occurrences? Do you remember the way your family reacted to the normal changes in your body?

Girls mature an average of two years before boys, and parents frequently are caught off guard by their daughter's sexual development. Most boys have their first ejaculation between twelve and thirteen, usually from masturbation or sexual dreams at night. The same hormonal changes that stimulate the physical development from child to adult also bring other normal changes: intensified sexual feelings and fantasies, more frequent spontaneous erections, increased vaginal lubrication, and a higher incidence of masturbation.

These changes in your body had social significance, because adolescence is the time when society at large, your parents, peers, the schools, and the media recognized your sexual capacities. Sociologist John Gagnon, Ph.D. (1972), emphasizes that to some extent, the sexualization of adolescence is invented—a social construction. The truth is, even though the capacity for orgasm (as separate from ejaculation in males) is available to younger children, there is no sense in which society recognizes this sexual capacity in preadolescent children.

In early adolescence, social and sexual development at times seems quite uncoordinated. It is possible for young boys to still be playing tag and using *Playboy* to masturbate, and for girls to still be playing with Barbie dolls or take stuffed animals to bed as they are also talking about boys.

Sometimes the meanings of the physical changes are more important than the changes themselves.

Undoubtedly, though, the physical changes that mark the beginning of adolescence are quite variable. Developing much faster, or slower, than your peers can be a terrible source of embarrassment or shame.

I was growing up in this tiny school in rural Utah. I already felt different. I was the smartest girl in the whole school. I had no friends. And to make matters even worse, when I was twelve, I grew these really huge breasts, I was a 32D. The boys wouldn't leave me alone. They snapped my bra everywhere, in the hallways, in classes. I couldn't escape. To this day, I am paranoid about passing strange men, and do the best I can to camouflage my body.

—Barbara, 35

I absolutely hated to go to gym in the ninth grade. I was still so short, and I hadn't developed at all. I hardly had any pubic hair, and I didn't have muscles, and my penis was tiny. And there was a group of boys who, I swear, were seven or eight inches taller than me, and fully developed. It was torture. They laughed and made snickering comments in front of me and behind my back.

I had a growth spurt when I was in college, and I wound up to be five feet eleven inches tall, but in my mind, I'm still back in ninth grade. My body image is of a tiny, skinny boy. I still feel vulnerable in group showers.

—Tom, 26

The reactions of your parents to these physical changes had a big role to play in how you felt about them yourself. Those responses depended on the rules of their subcultural and ethnic group, and also on your parent's feelings about their own lives and their sexuality.

Obviously, families which had provided ideal, open environments for the discussion of sexuality all along would be likely to handle the adolescent issues well. But these families tend to be in the minority in the United States.

During my teenage years, I was never given any information about sex, nor permission to ask. This left me wondering what was normal, right, and appropriate.

—Blair, 36

When I was twelve and thirteen, my father was overly concerned about my sexuality and had exaggerated fears about my behavior with boys. I felt some sense of guilt in dating, and also a wish to act out for revenge.

—Bobbie, 35

My father would say negative things about women who dressed in an overtly sexual way—a great deal of makeup, short skirt, tight pants, a revealing or low-cut blouse. Mostly, he commented about strangers, but occasionally about my mother or myself. It made me believe that a woman looking sexual was wrong, bad, and shameful.

—Jan, 29

I had a lot of confusion over what is acceptable, what is respectful. I gained weight to be less sexually provocative.

—Alma, 46

Parents' Reactions to Girls

Far too many teenage girls are absolutely ignorant about their own bodies and have no interactions with their mothers with regard to explicit instructions about their sexual organs. Often, in childhood, boys and their dads stand side by side, each holding their penis to urinate—permission to touch is taken for granted. Girls and their moms, however, don't have any parallel interaction. This is quite unfortunate, and can hinder a girl's understanding of her own anatomy as well as her learning to feel comfortable touching herself and being touched by others (whether it be during a routine gynecological exam or during her sexual encounters).

My mother is very modest. She never taught me anything about my body. She could never even stand to talk to me about my period, and she never talked to me about tampons.

Needless to say, when I went alone to a gynecologist to get some birth control, I was totally unprepared for the whole ordeal. I had no idea that I was going to have to get up on that table, in a position like that. And I got really scared when I saw the speculum. I had no idea that they were going to put it into me. I was really frightened.

—Sarah, 23

Mothers respond to the start of menstruation in vastly different ways. One mother slapped her daughter across the face. Her daughter found out, later, that this was an old Italian custom, but at forty-nine, it still brings tears to her eyes when she thinks about it. Another mother proudly asked the daughter if she could tell the father (the daughter said no), and then took her out to a special lunch to celebrate. Yet another mother chose that moment to make a big deal out of how important it was to wash the blood stains out of your panties right away, and gave her daughter a washing lesson that very instant. And still another responded with a searing lecture about premarital sex.

Once I got my period, my mother seems to have gotten frantic about the possibility that I would get in trouble, even though I was impossibly shy. She would make me frightened of any kind of social contact with boys. She would say things like, "Sylvia was sitting on boys' laps. And you know what THAT means. And Joanna stayed out too late with her boyfriend, and you know what THAT means . . ." She made me so frightened of my own sexuality that I wasn't even able to enjoy kissing a boy, all the way through high school.

—Benita, 40

A teenager's budding sexuality affects the parents' feelings about themselves and each other. Ideally, the parents react with pride and joy to watching their children at the brink of adult life.

Joe remarked at how beautiful, and how sexual, his daughter looked:

"Wow, I look up, and here is my little baby girl, Jennifer, going out to a party, in a dress. And, I mean, she's a knockout. And she has no idea. She has no idea how she looks, no idea how much she has changed, no idea how men will respond to her. I feel like, boy, I've got to pay attention to what I'm thinking and feeling. And Jennifer still likes to come over and sit on my lap, like old times. I guess I'll have to find some way to tell her she is getting a little too old to sit on my lap. . . ."

Joe, being a father who has a lot of insight, responds to his daughter's budding beauty and sexuality, and his own sexual attraction, by complimenting her on how gorgeous she looks, and by taking note of his own sexual feelings. In addition, he shared his emotions about the transformation in his daughter with his wife, with whom he is close.

At sixteen, Francesca was getting ready to go on a summer vacation with the family. She had just gone out shopping with her best friend and had bought herself a very tricky two piece bathing suit. It was an unusual color, brown and white checks. And although the suit was not teeny and covered her completely, it was daring in that the top sections covering her breasts were held together with a metal loop in the middle of the chest, and the bottom half had similar metal loops on the sides keeping the front and back pieces together. The suit was stunning and would attract a lot of attention.

She tried it on for her mother. Her mother was overwhelmed with how Fran had grown up and startled at how gorgeous she looked. She told Fran that she looked great and that she should show her Dad. Dad was equally startled at what had become of his little girl, but simply opened his eyes wide, said, "Wow!" and whistled.

