

SEX *That* WORKS

*An Intimate Guide to
Awakening
Your Erotic Life*

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FREEDOM

The beginning of any journey is imbued with an urgency for more freedom—the freedom to know and understand more of who we are. When it comes to creating a sexual life that works, we must begin by understanding and defining our *own* sexual freedom. We cannot have sex that works until we create a space for our own sexual freedom. But that doesn't mean sexual exploits, and it doesn't mean drowning our need for real human connection in a sea of casual hookups.

Sexual freedom is really about responsibility. Yet how many of us truly realize this, even as adults? In my experience, not many.

In this chapter, we'll explore some of the ways we misunderstand what it means to be sexually free and sacrifice our tender, emerging erotic selves for what turn out to be sexual exploits instead of the true freedom we innately crave. I'll also present a few avenues that lead toward healing as well as helpful reminders as you set off on your own journey toward reclaiming your sexual freedom.



A lot of us are still working with a misunderstood notion of sexual freedom. While we understand that “being adult” is synonymous with “being responsible,” when it comes to sex, we often lose sight of this vital connection. Especially as young adults, we think being sexually free means acting on impulse, without reflecting on how our actions

will impact ourselves and others. How did we get this notion? The confusion starts early. For many of us, it begins during our adolescence, when our emerging erotic identity and newfound sexual desires create deep conflicts with the family and culture we grow up in.

The ideal of sexual freedom is enticing, especially in the years of our earliest sexual development. During adolescence, as many girls contemplate the big moment of losing their virginity, the questions of *when* and *with whom* dominate their thinking. For teen boys, the “first time” is a marker on the road to manhood and is fundamental to how they come to grips with what it means to be male. As this adolescent erotic consciousness emerges, though, it collides with a culture that has segregated sexuality from real human relationships and made it something to objectify, fetishize, and shame. As a consequence, many of us end up misunderstanding sexual *freedom* as *license* to do whatever comes into our heads, whatever we think might give us a little power over this sexuality that we don’t understand and aren’t allowed to talk about. The ideal of freedom flips on its head, and we find ourselves falling down the slippery slope of sexual irresponsibility.

This transition was no different for me. I was elated to finally have a boyfriend I wanted to “do it” with, but my first time, in the back of a car, was both brief and painful, leaving me wondering what everyone was making such a big deal about. His breaking up with me a few weeks later added a dose of humiliation, which his crazy ex-girlfriend magnified by spray-painting my white car with profanities.

It isn’t surprising that I followed this pitiful first time with increasingly desperate grabs at sexual “freedom.” I would meet guys in bars, using a fake ID to get in. The sex was painful, and the interactions with guys who couldn’t care less about me made me feel increasingly damaged—distanced from myself and afraid to look at how I actually felt. Yet the worse I thought of myself, the more desperate I became to find the loving, intimate connection that I thought sex was supposed to be about. As a child I was easily orgasmic, but this capacity left me entirely during this time. In the name of sexual freedom, I was eroding my ability to trust myself erotically—which, ironically, made me less and less free.

I hit rock bottom during my second year of college after a “relationship” with the social director of my campus’s “animal house” fraternity. By the time it ended, I was a wreck—physically, mentally, and emotionally. I couldn’t even go back to school.

These experiments in sexual freedom were a far cry from the romantic stories that filled my adolescence. Growing up in a desolate landscape where nobody really showed up for me, at home or anywhere else, I would listen over and over to Barry Manilow’s “Ready to Take a Chance Again,” longing profoundly for a loving relationship that would hold me and nourish me. It was only years later, after I had crashed and burned in college and had to figure out how to put my emotional life back together, that I learned that being sexually free meant, first and foremost, *being able to hold myself*. Seeking solace from strangers in bars was a dead end. The only person who could give me the freedom I craved was myself.

Even though some things have changed dramatically since then, I don’t believe that the experience of a young woman using a hookup app today is much different from my own. I projected my longing for the intimacy and connection of a sexual encounter onto a Barry Manilow song; a young woman today might project the same longing into the vast outlets of social networking. The damage we inflict on our fragile erotic selves is the same, and it is real.



