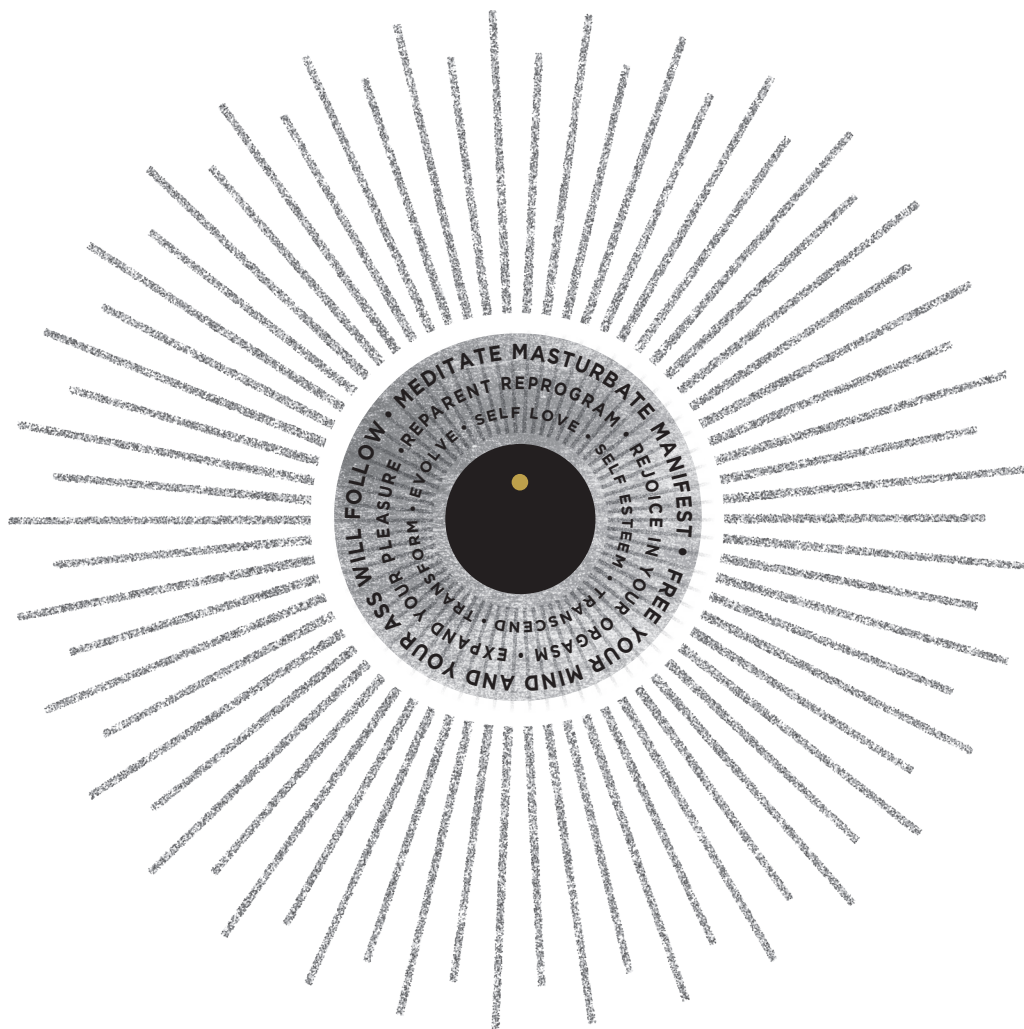


SEX • HEALTH & CONSCIOUSNESS



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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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INTRODUCTION

What do you think of when you read the words *sex*, *health*, and *consciousness*? Do those seem like three entirely different subjects? If you bought this book in a store or online, did you find it in the self-help/spirituality section, or in wellness, or in sexuality? Have you, like me, ever wondered why these categories are separated from one another? Collectively, we tend to silo our sexuality away from our mind, body, and spirit instead of integrating it. This strikes me as counterintuitive, especially as sex (and love) drives almost every aspect of human existence.

