

Sex in the Dark

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Panelists:

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[EL] Ethan Levine, PhD Services Empowering the Rights of Victims (SERV)

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[JP] Josette Palmer, MD, MPH, FAAFP, Primary Care Physician, Happy Healthy You-Glassboro, NJ

[DS] Daniel Strasser, PhD., Associate Professor of Gender and Family Communication at Rowan University

[SW] Scott Woodside, MSN, MBA, RN, Director of Student Health Services at Rowan University

Questions and Answers

HOW MUCH MASTURBATION IS TOO MUCH?

SW: There are a lot of myths about masturbation. It is a normal part of sexuality. Like with all aspects of health and wellness, moderation is the key. Excessive masturbation can cause irritation and swelling.

JP: If you have irritation, like a rash. Fine and normal. Can be prevented from using lubricant-can have a reaction from the lubricant (allergic)... Physical manifestation: irritation

AH: Should not get in the way of daily tasks. When paired with pornography, can become desensitized and then need more graphic images and your body can become less able to get pleasure from sex. Be cautious of how much pornography you are pairing with masturbation.

EL: The goal is for you to enjoy yourself. If that is not happening you have to change something.

JM: Recognize nothing wrong with also not doing these things. Lube is your friend

DS: Lube is good. Do not use household items like soap. Masturbation is a good way to figure out what you want.

WHAT IS GENDER FLUIDITY?

EL: It doesn't have a fixed definition, so people who identify as gender fluid may have different answers to this question. Who someone they are as a gendered person, how they feel (feminine or masculine) can change every day.

JM: Identity is sense of self (multiple genders, just one, none), could be either through gender expression (i.e how they dress)

DS: by the moment of who you are and how you feel about yourself. It's a performance that adheres to different contexts, maybe how you act in front of your parents would be different than how you act at the bar. Depends on your mood or who you are.

HOW DO I GET MY ROOMMATE TO LEAVE WHEN MY BOYFRIEND IS OVER?

JM: Ask nicely. Use signals.

JP: Use something you both agree on... make sure it's mutual. Communication!

SW: You have to learn to navigate. Use RAs and just ask for help.

DS: What do you do when you need a roommate to leave immediately? Sudden hook ups.

AH: That should be a conversation.

JM: Use humor!! Use a code word!! If I run into the room and say tippy toe, you gotta go.

EL: Same skills used with live in partners and just need space. Nice to have another place to go if needed.

WHAT IS THE HPV SHOT AND SHOULD I GET IT?

DP: HPV is known to lead to cervical, anal, and oral cancer. It's been out for about 14 years. I'm a big vaccine proponent, especially for that one. Parents think it's a sex causing vaccine (where it makes you want to have sex), 18 year olds can sign for their own vaccines. If their parent says no to getting it, they usually won't, but the vaccine covers 9 different strains of the cancers. People as old as 26, young as 9 are encouraged to get it. Insurance companies do not pay for it over 26. The vaccine is not a guarantee you won't get cervical cancer but pretty good chances. It's a 3 step vaccine, so you get the first shot and then wait a couple months for the 2nd one, then a few more months after that to get the 3rd and final shot. You should get it. Men AND women can get the shot.

SW: 79 million Americans are living with HPV, it's a virus, not a bacteria. The vaccine does cover several strains that cause genital warts as well as some strains of cancer. Use condoms to prevent HPV since it's through skin to skin contact. Dental dams for oral. USE CONDOMS!!!!

JM: Destigmatize testing. Has HPV and a cancer scare, you have to be open and honest to partners. It can create a happier and healthier sex life.

WHAT AND WHERE IS THE G SPOT?

AH: It's not just one place and is different for everyone. Males and females have different orgasms. The G spot is more difficult for females to find. Hard to find with fingers. Some people say that the vaginal and clitoral orgasms are different. Not that important to find this magical spot; explore your own body and be curious and communicate with partners. Have open communication.

CAN I TAKE VIAGRA™ THAT ISN'T PRESCRIBED TO ME?

JP: Viagra™ is used to enhance erections. Female Viagra™ is coming out. NO! Do not use Viagra™ not prescribed to you. It won't hurt you if you take it assuming you are healthy. Affects vision and lowers blood pressure. Don't take anything that isn't prescribed.