Many adult women have memories of their fathers or mothers, less mature and giving, or more anxious about their own sexuality, or more upset about their own lives, reacting to the girl's developing body in negative or competitive ways. "Watching their children, at the brink of adult life, with all options open to them can bring up feelings of discontent at how the parent's own lives have turned out," comments psychologist Lawrence Steinberg (1994, 91).

I had the sense that my mother was fearful of my becoming sexual and that males were bad, evil. Especially males that I didn't know and my mother didn't know. Now I sense my mother was struggling with recalling her own early sexual experiences. I still wonder what, if anything, happened to her to create this fear. One particularly upsetting event for me was her intense reaction to a boy asking me to a dance. She yelled, screamed and forbade me to go, as I feared she would—not a pleasant feeling.

—Lucille, 62

Ideally, as the child's body changes and the child becomes a young adult, parents will celebrate their burgeoning sexuality and give them good feedback about how they look, which helps to build sexual self-esteem. Unfortunately, because of societal rules about girls needing to be pretty, and the double standard of sexual behavior, a great number of adolescent girls get disturbing, harmful sexual feedback in adolescence, that can have serious repercussions in their adult sexual life.

Tabitha came into sex therapy to get over severe inhibitions which prevented her from experiencing sexual excitement. She loved her husband, and could get quite aroused. But somehow, before she actually had her orgasm, she would turn herself off.

As she was looking at her past experiences in her family, she came up with memory after memory of her father acting as if a woman with sexual feelings was a whore. When she was about ten, she recalls him looking up at her older sister, aged about eighteen, who was dressed up and getting ready to go on a date with her steady boyfriend, and muttering something about her sister being "like a damn bitch in heat."

Tina came into psychotherapy because she could not enjoy sexual relations with her husband. In fact, she had never felt comfortable being sexual with a boy, ever. Part of the problem may have been Tina's relationship with her father. He believed men should rule the roost and was controlling, and not warm at all. More importantly, however, he filled her with deep terror of men's sexuality.

Tina commented, "When I became a teenager, my father filled me with fears about being with men. He told me they would put a drug in my drink and then force me to have sex while I was defenseless."

Parents' Reaction to Boys

There is a dramatic difference in parents' reactions to their sons' emergence as sexual beings, since North American society and many parents hold a double standard. Boys don't need to be virgins at the time of marriage. Boys aren't usually raped. Boys can't become pregnant. So most mothers and fathers don't react to changes in the boys' bodies with panic.

It really makes me furious to think of the different ways that my brothers and I were treated when we hit our teenage years. When he was fifteen or sixteen, Bobby dressed like a punker and was drinking a lot and coming in the wee hours. He was going out with two different girls, and sleeping with both of them, as far as I can tell. Tommy, who was eighteen, had a steady girlfriend, and they were always necking in our TV room. Mom and Dad didn't say a thing.

But I wasn't allowed to "act cheap" or "look cheap." I couldn't wear red lipstick. There was this big fuss over my clothes, the tightness of my sweaters, the shortness of my skirts. And I had to be in by eleven o'clock, even when I was eighteen. Their rules and their overprotectiveness made me the butt of all my friends' jokes, and I feel like I lost out on some important experiences with boys that I'm trying to make up for now.

—Judy, 26

But neither do parents prepare boys or respond to the obvious changes in adolescence with the needed information.

My father was so cold that I didn't feel comfortable with him. When I had my first wet dream, I really wanted to talk to my mother. But she got embarrassed, and she blushed, and she just went in to her book shelf and got a book and gave it to me. I never asked her about anything sexual again.

—Jonathan, 57

Boys need to know that wet dreams are normal, that most boys have them, that nothing is physically wrong with them, and what to do with the messy sheets. Between ten and twelve, most boys discover the pleasures of masturbation, and parents must be comfortable talking about it. Sex educator Mary Calderone believes that when parents cannot allow their young sons to discover their bodies as a source of pleasure, these sons will be unable to find satisfaction in their adult sexual relationships.

Parents tend to minimize their adolescent children's questions about sexuality and their changing bodies. In *Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World* (1983, 215–216), authors/sex educators Sal and Judith Gordon asked a group of twelve-year-old boys in an Ohio suburban school system to submit a list of questions they had about sex. Common questions were

- What is an erection?
- Is it normal to jack off?
- I haven't had any wet dreams. Why?
- What is 4 play?(sic)
- My friends talk about cum (sic). What is cum (sic)?

Most parents in North America are not comfortable answering these kinds of basic questions for their sons. (Just as they are not comfortable talk-

ing about sexual pleasure—as opposed to reproduction—with their daughters.)

However, as adults, boys from reasonably loving but sex-evasive or sex-negative families may tend to have fewer sexual inhibitions than girls from such climates. First of all, boys' sexual organs are less mysterious than girls', and boys are more likely than girls to discover and practice masturbation in childhood and adolescence, even when parents' overt or covert messages forbid it. Wet dreams and involuntary ejaculations may be frightening but they are often linked with sensations of pleasure, while girls' first experience of menstruation may link blood with pain. Finally, boys' sexual expression is more social in nature, and boys who aren't taught about wet dreams and ejaculations at home can talk about it (and practice masturbating) in groups with their friends.

Although it may not cause sexual inhibition, boys' parents' inability to talk frankly with them about sexual urges or masturbation hinders boys in another way in adolescence and adulthood, diminishing their skills in responsibly integrating sexuality into relationships. Without comfortable parent-child discussions of sexuality, boys have no model of talking or negotiating about sexual wants and needs. In addition, parents miss the opportunity to teach boys that intercourse belongs in the context of a loving relationship, and that they can use masturbation to curb their sexual urges at times when intercourse is not appropriate.

Parental Competition

Unfortunately, parents sometimes feel competitive with their children. Just as the teenagers are coming into young adulthood, physically blossoming, with dewy skin and pert breasts, or with new beards and slim, muscled bodies, parents are confronting age-related changes in their looks.

My mother adored my boyfriend, Bill. I really wonder whether she was totally out of love with my father at that point. But she was really into criticizing me. As I think back on it now, I realize that the whole time I was going out with Bill, for those three years, she was on top of me about my weight. And how fat could I have been? I've always worn a size eight.

But you know, when I get my period, and I gain a pound or two, I never feel slim enough to make love . . . and I think it goes back to my mom's comments when I was in high school. Wow. It's really pitiful to think that it didn't occur to me until my thirty-sixth birthday that she was jealous of me!

—Erin, 40

Establishing a Sense of Autonomy

Another central psychological task of early adolescence is becoming an independent person—separating emotionally from one's parents. By the time they have become twelve or thirteen, most teenagers want to control their own day-to-day lives, including activities, friends, and values.

Relationships Outside the Family

In early adolescence, as described in a previous chapter, kids begin intimate friendships outside the family based on empathy, trust, and self-disclosure. It is in this period of socialization that friends become the most important people in the teenager's social world.