I believe that, as a culture, we need to radically redefine how we think and talk about sex. We need to take an honest look at how often we compartmentalize our sexuality and how disconnected we are from the primal energy (or life force) that our sexuality, and the act of sex itself, holds. Even thinking of sex as an activity that requires another person or must result in an orgasm needs to be questioned.

Sex can be a verb; a noun; a state of mind; an energy; a feeling; a source of power for some, of trauma for others; it can serve as a function of procreation, lust, even transcendence. Can we agree that whatever our current viewpoint, sex is a powerful act, action, or experience? *Health* is an easier word for which to land on a commonly accepted meaning: the condition of being well. What steps do we take to make ourselves healthy? Is it being mindful of the food we eat and of how much exercise and sleep we get? What about our bodily functions, genitalia, orgasms, masturbation, intimacy, and communication with sexual partners? The kind of content we consume and the sex we have? Where does our relationship with technology, pornography, dating, and love fit in? I believe

all these parts of being a human in the twenty-first century affect our state of health. Consciousness is the area where most of us have entirely individual ideologies. In the simplest terms, *consciousness* is a state of being awake. For you, this could mean trying to be in the present moment and truly aware of your body, surroundings, and the people around you. Others may think of meditation, yoga, spirituality, or religion. Or maybe you have no relationship to any of the aforementioned terms. This is okay. For our purposes together, let's think of consciousness as heightened awareness.

A deep dive into the intersection of and holistic alignment between sex, health, and consciousness is what follows in these pages. I see our culture's current take on sexuality as kind of like using a twelve-color Crayola box to draw with. A ROYGBIV (red orange yellow green blue indigo violet) rainbow is great, don't get me wrong, but what if colors are missing that could help us create a masterpiece? One that would blow every piece of art we've ever seen out of the water? This book is designed to help you access the latent Michelangelo lurking inside each of you.

To help on this journey, within these pages you will find homework, suggested practices to incorporate into your daily/weekly/monthly routine. You can integrate existing religious or spiritual beliefs into the framework I am laying out, and if you identify as atheist, you are welcome, too! All practices are in invitation, whatever your previous relationship to sex, health, and consciousness—even if you've no prior connection to these topics at all. I encourage you to make the exercises I offer here your own. Only you know best how to move, honor, and pleasure your body and soul.

What makes me the right person to be your guide on this trip?

Let me take you back . . .

I was an endlessly curious kid with an insatiable desire for more knowledge than was deemed age appropriate. I was especially fascinated by this mysterious word, *sex*, that grown-ups spoke of in hushed tones. I recognized from a very early age how much this word drove adult behavior. But no one would or could explain to me what exactly it meant and why everyone was obsessed by and secretive (ashamed) about it.

When I was eleven, I started borrowing my father's *Playboy* magazines, prompted by the appearance of my then idol, Madonna, on the cover. It was our Sunday ritual to go for breakfast at the coffee shop at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Afterward, I would wait for Dad while he got his nails trimmed at the barber salon next door. I got caught lifting the Madonna cover from the salon while he was at his weekly

grooming appointment. His manicurist, who was in her late seventies, reprimanded me for looking at photos of naked ladies. I didn't see what was wrong with studying body parts that I'd soon develop myself. How was I supposed to understand anything if grown-ups were keeping me from it?

I soon figured out where my dad stashed his porn mags at home and orchestrated a playdate with the cutest boy in my class to look at *Playboy* together. I took him to my secret hiding place in our backyard, tucked away from prying eyes, and pulled out a centerfold. He freaked out, and I put the magazine away, embarrassed. Later, we went out for ice cream and ran into two other boys from our class. They made fun of us for being on a "date" and asked me if I'd gotten my "pee-red" yet. They were quite proud of their taunts, having just learned what menstruation was a few weeks earlier during the one day of sex education we had in middle school (clearly, an unsuccessful academic exercise). The closest I got to having real sex ed in school was a human development course in seventh grade. Our teacher, a sex-positive hippie, instructed us all to go home and examine our vaginas using hand mirrors.