SW: I must caution students. Coupling with drugs and drinking could lead to complication especially if there is an underlying heart condition. Do not take recreationally.

AH: Why do you need it? Talk to a doctor or a counselor about emotional concerns. Desensitized by pornography and causes irregular sexual encounters.

DON'T TAKE MEDICINE NOT PRESCRIBED TO YOU.

I CAN'T CASUALLY HOOK UP WITH SOMEONE, DOES THAT MAKE ME WEIRD?

DS: No. That is valid and wonderful. It is what you choose. It may just be a time you don't want to do that. Might be a time for you to be by yourself.

SW: You are in the majority. There is this perception everyone is having sex. Rowan survey said 32% had not had a sexual partner in 12 months 43% said they had 1 sexual partner in 12 months. Perceptions aren't always the reality. There is someone out there like you no matter what.

EL: For some people sex isn't connected to emotion and romantic connection, and for some it is the complete opposite.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BISEXUAL?

JM: Attraction to both binary male and female. Pansexuality is attracted to anyone and everyone, no matter how they identify. Bisexual regards just male and female, still recognizes the binary.

EL: Sometimes connected to a binary concept of gender, but doesn't have to be. Has a friend that says "I am attracted to people who are like me AND who are not like me" bisexual can be like an umbrella term for pansexuality.

FEMALE ORGASM TIPS?

JM: Invest in rechargeable batteries. Everyone experiences orgasm differently. People can get off by someone nibbling on their ear. Understand what you like. If it's not happening the way you're seeing it, there's nothing wrong with you. Porn industry puts off a different picture than what happens in real life. External clitoral stimulation. Invest in good safe practices, includes toys if you choose to use it. 20 mins of foreplay usually is good beforehand.

DS: Talking about what feels good, desirable things and open with your partner & what you like and want. Both can have orgasms. Having a conversation of what works for you & how to do it with and/or for you. Communication!!!!!! Education portion for not only you but your partner

AH: Naomi Wolfe - book called Vagina. Vagina is attached to our brain. Lots of nerve endings on that nerve & has a direct effect on our mood. Could affect your ability to have an orgasm.

EL: Tips for having a good orgasm can change over time. A female assigned at birth who goes through a transition can go through body change and hormones & time to figure out. As well as male to female transition.

JP: Knows a woman who is in her mid-50s who has never had an orgasm. Has not communicated what her needs are - so important to effectively communicate what your needs are. Show your partner what you're comfortable with.

I GOT AN IUD IN 2017 THAT AT THE TIME WAS SUPPOSED TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR 3 YEARS. THE FDA HAS RECENTLY APPROVED IT TO BE EFFECTIVE FOR 5 YEARS, SHOULD I GET IT REPLACED OR CAN I WAIT?

JM: That is a conversation to have with your health care provider as depending on the kind of IUD have (copper or hormonal) may impact the effectiveness of it if it was not initially approved for a longer period of time. My IUD - Mirena, which is approved for 5 years - is approved overseas for 7 and my dr. told me I could wait another year before changing mine so in my case, I am able to keep it longer than 5 years, but again, I urge you to talk to your health care provider about it!

WHAT IS THE BEST BIRTH CONTROL FOR ME?

SW: This is a personal decision between you, your healthcare provider and your partner. Birth control measures range from invasive, like an intrauterine device to abstinence. Important to note that with the exception of condoms and abstinence birth control does not protect against STI's. Studies show the majority of birth control use is still the pill, followed by male condom then IUD. Injectable hormones, implants, vaginal ring and patch rounded out the other popular methods.

CONSENT SEEMS REALLY UNSEXY. HOW DO I MAKE IT OKAY WITHOUT RUINING THE MOOD?

