**Life Lesson**

**HARNESSING THE POWER OF SEXUALITY**

**TO PULL US FROM SICKNESS INTO WELLBEING**

 Sexual activity has a strong effect upon the brain, much like taking a drink of alcohol has. Both activities set off a cocktail of cerebral hormones that pleasure our bodies, loosen up our inhibitions, and flood us with a strong sense of wellbeing.

 These effects are widely known, but a fourth one is more important, and seldom talked about. *We develop a strong attraction to whoever and whatever we are experiencing alongside sex, and over time, we develop a strong bond with them.* It’s what the Bible calls “becoming one flesh,” and it happens automatically, subconsciously. Many doubt this is true, and few understand how this bonding occurs.

 The process of classical conditioning was discovered, named, and famously demonstrated by **Dr. Ivan Pavlov with his dogs**. When he rang a bell right before they were fed, they soon started salivating and getting excited at the sound of the bell, no matter when it rang. They came to desire and bond with the bell, a previously “neutral stimulus,” because it seemed to bring them all the wonders associated with the highlight of their day. We come to desire and bond with whoever we drink with. In the same way, and even moreso, **we come to desire and bond with whoever we have sex with.** We long to connect ourselves to whatever or whoever we believe to be the source of our sexual enjoyment.

 From adolescence on, whether we have known it or not, we have been responsible for choosing who and what we bond with sexually. When it comes to sex, we are all dogs. But we are all Dr. Pavlov too! **Our bodies are dogs, and our souls are their trainers.** Through classically conditioning ourselves, with virtually none of us being told about it, we have trained ourselves to desire and bond with whatever *people, mindsets, and situations* we have allowed to stimulate our sexual activity. Most of the popular choices for sexual stimulation today are unhealthy ones, as they bring people over time more sickness than wellness.

 For example, **our culture teaches us to separate sex from spirituality, and to experience sex more like animals do.** “Purely natural, spontaneous” sex allows only other *physical* instincts into awareness. When we shut everything else out of our sex life except our animal instincts, our sexual experience will include some sickening fruits of the flesh. These often include **deception, shame, fear, and of course lust -- bonding with and idolizing the object of our sexual desire.** This poisons our wellbeing by increasing our appetites for other sickening mindsets and lifestyles. For example, without believing that we can revise and redirect our desires, we come to believe that we can’t be satisfied without getting what we desire, as if we were animals.

 Has anybody ever taught us that we can all retrain ourselves to use our sexuality to help ourselves desire and bond with a loving creator, or with healthier fruits of the spirit? Yes, thirty centuries of religious teaching has taught this, validated by other wisdom streams from philosophy, science, and common sense. All these have taught us that things like **honesty, faith, humility, compassion, peacemaking, stewardship, enthusiasm, and physical fitness** are aspects of both sexual and personal integrity. Only when we have *personal integrity*, when we are independently comfortable in our own skin, can we experience *relational integrity,* with God *and* with a loved one.

 The four wisdom streams just mentioned have warned us not to waste our sexuality on recreational pleasures, or **escapes from responsibility, relationship, and reality**. Sadly, those experiences are more available to us in our youth than are romantic relationships with a healthy partner. By contrast, wisdom teaches us to save our sexuality for later, *using it to celebrate and consummate our loyalty and intimate companionship with a healthy life partner in marriage.* We will need all those magnetic and healing powers of our sexuality when we forge a life partnership with another person, in marriage. Way more than some private recreational pleasure, marriage does a great deal more good for more people in the long run, including current and future spouses and children. It encourages us not to regard the beloved as a *source* of all that is good, but rather as a *resource*, a channel who can merely share things they are receiving. Only by seeing a love relationship this way can we **experience any partnership gratefully, as a gift from God**.

 Below are contrasting mindsets and habits that will produce more illness or wellness in people, depending on how they use the neutral resources of *sexual (and gender) identity, style, and orientation:*