If I had a specific question about sexuality, my parents did their best to answer me in a way that provided cultural and political context. I recall asking my mother what a "sex change" (now called "gender transitioning")¹ was when I was around nine. She told me about the tennis player Renée Richards, who had transitioned from male to female and became a transgender activist after she fought to compete in the 1976 US Open, paving the way for a landmark New York Supreme Court ruling in her favor. My mother was on the board of Planned Parenthood and active in supporting women's reproductive rights. Yet she and my father—as liberated as they might have thought they were—never sat me down to have a one-on-one sex talk that covered more intimate questions, like "When should I lose my virginity? Would it hurt?" "How would I know if I was in love? Would that hurt, too?" "Was it normal to masturbate? Was there a right way to do it?"

1 This term refers to those whose medically assessed sex does not align with their self-assessed gender identity and/or sex. These individuals may or may not opt to explore a range of medical options that affirm their self-assessed gender and/or sex (chiefly hormone therapies and gender-affirmation surgeries). Emerging conversations within the trans community consider trans identity less through an event-based lens ("before transition" versus "after transition," "pre-op" versus "post-op") and more through a journey-based lens ("transitioning"), allowing endless personal locations on a trans continuum of identity, experience, and practice.

My first real job was as a paid intern for Planned Parenthood. I was thirteen. Although most of my friends were already losing their virginity, I hadn't even given a blow job, much less "gone all the way." Yet there I was, working in the office at the Santa Monica clinic, in the thick of STI² testing with antiabortionists picketing outside—plunged into the deep end of my professional sex education. I played online solitaire while fielding the phones, often antiabortion callers threatening the safety of the clinic and our staff with bomb threats.

Note: as this book goes to print, Roe vs. Wade, the landmark 1973 Supreme Court case that granted Americans the right to a legal abortion has just been overturned. Growing up with a mother who was Education Chairman on the Board of Planned Parenthood-Los Angeles, I don't remember a time where I was not aware of the dark and bloody history of abortion pre Roe vs. Wade. My mother took me to my first Planned Parenthood clinic to help women enter safely amongst the protesters outside when I was around 9 years old. I would overhear her conversations about wire hangers being used by desperate women performing at-home abortions; about the high mortality rates when it was criminalized; about the marches and sweat and tears of her generation as they fought for our right to choose. I understood what it took (and how many women's lives were lost along the way with often dangerous illegal abortions) to win the battle for freedom over our bodies. I never thought I would be mourning this very basic human right being taken away while completing a book whose impetus began when I first started working at a Planned Parenthood clinic all those years ago. As I send these pages to my publisher, we face more threats to our sexual and gender freedom—from expected restrictions on birth control; assisted reproductive technology like IVF and egg freezing; the right to sexual privacy, gay marriage, and more. I shudder to think where we will be by the time you are holding this book in your hands. As angry and heartbroken and tired as I feel in this moment, I will never stop fighting for these rights. I will never stop believing that the more information and education we have around these topics, the more we progress and expand as human beings and as a culture.

At Planned Parenthood, I was in the position of advising other kids about subjects I was in the process of learning about. In the media library of the clinic, it

2 This acronym stands for "sexually transmitted infections," or infections that have been spread through sexual contact, typically vaginal, anal, and/or oral. These can include (but are not limited to) chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, syphilis, pubic lice, HIV, trichomonas, and HPV. Some symptoms of an STI include: sores or bumps on the genitals or in the oral or rectal area, painful or burning urination, discharge from the penis, unusual or odd-smelling vaginal discharge and/or vaginal bleeding, and pain during sex. It is important to note that many STIs have no symptoms at all, which is why it is essential to get tested regularly.

was my job to organize literature and videos about sexuality and disease. Single fathers came in to check out materials on sex education and would ask me how to talk to their teenage daughters about sex. At high school parties and during recess, other kids sought me out with questions about urinary tract infections, blow jobs, and birth control. My advice of drinking cranberry juice to clear up UTIs had the additional effect of clearing the urine of marijuana traces. This made me popular with peers who wanted to beat drug tests. There were many times when the topics at hand were beyond my skill set. It was the early 1990s, so we didn't have Google to look up "how to give the best blow job" or "can you get an STI from anal sex?" Even the staff on-site at Planned Parenthood weren't prepared to answer the more personal and emotional questions my friends and I had about sex.

