



Seniors & Sex

Q: Is it strange for elders to talk about sex?

A: It's probably strange not to talk about it. One of many myths about growing old is that you lose your interest in or need for sex. Many people in our culture don't like to connect the two words, "seniors" and "sex," but it's just another form of age discrimination.

We assume that when people get old they're no longer useful as workers, as lovers, as role models---you name it. In our culture, we have a hard time thinking of older people as people.

A new national survey of 3,005 Americans between the ages of 57 and 85 reveals that seniors want to talk about sex, but have no one to talk to. The study found that more than half to three-quarters of those surveyed said they were still sexually active, and that interest in sex remains high as people get older. The frequency remains "surprisingly stable" among the physically able "who are lucky enough to still have partners."

"There's a popular perception that older people aren't as interested in sex as younger people," said one of the researchers. "Our study shows that's simply not true. Older people value sexuality as an important part of life." According to the study, elderly men reported more sexual activity than women, but researchers said that was because women live longer than men, giving the surviving men more opportunities to have sex than women, because the woman can't find partners. (The prevalence of same-sex activity among the elderly does not seem to make the headlines in such studies.)

The fact is, most younger people have no idea about the sexual wants of older people, because they have no clue about their needs in general. "This study paints a portrait of this aspect of older Americans' lives that suggests a previously uncharacterized vitality and interest in sexuality," said the study.

Because of stereotypes, we give older people little credit for still being "real" people. As one researcher said, "Our findings indicate that when it comes to sexual activity, older people are really just younger people later in life. There's no reason to believe they give up the basic human desire for love and intimacy and the kind of pleasure that comes from intimate relationships."

One intriguing part of this new study is the suggestion that sex may make you healthier. "Individuals who remain sexually active gain the benefit of the physical exercise that comes with sex," the researchers found. "It's also possible the hormones -- the endorphins released during sex -- give a general sense of well-being that could be beneficial. The psychological benefits of being loved and cared for may also trickle over to physical health."

The saddest aspect of the study is that many of the people interviewed said they had never had a chance to talk to anyone about these issues--not even with a spouse or their physician. If an older person wants to talk about sex, one reasonable response is simply to say, "Tell me about it."