

Dr Poul Rholeder, Professional Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, is a respected Clinical Psychologist who specialises in sexual health. He is also a trustee on the Diverse board. Here, Poul writes about why talking about sex is often still such a taboo for many of us.

Why is talking about sex often a source of embarrassment and shame for many people?

For many people talking about sex can bring on feelings of embarrassment, sometimes shame. We might talk about sex in general terms – “we had sex” – but talking with any kind of detail about sex, even if it was pleasurable, can frequently make many people start to blush with embarrassment. The talking can become awkward and uncomfortable. Why is it that we can feel embarrassment and shame for something that is so much a part of our lives, so much a part of our sense of self, and, hopefully, is something pleasurable?

There are many reasons for this. For most of us, we are socialised from an early age to think about sex as something to be a little embarrassed and ashamed about. It can be a ‘taboo’ topic between parents and children. For some parents they feel a duty to talk about sex, but do so with embarrassment. Some of this may be influenced by moral, religious codes about what are appropriate and inappropriate practices. It is typical for children to be curious about their bodies and the genitals of boys and girls and to engage in sex-play (“doctor-doctor”, or “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours”). Parents, when catching their children in such play, may respond with embarrassment, sometimes anger. The message very often is one of “do not do that”. We hear so often parents recalling how embarrassed they were when their little boy or girl asked them a question about genitals or something sexual, especially when other adults were around. Children quickly realise that they have asked an embarrassing question, or that they have done something wrong and may feel shame. We have generally become more mindful of this, but nevertheless from early on we are socialised, not only within our family, but within society, to treat sex and its pleasures as something private and something we need to be discreet about. Nakedness and sex is something private that we should be a little embarrassed about.

Puberty can be a particularly sensitive time for boys and girls to develop feelings of shame and embarrassment, as their bodies change and they start to feel sexual urges and desires. They may entertain sexual fantasies during masturbation that they feel embarrassed about. It can be common for people to have sexual fantasies that may involve topics that one would consider ‘taboo’ (might involve a

particular person or activity which one would never actually consider engaging in in reality). It is important to distinguish between fantasy and reality – just because we might entertain a fantasy, it does not mean we would act upon them.

The 'secret fantasy' itself might be what provides sexual excitement, not the reality. However, one may feel embarrassment or shame for having such sexual fantasies.

Feelings of deep shame can also be a consequence of childhood sexual abuse and maltreatment. This is a violation of one's body and self, and is often linked to feelings of considerable shame, and may have long-term consequences for one's experience of sex and sexuality. Conversations about sex between health care workers and clients can be difficult for both because it is something many have learnt to think of as an embarrassing topic. But health care workers may also be picking up the feelings of shame and embarrassment from the client (for example who may have experienced childhood abuse), and so should be treated as a sign to perhaps talk with some sensitivity.

Talking about sex can also feel embarrassing because we often use our imagination to 'picture' situations. Many people refer to this as one's "mind's eye". If someone talks to us about something they did – a trip to a beautiful tropical beach - we might imagine what it looks like by forming a picture of the scene on our mind. We might quite possibly do the same when talking about sex. We might not help forming a picture of what is being spoken of, and the awareness of having these internal images might make one feel self-conscious and embarrassed. We try to thus avoid talking about too much detail.

If we do need to talk about sex, such as to a sexual health care worker or doctor, or a health care worker to a client, it can be helpful to acknowledge the feelings of embarrassment, to normalise them as feelings shared by most, and ease in to the topic at a pace that feels comfortable for both speaker and listener. Sexuality is an important aspect of our sense of self, and so being able to talk about sexual matters that perhaps trouble us or we are worried about can be important for our wellbeing.

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