

Sex-Positive Healthcare: Respecting Diversity in Sexual Identity, Orientation, and Practices among Patients

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What Is Sex-Positive Healthcare?

Sex-positive healthcare practitioners understand that: 1) sexuality is a vital component of overall health and well-being; 2) the sexual spectrum is vast, and includes preferences and practices very different from one's own preferences and practices; and 3) everyone is entitled to comprehensive health education and professional, compassionate, judgment-free care.

Why Is Sex-Positive Healthcare Important?

- Sexual health has too often been overlooked as a relevant area of study in the medical field. A holistic approach to health necessarily includes sexual health. Medical practitioners need more information on the ways in which relationships and sexuality can affect overall health.
- The current approach to sexual health is too heavily skewed toward disease prevention. Although STI prevention is a public health priority, it should not be our only goal in treating individuals. Candid, respectful conversations about sexual wellness should be a routine part of comprehensive healthcare.
- Some sexual minority groups exhibit troubling health disparities. Many of these disparities can be traced to discrimination, whether real or perceived. When sexual minority patients feel that their needs are not being met in the healthcare setting, they may avoid seeking treatment. This is bad for them as individuals, and also bad from a public health perspective.
- Sex practices and relationship structures in the U.S. are changing, and Oregon in particular is home to a large population of people who self-identify as members of one or more "alternative" communities on the basis of their sexual identity, orientation, and/or practices.

How Can Healthcare Practitioners Be More Sex-Positive?

1. *Question assumptions*: your patient may not be cisgender, heterosexual, monogamous, or vanilla
2. *Get educated*: learn what you can about LGBTQIA individuals and sexually "alternative" lifestyles
3. *Start the conversation*: do not expect patients to disclose their sexual history without prompting
4. *Signal sex-positivity*: follow the patient's lead and avoid loaded terms or judgmental language
5. *Make the office a safe space*: educate staff about how to interact with sexual minority patients
6. *Adopt a "Harm Reduction" approach*: treat high-risk patients with respect and compassion
7. *Refer sexual minority patients who need specialized care*: be aware of your own limitations

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Ace/Asexual: An individual who does not experience sexual attraction to anyone, and has little or no interest in, or desire for, sexual activity. Asexuality can be considered as a lack of sexual orientation.

BDSM: This acronym stands for a group of erotic activities including *bondage* and *discipline*, *domination* and *submission*, and *sadism* and *masochism*. There are distinct subcultures under this umbrella term.

Cisgender: A term used to describe people whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

Demisexual: An individual who may experience sexual attraction after a close emotional connection is formed. Demisexuality is on the “gray-sexuality” spectrum between *asexuality* and *sexuality*.

Edgeplay: In BDSM, this term is used for activities that may result in short- or long-term health consequences, and, as such, may violate the SSC (Safe, Sane, Consensual) creed. Some examples include erotic asphyxiation, knife play, and fire play. When individuals are aware of the health risks and choose to engage despite potential harm, these activities would be considered RACK (Risk-Aware Consensual Kink).

Fluid Bonding: Engaging in sexual activities without the use of prophylactics; the term usually applies only when a conscious choice has been made to stop practicing safer sex.

Genderfluid: A gender identity that varies over time, either randomly or in response to different circumstances.

Genderqueer: Describes individuals who do not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions; they may identify as neither male nor female, or as a combination of both.

Harm Reduction: A range of public health policies designed to reduce the harmful consequences of behaviors such as recreational drug use or engaging in high-risk sexual activities.

Heteronormativity: The belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders, based on biological sex, and that men and women have natural roles in life. In this view, sexual and marital relations should be between members of opposite sexes.

Intersex: A general term for any one of several conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit typical definitions of female or male.

Kinky: Involving or given to unusual sexual behavior. *Kink* and *BDSM* are often used interchangeably to describe these behaviors, although the former term encompasses a wider array of preferences and practices.

Monogamish: This term was first coined by the columnist Dan Savage, and has since caught on in the media. It applies to committed couples who have an agreement that they can pursue sexual or romantic interactions with others, usually within carefully proscribed limits.

Non-Monogamy: Refers to several different types of interpersonal relationships in which some or all participants have multiple marital, sexual, or romantic partners.

Pansexual: Someone who experiences sexual attraction to individuals of any sex, gender, or gender identity.

Polyamory: A relationship structure in which individuals may have more than one intimate partner, with the knowledge and consent of all partners involved. It can be described as consensual, ethical, responsible non-monogamy.

Relationship Anarchy: The practice of forming relationships that are not bound by rules except what the people involved mutually agree upon.

Sex Worker: The preferred term for someone who provides erotic and/or sexual services in exchange for money.

Swinging: A non-monogamous behavior in which couples engage sexually with others as a recreational or social activity. The swinger community sometimes refers to this practice as “the lifestyle”.

Transgender: An adjective used to describe people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from what would be expected given the sex they were assigned at birth. Not all transgender people are transsexuals – in other words, there are people who identify as transgender who have no interest in hormone treatment or other medical procedures.

Vanilla: A term used by those in the BDSM community to describe non-kinky people or activities.

PRACTITIONER REFERENCES

The Alternative Sexualities Health Research Alliance (TASHRA) - A community-based non-profit with the important mission of bettering the health and healthcare experiences of individuals who are involved in alternative sexualities. Site also contains resources for healthcare professionals.

TASHRA.org

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RESOURCES FOR PATIENTS

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