



Discussion Guide

For Adults Working with Teens

Sexetc.org

answer
sex ed, honestly

RUTGERS
UNIVERSITY

Learning to Say "No" to Sex

By Joleen Rivera, 18, Staff Writer

Originally Published: Apr 13, 2004

Revised: Dec 4, 2006

For months I would spend nights crying myself to sleep. It was usually after coming home from spending the evening with a boyfriend. After saying “yes” to sex I really didn’t want or wasn’t ready for.

I always felt this way after having sex. I would throw off my clothes, shove my underwear to the bottom of my wastebasket, and hide under my covers—letting the feeling of dirt and shame travel up my body.

Then one night I couldn’t take it anymore. I knew this sadness wouldn’t fade away. It would always be there, lurking under my skin, until having sex with my boyfriend would trigger it and I would feel depressed all over again.

After writing my thoughts in a journal that night, I realized that I was having sex for the wrong reasons. I lacked self-confidence. I thought having an intimate relationship would supply me with happiness and make me feel whole. But it did the exact opposite. It made it even harder for me to find myself, because I was stuck in a web of physical and emotional attachments that I wasn’t ready for.

Seeing a Pattern

That night I began to look back at my past three serious relationships, which all involved sex, and I realized that I never enjoyed sex or felt comfortable performing it. I didn’t want this unhealthy cycle to continue. So I decided that, from that night on, I would remain abstinent.

Since early in my life, sex was a major source of confusion. My parents divorced when I was six months old. My mother remarried, but I never felt like I had a father figure—someone to help me recognize what a healthy relationship was. I never felt like I could talk to my mother about my sexual life, so I relied on advice from friends.

During sophomore year, when I thought I was ready to have sex with my first boyfriend, I asked some friends (who had already had sex) what I should do. I'd promised my boyfriend that we'd have sex. We thought it would make us closer. But deep inside, I was nervous and not ready. I remember a friend saying, "It's really no big deal, don't stress. After your first time, it's like nothing, just sex."

The first time I had sex, my boyfriend and I were in a rocky spot in our relationship. He was depressed and had accused me of straying from him. I thought that having sex would prove that I really cared. I was constantly looking for closeness and stability within our relationship.

Angela Diaz, M.D., director of the Adolescent Health Center at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, in New York City, says that one of the most common reasons teens decide to have sex is because they're looking for closeness. "They think that being in a relationship and engaging in sex will supply them with a sense of security," says Dr. Diaz.

Teens also have sex to gain popularity or acceptance in a clique, to save a relationship, or to prove that they are mature.

Making Changes

After two years, my relationships never made me feel good. Guys always pulled those sappy lines, like "I can't live without you" or "I'll never love anybody the way I love you." I'd fall for these lines. Until I found out they were lying, confused, or really didn't mean it. Why did I fall for these lines? I was insecure. On the night I decided to change, I realized I was giving too much of myself away. If I continued having sex in that numb state, I'd end up losing everything—including my self-respect. I knew I had to take a break. I couldn't count on someone else to make me feel good about myself.

So, I started doing new things, like taking yoga classes and staying home on a Friday night to watch a movie with my family. These things made me feel good without any commitment to a guy.

Dr. Diaz advises teens who are having sex for the wrong reasons to do other things for closeness and self-worth. Teens can develop true friendships and positive relationships, get involved in community work and extracurricular activities, and feel like a part of society.

Words of Advice

Now when I talk to freshmen and anyone who wants advice about having sex, I tell them to wait. I tell them that they don't have to have sex to feel love in their lives.

When you're a teen, you're really just beginning to know yourself. And getting sexually involved can complicate the process of self-discovery. I was totally consumed by sex. I'd get so caught up in the relationship that I'd lose sleep and my grades would suffer. Having sex is fine, but only when it's 100 percent your choice and you understand how it can change your life.

And you always run the risk of misjudging the guy or girl you're with. You might think he or she is the right person, but find out too late that it's not true. If you're a virgin, don't rush into sex. There will be a lot of guys and girls out there who seem like "the one," but most of them won't be. It takes a long time and a lot of relationships to truly know.

If you've already had sex, consider taking a break, even for a month or so. Give yourself time to really think about why you're having sex. Make sure you're having sex for yourself, not for your partner or acceptance from friends.

As for me, this is the longest I've gone without a boyfriend and, for once, I like it that way. It hasn't impacted my social life. I feel less pressure to "perform" for guys, which allows me to be myself.

I'm waiting to meet a guy I can be myself with. I'm starting to grow and realize what potential I possess without a boyfriend in my life. I'd rather be alone and not sexually active, than trapped in a sexual relationship that I'm not ready for.