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| ***Sickening Beliefs and Lifestyles*** | ***Healthy Beliefs and Lifestyles*** |
| Gender orientation and style are genetically fixed.  | We can train ourselves to enjoy new choices, ask for help. |
| After 12 or 13, we all need sexual activity/release. | Abstinence shows us sex is a tamable desire, not a need. |
| Everyone has a sexual pin code that turns them on. | Maybe not yet: keeping a mystique online attracts wellness. |
| Forbidden fruit is extra tasty, exciting, rewarding. | Violating trust in a nonsexual relationship harms like incest. |
| Erotic, seductive sex is hotter, so go for it now! | Only in committed marriage will erotic heat not burn us. |
| Paying for sex keeps it safe, automatic, impersonal.  | Any money exchange in sex objectifies all its participants. |
| Sex is most exciting when it goes wild without limits. | Being free within limits protects, grows us, *and* our freedoms.  |
| Sex gives relief from boredom, loneliness, and shame. | For a short while, but then they come back harder than ever. |
| My body image improves when people are attracted to me, so posting my attractive pictures helps that. | My image of my body depends on what I believe about it, how I treat it, and how I allow others to see and treat it. |
| Showing our bodies online builds self-esteem, as the more likes you get, the more you like yourself. | Going public with our private parts lets them be passed around by abusive trolls who use and degrade us, in public. |
| Sharing our bodies sexually is how we create love, because without sex, love can’t be real or lasting. | By saving full sex and nudity for fully committed marriage, we’ll feel more safe, special, beautiful every year we live.  |
| *Hungry love seeks to* *consume* experiences of love, affection, beauty, and desire, but cheapens them. | *Healthy love shares* experiences of love, affection, beauty, and desire for each other, celebrating and protecting them. |
| Love will make you lose control, obsess, have mood swings, tolerate pain, and rationalize idolizing, deceiving, and being dependent on each other *[all qualities of addictions].* | Healthy sexual love inspires in both parties’ personal growth of freedom, calm, honesty, gratitude, spiritual depth, loyalty, self-confidence, support, awareness of beauty, and balancing safety and risk *[all qualities of personal integrity].* |

**BIBLICAL INSIGHTS ABOUT SEXUALITY: Lust vs. Sexual Integrity**

 The Bible gives in rich detail **how life unfolds** for people who fall into sexual sin. It was pure visual seduction for **David** when he laid eyes on his neighbor’s wife **Bathsheba** (**2 Sam 11**). His heart followed his eyes in violating the 10th commandment, and in short order that act stimulated violations of the 9th (lying), 8th (stealing), 7th (adultery), and when these couldn’t be covered up, he went on and broke the 6th by murdering her husband. Previously a virtuous man, he quickly broke half the ten commandments, and it all started with his eyes. For her infidelity, Bathsheba may have gotten a palatial upgrade on her residence, but she had to endure her lover’s murder of her dear husband, feel his remorse expressed publicly in the hit song of its day (**Psalm 51**), and then like David and other adulterers, watch helplessly as their children and step-children lived out the generational after-effects over the years to come: rape, incest, violence, job loss, family disintegration, etc. (**1Kings 11:1-4**). **What does David’s story tell you about yourself? About God?**

 We see many successful **lives turned around** through repentance, confession, and obedient forsaking of sexual sin. David shows us the way in **Psalm 51**, and several **women in Jesus’ life** followed it -- the one at the well in **John 4**, the one weeping for the joy of her forgiveness and cleansing at the house of Simon the Pharisee (**Luke 7**), and the one caught in the act of adultery, about to be stoned for it (**John 8**).

 To prevent or to *break* bondage to sexual sin, it is necessary to guard what comes into the **mind** (Phil 4:8) and **heart** (**Pr 4:23**), through the **eyes** (**Mt 5:28-9**), through what we **touch** (**v.30**), so that unclean acts do not come out from our bodies (**Mt 15:18-19**), so we and others are not perverted and ruined by the words coming out of our **mouths** (**James 5:5-6**), or by what we join our souls to as we unite in **sexual** embrace (**1 Cor 6:15-20)**. This robs our spouse of what belongs to her (**1Cor 7:3-5**). **You check the doors of your house every night to keep your family safe. What good would it do to check every day your mind gate, heart gate, eye gate, ear gate, skin gate, mouth gate, groin gate, to keep good in and bad out?**

 Computer **porn** and cheat **chat** smells badly of “all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life” (**1 Jo 2:16**). We find the strength to avoid all this from our God, embodied in the Holy Spirit (**John 14-16**) poured out through the **church/fellowship** of believers (**Eph 2:18-21, 4:4-6**), the **word of God** (**Heb 4:12-13, 2Tim 3:16-17**), **friends** (**John 15:15**), **people we help** (**Mt 25:37-40**), and **small support groups** (**Mt 18:20**). **Is your God able to come to you through all these channels, or have you tired some of God’s blessing arms behind him?**

**HEALTHY EXPRESSIONS OF SEXUAL ENERGY**

Sexual energy or feelings themselves are not considered good or bad in the Bible, just the thoughts and behaviors that express them. For single adult love relationships, expressions of sexual energy are not encouraged in the Bible. Healthy ways of managing this drive are discussed in the Brainfood for the Good Life blog and podcast at *mynewlife.com*.