Teaching teenagers about sexuality is important, and studies show that this does not contribute to promiscuity. Unfortunately, however, teaching teenagers specifically about sexuality is not sufficient, because it does not necessarily teach them about intimacy.

By middle adolescence, teenagers begin to be more sophisticated about people and to appreciate that their friends have idiosyncrasies. Adolescents turn to their friends when they are disappointed, angry, or in difficulty. They learn about the ups and downs of friendship, and how you can go to different friends with different needs. At best, they learn which friends are true friends, and which friends aren't to be trusted. Early lessons about trust, empathy, and forgiveness are learned in the family—by adolescence, the give and take of relating to peers is the major arena for learning relationship skills.

While it will probably always be true that teenage boys will be more cavalier about sexual relationships than teenaged girls, in general, adolescents who didn't have empathic relationships, good modeling, and good communication in their family of origin are more likely to get into ill-advised, shallow sexual relationships and less likely to be able to have intimate (nonsexual or sexual) relationships.

Sexual coercion with a peer can contribute to negative associations to sexuality—disgust, detachment—that can take intensive work to undo as an adult.

My mother and father were really kind of cold. I didn't feel very good at home. There weren't all that many kids my age around; we lived way out in the sticks. And in this rural area where I lived, it was common for kids to go

off and drink and drive their cars really fast, and goof off. There was not much else to do.

So I got involved with this crowd of older kids, with this boy, Chuck, who I thought was cool, who had a really cool car. I felt like somebody when I went out with him. We mostly just drank. We really didn't talk. But I thought it was fun.

But then he really turned on the pressure for intercourse. I was only fifteen. The first time, he really forced me. We were out in the woods. After that, we were boyfriend and girlfriend, but I kept getting coerced into doing sexual stuff. I never really felt like it.

—Debby, 25

Early and middle adolescents who have the basic social skills, as well as parental modeling of intimacy, self-esteem, and confidence learn how powerful these peer relationships can be. They learn that close connections with peers can include enjoying each other's company, mutual trust, understanding, confiding experiences and feelings to each other, and being spontaneous in the relationship. A self-assured adolescent who realizes the depth of feeling possible with a peer is less likely to settle for a shallow sexual relationship, just to be in the in-crowd, or to avoid rejection.

Integrating Your Sexuality into Your Identity

Because of the relatively puritanical sexual socialization in American society, many adolescents need to separate emotionally from their parents in order to feel free to be sexual in healthy ways, to integrate their sexuality into their identity. Not separating from parents with very rigid sexual values can cause later sexual problems.

Morrie grew up well-loved in a highly educated, analytical, somewhat obsessive and cautious family. Rationality was prized. He respected his parents and loved them very much. His mother was warm and concerned about him, his father was a hard worker. So when they told him he should abstain from premarital sex, he took them quite literally.

An older brother, much more of a family rebel, tried to encourage him to separate from his parents and to help him feel more comfortable being sexual and "wild." But Morrie just felt that his brother was "being evil and trying to corrupt me." Morrie wanted to be the "good" kid.

Morrie did not masturbate much, and he did not have intercourse throughout college. When he finally felt he had met the person he wanted to marry, in his midtwenties, he felt it was safe to have intercourse. However, his intended was a very emotional, highly sexual young woman.

Morrie was threatened by this. He felt fearful that he wouldn't know what to do sexually. When he finally had intercourse with his fiancée, he had problems with premature ejaculation, which frustrated her.

It took him some time in sex therapy to straighten out his anxiety about sexuality. In retrospect, he felt that his brother had good intentions. He also came to see that he was really too attached to his mother. She was closer to him emotionally than she was to her own husband. Morrie wished that he hadn't been so intent on being the perfect, good son. He wished, in retrospect that he had experimented more, and paid more attention to his own sexual impulses.

In other kinds of families, more unhappy ones, difficulties separating can come out of an alliance with a parent who you feel is being victimized. If you grew up in an unhappy family, where your parents didn't treat each other well, or didn't love each other, you might have become allied with one of your parents, often the parent of the opposite sex. If the struggle to break away from this parent left you feeling guilty, and you didn't separate in adolescence, you may have had problems later, emotionally or sexually.

Hugh, who was to be married in a year, began sex therapy with his fiancée, a woman who loved him a great deal. Hugh was afraid of intercourse, and couldn't maintain an erection. Besides growing up in a sexually repressive environment, the crux of Hugh's problem actually revolved around his sexual guilt and his lack of separation from his mother.

When he was about twelve or thirteen, Hugh's mother, a very depressed woman, told him the intimate details of how she had been rejected sexually by his father. Hugh spent most of his adolescence feeling angry at his father, angry at himself for being a man, and sorry for his mother. He tried to take care of her emotionally, but nothing seemed to make her feel better.

In therapy, Hugh improved as he realized that all along, he had felt guilty for letting himself have more sexual pleasure than his mother had. As he realized that he couldn't fix his mother's life,

and that his primary attachment needed to be to his wife, his erectile problems resolved.

Bisexuality and Homosexuality

Although statistics vary quite a bit, it is safe to say that at least 4 percent of American males and 2 percent of American females are exclusively homosexual. (Kinsey et al. 1948; Crooks and Baur 1993). Current research implies that there may be a biological predisposition to homosexuality, and no evidence has clearly shown that childhood or family factors are a cause (Bell 1981; Ross and Arrindell 1988).

Discovering that you are homosexual in adolescence can be a very upsetting experience, compounded by the fact that most homosexual adolescents have internalized the negative and homophobic views of American culture. Many of them have even used negative labels on other gays, calling them "queers," "dykes," "sissies," or "fags." During adolescence, in a period already fraught with changing bodies, sexuality, and changing identity, homosexual and bisexual adolescents have extra stresses and strains that can lead to isolation, low self-esteem, and suicidal feelings and attempts.

Within the last few years, more is becoming understood about developmental processes among homosexual and bisexual teenagers. One excellent review of the literature is contained in a book edited by D'Augelli and Patterson (1995).

Because males and females are socialized differently in American society, gay adolescent boys and girls take different paths in becoming aware of their homosexuality. Since teenage girls are allowed a broader range of feelings and behaviors toward other girls, if you are a lesbian, you may have experienced your emerging sexual and emotional closeness as friendship, and you may not have identified yourself as lesbian or bisexual until well into adulthood.

However, if you are a homosexual male, you probably recognized your orientation during adolescence. This is because males are socialized more narrowly, and your longing for emotional and physical contact with other males probably made it more clear to you early on that you were homosexual.

Homosexual boys tend to crystallize their sexual identity more abruptly, and to focus on sexual activity while coming out. Consistent with their different socialization, lesbian teenagers may not act sexual during adolescence, instead focusing on self-absorption and reflection.

Coming Out

If you are gay or bisexual, how did you feel when you realized your sexual orientation? Usually, when teenagers realize their homosexual leanings, they get confused, and then petrified about the future rejection and persecution which they feel lies ahead of them. With adolescence already a lonely time of leaving the family, homosexual and/or bisexual teens feel completely stranded and alone.