AH: As we've been saying, communication is the key and CAN be sexy! Creating safety by talking about what you don't want and what you want creates a more pleasurable experience. That being said, being vulnerable and open in the moment can be hard. Check out these videos that may help you think about how you might initiate the discussion: <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/teens/sex/all-about-consent>

JM: I absolutely agree with Amy on this! Consent is super sexy! It doesn't have to be "Can I kiss you here?" or robotic, you can get creative with it. Asking "Do you like that?" in a sexy voice and be just one way to do that. It is important that both people feel empowered to say yes, no, or even maybe in that moment, however. One really awesome thing that the BDSM and Kink communities do is to have a debrief after a sexual encounter asking what went well, what might have felt strange, and how to provide a more pleasurable experience for next time. This take a little bit of practice to get used to, but can be a really effective way to talk about consent and pleasure.

EL: I agree with Amy and Jo! The one thing I'd add is that, as with any aspect of sex and any aspect of communication, you might not figure out what works for you right away. So if you try something out and it feels unsexy, don't be discouraged! The kind of debriefing Jo was talking about can be really helpful here. And you might find that you express yourself differently with different partners, or need to ask differently with different partners.

CAN I STILL GET AN STI/STD IF MY PARTNER IS WEARING A CONDOM?

SW: Yes, many diseases are passed on from skin to skin contact. HPV being the most common. Human Papilloma Virus consists of a virus that has more than 100 strains. Genital warts, caused by some of these strains, can be passed on regardless of condom use. Scabies, pubic lice, herpes and mollescum contagiosum can also be passed on from sexual contact regardless of barrier method.

HOW DO I ASK MY PARTNER TO COME GET STI TESTED WITH ME?

JP: Getting STI tested should be a part of any new relationship and even when you are leaving a relationship after a break up. Again this is where communication is key. Let your partner know that STI testing is important to you and it is a common practice when you start a relationship. If your partner refuses STI testing then that should tell you something about this person you are sharing your time with.

EL: Similar to the consent question above, there isn't a single "right way" to do this, and it might take some time for you to figure out how you feel most comfortable asking. It's absolutely fair to ask that a

partner get tested with you - whether in the beginning or a relationship, during the relationship if a concern arises (e.g., if something comes up with another ongoing partner, a former partner discloses having tested positive for an STI, or if you're considering making some changes to your safer sex practices), or around/after a breakup. STI testing is stigmatized, and so some people might feel uncomfortable or hurt by the request. However, your wanting to get tested with your partner is important and completely valid. I think that offering to go with someone, as you've described here, is a great way to counter some of that stigma and any insecurity they might be feeling.

HOW SOON AFTER STARTING BIRTH CONTROL AM I PROTECTED?

JP: After starting birth control pills one is safe from pregnancy after completing the first pack. Please remember that one is only protected from pregnancy with birth control pills and they do not offer any protection against STIs.

I'VE TRIED ONCE, BUT IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT AND SUPER PAINFUL TO PUT IN. I THINK IT MAY BE BECAUSE I'VE NEVER PUT ANYTHING THERE (LIKE TAMPONS, FOR EXAMPLE). I'M REALLY INSECURE NOW. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

AH: The vagina is a glorious and wonderful and temperamental thing. There is no reason to feel insecure, but I understand why you might. There are a couple of things you can try, but remember, everyone's body is different and responds differently to stimuli. Do what feels good, and don't do anything that hurts. You can try long periods of stimuli including oral sex to stimulate and lubricate your vagina, which also helps to relax your vaginal walls; use lube to help slide a small finger into your vagina, or even a small toy; try stimulating other parts of your body that makes you feel good to help relax you; remember to breathe, taking slow breaths with any vulva and/or vaginal play you might be participating in.

MY CLITORIS FEELS SUPER TENDER AFTER SEX. IS THIS SENSITIVITY NORMAL?

JP: The clitoris is a sexual organ. It receives an increase in blood supply during sex and often it is a vital part of the sexual experience. The sensitivity should not remain for a long period of time. If it is actually painful then that will take some of the pleasure out of sex. Make sure you communicate this with your partner. They should know if an activity is not pleasurable to you.

STATEMENT: IT'S SO HARD TO HAVE SEX WITH A DISABILITY.