I knew that one day there just HAD to be a centralized place to find all the latest and greatest information on sex and deliver it in an approachable, mindful way. And, taking a cue from my recess days, I knew I needed to create it.

Hence, The Sex Ed was born.

I founded TheSexEd.com platform and *The Sex Ed* podcast in 2018, with a core philosophy: *pleasure and sexual health are essential not only to surviving but to thriving*. I believe we need to consider our sexuality holistically and apply now commonly accepted mindfulness techniques to the way we think about, talk about, educate about, and have sex.

We might believe we have invented the wheel when it comes to sex, but almost everything you can think of has been around in one form or another since the dawn of humanity. The act of sex wasn't all that different centuries ago.

The oldest known stone phallus—which looks a lot like a dildo, although it may in fact be an object of ritual worship—is about twenty-seven to twenty-eight thousand years old. Now Bluetooth technology has given us remote-controlled sex toys and pleasure robots. (Human desires don't change much; technology does.) What has remained mostly consistent in all these thousands of years is a spiritual estrangement between our consciousness and the way we approach sexuality. My life mission is to change that. We tend to disassociate our body, and particularly our genitals, from our mind and soul—siloeing sex into a narrow box that doesn't allow us to fully express ourselves or tap into the awesome power of sexuality as a source of energy and creativity.

We absorb shame around our bodies and our primal feelings from the time we are little kids, instead of receiving the message that desire is okay and that there are healthy ways to set boundaries around it. Instead of learning to be comfortable first

and foremost with our own sexuality, bodies, and desires, we are taught to measure our worth, validity, and desirability through the eyes of others.

How are we meant to align and integrate our understanding of sex, health, and consciousness in a culture where “sex ed” is now mostly gleaned via streaming porn, without our being given the tools to decipher what we are taking in?

Consider this book a radical imagining of Sex Ed 101. Together, we are going to dismantle everything we *thought* we knew about sex in order to build a new foundation. One that is based on the awareness that sex, health, and consciousness intersect to form our understanding of ourselves and sexuality. I’m here to teach you that sexuality and spirituality *do* intersect—and, in turn, that the connection between the two will lead you to a healthier, more sexually empowered life. Through this process of reprogramming and reclaiming what this word *sex* means, we will discover how to be more authentic, experience greater pleasure, and have more enlightened relationships with ourselves and our lovers!

Ever since I was a teenager, I imagined a time in the future when I would have it all figured out. I would know who I was and be completely at ease in my skin. I wouldn’t question myself or encounter anxiety, depression, or insecurity. Life would be smooth.

I spent years watching friends, family, mentors, and people I admired from afar, wishing I was as self-assured, secure, successful, happy in relationships, or “together” as they were. I wanted to know their secrets. How could I become the healthy, confident, sexually empowered woman that I wanted to be? How should I navigate my relationships in a new frontier of sexual/gender roles and rules? How best should I care for my health, body, and mind?

A researcher by nature, I turned to experts.

Research has always been a refuge for me—a place where I could tune out uncertainty and fears, getting lost in piles of paper, stacks of books, and my wild imagination.

As a young married woman, I was an anomaly among my friends and peers, due to being in a monogamous relationship throughout my twenties and also as someone who investigated sexuality professionally. At eighteen, while studying photography at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, I had started collecting burlesque costumes at flea markets. As part of a thesis project for school, I photographed myself in the costumes, attempting to emulate the glamour poses of the great burlesque queens of the 1930s and ’40s. I wanted to look like they did: strong women who appeared empowered by their sexuality. I was still bewildered by my own.

I tracked down the last surviving twentieth-century American burlesque queens and recorded their first-person stories, spending time with them at their homes, businesses, and hospital rooms at the end of their lives. I learned firsthand the lost art of burlesque as they dressed me in their old costumes and taught me trademark moves. Some of the queens had wanted to be in showbiz; some had been abused; some had exchanged sexual favors offstage for extra cash. All had a lot to tell me about sex, heterosexual men, and how stripping affected their psyche. In a sense, I had my first sexual awakening as a married woman via eighty-year-old strippers passing their hard-earned wisdom down to me.