Hitting bottom during college was an important turning point for me. Finally, I started to have an inkling of how I might have misperceived this notion of freedom. I started to see that my actions had real consequences and that what I was doing in the name of sexual freedom didn’t feel like freedom at all—instead, what I was doing was another way I betrayed and hurt myself. I wasn’t looking out for myself, and the guys I was with certainly weren’t looking out for me. Now I think of the end of my freshman year as the beginning of what has become my life’s journey of rehabilitating my fragile erotic self and my misconstrued ideals about freedom, especially about sex.

The most important realization I've had is that sexual freedom is intimately, integrally connected to *responsibility*; there really can't be one without the other.

True sexual freedom does not come from acting out; it is not about sexual license. Authentic sexual freedom means taking responsibility for our own sexual needs. It means moving beyond sexual anxiety and damage through education, gaining not only the courage to take ownership of our erotic preferences but also the skills to engage in sexual behavior that is consistently pleasurable. It means growing up sexually and becoming adults. While we understand that “being adult” is synonymous with “being responsible,” when it comes to sex, we often lose sight of this vital connection.

Adults are not waiting for someone else to make them feel sexy or give them permission to explore the range of their sexual function; they are comfortable in themselves, comfortable making their own decisions, and comfortable being who they really are. That's true freedom. This kind of freedom, incidentally, also allows them to be truly responsive to the sexual needs of others, which makes them attractive partners—who tend to stay partnered.

Without understanding the vital connection between sexual freedom and personal responsibility, we can never reach the level of sexual maturity where we connect authentically and intimately with others. And without ever having these intimate connections, we cannot experience the full range of our feelings, including the amazing pleasure sensations our bodies are capable of having.



Taking responsibility for ourselves is the piece that most of us completely miss in our youth and often don't discover until we have done significant damage to our erotic souls. It is such an elusive lesson in part because of the cultural silence and shame surrounding the way we think about sex. For many, the sexual education we receive at school and home is as good as a locked box; it gives us few resources and none of the understanding we seek. During our early sexual years, we

move through the shadows, trying to make sense of what we are feeling before, during, and after our sexual encounters. Once we're older, we bristle at the idea of honest conversations about sex even between partners, let alone with our children.

Instead, we replace the education and witnessing that we really need to grow into our freedom with our mistaken notion that being free means baring all. We tweet and post about our exploits as a means of feeling them, letting an imagined audience's reaction to us be a proxy for our own sense of self-worth and covering up the devastating impacts of giving our sexual selves away for nothing.

Although I like to think that when it comes to sex education my four kids have had it better than many—their mom, after all, works as a sex educator—I know that each has struggled in their own way to map for themselves the terrain of their sexual freedom. Adding to their difficulties is the Internet culture they've grown up in, with its myriad channels for broadcasting far and wide each and every life event, amplifying the peer pressure to speak, dress, and behave in certain ways. Feeling this pressure, one of my sons had his first sexual encounter in high school with a girl he barely knew, whom he didn't care for, and who didn't care for him, just so he could say he “did it” and escape the stigma of being a virgin.

People have long been obsessed with virginity—whether it should or shouldn't be “lost” and when and how to lose it. Much of our obsession has to do with the shame that always seems to be cloaking sex and sexuality, and so part of waking up to our sexual freedom is removing this cloak. In doing so, we help to create more openness around sex in a world where even the adults don't know how to have mature conversations about their feelings or their bodies. Sexuality is absolutely fundamental to who we are as human beings, yet so many of us don't even know how to begin to talk about it—and if we do try, we end up feeling embarrassed. As a result, the places where our sexuality is damaged, as individuals and as a society, are never brought to light, which only makes the damage more destructive.