EL: Most depictions of sex and sexuality - including what we see in TV and movies, what comes up in sex education, and even what we see in sex positive activism - unfortunately tends to center the experiences and bodies of people without disabilities. That being said, there are some wonderful communities and resources on sex and disability out there. The University of Illinois' Disability Resources division has a great list, including books and websites/online communities, about sex and disability. Overall, they address range of disabilities and chronic illnesses, and many of the books and websites are community-produced (so written by and for people with disabilities and chronic illnesses): <https://www.disability.illinois.edu/sexuality-resources>

IS IT NECESSARY TO USE A CONDOM FOR ORAL?

SW: Yes. Sexually transmitted diseases of the throat can be passed on through semen or vaginal fluid. Barrier use can prevent sexual diseases like HIV, gonorrhea and chlamydia.

CAN YOU GET PREGNANT FROM PRECUM?

AH: You can. It is always wise to have your protection in play before any contact occurs.

JP: There may be sperm in the precum and if it finds its way to the egg pregnancy can occur. This is why the "pull out method" is not an effective birth control method.

IS IT GAY TO LIKE TRANS - MALE TO FEMALE WOMEN?

EL: I think that the important thing to remember here is that transgender women are women, and so being attracted to trans women means being attracted to women. Given differences in transition pathways, being attracted to trans women also doesn't necessarily mean anything specific about what kinds of sex are possible - trans women may have penises or vaginas. Like all people, trans women may or may not enjoy various kinds of sex, and may or may not enjoy using various sex toys. If straight cisgender (not trans) men are attracted to trans women, this doesn't make them any less straight - and likewise, cisgender lesbian women who are attracted to trans women aren't less gay/lesbian.

IS IT GAY TO LIKE ANAL SEX?

AH: Absolutely not. This is a sexual activity, like any other, that is enjoyable to some and not to others. You would need to explore your own thoughts, feelings and physical experiences with anal sex to know what you like. Anal sex doesn't just have to happen with a penis either. You can have anal sex with someone using a dildo or other toy. You can use your finger(s) or tongue to stimulate the anus. It's perfectly natural to be curious about it and explore the possibilities AND like any sexual activity it's important to be safe. Inserting something in your anus is more likely to cause small anal fissures that then create an environment vulnerable to sexually transmitted infection so definitely use a condom or other barrier method and lube to create a more pleasurable experience.

WHAT DOES LGBTQIA + MEAN?

Jo: First, I want to say the lived experiences of individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ may fall around, outside of, be a combination of, and/or within these definitions. These definitions are pretty text book and a larger conversation would allow for us to complicate and nuance what each can and does mean.

L for Lesbian (women who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women), G for Gay (Men who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to other men), B for Bi (anyone who is attracted to both sexes), T for trans (this is an individual whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity and is considered an umbrella term for a variety of individuals and what "trans" means to them), Q for Queer (another umbrella term used by a variety of people who fall between, within, and/or outside any of the binaries of male/female, gay/straight, boy/girl, etc.) Q is also for Questioning (Anyone who is questioning their gender identity, gender expression, and/or sexual orientation, I is for Intersex (anyone who has a combination of hormones, chromosomes, and/or genitalia that does not distinguish them within the medical binary of "male/female." It is important to note that many people may in fact be intersex as often times our sex assigned at birth is determined by what the appearance of our external genitalia appears to look like (penis/no penis), A is for Asexual (any person who does not feel they are romantically and/or sexually attracted to other people; this sexual orientation falls on a spectrum however and can be a combination of things including, for example, someone who is sexually attracted to individuals, but develops no romantic attachment meaning they do have sex, someone who must have a deep romantic attraction and/or connection to someone but has no desire to have sex, and so on. A is also for Advocate (someone who advocates for social justice through action, behavior, and speech), and the PLUS is everyone else including us Pans!

HOW SOON AFTER SEX CAN I GET TESTED FOR AN STI?

SW: Each disease has a different incubation period or time it takes to become recognizable as symptoms or found in your blood. For example modern blood tests can detect HIV as early as 2-3

weeks after infection, while rapid tests may take one to two months to show an accurate result. Some diseases like HPV and syphilis may take months to show up in a test. In general, an asymptomatic patient that receives a panel of STI tests four weeks after a sexual encounter will get accurate results. Being tested immediately after a sexual encounter would provide a baseline, but not necessarily offer accurate results. If symptoms do occur, the patient should get retested.

