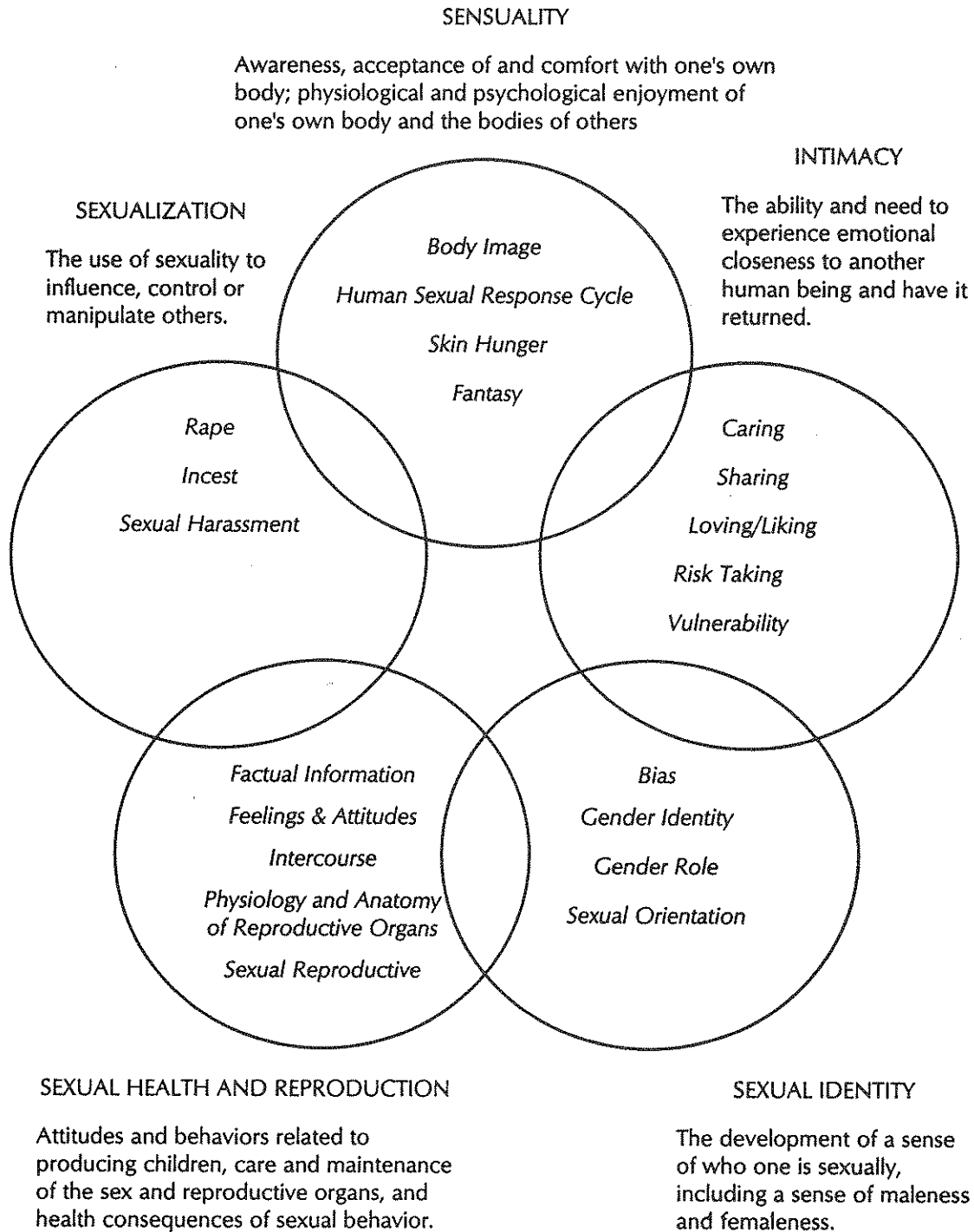


Circles of Sexuality



Circles of Sexuality Explanation

Sexuality is much more than sexual feelings or sexual intercourse. It is an important part of who a person is and what she or he will become. It includes all the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of being female or male, being attractive and being in love, as well as being in relationships that include sexual intimacy and physical sexual activity.

Circle 1:

SENSUALITY is awareness and feeling about your own body and other people's bodies, especially the body of a sexual partner.

Sensuality enables us to feel good about how our bodies look and feel and what they can do. Sensuality also allows us to enjoy the pleasure our bodies can give us and others. This part of our sexuality affects our behavior in several ways:

- ✓ *Need to understand anatomy and physiology* — with knowledge and understanding, adolescents can appreciate the physiology of their bodies.
- ✓ *Body image* — whether we feel attractive and proud of our own bodies and the way they function influences many aspects of our lives. Adolescents often choose media personalities as the standard for how they should look, so they are likely to be disappointed by what they see in the mirror. They may be especially dissatisfied when the mainstream media does not portray positively, or at all, their types of skin, hair, eyes, body sizes or other physical characteristics.
- ✓ *Experiencing pleasure and release from sexual tension* — sensuality allows us to experience pleasure when we or others touch certain parts of our bodies. As the culmination of the *sexual response cycle*, males and females can experience orgasm when they masturbate or have a sexual experience with a partner.
- ✓ *Satisfying skin hunger* — our need to be touched and held by others in loving, caring ways is often referred to as *skin hunger*. Adolescents typically receive less touch from family members than do young children. Therefore, many teens satisfy their skin hunger through close physical contact with a peer. Sexual intercourse may result from a teen's need to be held, rather than from sexual desire.
- ✓ *Feeling physical attraction for another person* — the center of sensuality and attraction to others is not in the genitals, but in the brain, the most important "sex organ." The unexplained mechanism responsible for sexual attraction rests here.
- ✓ *Fantasy* — the brain also gives us the capacity to have fantasies about sexual behaviors and experiences. Adolescents often need help understanding that the sexual fantasies they experience are normal, but do not have to be acted upon.