Our aberrant denial of what it means to be human and sexual creates strange and harmful behaviors. It was only about a hundred years

ago that boys—these would have been our grandfathers and great-grandfathers—could be forced to wear a ring with sharp metal prongs around their penis, which would gouge the penis when it became engorged as a result of a boy’s “impure” thoughts or even dreams. We might like to think we’ve become more accepting since then, but have we? There are plenty of examples of how convoluted our relationship to sex still is. Consider this: we now live in a world where *millions* of girls have had their clitoris brutally removed.¹ Often they are made to undergo this torture by *their own mothers*, who had to undergo it themselves. It seems unimaginable, yet we pass on our own sexual damage to our children—and as a result, we all suffer.

Closer to home for many of us is the epidemic of rape and sexual assault on U.S. college campuses.² This is another example of how a damaged relationship to sex is afflicting us all, but especially young people, who are grappling with impaired notions of freedom they’ve inherited from a culture with a twisted relationship to sex. For many of today’s young adults, the current practice of casual hookups through online dating sites is accepted as a normal, even inevitable, part of dating. I have met many beautiful, intelligent young women who routinely have casual sex with strangers they’ve barely met—and I stress to them that “meeting someone” is not the same as perusing their online profile. Sadly, they believe this is the only way to find someone to be intimate with. Many of these girls, too, have misperceived—as I did—what it means to be sexually free. Not only does this casual sex rarely end in orgasmic pleasure, but also early and persistent damage to our erotic consciousness often leaves us unable to feel at all. I have wondered whether there is a direct connection between the rising number of young people who engage in self-harm and those who have hookup sex.³

There is also the recent trend of successful young women being publicly shamed when naked photos of them are posted on the Internet. When actor Jennifer Lawrence’s phone was hacked and photos she’d sent to her boyfriend appeared online, she said of the people who had done it, “I just can’t imagine being that detached from humanity. I can’t imagine being that thoughtless and careless and so empty inside.”⁴ A number of

other female celebrities also received threats, saying they would be next, from the same people. We can all see the double standard here: these are women who might be expected to pose nude onscreen, where their naked sexuality can be accepted because it is distanced from reality by the trappings of Hollywood, but when they appear naked outside that context, it's assumed they will be shamed and their reputations ruined.

Genital mutilation, college rapes and sexual assault, hookup culture, photo scandals—these are all symptoms of the same disease: fear and denial of what it means to be human and sexual.

The problem is made even more convoluted, especially in the United States, by the prevalence of sexual dysfunction. It impacts nearly half of all women at some point in their lives and typically begins with vaginal dryness, pain with penetration, and an inability to orgasm. Almost as many men deal with premature ejaculation or an inability to have or maintain an erection, as well as generalized anxiety around being sexual. Although our bodies are just as capable of experiencing intense pleasure as they are of experiencing discomfort, for many of us, our early experiences with sex lead us not to pleasure and developing a growing confidence with our sexual maturity, but to suffering and stalled sexual development.

My point in telling you all this bad news is not to be grim but to illustrate that this work of rehabilitating our understanding of sexual freedom is hard and has high stakes. Yet it is the work that will cure the disease of denial and shame around sex.

Waking up sexually starts with breaking the societal barriers that silence our questions and desires. Especially with the people we trust most deeply, we deserve to dare ourselves to wake up to the sexual beings we are.



Our journey of erotic awakening begins with responsibility, and a key part of taking responsibility for your erotic self is recognizing that no one else but you can heal it or make it work. For each of us, the process will look different, because we have each been damaged in different ways.

Yet we are all similar in an important way: we all live in a human body capable of feeling a wide range of painful and pleasant sensations. Sensation—this common, shared space of embodiment—is where we can begin our healing.

For myself, working with sensation—touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing—has been the key to unlocking my sexuality and all its pleasures. I'll say more about sensation and pleasure in later chapters, but I mention these topics here to show you something bigger than my own story: the process of creating a space of erotic freedom involves practicing, learning, exploring.