JP: As mentioned above, an asymptomatic individual should have accurate results at 4 weeks but if symptoms occur prior to testing one should seek care. Also if after you have sex and you hear that the partner may have tested positive to an STI seek care ASAP so you can be treated sooner than later.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST ADVICE IN SUPPORTING A FRIEND WHO IS TRANSGENDER?

EL: Ask! There's no single best way to support a transgender friend around their identity. That being said, there are a few specific things you might want to consider checking in about: does this person want to use the same name and pronouns in all spaces, or might there be different needs (e.g., someone might feel safe to use a chosen name at school, but not when their parents are visiting). If you make a mistake, how can you best acknowledge that and apologize? If you see someone else make a mistake, or see someone else be openly hostile, how would your friend like you to respond in the moment and afterwards? You might also want to think about how much you'd like to be a go-to person around gender related matters. For example, if this person is struggling with unsupportive family or friends, would you like to be available to talk about that? Would you want to go with this person to disclose a trans identity to a relative, or would that be too much? If this friend pursues gender affirming surgery/ies, would you be interested in helping out with that - and if so, how? "Helping" could involve a range of things such as just being a supportive person to talk to, going to medical appointments, helping to make sure that someone had food/water/loose clothing, helping someone catch up on schoolwork afterwards, and more.

HOW OLD IS TOO OLD TO LOSE YOUR VIRGINITY?

No one is ever too old to lose your virginity! The important thing is to be with someone you want to be with and who respect that it is your first time and wants you to enjoy yourself!

HOW TO KNOW IF/WHEN YOUR HYMEN IS BROKEN?

AH: Most people think the hymen is a thin layer of tissue that covers the entire opening of the vagina and when you have "sex" for the first time the hymen is punctured and you bleed. The hymen IS a

thin, fleshy tissue that is found at the opening of your vagina; however it usually is NOT covering the entire opening of the vagina. There is often a hole or holes already in the hymen and the hole stretches when a tampon is inserted or a penis enters the vagina. Everyone's hymen is different and so everyone is different when it comes to pain or bleeding when a hymen is stretched (otherwise known as "broken").

WHAT IS CONSIDERED SEXUAL INTERCOURSE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE WITH VAGINAS?

AH: Heteronormative cultural has defined sexual intercourse as sexual contact by penetration of the vagina by a penis. With two people who have vaginas, sexual intercourse may be self-defined and/or refer to penetration of the vagina with a dildo, a finger or fingers, or a tongue. It might also mean anal or oral intercourse. Maybe you are wondering what it means to lose your virginity or what having "sex" means between two people with vaginas. Again, I think this is a personal decision and should involve some thinking about what sex, sexual activity and intimacy mean to you. Some people consider "intercourse" the loss of their virginity or having sex but what if that happens via a sexual assault? We wouldn't say that you've lost your virginity or had sex for the first time if you were sexually assaulted.

WHERE CAN I GET FREE CONDOMS ON CAMPUS?

Free Condom Friday, every Friday during the fall/spring semesters, from 10am - 12pm in the Wellness Center!

SO MY PARTNER RECENTLY TOLD ME THAT THEY WANT TO BE INTRODUCED AS MY BOYFRIEND THOUGH CONTINUE TO SAY THAT THEY ARE A GIRL AND A LESBIAN. AM I DISRESPECTING THEM IF I ACCIDENTALLY CALL HIM MY GIRLFRIEND?

EL: Reading this question, it comes through really clearly that you care about and want to support your partner. Gender identity can be complicated, and so can supporting someone who is gender nonconforming - whether that person identifies as trans or not. It's not disrespectful to make mistakes. It may take some time for you to shift toward calling your partner your boyfriend, after previously saying girlfriend. What matters is that you are trying to be supportive and respectful. If you do make a mistake, try to acknowledge that. Based on what you shared here, I think you might want to speak with your partner and share some of your own thoughts and questions - maybe ask something like "I want to be sure that I'm respectful to you, but sometimes I might make a mistake. If I accidentally say 'girlfriend' instead of 'boyfriend,' what should I do?" It might be that your partner would like you to immediately correct yourself. It might be that your partner would want different

things in different moments - for example, when you're hanging out with friends vs. when you're in class.