Once you recognized a bisexual or homosexual orientation, what factors came into play in helping you make your decisions to reveal (or not reveal) your sexual orientation to others? Did you believe that you were the only gay teen in your peer group, or in your school?

Homosexual or bisexual teens may simply stay hidden, cut off from the social groups of straight kids. Or, in urban areas, in what may be a more harmful move, they may be drawn to bars and clubs, where they meet older gays and leave themselves open for exploitation.

Fear of parental disapproval among teens is so great that many hide their sexuality, both to save themselves from rejection by parents and to protect their parents from the hurt they are sure will be caused by the revelation. But this makes forming a sense of identity problematic, since they are, in essence, leading double lives. If you are homosexual or bisexual, you may have missed out on a normal rite of straight passage: having your parents meet your boyfriend or girlfriend.

Parents of homosexual or bisexual teens often immediately blame themselves and wonder what they did wrong. They can be hostile to the adolescent, or react with grief, as they begin to realize that many of their own dreams (for the child's marriage, grandchildren, etc.) will not occur.

Happily, there are some differences in the experiences between the adolescents of the early 1970s and before and teenagers coming of age now, in the 1990s. Although antihomosexual feelings are still rampant in North American society, more information and connections are available in society. More recently, homosexual and bisexual teens have the opportunity to safely find each other by contacting the National Gay Task Force.

There is no doubt that the societal stigma of being bisexual or homosexual is an enormous burden for teenagers. In adolescents, and also in adults, it involves ongoing choices about whether or not to be open about your sexual orientation, as new situations arise. While the consequence of passing for straight can be feelings of emotional distance from others, the financial and social costs of coming out and facing discrimination are real as well. These are important choices which must be made.

However, the homosexual or bisexual child who has learned that touch equals love, who trusts others, who has empathy, high self-esteem, and good social skills, who had permission to explore, and whose family handled power well clearly arrives at adolescence with much better tools to experience sexual pleasure, to integrate sexual pleasure with love and intimacy, and to face the societal challenges ahead.

I still felt close to my parents during adolescence. The house was tiny, it seemed, and there were lots of times where I wished I could somehow get more space, physically. I remember times of frustration, when I didn't want to be bugged, or asked questions. But I loved them.

They were so warm and open-minded about life that lots of my friends enjoyed hanging out at my house and just talking to them—especially to my mom. She had a way of really being interested in me and my friends, in what we were thinking and feeling. It was like she was excited by all of the changes going on in our minds.

I hadn't figured out I was bisexual yet, and I wasn't really being genitally sexual with anyone. When I finally figured out my sexual orientation, in my twenties, my parents were upset at first, but they came around eventually. I think the fact that I felt close to them for so long helped me to weather the period where I upset and distressed them. I have to say, it was horrible.

—Roger, 49

Your First Time

Some studies show that the "typical" American adolescent in the 1990s has intercourse by the time he or she is fifteen years old, while other research indicates that only 68 percent of girls and 78 percent of boys had had intercourse by age nineteen.

There is no such thing as a "perfect" first time, but some situations are more ideal than others.

And at this point, I knew what he wanted, and I just didn't have the energy to say no, and so we just did it in the car. It was okay. He came right away. It certainly wasn't the way I wanted to have my first sexual experience, but it wasn't traumatic.

—Jenny, 53

My first time, I was thirteen, and there was a neighbor across the way who used to arm-wrestle with me. She was a little bit older than me. And so we were fooling around in my parents' basement, and we did it there.

—Greg, 41

Well, I was in my second year in college, and I swear, I was the only virgin I knew. And I had been going out with Walt for several months, and I thought he was really sexy. And I just got tired of being a virgin, and I just decided to kind of turn the whole virgin badge in. And so I did. And it was good.

—Gillian, 24

I felt pressured by the rest of the guys. I just wasn't into trying to lay every girl around. I was really kind of shy. But I got tired of the pressure, and I finally went out with a girl who had the reputation of being a tramp. I tried to do it with her, and I couldn't, and I felt really humiliated. I was afraid to try again for years. It wasn't until I was in college and really fell in love with the woman I eventually married that I had good experiences with petting. And so the first person I slept with was also the last—my wife.

—Jay, 38

Clearly, having your first experience with intercourse or partnered genital sexuality with a person who cares about you and will listen to your wishes is an important ingredient in a good first time. Early experiences with intercourse as an adolescent can be very important in forming your feelings about yourself as a sexual person, good or bad.

Natalie and Jim's first time was close to an ideal experience. At seventeen, they had been going out for six months. They had met each other in high school band several years before, and had always liked each other. They had similar interests, including sports, music, and acting. Both came from families that were loving. Natalie's parents had been relatively open about discussing sexuality. Jim's were somewhat avoidant about sexuality but generally supportive.

Nat and Jim had been getting closer and closer physically, with necking and petting, and they felt they loved each other. They were even discussing college choices, in the hopes that they could stay together.

They began talking about whether or not to have intercourse several days before they actually did it. Separately, one spring day,

Natalie went out to the drugstore and bought a foam contraceptive. Jim went a few days later and bought condoms, without knowing what Natalie had done.

On their next date, they discovered what they had each bought. They drove to a "lover's lane," parked, and made love. It wasn't a perfect experience—they were both a bit unsure of what they were doing—and they laughed a lot about it, afterward. They continued to see each other for the next year and continued to have intercourse, with more and more pleasure.

Unfortunately, they wound up going to separate colleges. But both of them felt good about themselves, about each other, and about sexuality because of this first experience. Each of them went on to other successful sexual relationships.

Sexual Trauma

Sexual experiences in adolescence, especially forced or unwanted ones, are very influential in determining adult sexual identity and functioning. Unfortunately, during this time of life, coercive sexual events are very common, particularly for girls.

Every time I think about the sexual stuff I did with Todd when I was fifteen, I feel sick to my stomach. Just sick. I was a total dope. He really used me. He manipulated me. And the thing that really bothers me is that I get these sexual flashbacks now during sex with my husband, whom I love, and it really ruins it.

—Gila, 58

There are various types of unhappy sexual experiences you may have had in adolescence, ranging from being irresponsible and promiscuous to being sexually abused to being coerced or raped. Negative sexual experiences in adolescence happen to both young people who have had basically healthy sexual development thus far, and to those who have already experienced sexual problems and roadblocks.