To begin our journey toward becoming mature sexual beings, we need to *educate* ourselves about our bodies and our sexuality, and we need to build a vocabulary with which to talk about sex. Education is essential because, just as in other areas of cognition, what we don't know about our sexuality or don't have language to describe disappears from our conscious experience, where we can engage with it rationally. Instead, this ignorance slips into our subconscious, where it impacts our thoughts and bodies even more deeply, but where we have much less access to it—and therefore less ability to transform it.

For example, consider the largely unknown anatomical structure of the internal clitoral erectile network. Contrary to popular belief, the clitoris is not just a small button that sits on top of the vagina; the external glans, containing over 8,000 nerve endings and connected to 15,000 more throughout the pelvis, is the proverbial tip of the iceberg. In fact, the clitoral organ structure closely resembles the male sexual structure, but with long legs that reach deep into the vagina.

It wasn't until the 1990s that research was done which elevated the clitoris to a full organ system that is part of a complex internal erectile network, and not until 2011 did we have an accurate sonographic image. Yet even today, most women have yet to fully understand how to access this complex and profound organ system they are carrying around. One of the researchers, Dr. Pierre Foldès, noted that this internal organ system only functions at its full potential for women who know it is there and are working at cultivating their sensitivity. Knowing about this important network of erectile nerves makes

it more possible to experience all of its sensations—thus the long-standing arguments about the existence of the G-spot.⁵

Our lack of knowledge about our sexual selves and the complexity of our sexual functioning is not limited to our anatomy. While pain with sex is almost more common than not, we often know little about its potential causes. And it is the utter silence—and discomfort about breaking our silence—that keeps us locked away from the healing sexual capacity that lives in each of us. The solution to almost all sexual dysfunction begins with open dialogue, not suppression, and to start and maintain this dialogue, we need to educate ourselves.

»» As your first step toward sexual freedom, build a curriculum for yourself and the people you love that allows you to expand your ideas about sexuality and to experience pleasure without shame. This may well mean providing yourself with the sex education you really should have been offered when you were first emerging as an erotic being. A good place to begin is by asking questions and finding the resources and people to help you answer them. You could start with this book's "Further Reading and Resources" section, where I've included some of the resources I've found most helpful.

One thing you can try right now: Make a list of three or four questions you have always had about your own sexual response but never had the nerve to ask anyone. Allow yourself the freedom to ask anything. Don't be surprised if your questions are linked to your deepest fears about your ability to perform or respond sexually. Your questions are the keys to learning that you have needed.

Once you have your questions down, commit to getting real answers. You could do this anonymously by posting on question-and-answer sites such as

Kinsey Confidential, by reading books that will give you insight, or by committing to seeing a sexual health counselor (see “Further Reading and Resources” for where to find one).

You can't find answers to questions you won't ask. Start here and now by asking.

The next step in becoming truly sexually free is to give yourself permission—permission to be curious about your erotic capacity, to explore your body, to experience the mental abandon that is necessary for passionate sex.

So much about our sexual experience is connected to our ability to give ourselves permission to explore the far reaches of arousal. The permission that I am referring to is not deliberative “thinking through the consequences.” It is more a visceral form of openness that allows all of the mysterious and hard-to-articulate intensity of sexuality to move through you. We are inherently sexual beings, and this instinctive procreative urge has the power to transform all aspects of our health. By giving ourselves permission to engage fully with all our senses, we call our minds back into our bodies from wherever they may have wandered to during our day's work, and we begin to feel what's happening right here, where we really live—in bodies that are highly sensitive, in living organisms filled with feelings and desires.

No one is exempt from nagging shame and insecurity when they dive deep into their sexuality. But the transcendent emerges from the physical; passion has to replace our more organized, linear thought process in order for our capacity for pleasure to lead us into incredible experiences, the sort we can't believe we've had even moments after having them.

What keeps people from this pleasure delirium is an inability to open up while relinquishing control. Pleasure and passion can seem frightening and unpredictable, especially if you prefer a more controlled and predictable life. For example, think of the leap that has to occur for the couple that thinks sharing a toothbrush is gross to be