IF WE'RE BOTH DRUNK, HOW DO WE BOTH CONSENT?

AH: Many people ask this question with legal concerns in mind but I'd like to answer it both legally and broadly because it's murky. How drunk is drunk enough to not be able to give consent and how do we know that about our partner when we are also drunk? The reality is that someone can be blacked out and say yes to something that they would not have said yes to in a sober state. Legally, if someone is incapacitated by their intoxication then the person who initiates the sexual activity is acting in an abusive way. Consent can not be given under those conditions. If you don't know how drunk the person is and/or you are not sure how drunk you are you need to ask yourself what your values are here? Is this the kind of sexual activity you want to engage in? Is it worth the legal risk of sexually assaulting someone? Is it worth the emotional risk to you or your partner to engage in an activity that neither of you may remember nor want to engage in under other circumstances? Obviously, people have sex during and after drinking, so I'm not saying you shouldn't or can't have sex after having alcohol but consent can't be given if someone is intoxicated to the point of incapacitation, physically and cognitively, so unless you are sure that the person you are with is clear-minded, it might be best to wait and see if you still want to have sex at a later time.

IS IT SAFE TO SWITCH HOLES WHEN HAVING SEX? AS IN FROM THE VAGINA TO THE BUTT?

JM: It is not. Porn lied. Each area of the body has specific bacteria and functions to keep those areas (the anus and vagina) safe and working properly. If you are going to be putting anything in your butt or vagina (which is a lot of fun!) make sure you are using either two different items, body parts (penis and toy, penis and hand, toy and hand, etc.) or that you are properly washing each item before inserting into another orifice.

HOW TO SAFELY PERFORM "BREATHPLAY" WHEN HAVING SEX? WHERE SHOULD YOU PLACE THE HAND AROUND THE NECK TO ENSURE FOR A SAFE SEX EXPERIENCE WITHOUT CHOKING YOUR PARTNER?

SW: Breath play or erotic asphyxiation is the act of decreasing the amount of oxygen going to your brain during sex. It typically involves smothering or strangulation. There are not safe techniques for asphyxiation. This practice could cause death, loss of consciousness, or damage to the muscles supporting the neck and throat.

IF I HAVE AN ORGASM/MY BODY REACTS, DOES THAT MEAN I WANTED IT?

AH: Absolutely not. In fact, it's normal for our bodies to react in a similar way to having consensual sex when we are being sexually assaulted or raped. We might be forcibly assaulted or have said no to sexual activity but freeze when the person violates our boundaries. A hormonal reaction occurs in our body that is different for everyone. Two hormones in particular, oxytocin and opioids, can cause the body to orgasm or feel aroused even when we are being assaulted. Oxytocin is the hormone that gets released when we have consensual, pleasurable sex. It gives us a rush of feel good. Opioids are hormones that get released when our body is being hurt. Both of these hormones are protective in that they mask the emotional and physical pain of what might be happening AND they can also trigger "pleasure". We wish we could tell our body to shut off those natural responses but we can't. Think about this, can you tell your eyes not to tear up if you cut an onion and wave it in front of your face? The answer is no. Our eyes will tear up despite our best efforts to stop them from doing so. Our private parts are similar in that they may also react outside of our control or what our mind wants.

EL: I just want to reinforce Amy's point here. I have worked with a lot of individuals whose bodies reacted to sexual assault. When this happens, it is common for people to struggle with self-blame and to wonder if their experience still "counts" as sexual violence. As Amy said, it absolutely still counts, and having an orgasm or other physical response to sexual assault doesn't change the fact that it's assault. If you don't agree, if you don't want it, that's what matters.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE IN SIZE OF A CONDOM? DO I NEED MAGNUM CONDOMS?

JP: The condom needs to fit the penis. If the condom is too small it will not fit properly and come off during sex. This will not provide protection against pregnancy or STIs. Also if the condom is too large it will not provide an adequate seal and this will possibly allow an exchange of fluids that was not intended to happen. Having a condom that properly fits the penis is important no matter what the size is.