Sexual exploitation and assault does not happen only to teenagers who are in abusive or neglectful families. It occurs to boys and girls—gays, straight, or bisexual (Lobel 1986). Even if your parents were basically caring, sexual trauma can occur, though there are certain ingredients in family

life which encourage skills that can prevent adolescents from becoming either the exploitive or the exploited one in sexual relationships:

- feeling valued for oneself, and understanding one's worth as a person
- learning to talk about your desires, rather than simply acting them out
- learning the difference between assertive and aggressive behavior
- growing up in an environment where one's feelings are respected
- discouraging passivity and submissiveness in girls
- growing up with parents who treat each other well
- not being exposed to gender role stereotypes which feed into date rape myths (for example, not hearing women called "cheap")
- having frank discussions about the increasing sexual urges felt by adolescents and how to handle them (including teaching both boys and girls that their sexual excitement is their responsibility, talking about masturbation as a safe way to handle feelings of sexual excitement, and realistically discussing with girls the fact that boys will try to pressure them for sex and teaching them to be assertive in refusing activities which they don't want)
- learning that it is not a good idea to "get high" on a date, since 75 percent of date rapes involves drugs and alcohol
- learning that sexual impulses are healthy and fine, but that partnered sexual behavior should occur only when it is mutually wanted in a relationship (including teaching boys that at *any* point in a sexual interaction, "no" means "no")
- knowing that you are still emotionally connected to your parents and that they will help and support you in any situation, even if you have engaged in forbidden or foolish activities

Many of us were not blessed with a parent who could protect us—a parent who was lucky, vigilant, connected emotionally, open enough about sexual matters, and not afraid of asserting control and influence.

Patsy came from a close family with a very attentive mother. Sexuality was easily discussed in her family, but being sexual at a young age clearly wasn't taken lightly. In ninth grade she went to a new high school, and met a crowd of kids who were much wilder than the intellectual ones she normally went around with. There

she met a new guy, named Val who was very interesting, offbeat, and smart. He drank, but to Patsy, that was very exotic. He was handsome, and he kissed really well. He also was a romantic, who recited poetry and went out of his way to walk her home at least once a week, a long distance.

One day, when he walked her home, he met Pat's mother. She noticed that he had liquor on his breath. She also noticed the lusty way he looked at Patsy. Patsy's mother forbade her from going out with Val. This was something that her mother had never done before, and it angered Pat. Naturally, she disobeyed, and one day she went to Val's house after school. Val began to drink, and he got very sexual—more sexual than Patsy felt was right. All of a sudden, her mom's voice rang in her ears, she sensed the danger, and Pat tore herself away, and walked the long walk home.

Sexual trauma, such as date rape or stranger rape, can happen to anyone. Unfortunately, if your family didn't handle your sexual development well, the chances of having traumatic sexual experiences in adolescence, such as rape, seduction by an older person, promiscuous sex, or participating in sexually exploitative relationships increase.

Families that don't give children a sense of love, trust, and empathy produce adolescents who are prone to addictions and fleeing from home before they have the job and social skills to take care of themselves. A child who grows up feeling unloved by her parents may grow into a teenager who trades sex for love. A girl who is not allowed to assert her own wishes in an authoritarian home won't have the practice in refusing to do what her boyfriend wants. A boy who doesn't have practice talking and negotiating can't talk his way out of the social pressure to "get laid" by a prostitute, even though he thinks the idea is repulsive. Families environments which were seductive encourage adolescents to get into sexual activities prematurely. A teenager who hasn't been allowed to develop good social skills and have deep friendships is more likely to miss the cues that he or she is being used by another person sexually.

The aftereffects of a traumatic sexual experience in adolescence can be depression, lowered self-esteem, fear, self-hatred, a lifelong distaste for sex, and the whole range of sexual dysfunctions—including lack of arousal, sexual pain, difficulty with orgasm, avoiding certain sexual activities which are associated with the traumatic experience, or subconscious feelings that anyone who likes sex is bad or evil.

Just as Lou, fourteen, was beginning to be interested in girls, and they in him, he was seduced by his alcoholic stepmother (aged

thirty-two). She performed oral sex on him, which felt good while it was happening, but afterward, he felt ashamed and dirty, and fled the house. He wound up becoming a male prostitute to survive. For a few years, he lived with an older homosexual man who supported him. It took him fifteen years to pull himself together, get a good job, and be independent.

He met Julie when he was thirty-two, fell in love and married her. Their sex was okay before they got married—but once they got married, he became more and more turned off by her. Whenever Julie wanted genital contact as well as affection, Lou was filled with disgust, and thought of her as a whore. Because his guilty and upset feelings about being used sexually as an adolescent have never been resolved, Lou now feels all sex is dirty.

While too much sexual repression, fear, and guilt is detrimental to sexual development, so is its opposite: too much sexual freedom. In alcoholic, drug-dependent, or neglectful families, parents lack the discipline and energy themselves to set and enforce intelligent rules for their children's social adventures. The lack of parental guidance and limit-setting is often viewed by the teenager as a lack of interest.

Sharon began psychotherapy to deal with her depression. Sharon had escaped from a rather disordered past and felt like a phony, living a normal life when in fact she had been a "tramp." She avoided sex with her husband, much as she loved him.

Sharon was a middle child of seven children. Sharon's dad was an alcoholic. Sharon's mother, who meant well and was affectionate, was overwhelmed. She basically let the kids run wild. The siblings were close, and even though the house was chaotic, they felt able to bring their friends around. Sharon was a friendly, outgoing kid by nature, and was comfortable with other children. She was bright and funny, and she liked hanging around with her older brothers and sisters.

Sharon really couldn't count on her mother to take care of the business of living throughout childhood. The siblings depended mostly on each other.

When Sharon was fourteen, she was allowed to go off with a group of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, for an entire summer, to a beachfront community one hour away from home. Of course, she had sex all that summer, sex to which she consented. And it spoiled her identity. She feels "cheap" and cannot get rid of the feeling that she is an impostor, even though she is now a successful

professional in her own right. While she loves her husband, she is not interested in the sexual part of their relationship.

Ideally, sexual contact and sexual intercourse occur in the context of the natural, gradual unfolding of your own sexual impulses. But a common, emotionally confusing sexual scenario particularly for females is getting into a relatively long-term sexual and emotional relationship with an older person. In this scenario, the older person pushes along the sexual contact and it becomes an accepted, standard part of the relationship (see Alana's excerpt below).

This may have happened to you, particularly when there was a lack of emotional closeness at home, and you used sexuality as a way of getting into a relationship which would get you away from your parents.

If this happened to you, you probably won't think of yourself as having been raped. But the danger is that you will grow up to think of yourself as a person without your own sexual longings and of sexuality as something you do for other people.

Alana (see also page 82) came into sex therapy with her husband, Rich. They have been married for five years and although Alana loves Rich, she doesn't want to have sex with him. She has never experienced sexual desire.

Alana's mother was mostly critical, often controlling, and never talked to her about sexuality. Her father was somewhat distant and was not happy with Alana's performance at school.

Alana wasn't that popular. She hadn't had many experiences with boys. Nor had she had much of a taste of any kind of sexual experience, including exploration of her own body. Once she remembers kissing a boy and feeling her body get "twitchy," but that was the extent of her sexual consciousness.

At fifteen, Alana was just chafing at the bit. She wanted out from underneath her parents' thumb. She wasn't sure what her plans would be for the future; school didn't seem to hold much promise. It was at this time she met Troy, six years her senior.

