



Transcript Episode 1: What's Sex Anyway?

Clare

Hello and welcome to the Sex and Relationships Podcast. I'm so pleased you can join us. This is the podcast where we draw on our years of experience as sex and relationship therapists. I'm Clare Prendergast and I'm here with my colleague Janet Eccles. Hi Janet.

Janet

Hello, Clare.

Clare

We're kind of meeting to chat about all things sex and relationships. And today we said, let's talk about what is sex anyway?

Janet

I thought this would be a good place to start in this series of podcasts, because it seems to be the most basic and fundamental question of all. And it's really interesting, I think, to start off any conversation about sex, about sexual problems or issues or mismatches or compatibility or whatever it is that you're talking about to talk about Okay, right, let's start at the beginning. What is it? What does it mean to you? What's it for? And I think very commonly that the first response, understandably, that many people will give is, oh, I've never really thought about that before.

Clare

Yeah. What is sex for *you* and what is its purpose in your life?

Janet

Exactly.

Clare

And I think, I mean, what I just love about that question is the way it just immediately opens up the space for, for difference to be in the room and difference to be Okay.

Janet

Yeah.

Clare

Because, I mean, essentially what sex is for me is highly unlikely to be the same as what sex is for you. And if we did a straw poll in our little communities, I'm sure we'd get a hundred different answers from 100 different people.

Janet

Yeah. And how good is that?

Clare

Yeah. I mean, that is the good news, isn't it? But it isn't the context that most of us hold when we think about ourselves and our sex lives. We tend to think there is a right way to do sex, there is a way that sex should be. And if I'm not experiencing sex in that way that my mind has it, then something's wrong.

Janet

And I think that forms the basis of a lot of the problems that that we work with in our practice with, with our clients, that sex has to be this particular way. And because me or I'm not managing it or it's not happening like that in my relationship, then clearly there's something wrong, either with me or my partner or whomever I'm having sex with. Therefore, the psychological aspect and the anxiety that that can produce of, "oh, I'm not doing it right", you know, I think forms a really substantial part of our work, actually.

Clare

Yeah. Yeah. And really, I mean, what is sex? I mean, when I asked myself that question, I just went straight into PIV sex, which is, you know, penis in vagina. That is what sex is. And, you know, as a bisexual woman, it was kind of like 'oh, really'? So same sex people don't have sex. It's like it was just such a ludicrous. But it was like an automatic place. My head went, yeah, you know, sex is intercourse. And of course it isn't. Intercourse can happen during sex, but it isn't sex.

Janet

Exactly. It's so much more besides that. And I guess if we looked at the definition of sex in a dictionary, it would say something along the lines of it's sexual intercourse and it's between two, uh, well, hopefully consenting adults and it involves intercourse or penetration in some way. And of course, one of the things that we do as psychosexual therapists is we try and broaden the landscape of what, what sex means and different sexual behaviours and play, that actually comes under this umbrella term of sex.

MUSIC**Janet**

When I asked that question to people that I work with in terms of what does sex mean to you? What's it for? I get a number of different answers. I'm sure you're the same, Clare. A lot of time people will say, well, it's physical pleasure and it's fun and it's great for busting stress. And other people might say, well, it's about being physically intimate and physically close with my partner. Or it might be about bonding and, you know, and knowing that actually if we're if we're if we're doing it, if we're having sex, that we know that that we're okay, aren't we? But I guess we both know that, you know, a lot of people can have a lot of bad sex and unsatisfying sex. And therefore, you know, maybe that reliance on, well, you know, we have intercourse once a week on a Tuesday night, 11:00 at night. We're both exhausted but we're okay, aren't we? Because we're doing that. And, you know, very early, really important part of our job is to well, let's just have a look at that and let's see if the way that you are operating sexually, in this case, in a relationship actually is the way that's going to give you the most, uh, contentment and fun and closeness that that actually, that's the thing that you craving.

Clare

And the sense that your sex life is yours. And working out what that looks like for you is the work. It's not something you can, as you said, go to the dictionary or go to Pornhub or canvass your friends to find out what you should be doing for your sexual pleasure. The work is actually checking in with yourself and your partner and working out what do we want for our sex life, and what do I want for my sex life? Because obviously that's also a big chunk of our work, isn't it? When you have a couple and one person wants to have sex to stress, bust and let off steam and forget all their problems, and the other person only wants to have sex when there's time and space to be really, really close and connected and take a long time. And it's like if you're just wanting to get one off for stress busting, it's kind of like, you've got a cross purpose.