Circle 2:

SEXUAL INTIMACY is the ability and need to be emotionally close to another human being and have that closeness returned.

Sharing intimacy is what makes personal relationships rich. While sensuality is about physical closeness, intimacy focuses on emotional closeness. Several aspects of intimacy include:

- ✓ *Liking or loving another person* — having emotional attachments or connections to others is a manifestation of intimacy.
- ✓ *Emotional risk-taking* — to have true intimacy with others, a person must open up and share feelings and personal information. We take a risk when we share our thoughts and emotions with others, but it is not possible to be really close to another person without being honest and open with them.

As sexual beings, we can have intimacy with or without having sexual intercourse. In a full and mature romantic relationship between two people, the expression of sexuality often includes both intimacy and intercourse. Unfortunately, intimacy established through caring and good communication is not always a part of adolescents' sexual experiences.

Circle 3:

SEXUAL IDENTITY is a person's understanding of who she or he is sexually, including the sense of being male or female.

Sexual identity can be thought of as three interlocking pieces that, together, affect how each person sees herself or himself. Each "piece" of sexual identity is important:

Gender identity — knowing whether you are male or female. Most young children determine their gender by age two. *Gender role* — knowing what it means to be male or female, or what a man or woman can or cannot do because of their gender. Some things are determined by the way male and female bodies are built. For example, only women menstruate and only men produce sperm. Other things are culturally determined. In our culture only women wear dresses to work, but in other cultures, men wear skirt-like outfits everywhere.

There are many "rules" about what men and women can/should do that have nothing to do with the way their bodies are built. This aspect of sexuality is especially important for young adolescents to understand, since peer and parent pressures to be "macho" or "feminine" increase at this age. Both boys and girls need help sorting out how perceptions about gender roles affect whether they are encouraged or discouraged to make certain choices regarding relationships, leisure activities, education and careers.

Sexual orientation — whether a person's primary attraction is to people of the same gender (homosexuality), the other gender (heterosexuality) or both genders (bisexuality).

- ✓ Sexual orientation generally begins to emerge by adolescence.
- ✓ Between 3 and 10 percent of the general population is believed to be exclusively homosexual.

- ✓ Heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual youth can all experience same-gender sexual activity around puberty. Such behavior, including sex play with same-gender peers, crushes on same-gender adults or sexual fantasies about people of the same gender are normal for pre-teens and young teens and are not necessarily related to sexual orientation.
- ✓ Because of negative social messages, young adolescents who are experiencing sexual attraction to, and romantic feelings for, someone of their own gender may need support from adults who can help teens clarify their feelings and accept their sexuality.

Circle 4:

REPRODUCTION and *SEXUAL HEALTH* are the capacity to reproduce and the behaviors and attitudes that make sexual relationships healthy, physically and emotionally.

Specific aspects of sexual behavior and reproduction that belong in this circle include:

- ✓ *Factual information about reproduction* is necessary to understand how male and female reproductive systems work and how conception occurs. Adolescents typically have inadequate information about their own or their partners' bodies. They need the information that is essential for making informed decisions about sexual behavior and health.
- ✓ *Feelings and attitudes* are wide-ranging when it comes to sexual behavior and reproduction, especially health-related topics such as sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV infection) and the use of contraception, abortion and so on. Talking about these issues can increase adolescents' self-awareness and empower them to make healthy decisions about their sexual behavior.
- ✓ *Sexual intercourse* is one of the most common human behaviors, capable of producing sexual pleasure and/or pregnancy. In programs for young adolescents, discussion of sexual intercourse is often limited to male-female vaginal intercourse, but all young people need information about the three types of intercourse people commonly engage in — oral, anal and vaginal.
- ✓ *Contraceptive information* describes all available contraceptive methods, how they work, where to obtain them, their effectiveness and side effects. The use of latex condoms for disease prevention must be stressed. Even if young people are not currently engaging in sexual intercourse, they will in the future. They **must** know how to prevent pregnancy and/or disease.

Circle 5:

SEXUALIZATION is using sex or sexuality to influence, manipulate or control other people.

Often called the "shadow" side of our sexuality, sexualization spans behaviors that range from harmlessly manipulative to sadistically violent and illegal. Behaviors include flirting, seduction, withholding sex from a partner to "punish" the partner or to get something you want, sexual harassment (a supervisor demands sex for promotions or raises), sexual abuse and rape. Teens need to know that **no one** should exploit them sexually. They need to practice skills to avoid or fight against unhealthy sexualization should it occur in their lives.