For the first time in her life, Alana felt like "somebody." She could ride around in Troy's car, after school, and get out of her house. She was so happy to finally have a sense of herself.

Troy began pressuring her for sex soon after they met. He took Alana to a clinic in a run-down section of town to get birth control. She remembers the clinic with disgust—it smelled funny, and she felt dirty and cheap going there.

She has no memories of the first time they made love, and some of her memories of the rest of their sexual experiences together were uncomfortable for her. She didn't feel sexual enjoyment or desire. Troy wanted her to give him oral sex, and sometimes he would hold her head down by his penis and force her. She had intercourse because Troy wanted her to, because she felt it was inevitable, because she didn't want to lose him (and be a nobody again). She went along with whatever sexual activities he proposed, without paying attention to her own feelings of what was okay and what wasn't. Whatever occurred, and she doesn't have that many memories, sex was frequent over the two years they were together.

Talking in therapy, in retrospect, Alana still can't imagine, as a teenager, openly talking to anyone about how to handle her disturbing, ashamed feelings about their sexual relationship. According to Alana, her mother would just have criticized her. And at that time, she didn't want to leave Troy.

As an adult, Alana turned into an assertive, competent woman. It is painful for her to look back on this relationship: "I was trapped . . . passive. And I'm not generally like that . . . I feel naïve, and used. I was so stupid." She blames herself for being passive. She really shouldn't keep criticizing her adolescent self, because what happened wasn't solely her responsibility.

Alana is extremely inhibited in the different sexual practices she'll consider: "I can't help it. I just feel like some of that stuff is dirty, disgusting. It has nothing to do with love." She can't imagine having sexual urges herself. "I know that other women are like that, but not me. I'll never feel that way."

Given the current culture, which objectifies women and glorifies male sexual conquest, how likely is it that a twenty-one-year-old boy would *not* pressure an attractive fifteen-year-old for sex? In Alana's case, her parents saw that she was dating a much older boy, and that he had a car, but they said *nothing* to her about her sexuality and relationships. The omission was so obvious, it must have felt to Alana like her parents were glad to get rid of her.

Even though all of us felt grown up at the time, looking back, it should be clear that as adolescents we were not prepared to protect ourselves from sexual assault or exploitation. In the United States, even currently, there is little sex or "rape prevention" education available publicly.

It takes an open relationship, superb communication, and active intervention, and some good luck, to help a teenage child extricate herself from a situation in which she might be sexually exploited.

And what about boys like Alana's boyfriend Troy, who treated girls like he did? Some of you male readers might look back now, and feel terrible about some of the girls you exploited. If Troy's parents had been open enough to talk about sex in the context of relationship, to talk about sexual urges, and to talk about masturbation, perhaps Troy would have been less likely to be so exploitative.

Male Sexual Myths

Sexual socialization in the United States, just as in many other countries, contains a double standard perpetuated by numerous sexual myths. According to Zilbergeld (1992), some of the most prevalent male sexual myths are that men should never express vulnerability, that sex equals intercourse, and that a man always wants and is always ready to have sex.

Traditional gender socialization for boys gives permission for sexual curiosity and experimentation, as long as it is strongly heterosexual in its definition (Masters et al. 1975). Conventional socialization for boys permits, and even encourages, the expression of sexual drive outside of any relationship context. In *Masculinity Reconstructed* (1995, 13), Dr. Ron Levant lists seven traditional male norms. One of them is "sex disconnected from intimacy."

Bolton, Morris, and MacEachron (1989, 16) go further, commenting, "It is difficult to overestimate the impact of same-sex peers on . . . sexual socialization. . . [they define] masculinity as sexual aggressiveness through initiation and perpetration."

Psychologist and author Dr. Gary Brooks (1995) illustrates these themes in his article "Rituals and Celebrations in Men's Lives" (1995, 6):

"When I was eleven, my family moved from a tiny town in Maine to a large, multi-ethnic, working class suburb of Boston. As a native, 'hick' kid, I was bewildered by the fast-paced life I encountered . . . I soon learned that the mechanism for proving myself was the ritual street-fight. This wasn't a bloody or dangerous thing, but more of a brief wrestling match. Lots of posturing, but very little real action (thank God!). This wasn't exactly the welcome wagon, but at least it provided human contact and a sense of place in the pecking order.

Years later, having established myself in this group, I was witness to another curious transition ritual—'getting laid.' In this neighborhood, many of the older guys enjoyed pressuring the younger ones to venture into the 'combat zone' of Boston, seeking out one or more prostitutes. Many of the guys entered the world of interpersonal sexuality in a half-drunk state, massed together in a cold tenement room, taking turns to get a few minutes of dispassionate sexual thrusting. Most reported more fear and distaste than arousal and sexual gratification. Passion and sexuality were out of the question."

Again, here is the socialized myth that men always want sex. In fact, researcher Dr. Charlene Muehlenhard (1989) has found evidence that young men engage in sexual intercourse when women make advances even when the boys don't want to. This phenomenon occurs because the boys felt they needed to gain more experience; they were worried about their reputations and felt peer pressure; they needed something to talk about; or because they didn't want to appear shy, fearful, homosexual, or impotent.

And despite the fact that females are more likely to be the victims of sexual assault (outside of prison), males can be victims of trauma as well (Bolton et al. 1989; Hunter 1990). Male socialization discourages sensitivity and the admission of weakness (Levant 1995), leading to male victims of sexual abuse and trauma to be less likely to ask for help (Finkelhor and Baron 1986).

Female Sexual Myths

Traditionally, girls are taught to be compliant, to do what they are told, to be friendly and helpful, and to be pleasing to men. They are not taught to be concerned with sexual pleasure, but with "romance"—the notion that they will attract, fall in love, be swept off their feet, and be taken care of by a man. While girls are taught about reproduction, they are discouraged from learning about the parts of their bodies, or about the sexual pleasure they can give themselves (Heiman and LoPiccolo 1988; Kitzinger 1983). Thus many heterosexual adolescent girls are left totally unknowledgeable about their own bodies and erotic feelings, and led to believe that their sexuality will be awakened, lovingly, by a boy.

Ironically, this traditional socialization is a script for disaster. Research (Muehlenhard and Linton 1987) has shown that girls are much more likely

to be exploited sexually by boys if they are taught to be sweet, passive, compliant, and to think of sexuality as "something your husband will teach you." (Dr. Muehlenhard has concluded that girls should steer away from men who have sexist attitudes, men who insist on making all the decisions about what will happen on a date, and men who refuse to take "no" for an answer.)

But for most women, their parents did not constructively confront these twin realities: the positives of their sexual coming of age and the negatives of traditional male sexual socialization. There was no acknowledgment that it would be good to get to know their own bodies, sexually. And when girls were warned about men, it was done in a very frightening, sex-negative way.