MUSIC**Janet**

I think it was Bernie Zilbergeld in his really excellent book, *New Male Sexuality*, he talked about, look, you can have a cup of coffee and a cookie sex, or you can have a seven course banquet sex. And both of those and everything in between is fine. But the important thing is checking out what am I in the mood for? What are you in the mood for? What should we do today? And then drawing on hopefully a quite wide repertoire of of physical behaviours, physical acts, ways of relating to each other which actually may go from kiss and cuddle on the sofa or a foot massage, or having a bath together or a shower together, or, you know, right up to, you know, the most energetic and passionate intercourse. For me, all of those things fit into this definition the parameters of what a sexual relationship can be. And always, I really encourage the people that I work with to think, okay, what am I in the mood for? What's going to work for me today? What are you in the mood for? Oh, you want to do that? Okay. Don't know if I'm there yet, but you know what - how about this? And to enter, to have the communication skills to enter into a kind of a negotiation. But in a fun way.

Clare

And I think, I mean, you use the magic word there, Janet. The communication word and, and the difficulty I think, with sex is because, I mean, we'll talk about this in subsequent episodes, but there's so much mythology around it and, and words like normal, natural,

spontaneous, easy. These are some of the myths that folk have been fed. And when they come into a room and talk to us or are listening to this podcast and hear words like negotiation, communication, you know, they're not automatically sexy words.

Janet

True.

Clare

And yet they are the cornerstone of having a really fun, vibrant, dynamic sex life.

Janet

But what is sex if it isn't communication? Because that's another really important function of sex, don't you think? It's about communicating? So, you might be communicating nothing more complicated than I find you really attractive. And I want to have energetic, passionate intercourse with you right now. Or actually you might be saying, you know, I just. Want to be close to you, and I want to feel good, and I want to give you some pleasure, you know sex is communication.

Clare

It is. But I guess I am speaking old, old-fashioned talking communication that being able to either before, during or after an encounter, ideally afterwards actually. I think it can be really helpful to let each other know, oh, I really liked that. Or that was a bit awkward or that was funny or that was that was really, really hot. Or so that you build an understanding together of what gets you going and what really sets you back.

Janet

Yeah. And yeah. And I guess what goes along with that, Clare, is that if you have a strong sexual relationship, you know, and this obviously is in a relationship context, it has to be okay for sex to go wrong sometimes. Do you know that sometimes it can be disastrous. And to be able to sit with your partner and then say, well, we won't be doing that again, I think we'll try something else next time and be able to laugh about it. And then it's not taken so hugely personally that I've failed in some way, you know. And I suppose that brings us back to a lot of the work that we do, which is making sex safe again, not because there is abuse or aggression or violence at play, but because it's

about being confident, assertive and just able to, yeah, to communicate some of this stuff.

MUSIC

Clare

When sex stops being about what we're talking about, which is sort of various behaviours, things that you do and becomes meanings. If you don't like what I like, then, you know, fill in the gap. 'You don't love me'. 'We're not compatible'. 'We're not going to, you know, we're not right together'. 'This isn't meant to be', 'you don't love me'; as opposed to 'right here, right now. I'm not feeling it. I might have done this morning. I might tomorrow, but right here, right now, this isn't this isn't working'.

Janet

Absolutely.

Clare

And it's that willingness to keep coming back and and trying again and trying and, you know, just it's so tempting to go "oh, we tried that once" and then that's it, the door slammed on it because there's so much pain that can be felt rather than yeah, we tried that once and then we tried it again and then we tried it again. And each time there's a slightly different nuance. And we're talking, you know, we're talking and deconstructing and, and learning, learning about our own bodies and each other's bodies as we go.

Janet

And isn't that the sadness of what we do, that that many sexual problems are caused by that miscommunication and misunderstanding and, and making meaning where there is nothing more than, 'oh, I've had an exhausting day', or 'it's the time of the month', or 'we had a conflict earlier and you're over it and I'm not. And I'm still feeling.....', you know, there are so many things that can get in the way. And I suppose I also wanted to talk a little bit more about what constitutes sexual play and sexual behaviour. Because you hear this phrase, proper sex is something that I hear an awful lot, that if you're not doing this, it's not proper sex. And so, uh, I don't know if you ever hear this in your room, Clare, but the idea of, you know, two people say, well, we've not had sex for a year, and then you might sort of say, okay, has there been any physical contact? And, and they

might say, oh, yeah, yeah, we do oral sex. And, you know, we use hands and fingers and we use a vibrator and you're like, that's not proper sex because I would call it proper sex. So then, you know, having that conversation about, well, what constitutes proper sex. Um, and, you know, and of course, that feeds into everything that we've just been talking about. I mean, I would also include things like fantasy sharing or role play, but actually also flirting in the kitchen, having a bit of, you know, sexual banter and all of that is that affirmation and reaffirmation of we're in this and we're in a relationship where we do this thing that is special to us. Now, obviously, also, that's not all people, you know, lots and lots and lots of people aren't in relationships. And to them, sex will have a different meaning and we will talk about that as well, of course.