I directed a documentary about my experiences, *Pretty Things* (HBO, 2005) and wrote a book, *Pretty Things: The Last Generation of American Burlesque Queens* (HarperCollins, 2006). As I was finishing up a book tour, my marriage slowly began to unravel, a process that took a couple of years. I realized that I still had a lot to learn about who I was and what I wanted out of life, let alone a relationship.

While exploring my sexuality and new relationships postdivorce, I was also delving into academic archives and libraries in search of information on late nineteenth-century prostitutes, pimps, and madams for a second book, *Sporting Guide: Los Angeles, 1897* (Regan Arts, 2015), set in the world of vice and sex work.

As I analyzed 1840–1910 census records, making notes for my book, I was also conducting first-person research—falling in and out of love and trying experiences on for size. I questioned my personal network of “sexperts” and friends about how best to navigate sex and dating in my thirties. I was often struck by the parallels between the nineteenth century and the present day; the human experience of love, grief, and sex remains unchanged by time.

In 2012, a friend, the adult film star and author Nina Hartley, invited me to sit in on her guest lecture for a sex education, therapy, and behavior seminar at the University of California, Los Angeles. When I arrived, the previous lecturers, an adult film actress and producer, were finishing their presentation and handing out research materials—their pornographic DVDs—to the students, an eager crowd of licensed and practicing sex therapists and medical residents.

The professor of the class, the late Walter Brackelmanns, was director of the couples and sex training program. He had been teaching at UCLA for fifty years and was president and cofounder of the American Association of Couples and Sex Therapists. Meeting Walter and his codirector, Wendy Cherry, felt like landing in sex-ed heaven. Dr. Brackelmanns and Dr. Cherry welcomed me

into the seminar, which I audited (and eventually guest lectured in myself) for many years to follow. They became mentors, colleagues, and friends.

I've now spent close to three decades exploring sexuality, both professionally and personally. Every experience in my private life, as well as all my academic and anecdotal research, has cemented my belief that integrating mind, body, and spirit is essential for sexual wellness.

I've interviewed doctors, professors, scientists, and practitioners in the fields of mental and physical health, sexuality, bondage, yoga, meditation, and space exploration. I've recorded conversations with a wide range of friends, including surfers, high school students, botanists, historians, cultural practitioners, and sex workers. In the process I have received loads of helpful, practical advice on sexuality, health, and consciousness. Everyone had something useful to share.

I found that happiness and pleasure are not out of reach. We all have the ability to accept and love ourselves exactly as we are, in the moment we are in, flaws and all.

So why do we have so much trouble doing so?

Is it because our culture doesn't teach us at an early age to celebrate and cherish our bodies, our sexuality, and our mental wellness? Is it because there are so many easy opportunities to tear ourselves and others down instead of being kind and loving?

Why is it that when we feel our lowest, we look outside for assurance? We seek validation or escape in someone or something else—sex, food, drugs, alcohol, electronic devices. Not that there's anything wrong with healthy escapism or a vice or two, but it's easy to fall down the rabbit hole of self-destructive behavior and then feel shame over whatever it is we "shouldn't" be doing. Why can't we be gentler on ourselves?

I longed for a guidebook on how to handle my challenging times—divorce at thirty-one to a man I had met at eighteen; PTSD from multiple traumas; the illness and death of my father. I remember during a particularly low point asking one of my best friends how long it would take to feel better and being frustrated by her answer: "It will just take as long as it takes." I wanted a magic pill to cure my loneliness, insecurity, heartbreak, and grief.

I decided to approach each difficult moment as an opportunity to change myself, my attitude, my life. After my divorce, I moved into the first apartment I'd ever had on my own and drank my morning tea with our wedding china. I fell in and out of love again. I started meditating. I took risks in my career. I redefined my relationship to my sexuality. I learned patience, trust, and forgiveness. I spent as much time with my dying father as I could, to hold on to every bit of him.