Ideally, parents would have modeled respect, love, and affection, in their relationship, and would support their daughters developing a loving relationship with a boy. At the same time, they would be realists and would have prepared their girls for the kinds of lines they would be fed by heterosexual boys who were merely looking for a sexual conquest. (For instance, Sol and Judith Gordon's *How to Raise Conservative Kids in a Sexually Permissive World* (1983) gives advice for how to prepare daughters to fight lines such as: "If you loved me, you would", "What's the matter, are you frigid?", "You have to. You got me this excited", and "I paid for everything; you owe it to me.")

The clash of male and female socialization left many adolescents vulnerable to sexual experiences which created sexual scars—in many cases, this misinformed myth-perpetuation provided the societal backdrop for date and acquaintance rape.

Date and Acquaintance Rape

Most rape, and specifically most acquaintance rape, happens between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. During dating, young people are faced with the pressures of sexual encounters, usually without any experience or guidance in knowing how to deal with them.

With teenage and young adult males biologically driven and wanting sexual relationships, adolescent and young adult women can easily get caught up in dating relationships in which there is sexual coercion, and become victims of date or acquaintance rape.

Studies (Ageton 1983; Levy 1991; Koss et al. 1987; Abbey et al. 1996) have shown that between 20 and 25 percent of college women will experience rape or attempted rape at some point in their college careers. In addi-

tion, the uncensored contemporary opinions of a shocking percentage of bright, well-educated young men are compatible with beliefs that underlie sexual assault, exploitation, and rape (Koss 1988; Goodchilds and Zellman 1984; Muehlenhard and Linton 1987; Koss and Harvey 1991). Study after study has shown that quite a few boys think that forced sex is permissible in certain situations, such as when the girl initiated the date, when the boy paid for the date, or when the couple went back to the man's home or car. Much research indicates that if a girl has done anything which the boy feels has "led him on," he has the right to sex. So, once a girl agrees to have sex, if she later changes her mind and doesn't want it, some boys feel that it is acceptable to force the intercourse. In addition, some justify coercion if they are so turned on that they don't believe they can stop.

In almost every rape situation, even in situations where the victim was drugged, there is misplaced self-blame.

Karen came from a very traditional, modest, sex-avoidant Italian family. Her father was the head of the house. Sex was not discussed at all, nor was any aspect of relationships with boys. She was shy and had had very little experience dating. She was bright, and friendly, but quite naïve.

She went off to college and wound up in a coed dorm—with coed bathrooms! In addition, unbeknownst to her, the dorm in which she was placed was known as a "party" dorm. There was a lot of drinking going on, not just on weekends but during the week, too.

One night, one of Karen's male dorm-mates invited her into his room to talk. She knew him from several classes, and she didn't think anything of it. While there, she had a few drinks. She believes that this boy put some kind of sedative into her drink because she became very woozy. The next thing she knew, she saw two other boys in the room. They forced her to perform oral sex on all three of them.

Karen is happily married now, but she still has intrusive memories of her sexual assault. She feels guilty, as if she did something wrong, even though rationally, she realizes that these young men were simply rapists.

Dara went to high-school in an upscale neighborhood outside of New York City. Her family was very successful financially but wasn't terribly empathic or close.

Dara didn't feel understood or valued in her family. Her mother was self-absorbed and critical and seemed competitive with her. Her father was prone to fly into rages in which he verbally abused everyone in the family, including the mother and the kids. Sexuality wasn't discussed much in her family, but there was a lot of concern about looking successful and having many friends.

Dara had lots and lots of friends. One evening, after going to a football game, she and her group began drinking quite a bit. There was one boy who was there that evening with whom she had flirted recently. She didn't know him well. The group decided that they would split up for a while, and then meet up at one of Dara's girlfriend's houses later.

She went off in a car alone with this new boy. They wound up driving around and then making out and petting heavily in a parking lot until late at night.

It was really too late to meet up with her girlfriend, and this boy was pressuring her for more sexual activity. Dara said no. He threatened to drop her off, alone, in the lot where they were parking. But it was the dead of night and it was cold. She was scared, and couldn't think straight.

Dara was afraid to walk all the way back, alone, to her friend's house, where she was supposed to sleep over. And she felt it was so late that she would get her friend in trouble with her parents if Dara showed up in the wee hours.

Dara did not feel that she could go to her own house, which was about three miles away. She smelled of liquor. It was late. She just knew her father would scream at her. She couldn't take it.

So she got back in the car with this kid, and he took her to his house. His parents were asleep already. He had his own suite in the lower part of the house. As she walked down the stairs to his room, he barked at her to take her clothes off and get on her hands and knees. She felt really humiliated; she had never ever gotten into that physical position with a boy. She protested, refusing to take most of her clothes off, and he persisted.

She was scared but she took off her clothes. She told him that she didn't want to have sex. She began to cry. He entered her anyway, and began slamming himself into her from behind. She kept crying. He was saying, "My cock is really big, huh!" She kept crying and he kept on raping her. Afterward, he acted astounded that she was still weeping. At that point, he finally realized what he had done, and he began to cry, too.

Dara never even told her mother about this incident, because, as she puts it, when she tells her mother something distressful, her mother just yells at her for upsetting her. At thirty, Dara still thinks sadly of this incident, and she still blames herself for it.

Recovery

Recovery from sexual assault or from bad feelings left over from exploitative or unwise sexual relationships takes time and courage, but it can be done. There are different degrees of trauma, and some of you should not attempt this task alone.

If you had adolescent incidents which left you with spoiled feelings, but your previous sexual development had gone well, you may be able to do a lot of reparative work on your own.

But if what happened was a major incident (such as rape or sexual abuse), involved violence, if you are still having flashbacks, or if recalling the incident is too painful to stand, you should seek professional help. The same is true if you often feel depressed, fragile, isolated, not grounded (in reality or in your body), or like you cannot cope with life. Do not do this work on your own.

However, under any of these circumstances, you still can learn about the components of the healing process, and you still can begin thinking about what you want to change. Doing the exercises at the end of this chapter will help you figure out what to target in therapy. But though you can write down what happened to you, do not elicit vivid memories about it until you are in treatment with a professional.

Mental health experts have done a lot of research and made great strides in treating sexual trauma just in the last few years (Resick and Schnicke 1992; Westerlund 1992; Shapiro 1989 and 1995; Vaughan et al. 1994; Smythe 1995; Korn 1997). So if you carefully choose a competent psychotherapist with up-to-date training in working with sexual trauma, psychotherapy can help you change your distorted attitudes about yourself and your sexuality. Even if the trauma happened long ago, it is likely that you can be helped to get over it today.

The key to beginning the healing process rests in dismantling the fear and disgust and in incorporating a new, positive outlook about your future sexuality. This involves several stages (Smythe 1995).

1. Stop avoiding the fact that the incident(s) happened.
2. Write down your ideas about why the event occurred the way it did.

3. You need to become clear on your faulty, negative beliefs about sexuality that are based in the adolescent trauma.
4. You need to choose a new, positive set of beliefs about the experience.