 For married couples, married love life is a gift from God, intended to be enjoyed: for marital refreshment and enrichment (**Prov 5: 15-19**), for the appreciation of natural beauty and pleasure (**Song of Solomon**), and to be enjoyed as a thanksgiving to God (**I Tim 4:3-5**). Spouses are to leave their parents and cleave to each other, and take lots of time to be alone together in their first year (**Deut 24:5**). To protect the marriage from temptations to infidelity, partners are called to regularly keep up their sexual relations (**ICor 7:3-5**). With love and respect, they care for each other’s bodies as their own, seeing them as beautiful and pure, and sacrifice their own desires to take care of each other, as Christ did for the church (**Eph 5:21-33).**

**GUIDING ADOLESCENTS INTO HEALTHY EXPERIENCES**

**OF THEIR SEXUALITY, ROMANCE, AND GENDER**

Let’s define healthy as *what does the most good and the least harm to the most people in the long run*. By this definition, **here are some beliefs about healthy Love, Sex, and Gender** which teenagers don’t often believe to be true, but which most of them will realize as true when they’re a generation older:

1. Like money, anger, and nuclear energy, sexual energy/desire is not good or bad – its effect depends on what you use it for.
2. Compared to promiscuity and cheating, fidelity, and monogamy lead to more honest, stable, loving, *healthy* lives.
3. Using sex for mutual fun and pleasure benefits only two people, and only in the short run.
4. Using sex for power, domination, and one person’s greater pleasure is very unhealthy.
5. Opposites attract throughout nature, adding energy, creativity, strength, and inspiration.
6. Attraction to people for how similar they are to ourselves will fade over time as we grow, and will turn into attraction to the new and different.
7. In mate selection, choosing people with *different gifts, interests, skills, and temperament* is more difficult at first, and more beneficial as time goes on.
8. Choosing people with *similar values and beliefs* gives less chemistry at first, but enables a couple to partner better in working toward common goals; the chemistry can bloom later and last longer.

# Many personal problems are easier to solve within a relationship if the solutions were practiced by both parties beforehand. A healthy love relationship partners with outside help needed to solve problems like these:

* Seeing yourself as trapped or helpless, or as *a permanent victim* of anything
* *Idolizing* any created person or thing as a source for your identity, security, or wellbeing
* Seeing any aspect of yourself as *unable to grow, change, or improve*
* *Publicizing online sexual things* that happened in private
* *Expressing yourself sexually* (with someone or online) *before becoming mostly self-sufficient*
* *Falling in love with someone who disrespects, idealizes, lies to, or depends on you*
* Comparing your body to others, and *wishing it looked more like somebody else’s*
* Believing that to be healthy, *you must receive regular orgasms from someone or yourself*
* *Expecting someone else to make you feel good enough to feel comfortable in your own skin*

 If your teenager wants you to bless or approve a love relationship, you need to **ask them how they would solve these problems** if they resurface in the relationship. If their solutions involve no outside help, you can ask: *how would you know if your love relationship made you lose interest in what you need to solve problems like this? What would you do about it? Have you two discussed this?*

***General Guidelines for Parents***

 Until your children are 21, have been living stably and responsibly out of the home, and are on their own financially, you can use these guidelines for your conversations.

• **Seek first to understand, then to be understood.** Until they know you care, they won’t care what you know.

• **Acknowledge and appreciate their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, values, decisions,** and even public confessions of who they are, **but you do not need to say whether you agree, will support, or feel good** about them. You respect their privacy, and you respect your own privacy as well.

• **When** **they say they are sure they won’t change their mind and heart and will on this matter**, it is OK to say, “Your mind, heart, and life become bigger each year, and each year you have new things to bring to this (gender identity/love relationship/etc.). The longer you wait to promise yourself you won’t change your lifestyle, the better you will get along with yourself down the road.”

 Finally, respect that these *issues of romance, sex, and gender are very personal.* So have been all the other eight issues written about here: truth, safety, respect, caring, mercy, money, purpose, and health. Talking about personal things works better when we try not to be preachy or pushy with our children, or with our grandchildren. We *can* push questions, but not so much answers. Let’s give ways for trust to be earned. In this spirit, you and your family can *make a few healthier choices* down the road.