Clare

I mean, it's interesting this term, proper sex, I mean, the word that I hear a lot is 'normal', that in some way I'm abnormal because I'm not doing x, y, and z. And if I was, then I'd be normal. And I think it's a cousin of 'proper'. It's like, let's just debunk it. My sex life is the sex life that suits me. And your sex life is the sex life that suits you. And you referred to single people there. Do you know, it could be that your sex life is red hot all by yourself? It could be that you're in a relationship, but you've negotiated a non-monogamous set up or a polyamorous set up, and you might have different kinds of sex in the different contexts. They're all quote unquote 'proper sex'. It's the sex that suits you at the time. And that's the thing is, like, it's the good news and the bad news, really, it's coming back to self and checking am I doing what I want to do? Is this okay with me? Is this giving me pleasure. And if there's a no to any of those questions, then that's the problem. Not whether or not what you're doing is proper or improper. It's that you're out with yourself and you're not being true to yourself in your intimate life.

Janet

Yeah, 100%. Clare. And I guess that comes down to, well, what did we learn about sex when we were growing up and we first became aware of this thing and how did we learn about it? What, how did our families deal with sex? What did we learn about it from them, or what changed? Or watching pornography as teenagers or learning from religion. Or what did we learn to play? You know, all of these messages of which there will have been thousands and thousands of them when we were growing up. They all implant a little seed in our minds, in our developing minds as teenagers, as we hit

adolescence and puberty. And somehow we begin to form these ideas of what good sex is. And that often is not about self permission.

MUSIC

Clare

What is sex really, I think as a question is what age we are now, because the idea of what is quote unquote 'good sex' in our late teens, early 20s, even through our 20s is going to be really different in our 50s and 60s and then different again in our 70s and 80s. But the truth is, we can have sex across our lifespan, and we can have good sex across our lifespan, but it's not going to be the same activity. We're not going to be doing the same thing at our different life stages. And so, debunking any notion that we picked up in the playground of what sex is, is, is crucial for our ongoing pleasure and evolution in this area.

Janet

And we might well be doing some things at 70 that we were doing at 15 because we enjoy them. But it might also be that we grow out of them, or different things excite us as we get older, and we have different influences and different experiences in our lives, whether it's sexual or other things. You know, we might see something in a film that really excites us. But you're right, we sort of go through this shedding process and building process throughout our lives like we do with every other thing, whether it's food or exercise or friendships. You know, we can outgrow sexual practices. We can develop new sexual practices. It's personal choice, of course.

Clare

Well, I think we're coming to the end of this episode. Thank you so much for being with us today. If you want to read more about what we've been talking about then please do visit our website: thesexandrelationshipspodcast.com, thesexandrelationshipspodcast.com

Janet

Yeah. We thought it would be quite interesting, didn't we, that whilst today's been quite general, we've been talking about what sex is and what it means to different people. What we're going to do now, I think, is we're going to have chats about common sexual

problems that we work a lot within our practice, and they will include things like arousal and how and why people, no matter what, what sex or gender they are, they can become aroused in different ways and at different times. And often one of the common things that we see is a mismatch in arousal levels, and how quickly people are aroused and ready to engage in anything, any sexual play. Uh, other common problems that we will be chatting about things like ejaculatory problems, communication, that's one that always is around good communication and that's how to communicate well, but also how to do conflict well or better as well. Because obviously managing conflict is big in terms of what we do. We'll be talking about orgasmic problems. We'll be talking about pain in sex and anything and everything really that we can think of that we work with commonly with our clients.

Clare

Absolutely, absolutely. And if you know, while you're listening to us, there's anything that you would really love us to talk about, you know, do get in touch. We're really up for responding to any kind of subject you guys would like to hear us talk about. It's been lovely chatting Janet, until next time bye, bye.

Janet

Bye Clare