Negative sexual events which occurred in adolescence can create great anguish. Many survivors of such events do not attempt to change at all, and just suffer with their changed self-esteem, depression, changed associations to sexuality, sexual avoidance, sexual pain, or sexual dysfunction (Golding 1996; Resick and Schnicke 1993). It isn't necessary to live your life with sexual pain, without ever experiencing sexual pleasure, or with abridged sexual pleasure, because of what happened to you in adolescence.

If you suffered from unwise, exploitative, or traumatic events in your adolescence, the exercises at the end of this chapter will help you begin to reclaim your sexual self.

If You Need Professional Help

If you fit the description of someone who needs professional help (see Recovery section, page 194), use what you have written in your journal so far to consciously change what you say to yourself when you think of these troubling sexual incidents. Find a competent professional to help finish your trauma work.

Becoming an Adult

It is much better to grow up in a family where both parents accept an adolescent's changing identity, budding beauty or handsomeness, and emerging sexuality. When your parents give you feedback that your awakening sexuality is normal and not dangerous, and that they still love you in your new incarnation, it helps you to cement a healthy sexuality.

One of the tasks of adolescence is to consolidate this newfound sexuality into your new identity as an independent person. Being a sexual person does not necessarily mean having intercourse, and it certainly doesn't mean being promiscuous. It *should* mean feeling permission to be alive, experiencing your sexual stirrings at your own pace, learning to feel good about your sexual self, and mastering how to give yourself sexual pleasure without hurting yourself or others.

Whatever problems you had in your life prior to adolescence, don't get stuck blaming yourself for calamities you had in your teenage years. There are societal and familial forces answerable for the widespread existence of adolescent sexual trauma. By learning to make a *reasonable* assessment of what happened (dividing up the responsibility and putting it in context), forgiving yourself, and working on developing good feelings about being a sexual human being, you will begin on the road to a healthy sexual life.

Exercises

Examine Your Adolescence

List three *nonsexual* critical incidents, or family themes, positive or negative, which stand out in your mind as defining your unfolding adolescent sexuality. You can refer to your journal writings for other chapters to review early issues of family development such as touch, empathy, trust, power, friendship, and family environments. Also think about the major themes of adolescence, like your changing body, your relationship with your peer group, your parents' reaction to your sexuality, and your socialization. (If you experienced sexual trauma in adolescence, write those incidents in the "Reassign Responsibility for Sexual Trauma" exercise on page 197.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What are the consequences of these incidents today, in terms of your belief system, sense of your sexual self, or feelings about sexuality as an adult?

Theme or Incident	How It Affected My Adult Sexuality
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

List the changes you would like to make in these areas. Think in terms of correcting beliefs or behaviors.

The Incident or Theme	The Current Behavior or Belief I Will Change
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

If You Were Sexually Active As An Adolescent

If you were sexually active as an adolescent and/or experienced sexual trauma, complete the following exercises you believe pertain to you.

Reassign Responsibility for Sexual Trauma

If you experienced sexual trauma in adolescence, complete the steps below. If you experienced more than one incident, make a copy of this sheet and complete one for each separate incident.

Describe the incident here:

How did you originally feel about the incident?

What familial factors, if any, do you believe contributed to the incident(s) occurring (for example, low self-esteem kept me from leaving; my bad body image made me too afraid no one else would have me; etc.)?

Which sexual socialization factors do you believe may have come into play?

Looking at all the factors you have named, write a new assessment of responsibility for the episode: Divide up the responsibility for the factors, some to the person who hurt you, some to your family background, and some to yourself.

Regrettable but Consensual Relationships

If you were in a consensual sexual relationship as an adolescent, and you regret your actions, answer the following questions. If you had more than one, make a copy of this sheet and complete one for each relationship.

What did you get out of this relationship at the time?

In retrospect, what do you wish your parents had said to you, or asked you, about this relationship?

Do you think them addressing the problem would have helped you to stand up for yourself or fix the relationship, or do you think you would have stayed in it anyway? Why?

Choosing What You Would Like to Change

Once you have reexamined your adolescence, and sexual and nonsexual events that have caused you to view sex in a negative context, you need to choose what you wish to change.

List any bad feelings you have about sexuality in general, and also about *specific* sexual acts, that you might have because of your adolescent experiences.

Bad feelings I have about being sexual in general:

Bad feelings about participating in specific sexual behaviors which are linked to bad adolescent sexual experiences:

**Things I now feel are dirty
or disgusting**

**The events which I
associate with the acts.**

You are in control of your sexuality now. Mark with a "C" (for "change") any activity you now shun which you would like to feel fine about.

Identify Negative Beliefs

Frequently, after a traumatic event, your whole inner model of life changes in a very negative way, and then you go on to organize your future life around that negative belief system. Read the following list of some common negative beliefs (Shapiro 1989, 1995; Westerlund 1992; Resick and Schnicke 1993; Korn, 1997) and check off any that apply to you. If you have a negative belief which isn't listed here, write it down.

Negative beliefs:

- ☐ I am never safe.
- ☐ I am in danger.
- ☐ I must be in control of myself and relationships at all time.
- ☐ No one can be trusted.
- ☐ I can never let myself relax sexually again.
- ☐ I can never trust anyone/men/women again.

- ☐ I am worthless.
- ☐ Sex is dangerous, sick, disgusting.
- ☐ I am not good.
- ☐ I am powerless.
- ☐ I will always be a sexual victim.
- ☐ I deserved the bad consequences which happened when _____
- ☐ Physical intimacy is impossible for me.
- ☐ _____ (write in a particular behavior) is disgusting.

Write any other negative beliefs here:

Mark with a "C" (for "change") all of the beliefs you would like to change.

Replace the Negative with Positive

Thinking of how your sexual life has been constrained by what happened to you in adolescence, check off the positive beliefs you would now like to incorporate into your world view and your sexual self.

Positive beliefs:

- ☐ I can learn to trust others.
- ☐ I can take care of myself now.
- ☐ I deserve good things.
- ☐ I did the best I could.
- ☐ I was young and inexperienced. I can forgive myself.
- ☐ I was young and inexperienced then. I can take care of myself now.
- ☐ It's over. I'm safe now.
- ☐ I'm okay. It wasn't my fault.

- ___ I can learn to make good choices in people.
- ___ I can protect myself now.
- ___ I can emerge stronger.
- ___ It is normal for me to have sexual needs and desires.
- ___ I can begin to explore my body.
- ___ I can allow myself to feel sexual feelings.
- ___ My taste in foods has changed over the years. I can learn to enjoy different sexual activities, too.
- ___ Sex is becoming easier for me.
- ___ My sexual sensations can flow freely.
- ___ Sexual feelings can please me.
- ___ I'm beginning to like my sexuality.

Write any other beliefs here:

With a colored pen, write a "G" (for "goal") next to the beliefs that you would like to adopt first. (Pick the easiest ones to start with.)

Now write down here your plan for integrating some of these positive beliefs (i.e., your corrective beliefs, a soothing mantra, or your plan to read a book).



Chapter 11