I realized that people come into our lives to love, hurt, teach, leave, and heal us. That situations occur to offer us lessons. That nobody has it any more figured out than anybody else. Most importantly, that being truly *conscious* of my desires, boundaries, relationships, and sexuality comes with the reward of a more fulfilling sex life.

The amazing thing is that we hold all the mysteries of the universe within us. But somewhere along the way, we stopped listening to our instinct and intuition. We forgot how to have self-love, self-esteem, and self-acceptance.

I don't claim to be an ultimate guru on sex, health, and consciousness. You are ultimately your own best guide! But real life and professional research have given me tools and experienced authorities to call upon when I am struggling. I wrote this book to share the practical advice I have gathered along the way. And to remind myself—and all of you—that we don't need to have it all together all of the time in order to awaken the guru inherent inside all of us.

So how does this relate back to sex, you ask?

Let's start with a simple exercise.

Close your eyes and take a deep breath in. Hold your breath in for three counts and then slowly exhale, allowing your belly to fully release. Great. Now do it again twice more. Feeling settled? Now let's do it again, but as you exhale, bring your focus to your genitals. Notice how they feel—itchy? Wet? Dry? Sticky? Tingly? Numb? Whatever adjective you choose to describe the current state of affairs down below is okay! Just noticing and naming it is the first step on the road to a marvelous new relationship with your sexual health.

With your eyes still closed, breathe again deeply, exhaling all the way down your throat, chest, and belly and into your genitals. Do this slowly with me now, three times in a row. Do you feel any change in sensation? Are there any new adjectives you'd like to add to your list? Does it make you uncomfortable or feel awkward, weird, stupid, shameful, scary, silly, exciting, or titillating to check in with your penis or vagina?

Still with me?

The first step is becoming *aware*. Applying our *consciousness*, remember?

So much of what drives us has to do with sex and relationships. We also tend to define ourselves and others by sexual standards that equate sex with self-worth. Add social media and the ready availability of porn to the mix and it is easy to see why our current culture tends to view sex as transactional, detached from spirituality and a higher state of consciousness.

Let's get a few basic truths straight.

Sex is not an act for which you need another person to participate in.

Sex doesn't need to culminate in orgasm to be a powerful experience or "good."

Sex affects every single area of your life, including your decision-making process, whether or not you compartmentalize it.

Your sexual energy is one and the same as your creative energy. (Yogis and Eastern cultures often refer to this as "prana," "qi," etc.) Athletes and artists (among them supposedly William Shakespeare and Mae West) often abstained from partnered sex when training for a big game or completing a creative work.

If we can expand our ideas of what sex and our sexuality are and have the potential to be, we can begin to tap into them as sources of power and personal growth.

I would much rather be having consciousness-altering, transcendent sex and exist in a society that values and honors a full spectrum of sexuality and gender identity. I want to live in a culture that is actively removing shame, fear, trauma, and taboos around sex and normalizing an integrative, expansive approach to human sexuality.

So how do we achieve this? By creating a new archetype for sex education, one that is based on the alignment of *sex, health, and consciousness*. In order for you to have the best relationship with your sexuality—and, therefore, the best sex possible—we need to make sure your mind, body, and consciousness are calibrated and operating in equilibrium.

Getting clear on how we approach each of these areas personally *and* how to integrate them are the foundations needed to reach truly transcendent sex—and what you'll learn in this book. A simple analogy to explain my philosophy is to the chakra system. In lay terms, chakras are energy centers located throughout your body, from the base of your spine all the way up to the top of your head. Think of them as your energetic nervous system. From bottom to top, these chakras are:

Root: located at the base of your spine around the perineum

Sacral: located just below the navel

Solar: located around your abdomen below the uppermost rib

Heart: located at your heart

Throat: located at your throat

Third eye: located in between your eyebrows

Crown: located at the top of your head

We'll be examining sexual wellness from the ground, or root, up. First, we'll be exploring our sense of safety (our root chakra) and sex (our sacral chakra) as