HOW MUCH SEX IS TOO MUCH?

AH: Just like masturbation, this is different people. Sex, like other behaviors, can be something that you feel like you "need" do. If your thoughts or urges to have sex become overpowering or get in the

way of daily activities then it's "too" much. We all have different sex drives so someone may think about and have sex regularly while someone else rarely thinks about sex.

HOW DOES THE PLAN B PILL WORK? WHAT IS IT?

JP: Plan B is used as emergency contraception, therefore its purpose is to prevent pregnancy. It is composed of hormones that are often used in birth control pills but in higher concentrations to prevent implantation in the uterus. While it is effective to prevent pregnancy, it is not healthy to continue to use this as a method of birth control. It was meant to be more for occasional use, sparingly. When patients tell me they are using Plan B weekly or even a few times in a few months I discuss regular birth control methods- i.e birth control pills, IUD, implants, etc. It is not uncommon to get nauseous from Plan B due to the high hormone concentration. Some patients even vomit after ingestion. If this happens, the dose may have to be repeated if it occurs shortly after taking the dose.

HOW CAN I HAVE SAFE ANAL SEX?

AH: First, talk to your partner to make sure it's something you both want to do. Because the anus has more sensitive tissue and is prone to tearing, the risk of an STI is higher, SO.. a condom or dental dam is a must. Lube is also a must. Make sure you use a water-based lubricant so it does not break down the condom. Go slow if it's your first time. Do your best to relax so that penetration is easier and more pleasurable. And, as we've said before, communicate during the encounter so that all of you are communicating what you're feeling and if you want to stop or continue at any point.

WHAT ARE OTHER SIDE EFFECTS OF BIRTH CONTROL?

JP: Some women crave carbohydrates so it is important to choose your meals wisely while on birth control pills because this could possibly contribute to weight gain. Nausea and migraine headaches may also occur. The combination of tobacco use and oral contraception can place a woman at risk for blood clots. If you are a smoker, birth control pills may not be the best method of birth control for you. I counsel my patients about the risk of smoking on birth control pills and encourage them to quit.

DOES CIRCUMCISION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

JP: Make a difference in regards to??? While the majority of men in the United States are circumcised there are approximately 20% that are not. I have found that if a father is not circumcised they do not want their sons to be circumcised. This procedure usually happens in the nursery but occasionally as the infant gets older it will be done in the operating room by a urologist. As someone

who cares for children and adults, one of the biggest problems I have seen is improper care of uncircumcised penises which can lead to bacterial infections in men and even in their female partners. Over the years studies have gone back and forth in regards to lower rates of STIs in circumcised men. Because I spend some of my time in an STI clinic I don't have a typical view of the male population because most are there for a concern or issue they may be having. The majority are circumcised but they also have STI's. If your partner is not circumcised that should not be a determining factor in regards to you having intercourse with them. Go for it!

I WANT TO EXPLORE MY SEXUALITY. IS IT BAD THAT I WANT TO HAVE SAFE SEX?

No, of course not. It takes courage to make the wisest decision for yourself, especially in the face of differing opinions. You can still be curious, explore and have awesome sex while also using condoms and/or dental dams. When you feel safe and protected you are likely to have better sex and feel more comfortable exploring in ways that you might not if you are worried about STI's or pregnancy.

IF MY RELIGION PROHIBITS PREMARITAL SEX, BUT I WANT TO TRY, HOW DO I BALANCE MY INTERSECTING IDENTITIES WHILE BEING TRUE TO MY BELIEFS AND DESIRE?

AH: This is a tough situation and one that requires some evaluation of your intersecting values and beliefs. Being mindful that you have these intersecting beliefs is the first step. You've brought awareness to this dilemma. Some questions you might ask yourself to help you decide what to do:

1. How important is my religion to me? What's the difference between my spiritual belief and the rules of the church or religion? Does that matter to me?
2. Why DO I want to try to have premarital sex right now? What might be the pros and cons of having sex or not and sticking to my religious beliefs?

EL: I would add here that it can sometimes be valuable to connect with other people who are struggling with these questions, in your own or other faith communities.